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Religious Content in Science and Social Studies Textbooks in the Former Yugoslav Countries

Extended summary

The socio-political and economic changes that occurred from the late 20th to the early 21st century brought about reforms in the educational systems in the countries of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Yugoslavia). These reforms consequently influenced the status of religion within the curricular frameworks of both compulsory and elective subjects. Given that Science and Social Studies lessons in the first cycle of education are integrative in content, the authors focused their research attention on analyzing Science and Social Studies textbooks for the first cycle of education in the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Croatia, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (including the Republic of Srpska), the Republic of Montenegro, the Republic of Slovenia, and the Republic of North Macedonia.

Starting from the main research objective — *to examine the extent of religious content in Science and Social Studies textbooks for the first cycle of education in the countries of the former Yugoslavia* — three research tasks were defined: 1. To determine the proportion of the category *religion* in the main section of the Science and Social Studies textbooks in the former Yugoslav countries (BT); 2. To examine the representation of the category *religion* in the visual and pictorial components of the textbooks (VC); 3. To identify the proportion of the category *religion* within the didactic-methodological apparatus of the sampled textbooks (DMA); and 4. Determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the representation of the religious

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content in the domains of BT, VC, and DMA in the textbooks for the first cycle of education in the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

The study applied a descriptive method in observing the theoretical framework and interpreting the findings based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The unit of analysis consisted of individual phrases in the main text, visual representations in the textbook's visual section, and individual questions, tasks or instructions within the didactic-methodological apparatus of the textbooks. The research sample was stratified — it included four Science and Social Studies textbooks for each of the first four grades of primary school used in the 2025/2026 school year in the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Croatia, and the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and three textbooks for each grade of the first cycle of education in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Montenegro, the Republic of Slovenia, and the Republic of North Macedonia.

A comparative quantitative analysis of the average representation of the category *religion* in the main section of the Science and Social Studies textbooks for the first cycle of education across the countries of the region indicates variability and dichotomy. The share ranges from 3.65% to 0%. The highest proportion of religious content was recorded in the textbooks of the Republic of Slovenia, while a complete absence was observed in the textbooks of the Republic of North Macedonia. A similar level of representation of the category *religion* was found in the textbooks of the Republic of Croatia (2.86%), the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2.78%), and the Republic of Serbia (2.73%), followed by a slightly lower share in the textbooks of the Republic of Srpska (2.38%), and finally, the lowest in the textbooks of the Republic of Montenegro (1.90%). The duration of the first cycle of education did not influence the final research results.

Regarding visual support, the most numerically representative were the Science and Social Studies textbooks of the Republic of Srpska, in which 2.57% of the visual content has a religious character. A similar average representation of the category *religion* was observed in the textbooks of the Republic of Croatia (1.60%), the Republic of Slovenia (1.52%), the Republic of Montenegro (1.43%), and the Republic of Serbia (1.36%). In addition to the Republic of North Macedonia, the textbooks of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina also do not include any visual content of a religious nature.

Religious content interpreted through questions, assignments, and instructions was recorded only in the textbooks of the Republic of Srpska (1.58%), the Republic of Croatia (1.49%), and the Republic of Serbia (0.39%). The only textbooks in which religious content was entirely absent across all three analyzed segments are the Science and Social Studies textbooks in North Macedonia.

Qualitative analysis showed that there is no consistent representation of the category *religion* (BT, VC, and DMA) in the Science and Social Studies textbooks of the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The progression of the concept of *religion* in terms of intensity, extent, scope, and reach was not observed. In some textbooks, the promotion of the religion of the majority population predominates (Republic of Croatia, Republic of Slovenia), even though these contents are introduced as early as the first-grade textbooks. Examples of good practice, soli-

ilarity, and coexistence among different religious communities are rare (Republic of Srpska), with holidays of other faiths mostly presented only at an informative level.

Therefore, the absence of visual support, and especially of didactic-methodological instructions that would encourage students' understanding of their own personal identity as well as the comprehension of other and diverse identities, cannot be considered justified. Among the seven analyzed countries of the former Yugoslavia, only the textbooks of the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, and the Republic of Croatia address the category *religion* simultaneously across all three segments of the textbooks (BT, VC, DMA), thus creating space for the proper formation of the selected (targeted) concepts and ideas. However, there is no developmental progression of the category *religion*, as in terms of the representation of the religious content, its diversity, clear conceptual hierarchy, scope, and reach, no progression from grade to grade has been achieved by following a concentric-circle model.

A recommendation remains for textbook authors to adopt a more dedicated approach to this category of national identity in the verbal and visual interpretation of the Science and Social Studies content, using diverse examples (such as orientation in space, family, demographics, occupations, rights and responsibilities, etc.). The identification of identity diversity must serve to promote solidarity and coexistence at a global level.

Keywords: religion, textbooks, Science and Social Studies textbooks, younger primary school students

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