

The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Mountain Regions of Eurasia: A Comparative Study of Russia and Thailand

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Abstract

The article presents a comparative analysis of the involvement of non-governmental organizations in environmental protection in mountainous regions of Russia and Thailand. Its findings draw on public opinion surveys conducted in Russia, which are then compared with conclusions reached by Thai researchers studying similar issues in Northern Thailand. Despite apparent differences, both regions face remarkably similar environmental and social problems. There are, however, significant differences. Overall, in Russia, the performance of non-governmental (NGO) institutions in the mountainous regions is weaker than in Thailand. The reason for the difference is that Thai NGOs tend to be the expressions of the self-organization, particularly when they appear on the grassroots level to protect the interests of local communities. In Russia, NGOs tend to act in accordance with the governmental policies and in close interaction with the central government authorities. A stronger state leaves less room for the successful work of non-governmental organizations.

Introduction

In this article, we look at the place of the non-governmental organizations in the field of protecting the environment in mountain regions on the vast spaces of Eurasia. Two particular regions are selected for a comparative study. One is situated in Russia, in the North Caucasus. Another is in the Northern regions of Thailand. The differences between these two parts of Eurasia are apparent. Not only are they situated thousands of miles apart and in different climatic

zones, they also significantly differ in their human and social components. Despite those differences, both regions face remarkably similar environmental problems caused by climate change, globalization, capitalism, and the fundamental shift from traditional forms of society to a society increasingly driven by individualism and consumerism. Among the real obstacles to their sustainable development, one can list, according to Jack Ives (2004: xvii), administrative incompetence, corruption, and greed.

There are many aspects in which comparison of fundamentally different regions can offer insights in the way communities in mountain regions adapt to the evolving environmental, social, and economic changes. The field of comparative study of mountain regions is enormous in its scope, depth and, indeed, height. A comparative approach to mountain issues is clearly seen on the political level of the United Nations. A resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 2021 declared 2022 the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development (UN, 2022). An international attention to mountain regions is understandable. Mountains are the custodians and suppliers of natural resources on which life in the surrounding lowlands and remote urbanized and industrial centers depends on. In this respect, mountain territories and local communities play a significant role in national strategies and programs of socio-economic development.

There are similarities shared by many mountainous communities across the world. There is a general decline in birth rate, the movement of younger generation to cities, weakening of traditional cultural bonds, and the growth of consumerism. The mountainous societies remain certainly more conservative, but these general social trends are evident in many countries. With the weakening of family structures and decreased social cohesion on a local level, comes the increased role of the state. The state is the strongest player in the whole fabric of environmental management leaving local communities and non-governmental organizations lingering somewhere at the margins of environmental policies.

The topic of the impact of globalized social processes on mountainous communities around the world has been brilliantly discussed in the book *Life in the Mountains: Natural and cultural diversity – diversity of development models* written by Yuri Badenkov (2017). It offers an original theory of developmental ecology

through examining the diversity of life and ways of development of mountain settlements in diverse regions of the Alps, the Caucasus, the Himalayas, the Appalachian Mountains, and Altai. It identifies the problems of political and economic inequality of mountain settlements, their dependence on development policy, and the issues of preserving the unique ecology of mountains. The main focus is on spatial development, in which four interweaved areas are singled out: social, economic, legal, and geographical. The ideas of Badenkov provide the framework in which many Russian studies of mountain regions have been conducted and which can also be used to explore the same theme in other regions including Thailand.

Local communities in mountain regions have certain social and natural boundaries. The communal life is shaped first of all by the physical environment. However, people's behavior is also influenced by a different degree of adherence to socio-public, spiritual-religious, and other norms, rules, and stereotypes of behavior. In extreme natural conditions that are common for mountain regions, these norms and rules are formed through the direct interaction with the natural environment. At the same time, social patterns of behavior carry a significant impact on the preservation of the environment.

The human impact on the environment varies depending on the space of human activities. In mountainous regions, existential space has a "matryoshka" structure. In the center, there are well-mastered axes and nodes of intersection of material, social, spiritual, and cultural elements. They are represented by settlements and roads. Here the greatest intensity of social processes is observed. Therefore, the impact on the physical conditions is the strongest in this space. The environment that surrounds the axes and nodes of existential space is well mastered and deeply transformed by human activity. It is represented by fields, hayfields, and pastures. Much less

developed is the habitat in which there are no permanent settlements, and the use of nature is seasonal. The boundaries of this zone often depend on the factors of accessibility and remoteness. It is a kind of "storehouse" for additional resources, and also often serves to maintain the entire natural environment in balance. Undeveloped space is physical space, which serves as a certain potential for development.

Environmentally significant activities in the form of development and preservation are influenced by a specific structure of this existential space. On its basis, the social processes of self-organization and self-government of a local community begin to grow and, in their turn, influence its boundaries and the degree of the exploitation or conservation of natural resources. There is an additional external factor that directly impacts the environmental conditions: central governmental policies. Thus, the processes of the interaction with the environment can be analyzed as a combination of three institutional layers: informal self-organizational institutional mechanisms, local self-government as formalized institutions, and external governmental management.

Governmental management may incorporate the elements of self-organization and self-management. However, it acts mostly at the regional and state levels. The process of managing environmental development involves a sort of division of powers between the self-organizing, self-governing, and central government components of the system vertically (between local and regional structures) and horizontally (in various parts and areas). The vertical division of powers provides, first of all, for the creation, regulation, and support of systems of self-organization and self-government at the local level. The division of powers between different territories implies the creation of an effective system of districts and areas that perform their own, most optimal function for these territories.

In each specific case, the contribution of external (central government) and internal (self-organization) factors is different. State regulation is often of secondary importance in remote and hard-to-reach areas, where the role of self-organization and self-government increases significantly. To form an effective mechanism of environmental protection, it is necessary to skillfully use the elements of self-organization and self-government. This is especially true at a stage when the state is experiencing a shortage of means and instruments of influence.

Considering this sociological framework, it becomes obvious that non-governmental (NGO) institutions must take a special position in the mountainous regions since they are the expressions of the self-organization, particularly when they appear on the grassroot level to protect the interests of local communities. In the past, international organizations were important contributors to the growth of domestic environmentalist organizations (Betsill et al, 2007, p. x). They channeled donor investments into the development of many mountain regions of the world. They also provided valuable expertise and transferred knowledge. Their role is difficult to overestimate in raising environmental awareness among mountain people who remain educationally disadvantaged. The positive result of their work is noticeable in both countries. However, this assistance has been uneven and has significantly decreased recently for political reasons (Tysiachniouk et al, 2025, p. 788).

The focus of this paper is the role of non-governmental organizations in enabling local communities in mountainous areas to respond effectively to environmental challenges in two countries - Russia and Thailand. By comparing these cases, we aim to identify broader tendencies that shape the management of natural resources in mountain territories.

Methodology and Study Objectives

The methods of research are determined by its study objectives. Our broader objective is to gain a better understanding of social processes that take place in various mountainous regions of the Eurasian continent in the field of environmental protection. More specifically, the analysis focuses on the contribution of non-governmental organizations to a comprehensive system of environmental governance. This research employs a comparative method. Two mountainous regions are selected for comparison: the North Caucasus in Russia, and the northern highlands of Thailand. There are several reasons why Russian and Thai mountain territories have been selected for a comparative study.

The first reason is that comparing countries with highly diverse contexts allows us to identify common factors influencing local models of environmental management of mountainous territories. Juxtaposing two markedly different regions makes it possible to discern common tendencies that shape social responses to environmental problems and the selection of management approaches to address them. In other words, by utilizing the comparative method we seek to identify commonalities.

Another reason for our choice of the objects of comparison is the similarity of problems faced by local communities in both countries. Both Russia and Thailand are non-liberal states with the limited role of civil society (Cheskin & March, 2015. Theerapat Ungsuchaval, 2016). As such, they have displayed certain common characteristics. There is a high degree of dependence among local non-governmental organizations on international assistance. However, this assistance has significantly decreased for Russia and Thailand largely for political reasons. In relation to Russia, the involvement of international NGOs has virtually stopped because of the war in Ukraine. The decrease of international assistance to Thailand is

also noticeable according to local environmental activists although it is less dramatic as in the case of Russia.

In this paper, we analyze the role of non-governmental organizations in environmental protection in the North Caucasus and Northern Thailand by examining their interactions with the broader network of social institutions involved in environmental management. Our methodological approach emphasizes the institutional context: we investigate how NGOs operate within shifting local governance structures, how they coordinate with state and community actors, and how social changes in both regions shape their capacity to address environmental problems.

The paper does not attempt to present a strictly balanced comparative analysis of the two regions. Instead, it employs two complementary theoretical and methodological approaches. The Russian case is examined largely through the lens of development ecology (Bronfenbrenner, (1979, p.11), whereas the Thai case is approached from the perspective of cultural ecology (Sutton & Anderson, 2014, p.31). As a result, the analysis of the work of the NGO in the North Caucasus is embedded within a broad historical and socio-political context, while the examination of the Thai highlands focuses more on the cultural conflict between the hilltribes way of life and the state policy in which NGO advocacy play an important legal role. Despite their different emphases, these approaches can generate productive insights, as illustrated in the work of Yuri Badenkov (2017), briefly discussed in the introduction. Since the comparison of the role of the NGO is done in relation to a range of social institutions, it is unavoidable that their direct environmental impacts – such as contributions to biodiversity protection, forest cover trends, watershed restoration, or sustainable resource use – remain outside the scope of this paper.

The article has three parts. The first one offers a brief summary of the comprehensive sociological studies conducted by one of the authors of this article together with a number of renowned scientists and sociologists in Russia. Extensive quantitative data were obtained by means of a public opinion poll with a sample population of a total of 1000 people for two regions in the North Caucasus. Then it was analyzed within the framework of developmental ecology. Their work has been largely published in Russian language that is not yet available for a wider international audience (Shogenov, et al., 2018) even though a small part of this work has already been translated in English (Chechenov, et al, 2020). The second part compares the findings of the Russian researchers with conclusions reached by Thai scholars working within the framework of cultural ecology. The final third part attempts to single out common trends in the role of the non-governmental organizations in the field of environmental protection.

North-Caucasus Region

The North Caucasus region possesses an enormous diversity in terms of physical, environmental, social, and anthropological features. The following description applies largely to the three mountainous regions of Caucasus: the Chechen Republic, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia. Being the subjects of the Russian Federation, they are formed not so much on the territorial principle as on the ethnic one. Their formation goes back to the original Soviet policy of giving ethnic minorities a limited autonomy (Martin, 2001, p.1). Considering the fact that many ethnic groups are intermingled (particularly in Kabardino - Balkaria and Karachay - Cherkessia), the idea of administrative divisions on the ethnic principle is problematic. It may certainly create difficulties in the unified and comprehensive administration of environmental management programs.

One of the authors of this paper together with a team of distinguished Russian sociologists and geographers has conducted a rigorous sociological study on topical issues of public life and trends in the development of civil society in those regions. (Shogenov et al., 2018, p. 97). Extensive quantitative data were obtained by means of a public opinion poll with a sample population of a total of 1000 people for each of the regions of Kabardino - Balkaria and Karachay - Cherkessia. The representativeness of the sample was ensured by quotas developed in accordance with the key socio-demographic characteristics of the population of the republics on the basis of data specified in the regional territorial branch offices of the Federal State Statistics Service. The research also included the qualitative part in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of civil society and local public organizations. Each series of interviews ended with a joint seminar with the participation of these public figures, as well as representatives of the academic and expert community. At these meetings, the preliminary results of a public opinion poll and a series of interviews obtained in each republic were discussed (Ibid., pp.97-98).

This comprehensive study was possible thanks to the enthusiasm of local scholars and the financial support within the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (2014–2016) which contributed significantly to various academic and environmental initiatives within Russia before the war in Ukraine. Even though its focus was rather wide-ranging and transcending the issues of the environmental management and the role of non-governmental organizations by looking at the broad topics of civil society and civil participation in the named regions, the results of this study highlight the difficulty for non-governmental organizations to carry out effectively their work in those mountainous regions.

One of the striking results of the study is the indication of a lack of trust towards non-governmental organizations. In Karachaevo-Cherkessk Republic, only 18,33 % of respondents trust NGO meanwhile 81,67 % of the respondents trust the President of Russian Federation. In Kabardino-Balkaria, trust for NGO is somewhat higher: 37,38 % but still far behind the number of respondents who trust the President: 68.93 %. (The data is for 2014-2015. Ibid., p. 98). The reasons for a low degree of trust towards non-governmental organizations are found in political and socio-economic conditions prevalent for the North Caucasus mountainous regions.

Independent NGOs could not exist in the former Soviet Union. After its collapse, many NGOs appeared but they were considered as the product of unlawfulness and chaos that ruled in Russia during the transitional period of 1992-2000. In public opinion, the NGO are often associated with extremist movements that contributed to political instability of the post-Soviet state-building period. The distrust of NGOs affects the perception of civil society institutions as a whole as something closely related to politics and power. The share of the non-political civil sector in the republics is currently extremely insignificant to influence public opinion (Ibid., p. 99). Since 2000, the very existence of the NGOs and their operation is strictly controlled.

The scope for the activity of the registered NGO is determined, firstly, by federal laws and regulations, and secondly by the local ruling elites who have the power to interpret and apply the federal law. This is equally true for the once oppositional national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are now entering into compromise relations with various actors. The level of public trust to these organizations depends not so much on their program and policy, as on the source of their sponsorship and on the influential figures of local politics with whom they are associated in public opinion. The intro-

duction of strict control over external sources of funding, the adoption of the law on foreign agents (Russian Government, 2012. Russian Government, 2022), as well as criticism of Western liberal models of civic activity in the media have contributed to the credibility of the human rights civil movement as a whole including environmental rights movement. In particular, an analysis of public opinion in relation to the most prominent international non - governmental organizations working in the field of civil rights showed that the majority of respondents find it difficult to assess the impact of international NGOs on the stability of the country, and a third of respondents are convinced that they are destabilizing the situation (ibid.)

Thus, international non-governmental organizations have a minor impact in the regions of the North Caucasus. The NGOs that promote ethnic identity remain the most influential and relatively independent organizations. In local conflicts at the level between the state, ruling elites and local communities, they mediate. They offer an alternative channel of direct communication with the federal state organs by passing through the information controls of local and regional authorities. This takes place particularly when there is a conflict of local communities with local or regional governments. Their opinion is heard when the authorities make ethnically sensitive measures (Ibid., p. 106). Overall, these organizations do play a significant role in significant decisions affecting the environment, but their stance towards environmental protection is not necessarily positive. It depends on personal connections to the ruling elites and business actors. The issues of power and allocation of resources can easily override the interests of natural conservation.

Russian researchers noticed that the actual resource of civil mobilization at the republican level is not a civic identity and a corresponding sense of responsibility, rather it is the ethnic identity

that predominates in mobilizing local communities for a social action (Ibid.) In this context, environmental concerns are overweighted by ethnic considerations. In solving environmental issues, NGOs that advance national agenda are generally lacking a strong motivation to act. Environmental issues are solved largely by the state organs or by informally connected groups of local people. "In the context of the growing control of the state over the formal institutions of civil society and their gradual integration into the state agenda, the overwhelming majority of actual civic activity finds its manifestations in informal dimensions" (Ibid., p. 108). The weakness of non - governmental organizations can be explained by socio-economic processes that take place in the North Caucasus republics.

All three regions show certain similarities in socio-economic conditions that directly affect local environmental policies. First of all, traditional mountain communities are affected by economic changes and by the state laws particularly in relation to the land use. Secondly, the very existence of mountain communities often depends on the governmental financial support. Local communities react extremely painfully to the state's failure to fulfill its social security functions, especially if the state fails to provide services such as schools, hospitals, kindergartens. The availability of social benefits provided by the state allows local communities to gradually evolve and maintain the potential for innovative development including environmental management.

The form and methods of environmental management are based on the local concept of landownership which is customary limited to those who are involved in traditional occupations of animal husbandry and agriculture. There are, however, significant changes, for example, in the Chechen village of Makazhoy of the Vedensky district, agriculture is largely limited to growing potatoes, other vegetables, and sometimes corn for self-consumption. In another Chechen village,

Veduchi of the Itum-Kalinsky municipal district, gardening is actively developed comparatively recently. From the conversation and unstructured interview with members of a local NGO "Cheberloi" (Gunya, 2019), it appears that the amount of cattle is not significant, that the use of public pastures has to be agreed with the local administration, and that the main source of income are the payments made from the governmental budget in various forms. It is true that some income is still derived from the animal husbandry and agriculture such as making cheese, dried meat, dried fodder, but it is supplementary to a work for a local administration, school, or any government funded job. Another source of income is the credits obtained in accordance with agricultural development programs initiated by the government to support horticulture and farming. Access to credit is based on the ability of villagers to conduct independent economic activities.

The local community is closed to outsiders. Land use is regulated mainly by traditional teip (tribal) institutions. According to governmental rules and laws, it is possible for an outsider to get land for use and sell it, but the traditional rules do not permit selling land to "strangers". Land can be sold first of all to relatives, neighbors, or members of your "gar" (gar is a subdivision of the teip (tribe)). Each family clearly knows the boundaries of their lands, even if they are not registered by law. Recently, many people from mountain teips have begun to register their family and ancestral lands as property according to the government law, even if they do not use this land. However, the traditional institutions of land use and resource use still persist, even though the size of economic activity is not significant.

The change in the use of natural resources is more apparent in Teberda village of Karachay-Cherkess Republic. More people than in the villages mentioned above depend on the government for their income being employed in a bigger school, local hospital, kindergarten, water supply, electrical

and transportation services (Gunya, 2013, p. 133). Many locals are employed by the Teberda National Park. Tourism is another important source for local income. Teberda village is a striking example of transformation happening in mountain communities: decline of traditional economic activities such as animal husbandry, and the increased dependence on the income derived directly from governmental sources, or tourism. The latter is again dependent on the governmental investments in infrastructure. In other words, the well-being or even the very existence of many mountain settlements depends on the provision of social benefits by the state. This is particularly apparent in the provision of health care and education for children. The dependence on the state support is well documented in many mountainous regions of the North Caucasus (Gunya, 2019, p. 117).

It is, however, noteworthy that a lack of governmental support does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of mountain communities. Tashly-Tala village in Kabardino-Balkaria can serve as an example. There is a school, but the number of pupils is insignificant to allow an employment of many workers. The outpatient clinic was closed as well as the kindergarten, but, despite the lack of governmental support, the villagers do not leave the place. Almost all three generations are present in the village: older, middle, younger. The same cannot be said about other places. For example, the ancient Balkarian village of Köndölen faces a dire economic situation in which young people actively migrate to cities. The village, paradoxically, continues to exist because of the remittances sent by young people working elsewhere.

This brief description of mountainous communities in the North Caucasus is important to give a better understanding of the limitations for an environmental NGO to get involved. It becomes evident that the approach to the environmental management adopted in most Russian

regions does not allow an active participation of non-governmental actors. Two approaches in environmental management can be conventionally distinguished (Chechenov, et al., 2020). One of them focuses on the state level and is characterized by strict centralization and adherence to formal rules. The attention to local specific circumstances and the significance of informal institutions is minimal. The negative features of this approach include the lack of long-term stability caused by frequent changes in governmental policies and the restriction of freedom in launching environmental initiatives. Its positive features usually include the achievement of a certain short-term stability and the creation of certain external mechanisms of environmental protection.

Another approach is based on the self-organization of local communities. In the post-Soviet transitional years of the nineties of the last century, the elements of self-organization clearly manifested themselves in the form of private family entrepreneurship as one of the new emerging types of economic activity. This approach is more favorable to the participation of the NGOs as it does not depend on various forms of state interference. Its conduct and planning were and still are based on the mechanisms of local adaptation to specific natural conditions and includes traditional environmental management techniques developed over the centuries.

It is true that the second approach has not completely disappeared in the mountainous regions of the Caucasus. On the level of local self-government institutions, a special type of hybrid environmental management has been developed, which, on the one hand, includes traditional mechanisms of self-organization, and on the other hand, elements of modern institutional forms of environmental management. A hybrid approach is sometimes formed which integrates both regional and local, formal, and informal, old, and new environmental practices. It is particularly noticeable at the level of local institutions.

The state is attempting to influence the processes taking place at the local level. It promotes and implements the activities of some locally organized associations, such as the Council of Elders, the Women's Council, and others. These organizations, however, do not yet have real power in local affairs that is exercised by the Head of the administration. Mayors or Heads of Local Administrations are sometimes directly elected by residents, sometimes are appointed by local councils, often in collaboration with regional and federal authorities (Russian Government, 2003). While the central government does not directly appoint most local officials, it has substantial influence, particularly through the power of oversight ensuring that local administrations operate according to governmental regulations (Golosov et al., 2016, p. 521).

In this hybrid approach, there is very little room for an independent NGO. Major decisions affecting the environment are taken through a complex mechanism of the existing family-kinship and intra-local connections that subtly regulate public life. They run through certain channels of influence on the Head of Local Administration and in many situations limit his power within the framework of informal rules and traditions. In each village, there are informal rules that regulate joint life and environmental management within and between villagers.

Despite the proclaimed aspirations to protect the independence of administrative entities of local communities (Russian Government, 1993: Article, p. 130), the possibilities of self-government in the North Caucasus republics cannot be fully realized. The state interferes in the delicate mechanisms of self-government, appropriating rights to local resources. This reduces the scope of local initiative within self - organizational and self-governing mechanisms that take into close account local characteristics and needs.

The monopolizing power of the state may produce stability in the short term. However, as Russian researchers noted, "the possible consequences for stability of the continued state monopolization of the formal civil sector remain an open question. On the one hand, these processes reflect the ongoing process of institutionalization of the state itself in the North Caucasus, including the sphere of civil society. On the other hand, the low adaptability or rigidity characteristic of official institutions, as well as the limitation of the range of actors involved, restrain grassroots civic initiative, as well as the corresponding stabilizing potential" (Shogenov et al., 2018, p. 108).

One can conclude that in the current situation in the North Caucasus, it is difficult for the non-governmental organizations to find a niche in which they can successfully operate. Much of environmental management is monopolized by the state. It is widely perceived as the only guarantor of security and order at the local level to prevent inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts. Moreover, the non-governmental organizations could be perceived as the disturber of a fragile peace. They are not perceived as essential elements of environmental management in ensuring progressive and conflict-free development.

Another difficulty for non-governmental organizations to integrate in local mechanisms of environmental management is the parochial tendencies of local government. It is certainly a positive and an expected phenomenon that in remote mountain villages, environmental management is based not so much on the state laws and institutions, as on local mechanisms of self-government and self - organization. However, these local communities may not always welcome the outsiders who promote new environmental practices. Local communities are not always ready for the flow of information and the introduction of ideas from the outside.

In a sense, the environmental non-governmental organizations are squeezed out in the friction process that takes place between centralized system of governmental control and local aspirations to manage natural resources for their own benefit. None of the sides of this conflict is willing to accept an independent role of environmental non-governmental organizations. The latter, instead of focusing on specific environmental problems, have to be bogged in the fine complexities of local politics with enormous diversity of local social, political, and economic conditions and characteristics.

Despite these serious limitations, the need for non-governmental organizations is apparent not only from the point of view of bringing expertise and funds in improving local environmental management, but also from the necessity to create a system of environmental management that is not based on the ill-conceived and crude obedience to uniform rules emanating from the center. It is necessary to pay attention to the formation of end-to-end management mechanisms that harmoniously combine various levels (local, regional, national) and prevent antagonisms. This can be achieved not only through the distribution and delegation of powers between distinct levels, or the formation of optimal territorial units of government, harmoniously integrated into higher levels, but also through the free flow of expertise and funds carried out by non - governmental organizations.

Northern region of Thailand

In the field of environmental management, there are certain similarities and, at the same time, significant differences between the North Caucasus and the mountainous regions of Northern Thailand. Some of them originate in the overall political and economic structures of their respective countries, while others are regional in their nature. It is important to describe them even briefly to understand better the role of non-governmental

organizations in these two mountain regions of the Eurasian continent.

The northern region of Thailand is a mountainous area comparatively densely populated by hill tribes. The Thai government recognizes at least ten ethnic groups living in highland areas with a population of around one million people (Songkrant Pongboonjun, 2023, p.98). Half of them belong to Karen, the largest one among these hill tribe groups (Ibid. 99). Many of them live in or close to forests. Unlike Russia, they are not granted the right to form their regional government. Thailand is a unitary state, and the formation of provincial and district government offices is not influenced by the ethnic composition of the local population.

Despite many cultural, historical, and political differences between Russia and Thailand, one similarity is obvious. Thailand, like Russia, adopted a bureaucratic state structure in which many local decisions are made by government officials without necessarily the participation of local people (Munger, 2015, p.304). Until the democratization process at the end of the last century, the influence of the Thai non-governmental organizations in environmental management was minimal (Surathin Chaithongkam, 2020, p.94). Adam Simpson (2005, p. 4) described Thailand as a competitive authoritarian state in which green activists find it difficult to voice dissent, influence political discourse, and fully participate in electoral politics. The meaning of a competitive authoritarian state was explained in the work of Levitsky and Way (2002, p. 52): "Formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy." Simpson applied the definition to Thailand, pointing out many cases of overt harassment of NGO activists by the military and police as well as threats of violence perpetrated

by non-uniformed assassins (Simpson, 2005, p.15). Since 2005, Thailand has evolved, and the NGO activists have more freedom to act, particularly in the field of environmental protection. However, cases of persecution of human rights activists continued to be significant in the years 2017-2018 (Kendall, 2019).

The way the Thai government treated ethnic minorities mostly living in the mountainous regions could, to a certain extent, justify Simpson's assessment of the nature of the Thai political system in the past. Hill tribes faced many legal and policy challenges that endure to the present (Songkrant Pongboonjun, 2023, p.99). A harsh treatment of local people by governmental agencies, particularly in the matter of using land and forest resources, has been widely reported by various NGOs. A major cause was perceived in the lack of rights of mountainous people to the land on which they live. "In Thailand there is no recognition of the 'indigenouness' of hill tribe people. Consequently, there is no formal recognition of indigenous land" (Kalpalata & Pornpen, 2008, p. 12). During a long legislative process, the Thai government has increased control over the natural resources in mountain regions that are still largely covered by forest. In 1941, the Forest Act, B.E. 2484, was passed. This legislation brought under government control all forests that were not acquired by any person under the procedures of the Land Code. (Ibid., p.13). Use of forest resources required obtaining a license and payment of royalty. It strictly prohibited clearing forest for personal use under the threat of heavy penalties. Another law, the National Park Act, B.E. 2504, was passed in 1961. It gave authority to the government to establish national parks reserved for the benefit of 'public education and pleasure.' The land in those parks could not be owned or legally possessed by private persons. An unauthorized use of forest resources was generally prohibited. The third important legislation was passed in 1964: the National Reserved Forest Act,

B.E. 2507. It gave the authority to the government to establish nature reserves, within which the use of natural resources by local people was even more restricted than in the previous legislation.

In theory, local people could claim their rights to land they were using for many generations. Section 5 of the Land Code "provided the option to people occupying forest land as of 30th November 1954 to prove their claims and obtain a user certificate" (ibid., 15). However, the time for making such claims was limited by respective legislation. If a claim was not made, it was assumed that the person had renounced it. Those who presented the claims could obtain monetary compensation or permission to continue using the land. Because of the local protests supported by NGOs, the government softened its policy. It gave some recognition to the rights of mountain people who had been living inside the forests. The approvals to continue using forest resources were not regulated in statutory law and depended much on ministerial regulations. There were reports that they were given only for the land that had been used continuously for a period of sixty years (ibid, 16). "Even if the villagers could provide proof that they were using a piece of forest land before such land was declared to be protected forest area, still they could be evicted if such land was considered to be a watershed area or conservation forest" (Ibid.). According to the local NGOs, 85% of the people living inside the forests would be considered to be violating the laws relating to forests. About 4,192 villages are still located in reserved forests nationwide (Songkrant Pongboonjun, 2023, p.99).

The problem of staying in the protected areas is exacerbated by traditional practices of slash-and-burn agriculture. It is sometimes described as rotational farming. "People would grow rice and vegetables on a plot of land for one year and move to another plot the following year, leaving the land to recover for several years before returning to the farm" (ibid). Returning to the

previous plot would require clearing and burning grass and small trees that have grown since the previous use of the land. This practice is forbidden by the legislation referred to above.

In one case (in the Karen village of Mae Omki), forestry officials arrested two people who were clearing the land (Ibid). One was a mother of five children, and another was an 80-year-old man. They were charged with violating the National Reserve Forest Act B.E. 2507 and the Forest Act B.E. 2484. They claimed that they had used this land for many years already for feeding themselves as they did not have any other income. Being poor, they did not have money to secure bail. They also did not speak Thai and could not understand the nature of the charges against them signing confession statements. Villagers contacted NGOs that offered continuous assistance in this case. The lawyers working with NGOs attempted to protect the two defendants by means of convincing the court to affirm the defendants' right over their traditional lands.

The trial court did not examine the genuineness of confessions and sentenced the defendants to prison: one year for the mother and one year and three months for the old man. The defendants appealed, arguing that the lower court did not provide them with a qualified translator. The Appellate Court ordered a retrial. The new trial was in favor of the defendants, but the prosecutor appealed. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court, which ruled that "the defendants were not guilty on the ground that they did not intend to violate the law. However, the Supreme Court did not rule that the defendants had community rights over their lands" (Ibid., p.102). Since the land belongs to the state, the villagers have no right to use it without permission.

Even though the argument of the NGOs for the community rights to land was rejected in this case, it helped to mobilize local communities of hill tribes to legally challenge the state's power over natural resources and lands on the basis of

general constitutional provisions. This case is also different from previous cases where the NGOs did not challenge the monopoly of the state on forest resources. Rather, they accepted a mediating role in the conflict between governmental organs and the local mountain ethnicities. One example can be the conflict at Na-on village of Vienghang District on the territory of Chiang Dao National Park. In 2006, 25 government and military officers armed with heavy weapons arrived at the village and ordered the eviction of its residents under the threat of having their houses burnt and themselves punished according to the forest protection law (Kalpalata & Pornpen, 2008, p. 19). No written order was given. Activists from two NGOs filed a petition with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of Thailand on behalf of the villagers. As a result, the order of eviction was stayed, and a long process of negotiation between villages and the authorities followed with the active participation of the NGOs. In the end, the villages agreed to relocate on the condition of being provided with new houses and land suitable for cultivation.

In another similar 2006 case, 300 government officials, including armed military officers, arrived in Huaykon village and arrested 21 villagers on charges of encroachment of land within the Sri Lanna National Park (Ibid., p.23). The arrested people were soon prosecuted. 14 of them confessed to their crime. Later, more arrests followed along with eviction orders. The NGOs, IMPECT (Inter Mountain Peoples' Education and Culture in Thailand Association) and HPT (Highland Peoples Taskforce), submitted a petition to NHRC and the Lawyers Council of Thailand to investigate the case. They also provided legal assistance to the defendants. The NGO activists conducted an independent investigation and submitted evidence in favor of the accused (ibid., p. 26). Eventually the villagers were released on the condition that they would leave the area. Thai courts were willing in a number of cases to accept evidence submitted

by the NGOs (Ibid., p. 32). The NGOs also took part in establishing private foundations in constructing houses for evicted villagers.

In many cases, the Thai NGOs managed to strike a balance between the interest to conserve natural resources and the interest of local communities to benefit from them. Some NGOs are specialized in litigation, trying to protect the rights of local people. "Enlaw" is one of them that is well known in Thailand. It was founded by a Thai social activist and lawyer, Surachai Trong-ngam, with the support of the Blacksmith Institute, an American foundation willing to fund an environmental litigation NGO in Thailand (Ibid., p.32). Even though "Enlaw" focuses on pollution cases and community empowerment related to mega-project, it is also active in protecting the rights of indigenous mountain people in eviction proceedings as well as forest violation criminal cases. One example is the arrest and prosecution of 22 Bang Kloi Karen villagers in the mountains of the Kaeng Krachan National Park. They could face a jail term of 4 to 20 years. "Enlaw" as well as other NGOs, particularly Community Resource Center, offered legal service to villagers in this case (Manushya Foundation et al., 2021). The decision of the court was the provisional release of the defendant on the condition that they would not return to the park without permission (World Rainforest Movement, 2021).

Apart from involvement in particular cases, Thai NGOs actively promoted a new legislation that would allow local people, including those living in mountain areas, to manage forest resources. As a result, the Community Forest Law was enacted in 2007. However, mountain people leaders and NGOs criticized it for failing to recognize the rights of the community to manage local forests. "Rather through its strict rules, the law took away the space that different communities had created for themselves" (Kalpalata & Pornpen, 2008, pp. 61-62).

Sometime earlier, the National Environmental Quality Enhancement and Conservation Act B.E. 2535 (1992) granted individuals the right to manage and protect natural resources and the environment for the first time. It also gave NGOs the right to participate with the government in managing and protecting natural resources and the environment, with assistance from the government in such areas, such as organizing volunteers to assist in government management of environment; conducting public relations campaigns and dissemination of information to promote public environmental awareness; providing assistance to people in certain areas of the country, particularly in remote mountainous regions, to initiate projects or activities for environmental protection and conservation of natural resources; conducting study and research with respect to environmental protection and bringing to the attention of the Government the outcome of such study and research; and what is more significant, providing legal aid to people who are in jeopardy or afflicted by pollution damage as well as acting as the representative of such pollution victims to bring lawsuits for damages (Thai Government, 1992, Section 8). It is noteworthy that the law did not grant the right to NGOs to initiate civil law proceedings in relation to losses of biodiversity and also initiating criminal proceedings in both pollution and the loss of biodiversity cases (Surathin Chaithongkam, 2020, p. 94).

The activity sphere of Thai NGOs in mountainous regions is never limited to the protection of the local communities' rights. Kanokwan Manorum (2020, p. 370) distinguished other forms of the NGOs' involvement. Some of them attempted to solve environmental problems more by education and research than by political or legal action. Chiang Mai University academics were among the pioneers who advanced the knowledge-based approach of Thai NGOs (Ibid.). Other approaches advanced livelihood, people's participation, alternative development, and community culture (Ibid., p. 372).

In Thailand, environmental NGOs have received significant financial support from international NGOs and foundations. It is reported, however, that since 2012, international support for Thai NGOs decreased (Kanokwan Manorom, 2020, pp. 366-7). The Foundation (Project) for Ecological Recovery, a Thai NGO, has been supported by the German Heinrich Boell Foundation since the early 1980s (Munger, 2012, p. 8). This foundation is well known for advocating green political activism. It would be a mistake, however, to perceive Thai environmental NGOs as a purely Western transplant. "When the first international advocates for "environmental rights" appeared on the scene, Thailand's NGO community was already deeply involved in supporting community political development" (Manger, 2012, pp. 8-9).

The Foundation (Project) for Ecological Recovery became famous for initiating a successful national-level campaign to stop construction of the Nam Choan Hydroelectric Dam in a mountainous region that would flood a large part of the country's natural forest protected area, Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, which was later declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Pinkaew & Rajesh, 1992, p.4). Apart from national campaigns against major industrial projects, this NGO pioneered the so-called "Ecological Community Development program" that involved the NGO's activists going to villages in mountainous and other areas "to learn the situation of local people and work with them to look for solutions" (Ibid.). The NGO adopted two major approaches in its work. One was called the "strategic approach" (Ibid., p.5). It involved an attempt to build alliances among different groups that, for various reasons, were interested in the environmental measure advanced by the NGO. The reasons could be conservationist, religious, economic, or political. The alliances were built by personal interaction and environmental awareness campaigns. The second was called the "holistic approach" (Ibid., p. 9). It promoted local wisdom and the potential of local people in the

management of natural resources. "As community management systems are eroded and local people are increasingly accused of destroying their environment, the role and ability of communities to take care of their ecosystems is also gradually disappearing" (Ibid., p.10). The management of natural resources by a local community is opposed to the centralized governmental management, which was blamed for inefficiency and the destruction of the environment for the sake of economic profit.

Granting rights to local communities to manage natural resources is a controversial issue. Mountain dwellers do often destroy biological resources (Shytov et al., 2007). They often resisted the government conservation programs that attempted eviction from nature reserves, prohibition of traditional hunting or fishing, and restriction of freedom to plant crops on mountains. The conflicts between mountainous settlers and the authorities provided an opportunity for NGOs to play an important role in mediating between the two sides. They often provide legal aid in complex forest violation cases that can be litigated almost indefinitely (Mae Omki, 2015, p.64).

It would also be a mistake to represent Thai NGOs as largely political groups trying to protect local communities from state intervention and exploitation by big businesses. What is noteworthy in the activities of Thai NGOs is the religious element in their genesis. Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries shared their concern for the welfare, health, and education of the poor (Kanokwan Manorom, 2020, pp.367-8).

The growth of Thai environmental NGOs is remarkable. "By the year 1989, 12,000 local NGOs were set up, of which 44 percent were working in the field of welfare and development. They supported local people to realize their rights to protect natural resources for local livelihood and mobilized them to protest and negotiate with the government for sustainable resource management and making environmental preservation a top political

agenda" (Ibid.). Some of the environmental organizations were registered and obtained the status of a legal entity in the form of a foundation or an association. However, much work was done by non-registered temporal projects, groups, and forums often associated with colleges and universities (Ibid., p.370).

Because of the decline of international contributions, the Thai environmental NGOs are increasingly dependent on domestic sources of funding. Two sources are becoming important (Kanokwan Manorom, 2020, p.374). One is the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, funded by the state revenues, particularly from the sin taxes from the alcohol and tobacco trade. Another is the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), a public organization funded by the government. It allocates substantial research grants that aim at solving social as well as environmental problems and creating a knowledge-based society. In addition, there is the Thailand Environmental Fund (TEF) that provides funds for the projects of sustainable environmental management.

The strength of Thai NGOs is in their close cooperation with each other and the ability to organize a protest movement against a particular governmental measure that affects human or environmental rights (Aim Sinpeng, 2020, p.148). This cooperation is possible because of a common ideological foundation. Its core is articulated by Thai academics in educational institutions and practiced by their students. Despite the diversity of views among NGO activists, it would not be a mistake to classify it generally as a movement opposed to authoritarianism, capitalism, and individualism in promoting community culture (Saichol Sattayanurak, 2020, p.247).

Non-governmental organizations and the environmental protection in Eurasia

Having given a brief survey of the role of the NGOs in environmental management in two diverse mountainous regions of Eurasia, we can

see certain similarities and differences. As for the similarities, it is obvious that the NGOs have an important role to play in the overall structure of the environmental management. In both countries, NGOs mobilize local people to protect the natural resources. Both Russian and Thai NGOs sometimes, for different reasons, receive less financial support from international organizations. Equally, Russian, and Thai big business entities are little motivated to fund extensive environmental projects in mountainous regions. They perceive them to be ineffective, invisible, or irrelevant (Crotty et al., 2023, p.39).

As a result, funding of NGOs is left to small donations from environmental enthusiasts or governmental support. Both Russian and Thai governments offer some assistance and collaboration, viewing the environmental NGOs as useful assistants. At the same time, both countries do not promote increased business self-regulation and collaborative governance arrangements by means of soft law that favors the engagement of environmental NGOs to the same degree as it is done in Western Europe (Talesh, 2022, p.107). As a result, the NGOs are largely excluded from making important environmentally significant decisions. They are treated with suspicion. Their funding by governmental agencies is done, perhaps for the political reasons to prevent challenges to the state's economic activities (Crotty et al., 2023, p. 40).

In order to play an important role in environmental management, environmental NGOs require funding. Considering that the flow of funding from foreign sources is decreasing in Thailand and virtually stopped in Russia, and also that the businesses in those countries have low interest in supporting environmental NGOs with the comparative weakness of the middle class to engage in pro-environmental initiatives, the only substantial source of support remains the state. It was already mentioned above that the Thai public grants give significant support to

environmental NGOs via such organizations as the Thailand Research Fund. The same tendency has also become apparent in Russia, as it has allocated recently billion rubles (more than 11 million USD) to the support of NGOs (Russian Government, 2025). This allocation of the funds is highly centralized. It is carried out by a special committee that consists of 22 members, mostly high-ranking government officials, such as one vice prime minister, the minister of natural resources, the minister of justice, etc. Only one representative of NGOs is included: the head of the Autonomous Non - Commercial Organization "Eurasian Center for the Conservation of Far Eastern Leopards." This environmental organization, however, is also closely connected to the top level of Russian bureaucracy (Kommersant, 2017).

It appears that environmental NGOs are much more dependent on governmental support in Russia than in Thailand. The scope of the Russian presidential grants is impressive. Only for the first 2 months of 2025, around 40 organizations, many of whom are environmental NGOs, received presidential grants whose amount varies from one hundred thousand rubles to 15 million rubles (Presidential Grant Fund, 2025). The state funding, however, remains insignificant for grassroots NGOs. According to a leader of a new NGO, "Nature and People" that was formed by the activists who formerly worked with the dissolved WWF Russia, the main source of funding comes from donations of private individuals and businesses, not state grants (Rybakov, 2024).

The scope of the new NGO still lags far behind the work done by the Russian section of the WWF in the past. In almost 30 years, the latter has carried out 1,500 field projects to preserve and increase Russia's natural resources in 47 regions of the country, including the Northern Caucasus (Kommersant, 2023). The new organization in one year carried out around 16 projects only (Nature and People, 2024). One reason for the much smaller scope is the lack of funding. It is unclear

how much the organization "Nature and People" received in donations, but it is certainly much less than the donations given to WWF Russia. According to influential Russian newspaper Kommersant (2023), in 2021 WWF Russia received 1.1 billion rubles from sponsors. More than 70% came from foreign structures, including WWF branches in the UK, Germany, and Sweden, as well as the European Commission and the German International Climate Initiative. WWF Russia received only 4.4 million rubles from the Presidential Grants Fund and 109.6 million rubles from Russian companies.

The case of WWF indicates that the Russian environmental NGOs are not tolerated if they challenge the economic ambitions of the state. On March 10, 2023, WWF was added to the list of foreign agents by the Russian Ministry of Justice for the following reason: "Under the guise of protecting nature and the environment, biological diversity of species, representatives of the fund tried to influence the decisions of the executive and legislative authorities of the Russian Federation and obstructed the implementation of industrial and infrastructure projects," the ministry's explanation said. "The fund disseminated negative information about decisions made by government bodies and the policies they pursued" (ibid.).

After 2022, one can observe a sharp decline in the activities of Russian NGO organizations. It can be seen in the recent case of Ecological Active, a non-governmental organization in Altai Krai, another mountainous region of Russia. It became famous for initiating legal proceedings against a gold mining company, Anui, and the governmental authorities that authorized its mining activities that led to significant environmental harm (Zuzin, 2025). Anui obtained a license in 2013. In 2019, the Central District Court of Barnaul city revoked the license, citing the harm to the endangered species affected by mining. However, in 2024, the mining operations resumed as a new license was issued to the same company.

The authorities cited new scientific evidence that mining is not harmful. In the new case, however, Ecological Active is not mentioned. The protest is led by local people and some academics from local universities. Why is the Ecological Active ceased from being active? It is not reported. What is known, however, is that the Ecological Active worked closely with the WWF in the past before its prohibition (Altaiprirod, 2020). This case underlines the tendency of the narrowing field for the environmental NGOs in Russia in general, which will also be reflected in the northern regions of the Caucasus.

In this respect, the Thai government offers by far a greater freedom for the NGOs to challenge the economic decisions of the state. The apparent difference in the role of the non-governmental organizations across the Eurasian continent is not surprising. Even though different regions may face similar environmental problems such as deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution, the social responses to them will inevitably be different considering various political, social, and cultural contexts.

Several differences between the northern regions of Thailand and the regions of the North Caucasus can be identified. The most apparent one is found in the separate roles of the state in the social life of the two respective regions. In the North Caucasus, the state exercises far greater power in controlling social life. This is particularly seen in the distributive roles of the state. People in the North Caucasus are completely dependent on the state's provision of social benefits such as pensions, schooling, childcare, and medical care. Mountain people in Thailand also receive some benefits from the state, but those benefits are seen as complementary. One reason for the difference between the regions is that the source of the well-being of the people in the North of Thailand remains their agricultural labor. In the North Caucasus, the situation is reversed. The main income comes from the state while agricultural

work is supplementary. Even though salaries, wages, or social benefits provided by the Russian state are not high, most local people depend on them. In Thailand, mountain people begin to receive more income from being employed by the state, but the majority remain self-employed in their agricultural work or providing tourist services.

The preponderance of the Russian state in local affairs, including environmental management, reduces the scope for the possible involvement of the environmental non-governmental organizations. In Thailand, the NGOs play by far a greater role in carrying out the task of environmental protection. There are more of them, they possess more funds, and what is more important, they attract more young people to get involved in their work. Thailand is a place whose political, social, economic, and cultural environment is certainly more favorable to the activities of the environmental NGOs than Russia. There are several reasons for this conclusion.

First of all, the NGOs in Thailand are not subject to rigorous state control. Second, they have more sources of funding. The Thai national wealth is less concentrated in the hands of the state or a narrow circle of rich people. Even though the disparity between the rich and the poor is also striking in Thailand, it is more apparent in Russia (Buasuwan, 2018, p.158). Russia and Thailand are both classified as countries with upper middle income (Credit Suisse, 2022, pp.23-24). The wealth per adult appears to be lower in Thailand compared to Russia: 24,638 versus 34,005 USD (Ibid., pp.111-112). However, there is a significant difference in the position of the middle class. The median wealth per adult in Russia is significantly lower: 6,919 USD compared to Thailand's 8,662 USD (Ibid., pp.111-112). The median wealth per adult expresses the amount of wealth owned by the middle class. The number of people belonging to the middle class in Thailand is much larger than in Russia. The distribution of adults by wealth range in Thailand is as follows: the poor people

in Thailand whose income is under 10,000 USD comprise 53.6% of the total population, and the middle class whose income is between 10,000 and 100,000 USD makes 43.8%. In Russia, the poor make 66.9% and the middle class 29.4% correspondingly (Ibid., pp.121-122). The difference is not only in the numerical superiority of the middle class in Thailand. The Thai middle class is more independent from the state and various state benefits. This independence is reflected not only in the source of income, but many Thais have their own private business and private land. It is also seen in the wide availability of private education and private health care. Thais have greater opportunities to obtain their education in private educational institutions in Thailand or their university degrees in the Western universities (Buasuwan, 2018, p.161). As a result, a stronger Thai middle class is more independent from the state and is more motivated to support various non-governmental environmental initiatives. In other words, the economic and social structure in which the state plays a less significant role is better for the existence and the environmental activity of the NGOs. In Thailand, more people seek employment in the private sector. Working for an NGO is not seen as less advantageous than working in a government office.

Another significant difference between the North Caucasus and North Thailand is that the mountain people in Thailand are not experiencing ethnic tensions. A Thai mountain village normally consists of a single ethnic group. However, neighboring villages often belong to different ethnicities. Despite living next to one another, ethnic groups rarely conflict with one another. Certainly, the conflicts do occur concerning the use of natural resources, but they are generally settled by negotiations without resorting to governmental intervention (Hares, 2009, p.386). The local administration is formed not on an ethnic principle. The positions in local administration are open to all ethnicities. In this respect, local and regional

governments stand above the interests of a particular ethnic group.

The cultural influence of Buddhism as discouraging conflict might play a positive role (Klausner, 1987). The mountain villages in Thailand, even though ethnically homogeneous, are religiously diverse. Christians, Buddhists, and animists live peacefully together. The culture of tolerance and the avoidance of mutual confrontation is one of the conspicuous characteristics of the society in the Thai mountain regions that creates a comfortable zone for an environmental NGO to work.

Conclusion

Comparing the role of the environmental NGOs in two mountainous regions in Russia and Thailand has drawn us unavoidably into big political and economic issues. The conclusion is rather simple that it may not have required the toils of examining complexities of work of non-governmental organizations in the vast spaces of Eurasia. A stronger state leaves less room for the successful work of non-governmental organizations. The comparison, however, offers something more than this old political truth. It shows two separate tendencies in non-liberal states. The tendency in Russia is to stifle any independent work of environmental activists. The tendency in Thailand is to let the non-governmental organizations play an important role of mediating between the government and mountain dwellers. As the result, Thailand seems to be offering at the moment much better opportunities for the environmental NGOs to engage in the protection of natural resources in its mountainous regions. They are not subject to strict governmental control. What is more important, they attract many people, often with strong religious motivation, to take part in the noble task of caring for nature. In this respect, Russia is still awaiting the birth of a strong environmental movement based on the religious foundation.

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