DERMENDZHIEVA, S.; DRAGANOVA, T. (2024). ***Innovative strategies and methods of training Geography and Economics for Europe, Balkan Peninsula and Bulgaria in 7th grade.*** The Overarching Issues of the European Area- How to efficiently combine sustainability, resilience and territorial management?. Porto, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. pp. 268-283
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INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES AND METHODS OF TRAINING GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMICS FOR EUROPE, BALKAN PENINSULA AND BULGARIA IN 7TH GRADE

ESTRATÉGIAS E MÉTODOS INOVADORES DE ENSINO DA GEOGRAFIA E ECONOMIA PARA A EUROPA, PENÍNSULA DOS BALCÃS E BULGÁRIA NO 7º ANO DE ESCOLARIDADE

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Abstract

The educational system in Bulgaria is being modernized, transformed and digitized. There is a continuous effort to increase the quality of education, the improvement of methodological tools and the introduction of innovative strategies, models and training methods.
In the training of geography and economics in the 7th grade, from the academic year 2024/2025, new curricula will be in force, which has been amended and supplemented, and includes changes related to all components. The content design for the study of Europe, the Balkan Peninsula and Bulgaria is preserved as a temporal identification, but with modified didactic purposes, grouping and training methodology.
In the present chapter, are presented conceptual frameworks of the school subject geography and economics for the 7th grade, through a situational analysis of the educational process and the new curricula in 2018/2019 and in 2024/2025 or for the period of a six-year.
Specific ways in which artificial intelligence can be used in education to improve the educational and learning experiences, encourage individualization and contribute to raising student outcomes are presented. Based on this, artificial intelligence is a software that is able to detect cause-and-effect relationships in the data provided to it and generate predictions, recommendations or decisions based on incomplete and unclear information without the presence of predefined instructions.

Keywords: geography and economics, curricula, methods, strategies, Europe, Balkan Peninsula, Bulgaria.

Resumo

O sistema educativo na Bulgária está a ser modernizado, transformado e digitalizado. É visível um esforço contínuo para aumentar a qualidade da educação, o aperfeiçoamento das ferramentas metodológicas e a introdução de estratégias, modelos e métodos de formação inovadores.
Na formação em Geografia e Economia do 7.º ano, a partir do ano letivo 2024/2025, passaram a estar em vigor novos curricula, que foram alterados e complementados, incluindo alterações relativas a todas as componentes. O design de conteúdos para o estudo da Europa, Península Balcânica e Bulgária foi preservado como uma identificação temporal, mas com propósitos didáticos, agrupamento e metodologia de treino modificados.

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Estruturas conceptuais da disciplina escolar geografia e economia para o 7º ano são apresentadas neste capítulo, através de uma análise situacional do processo educativo e dos novos curricula.
São apresentadas formas específicas através das quais a inteligência artificial pode ser utilizada na educação, para melhorar as experiências educativas e de aprendizagem, e contribuir para melhorar os resultados dos alunos. Com base nisto, a inteligência artificial é um software capaz de detetar relações de causa e efeito nos dados que lhe são fornecidos e gerar previsões, recomendações ou decisões baseadas em informação incompleta e pouco clara, sem a presença de instruções predefinidas.

Palavras-chave: geografia e economia, currículo, métodos, estratégias, Europa, Península Balcânica, Bulgária.

1- Introduction

The dynamic changes in the last five years and Bulgaria's place on the global socio-economic and political-strategic, cultural and educational scene determined higher public demands at all levels. With an optimal combination of the necessary didactic conditions (a detailed study of the educational documentation and compliance with its requirements; appropriate selection of textbooks and teaching aids, informatization and technology, adapted to the specifics of the specific school environment) and application of the principles of humanization, sociologization, dynamization of the interaction between teacher and students in the course of educational and cognitive activity, the social expectations for geographical training would be achieved.

In the training of geography and economics in the Bulgarian school, the process of educational reform, amendments and additions to the curricula has not stopped since its beginning in 2016. Some of the program amendments and additions that have occurred are inevitable in relation to the digital transformation of education, innovations and global educational trends and changes in public attitudes and school innovation. Another part is unfounded and outside the framework of educational traditions, but follow the general methodological trends in education.

Geography education occupies an important place in the general education of modern young people. Its position is based, on the one hand, on the general state educational policy and, on the other hand, on its so-called absolute value in the general education of people, connected with his understanding and rational activity in geographical space. This value is based on the uniqueness of geography as a natural and social science, on its „dual object" of study (Dermendzhieva, 2001, 80-81).

The study of geography becomes an essential basis for understanding a world that is complex and rapidly changing. By assessing the diversity of people and places in the world, geography provides real opportunities, not only contributing to local, national, and global development, but also for „understanding and promoting multicultural, international, and other perspectives in the world" (Dermendzhieva, 2021, 116).

Content analysis, situational and comparative analysis, systematization, generalization, deduction and induction, in combination with the exploratory, complex and systematic approach, are applied in the research and the didactic interpretation on the topic.

The methodology of the study is also based on the program data of the last two editions of the curricula in geography and economics. Through the qualitative method, the program data in the curricula were analyzed, synthesized and evaluated - content analysis, topic analysis, analysis of expected results, analysis of new concepts, analysis of the number of lessons, analysis of lesson types, analysis of other didactic criteria. The program and statistical data used are the basis for the comparative models in the article, presented through infographics and diagrams.

The present chapter is structured as follows: after Introduction, the second section focus on the content aspects and objectives of geography and economics education in grade VII, types of geography and economics lessons in grade VII in relative and percentage values, comparative models between curricula, competencies as expected learning outcomes and new concepts and comparative models of studied countries.

2 – Content aspects and objectives of geography and economics training in grade VII

2.1- Situational analysis and didactic interpretation of the learning content

In Bulgaria, the latest educational reform poses a challenge and raises questions and possible solutions about the place and role, importance and content of school geography education and its successful development against the background of the unified state educational policy. It is also a circumstance that defines a new learning environment with adapted educational phenomena, processes and objects.

In the Bulgarian secondary school, the study of Geography of Europe, the Balkan Peninsula and Bulgaria in the new realities is designed in the normative documents, the world trends in education, the societal needs and the combination of traditional and innovative models of geographical education. Each systematization has a conditional nature as it is based on different criteria. It is based on the answers to several questions (Fig. 1):

- „What is being studied (subject approach);
- How, by what means is it studied (methodological approach)?
- Why, for what reason, for what purpose is it studied? (applied approach)" (Dermendzhieva, 2021, 27).

The new realities bring to the fore the importance of geographical knowledge, of geographical cognition, the importance of geographical education as culture, as behaviour, i.e., with other emphases and new dimensions. This calls for research, along with a deep rethinking of the achievements of geographic education in our country, in combination with the traditions that have retained their value. Mass digitalization and the introduction of educational innovations are observed with innovations related to the new realities, forming „a philosophy of the development of geographical values" (Dermendzhieva, 2021, 120).

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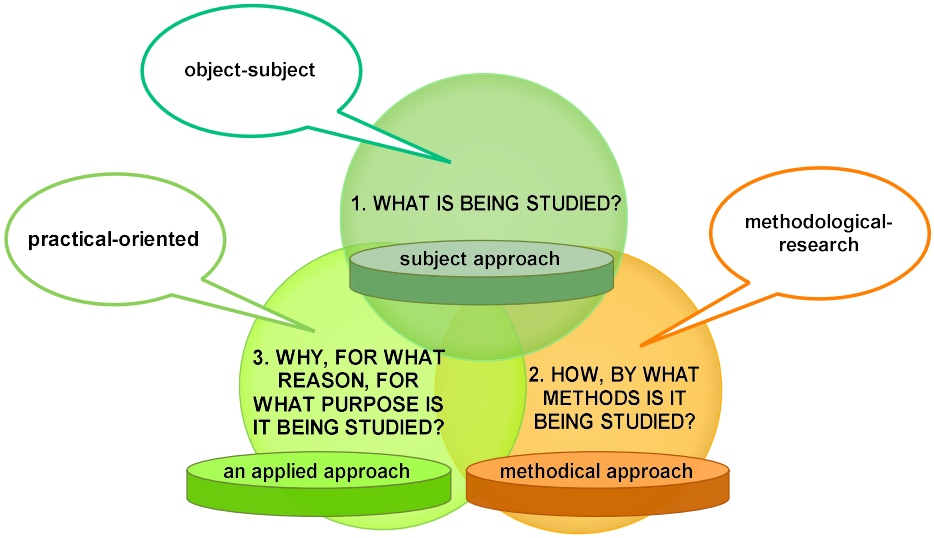


Figure 1 - A general scientific system for the overall scientific knowledge of geography
Source: Author's scheme – S. Dermendzhieva and T. Draganova

The grounds for determining the place of the 7th grade course as part of the geographic training system are:

- the traditions that have preserved their value, which after repeated changes prove the expediency of the arrangement of the continents (typological approach);
- the modern achievements of the geographical science, primarily in terms of regional studies, which implies a complex approach to the study of the continents and oceans of the planet;
- the new concepts in didactic, methodological and psychological-pedagogical science, as a result of which the adaptation of scientific knowledge for educational purposes is carried out in accordance with the principles of accessibility, actuality, complexity, systematicity, personal significance and are adequate to the age characteristics of the students; the potential opportunity for interdisciplinary (according to the scope) and preceding, concurrent and prospective (according to the chronology) binding of the educational content in geography and economics.

The effectiveness of geography education in grade 7 can be assessed by the following two criteria: the ability of students to use their critical thinking in situations that are new to them and the degree of engagement and interest demonstrated toward learning (Dermendzhieva, 2010, 400). The training includes characterization of the geographical position and borders of Europe and the Balkan Peninsula and selected countries within them, features of the nature of Europe and the Balkan Peninsula, the political map, population, economy in Europe and in selected countries (Great Britain, France, Germany) and the political map, population, economy in the Balkan Peninsula and in selected countries (Romania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Greece).

Four of the expected outcomes are specifically linked to the geography of Europe and the Balkan Peninsula, and the fifth is indirect because it includes the political map, population, economy and selected countries of the Balkan Peninsula as part of Europe. The characterization of a continent is done according to the model: geographical position and borders, population, political map, economy, countries representative of the continent (for Europe - 3, and for the Balkan Peninsula - 4). Concluding the course is anlysed the geography of Bulgaria. The section covers geographical position, nature, population, settlements, and economy.

The training in geography and economics in the seventh grade is aimed at continuing the formation and development of geographical culture through the mastering of basic knowledge, skills and the acquisition of key competences by students. The training covers the surrounding space the regional and local level through the study of Europe, the Balkan Peninsula and Bulgaria.

The didactic goals are oriented towards searching for the meaning of what has been learned and discovering its application in new and unfamiliar everyday situations. The goal setting is oriented towards ensuring a full and effective acquaintance with the approaches and means of finding and using geographical knowledge for personal, professional and social realization.

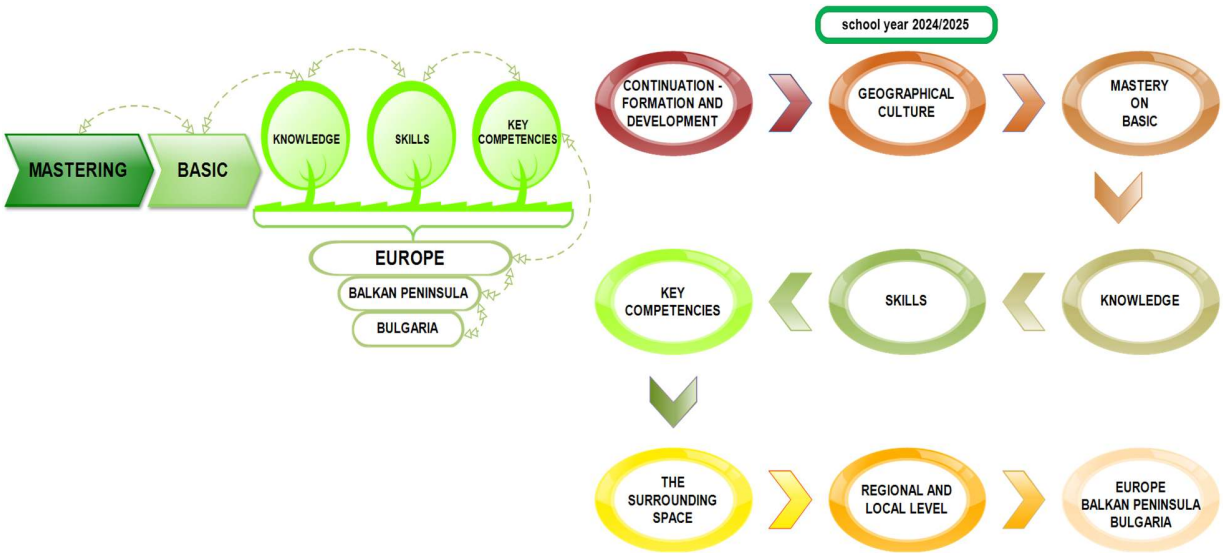


Figure 2 – Comparative model of the main objective in the curricula before and from the academic year 2024/2025
Source: (Curricula, 2023, 1)

The comparative analyses cover the curricula in force until the 2023/2024 academic year and the amended and supplemented curricula in force from the 2024/2025 academic year. The main objective for the whole class reveals: structural integration; didactic expansion of the objective in relation to geographical culture; preservation of the chronological character of the surrounding space, the different territorial levels and units; integration of the learning process as a function of social activity; integration of practical-applied

dimensions; overcoming the reproductive character of memorizing data and facts; introduction of social and civic competences where the aim is to apply geographical knowledge for personal, professional realization (Fig. 2, Fig. 3).

The main objective before the mini-reform of 2023 is competency and horological-content oriented, with the requirements covering the mastery of basic knowledge, skills and key competences on a territorial basis in the direction from the far to the near or the deductive to the inductive range or from *Europe - Balkan Peninsula - Bulgaria* (Curricula, 2017, 1) The three horological units are integrated programmatically as independent structural-content units.

The 2024/2025 main purpose has been structurally, territorially and content-wise amended and supplemented. The didactic specification has been included not only for the three horological units to be studied: *Europe - Balkan Peninsula - Bulgaria*, but also the taxonomy on which the movement from the general to the particular or to the native country takes place has been described: at the regional and local level.

The amended and supplemented curricula set the conceptual centre for continuing the formation and development of the **geographical culture** at the competence level through the didactic unity of knowledge, skills and acquisition of the key competences by the students (Curricula, 2023, 1) The formation of the geographical culture is the main objective of the school geographical education, because „the general culture is formed on the basis of the geographical culture" and a unique geographical picture of the world is built, situated on the four main components: „geographical picture of the world, geographical thinking, methods of geography and language of geography" (Dermendzhiev, 2018, 23-24, 222; Draganova, 2024, 41, 46). Or the normative statement about the training to continue the formation of the geographical culture in grade VII is a didactic induction related to the volume category of the objective „picture of the world" and the improvement and enrichment of the geographical culture in the context of global thinking and global competence (Dermendzhieva, Draganova, 2022). The implemented programmatic targeting for continuing the formation and development of the geographical culture is a direct transformation of the geographical environment for Europe, the Balkan Peninsula and Bulgaria on the one hand, and „people as formers of the geographical values" on the other hand, while a third side is „the rational activity and individual excellence in dealing with geographical information" (Dermendzhieva, 2021, 160-163).

The curricula additions also cover the implementation of a requirement for the way of learning and the outcome of this learning to be of a practical and applied nature. The search for meaning from what is learnt is precisely the transformation of training into a social activity, one that is the basis for the reproduction of any subsequent activity. The formed competences as a system of knowledge, skills and values are applicable specifically in new and unfamiliar everyday situations or the training as activities is transformed as a socially significant quality of the already trained students capable of applying familiar models in new environments and new situations. The didactic emphasis is on learning as activities, and the training process guides the structure and content of the activities to form the main characteristics of this training, which is a social phenomenon and a carrier of the geographical culture.

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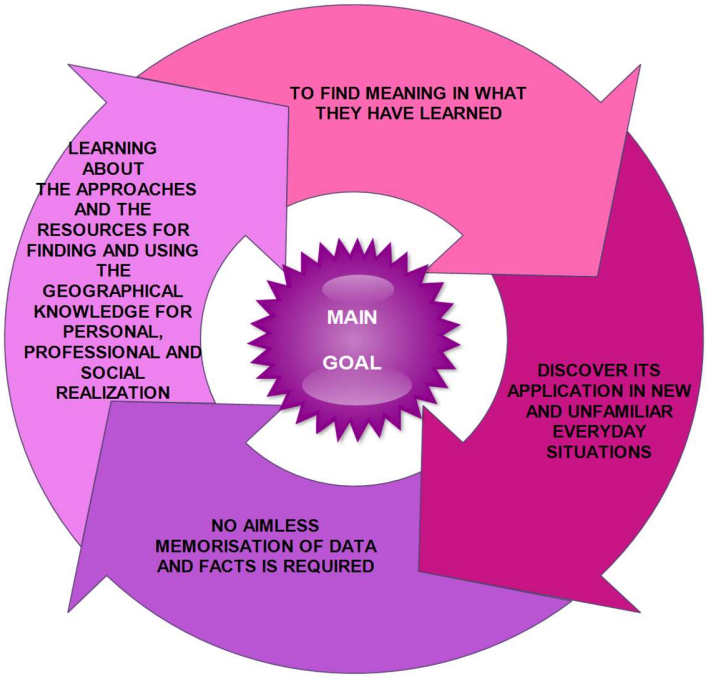


Figure 3 – Decomposed supplemented main objective of the curricula in geography and economics for grade VII in force from the academic year 2024/2025.
Source: (Curricula, 2023, 1)

The programmatic specificity of objective setting in Grade VII in the supplemented curricula is the search and use of geographical knowledge in order to achieve personal, professional and social realization (Fig. 3). In this case, the geographic specific objective corresponds to the legal framework in the implementation of the third objective: „acquisition of competencies necessary for successful personal and professional realization and active citizenship in modern communities" (ZPUO, 2016, 2). Knowledge of the approaches and means of finding geographic information is important, assuming its selection and interpretation rather than reproductive overlay and reproduction of facts, theories and data. The implementation of this procedural requirement is mentioned in the brief as not allowing „the aimless memorization of data and facts" (Curricula, 2023, 1). On the other hand, the objective is oriented towards the group of key competences - **social and civic competences**, an integral part of the scope of general education, socialization, education, and training of students. Essential for the realization of this objective is the interaction with the other groups of key competences, as well as the fact that it is a reflection of the principles of the school education system related to „orientation to the interest and to the motivation..., to the age and social changes in its life, as well as to its ability to apply the acquired competences in practice" (ZPUO, 2016, 2).

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2.2- Types of geography and economics lessons in VII grade in relative and percentage values - comparative models

The content analysis of the types of geography and economics lessons in the amended and supplemented VII grade curricula reveals a change in the names as well as in the relative percentages of four of the five lesson types (Fig. 4, Fig. 5). One type is for activities, and in the amended and supplemented curricula the emphasis is on the practical nature of the exercises and the activities are not in the position of clarification or it is stated „didactic-conceptual equivalence of the type of skills – practical" (Draganova, 2023, 146-147; Draganova, 2024, 229):

- „for exercises (activities)" and „for practical exercises and activities";
- „for assessment papers" and „for assessment papers (for entry and exit level and for assessment papers)" (Curricula 2017, 7; Curricula, 2023, 6).

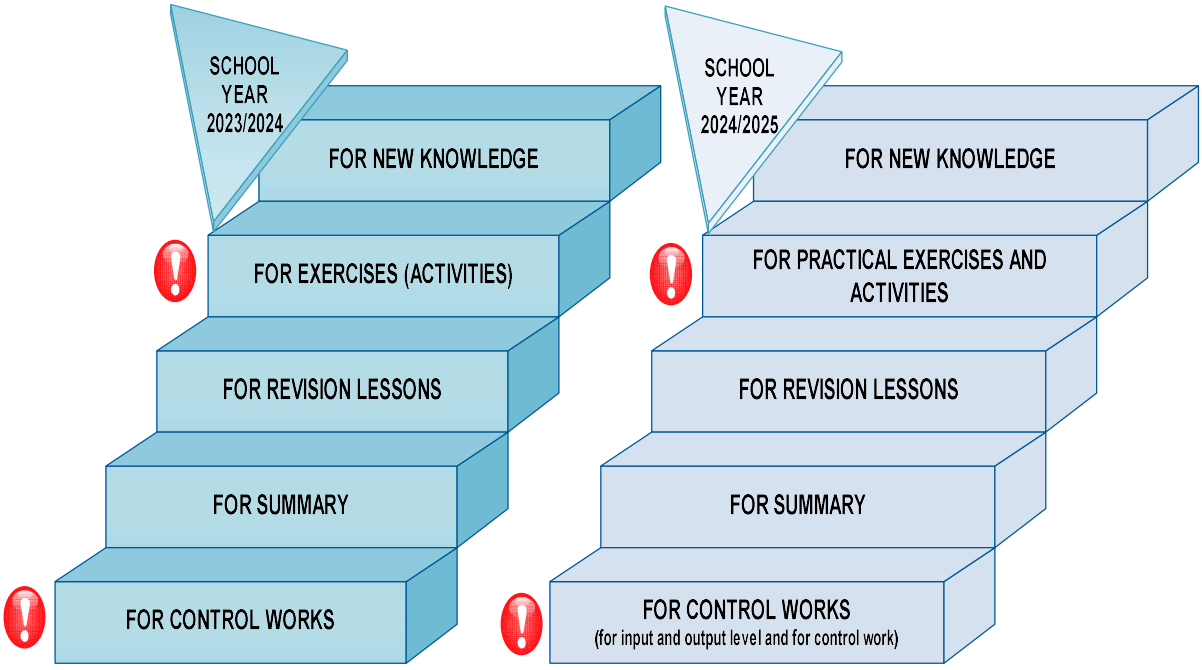


Figure 4 – Comparative vision of the lesson types in geography and economics in VII grade between the curricula of 2023/2024 and the academic year 2024/2025
Source: (Curricula 2017, 7; Curricula, 2023, 6)

The other type of lesson where there has been a change and terminological layering is for the lessons on *control works*, where in the supplemented curricula model for the 2024/2025 school year, clarification has been added for the type of assessment as exit and entry level. The repetition in the clarification that the lesson type is for assessment papers is not explainable, given that it is already defined in the systematized vision - *for control works*.

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The comparative model of the recommended percentage distribution of compulsory school hours for the two curricula shows a change in quantitative values in relative and absolute terms. Only one type of lesson is not covered by the changes in the quantitative distribution of school hours - *for control works*.

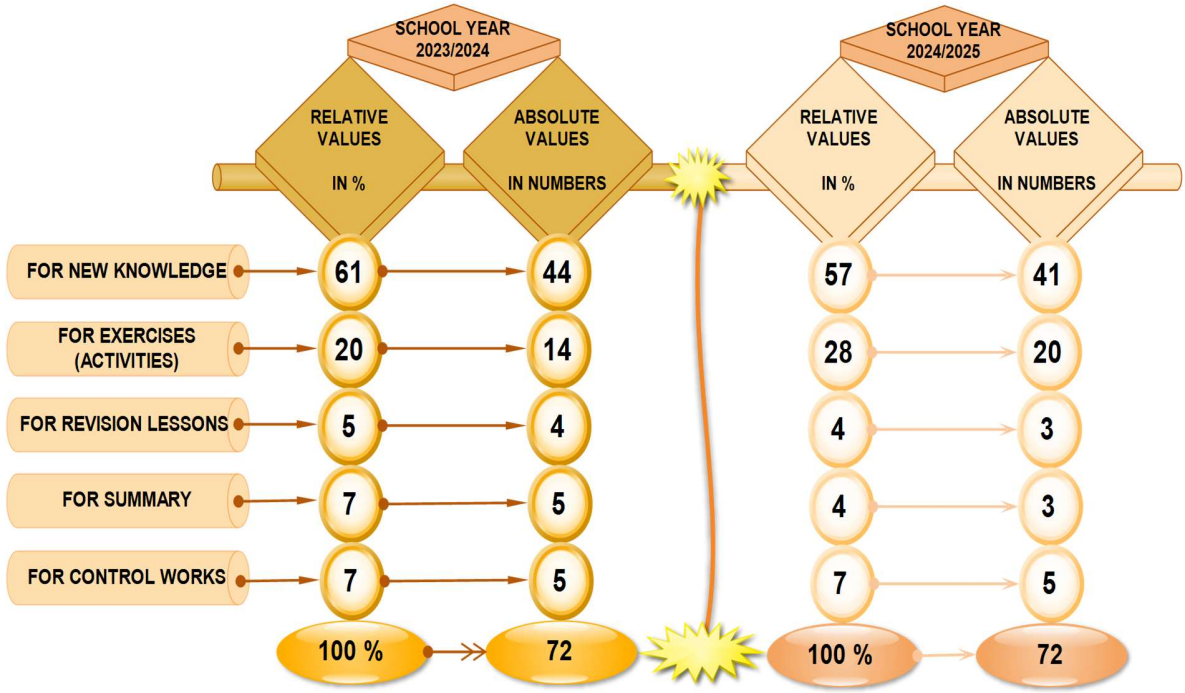


Figure 5 – Comparative model of the recommended distribution of the mandatory school hours in geography and economics in VII grade according to the curricula of 2017 and 2023
Source: Draganova, 2024, 232-233.

For the other lesson types, the following curricula changes are observed:

- reduction of the lessons for new knowledge - by three lessons;
- Increase the lessons for exercises and activities - by six lessons;
- minimal reduction of the revision lessons - by one lesson;
- reduction of the lessons for summary - by two lessons;
- the overall normative framework of increasing the compulsory school hours is towards one type of lessons - practical exercises and activities;
- three lesson types are reduced in proportion to two other lesson types, 7/5 and 4/3, with a 2/1 reduction.

The amended curricula in force from the 2024/2025 academic year sets quantitative equality in the absolute number of revision and summary lessons. The didactic underestimation and reduction of these two types of lessons is not justified. Summary lessons in grade VII are minimized to 3, probably based on the chronological content of the three territorial units, but in this case they are studied not as separate topics in a 1:1:1 ratio, but are normatively established as 2:1. The didactic arguments for devoting a greater amount

of lessons to summarization are related to its objectives of application in the lesson system - deepening, broadening and awareness of the new school content, consolidation, generalization, as well as meaningful systematization. Through the lessons of summarization and revision, a holistic view of the geographical objects, processes and phenomena is formed. The functionality of these types of lessons is disturbed, especially the summary lessons, where the dependence is proportional to the increase of the classes in the vertical and because „through them the summary results of the educational work can be best seen and corrected accordingly if necessary" (Andreev, 1996, 295). There is a didactic disproportion between the lessons for summarizing (3) and for assessment (5) papers (3:5), where there is a methodologically justified relationship.

The reduction of lessons on new knowledge at the expense of lessons on practical exercises and activities is in response to the main objective of the curricula and the idea of orienting the learning process towards practice, overcoming the aimless memorization of data and facts, as well as the knowledge of approaches and tools for finding and using geographical information. The increased number of activity lessons reflects the need to effectively learn and apply fundamental geographical skills, develop research skills, activate thinking activities and independent learning, as well as the development of critical thinking (Dermendzhieva, 2021, 502).

2.3- Competences as expected training outcomes

In the amended and supplemented curricula in geography and economics for VII grade from 2023, a total of **57 expected results** are set against **84 expected results** in the curricula until 2023/2024. The reduction in competencies as expected outcomes is drastic - **27 fewer expected outcomes** have been removed from the 2023 amended curricula.

A total of **19 active verbs** are included in the 2017 syllabus for class VII, the most applicable being - characterizes (repeated 24 times); evaluates (repeated 15 times); applies (repeated 7 times); indicates (repeated 6 times). There are 7 active verbs included which are only applied once - *names*, *composes*, *understands*, *elaborates*, *answers a geographical question*, *expresses an opinion* and *comments*. A total of 8 active verbs are between the maximum and minimum values of application and repetition, or between 2 and 4 times, and most refer to factual and conceptual knowledge: *knows*, *defines*, *describes*, *explains*, *presents*, *gives examples*, *groups*, *compares*. All 84 expected outcomes were composed by the 19 active verbs, with a predominance of application versus **conceptual** and **metacognitive knowledge** at the levels of acquisition - ***application*** and ***evaluation*** (Fig. 6). The two levels are met by **characterize** 24 times applied and **evaluate** - applied 15 times or in total out of the 84 competencies as expected outcomes almost half - 39 are introduced as a requirement through productivity of learning process.

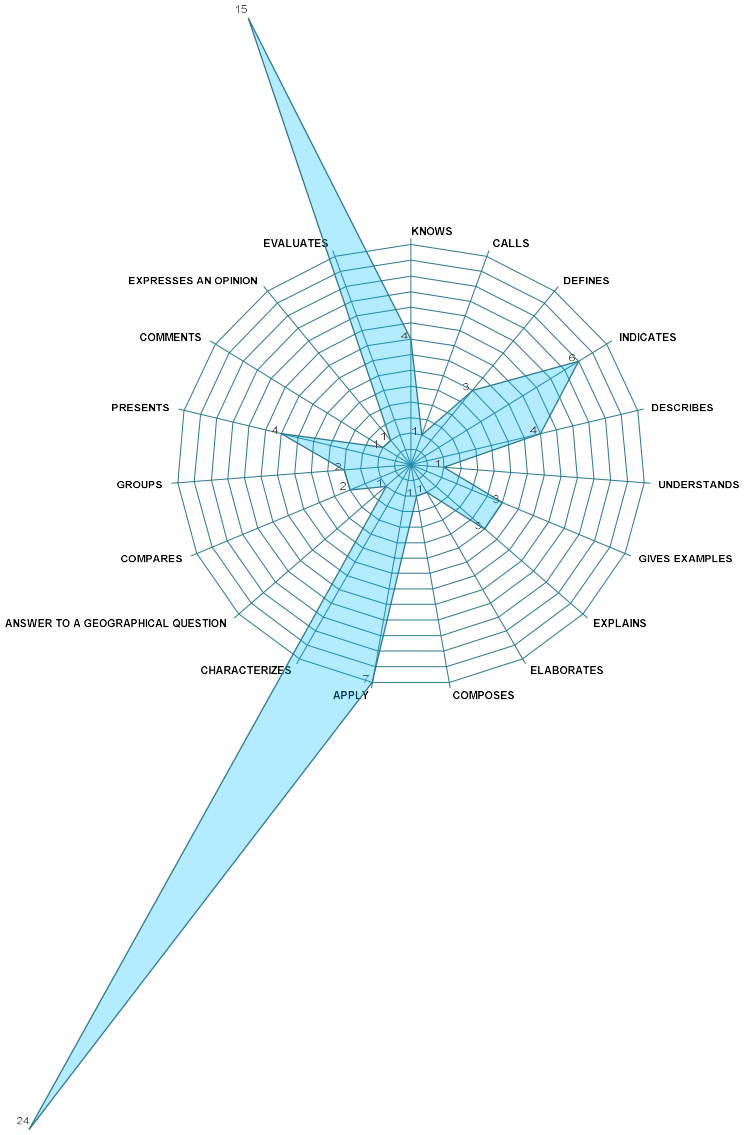


Figure 6 – Systematized model of the active verbs, composed according to the competences as expected training outcomes of the curricula in geography and economics for VII grade from 2017
Source: (Curricula 2017, 2-7)

In the curricula of 2023 for VII grade a total of **20 active verbs** are included on the basis of which **57 competences are composed as expected** ––training outcomes (Fig. 7). The application of the active verb characterized by the maximum frequency of repetition has been maintained - a total of 19 times, but less compared to the 2017 curricula. Compared to the four active verbs in the 2017 curricula, only one has remained in the amended curricula, which dominates in level of mastery - ***application*** (*characterize*).

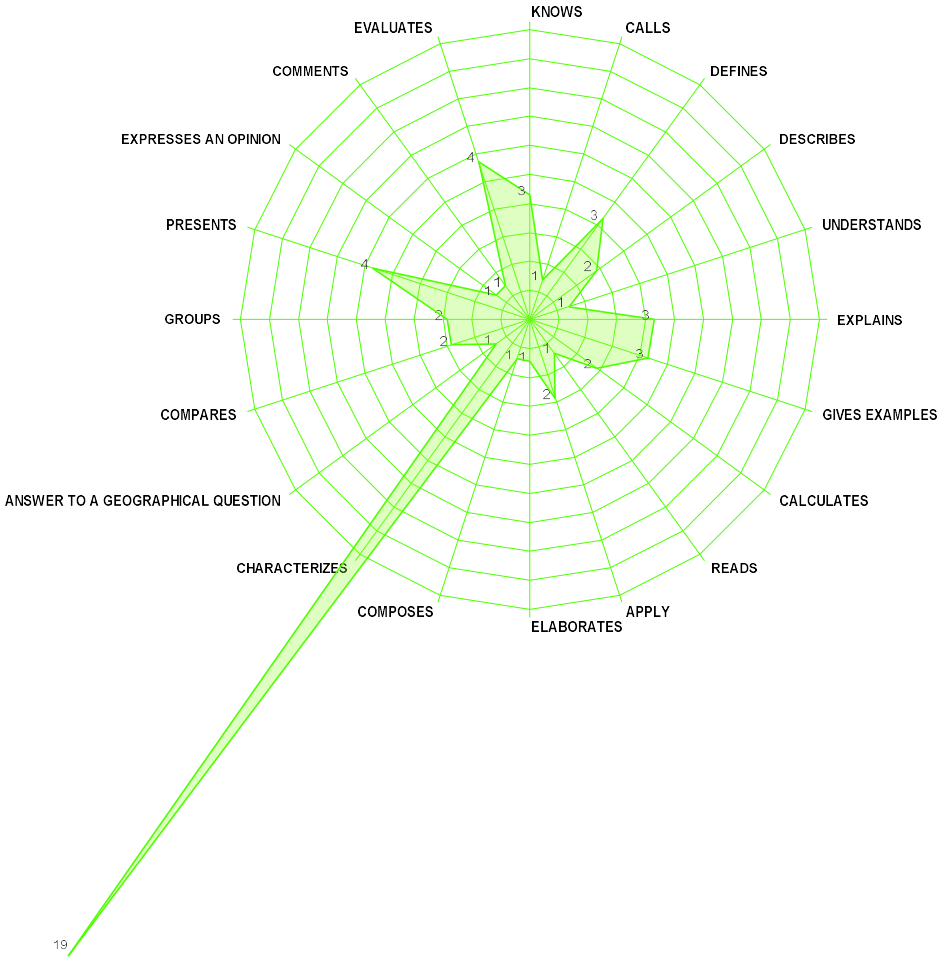


Figure 7 – Systematized model of the active verbs, composed according to the competences as expected training outcomes of the curricula in geography and economics for VII grade from 2023
Source: (Curricula 2023, 2-6)

A total of 8 active verbs were found to be used only once: *read*, *name*, *understand*, *elaborate*, *compose*, *answer a geographical question*, *comment*, express an opinion. In this taxonomic context, for the single application of the active verbs, the 7:8 ratio in favor of the 2023 curricula has been maintained. The number of active verbs that have a frequency of repetition between 2 and 4 times has increased - 11 in total: *recognize*, *determine*, *describe*, *explain*, *calculate*, *apply*, *compare*, *give examples*, *group*, *present*, *evaluate*. It is found that the number of active verbs are predominantly reproductive in nature of the action required in the process of competence formation as expected outcomes.

The comparative model of active verbs between the two curricula reveals the preservation of activities for characterizing geographical objects, processes or phenomena (Fig. 8). A decrease in productivity in the direction of evaluation is noted, as well as an increase in the number of active verbs, which determine the reproductive focus of the training.

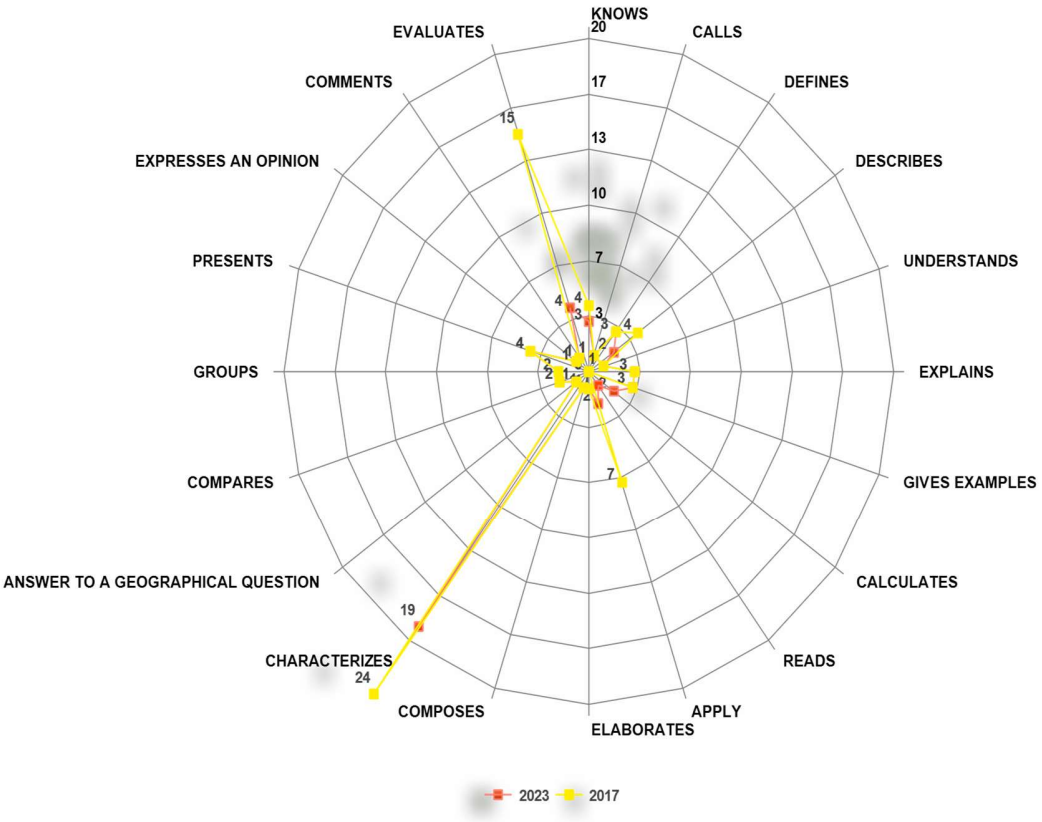


Figure 8 – Comparative model of the active verbs, compounded by competencies as expected training outcomes in geography and economics curricula for VII grade from 2017 and 2023

2.4- New concepts in geography and economics training in VII grade

The situational analysis of the new concepts in the 2023 geography and economics curricula identifies the presence of 27 in total and 37 in the 2017 curricula. A reduction in the amount of new concepts in the amended curricula by a total of 10 concepts is observed. There is no didactic justification for the mechanical removal of 10 new concepts from the curricula content at programme level. Some of the removed new concepts from the structural distinction for new concepts have been moved to competences as expected training outcomes, embedded in the expected outcomes themselves or as annotations.

2.5- Countries studied at curricula level in grade VII - comparative models

In the amended and supplemented curricula in geography and economics for grade VII, a total of 7 countries to be studied in *Europe* and the *Balkan Peninsula* are listed with geographical nomenclature, in

the following sequence: *Great Britain*, *France*, *Germany*, *Romania*, *Serbia*, *North Macedonia* and *Greece*. Countries are defined for characterization as competence by essential features. The curricula requirement as a competency is for students to represent the study of a country of choice from Europe and the Balkan Peninsula in a variety of forms. (Curricula, 2023, 4) The amended curricula does not specify or record the various forms through which students may represent the chosen country.

The retrospective analysis of the 2017 curricula reveals a total of 10 countries to study by rule, divided on a territorial basis: from Europe - *Sweden*, *Great Britain*, *France*, *Germany*, *Italy*, *Russia* or 6 countries and from the Balkan Peninsula - *Romania*, *Serbia*, *Macedonia* and *Greece*. The curricula requirement is introduced to characterize the countries by rule, with the same presentation competency but for the two territorial units: Europe - selected country in different forms - text, poster, presentation and from the Balkan Peninsula in different forms - text, poster, presentation. The competence to present a country is, as a rule, twice established for the continent of *Europe* and for the *Balkan Peninsula*, but with very clearly identified different forms - text, poster and presentation, which are missing in the 2023 curricula.

The curricula for *geography and economics* for the academic year 2024/2025 has reduced the number of countries to be studied by removing three countries - *Sweden*, *Italy* and *Russia*. In retrospect, Russia has featured in geography and economics curricula and textbooks as a representative country for the continent of *Europe*, but the current political climate and military conflict have determined that the programme item be removed for study. The removal of *Sweden* and *Italy* are as inexplicable as their inclusion, especially of *Sweden*.

The reduced number of countries to be studied can be traced back to the conceptual change with regard to the chronological unification of the themes *Europe* and the *Balkan Peninsula*, which is not a substantive or a didactic reason for removing certain countries.

For both curricula studied, the active action of *characterizing* a country is retained, as well as the *presentation* of a selected country from *Europe* and the *Balkan Peninsula*.

It is not didactically justified to substitute the action of characterizing a country **by rule** and **by essential features** because there is a substantive, structural and metacognitive difference between them, and they should not be identified in program documents (Draganova, 2024, 248).

3 – Conclusion

The implementation of the state educational order and the normative requirements for training geography and economics in the 7th grade is based on innovative strategies and training methods that are holistic, systematic, and synthesis-integrative.

The training of geography and economics in the 7th grade has a key prospective importance for the system of the geographic education. Its qualitative implementation means predictable efficiency with an

increasing affinity for creativity on the part of the teacher and students due to the freedom to use algorithmically acquired knowledge about the characterization of territory and skills to apply them.

The content analyses, situational and comparative analyses of the curricula in geography and economics for grade VII reveal a decrease in competencies as expected outcomes, a decrease in the number of new concepts and a transformation of the terminological substitution between the rule and the essential features in the characterization of a country, as well as a decrease in the number of the studied countries. The analyses cover only the normative documents – curricula in geography and economics.

There is a progressive reduction in competencies as expected learning outcomes and new concepts. Competencies specific to geography education have been removed, which changes the functions of the curriculum as an official state document.

The names of the types of geography and economics lessons have been preserved, with variability observed only in the activity lessons.

New amended and supplemented curricula are expected, which will be a model for comparison with the already effective second-year curricula from the 2024/2025 academic year, as well as those from the previous 6 academic years (from 2018/2019). The continuous amendment and supplementation of curricula has already been a system of the educational reform in Bulgaria since 2016, but no justified and didactically argued changes are being made. Most amendments are mainly mechanical-programmatic and have a reducing effect in terms of the program structure by topics, content and new concepts. Changes related to the return of conceptual requirements from before the 2016 educational reform are also noted, such as replacing a characteristic of a geographical object (country, river, etc.) as a rule with one by essential features.

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