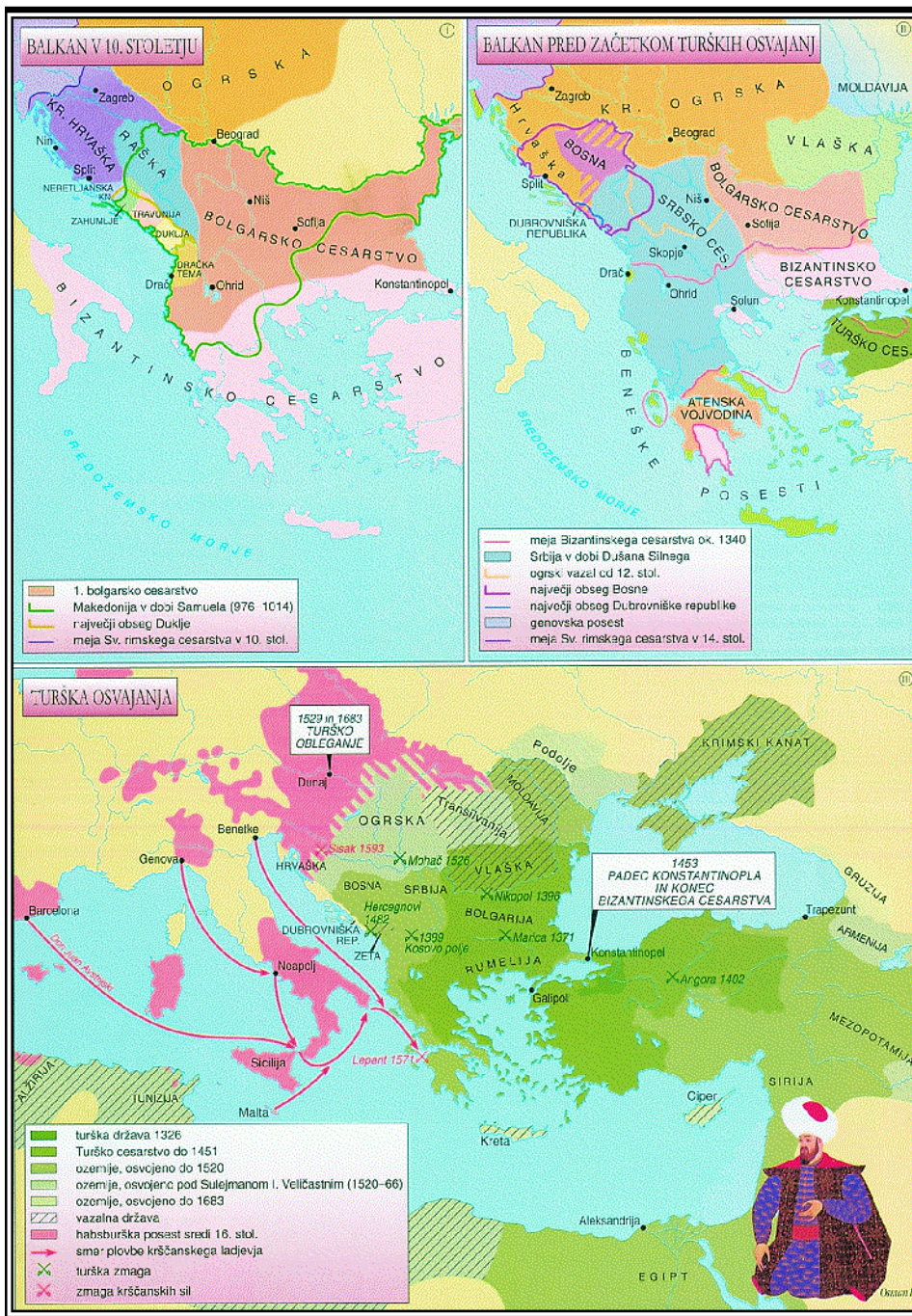


# The Reflection of Balkan History in the Bulgarian School Textbooks

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In the last few years a considerable variety of competing but officially approved by the Ministry of Education textbooks of history has appeared in Bulgaria. It became a standard for the public and private schools system. In regard to the current educational programme, these textbooks are supposed to be the main source for constructing knowledge and attitudes to national, European and world history. With some exceptions, the texts are in conformity with the pupils' age, the definite thematic and the correlation between the different units (histories).

The ongoing political and social changes after 1989 have directly influenced the ways the existing standards and traditions in historiography are adapted. It is most often that the production of the textbooks is a collective effort, as the authors belong to different generations. It is in their power to choose the appropriate methodological and didactic approaches, the significance of the different problems, the stylistics, illustrations and apparatus. It is entirely in the teachers' prerogatives to choose one or another of the available textbooks for the definite course of education. The changes in the political situation and in the social climate predetermine the current attempts for at least partial rethinking of the national history. These attempts result in



enlarging the chronological and thematic range and the content of the adapted “grand narratives”. The historiographic traditions are still deeply rooted in the “classical” positivism, (post-) Marxism and to a lesser extent - the “Annales” school. Although some of the texts apply methods borrowed from the historical demography, sociology, geopolitics and cultural anthropology, the place of the political history remains the crucial one. Some units are dedicated to everyday life, religion, minority issues/ethnoreligious cohabitation, arts etc. In general, it does not challenge the predominant vision of history as almost everlasting sequence of (political, ethnic, religious and national) conflicts.

I have already had the opportunity to comment the different aspects of the Bulgarian textbook situation while answering several Textbook Committee questionnaires and during some of the workshops which took place. Without generalizing the whole scope of the previous observations, I will try to summarize very briefly the place of the “Balkan” problematic as reflected in the history textbooks.

The major question what Bulgarian pupils can learn about the Balkan neighbours could probably be answered by applying the respective sociological methods. Some sociological surveys which were part of two Balkan School projects clearly show the important and even dominating role of the media and family environment in shaping the children’s notion about “the other”.

The process of rethinking of the mutual Balkan affiliation of the Bulgarians after the disintegration of the former Soviet block is a gradual and complex one. It came after decades of implanting of the ideas of the common Slavonic and “socialist international” “brotherhood”. The history textbooks in some respects mirror the newly realized place of Bulgaria in the contemporary Balkan realities

as well as some new trends in the textbook writing. At the same time the authors’ attitudes, scientific interests and stereotypes influence the ways the Balkan subjects are presented.

In contrast to the standard put to practice in the Republic of Macedonia, for example, the subjects covering the Balkan peoples’ history in Bulgarian textbooks are subordinated to the detailed presentation of the Bulgarian and the European past. The leading idea which predetermines the way the national history is presented is the unity of the “sacred” ethnic territory encompassing Moesia, Thrace and Macedonia. In general, the historical past of these lands is quite more “Bulgarian” than “Balkan”.

Not taking under consideration the classical Antiquity, the modern Balkan nations are presented in two main retrospective lines from the Middle Ages up to now: as Bulgarian ethnical and state neighbours. Here I do not intend to repeat the observations or conclusions of the other authors of this joint publication concerning the striking similarities in the respective ways of presenting the “other” Balkan nations (histories) versus “our national” past. In short, the predominant number of the Bulgarian textbooks share more or less the same main features or clichés: victimization (especially in the context of the “national catastrophes”, 1913, 1918) and glorification, “alien”, “egoistic” and “perfidious” state neighbours or imperial masters, incompatible national programmes and doctrines. One of the significant specifics of the predominant vision is the absence of direct negative stereotypes for the neighbouring peoples or the ethnic minorities within the Bulgarian state borders. On the other hand, there are many hints, selected events, fragmentary facts and contexts which directly link the respective people/nation with its “own”, very often “rivaling” or “hostile” state. The main fields of the Balkan contacts are

the military conflicts, nationalistic quarrels and “propaganda” (especially in the Ottoman Macedonia in the end of 19th c. - 1913) and the lost national “ideal” (in the parts of the “sacred” territorial and ethnic space, annexed by the neighbouring states).

Although the different texts and authors’ choices are hard to be summarized, we may offer the following conclusions:

- In general, Bulgarian textbooks do not present the main trends of the history of the neighbouring nations.
- Despite all differences in details and content, it is rare when the textbooks construct a common context regarding some of the most important regional events. As a rule, the “national fate” of Bulgarians is portrayed as specific enough even when the texts deal with some common tragedies, suffered by all Balkan peoples.
- The idealization of the Bulgarian “national” in definite cases is achieved by the established technique of intentional selection of facts concerning the cases of violence, genocide, attempts for ethnic assimilation etc. The “historical responsibility” for a number of tragedies, the correlation between some Bulgarian deeds and the common Balkan negative consequences are usually not part of the general factological frame or analysis. The terminology and contexts for “occupations”, “annexations”, “denationalisations”, religious and other “discriminations” are referred to the acts and policies undertaken mainly by the neighbouring states’ authorities to the detriment to Bulgarian ethnical/national body, but not vice versa.
- Despite all the negative features pointed out, there are at least some developing new tendencies. For all the failures in its presentation, the Balkan background has already been adopted as an immanent part of the text-

book narratives together with a number of “imperial”, cultural, religious and minority issues. They treat objectively not only the Balkan “differences”, but also “similarities”.

The optimistic view is that the evident tendency towards modernization and humanization of the school texts will result in enlargement and enrichment of the subjects concerning the regional past. If the term “the Balkans” has neutral or positive meanings, some of them have already been projected and, hopefully, will experience a further development in the Bulgarian history textbooks.