
Building the Public Image of a Leader: The Case of Politicians Visiting Polish Military Contingents

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this article is to examine the elements and functions of the image of leaders in political organisations in the context of their foreign visits to Polish military contingents. The specific context of this type of activity, both in terms of security and symbolism, requires a particular type of analysis.

Approach/Methodology/Design: Desktop-based research that consisted of a document and database review of available information from national sources. The study extends across disciplines and has a basis typical to social sciences, mainly to disciplines such as management and political and administrative science.

Findings: Visits by politicians to military contingents abroad are remarkable, as they occur in specific places where soldiers conduct critical tasks, often risking their health and lives.. Participating in it is crucial to show allied solidarity in the NATO forces' reinforced presence deployed on the Alliance's Eastern flank. The military bases of contingents are scattered around the world, often positioned in hostile territory, attracting media coverage and providing an opportunity for a politician to thank soldiers for their service, but also to reinforce his post

Practical Implications: The place, the conditions, the identity of the accompanying persons, the programme of a given visit, the content of the speeches, the military ceremonial, the religious milieu of the ceremony, personal meetings with soldiers and civilian employees of the army, joint photographs with them, their behaviour and even their dress are crucial in such an event and help shape the image of a politician-leader..

Originality/Value: The publication draws on an interdisciplinary perspective, juxtaposing phenomena and contexts previously unexplored to a greater extent. It can contribute to a better understanding of leadership in political organisations and image-making issues.

Keywords: Leadership, national security, public image.

JEL classification: M31, M37.

Paper Type: Research study.

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 1950s, Polish soldiers started serving abroad to build peace. They participated in three international peacekeeping commissions formed after the conflicts in South-East Asia, whose task was to oversee the observance of the achieved truce. They included representatives of states designated by the warring parties, influencing the quality of these teams' work, within which disputes were fought, indicating sweeping partiality (Birchmeier, Burdelski, and Jendraszczyk 2003; Ciechanowski, 2007; Zuziak, 2009).

The Polish Army participated in peacebuilding forces in 1973, when, with the invitation of the UN Secretary-General, Poland deployed a logistics battalion, the so-called POLLOG, to the UN Second Emergency Force - Second United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF II) in Egypt. For six years, the Poles and Canadians had performed joint logistical tasks for operational battalions of the mission. They were stationed in the buffer zone, situated east of the Suez Canal, partitioning Egyptian and Israeli forces at the end of the Syrian-Egyptian-Israeli armed conflict, lasting from 6 to 24 October 1973. A year later, Polish and Canadian logisticians joined in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) mission in the Golan Heights. The service of Polish soldiers in such a geopolitically crucial place was an invaluable opportunity for politicians holding critical positions in the state to manifest themselves in the international arena. Nonetheless, this did not realise because Poland depended on the Soviet Union for foreign policy as a Soviet satellite. However, Poland did contribute immensely to the UN in the 1980s.

After Poland gained its sovereignty, assuming responsibility for building national security became inevitable. Thus, the new authorities had to redefine the policy in this area and make substantial changes in the functioning of the armed forces, occurring despite the background of a sweeping decrease in military structures across Europe. Poland is currently one of the most active contributors to the UN (Ciechanowski, 2010; Kozerawski 2010; Lotarski 2014; Zuziak 2009). In the early 1990s, a Polish military contingent (PKW) existed in the Middle East in the UNDOF mission, and in 1992 Polish soldiers were in Lebanon in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission. After 1989, for a few months, the Polish logistic battalion conducted its mandate tasks in the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) mission in Namibia, in August 1992, another one served as part of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

Polish operational battalions were part of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) mission in Croatia, and after its dissolution in March 1995 - in the United Nations Confidence Restoration Operation (UNCRO) operation. Although UN soldiers, including Poles, were under the cross-fire from the parties to the conflict in Cambodia and the Balkan area, no eminent politician from Warsaw visited the fellow servicemen conducting mandated tasks there until the end of the 20th century.

The UN missions in the former Yugoslavia failed. Therefore, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation had the Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. As a participant in the Partnership for Peace programme, Poland sent an operational battalion, becoming part of the multinational Nordic-Polish Brigade functioning in the north-eastern part of Bosnia. The visit of the Scandinavian Ministers of Defence to the brigade was a milestone. That visit also included Stanisław Dobrzański, the first Polish politician of that rank to visit soldiers participating in a foreign operation (Mędykowski, 1996).

The Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski began a new chapter on 29 May 2000 when he visited Israel officially. The highest level featured President Ezer Weizman and Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and the following day Kwasniewski became the first Polish leader to visit soldiers of the PKW UNDOF (Łotarski 2014). Yet, another meeting with soldiers serving on the Golan Heights occurred on 15 December 2002, during Kwaśniewski's working visit to Syria. The Polish leader met President Bashar Al-Assad, and in the afternoon, he visited soldiers of the UNDOF mission. Kwasniewski travelled to Lebanon next day, discussed bilateral economic and military cooperation with President Émile Lahoud, and then arrived at the PKW UNIFIL base in Naqoura; and met with Polish soldiers.

The date of this trip was notable because it happened a week before Christmas. Most of the future visits by Polish politicians were to be organised according to the same calendar key as they were close to the dates of Christmas and Easter and less frequently national or military holidays. Politicians would meet their counterparts in the relevant country, but, in other cases, they would visit military personnel directly.

A typical visit pursued a similar script, comprising of a welcome according to military ceremonial. A speech by the guest, during which critical declarations and acknowledgements were present, followed the presentation of decorations and other distinctions, a mass (specifically when the event occurred before a holiday), a meal, a meeting with mission personnel, and a show of equipment. These events were attended by journalists, with television, radio and press coverage, making the headlines of newspapers and internet portals; and effectively polishing the image of the politician-leader.

2. Consequences of the Attack on the World Trade Centre

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 received a harsh reaction from President George W. Bush. Suggesting unproven accusations about Saddam Hussein's regime of having weapons of mass destruction, two and a half years after 9/11, the coalition forces under American command attacked Iraq. The Polish authorities approved the intervention policy and deployed a small armed force with the consent of the political elite. After the victory of coalition forces, Iraq had five occupation zones.

The Poles were responsible for maintaining peace and building stability in one of them and the command of the Multinational Division Centre-South (MND C-S), whose backbone included three multinational brigade combat groups under Polish, Ukrainian, and Spanish control. Firstly, the division had formations from 22 countries. Managing such a complex conglomerate of soldiers with different English language skills, training ranges, mentalities, and many other aspects of military craft were an immense task (Ciechanowski, 2016).

The division's command was in historical Babylon, where an official ceremony was held on 3 September 2003 for the MND C-S to assume responsibility from the Americans. The Ministers of Defence (MON), Jerzy Szmajdziński and his Ukrainian counterpart Yevhen Marczuk, and the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Defence of Spain attended the ceremony, among others (Ojrzanowski 2005). As the heads of ministries participated in the event, it found a lot of media coverage. The operation performed in Iraq attracted much interest from journalists; and for the first time, Polish radio and television stations and press editorial offices accredited their teams in the region permanently.

Presidents of the Republic of Poland, Prime Ministers (PM) and MONs have recurrently visited soldiers serving in Iraq. These events found widespread coverage in the mass media, reiterating the public about the hardships of the stabilisation mission, proved to be a fight waged against a determined enemy. The following table depicts the visits of the leading representatives of the Polish state in Iraq.

Table 1. *Visits of politicians to soldiers of the PKW Iraq in chronological order*

| Function | Person | Date of visit |
|-------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| MON | Szmajdziński | 3 September 2003 |
| PM | Miller | 11 November 2003 |
| MON | Szmajdziński | 22 August 2004 |
| PM and MON | Belka and Szmajdziński | 22 December 2004 |
| PM and MON | Belka and Szmajdziński | 22 December 2004 |
| MON | Szmajdziński | 7 February 2005 |
| PM and MON | Belka and Szmajdziński | 26 July 2005 |
| PM | Marcinkiewicz | 21 December 2005 |
| President and MON | Kaczyński and Sikorski | 6 April 2006 |
| PM | Kaczynski | 20 December 2006 |
| PM and MON | Kaczynski Szczygło | 16 May 2007 |
| MON | Szczygło | 29 August 2007 |
| PM and MON | Tusk and Klich | 19 December 2007 |

Source: Own elaboration.

The main objective of these visits was to demonstrate political support for the operation. Meetings with Polish soldiers occurred at bases in Babylon and later Diwanijja on religious and national holidays; and when division commanders were changed. Trips by the heads of MON were routine, including Jerzy Szmajdziński's

visit in August 2004 and Aleksander Szczygło's visit in May 2007. Iraq was not a haven; the plane landed in Baghdad, and the remaining part to a particular base had to be covered by helicopter, making the journey extremely risky. The distinguished guests, such as the heads of state, were always carried by American crews. Due to security issues, the dates of the planned visits were not publicised because plans would change.

At the beginning of May 2007, the plane carrying Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński did not even land in Iraq, because the American dispatcher did not permit it to fly over that country airspace. The American side later apologised for that event. A few weeks later, on May 16, the Prime Minister, along with the ministers of defence and economy, landed in Baghdad and had a meeting with the head of the Iraqi government. However, a sandstorm did not allow Kaczyński to fly to the Polish 'Echo' base in Diwanijja. MON Szczygło later gave the reason for the cancellation of the visit to the military base in Diwanijja as follows: 'During the prime minister's visit, there was shelling near the helicopter landing pad in the Green Zone, near the American embassy' (Borowski, 2007).

The attitude of public opinion towards participation in the stabilisation operation in Iraq, as the mission was officially called, caused mixed reactions among the public after the number of soldiers killed and wounded increased substantially. In a survey performed by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) in May 2004, when four Poles lost their lives in the Iraqi mission, as high as 74% of respondents did not support the presence of the Polish army in Iraq, and 63% of those polled asked for the rapid return of the troops to the country (Lorenc, 2008). Despite growing public disapproval, PMs and MONs visited Iraq.

Accordingly, a signal was sent to the public about the authorities' interest for the soldiers, and an image of the leadership role of specific politicians and their determination, was depicted in critical situations. The visits also included paying tribute to the fallen soldiers. Minister Szmajdziński initiated a discussion on the withdrawal of the contingent as early as 2004, after heavy losses in Iraq. The Law and Justice government in power wanted to extend the mission, and the Polish armed force was withdrawn from Iraq in 2008 by the decision of Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The final Polish contingent of the Polish Armed Forces left Iraq on 28 October 2008, with only a detachment remaining to train Iraqi troops under the NATO mission.

3. Afghanistan - The Most Dangerous Operation

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the refusal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to hand over Osama bin Laden to the Americans, the troops of the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan to eliminate al-Qaeda. This was the inception of the anti-terrorist operation 'Enduring Freedom' (EF) started on 7 October 2001 (EF), and Poland joined, too. A small contingent of 120 personnel

began service on 22 November that year, conducting principally logistical tasks at the Bagram base (Jureńczyk, 2016; Matuszak, 2014). In December 2003, the Polish armed forces were put under the NATO International Security Assistance Force - ISAF; and the political and military centre of gravity of the relevance of operations performed in that country shifted. The Polish contingent also modified the profile of operations from engineering to operations to build stability, but in reality, fierce fighting with the enemy occurred, and the Afghan police forces had training at the military bases (Jureńczyk, 2016).

Firstly, the politicians did not visit Afghanistan, and the MON Szczygło visited Afghanistan five years later. This visit controlled the status of preparations for participating Polish soldiers in NATO's ISAF operation. The new subordination of the mission meant that over the next 14 months, the MONs (Szczygło, then Bogdan Klich) visited Polish bases as many as six times, attending critical events of individual PKW units in this most dangerous mission. This activity of ministers was not surprising because the disapproval of Poles' participation in the ISAF operation was on the rise. The CBOS surveys performed from January 2007 to September 2008 showed that about three-quarters of respondents did not approve of the presence of the Polish army in Afghanistan (Lorenc, 2008).

Discussing the image issues during the visits of notable politicians in Afghanistan is worthy. Nevertheless, we should go back to 10 March 2004, when members of the government and parliamentary delegation visited Iraq. The guests marched around Camp Alpha in military uniforms not different from those of soldiers. What motivated them to wear military uniforms was unclear. However, it attracted the attention of the photographers present. Likewise, the Sejm National Defence Commission and the Special Services Commission members again dressed in uniforms when they visited the PKW in Afghanistan on 30 August 2007.

Among the groups mentioned here, Minister Szczygło displayed in military uniform when he visited the Wazi-Khwa base on 16 September 2007, while his successor, Klich, accompanied the Prime Minister on his first visit to Afghanistan on 22-23 August 2008. Tusk was in civilian clothes then, though not in a suit like his predecessors, but on an elegant sports outfit. Pictures from the president of the Republic of Poland visits, Lech Kaczyński, on 8 April 2009 with the head of the National Security Agency, Szczygło, depicted the head of state in a military jacket, a uniform yardstick at that level.

Once again, the most crucial politician, as an example, Bronisław Komorowski went to Afghanistan on 21- 22 June 2010 as the Speaker of the Sejm, acting as the president of Poland. Then, he was on a civilian outfit, while the chief of National Security Bureau (BBN) Stanisław Koziej and ministers Klich and Radosław Sikorski were in uniform. The public appearance of politicians in uniforms, though used to fortify the message of the politician's commitment to military matters, I think, devalues the military uniform. Usually, the ministers of national defence appear in

these clothes, unlike their NATO colleagues, stressing the status of civilian control over the army.

Table 2. *Visits of key politicians the PKW Afghanistan in the period from 2007 to 2013 presented in chronological order*

| Function | Person | Date of visit |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------|
| MON | Szczygło | 26- 28 February 2007 |
| MON | Szczygło | 22- 23 May 2007 |
| Speaker of the Polish Sejm | Dorn | 21- 22 June 2007 |
| MON | Szczygło | 11- 14 September 2007 |
| MON | Szczygło | 30 October 2007 |
| MON | Klich | 20- 21 December 2007 |
| MON | Klich | 18- 20 April 2008 |
| MSZ | Sikorski | 5 June 2008 |
| PM and MON | Tusk and Klich | 22- 23 August 2008 |
| MON | Klich | 30 October 2008 |
| MON | Klich | 4- 5 March 2009 |
| President and BBN Head | Kaczyński and Szczygło | 8 April 2009 |
| Premier | Tusk | 17 August 2009 |
| MON | Klich | 2- 3 September 2009 |
| MON | Klich | 22 December 2009 |
| MON | Klich | 20 April 2010 |
| Speaker of the Sejm acting as President of the Republic of Poland | Komorowski | 21- 22 June 2010 |
| PM and MON | Tusk and Siemoniak | 22 December 2011 |
| MSZ | Sikorski | 15- 16 December 2012 |
| MON | Siemoniak | 1 August 2013 |

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2 shows the official visits to Afghanistan from 2007 to 2013, where a few details are worth noting. During Polish President Lech Kaczyński's Easter visit in 2009, he met Polish military personnel patrolling the Kabul airport, but his first attempt to fly in an American helicopter to meet soldiers in Ghazni province was unsuccessful due to weather issues. The president postponed the original date of the delegation's return to the country. Then, a successful attempt to reach the Polish base occurred.

However, the pre-Christmas visit of Prime Minister Tusk and MON Klich on 22 December 2011 was special because they came for the farewell ceremony to five fallen soldiers, who died the day before due to a booby-trap explosion. This largest mission of the Polish Army, as to the scale of commitment of military forces and resources, culminated on 4 December 2014, at the end of the ISAF operation. As in Iraq, after the operation in Afghanistan, a NATO mission started to train and support local security forces. When the Institute for Market and Social Research (IBRiS) performed research for Rzeczpospolita in 2020, up to 45% of those surveyed

favoured a small contingent of Polish soldiers staying in Iraq to train the Iraqi army as part of the NATO mission (Skwarczek 2020).

4. Politicians Facing New Challenges

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed a new phenomenon in the Middle East - the birth of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The US President Barack Obama authorised the formation of an international coalition to conduct an air operation termed Inherent Resolve against ISIS on 7 August 2014. This force started operating on 20 June 2016, alongside the PKW Iraq, a Polish contingent equipped with F-16 'Hawk' aircraft performing reconnaissance flights for the international coalition troops. In the second decade of the 21st century, the contingents served in Afghanistan and Kuwait attracted the most media and public attention, owing to their tasks. Therefore, they were often visited by politicians, which were not surprising.

Table 3. Visits of politicians to soldiers of PKW Afghanistan and PKW Kuwait in the period 2015-2019 presented in chronological order

| Function | Person | Date of visit | Notes |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------------|
| MON | Macierewicz | 20.12.2015 | PKW RS Afghanistan |
| MON | Macierewicz | 11–12.08.2016 | PKW RS Afghanistan |
| MON | Macierewicz | 21.12.2016 | PKW Kuwait |
| MON | Macierewicz | 22.12.2016 | PKW RS Afghanistan |
| MON | Macierewicz | 18–19.12.2017 | PKW RS Afghanistan |
| President | Duda | 21.12.2017 | PKW Kuwait |
| President and MON | Duda, Blaszczak | 26.03.2018 | PKW RS Afghanistan |

Source: Own elaboration.

When analysed, the MON Antoni Macierewicz, was very active during his first trip on 20 December 2015. Dressing in military uniform, he visited as many as three military bases on one day, Kandahar, Gamberi and Bagram, where mainly special forces were on duty to train, as part of the aforementioned NATO Operation Resolute Support (PKW RS), anti-terrorist operators of the Afghan police. The place and date of the visit were not random because Minister Macierewicz, on the anniversary of the tragic death of five Polish soldiers in Afghanistan, announced 21 December as the Day of Remembrance of the Fallen and Deceased in Missions and Military Operations outside the State Borders.

Two more visits occurred in 2016, during an August trip on the eve of the Polish Army Day, Macierewicz was with the soldiers at the Kandahar, Morehead, and Bagram bases. He met, among others, the commander of the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (RSM) Gen. John W. Nicholson and the commander of the NATO Special Forces Component in Afghanistan (NSOCC-A) Maj. Gen. Scott Howell. The December trip was unique; Kuwait was the first

destination on Remembrance Day, where the chief of the ministry met with the air force, Afghan visit was the second, involving three military bases.

Because Macierewicz was dressed in the military outfit again, the non-verbal message was noteworthy, but the uniform had emblems reinforcing the non-verbal message. It was the symbol of the PKW units, currently participating part in both missions. The last trip to Afghanistan, by a uniformed minister, occurred in December 2017, and a few weeks later, he lost his post, which caused a bitter and shaming conflict between him and President Andrzej Duda, the head of the Polish Armed Forces. Then, two politicians visited the contingents separately; and a year after Macierewicz's visited Afghanistan, President Duda, in civilian outfits akin to a uniform, met the air force at Kuwait's al-Jabir base (Świerczyński, 2017).

The Spring of next year witnessed President Duda visit of Polish soldiers at Bagram, accompanied by the new head of MON Mariusz Błaszczak, for the first time. The state leader posed himself in an outfit very similar to the uniform; the minister was in military uniform, but this time in the American one, and on the sleeves of jackets of both guests carried signs of the 7th shift of the Polish Armed Forces. The politicians have only dressed in military uniform in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kuwait. The President, during his Easter 2018 visit, vowed to increase the size of the contingent (President Duda in Afghanistan. 'We will increase the contingent by 50 soldiers by the end of the year', 2018). However, the prestigious allied-led mission in Afghanistan ended unexpectedly with a shocking failure in 2021.

Politicians also visited other military personnel serving other tasks in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Mediterranean Sea between 1999 and 2020. The activity of Polish politicians in these places is in Table 4.

Table 4. *Visits of Polish presidents, prime ministers and ministers of national defence (MON) to other contingents between 2001 and 2019 in chronological order*

| Function and person | Location | Date of visit |
|---|--|---------------|
| Presidents of the Republic of Poland | | |
| Kwasniewski together with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma | PKW KFOR, Kosovo, Polish-Ukrainian Battalion | 09.01.2001 |
| Kwasniewski | PKW in Macedonia and Kosovo | 02.10.2002 |
| Kwasniewski and MON Szmajdziński | PKW UNDOF | 15.12.2002 |
| Kaczyński | PKW KFOR, Kosovo | 02.05.2009 |
| Komorowski | KFOR | 02.04.2012 |
| Komorowski | KFOR | 11.11.2012 |
| Duda and MON Błaszczak | PKW Romania | 19.12.2018 |
| Duda and MON Błaszczak | PKW EUFOR, BiH | 15.04.2019 |
| Duda and MON Błaszczak | PKW Latvia | 28.06.2019 |
| Duda | PKW Sophia, Sicily | 19.12.2019 |
| Prime Ministers of the Republic of Poland | | |

| | | |
|--|----------------|------------|
| Tusk and MON Klich | KFOR | 11.11.2012 |
| Kopacz and MON Siemioniak | KFOR | 02.04.2015 |
| Morawiecki | PKW Latvia | 15.08.2018 |
| Morawiecki | PKW Orlik | 05.04.2019 |
| MON | | |
| Szczygło | PKW UNDOF | 27.03.2007 |
| Szczygło | PKW UNIFIL | 17.06.2007 |
| Klich | PKW UNIFIL | 09.04.2009 |
| Klich | PKW UNDOF | 1.06.2009 |
| Siemioniak and Jerzy Miller (Interior Ministry) | KFOR | 04.11.2011 |
| Siemioniak | KFOR | 18.04.2013 |
| Macierewicz | KFOR | 11.04.2017 |
| Macierewicz | PKW Latvia | 28.09.2017 |
| Błaszczak | PKW Latvia | 26.05.2018 |
| Błaszczak | PKW EUFOR, BiH | 04.01.2019 |

Source: Own elaboration.

The data analysis presented in the table permits us to deduce many conclusions, the first related to the Polish units serving in the Balkans, namely in Kosovo as part of the NATO KFOR operation, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of the EUFOR operation. Two points are critical here. First, it was a place regularly visited by Polish leaders, and it was in PKW KFOR that President Kwaśniewski visited military personnel together with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuczma, who was visiting the Polish-Ukrainian Battalion in KFOR. The second destination was conventionally the Middle East and the UNDOF and UNIFIL missions, with military personnel active there until 2009. Poles served under the blue flag in southern Lebanon after 10 years. Thirdly, there existed Polish military forces on NATO's eastern flank in Latvia, in multinational battalion groups as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) force, and in Romania, where troops of the Tailored Forward Presence (TFP) were serving.

5. Conclusion

Visits by politicians to military contingents abroad are remarkable, as they occur in specific places where soldiers conduct critical tasks, often risking their health and lives. These are missions under the flag of the United Nations or the European Union, including peace enforcement and combat operations in Croatia, Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan or on the Mediterranean Sea. Participating in a programme like this is crucial to show allied solidarity in the NATO forces' reinforced presence deployed on the Alliance's Eastern flank.

The military bases of contingents are scattered around the world, often positioned in hostile territory, attracting media coverage and providing an opportunity for a politician to thank soldiers for their service, but also to reinforce his post. The place, the conditions, the identity of the accompanying persons, the programme of a given

visit, the content of the speeches, the military ceremonial, the religious milieu of the ceremony, personal meetings with soldiers and civilian employees of the army, joint photographs with them, their behaviour and even their dress - all are very crucial in such an event and help shape the image of a politician-leader..

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