



VISUAL MATERIALS AND MODERNISATION OF GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION IN SOCIALIST ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we presented and discussed how teachers were advised to teach geography, using images, during socialism in Romania (1948-1989). Besides geographical knowledge, geography classes were supposed to also transmit other types of knowledge, because the scientific canon of geography in socialist Romania was shaped through politicised education. Our aim was to show how geography education and geography textbooks were infused with propaganda, in particular to produce a coherent and impactful official visual discourse through spatial representations of territorial development under socialism. We analysed several didactics of geography from the socialist period and school textbooks for teaching geography. Critical visual methodology and the discourse analysis method were employed. Results showed that didactic advice for teachers aimed to shape students' socialist consciousness. This was to be developed starting from patriotism and a positivist approach to geographical space: visual representations were "telling the truth" about the socialist reality.

Keywords: didactics of geography, textbooks, maps, propaganda, socialist development

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ON VISUAL IMAGERY: AN INTRODUCTION

The political legacy in the form of development processes and patterns instituted under various forms of communism and socialism still shapes Eastern Europe (Verdery, 1991; Andrusz et al., 1996; Silova et al., 2014; Mele & Jonas, 2020). Moreover, collective memory and storytelling within personal networks and families continually model and reinforce representations of the past that bear influence on the present (cf. Borén & Gentile, 2020, p. 104; Ilovan, 2020a).

The use of visual imagery in formal and informal teaching materials has sparked important debates in cultural geography, with the emergence and extensive application of critical reading for these sources in their respective historical and geographical contexts (Bagoly, 2018; Ilovan et al., 2018). Critical visual methodology offers insights into the formation of spatial representations during a certain period (Rose, 2014) and a better understanding of the power of these representations, which impact Romanians' relationship with space and with their nation (Ilovan, 2024a, 2025). Visual representations help in the direction of an in-depth understanding of the propaganda discourse in formal education during socialist Romania, thus getting



us closer to an accurate analysis of how representations of the nation, of the national space, and territorial development were constructed by those holding political power (Ilovan, 2018, 2021, 2022).

The communist state's socialising system in schools very much used textbooks to inculcate students of all ages with the society's values, political and social culture, and as part of the latter, classifications connected with territories, particularly nation-states or nations such as 'imaginative communities.' Textbooks are expressions of socio-spatial consciousness which point to various social forms of consciousness and ideologies (Anderson, 1983; Paasi, 1999; Ilovan et al., 2018, 2019; Ilovan & Merciu, 2021). One can observe in day-to-day conversations, either in person or online, that regular people will often refer to territories and groups using the same terminology they have picked up from the geography classroom as students. For example, some information might not be agreed upon by students from other education systems (foreigners will often find it intriguing that, in the Romanian textbook, Romania is classified as being located in the south-east part of Central Europe). In this way, textbooks can create friction between different national and international communities. Therefore, these geopolitical texts have provided a 'truth' and knowledge about society that are spatially and historically contingent (Hajdú & Paasi, 1995, p. 35). This knowledge and truth mediated in the school environment to students are hence politically laden (Paasi, 1999, p. 17; Silova et al., 2014; Caramelea, 2015; Dulamă & Ilovan, 2015, 2017; Conțiu & Conțiu, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection. We analysed several didactics of geography (Ardeleanu et al., 1964; Erdeli, 1950; Dăneț et al., 1984; Stoica & Bușe, 1985; Mândruț et al., 1982) and *Geography of Romania* textbooks (Tufescu et al., 1981; Iancu et al., 1985, 1989; Giurcăneanu et al., 1986) published in socialist Romania. We paid attention to the didactic advice on using visual imagery in geography classes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation. In this research, we explore the specific meanings given to images by the official visual discourse and not the experiences that images produce. In addition, we analyse the didactic advice given to teachers in the socio-political context of the communist period of Romania. Thus, critical visual methodology and the discourse analysis method were employed in working with representations of space (Anderson, 1983, 2019; Dubow, 2009; Conțiu & Conțiu, 2019; Conțiu et al., 2022; Ilovan, 2024b) and with ideologically laden didactic advice or discourse (Bhabha, 1990; Cook, 2008; Gee, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section on findings related to textbooks and geographical education during socialist Romania highlights the use of visual materials in teaching and learning, within the context of the broader process of educational modernisation. In the politicised and ideologised context of the period (1948-1989), authors of didactics of geography considered that one of the main directions for the improvement of the education system was using the modern methods for teaching and learning in an efficient manner (Mândruț et al., 1982, p. 7). Modern education included the use of visual (Figure 1) and audio-visual materials:

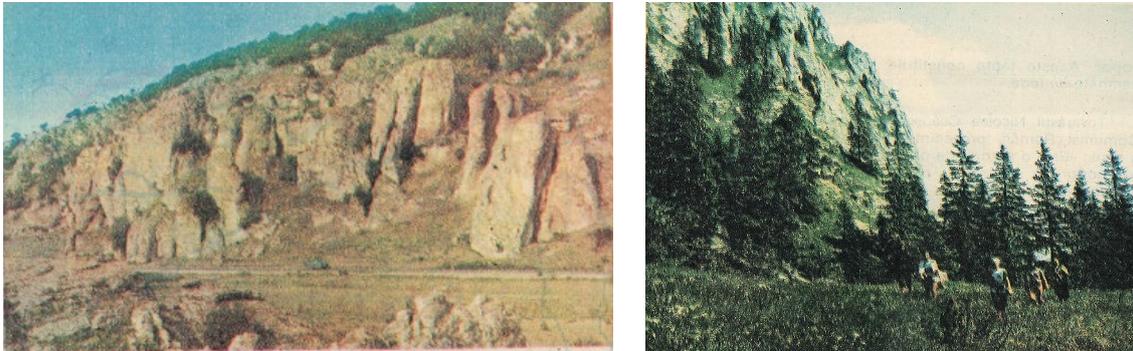
TV broadcasted¹ films and images have a high importance level for educating socialist patriotism. Noticing the beauty and richness of the natural landscape, of the industrial and agricultural one, students' national pride feeling is formed, awakening their wish to be active participants in the construction of the new life (Stoica & Bușe, 1985, p. 28).

¹ All translations from Romanian into English were realised by the authors.



Figure 1

Landscape from the Dobrudja Mountains (left) and from the Suhardul Mic Mountains (right)²



Source: Iancu et al., 1989, p. 34, p. 125

This aligns closely with socialist “historical” films, which frequently featured panoramic shots of natural landscapes—such as ancient soldiers positioned atop rugged mountains to ambush enemy forces—and “hero of the people” films that often incorporated chase and combat scenes set against the backdrop of picturesque Romanian scenery.

The presentation before students of the Carpathians as being the “backbone” of Romania’s territory (stretching across the centre of the country) is another factor which has been used to inculcate the idea that Romania is justified in its current territorial form (Transylvania belongs to Romania as to sustain the shape of the map – otherwise Wallachia and Moldova would look like a half-moon) (cf. Ilovan, 2020b). Also, the mental implications on the students should be considered concerning the information presented that Romania consists of a balanced mix of landforms. If there are roughly 33% mountains, 33% plateaus and hills, and 33% flatlands or plains, then this (although factually correct) configuration might also convey an idea of “equilibrium,” perhaps adding to the “myth” that Romania is a “special” or “blessed” country.

National pride served as a foundation for socialist construction, and Geography was designed to prepare future contributors to post-2000 development, aligning with the Romanian Communist Party’s priorities for the professional training of students:

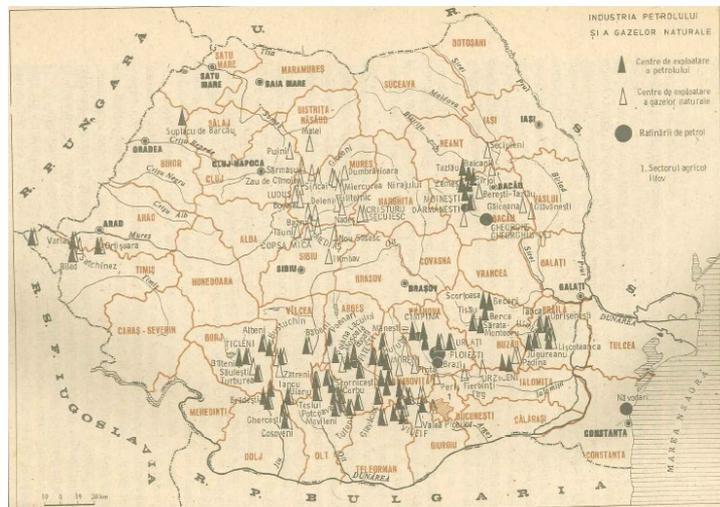
As a matter of fact, the basis of this perfecting process are specified clearly in the Party’s documents, where the priority objectives of our school are “forming staff in close connection with the social and economic development requirements of our homeland”, preparing our youth to become active participants to the work of art in constructing socialism in our homeland, and, a result of these objectives is “systematic modernisation of the educational contents and of the methods for conveying – achieving knowledge in the alert rhythm imposed by the evolution of science, technique and culture” (Mândruț et al., 1982, p. 6).

The national resources maps and the related processing industry (Figure 2) instilled a sense of pride in students—its dense array of symbols in a 2D layout conveyed the message that Romania was a land rich in resources and full of potential, a symbol of future prosperity. This symbolic abundance may help explain the nostalgia and sorrow surrounding the closure of mines and extraction sites, which continued to be prominently featured on celebratory maps well into the 1990s.

² Titles of figures are the original ones in the textbooks, and translated into English.



Figure 2
The petroleum and natural gas industry



Source: Tufescu et al., 1981, p. 68

The analysed sources include pedagogical recommendations emphasising the use of diverse visual materials, with priority given to maps. Ever since the beginning of the 20th century, in Romania, advice on teaching Geography has referred to using maps. Maps were valued for their ability to vividly convey reality to students, serving as an intuitive and accessible educational tool. One goal of geographical education was to place the map at its core (Popescu, 1907, p. 24), along with the globe, a specific representation of the map (Popescu, 1907, p. 25).

Maps were regarded as highly informative visual representations of the homeland that require specific skills:

Thus, a student who graduates from high school should interpret correctly, for instance, a climate map, a land use map, and an economic map. But this requires that teachers are more concerned in familiarising students with such maps, that are, in fact, different ‘images’ of the homeland; the maps in “Atlasul Național al R.S. România” [National Atlas of the Socialist Republic of Romania] are very useful and suggestive from this point of view. We consider that a skill that should be formed progressively during school years, but which should be accomplished in the 12th grade, is that students should independently sketch the contour of our country and several landmarks (the Danube, the main rivers) (Mândruț et al., 1982, p. 15).

Visual tools such as maps can effectively convey the perceived “grandiosity” of the homeland. Through the practice of freely sketching the national map, students might subconsciously absorb the idea that they belong to a “large” country—one that is not small and, by implication, not insignificant in global standing. This notion continues to resonate in contemporary discourse, where the association between physical size and national importance—a big country equals an important country—still frequently appears.

Thus, the teaching and learning of the geography of Romania were fundamentally characterised by the use of maps:

[...] a lesson without maps is no longer a geography lesson (Erdeli, 1950, p. 168).

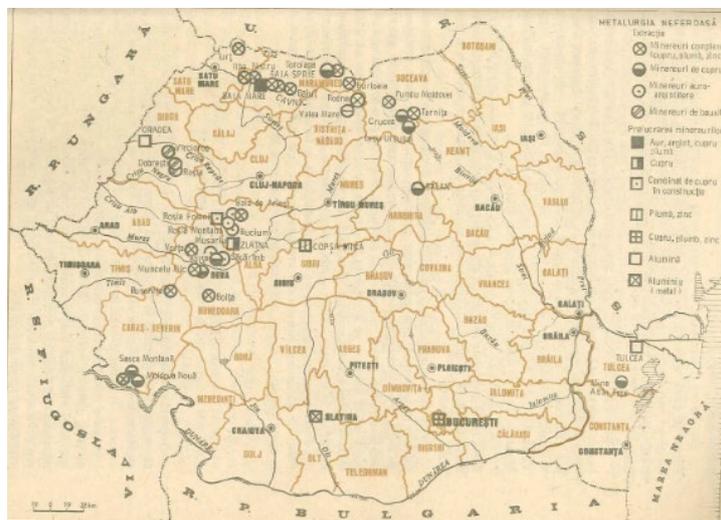
However, mistakenly, maps are regarded as truthful representations, accurately depicting reality, not constructions of the respective reality:

Establishing the relationship between the map and illustrations in the textbook will give life to the map and will help students form a concrete image of the studied region. Under the conventional signs of the map, students will feel the lively pulse of real life (Erdeli, 1950, p. 178).



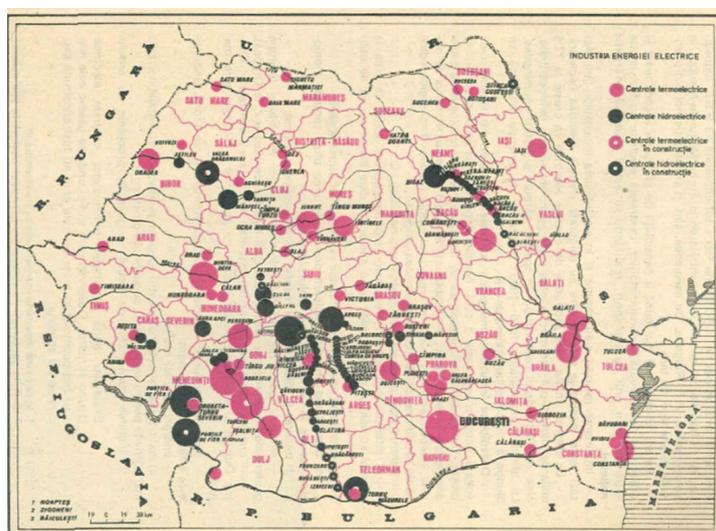
In addition, one could argue that different symbols and symbol sizes can convey an intentional discourse, such as the triangles for oil, squares for coal, stars for electricity, the increased size of certain city symbols based on population or influence, etc. One might understand that, during the socialist era, the more decorated the map in symbols—especially a resource or industry map (Figure 3)—the stronger the idea that the whole nation is a “powerhouse” (Figures 4 and 5). Photographs would reinforce this perception (Figure 6). The planned economy led by the Communist Party is ideally reflected in the electrification of the country, at the basis of present development in all sectors of the economy and in the civilising process. We can also notice the lack of any maps depicting the negative impact of industry or exploitation. Economic growth was the focal point. Additionally, the extensive use of symbols across the map(s) suggests that the designers intended to convey the idea that the entire territory was productive and significant, with no area lagging in terms of economic development. Each had something to contribute.

Figure 3
Non-ferrous metal industry



Source: Tufescu et al., 1981, p. 79

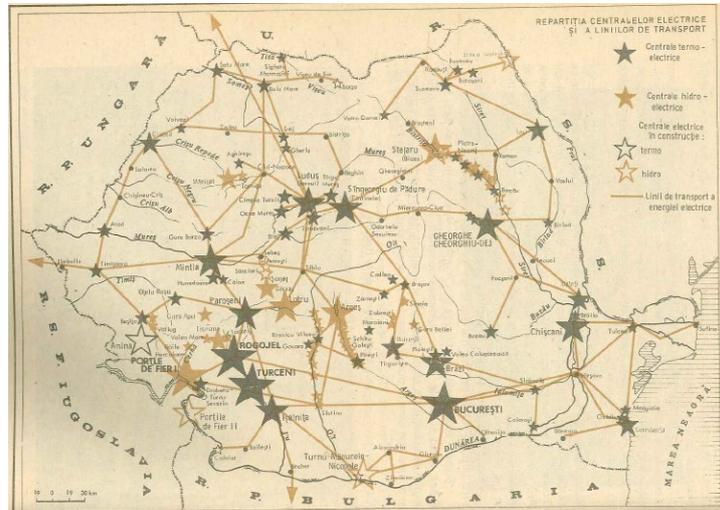
Figure 4
The electric power industry



Source: Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 113

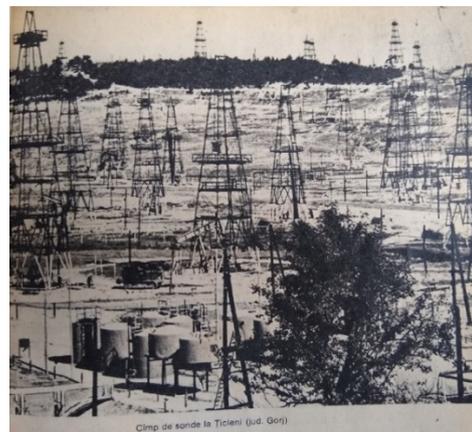
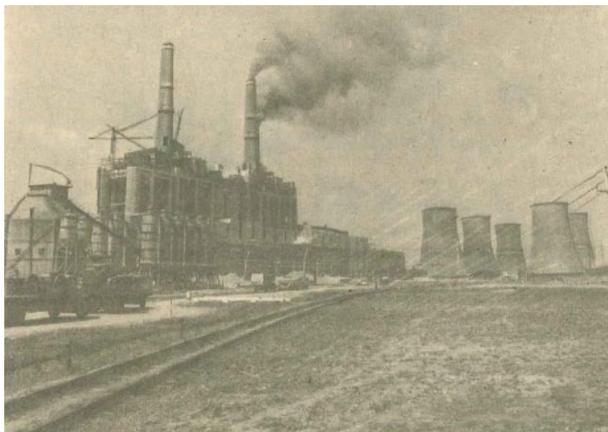


Figure 5
The spatial distribution of power plants and transmission lines



Source: Tufescu et al., 1981, p. 74

Figure 6
Rogojelu Steam Power Plant (left) and Field of bores in Țicleni (Gorj County) (right)



Source: Tufescu et al., 1981, p. 73 and Iancu et al., 1985, p. 73

Guidance on cartographic material—how to select and use it—emphasises the importance of linking maps to new societal achievements and of incorporating photographs to provide a realistic representation of Romania's territory:

Students will identify all centres on the maps. In parallel with mural maps, the ones from atlases and textbooks should be used (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 159).

During lessons, annexe maps from the textbook and maps from atlases will be used (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 152).

As didactic material, you should use the physical and the administrative map of the Popular Republic of Romania, the economic-geographical map of the Popular Republic of Romania (both are mural maps at the scale of 1:400 000), collages with photographs with aspects of the history of our country, especially with the latest achievements (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 157).

As didactic material, one can use: the physical and administrative map of the Popular Republic of Romania, scale 1:400 000, the schematic map of the railways, illustrations with newly built railway stations (Constanța railway station), with railways and bridges built in the years of our regime (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 161).



The “newly built” or only modernised railway stations further suggest that the authorities aimed to instil in students the concept of progress and prosperity, particularly linked to industry and technology (Figure 7). By emphasising the “new,” it can be argued that they sought to discourage inquiry into the old monarchical regime, subtly portraying it as inferior and outdated.

Figure 7

Aspect of a railway part (North Railway Station—Bucharest)



Source: Iancu et al., 1985, p. 109

In the first half of the 20th century in Romania, photographs were regarded as a supplement to the map, serving as a supportive tool and a complement (Popescu, 1907, p. 26), and were expected to depict characteristic locations of the Earth. Photographs taken by the teacher during field trips were recommended for being cost-effective and easily accessible. Similarly, picture postcards and advertisements from factories or transport companies served the same purpose (Popescu, 1907, p. 26): to complement and clarify the text. The role of maps and other types of images is emphasised, but they cannot effectively replace the textbook; instead, they serve as complementary tools (Popescu, 1907, p. 27).

The year 1950 is when the book titled *Metodica geografiei. Prelucrare din limba rusă* [Methodics of Geography. Processed after the Russian Language Publication] is published, and it includes detailed guidelines on the use of visual imagery in geography lessons. Considering “the attentive analysis of a geographical image” (Erdeli, 1950, p. 176), the author emphasises the presence of four stages:

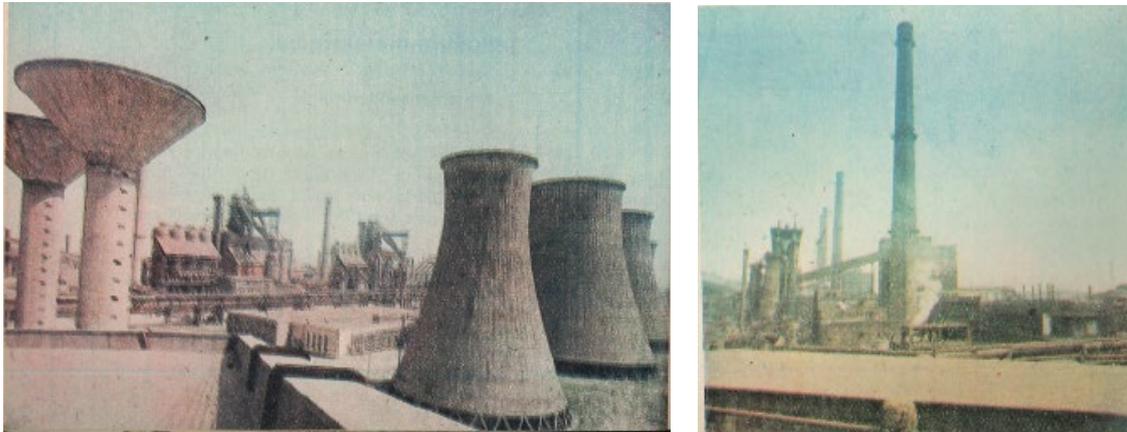
The first stage—the general visual impression provided by the landscape represented in the painting. For students’ attention not to be attracted by different details secondary to the painting, the teacher asks questions that attract their attention to the main points of the painting’s contents; The second stage—the relationship between painting and map ... because the main mission of the geographical paintings is to help students correctly represent the phenomena and characteristic features of the country and of the studied landscape; The third stage—the analysis of the painting ... its contents; The fourth stage—the synthesis of the painting is realised in order to give students a complex image of the represented phenomena and landscape (Erdeli, 1950, p. 173).

Such images have likely become linked to specific locations in the country, particularly in the fields of Economic and Human Geography. For instance, the steelworks are associated with the town of Hunedoara, as well as with Galați and Râmnicu Vâlcea (Figure 8). Hunedoara, when another image with an industrial platform is presented, has a related question associated: “Which is the main industrial branch of this urban centre?” (Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 98).



Figure 8

Galați. Aspect from the Steel and Iron Factories (left) and Hunedoara. Steel and Iron Factories (right)



Source: Iancu et al., pp. 82-83

A student's mindset when viewing images must be guided by the Geography teacher: "... to look at the painting with the traveller's eyes" (Erdeli, 1950, p. 176). According to these authors, the connection between images and maps is essential. As time progresses, the variety of visual imagery is increasingly reflected in educational guidelines: "A very efficient educational means is represented by the collection of images [RO, *vederi*] and thematic illustrations" (Dăneț et al., 1984, p. 37), as well as in their explicit use to highlight the modernisation of the economy and infrastructure in socialist Romania through illustrative materials—photographs clipped from newspapers, magazines, and books, as well as those taken by the teacher and their students, films, and other media:

In geography textbooks, illustrations have very high importance, making more concrete for students the studied geographical phenomena. But a real utility will be obtained only when the teacher will know to reflect well on the question he or she will ask concerning each illustration (Erdeli, 1950, p. 177).

Analysing the textbook illustrations attracted students' attention to many details related to the studied region ... establishing a relationship between the details discovered with the help of photographs and the text of the textbook will allow students to remember more easily the textbook descriptions. This result will be obtained only in the case when the teacher will show students intuitively the way such a connection should be made (Erdeli, 1950, p. 178).

The textbook illustration ... may be connected in a useful manner by the following lines in the textbook (Erdeli, 1950, p. 178).

Geography, which embraces various aspects of nature and human economic activity, needs more illustrations than any other subject (Erdeli, 1950, p. 180).

[...] cutting illustrations from old geography textbooks and by clipping them from magazines and newspapers. Many images of interest to geography are on postal stamps (Erdeli, 1950, p. 180).

Stereoscopic photographs ... that contribute so much to forming the notion of space to students (Erdeli, 1950, p. 180).

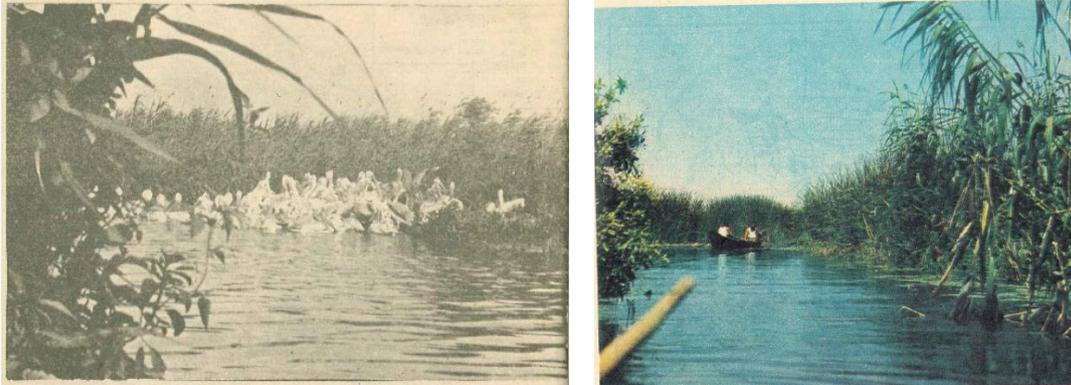
The cinema cannot be replaced for the lively rendering of people's activities, of their living, of customs and of the social relationships (Erdeli, 1950, p. 187). [...] Showing a cinematographic film must be related to corresponding regions on the geographical map or with schematic maps on the blackboard (Erdeli, 1950, p. 189).

Nevertheless, a film constructs a narrative and reinforces stereotypes in the mind of a student. For instance, the Tulcea region is likely universally associated with rich wildlife, white-and-blue houses, as well as with fishing and boating activities (Figure 9).



Figure 9

Pelican colony in the Delta (left) and The Danube Delta – a charming view³ (right)



Source: Tufescu et al., 1981, p. 34 and Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 53

The strong emphasis on visual elements—photographs, films, and field trips—raises important questions about how visually impaired students were accommodated in geography classes in socialist Romania. Unlike today, where alternative methods such as audio descriptions and tactile materials are more widely available, the educational approach of that period appears to have largely overlooked non-visual forms of engagement.

[...] film, with didactic importance and usefulness in teaching geography, is situated next to trips (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 42).

The film has an important role in connecting teaching geography with life, making known various aspects of the production process in factories, of using advanced techniques, of work in collective households or in state agricultural households (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 42).

[the film] actively contributes to fixing the represented phenomenon into the students' memory (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 40).

Besides paintings, in the geography lessons, *textbook illustrations* should be used. If they are well realised, underlining the typical, characteristic to the respective objective nature, illustrations play an important role in teaching geography: with their help, geographical objects and phenomena appear more complete and easier to understand by students (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 41; *our emphasis*).

Because the textbook illustrations achieve their aim, they must accomplish a series of conditions: to be conceived scientifically and executed correctly and suggestively; to precisely render ideas, aspects, etc. closely related to the lesson contents (Ardeleanu et al., 1964, p. 41).

Typical illustrations for the studied geographical object and phenomenon (Dăneţ et al., 1984, p. 38).

[...] choosing the appropriate images for each lesson, the duration of presenting images should be of 5-7', maximum 15'; students' initiation in exploratory observation of images, in receiving the message in the most appropriate moment of the lesson (at its beginning, during the exposition, or at its end, for fixing the achieved knowledge) (Dăneţ et al., 1984, p. 43).

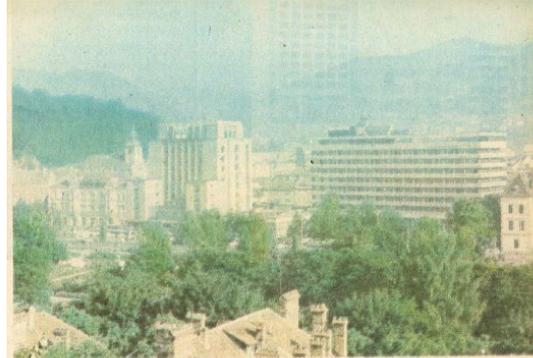
In the context of the socialist economic geography curriculum, “appropriate images” would undoubtedly refer to the most “hygienic” and orderly visuals—neat, well-structured depictions of urban environments (Figures 10-12). These images were designed to convey a sense of order, discipline, and harmony between people and their tools or built surroundings, reinforcing the ideals of a productive and well-organised socialist society (Figures 13-18).

³ The same image as in the 4th grade textbook, but with a comment “o privilegişte fermecătoare”/ a charming view.



Figure 10

Aspect of the new urban landscape of Braşov



Source: Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 97

Figure 11

Cluj-Napoca. "Grigorescu" housing district and Iaşi. New housing district



Source: Iancu et al., 1989, pp. 68-69

Figure 12

Union Square in Iaşi⁴ and new buildings in Piteşti⁵



Source: Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 98

⁴ The same image as in the 4th grade textbook.

⁵ The same image as in the 4th grade textbook.



Figure 13

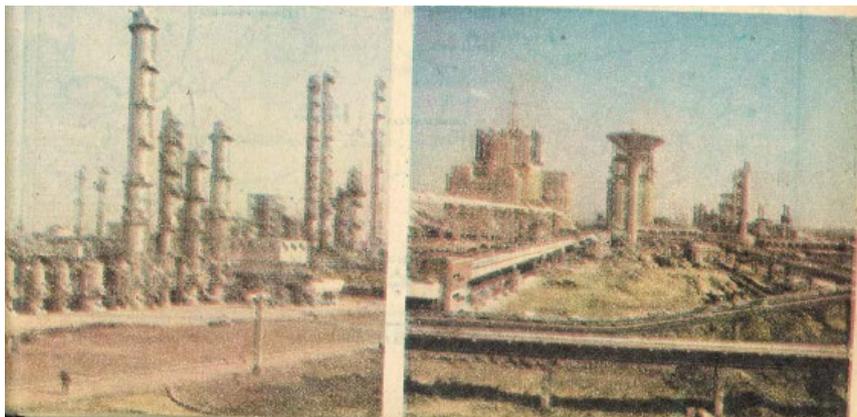
"Dacia" car on the assembly line at the Car Factory in Pitești–Colibași



Source: Iancu et al., 1985, p. 85⁶

Figure 14

Partial image of the Petrochemical Factories in Pitești. Chemical Fertilisers Factories in Arad



Source: Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 125

Figure 15

Partial view from the Factories for Synthetical Threads and Fibres in Săvinești



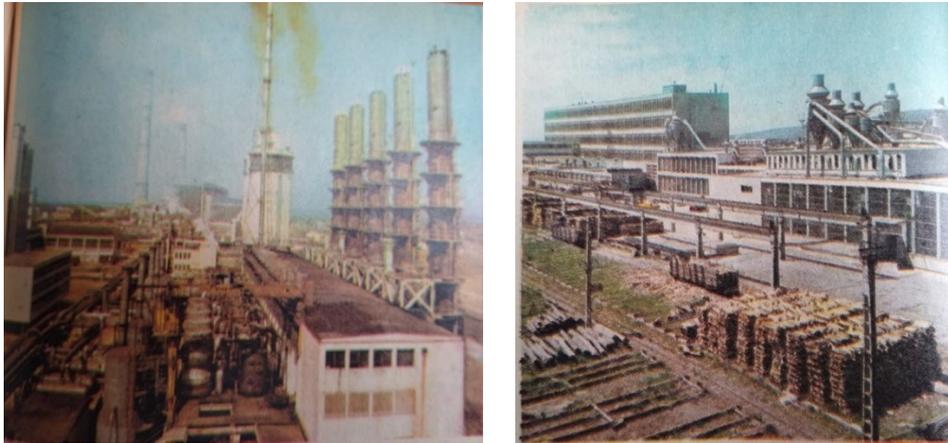
Source: Iancu et al., 1985, p. 88

⁶ The same image in Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 121.



Figure 16

View from The Chemical Factories in Craiova and Wood Processing Factories in Tîrgu Jiu



Source: Iancu et al., 1985, p. 87, p. 92

Figure 17

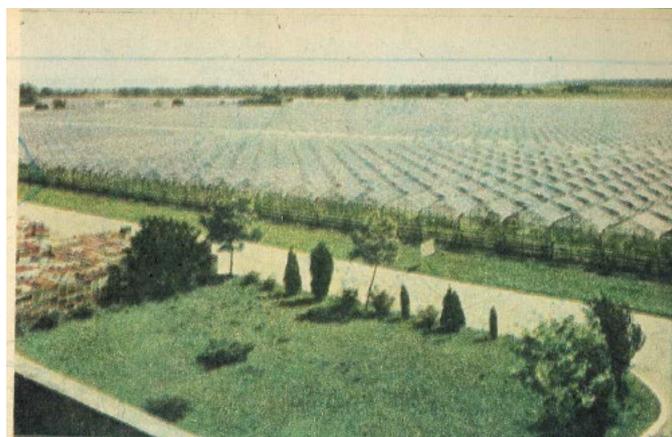
Rich harvest in the homeland fields (left)⁷ and Harvesting with combines (right)



Source: Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 148 and Tufescu et al., 1981, p. 110

Figure 18

Greenhouses in Tîncăbești, near the capital city (Ilfov Agricultural Sector)



Source: Giurcăneanu et al., 1986, p. 153

⁷ The same image as in the 4th grade textbook about wheat harvesting.



This marks a significant contrast with today's curriculum, where many elements have been gamified, shifting the focus from rigid structure and idealised imagery to interactive, student-centred learning experiences (Ilovan et al., 2018; Rus et al., 2019; Buda et al., 2020; Ciineanu et al., 2020). Geography classes were not intended to be entertaining or fun; rather, they were designed to be serious, informative, and aligned with the ideological and educational goals of the socialist system. These classes were intended to convey geographical knowledge in a structured and purposeful manner, reinforcing both academic content and the ideological values of the time. Such ideas, however, pre-date the communist period:

It is a danger for intellectual discipline as well as for the discipline in schools the communication manner concerning images and especially the abuse that could be done while using them. One should not ignore that the teacher finds here precious help for clarifying and imprinting on schoolers' mind geographical knowledge, but the class should not be transformed into one for partying by abusing images. In this respect, there have been presented some fears by the German pedagogical literature for some time (Popescu, 1907, p. 27).

A communication of geographical knowledge is realised especially through oral description or written rendering, that is, with words instead of the plastic presentation of maps and photographic images. This second manner of study cannot be separated from the first one, which serves the former also as a support (especially the map) and as a completion (the images) (Popescu, 1907, p. 27).

This notion persisted into the 1980s, when even artistic films of the era could serve as educational tools, aligning with the programmatic aim of teaching the history and geography of the homeland as envisioned in the creation of the new socialist man:

Students should not regard the film as an entertaining activity, but as a learning activity (Stoica & Bușe, 1985, p. 29).

These findings show a focus of the images on the following topics: economic development, pure nature, and a positivist approach based on *the one truth*, supporting lexical knowledge and socialist values (i.e., patriotism). Thus, through education, Romanians were taught a certain scale of values, where love for the country or patriotism was the highest. Unfortunately, this patriotism came with a particular understanding of the term, which included mandatory love for the Romanian Communist Party (Copilaș, 2015; Ilovan, 2025).

Textbooks in particular reflected quick societal changes, trying to maintain a discourse about authenticity. Thus, the promoted images represented economic development, pure nature, and unique culture. This legitimised political ideology and power and impacted society and its values: a unique, authentic, but at the same time, modernised space.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we presented and discussed how teachers were supposed to teach geography using images during socialism in Romania. Besides geographical knowledge, geography classes were supposed to transmit as well other types of knowledge, as education in general and the geographical one in particular were politicised. The hidden agenda of the educational discourse was that of constructing national identity according to communist ideology, that is, geographical knowledge as a social, but first and foremost, a political construct, socialising students with the dominant ideology/hegemonic discourse. Ideological manipulation was leading, while critical thinking was not advocated for. In this context, socialist development was based on industrialisation, urbanisation, and systematisation. These official representations were one of the sources of people's self-representations. Didactic advice for teachers aimed to shape students' socialist consciousness. This was to be developed starting from patriotism and a positivist approach to geographical space: visual representations were "telling the truth" about the socialist reality.



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