

BULGARIAN CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU REPORT OF A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN BULGARIA

Alpha Research Ltd

This Synthesis presents the results of a group discussion held in Sofia on 10 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union. It is part of a wider citizenship project managed by Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, with the support of national partners of the European Qualitative Network coordinated by OPTEM, on behalf of the European Commission.

Introduction

This report presents the results of a group discussion held in Sofia on 10 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union.

It is the Bulgarian section of a pan-European qualitative study involving 18 of the Member States.

In each country the study was carried out by the national partner of the European Qualitative Network coordinated by OPTEM: in Bulgaria by Alpha Research Ltd.

This study forms a part of a wider Citizenship Project managed by Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute on behalf of the European Commission.

BOX 1 ► Composition of the group of respondents

Gender	Age
Women: 5	20-34 years: 3
Men: 4	35-49 years: 4
	50-60 years: 2

Social class

Lower-middle social class: 4 (professions of head of household: manual worker at a printing press company, civil servant, primary school teacher, construction worker)

Higher-middle class: 5 (professions of head of household: construction engineer, economist, chief expert in public sector, associate professor, shop owner)

Political opinion

The respondents were also recruited so that diverse political opinions were represented in the group.

During the discussion no substantial differences in opinions were observed regarding the profession, political views or age of respondents. The factor, which outlined more differences in respondents'

views was if they have had or not practical experience in any aspect, related to the EU (involvement in EU programs, institutions or civic activities).

1. Initial thoughts about the European Union

Unlike the tendency of considerable deterioration of the EU image in the last few years (the average score for EU27 2011-2013 goes down to critical 30-31%) positive attitudes in Bulgaria still prevail (a stable score of 56% by Autumn 2012). Moreover, according to standard Eurobarometer surveys Bulgaria remains among the countries with highest levels of trust in the EU overall (60% compared to 33% EU27 in Autumn 2012 Survey).

Nevertheless, the attitudes towards the EU demonstrated in the discussion conducted in Bulgaria were not so enthusiastic, **drawing rather gloomy image of the Union.**

Yet, **some features of the positive EU image are still valid**, being envisaged rather as hopes and beliefs than actually experienced positive effects of the Bulgarian EU membership.

Whether EU is perceived more positively or more negatively seems to be in close relation with the experience/knowledge respondents (do not) have in/about the EU. **The more experience or knowledge the respondents have, the more negative their thoughts about the Union are. However, the majority of the respondents have no practical experience in any aspect related to the EU (no involvement in EU programs, institutions or civic activities).**

The **main topics** which come out in the discussion are **divergent**, ranging from having moderately positive to strongly negative notions. The nature of topics mentioned vary from the opportunities the EU provides for business, education, travelling, to regulations established and the bureaucratic structures of the Union. Yet, most of the respondents demonstrate rather shallow knowledge and little or no involvement in these issues. It seems that the condition for being more involved in the matter is if one has had a personal experience – either related to job/professional engagements or through experience of relatives or friends.

The majority of respondents rarely search information or follow EU related topics. If so, this happens rather incidentally. However, the lack of regular information search or involvement with EU related issues does not prevent participants from evaluating different features of EU.

The **positive aspects** of the EU the participants outline are:

- That it is a union of free democratic countries and therefore **evokes expectations for EU to guarantee the continuation of democratic functioning of all Members** in the future.

"It is a union of democratic countries looking for larger markets. That is why they are united. And which, I hope, will guarantee us a democratic development in the future"

- That the EU has provided **numerous opportunities** to its member citizens. The most often mentioned one is the **free movement** of goods, capital and persons.
- Opportunities for **travelling** to other countries or acquiring a better **education abroad**
- **Infrastructure projects in Bulgaria**, which were subsidized with EU funding

Apart from the several positive aspects of the EU, the participants strongly emphasize its **negatives**. These negatives are both related to the EU as an institution, as well as the role and participation of Bulgaria as an (un)equal member of the Union and the way other Members perceive the country.

- One of the strongest and most agreed on theses is the self-critical attitude that **Bulgaria is not ready yet to meet all the requirements from the EU**. Moreover, respondents strongly agree that Bulgarian administration suffers from insufficiency of competent professionals who are often responsible for failures in different areas.

- There is a dominant sense that Bulgaria, being one of the poorest Member States, is perceived by the richer as a "second hand" country and this attitude would never change.

"It is where we will never be. Western countries will never accept us as equal to them and we will always be second hand. Just as we perceive Africans, they perceive us. There is no basis for comparison. I don't know how we can fit in the other EU countries."

- Another negative notion regarding the EU is the large number of rules and regulations established by the Union. These rules and regulations are often perceived as interference with national policy and internal affairs of the country. Such regulations are considered to be annoying or even obstructive in some aspects as for example SME business development.

"They force you to obey rules which we are not able to. As for the business – if you want to receive funding, you need to assure half of the amount you have applied for. This is unbearable and causes businesses to close."

- The clumsy **bureaucracy** is seen as an obstruction to overall functioning of the Union. It is especially negatively perceived as regards to implementation of projects funded by the EU. The personal experience with EU projects points that bureaucracy and accounting the projects consume much more time than the actual work. Thus, instead of results-oriented, they turn into accounting-oriented projects. This "vicious circle" devaluates the essential parts of the projects.

"The problem of the EU is the administration itself – complicated structures, very high paid, sometimes doing stupid things"

"I have serious problems with some of the projects I work on. They are of purely administrative nature – figuratively speaking, the paper work is seven times more than the actual work."

- Some respondents, especially the ones who have relatives living abroad, state **there are double standards in the EU and some countries are more privileged than others**. One example is with education, which is thought to be underprivileged in Bulgaria compared to other countries.

"It is not the same in all States. My daughter, who is a student in UK, has taken out a loan. She will return it after she has found a job that is well paid. Here in Bulgaria you get a loan and the bank is indifferent of whether you have found a job or not. So it is not the same in all countries."

There is a **difference in general attitudes towards the EU among respondents who have had some kind contact with the EU**, no matter whether with administration, sites, etc, **and those who have never had any experience. The more experienced, the more skeptical** the respondents tend to be. And vice versa, those who have no experience seem to be either more optimistic or neutral to the EU.

The key reasons for those expressing skepticism are the sense of being treated unequally in the Union (in comparison to other EU members) as well as not seeing any substantial results of the membership yet, excluding infrastructure improvements.

2. Sources of information and knowledge on the EU

The main sources respondents receive information from are rather similar and lacking diversity. Group participants mostly receive information on the EU from **TV news or internet news sites. The information is rarely intentionally sought** but rather randomly comes along with the rest of the news flow.

Only two of the respondents report searching information about EU related topics more regularly. This regularity, however, is in tight connection with the professional needs of these respondents. The sources of information used for professional purposes are entirely internet based - either directly on the sites of European institutions, specialized web portals or professional social networks, as internet is considered to be the most reliable source of information.

"I mostly follow up the information I need from media - television, radio stations but always double-check with internet. I usually go to the Europa site. The last time I was furious about the sugar and flushing cisterns volume directives made up by euro clerks - they only allow 3 liter volume of flushing cisterns for toilets".

For the rest of the respondents, **though the information from media (mainly TV) and internet news sites is considered to be insufficient, there is no further interest in searching more information about the EU** than what is randomly seen/heard of.

Some respondents admit they have checked the site of the EU after it was released in Bulgarian but have lost interest soon after that.

As far as personal life is concerned, some respondents mention they have interest in education topics - mainly as regards to opportunities for their children (among respondents who have children).

Given the fact that the majority of respondents do not intentionally search information related to the EU, it is hard for them to answer what topics they usually get informed about.

A trustful and quite influencing respondent's opinions source of information is hearing or seeing **close experience of friends, relatives and acquaintances**.

Participants declare they feel very distant from the EU and have **no motivation in obtaining** any kind of **additional information**. What causes the distance is the bureaucratic model of EU functioning, and the sense that institutions cannot be controlled, nor anything depends on their opinion. This position is shared both by respondents in younger and higher age, in both higher and lower social class.

3. Questions regarding the future of the EU

The visions of the future of the EU **are rather gloomy and pessimistic**. Optimistic features are more moderate and the pessimistic ones dominate. Respondents who are more informed on EU related issues demonstrate higher skepticism about the future of the Union. The following negatively perceived aspects regarding the development of the EU in the coming years are placed at the discussion:

- **Fears of Union dissolution**

The concerns in this respect are mainly related to the lately raised issues whether the UK would remain a member of the Union or not. Some respondents share concerns that Germany is slowly taking this direction as well. Thoughts on this matter lead to the conclusion that **if the most developed countries in the Union leave, it is doomed to decay**. If the countries, which carry the financial burden of the EU leave, the Union will certainly collapse according to respondents who pretend to be better informed about the EU.

- Certain concerns are expressed regarding the development of the **energy policy** of the EU. There are **two main aspects** respondents express concerns about:

- The **dependency of the EU on Russia** as regards to gas supplying.

"They talk about diversification all the time but I don't see it, especially after they rejected Nabucco pipeline".

- The **threats to the environment by using conventional energy sources** such as gas, oil and coal, and the need of inventing and implementing alternative sources of energy.

- **Fears of losing national identity.**

In this respect respondents are concerned about keeping the authentic Bulgarian identity in the context of EU's policies of unification, establishment of common standards and rules. The EU is perceived as sometimes interfering too much with national issues. It is believed that this globalizing process erases small countries' identities such as Bulgaria and preserves the identities of the developed and privileged ones.

"This is the idea of globalization, to take away national identities - not to have separate national states but a huge state called Europe. The well developed countries will benefit from globalization. The ones like us are easily manipulated all the time"

In spite of the prevailing fears and concerns among respondents, **still some hopes and expectations to the future of the Union are expressed**. In quite a few situations common EU goals are often mixed or confused with national priorities.

- One of the main goals outlined for the future is related to one of the most criticized aspects of the EU - administration and institutional functioning. Respondents believe that in the next few years one of the main challenges for the EU would be to **cut off budgets for administrative expenses** as well as **decrease the number of employees in administrative structures** of the EU. These economies are perceived as crucial for the EU in order to start working financially more effectively.
- Expectations (based on information from TV) that in the coming years there will be a **unified minimum wage for all Member States**. These are basically expectations of the EU improving the life standard in poorer countries, and in Bulgaria in particular. This expectation is expressed by

respondents in lower - social class, middle age, who in general feel more insecure about their future.

- According to respondents the EU should set high priority to **environment protection**. This is one of the aspects the EU is perceived to have achieved a lot and is respected for its efforts. Environment tends to be a top issue for younger respondents.
- The image of Bulgarian professionals working in the administration responsible for the European funds is strongly negative. They are perceived as lacking competence and even causing the low absorption of EU funds in Bulgaria. Therefore, participants demonstrate expectations towards Bulgarian administration to improve their competence.

Most of the respondents simply express critical attitudes towards the core challenges for the EU and its future but declare no further need to learn more on the problem areas discussed.

What respondents demonstrate most interest in, and admit they would appreciate if they had more information, is **what the EU could do to "help" Bulgaria**, especially with respect to education system, health care, absorption of EU funds, banking system. All these areas are believed (especially by less informed respondents) to be piloted or even regulated by the Union. For example, there are expectations for EU to regulate interest rates in banks in Bulgaria.

No questions were raised about the judicial system (which has been highly criticized by EU) nor the immigrant flows, which have been a hot topic over the last few months since the increasing number of refugees evoked a sort of internal crisis.

4. Current means of expression of citizens' views

All respondents feel **they can hardly have their voice heard either by national or EU institutions**. Yet, most of them have never tried to do so. There are doubts in the will of both Bulgarian and European institutions to help citizens and work in their favor. This is one of the considered reasons why they would not even try to express opinion. Other reasons respondents give are that overall **mistrust**

"inside" (by inside they mean in Bulgaria) is simply transferred to the "outside" (meaning Europe). Respondents feel a **huge gap between them and European institutions** but cannot tell how this gap could be closed. Predominant sense that **institutions are out of citizens' control** is present among all participants.

"We should be able to influence the institutions' actions but we cannot figure out how to do it."

"Well there is no audibility at any level. We can't be heard in Bulgaria, not to mention Europe hearing us."

Only one respondent has actual experience in addressing EU institutions - either by writing letters or emails. His attempts however to reach institutions and receive information he needs have all been disappointing. Reason for disappointment is that all the officials have done has been to send him to read on his own directives and regulations. Another disappointment expressed is timing of responses. It is stated that sometimes receiving a reply takes too long, and timing is often of crucial importance for implementation of projects. A delay in response from institutions can be fatal for the project's success.

"The EU reply to letters but this reply may come in three months. And the answers are always evasive. They answer in general but the answer comes from a secretary who tells you that you are generally right, but you have national legislation, so check it. I've sent post letters. They always answer but..."

Despite the predominant skepticism that citizens can hardly have their voice heard, respondents make some effort to at least name the possibilities to express views. What they bring into mind is online channels from the official sites of the EU, post mail, or direct contact with Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament.

A possible way to express views or make complaints is considered to be television.

Thinking on how opinions could be expressed and questions raised, respondents reach to the conclusion that they would like to learn more about **how they can contact local Members of the European Parliament**. A need of more information is claimed on how to reach the Members, whether they represent certain regions, the means of possible communication. Along with the lack of sufficient information, participants criticize the European Members of Parliament that they set a huge gap and all they do is fly from Brussels to Strasbourg, when they are

supposed, in their opinion, to listen to peoples' needs and bring their suggestions to the Parliament.

"With their high salaries they are reluctant to look at what is happening here."

"We are not represented by our Members. They represent themselves. They just account business trips, flights and that is it."

With one or two exceptions, respondents in the discussion admit they are not aware of how many representatives from Bulgaria there are in the European Parliament, who they currently are, or what the mechanism of electing them is. Thus, the need of more information on this matter is stated.

- In the discussion an idea of the possibility of recalling members of the Parliament in case they do not do their job emerges. This, in respondents' opinion, would be a proper mechanism for controlling EU Members and would force them to be more careful in their actions.

5. Perceptions of new ways for citizens to get their voice heard

It is no surprise that this part of the discussion was unfortunately rather unfruitful. Activating respondents' creativity was quite a challenge and as a result **very few ideas were brought to the discussion. The proposed ways of expressing opinions more or less already exist**. The ideas brought forward are:

- **Personal meetings held in EP Members' offices** in Bulgaria. The idea here is that there would be associates who could give appointments to citizens and hear their suggestions, comments, complaints, etc. This idea meets the resistance of some respondents as they do not believe it would be physically possible to meet so many people over a day.
- **Online communication** with EU representatives.
- The third and last idea generated, though confusedly expressed, is **to create some sort of Think Tank** where ideas of citizens are collected, or ideas are generated and widely discussed by citizens. Contra arguments regarding this idea are related to the concerns that establishing an organization of the kind would cost additional expenses to the EU. If so, the idea would not be received well.

6. Assessment of several propositions for improving citizens' involvement

Considering the lack of willingness for civic involvement and the general mistrust in most of the institutions, participants in the discussion have a more or less skeptical approach to all propositions discussed.

A. An information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a web site, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.

The spontaneous reaction to this proposition is that such a service is **superfluous** and not necessary at all. The argument for such reaction is that it would be an excessive expense, which would be just another waste of money. If such service would be opened, respondents would definitely insist on knowing what money it was financed with.

Only one of the respondents could recognize in this proposition an already existing service.

Concerns are expressed that if the officers are to be Bulgarian they would lack competence and would make it practically useless.

Whilst respondents react with apathy to the idea of having a web site and service answering questions either by email, telephone or mail, they explicitly reject the opening of offices in bigger cities, considering it useless.

B. Debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.

This idea is **spontaneously accepted with slight irritation**. The main reason for it is that they have seen different debates on TV, heard of forums but they have not seen any results so far from all media debates and other formats.

Participants admit they would not be influenced or stimulated to take actions by such a form of debates.

Yet, they assert that there has to be some form of obtaining information on EU related issues. An

example is brought from the past when there have been debates for the Rural Development program.

C. Opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of Europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.

This idea is generally **more positively perceived**. And more thought and comments emerged. The most positive aspect of such a way of citizen involvement is the possibility of **cross country exchange of citizens' views about the EU**. The majority of respondents even had additional propositions on how it could work more effectively, such as:

- Organizing public media debates on important to-be-taken decisions in order the information to reach as many people as possible, and then conducting a study across Member States.
- Constructing a web site for every country where online surveys are regularly conducted.
- Despite the overall positive reaction to this proposition, **arguments against it** were still brought forward:
 - The risk of spending too much money
 - Similar polls already existing. Here what is referred to are the forums open for discussions before voting important legal acts.

D. The possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your Members of the European Parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.

Respondents are quite **sceptical** about such a possibility. They do not trust politicians and therefore do not think this would be an actually working method. *"This is hypocritical. They should not be allowed to take any decision without the approval of the public."*

E. Consultations through the Internet organised by the European Commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.

This idea is also perceived rather reluctantly.

It is considered by some respondents to be doubling already existing possibilities and is therefore perceived as unnecessary.

A few of the participants express an opinion that it should be local Members of the European Parliament

whose responsibility it is to consult and inform citizens on the upcoming major decisions to be taken on European level.

F. Similar consultations, organised by our national government.

Attitudes towards this proposition are **even more reluctant** and even refused to be commented on.

G. An interactive service using the Internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.

Some respondents recognize such a form of communication and stimulation of involvement as already existing. **No interest or comments** are provoked by this proposition.

H. Information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take part in the coming election of Members of the European Parliament next Spring.

Such campaigns are perceived as necessary, in order to persuade people to participate more actively in the next elections for European Parliament. Given the traditionally low voter turnout on such elections, respondents admit that people need to be activated in one way or another. Moreover, almost all respondents report having very little or no information at all on the election candidates, on what policies they are to take, etc. This is why most of the respondents approve of the idea for active information campaigns. However, most of them confess such a campaign would not encourage them to participate in debates. The outcomes for them personally would be in acquiring more detailed information on the candidates, the process and purposes of the EP elections.

In respondents' opinion, the main, if not only the purpose of such campaigns should be to **explain to citizens why these elections are important** and how their lives are reflected. It is admitted that a serious crisis of representativeness exists in Bulgaria and is hard for people to feel represented in the EU.

"I do not feel represented in my own country, and we are talking about Europe – no way."

APPENDIX - DISCUSSION GUIDE

КАЧЕСТВЕНО ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ НА ВКЛЮЧВАНЕТО НА ГРАЖДАНЕТЕ В ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЯ СЪЮЗ

ГАЙД ЗА ГРУПОВА ДИСКУСИЯ

ВЪВЕДЕНИЕ: Питайте всеки участник да се представи с няколко думи, като каже как се казва, с какво се занимава, т.н.

Тема 1 /10 min/

Днес сме се събрали, за да поговорим за Европейския съюз.

Бихте ли ми казали какво първо ви идва наум/което се сещате за ЕС?

- Изчакват се спонтанни реакции
- **Изследвайте/попитайте за:**
 - Естеството на спонтанно споменатите теми за ЕС
 - Позитивни и негативни аспекти, отнасящи се до ЕС
 - Степен на базова заинтересованост и въвлеченост на респондентите в свързаните с ЕС теми/проблеми – следят ли темите, свързани с ЕС, засягат ли ги тези теми, по какъв начин.... Какво ги вълнува

Тема 2 /10 min/

По отношение на това, което знаете и си мислите за ЕС: бихте ли ми казали от къде идва то/от къде произхожда?

От какви източници получавате информация или чувате мнения за ЕС – разбирайте „източници“ в най-широк смисъл – от официални информационни източници до неформални разговори с приятели или други хора?

- Изчакват се спонтанни реакции
- Изследвайте/попитайте за:
 - Степен на разнообразие на споменатите източници
 - Какъв е характерът на информацията от всеки източник
 - Интерес/надеждност на всеки източник

Тема 3 /15-20 min/

Нека сега да обсъдим по-подробно бъдещето на ЕС и въпросите, които може да ви възникнат в тази връзка.

Вероятно има определени аспекти, които вие считате за важни, и бихте искали да знаете и разбирате по-добре начинът, по който ЕС работи и посоките, които следва/поема – тъй като е възможно да не получавате достатъчна информация от източниците, които преди малко споменахте.

- За какво по-конкретно вие лично бихте искали да научите повече?
 - Изчакват се спонтанни реакции
 - **Изследвайте/попитайте за:**
- Общото впечатление за степента, в която смятат, че имат добро или недобро разбиране/знание по тези въпроси/проблеми
- Възприятие за основните предизвикателства пред ЕС за идните години
- Изразена от респондентите необходимост от по-добро познаване и разбиране – по какви теми по-конкретно? С какво достъпната в момента информация по тези теми не е задоволителна?

Tema 4 /10-15 min/

Като граждани, би трябвало да имате възможността да изразявате мнението си и гласът ви да бъде чул по въпросите за бъдещото развитие на ЕС – дали да се одобри една или друга посока, по една или друга причина.

- Какви са начините да го направите?
 - Изчакват се спонтанни реакции
 - **Изследвайте/попитайте за:**
- Възприятие за възможности/трудности човек да изразява мнение по теми, свързани с ЕС и мнението му да бъде отразено - по какви начини?
- Схващане за причините това да е трудно
- Конкретни въпроси, по които респондентите биха искали да изразят мнението си като граждани и то да бъде отразено; очаквания в тази посока.

Tema 5 /15 min/

Има различни начини, по които мнението на европейски граждани като нас би могло да бъде взето предвид. Сега ви предлагам да се опитаме да помислим за възможни начини, каквито се сетите, просто да се отдадем на въображението си, и да дадем каквито идеи ни хрумнат, дори за момента да не сме сигурни/да не знаем как могат да се приложат на практика. Какви начини си представяме? Какво ви идва наум?

- Изчакват се спонтанни реакции
- Стимулирайте креативността на групата като окуражавате респондентите да „скачат“ от една на друга идея.

Tema 6 /25 min/

Сега ще ви представя няколко различни идеи, чиято цел е да осигурят по-добри възможности мнението на гражданите по темите, свързани с ЕС, да бъде чуто и взето предвид. Моля, да ми кажете какво мислите за всяка една идея:

- *Накарайте респондентите да отговарят по всяка позиция поред, и да се аргументират*
Достъпна ли е, дава ли възможност или не, защо, би ли стимулирала гражданите да вземат по-активно отношение по въпросите на ЕС, за тях работи/ не работи...

A. Информационна служба за функционирането/ начинът на работа на ЕС и неговите политики, която се състои от работещи информационни офиси във всеки голям град, уеб сайт, и служители, които бързо отговарят на всякакви въпроси по телефон, поща или имейл.

B. Организиране на дебати в основните медии между граждани и експерти по въпросите на ЕС, на тема поетите от ЕС насоки/пътища

C. Проучвания на общественото мнение за ЕС, които регулярно да се провеждат в цяла Европа, като така дават възможност на гражданите да научат какво мислят по тези теми техните собствени съграждани и гражданите на другите европейски страни

D. Възможността няколко пъти в годината във вашия регион да се провеждат срещи с евродепутати от България или други европейски политици

E. Отворени за всички граждани консултации по интернет, организирани от Европейската комисия по повод на всяко голямо решение, което предстои да се вземе на европейско равнище.

F. Подобни консултации, организирани от нашето правителство.

G. Интерактивна служба, използваща интернет и социалните мрежи да събира мненията на гражданите, техните желания или критики по отношение на решенията/политиките на ЕС.

H. Активни информационни кампании с цел да насърчават гражданите да се включват в предстоящите дебати, както и да участват в

предстоящите избори за Европейски парламент през следващата пролет.

Благодарим ви за това, че дойдохте и участвахте в нашата дискусия.

Ако след дискусията ви дойдат наум някакви идеи, моля, не се колебайте да ги споделите с нас.

(Оставете актуален имейл адрес, на който респондентите да могат да пишат за целта)

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