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Education as an instrument of ideology: The teaching of history in Bulgarian schools during socialism (1944-1989) and nowadays

Abstract. Research into the instrumentalisation of historical education for the ideological legitimisation of power remains relevant both for understanding the mechanisms of socialist regimes and for analysing the contradictory processes of post-socialist transformation. The aim of the study was to reveal the evolution of mechanisms of state control over historical education in Bulgaria through a comparative analysis of the instruments of direct indoctrination during the socialist period (1944-1989) and hidden forms of ideologisation in the present day. The methodology was based on a problem-chronological approach, combining an analysis of institutional changes in Bulgarian education policy and regulatory acts with a study of the transformation of historical narratives and educational programmes in both periods. The results of the study showed that during the period 1944-1989, a total system of ideological control was formed in Bulgaria, based on the institutional subordination of science to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, censorship restrictions by Glavlit, and the normative establishment of Marxism-Leninism as the only methodology. It has been established that through the implementation of the 1959 Law on the Connection of School with Life, historical education was integrated with industrial practice, becoming an instrument for fostering loyalty through labour, and the narrative was focused on the “founding myth” of 9 September 1944 and class struggle. It has been demonstrated that after 1989, there was not a de-ideologisation, but a “narrative inversion”, in which the socialist canon was replaced by the rhetoric of totalitarianism to legitimise market reforms. The analysis revealed a transformation of direct pressure into “soft” control mechanisms – the structural displacement of the topic of socialism to the end of the 12th grade curriculum, a focus on standardised exams that require memorisation of facts rather than analysis, and systematic disregard for personal sources and the traumatic experiences of ethnic minorities (particularly during the “Revival Process”), which blocks the formation of critical reflection on the past. The practical significance of the study lies in presenting a model for analysing the long-term ideological influence on education and providing tools for identifying “hidden” mechanisms of instrumentalisation

Keywords: totalitarianism; historiography; indoctrination; communism; society

INTRODUCTION

School history education serves as a mechanism for shaping collective memory and national identity. In states that have undergone periods of ideologically driven governance, such as the countries of the former Eastern Bloc or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the analysis of past educational practices and their long-term legacy is of particular scholarly interest for understanding the relationship between political regimes and public

consciousness. For Bulgaria during the socialist period (1944-1989) and the subsequent decades of transformation, the relationship between state ideology and the teaching of history has been a central subject of academic inquiry. Understanding the processes through which historical narratives were constructed in that era, as well as examining the legacy of these processes in the present, has shaped the relevance of this study.

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B. Magyar & B. Madlovics (2020) proposed expanded conceptual frameworks for understanding the functioning of post-communist regimes by systematising their political and economic characteristics. The researchers moved beyond standard models of transition, arguing for the need to analyse the specific anatomy of regimes that emerged from the ruins of socialism and their propensity for authoritarian relapse. This macro-analysis is complemented by studies focusing on concrete instruments of ideology. I. Znepolski (2020) analysed the interaction between communist doctrine and the academic sphere, proposing a theory of the detotalitarianisation of science. The author examined in detail the mechanisms through which party control penetrated scientific institutions, as well as the difficulties involved in freeing academic knowledge from ideological layers in the post-Soviet period. Other scholars, such as D. Genova (2022), concentrated on the linguistic mechanisms of propaganda, showing how party slogans ritualised social life. In her work, the author demonstrated that the language of posters and official speeches served as an instrument for creating a pseudo-reality that substituted reality with ideological constructs. In the Bulgarian context, these control mechanisms also extended to extracurricular activities.

Y. Yancheva (2022) analysed in detail the role of the Pioneer organisation as an instrument for the disciplining of the individual, which operated parallel to the school system to foster loyalty. The study showed that through a system of rituals and collective responsibility, the state sought to establish control over the free time and private lives of young people. The fall of the Communist regime in 1989 initiated new challenges, which were also reflected in academic works. B. Koulov (2024) identified the structural and financial problems faced by Bulgarian education in the post-socialist period, stressing that demographic decline and chronic underfunding became major obstacles to effective modernisation. Alongside administrative reforms, a struggle over historical memory emerged. G. Medarov & V. Stoyanova (2024) examined competing representations of totalitarianism in contemporary Bulgarian historiography, revealing the impact of current politics on interpretations of the past. The author argued that historical narratives often become hostages of political battles, where the past is used to discredit opponents. The problems of forming education about the Communist period were analysed in detail by E. Kelbecheva (2020), who revealed the difficulties in overcoming contradictory narratives and the instrumentalisation of memory. The researcher emphasised the necessity of creating new methodological approaches that would allow pupils to critically reflect on the complex pages of history without simplifications.

At the centre of these transformations stood history education itself. V. Uzunova (2023) conducted a comprehensive analysis of reforms in the teaching of history in Bulgaria, comparing the key stages of change between 1948 and 2002 and tracing the direct influence of politics on methodology. The work demonstrates the cyclical nature of the reforms, which often depended on changes in

governments and foreign policy vectors. At the same time, I. Garai *et al.* (2025) proposed considering educational reforms as a separate pedagogical phenomenon. The authors demonstrate how the historical context affects the implementation of modern initiatives, emphasising the importance of taking local traditions into account when implementing international standards.

Existing studies on education in Bulgaria, as outlined above, have tended to document the presence of ideological control or analyse the challenges of the post-socialist period. However, they have lacked a comprehensive comparative examination of how specific historical narratives evolved in school textbooks between 1944 and 1989, as well as a detailed comparison of socialist-era mechanisms of ideological shaping with the new, “hidden” forms of instrumentalisation that emerged after 1989. As a result, a gap remained in understanding whether genuine de-ideologisation occurred, or whether ideological instrumentalism merely shifted from an overt to a more concealed form.

The aim of this study was a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of ideological shaping within history education in Bulgaria during the socialist period (1944-1989) and to identify how these approaches transformed into hidden forms of instrumentalisation in the post-socialist era. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: to identify the key stages and mechanisms (institutional, methodological, and censorial) of party control over the content of history education between 1944 and 1989; to analyse, using normative documents and curricula, the evolution of representations of central themes in Bulgarian history; and to explore the main trends in the transformation of historical narratives in Bulgaria after 1989, revealing the new concealed mechanisms of ideological influence, including those embedded in curriculum structuring and testing practices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was based on an analysis of published sources covering the period from 1944 to 2025, which made it possible to carry out a comparative examination of the two eras under consideration – the socialist period (1944-1989) and the post-socialist period (after 1989). The selection of materials was guided by their relevance to the study of state ideology in Bulgaria, educational policies, and historical memory. The inclusion criteria comprised four main types of sources: fundamental doctrinal texts of Marxism-Leninism, official party historiographical works from the socialist era, contemporary academic studies on educational transformations, and personal sources that document cultural memory and everyday experience. A separate group of sources consisted of legal and regulatory acts: the Law of Bulgaria No. 218 “On National Education” (1948) and the latest update of the Law of Bulgaria No. 112-27 “On Higher Education” (1955). Their comparative analysis made it possible to trace the transformation of legislative priorities from the ideological control of early socialism to nowadays European standards of academic autonomy. The exclusion criteria allowed the removal of works on general pedagogy

that were not directly related to the teaching of history, as well as historiographical works that were unrelated to the Bulgarian context or to the chronological periods studied.

To understand the methodological foundations that were forcibly imposed on Bulgarian scholarship and education, the study drew on fundamental texts of Marxism-Leninism, including F. Engels' (1999) work on historical materialism, which explains the doctrine of the five formations. This foundation was supplemented with selected works by key ideologists of Bulgarian communism, such as T. Zhivkov (1975) and G. Dimitrov (2022), which demonstrated how this doctrine was adapted and applied in concrete political practice. To analyse the officially sanctioned "grand narrative", party publications were used, exemplified by *The History of the Bulgarian Communist Party* (Vekov *et al.*, 1980). For the study of the post-socialist period, research analysing educational reforms and their outcomes was included. To understand the context of everyday life, which is often excluded from official narratives, projects dedicated to cultural memory were used, recording experiences "from below" (Genova & Gospodinov, 2006).

The problem-oriented chronological method served as the basis for structuring the entire study. It made it possible to divide the analysis into two stages – "The Institutionalisation of Ideological Control (1944-1989)" and "Reforms and Narrative Transformations (after 1989)". The use of this method enabled not merely a chronological description of events, but the tracing of the evolution of specific issues – mechanisms of control and the content of narratives – over time.

Institutional analysis was applied to examine the formal and informal structures through which ideological control was exercised. This method made it possible to focus on the mechanisms shaping educational content. For the period 1944-1989, it helped identify the roles of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Glavlit as the censorship authority (Znepolski, 2020), and party committees as departments of agitation (Sygkelos, 2011). Applying this method to the post-socialist period made it possible to reveal new mechanisms of influence, such as the institutional design of curricula and the pressure exerted by standardised testing. Comparative-historical analysis became a central tool for demonstrating "narrative inversion" and was used to directly compare interpretations of key events and terminology in the two periods.

Narrative analysis was used to deconstruct the language and logic underlying the construction of historical narratives in textbooks and academic works. This method helped reveal not only what was said, but how it was said, as well as what was omitted. Narrative analysis made it possible to identify the tendency towards the "personalisation" of the socialist past around the figure of T. Zhivkov. In addition, the method revealed a key form of systemic exclusion in contemporary textbooks – the marginalisation of "history from below", including everyday experience and the history of repressed minorities (Pomaks, Turks), in favour of dominant "state" sources presented "from above".

RESULTS

Institutionalisation of ideological control over historical scholarship (1944-1989)

The establishment of a new political regime in Bulgaria after 9 September 1944 led to a fundamental restructuring of the humanities. Historical scholarship was designated as a key instrument for the ideological legitimisation of power and for the conduct of the "class struggle". Between 1948 and 1952, an extensive system of party-state control over the production of historical knowledge was created and institutionalised (Békés, 2022). This process encompassed all levels, from the reorganisation of major research centres and the normative entrenchment of a single methodology to the introduction of total censorship and direct party supervision of historiographical projects. The purpose of these measures was to transform history from an academic discipline into a service mechanism that met the ideological needs of the regime.

One of the first steps in subordinating historical scholarship was its institutional reorganisation. Prior to 1944, Sofia University had retained its status as the country's principal academic centre, with long-standing traditions of relative autonomy. The new authorities took steps to alter this balance, and as early as November-December 1944 a provisional leadership of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences was appointed. This process continued, and in 1947 a separate Institute of Bulgarian History was established within the structure of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. This institutional reform was not merely an administrative change but a deliberate act aimed at centralising scholarly research under party-state control. The creation of a history institute within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences rather than within the university enabled the Bulgarian Communist Party to establish direct administrative and ideological control over the research process. This was achieved, among other means, through the appointment of ideologically loyal and vetted personnel to key leadership positions within the Academy and its newly created institutes. As a result, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences was transformed from an academic learned society into the principal instrument for implementing state policy in science. Historical research was effectively removed from the sphere of university autonomy and incorporated into the vertical structure of the party-state apparatus, which significantly facilitated the subsequent imposition of uniform methodological and ideological standards (Szumski, 2019).

Institutional control alone, however, was insufficient to ensure the complete subordination of the discipline. The regime also required the unification of the methodological foundations of historical scholarship. This function was fulfilled by the First National Conference of Historians, held in 1948. This event, alongside other initiatives such as the Second Congress of the Fatherland Front in February 1948, served to formally entrench the new ideological framework. The conference effectively established Marxism-Leninism as the sole permitted and mandatory methodology for all historical research in Bulgaria.

Historical materialism was proclaimed as the central doctrine (Sygkelos, 2011). This theory, as formulated by F. Engels, interpreted the course of history as a process driven by a “final cause and great driving force” rooted in the economic development of society, in changes in modes of production and exchange, and consequently in the division of society into classes and the struggle between them (Engels, 1999). The introduction of this dogma into Bulgarian historiography after 1944 meant that the historical process was henceforth to be interpreted exclusively through the prism of class struggle. The 1948 conference officially declared all previous, non-Marxist historiographical approaches to be “bourgeois”, “reactionary”, and unscientific. This decision had far-reaching consequences, as it enabled the formal and coercive fusion of historical scholarship with the dominant ideology. History lost its explanatory function and was reduced to an illustrative one; its task was no longer to investigate the past, but to provide “historical” evidence and illustrations for pre-determined ideological theses concerning the inevitability of the victory of socialism and the vanguard role of the Communist Party (Békés, 2022).

The formation of a new ideological canon required a dual strategy that involved not only the active promotion of Marxist narratives but also the aggressive elimination or concealment of any alternative views and facts. A key role in this process was played by a specially created censorship institution. Following the Soviet model, the Main Directorate for Literature and Publishing (Glavlit) was established in Bulgaria. This body exercised total control over all printed materials, from newspapers to scholarly monographs. Libraries, which in the conditions of the 1940s and 1950s – when television was rare and newspapers were under full party control – served as the main source of information for a large segment of society, were rapidly transformed by the new regime into “an instrument in the hands of the communist state”. Their new task was no longer merely to provide access to knowledge, but to “actively impose a new socialist way of thinking”. Glavlit and the libraries under its supervision not only prohibited publications but also constructed a new informational reality. They restricted readers’ access to “harmful” literature by creating “boundaries to access scientific information”. Books that contradicted the party line, represented non-Marxist perspectives, or belonged to “bourgeois” historiography were removed from open collections. Following the Soviet example, so-called special collections were created for such works. These were restricted repositories to which access was tightly controlled and granted only to a narrow circle of vetted individuals – primarily nomenklatura officials or ideologically reliable scholars – on the basis of special permission. In this way, Glavlit and the special collections were not merely instruments of repression against books; they were tools for constructing a new ideological canon through the creation of a fully controlled informational space (Roberts, 2022).

Alongside censorship, which performed a “negative” function of purification, the regime actively pursued a

“positive” function – the production of its own texts. An example of this approach was the multi-volume project History of Bulgaria, the first two volumes of which were published in 1954-1955, as well as the publication of the History of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Vekov *et al.*, 1980), which consolidated the official party version of events. This project was not the result of independent academic initiative or scholarly debate; it was a direct party commission implemented under close supervision. The process of writing and publication was controlled not only at the national level. The project also had a foreign-policy dimension and was carried out under the academic patronage of the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (Szumski, 2019). The production of such synthesising works reflected a shared objective: not the creation of unique national histories, but their integration into a common Soviet narrative. This narrative was intended to emphasise the “leading role” of Russia, and later the Soviet Union, in the history of the Slavic peoples, based on the doctrinal theses of G. Dimitrov (2022) concerning the decisive importance of Soviet assistance and the “unbreakable friendship” with the USSR as a guarantee of national sovereignty. Historians involved in such projects received specific instructions, and the process was supervised directly by the Central Committee of the party. Any contacts or visits by Soviet historians to countries of the Eastern Bloc were sanctioned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and reports were submitted both to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences and to the Central Committee. This transformed historiography into a service discipline that was required to respond to current political needs. When the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party adopted particular decisions, or when the country’s leader T. Zhivkov (1975) adopted a hard-line stance on international issues and justified the party line in his speeches, historians were expected to provide immediate ideological substantiation. A clear example is the reaction to the events of the “Prague Spring” in 1968. T. Zhivkov was among the first to define the events in Czechoslovakia as a “counter-revolution”. In response, Bulgarian media and the ideological apparatus immediately intensified narratives about “bourgeois ideology”, “anti-communism”, and the “ideological subversion of imperialism” (Szumski, 2019).

The institutional and methodological control established over historical scholarship found its logical culmination and practical realisation within the system of school education. While academic institutions (such as the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) and censorship bodies (such as Glavlit) were responsible for producing and filtering the “grand narrative”, the task of the school was its didacticisation. The school was intended to transmit the approved ideological canon, to embed it in the consciousness of new generations, and, crucially, to embed it not only at the cognitive level but also at the emotional level through a system of everyday practices, extracurricular activities, and social rituals (Vukov, 2008).

The Bulgarian Communist Party consciously modelled its policies in all spheres, including education, on the example of the Soviet Union. This process unfolded against the backdrop of broader social transformation, as Bulgaria was transformed during the 1950s-1970s from a predominantly agrarian society into an industrialised socialist state. Education was viewed as a key element of this process, aimed at “raising the educational level of the population” and cultivating a “new person” within the framework of the dominant ideology (Dragostinova, 2022). The Sovietisation of education meant not only copying administrative structures but also a complete restructuring of the legislative basis following the Soviet model. It involved the direct adaptation of curriculum

content, which was first systematically established in the Law of Bulgaria No. 218 “On National Education” (1948). Bulgarian history was rewritten and structured in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist dogma of the five socio-economic formations, which directly followed the doctrine of historical mercantilism approved as the sole methodology in 1948 (Table 1). This unification had a specific goal: the Bulgarian pupil was to study history not as a unique national process, but as a local example of the universal and inevitable laws of the class struggle. The history of Bulgaria, thus, was merely intended to confirm the correctness and universality of the Soviet model of development, which inevitably led to Socialism and Communism.

Table 1. The Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the five formations and its application in Bulgarian historiography

Socio-economic formation	Key characteristics (according to the doctrine of historical materialism)	Application to Bulgarian history (in official historiography, 1944-1989)
Primitive communal system	Classless society, communal ownership of primitive means of production, absence of exploitation	Ancient history of the Bulgarian lands (Thracians, Slavs, Proto-Bulgarians) prior to the emergence of state formations
Slave-owning system	The first class-based antagonistic society, with the main classes being slave owners and slaves; private ownership of the means of production and of the slaves themselves	The ancient period in the Balkans (e.g., Greek colonies, the Roman Empire). This stage was often debated in terms of how clearly it applied to the Thracians
Feudal system	The main classes are feudal lords (landowners) and dependent peasants; the primary means of production is land; serfdom or other forms of extra-economic coercion	The First and Second Bulgarian Empires. The period of Ottoman rule was defined as “Ottoman feudalism”, and the national liberation struggle as “anti-feudal”
Capitalist system	The main classes are the bourgeoisie (owners of capital) and the proletariat (wage labourers); private ownership of the means of production; exploitation of wage labour	The period from Liberation in 1878 to 1944. Described as a stage of “the emergence and development of capitalism”, culminating in a “monarcho-fascist dictatorship”
Socialism/ Communism	Socialism – the first, transitional phase. Public ownership of the means of production, the dictatorship of the proletariat (rule of the Communist Party), a planned economy. Communism – the higher, classless phase, based on the principle “From each according to ability, to each according to need”	The period after 9 September 1944. Officially proclaimed as “the construction of socialism” and the inevitable, scientifically grounded transition to communism

Source: compiled by the author based on A. Vekov *et al.* (1980), F. Engels (1999)

The analysis of the table demonstrated the determinism of the historical narrative that was implemented in Bulgarian education. As is evident from the table, each stage of Bulgarian history was coercively assigned a corresponding formational label, which sometimes contradicted historical realities (particularly regarding the slave-owning system or the specific nature of the Ottoman period). Such a structure left no room for alternative interpretations; the entire historical path of the nation was presented as a linear movement from exploitation to Communism, with 1944 becoming the culminating point of this development.

A central element of the new school canon became the regime’s “foundational myth” – the events of 9 September 1944. This myth was essential for legitimising the power of the Bulgarian Communist Party. As acknowledged in post-communist historiographical debates, the regime was established through a military coup, the success of which was possible only due to the direct intervention of the Soviet army on 8 September 1944 (Naimark, 2017). However, within the official socialist narrative this event was completely transformed and presented as the culmination

of a broad “anti-fascist resistance” and a “popular armed uprising”. Accordingly, academic priorities and the content of history textbooks for grades 8-11 were focused precisely on the “partisan movement”, the “anti-fascist struggle”, and “class warfare”. History was radically simplified and structured through binary oppositions. The entire historical process was reduced to a confrontation between “progressive” forces (the proletariat, partisans, the Bulgarian Communist Party) and “reactionary” ones (the bourgeoisie, “monarcho-fascists”). This binarity eliminated ambiguity, nuance, and complexity, rendering the historical process simple and easily digestible for ideological internalisation. This ideological canon also had a direct social embodiment that extended beyond textbooks, notably through university admission quotas. A special category of “active fighters against fascism and capitalism” was created; these individuals and their children were granted social privileges, among the most important of which was guaranteed access to higher education outside the general competitive admissions process, formalised through specific regulations. Thus, the educational system did not merely promote the

myth of the “anti-fascist resistance” in history lessons. It actively participated in the creation and reproduction of a new, regime-loyal social aristocracy whose privileged status was directly tied to this ideological narrative (Wcislik & Kopeček, 2015).

Ideological influence was not confined to the forty-five minutes of the history lesson; it extended into the extra-curricular sphere, aiming at the emotional (affective) consolidation of the cognitive knowledge acquired in class. The objective was to create a total ideological environment in which pupils would constantly remain within the field of influence of party narratives. Numerous thematic exhibitions were organised, not only in museums but also in factories and institutions. These exhibitions were dedicated to the “heroic” past canonised by the party and bore titles such as “Behind the Bars of Fascist Prisons”, “Partisan Everyday Life”, or “Paratroopers and Submariners”. Schools introduced compulsory extracurricular activities with a militaristic and ideological character. From 1976 onwards, military clubs were established as after-school activities. Even earlier, from the autumn of 1968, compulsory two-year military training was introduced for all boys and girls aged 16 to 18. A deliberate synchronisation of three calendars took place: the pedagogical calendar (school year, holidays), the historical calendar (anniversaries of the “resistance”, birthdays of “heroes”, battle commemorations), and the political calendar (party congresses, state holidays). School assemblies, “lessons in courage”, and compulsory meetings with “veterans” (participants in the mythologised partisan movement) transformed the abstract historical narrative learned from textbooks into a living, personalised, and emotionally charged experience. This made distancing and critical reflection on the past virtually impossible, fostering a durable affective bond with the official ideology (Vukov, 2008).

An important stage in the development of ideological education was the adoption in 1959 of the Law “On the Link between School and Life and the Further Development of Public Education”. This law marked a shift from predominantly passive assimilation of ideology (studying theory, memorising dates) to an active one (the practical

implementation of ideology). The main goal of the law was declared to be the “preparation Bulgarian youth for life in a socialist and communist society”. The key mechanism for achieving this aim was defined as “the combination of education with socially useful and productive labour”. The law also introduced structural changes: compulsory eight-year schooling and the creation of the twelve-year “comprehensive polytechnical school” (later reduced to eleven years). The significance of this law for the teaching of history was profound: the historical narrative of the “heroic labour” of the working class and of industrialisation as a progressive stage now had to be reinforced through pupils’ physical participation in “productive labour”. Pupils were required to work in factories, industrial plants or agricultural cooperatives. Thus, history education ceased to be a purely humanities-based, academic discipline. It became an ideological justification for polytechnical education and labour training. Pupils first learned in history lessons about the “heroism” of labour, and then went to “work”, reproducing and validating through their practical activity the historical narrative provided by the state. This system was abolished only at the end of 1989.

Reforms and narrative transformations in the teaching of history after 1989

The fall of the socialist regime in November 1989 initiated contradictory transformations within Bulgarian society. As the education system in Socialist Bulgaria functioned as an instrument of ideology, it naturally became a central arena of change. A complex, multi-stage and non-linear process began to unfold, involving the deconstruction of the socialist canon in the teaching of history. At the same time, a new post-socialist historical narrative was emerging – one that likewise acquired ideological functions aimed at legitimising the new socio-political and economic order (Dainov, 2007). The reform of the education system, particularly in the field of history teaching, was not a single event but passed through several conflict-laden phases, reflecting the wider political and ideological struggles within the country (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of the stages of educational reform in Bulgaria in the post-socialist period

Category	Phase 1 (1990-1997)	Phase 2 (1997-2007)	Phase 3 (after 2007)
Chronology and context	1990-1997: Post-socialist transition	1997-2007: Beginning after the political and economic crisis and the collapse of the socialist government in 1997	After 2007: Directly caused by Bulgaria’s accession to the EU
Key characteristic	Initial deregulation and intense ideological confrontation	Administrative modernisation and standardisation	Shift of emphasis from administrative modernisation to a competence-based approach
Driving forces	Reformers (at the political level). Opposition: “old nomenklatura cadres” in local administrative structures, BSP, Minister of Education I. Dimitrov	New Union of Democratic Forces government	EU (as a source of funding and standards)
Key measures	Abolition of explicitly ideological subjects (e.g., “scientific communism”). Revision of school curricula. Emergence of the first alternative textbooks (for example, from the “Prosveta” publishing house)	Renewed commitment to reform. General harmonisation of the education system with Western European standards	Funding through EU Operational Programmes (notably “Human Resources Development”). Implementation of ECTS

Table 2. Continue

Category	Phase 1 (1990-1997)	Phase 2 (1997-2007)	Phase 3 (after 2007)
Legislative framework	Higher Education Act of 1995	Amendments to the to the Higher Education Act (1999)	Amendments to the Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA)
Declared objectives	Dismantling of the state monopoly over educational content	Creation of new academic degrees. Establishment of agencies for quality assurance and accreditation	Transition from “mechanical reproduction of knowledge” to “the development of competences and life skills”. Development of ICT skills and “lifelong learning”
Identified obstacles/resistance	Implementation was not linear. Resistance and sabotage by local administrative structures that preserved a “corporate culture oriented towards control”. The BSP’s return to power in 1994 and the appointment of I. Dimitrov, who had “sabotaged... reforms” as early as the 1980s. I. Dimitrov “effectively halted” reforms, calling them “treacherous” on 15 September 1995 and accusing the EU and the Open Society Foundation	Modernisation was described as “superficial and administrative”. It confronted the reality of low educational quality	
Concrete outcomes	Emergence of a market for alternative textbooks, notably “Prosveta” and “Anubis”. Political blockade and the effective freezing of reforms (after 1994)	Testing (1997/98): 25% of Year 4 pupils failed to reach the minimum knowledge threshold (Bulgarian language, mathematics). Study (2004): Only 38% of employers believed that the education system provided young people with the necessary skills	Implementation of ECTS in higher and vocational education. Development of programmes aimed at ICT skills and “lifelong learning”

Note: ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System; BSP – Bulgarian Socialist Party; ICT – Information and Communication Technologies

Source: compiled by the author based on E. Dainov (2007), Operational Programme Human Resources Development (2025)

The analysis of the data presented in the table demonstrated the non-linear trajectory of educational reforms in Bulgaria, the dynamics of which were largely determined by the political conjuncture. The initial phase was characterised by institutional confrontation between reformist forces and the post-communist nomenklatura, primarily the BSP, which resulted in the blockage of transformational processes at the local level. Institutional stabilisation and the restoration of a westernising vector occurred during the second phase under the governance of the Union of Democratic Forces. The third phase, driven by the imperatives of European integration, was marked by the implementation of structural mechanisms, in particular the ECTS, and by the normative consolidation of standards in the Law of Bulgaria No. 112-27 “On Higher Education” (1995). At the same time, systemic deficits in the quality of education, objectified by the 1997/98 testing, had a prolonged negative impact, highlighting the need for a shift towards a genuinely competence-based paradigm.

Institutional reforms were accompanied by a radical narrative inversion in the content of history education. A complete transformation of terminology and evaluative frameworks took place: previous discussions about the “beginning of socialism” in Bulgaria were instantaneously transformed into debates about the “beginning of totalitarianism”. This term, previously prohibited in official discourse, became the dominant framework for describing the entire period from 1944 to 1989. The key concepts used to describe the establishment of the regime became “Sovietisation” and the “one-party system”. A fundamental revision of key historical figures and events followed.

In particular, G. Dimitrov, who had previously occupied a central place in the official ideological canon, acquired radically opposing interpretations within the new discourse, being portrayed, for example, as an “instrument of Stalin”, a “conduit of Sovietisation”, and a “destroyer of democratic opposition” in Bulgaria (Sygkelos, 2011). The People’s Court of 1944-1945, which had earlier been presented as an act of “class justice”, was now unequivocally described as a “parody of legality” and an instrument of mass repression. Crucially, the very function of ideology in the teaching of history changed: whereas the former Marxist-Leninist ideology had served to legitimise the rule of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the new anti-totalitarian rhetoric began to function as a means of sanctioning and legitimising the new, contested “transition to the free market and democracy” (Rönkkö, 2021).

In order to justify and substantiate the new neoliberal consensus (often described as There Is No Alternative), the socialist past had to be demonised. This led to the emergence in academic and educational discourse of two competing, though unequal, approaches to describing the period. The first, “totalitarian socialism”, focuses on the repressive nature of the regime, ideological control, crimes, and the absence of civil liberties. The second, “state socialism”, offers a more neutral socio-economic analysis, describing institutional features, the planned economy, and the “greyness” of everyday life under the regime. In school textbooks, which require clear and unambiguous formulations, the “totalitarian” framework became dominant, as it was more suitable for the political objective of demonising and delegitimising the past (Dainov, 2007).

In the process of simplifying the forty-five-year period for educational purposes, a pronounced personalisation took place. The entire socialist period, especially its later phase, increasingly came to be associated with a single individual – T. Zhivkov, who led the country for thirty-five years (1954-1989). This era is persistently linked to his figure, as well as to his native town of Pravets, which received privileges and infrastructure investments during his rule. Such a focus on the personality of the dictator, rather than on an analysis of the system itself (political, economic, and ideological), leads to a depoliticisation of analysis. It creates space for the coexistence of seemingly incompatible elements – a general critique of “totalitarianism” as an abstract system alongside a widespread social nostalgia for “stability”, “social protection”, and “prosperity”, which are associated precisely with the period of T. Zhivkov’s rule. This social ambivalence has been directly reflected in new school textbooks, particularly those proposed in 2019 in response to the new 2018 curriculum. These textbooks provoked public controversy and accusations of “whitewashing” T. Zhivkov. Despite an overall critical framework of totalitarianism, some texts contained claims that T. Zhivkov had a “moderate style of governance without harsh repression”. Others argued that his policies were aimed at “improving the population’s well-being”, and that dissatisfaction with the lack of civil rights was “appeased” by rising living standards. This personalisation and the positive connotation of a specific leader constitute a convenient narrative that reflects the unresolved and contradictory attitude of contemporary Bulgarian society towards its socialist past (Simeonova & Synovitz, 2019).

The study of educational practices after 1989 has shown that, despite the formal de-ideologisation of curricula and the proclamation of new objectives (competences, European integration), an instrumental approach to the teaching of history has persisted. Ideological influence did not disappear but rather transformed, shifting from direct, overt propaganda (as in the period 1944-1989) to “soft”, latent, and “hidden” forms. This observation corresponds with broader socio-legal analyses demonstrating that modern states increasingly rely on institutional narratives and normative frameworks to legitimise political choices and shape collective perceptions without resorting to explicit ideological coercion (Bereznik *et al.*, 2023). This influence operates less through the explicit content of textbook paragraphs and more through the so-called “hidden curriculum”. This term refers to unspoken patterns of thinking, institutional practices, biases, and structural constraints that shape pupils’ attitudes towards the past, often bypassing the stage of critical analysis. The “hidden curriculum” teaches pupils “how” to perceive problems rather than “what” to know about them (Koleva, 2022).

One of the key mechanisms of “soft ideologisation” is the conscious or unconscious restriction of the source base used in teaching. Contemporary textbooks and lessons, despite the requirements of the 2018 curriculum, rarely engage in detailed discussion of the “realities of life” under

totalitarianism. Research points to the absence in school curricula of personal sources (“history from below”) and analyses of everyday life. There is also no exploration of how the population perceived its reality as “normal”, in contrast to the political narrative emphasising the repressive nature of the period. Projects such as “I Lived through Socialism” or “The Inventory Book of Socialism”, which collected personal stories and artefacts, exist in the media sphere but are weakly represented in schools (Genova & Gospodinov, 2006). Particularly striking is the lack of in-depth study of the “history of repression”. Although repression and the People’s Court are mentioned as facts, there is no detailed analysis of the specific experiences of particular repressed groups (Kamusella, 2019). For example, the experiences of Muslim minorities, including Pomaks and Turks, who were subjected to forced assimilation campaigns and name changes, are effectively marginalised within the educational process. Similarly, the oral history of women in labour camps or the gender dimension of repression rarely become topics of classroom discussion, despite the importance of such sources for understanding the full picture. The source base of teaching is dominated by official documents of state and party origin, namely Politburo decisions, party archives, and legislative acts. As a result of the predominance of state-oriented sources, pupils study the history of the state and the history of the regime (even if this history is now presented from a critical perspective), rather than the history of society in all its complexity and diversity. This makes a multidimensional analysis impossible and reduces a complex forty-five-year period to a simple binary scheme of a “repressive state versus a silent people”. A second mechanism of “soft control” is the “examination effect”, in particular the influence of the state matriculation examinations. Pedagogical practices in real classrooms are shaped not only by the official curriculum, but also by pressure from parents and school administrations, who demand high academic results. In turn, the “hidden curriculum” dictates how problems should be perceived, not merely what should be known about them (Gigova, 2023). Under pressure to achieve results in standardised assessments, teachers are compelled to focus on what is tested in external examinations. The structure of standardised tests reproduces curricular priorities; thus, minimal attention to the analysis of the socialist past during instruction leads to a corresponding reduction of this topic in examination tasks. Teachers, rationally allocating limited teaching time, devote even less attention to these themes, concentrating instead on factual material required for the tests. In this way, the examination functions as a formally non-ideological, purely administrative instrument. In practice, however, it institutionally entrenches the marginalisation of complex topics, achieving an ideological outcome (the avoidance of in-depth analysis) without any explicit ideological directive (Koleva, 2022).

The most effective mechanism of “soft ideologisation” and “structural silencing” has proven to be the very design of the curriculum itself. The topic of the socialist

period (1944-1989) and the post-socialist transition after 1989 is placed at the very end of the Year 12 curriculum (Zajda, 2024). This topic is only one of nine broad themes covering an extensive chronological span from antiquity to the present. Occupying the smallest proportion of textbook content, and positioned chronologically at the end of the course, it is systematically pushed to the margins of the educational process. This is due to the objective shortage of classroom time and the priority given to preparing pupils for state examinations (Koleva, 2022). Such chronological placement institutionally ensures that most pupils complete their schooling without having systematically studied the most important and most complex period, which directly shaped their present and the society in which they live. Whereas in 1944-1989 ideology was achieved through excessive emphasis on and foregrounding of the “anti-fascist resistance”, in the contemporary period (the 2020s) a similar instrumental approach is achieved through the opposite method – structural marginalisation. In both cases, the outcome is similar: the avoidance of critical, in-depth, and multidimensional engagement with the period (Neuburger, 2022).

The cumulative effect of these “soft” mechanisms – restricted sources, examination pressure, and structural marginalisation within the curriculum – is the exclusion of socialism as a subject of critical analysis in the classroom. The “hidden curriculum” teaches pupils how to perceive the past, rather than what it actually was. The pedagogical discourse transmitted by teachers is characterised by an uncritical acceptance of Western models, reproducing a new binary opposition. Research indicates (Sierp, 2023) that in contemporary teaching Western Europe is “almost idealised” and presented as the “apex of global culture and development”. The socialist period, by contrast, is treated as an “already known” evil, something that does not require in-depth analysis but merely formal condemnation. Due to a lack of time, the absence of sources “from below”, and institutional constraints, schools do not challenge this binary opposition but rather reinforce it. The socialist period has shifted from a canonised and excessively emphasised past to one that is silenced and marginalised. It is not analysed, but instead used as a negative mirror and as a means of legitimising the country’s current pro-European consensus and political orientation (Dragostinova, 2022). At the same time, it remains misunderstood, unreflected upon, and mythologised – either through nostalgia or demonisation – for the new generation.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the research findings demonstrates that the instrumentalisation of historical scholarship and education in Bulgaria functioned as a mechanism of power. During the communist regime (1944-1989), history was transformed into an ideological apparatus designed to legitimise class struggle and socialism through institutional control, censorship, and didactic practices. Post-communist reforms after 1989 did not dismantle this logic but rather

inverted the narrative: Marxist dogma was replaced by an anti-totalitarian rhetoric, while the instrumental approach itself was preserved through the hidden curriculum, the structural marginalisation of certain topics, and a strong focus on personalisation. As a result, the past continues to be mythologised rather than subjected to sustained critical analysis. The broader significance of this finding lies in its illustration of a universal dynamic of power, whereby control over historical discourse shapes collective identity, obstructs genuine de-ideologisation, and underscores the necessity of pluralistic approaches in education in order to break cycles of manipulation in transitional societies. In this sense, the Bulgarian case contributes to a deeper understanding of post-socialist transformations and their long-term social consequences.

L. David (2020), in her work on forced memorialisation, provided a useful comparative framework for interpreting these findings. The researcher argued that the institutional imposition of particular memory regimes in the name of human rights often fails to generate social cohesion and instead produces new forms of alienation and formalised engagement with the past. L. David emphasised that the bureaucratisation of historical memory transforms traumatic events into standardised narratives that lose their emotional and ethical force, becoming instruments of political correctness rather than vehicles for deep reflection. A similar tendency was identified in the context of Bulgarian school education, where the introduction of “European” competence-based frameworks and civic education largely remained declarative, while everyday school practice continued to reproduce uncritical modes of perception. Whereas L. David focused primarily on the moral and ethical consequences of such policies at the societal level, this study demonstrates how standardised testing and chronological curriculum design technically sustain this superficiality, reducing the complex history of totalitarianism to a set of “correct” examination answers. In doing so, it empirically confirms L. David’s thesis regarding the limited effectiveness of formalised memory mandates.

The intellectual dynamics of late socialism in Bulgaria have been analysed by G. Medarov & V. Stoyanova (2024), who challenge the rigid dichotomy between power structures and dissidents by revealing an intermediate space of ambivalence. Within this space, intellectuals combined institutional cooperation with the regime and strategies aimed at expanding the boundaries of ideological autonomy. The authors argued that the period of T. Zhivkov’s rule was characterised by complex strategies of adaptation and cultural manoeuvring that cannot be captured by simplified models of total subjugation or heroic resistance. The results of the present study, based on an analysis of state educational standards and curriculum structures, highlighted a clear discrepancy between this academic complexity and the school narrative. This divergence can be explained by the differing functions of these texts: while academic scholarship seeks to restore historical complexity, school textbooks perform a legitimising function by

means of “narrative inversion” and the construction of a clearly defined “other” (the totalitarian past). This function necessitates the elimination of ambiguity and ambivalence, which are intrinsic to real historical processes.

The symbolic temporality of violence during late socialism has been examined by N. Ragaru (2023), who focused on memory practices related to the so-called “Revival Process”. The study demonstrated that the inclusion or exclusion of these events from the national historical narrative has been shaped by contemporary political conjunctures. The researcher emphasised that violence against minorities has been subject to manipulation, with victims either marginalised or instrumentalised for political purposes without being granted genuine subjectivity. The findings of the present study corroborate this conclusion through an analysis of educational curricula, which reveals the “structural silencing” of the specific experiences of Pomaks and Turks. In contrast to the author’s approach, which focused on the analysis of a wide range of cultural memory and public discussions, this study focused on institutional determinants. It was established that the dominance of official sources in textbooks creates structural barriers to the integration of oral history and the traumatic experience of minorities, as such narratives do not align with the canonical version of political history based on the ethnocentric state tradition.

L. Ricou (2020) analyses the processes of “Europeanisation” of educational systems in the post-socialist space, examining how the idea of “Europe” is employed in nation-building projects and in the reconfiguration of pupils’ historical consciousness. The author noted that integration into the European educational space is often perceived by local elites as an external resource for legitimising their own power and for symbolically distancing themselves from the communist past. This, in turn, leads to the construction of new myths about the nation’s “primordial Europeaness”. This observation directly correlates with the findings of the present study regarding the third phase of educational reforms in Bulgaria (after 2007), during which a shift towards a competence-based approach was identified under the influence of EU funds and frameworks. At the same time, the study reveals the largely formal and declarative character of this “Europeanisation”: despite the rhetorical embrace of European values, nationally centred narratives remained dominant, while the concept of totalitarianism functioned primarily as a tool of moral discrediting of the previous regime rather than as a means of fostering critical thinking. This confirms the instrumental use of the “European idea” within the educational field.

K.R. Ghodsee & M.A. Orenstein (2021), in their analysis of the social consequences of post-1989 transformations, argued that the implementation of radical market reforms in Central and Eastern Europe required the construction of a specific ideological narrative designed to justify sharp declines in living standards and growing inequality through the comprehensive demonisation of the socialist past. They demonstrated that political rhetoric emphasising the

inevitability of market transition depended on the erasure of memories of social security and welfare under the previous system, presenting socialism exclusively as a historical aberration. The present study provides direct empirical confirmation of this macro-sociological argument at the level of Bulgarian school education. It documents the total dominance of the totalitarian paradigm and the systematic exclusion from curricula of any references to social stability or the perceived normality of everyday life during socialism. The narrative inversion identified in textbook analysis – reducing the entire 45-year period to repression and economic failure – demonstrates how the school system performs a legitimising function for the new neoliberal order described by K.R. Ghodsee & M.A. Orenstein. In doing so, it blocks the possibility of critical comparison between social models and turns history into an instrument for justifying contemporary economic realities.

The mechanisms of ideological indoctrination through primary education have been examined in detail by J. Wojdon (2021). Focusing on primers and textbooks from former Soviet bloc countries, she demonstrated the role of visual imagery in constructing a world view presented as without alternatives. J. Wojdon showed how images and simplified texts shaped the outlook of the youngest citizens, producing a coherent narrative in which the party and the Soviet Union appeared as guarantors of a happy future. The findings of the present study, which focuses primarily on upper secondary education and history courses, complement her conclusions by revealing the continuity and institutional depth of this control. Whereas J. Wojdon analysed content – what was taught – this research uncovers the institutional mechanisms – how control was exercised – such as the role of Glavlit, special library collections, and the centralisation of academic institutions like the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. A further distinction lies in the focus on transformation: this study demonstrates that after 1989 the mechanisms of direct propaganda described by J. Wojdon did not disappear, but were reconfigured into “soft” forms of influence, including curriculum structure and examination regimes. These mechanisms continue to shape historical consciousness, not through overt indoctrination, but through exclusion and silence.

Overall, the analysis confirms that the instrumentalisation of historical education in Bulgaria has evolved from the direct ideological indoctrination characteristic of the socialist period into “soft” forms of legitimising the new socio-political order. Instead of overt censorship and Marxist dogma, the contemporary system relies on institutional mechanisms such as the hidden curriculum and the structural marginalisation of inconvenient topics to assert the non-alternative nature of the anti-totalitarian narrative. The identified trends demonstrate that a formal change of ideological signifiers and the declaration of European values have not ensured a transition to genuine critical pluralism. History continues to function as a resource for political mobilisation and for legitimising market reforms, rather than as a space for sustained, critical engagement with the past.

CONCLUSIONS

A comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms through which history education has been instrumentalised in Bulgaria made it possible to identify both the continuity and the specificity of the transformation of ideological practices under two distinct political regimes. With regard to the period 1944-1989, it was established that ideological control did not end with content censorship but was enacted through an institutional restructuring of the humanities. The relocation of the centre of historical research to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the creation of the Glavlit system ensured the vertical integration of scholarly knowledge with the directives of the Bulgarian Communist Party. An examination of regulatory documents, in particular the 1959 Law on the Link between School and Life, demonstrated how Marxist-Leninist methodology was didacticised through the introduction of the theory of socio-economic formations and compulsory “productive labour”. This transformed history from an academic discipline into an instrument for legitimising power, with the “foundational myth” of 9 September 1944 serving as a basis for shaping the loyalty of the “new person”.

A key outcome of the study was the identification of control mechanisms (“soft ideologisation”) that persist in the contemporary education system despite the implementation of European competence frameworks. The research demonstrated that the structural placement of the topic of socialism at the very end of the Year 12 curriculum and the focus on standardised examinations operate as effective instruments of “structural silencing”, technically limiting the time and depth available for studying the material. A

deficit of personal-source materials was identified, as well as the effective exclusion of the traumatic experiences of ethnic minorities – particularly the Turkish community during the “Revival Process” – from the official canon. This confirmed the thesis that contemporary history education continues to perform the function of constructing national identity through selective memory, ignoring complex and controversial aspects of the past for the sake of preserving a consensus political narrative.

A limitation of the present study was the fragmentary archival availability of complete textbooks issued in the 1950s. This factor has somewhat complicated the detailed reconstruction of the full range of didactic tools used during the early phase of the period under investigation, in particular preventing an in-depth analysis of the specific features of visual propaganda and the primary methodological directives. Future research may focus on conducting a comparative analysis of curricula in other Eastern European countries that have undergone post-socialist transformation – such as Poland, Romania, Hungary and the Baltic states. Such an approach would allow for the verification of the hypothesis concerning the universality of the identified mechanisms of “narrative inversion” and the identification of shared regional patterns in the implementation of state memory politics.

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Освіта як інструмент ідеології: викладання історії в болгарських школах за часів соціалізму (1944-1989) та в наш час

Анотація. Дослідження інструменталізації історичної освіти для ідеологічної легітимації влади залишається актуальним як для розуміння механізмів соціалістичних режимів, так і для аналізу суперечливих процесів постсоціалістичної трансформації. Метою дослідження було виявити еволюцію механізмів державного контролю над історичною освітою в Болгарії шляхом порівняльного аналізу інструментів прямої індоктринації в соціалістичний період (1944-1989) та прихованих форм ідеологізації в наш час. Методологія базувалася на проблематично-хронологічному підході, поєднуючи аналіз інституційних змін у болгарській освітній політиці та нормативно-правових актах з дослідженням трансформації історичних наративів та освітніх програм в обох періодах. Результати дослідження показали, що в період з 1944 по 1989 рік в Болгарії була сформована загальна система ідеологічного контролю, заснована на інституційній підпорядкованості науки Болгарській академії наук, цензурних обмеженнях з боку Главліту та нормативному встановленні марксизму-ленінізму як єдиної методології. Встановлено, що завдяки впровадженню Закону 1959 року про зв'язок школи з життям історична освіта була інтегрована з промисловою практикою, ставши інструментом виховання лояльності через працю, а наратив був зосереджений на «міфі заснування» 9 вересня 1944 року та класовій боротьбі. Було продемонстровано, що після 1989 року відбулася не деідеологізація, а «інверсія наративу», в якій соціалістичний канон був замінений риторикою тоталітаризму для легітимації ринкових реформ. Аналіз виявив перетворення прямого тиску на «м'які» механізми контролю – структурне переміщення теми соціалізму на кінець 12-го класу, акцент на стандартизованих іспитах, що вимагають запам'ятовування фактів, а не аналізу, та систематичне ігнорування особистих джерел і травматичного досвіду етнічних меншин (особливо під час «процесу відродження»), що блокує формування критичного осмислення минулого. Практичне значення дослідження полягає в представленні моделі аналізу довгострокового ідеологічного впливу на освіту та наданні інструментів для виявлення «прихованих» механізмів інструменталізації

Ключові слова: тоталітаризм; історіографія; індоктринація; комунізм; суспільство