

## VISUAL DISCOURSE IN ROMANIAN GEOGRAPHY TEXTBOOKS DURING SOCIALISM (1948-1989)

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### ABSTRACT

*Studies on Geography textbooks published during socialism followed several objectives. While most studies were interested in stereotypes, a few authors dedicated attention to their contribution to socialist education within the framework of socialist propaganda. Thereby, visuals played a central role. As a result, this study aims to uncover, in an explorative manner, the ways Geography textbooks dedicated to the national space contributed to a visual discourse in service of socialist propaganda. Content analysis served to explore the visuals included in three textbooks dedicated to the Geography of Romania. Published during the late phase of state socialism, the textbooks presented the curricular prescriptions for the past year of primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education. The results show that less than half of the discontinuous text elements were images. Also, the findings indicate the declining number of images across the educational levels. Despite the clear focus on the national space, the images included in the three textbooks emphasized the material achievements of the socialist progress instead of contributing mainly to nation-building.*

**Keywords:** representations, Geography, textbook, Romania, socialism

### INTRODUCTION

Textbooks mirror societal process and priorities (Bagoly-Simó, 2008a; Groza, 2017) and, therefore, are an excellent source for "understanding the society which created them" (Bargal, 1994, p. 224). Almost three decades after the

fall of the Iron Curtain, former socialist European societies continue to follow a path-dependent post-socialist transformation (Bagoly-Simó, 2012). While acknowledging their hybrid nature, little research was done on the role of images in Geography textbooks published during state socialism. This exploratory study aims to uncover the ways Geography textbooks dedicated to the national space contributed to a visual discourse in service of socialist propaganda. Following a brief discussion of textbook research on the (post-) socialist and (post-)soviet time, the paper describes the methods used, introduces the sample, presents the results, and following their discussion, sums up by formulating some concluding thoughts.

## **(POST-)SOCIALISM AND TEXTBOOKS**

When proclaiming that post-socialist transition was over, von Hirschhausen and Waelde (2001) underestimated the effect of both length and breadth of the process affecting millions of citizens living in former socialist societies and in the former Soviet Union. Particularly education continues in a path-dependent course with myriad hybrid structures still linking back to the half of century of state socialism.

When referencing European post-socialist transformation, Massey (2005) limited her summary on the process in a footnote to '1989 and all that'. As Bagoly-Simó (2012, 2013) repeatedly pointed out, such views are far from being rare. Academic Geography's interest in the region and the post-socialist condition peaked briefly around 1989 and 1991 leading to a few research projects and publications. However, a quarter of a decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain, as Bagoly-Simó (2016) concludes, the echo is modest at best.

In an overview of textbook production and the textbook market in Romania, Bagoly-Simó (2016) explored the particularities of post-socialist Geography textbook production. Thereby, he identified several hybrid structures conserving both socialist and new elements, all of which are indicative of a path-dependent development still in progress. Similarly, in a comparative international study, Bagoly-Simó (2013) also explored the ways textbooks represented the process of post-socialist transformation and concluded that most case studies painted an outdated picture of a region sunken in ethnic conflict, shaken by homeless children, and fighting unprecedented environmental pollution. Thereby, the textbooks not only used outdated visuals, but also constructed their discourse on selective (Western) perceptions of the new social reality following state socialism.

Research on Geography textbooks published during state socialism follows various objectives. In a comparative study, Bagoly-Simó (2008) contrasted the representation of Physical Geography in German and Romanian textbooks published during socialism with the aim to explore

their contribution to propaganda. Bridging the socialist/post-socialist divide, Mead and Silova (2013) placed the literacies of post-socialist childhoods at the junction of different readings of socialist upbringing and neoliberal futures. Relying on Newman and Paasi's (1998) pedagogies of space, Silova et al. (2014) analyzed post-soviet textbooks on representations of national territories, borders, and identities. Thereby, visual elements played a central role.

The potential of images to communicate and popularize dominant ideologies is researched in connection to the role of textbook ideology in social reproduction of certain values (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018). It is a fact that Geography builds canons (Mayhew, 2015), but during totalitarian political regimes, also the scientific canon of Geography was shaped (Caramelea, 2015; Dulamă & Ilovan, 2015, 2017; Dulamă et al., 2019). The topics are those preferred by the governing ideology and by the political hegemonic discourse (Kucerova et al., 2018). While "Geography textbooks represent an underutilized raw material for understanding the society which created them" (Bargal, 1994, p. 224), they also entail discursive representations in the form of text and images, imprinting "the consciousness of society" (Cherepanova & Filippova, 2018; *cf.* also Kucerova et al., 2018; Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018; Caramelea, 2015), contributing to building "a cultural and spatial reality" (Baudinault, 2016, p. 1).

While research in Geography Education over the last years focused on the role of images in the process of teaching and learning Geography (e.g., Janko & Knecht, 2014), the aim of this paper is to uncover, in an explorative manner, the ways Geography textbooks dedicated to the national space contributed to a visual discourse in service of socialist propaganda.

## **METHOD AND SAMPLE**

Content analysis served to explore the discontinuous text featured in Romanian Geography textbooks published during state socialism. The first analytical step consisted of software-assisted in-vivo open coding of all discontinuous text elements according to their type. During the second step, images and other discontinuous text elements were separated. The third step included several iterations leading to consolidated categories. During the last step, the following nine categories were consolidated: nature, industry, tourism, hydropower, agriculture, infrastructure, socialist settlement, urban, and rural. These nine categories served to compare the textbook published for the three educational levels.

Given the exploratory nature of the research presented in this article, the sample consisted of merely three Romanian Geography textbooks. During state socialism, the national publishing house Editura Didactică și

Pedagogică held the monopoly of the textbook market and produced one textbook for each school subject and each grade. Along with the textbooks published in Romanian, the publishing house also translated selected textbooks for students of the Hungarian and German ethnic minority. However, Geography of Romania was exclusively taught in Romanian. Despite the existence of solely one textbook for each grade and subject, the sampling rested of four principles. First, the final sample had to consider all three levels of formal education in socialist Romania, namely primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school. Second, given that Romanian school Geography traditionally combined a spiral curricular with elements of a linear approach, the textbooks for the three educational levels required, for the sake of comparability, a similar thematic structure. In consequence, the sampling considered the textbooks for grades IV, VIII, and XII, each of which was dedicated to the Geography of Romania. Third, despite the slow reform pace and minimal change in content (Bagoly-Simó, 2008), the textbooks had to exhibit similar publication dates. As a result, the process of sample constitution considered three textbooks published during the decade of the 1980s. Fourth, the exploratory work targeted a consolidated visual discourse which was expected to have evolved by the 1980s.

## RESULTS

The three analyzed textbooks contained a total of 329 discontinuous text elements distributed across 392 pages. Overall, images accounted for 41% of all discontinuous text elements (Table 1). Nevertheless, the share of images varied across the sample. The primary Geography textbook contained the highest number (73) and share of images (62%), followed by the textbook for lower secondary education featuring 52 images accounting for 39% of all discontinuous text elements. The textbook for grade XII of upper secondary schools used a total of 16 images that represented 21% of the discontinuous text included in the textbook. These numbers corresponded to an average of 0.59 image/page in the primary, 0.4 image/page in the lower secondary, 0.1 image/page in the upper secondary Geography textbook, and an average of 0.4 image/page across the entire sample.

The Geography textbook for **primary schools** carried the title *Geography of Romania (Geografia României; Iancu et al., 1989)* and contained four types of discontinuous text, namely images, maps, block diagrams, and graphs (Table 1). Thereby, the images accounted for more than half (60%) of all discontinuous text elements followed by maps (26%).

**Table 1.** Types of discontinuous text elements across the sample in absolute numbers (source: authors)

Textbook for Grade	Pictures	Maps	Block diagrams	Graphs	Sections
IV	67	29	13	3	0
VIII	52	78	2	1	1
XII	16	61	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>

The images featured in the Geography textbook for primary education were distributed across eight categories (Table 2), two of which, namely *tourism* (36%) and *industry* (22%), concentrated more than half of all images used as part of the discontinuous text. The category *infrastructure* primarily focused on socialist infrastructure projects. Similarly, the categories of *socialist settlements* and *urban* set a clear focus on the results of socialist spatial planning and development both in the urban fabric and in rural settlements. The textbook dedicated the same share of images to *nature* and *agriculture*, with an emphasis on technology-driven agriculture tied to cooperatives of production. With merely six images, the share of *hydropower*—represented by dams—is modest.

**Table 2.** Number of pictures in the textbook for primary Geography according to categories and chapters (source: authors)

Chapters	Pictures (total)	Nature	Industry	Tourism	Hydropower	Agriculture	Infrastructure	Socialist Settlements	Urban
Cover	7	1	1	2	2		1		
Our Country, the SRR	0								
Geomorphology	14	4		8			1	1	
Climate	1			1					
Hydrology	9	1		4	2		2		
Population and Settlements	6			1			1	2	2
SRR's Economy	0								
Industry	14		14						
Agriculture	6					6			
Transportation	2						2		
Commerce	4			4					
Questions	4			4					
Exercises and Tasks	0								
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>

Regarding the distribution of images across the chapters, the primary Geography textbook showed an unbalanced distribution. Both the chapter dedicated to Geomorphology and Industry contained the highest number of pictures, 14 each (each one-fifth of all the pictures featured in the book). However, while the introduction of geomorphological content combined images depicting *nature*, *tourism*, *infrastructure*, and *socialist settlements*, the pictures used in the chapter dedicated to Industry solely showed socialist plants and industrial production. Entailing pictures belonging to different categories remained the exception, while most chapters only showed pictures of one category, such as *tourism* in the chapter Commerce, *infrastructure* in Transportation, or *tourism* in Climate.

Seven of the eight categories identified in the primary Geography textbook depicted humans and human activities. Moreover, socialist societies and their material products remained at the core of all pictures included in the textbook. For example, historical urban fabric only appeared in contrast to the enriching socialist architecture. Similarly, pictures showing industrial activities opted against traditional industrial centers developed, for example, during the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy in Transylvania, and decided to promote the products of socialist industrialization.

Pictures coded as belonging to the category of *nature* represented a natural environment largely untouched by humans, however, always in service of the socialist society. Most strikingly, the pictures dedicated even to the physical geographical topics framed the natural environment as part of touristic and leisure activities.

The Geography textbook for **lower secondary education**, titled Geography of the Socialist Republic of Romania (*Geografia Republicii Socialiste România*, Giurcăneanu et al., 1986), featured, along with the four types already named in the case of the primary Geography textbook (Iancu et al., 1989), sections as the fifth type of discontinuous text element. As shown in Table 1, the textbook set the main emphasis on maps (58%), followed by images (39%) as the second frequent type of discontinuous text.

The 52 images included in the lower secondary Geography textbook represented nine categories. In addition to those presented above, the textbook by Giurcăneanu et al. (1986) also used images of the rural area and villages, which constituted the ninth category of the *rural* (Table 3). The category *tourism* concentrated the highest share of images (23%), closely followed by the *industry* (21%). While *nature* and *infrastructure* reached the same of share of 15% of all images each, the three categories containing images of settlements (*socialist settlements*, *urban*, and *rural*) concentrated 15% of the images. Thereby, the clear emphasis was on *socialist settlements* with ten percent of all images belonging to this category. The fewest images were counted for the categories *agriculture* (4) and *hydropower* (1).

**Table 3.** Number of pictures in the textbook for lower secondary Geography according to categories and chapters (source: authors)

Chapters	Pictures (total)	Nature	Industry	Tourism	Hydropower	Agriculture	Infrastructure	Socialist Settlements	Urban	Rural
Cover	2	2								
Location, Borders, and Surface	0									
Physical-geographical Setting	0									
Geomorphology	12	3		5			1	1		2
Climate	0									
Hydrology	5	1		3			1			
Vegetation, Fauna, and Soils	0									
Population and Settlements	7		1	1				4	1	
SRR's Economy	0									
Industry	11		10		1					
Agriculture	4					4				
Transportation	3						3			
Commerce	0									
Tourism. Main Destinations	8	2		3			3			
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>

The distribution of the 52 images across the thirteen chapters of the lower secondary Geography textbook showed an unbalanced image. The two longest chapters dedicated to Geomorphology and Industry featured a similar share of one-third of all images each, followed by the concluding chapter discussing Tourism (15% of all images) and the chapter introducing content on Population and Human Settlements (14%). Overall, less pictures were counted in chapters dedicated to physical geographical content (32%) as opposed to introducing facets of Human Geography. Also, most chapters included pictures belonging to several categories, with the exception of Agriculture and Communication focusing solely on *agriculture* and *transportation* respectively. The remaining chapters contained pictures belonging to at least two different categories. Also, the two physical geographical chapters, Geomorphology and Hydrography, that used images, tied the category *nature* to those of *tourism*, *infrastructure*, but also to *socialist settlements* and the *rural* (the latter only to apply to Geomorphology).

Pictures dedicated to the natural environment were coded as belonging to the category *nature*, and merely accounted for 15% of the 52 images counted in the textbook for lower secondary Geography. Except for two pictures identified in the chapter dealing with Tourism, all pictures of this category remained tied to physical geographical content. Nevertheless, pictures belonging to the category *nature* were part of chapters that also used visual elements pertaining to the categories of *tourism* and *infrastructure*. As with the textbook for the primary school, Giurcăneanu et al. (1986) also used pictures of nature in service of the socialist society, particularly with regards to its potential for leisure and tourism.

Finally, the textbook for **upper secondary schools**, dedicated to the Geography of the Socialist Republic of Romania (*Geografia Republicii Socialiste România*, Tufescu et al., 1981), merely contained two types of discontinuous text element (Table 1), namely pictures (21%) and maps (79%).

The total of 16 pictures included in the textbook covered only six of the nine categories (Table 4): *socialist settlements*, *urban*, and *rural* remaining without image-based visualization. *Nature* and *tourism* were, with four pictures each, accounted for half of all the images counted in the upper secondary Geography textbook. The remaining images belonged to the categories *industry*, *agriculture*, *infrastructure*, and *hydropower*.

Less than half of the 13 chapters constituting the upper secondary Geography textbook used pictures as discontinuous text. Nevertheless, an equal number of chapters dedicated to physical and human geographical content featured these pictures. Apart from the picture on the textbook cover, the introductory chapter dedicated to the Unity and Harmony of the Territory of the Socialist Republic of Romania is the only thematic unit that exclusively used a picture coded under the category of *nature*. The remaining two pictures belonging to *nature* were identified in the chapter on Geomorphologic Resources. However, this chapter combined them with two additional pictures belonging to the categories of *tourism* and *infrastructure*.

While content on climate and Biogeography refrained from using pictures, the chapter discussing Romania's Hydrological Resources merely featured two pictures coded as depicting *tourism*. As with its counterpart for primary school, the upper secondary Geography textbook featured a chapter on Agriculture that entailed exclusively pictures belonging to its matching category *agriculture*. The chapter dedicated to Industry used pictures belonging to both the categories of *industry* and *hydropower*, while its counterpart focusing on Transportation, Tourism, and Commerce entailed pictures depicting *tourism* and *infrastructure*.

**Table 4.** Number of pictures in the textbook for upper secondary Geography according to categories and chapters (source: authors)

Chapters	Pictures (total)	Nature	Industry	Tourism	Hydropower	Agriculture	Infrastructure
Cover	1	1					
Unity and Harmony of the Territory of SRR	1	1					
The Physical Settings as Prerequisite of the Country's Economic Development	0						
Climate	0						
Gemorphological Resources	4	2		1			1
Climatic Resources	0						
Hydrological Resources	2			2			
Population and Settlements	0						
SRR's Economy	0						
Industry	4		3		1		
Agriculture	2					2	
Transportation, Tourism, and Commerce	2			1			1
Romania's Development in Spatial Terms	0						
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

Five of the six categories counted in the upper secondary Geography textbook dealt with the socialist society. Merely one category, *nature*, depicted elements of Romania's natural environment. Nevertheless, the pictures, as in the case of the textbooks for primary and lower secondary schools, introduced nature as resource, for example, for leisure and touristic activities. While pictures of socialist settlements were missing from the textbook, visualizations of industrial or hydropower plants remained limited to the socialist past and discarded any earlier phases of industrial history.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate the existence of a textual culture with an economic use of images serving primarily the purposes of socialist ideology.

On the one hand, the visual discourse in Romanian Geography textbooks published during the late stage of state socialism in the 1980s rests on a limited number of images. While discontinuous text at primary level already showed a modest variety in the textbook for primary schools, it becomes even more reduced by the end of upper secondary education.

Thereby, images become increasingly insignificant and replaced, in quantitative terms, by maps. Nevertheless, the black and white images, apart from the map, are the only form of visualization featured in the extensive volumes dominated by continuous text.

On the other hand, images featured in the Geography textbooks rarely serve the purpose of content visualization. Instead, most of the images included in the textbooks served ideological purposes. The thematic chapters contribute differently to the political agenda of socialist ideology.

Physical geographical content focused on Geomorphology, climate, hydrography, flora, fauna, and soils only accounts for a humble share of images in all three analyzed textbooks. Thereby, images are useful discontinuous text elements to visualize landforms, types of clouds, forms of precipitation, or different plant and animal species. Instead of visualizing content that often proved as less accessible, the textbooks used images to depict citizens spending their leisure time in natural environments. The natural environment served, in the analyzed textbooks, as a resource for leisure activities of the socialist citizen. Previous work on Physical Geography in socialist states (Bagoly-Simó, 2008b) showed that former socialist countries used the content of school Geography to a different extent for political purposes. While the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) entwined the content of Physical Geography in textbooks with its political agenda, the chapters dedicated to physical environment in the Romanian textbooks contained only few elements of socialist ideology. The findings of the present study suggest the inclusion of socialist ideology during the 1980s by means of a subtle visual discourse already in the chapters dedicated to Physical Geography.

Human geographical content featuring images spans elements of Economic Geography as well as Urban and Rural Geography. Economic Geography, the core of socialist command economy and ideology, uses images to visualize the progressive industrialization of the country. Heavy industry and the energy sector rely on the few visualizations. Pictures of dams and hydropower production emphasize socialist progress and production and, therefore, play an essential role in the depiction of the socialist world order. In such representations, the visual discourse on natural resources at the service of socialist industrialization stands in stark contrast to contemporary textbooks that market hydropower as a sustainable and renewable alternative to carbon-intensive energy.

The textbooks portrayal agriculture as a technologically progressive and highly intensive field with limited human resources working in the primary sector. Collectivized farming is missing from the visual discourse presented in the textbooks.

Tourism and leisure, a representative of services in Economic Geography, plays an important role in the analyzed textbooks. However, the chapters dedicated to tourism remain detached from the basics of socialist economy, which emphasized industrialization and timely

agriculture. Nonetheless, as part of the visual discourse, tourism and leisure activities continuously reinforced the perspective that the natural environment, at the service of the socialist society, fulfilled the duty to secure relaxation and leisure.

Human settlements are the second human geographical content relying on images. While the rural space, an indicator of underdevelopment, enjoys little visual support, urban space in general, and socialist settlement in particular, play an important role in the socialist progress. Along with industrialization, fast urbanization served as an indicator of development—crucial for each socialist society (Bagoly-Simó, 2012). Thereby, urban fabric predating 1945 only appears in contrast to socialist architecture.

Pictures included in the chapters dedicated to Human Geography contributed to the socialist discourse by emphasizing the socialist present at the expense of the past. Both the industrial and urban history of Romanian regions, such as Transylvania, remain largely uncovered. However, it is the different urban and industrial past of the regions formerly belonging to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, that exhibited an urbanization of Central European type as opposed to the Balkanic patterns of urbanization (Kovács, 2002).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this exploratory study highlight the necessity to better understand the role of both continuous and discontinuous text elements in Geography textbooks published during state socialism. While the visual discourse remained void of any human references, and, thus, had little contribution to nation-building (Caramelea, 2015), its main role was to emphasize the material achievements of the socialist progress.

Given the late phase of state socialism at the core of this paper, further work is needed to understand the ways the visual discourse unfolded over the decades. Also, more detailed explorations of the interplay between continuous and discontinuous text would greatly contribute to understanding the hybrid elements still present in textbooks currently in use. A central aspect of future work should focus on comparative studies of textbooks published in Western and socialist countries concerning the representation of technological progress and societal development, as shown here by the discourse around hydropower. Furthermore, studies should compare, in historical terms, different socialist countries and highlight particularities and path-dependencies of the individual states.

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