

THE INFLUENCE OF UNESCO ON EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES IN YUGOSLAVIA UP TO 1974

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ABSTRACT:

The negative consequences of the Second World War were particularly evident in the sphere of education. Upbringing and instruction were not disrupted solely by the destructive effects of the war itself. The very structure and course of education came to be regarded as a contributing factor to the outbreak of the latest conflict in Europe. Thus, in addition to rebuilding the system, there arose a pressing need to reform education as such. The new international order, embodied in the establishment of the United Nations, sought to address these challenges through the creation of a specialized agency — the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** — whose mission was to reform education in the spirit of promoting peace and global understanding. Yugoslavia, as a socialist state undergoing profound transformations in its foreign policy, found in UNESCO a strong and reliable partner for the renewal and reorganization of its entire educational process in the aftermath of the war. The influence UNESCO exerted on education in Yugoslavia was substantial and will be examined in this study through three distinct phases. This article is based on **unpublished archival materials**, as well as **relevant scholarly literature and periodicals**, offering a new perspective on the dynamics between UNESCO and the Yugoslav educational system during the post-war decades.

Key words: *UNESCO, elementary education, textbook revision, scholarships, technical support, National Commission, non-alignment, regionalization vs. globalization.*

Introduction

The severe material damage to the educational infrastructure and the consequences of the bloody civil conflict elevated the educational process in communist Yugoslavia to one of the most important issues of state policy (Petranović, 1988). The initial period of reconstruction was characterized by a strong ideologization of education, adherence to the Soviet model, and the use of Soviet higher education institutions for the professional training of personnel necessary for independent functioning (Perišić, 2023). Although Yugoslavia was the first among the socialist bloc countries to express open tendencies toward normal cooperation with United Nations institutions—most notably reflected in the reception of food aid during the first post-war years—(Petranović,

1961) it nevertheless remained more reserved in its cooperation with international organizations in the field of education. The dramatic break in relations with the “Eastern Bloc” necessitated new methods for the training of personnel and for obtaining the assistance required to revitalize a system that had been deeply damaged and impoverished (Perišić, 2023). Following the liberation and the establishment of communist authority, and up until the rupture of relations with the Soviet bloc, Yugoslavia treated education as one of the key instruments in the construction of socialist social relations. Educational policies during this period were developed and supervised within the **Agitprop Department for Cultural Policy (Dimić, 1988)**, reflecting the ideological role assigned to schooling in shaping the new socialist citizen. The subsequent break with the Soviet bloc led to the emergence of a distinct **Yugoslav model of self-managed socialism**, which in turn required a comprehensive transformation of the educational system. During 1950, Yugoslavia underwent a significant cultural and political shift, reorienting itself toward the West and joining UNESCO. On **31 March 1950**, Yugoslavia became a **full member** of the organization and was granted a seat in UNESCO’s highest governing body — the **Executive Board** (Andonov, 2025).

Elementary school reform

A brief cooling of bilateral relations lasting about half a year occurred between Yugoslavia and UNESCO following the admission of **Spain** in **1951**. Yugoslavia, which had been compelled to revise its socialist model after the dispute with the Soviet Union and the subsequent intensification of its cooperation with the West, saw in this moment an opportunity to reaffirm its **communist consistency** by opposing **Francoist Spain’s** membership. The **Soviet Union**, notably, did not become a member of UNESCO until **four years after Yugoslavia**, which further motivated the Yugoslav authorities to present themselves as **leaders of the socialist bloc within the organization**. Although temporary, Yugoslavia withdrew from UNESCO’s **Executive Board** in protest. (Archive of Yugoslavia – AY, 318, 251, 1) Yet, only a few months later, Tito’s Yugoslavia received **substantial assistance from UNESCO** in reforming its **primary school system**, marking the beginning of a new and constructive phase in their cooperation (Todosijević, 2018).

The abandonment of the rigidly ideologized phase of education was necessary both as a means of distancing Yugoslavia from the Soviet bloc and as a result of UNESCO’s growing influence — particularly during the 1950s, when educational reforms were being implemented and the organization was dominated by **Western capitalist countries**. During this decade, UNESCO carried out primary education reforms in **England, France, Sweden, and West Germany**, and even in the **Soviet Union**, beginning in **1958**, after successful activities had already been undertaken in Western Europe and **Yugoslavia** (Todosijević, 2018). The dominant influence of Western UNESCO experts in implementing Yugoslavia’s reform inevitably contributed to the **opening of Yugoslav socialism toward capitalist practices**. One of the first **institutional penetrations of capitalism** into Yugoslav socialism came precisely through the **school reform**. In **1951**, Yugoslavia adopted the **Law on National Schools**, transferring centralized administrative control to **local self-governments** and thus initiating the introduction of the **self-management model** into education (Program SKJ, 1958). However, serious deficiencies in both **qualified personnel** and **infrastructure** soon became evident. To address these issues, in **1953**, the **Commission for the Reform of General Education Schools** was established as a specialized body under the **Federal People’s Assembly of FNRJ**, marking the beginning of systematic institutional reform of the Yugoslav school system. Over a period of five years, UNESCO provided substantial assistance to Yugoslavia, beginning with the establishment of the Institutes for the Advancement of Education in Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade,

Sarajevo, and Skopje. During this phase, UNESCO experts maintained a continuous presence in the country, and once the Institutes were fully established, their staff members were granted three- to six-month scholarships to study in countries where educational reforms were in a more advanced stage. Through these experiences and the technical support provided via various donations, a vast body of knowledge entered the Yugoslav educational system (Todosijević, 2018). More than 50,000 professional publications and scientific works from Western countries were introduced into Yugoslav institutions, becoming accessible to local scholars and administrators alike. The reports of the Yugoslav scholarship holders, which were a mandatory requirement, represented an important source of information upon which the legislative proposal was based. By 1958, a legislative proposal was introduced to standardize primary education requirements across the entire territory of socialist Yugoslavia. In this way, UNESCO played a decisive role in the reform and modernization of the Yugoslav primary school system, ensuring its alignment with contemporary international standards and pedagogical trends (Perišić, 2023).

Reforms in Higher Education and International Understanding

The exceptionally successful implementation of the primary education reform served as an incentive for both UNESCO and Yugoslavia to intensify their cooperation. What further contributed to this closer collaboration were two major developments: the ongoing process of **decolonization**, in which Yugoslavia played an active role through the **Non-Aligned Movement**, and the country's efforts to **reconcile with the Soviet bloc**, a process that often included the **revision of school textbooks**. Additionally, in 1956, UNESCO launched its long-term program "**Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values**." Within this framework, Yugoslavia occupied an exceptionally favorable position, both geographically and politically, as a mediator between the two worlds (Andonov, 2025). Reflecting this unique status, the official UNESCO magazine *The Courier* described Yugoslavia as a "**kaleidoscope of cultures**" (*The UNESCO Courier* 1980).

During the 1960s, UNESCO continued to provide extensive assistance to Yugoslavia. Yugoslav scholars received a large number of **specialized fellowships** for professional development in various scientific fields. Equally significant was the **technical assistance**, including the **equipping of university laboratories**,¹ as well as **regular scholarships** that allowed Yugoslav experts to become acquainted with the educational systems of other countries. These fellowships covered both the **social and humanistic disciplines** and the **natural sciences**, thereby contributing to the overall modernization of Yugoslav higher education. Furthermore, with the support of experienced members of the **Commission for the Reform of General Education**, such as **Miloš Žanko**, Yugoslavia actively influenced the **formation of educational systems in newly independent states in Asia and Africa** (Andonov, 2025). UNESCO also played a major role in the **reconstruction of Skopje following the 1963 earthquake**, contributing to the construction of **four schools**, the establishment of the **Seismological Institute**, and several other educational and scientific initiatives that symbolized international solidarity and cooperation. (Andonov, 2023).

Following the successful implementation of the primary education reforms, UNESCO initiated a broader policy of transforming the educational narrative and promoting international

¹ In 1960 the Technical Faculties in Skopje and Sarajevo received funds amounting to 11,500 dollars, which could be used for laboratory equipment. The faculty deans submitted a list of various instruments that had been procured from the United States, Norway, and Sweden. The Faculty of Mining in Tuzla also ordered equipment valued at 1,988 dollars. (AY, 318, 247, 1–7).

understanding. To establish and disseminate this policy, UNESCO organized four major seminars — in Paris (1956), Tokyo (1958), Wellington (1960), and Goslar (1962). The seminars focused on identifying and correcting various forms of distortion in educational materials, including intentional errors with propagandistic aims, unconscious mistakes, prejudices, tendentious presentation of facts, derogatory terminology, and general tendencies of cultural or national superiority. The objective was to expose and address these elements, leading to the creation of textbooks that fostered international understanding, critical thinking, and balanced discussion of controversial issues (Stojanović, 2024). During the 1960s, a series of regional meetings of UNESCO national commissions from several Balkan countries took place, where these issues were openly discussed. The Socialist Republic of Slovenia had already, by March 1962, aligned the narrative within its educational programs with UNESCO's recommendations with Austria and Italy (AY, 319, 51, 74). The question of textbook narratives was also raised in discussions with Bulgaria, where the Yugoslav side emphasized that the republican educational authorities were responsible for independently designing curricula. (AY, 319, 51, 7). This position effectively redirected Bulgaria to engage in dialogue directly with Socialist Macedonia, highlighting Yugoslavia's decentralized educational structure and its commitment to UNESCO's principles of intercultural dialogue (Andonov, 2025).

In addition to assisting with the establishment of the primary education system and Yugoslavia's inclusion in global efforts to improve school narratives aimed at building world peace, the focus eventually shifted toward the **advancement of higher education**. From the very beginning of its existence, socialist Yugoslavia suffered from a serious shortage of highly educated professionals, and one of the main ways in which UNESCO exerted its influence was through the **granting of scholarships** to Yugoslav specialists, as mentioned earlier in this study. The key impact of UNESCO on the field of higher education emerged **toward the end of the 1960s**, when cooperation between the organization and Yugoslavia reached a new level of institutional and academic engagement. In 1967, from November 20 to 25, a **conference of European Ministers of Education** was held in **Vienna**, organized by **UNESCO**. This event also carried broader **political significance** in the context of the **Cold War**, as it marked a diplomatic success for UNESCO in bringing together representatives from **28 countries**. Among the European states, only **East Germany, Portugal, and Albania** did not attend the conference (AY, 319, 53, 69). The Yugoslav delegation was diverse but included several prominent intellectuals and was led by the Secretary for Education and Science, Vukašin Mićunović.² The conference focused on issues concerning university teaching, access to education in relation to social, cultural, and economic conditions, and the broader question of how higher education could meet developmental needs. Each participating country was required to prepare an analytical report addressing several key aspects: the organization of higher education within the national system, admission policies and criteria for student enrollment, and the process of democratizing higher education through practical measures aimed at ensuring equal access. The analyses also examined the socio-cultural and economic background of students, the composition of the student body in relation to national development priorities, and the inclusion and role of foreign students within their respective institutions (AY, 319, 53, 110). In presenting his report, Secretary Mićunović highlighted the statistics on Yugoslav students, noting that during the 1964/65 academic year there were 170,499 students enrolled at universities throughout Yugoslavia. Mićunović added that 53,553 of these students were women and emphasized the significant increase in student numbers compared to 1945, when there had been only 25,339 students (AY, 319, 53,

² In addition to Mićunović, the delegation included Ksente Bogojev, Branimir Janković (Rector of the University of Niš), Roan Modic (Rector of the University of Ljubljana), Aleksandar Trumić, Ksenija Gačinović, Momčilo Peleš, Marija Filipović, and Jakov Sirotković (Rector of the University of Zagreb). (AY, 319, 53, 116.)

189). Yugoslavia ranked fifth in Europe in terms of the number of students per 100,000 inhabitants. The comparative figures were as follows: the USSR had 1,594 students per 100,000 people, the People's Republic of Bulgaria 1,229, the Netherlands 1,229, Czechoslovakia 1,015, Yugoslavia 947, Finland 908, Belgium 893, Sweden 876, France 850, the United Kingdom 572, Italy 586, and West Germany 469 students per 100,000 inhabitants (Politika, 23.11.1967, 1). Mićunović concluded his report by expressing gratitude to UNESCO for organizing the conference, which brought together 140 delegates from 28 countries, and by emphasizing the organization's role in Yugoslavia's success in achieving a high rate of university enrollment. He also highlighted the need for effective inter-European cooperation in the field of higher education.

Another event organized by UNESCO that contributed to higher education reforms was the **International Conference on Educational Planning**, held in **Paris from August 6 to 14, 1968**. The conference brought together **300 delegates from 85 countries**. The Yugoslav delegation was led by **Hasan Hadžimerović**, a professor at the Faculty of Economics in Sarajevo.³ The main objective of the conference was to prepare four key reports outlining UNESCO's guiding principles on the following topics: **strategies in higher education, innovations in educational development, management within the education sector**, and the **financial aspects of educational planning** (AY, 319, 51, 426).

In 1969, UNESCO organized a new conference at the Institute of Education in Hamburg, focusing on the professional development of university lecturers (AY, 319, 51, 650). The following year, in 1970, UNESCO strengthened its activities in the field of higher education by hosting a meeting of European university rectors in Bucharest, where Yugoslavia was represented by the rectors of the Universities of Belgrade and Zagreb. (AY, 319, 52, 807). All these international conferences and symposia had a significant impact on the development of education in Yugoslavia, as UNESCO, particularly during the late 1960s and 1970s, was regarded by the country as an important instrument for consolidating its non-aligned foreign policy.

Conclusion

The inconsistent foreign policy of Yugoslavia placed UNESCO among the country's top priorities on the international agenda. At the same time, Yugoslavia proved to be a compatible partner for UNESCO, particularly in facilitating the organization's entry into newly established states. This is evidenced by the two official visits to Yugoslavia by UNESCO's Directors-General, René Maheu in 1969 (Borba, 22.5.1969, 1) and Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow in 1974 (Borba, 6.12.1974, 1). The role that UNESCO played in shaping the Yugoslav educational system was substantial. In the absence of a lasting strategic alliance with either political bloc, Yugoslavia—through its commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement, in which it sought to maintain cultural leadership—became even more closely aligned with UNESCO's mission. The education of a large number of professionals through UNESCO programs, along with Yugoslavia's active participation in the agency's educational initiatives, allowed UNESCO to exert significant influence over the Yugoslav educational system. A series of high-level political conferences and symposia further strengthened Yugoslavia's ties with UNESCO. This process unfolded in three main phases: first, the reform of the primary education system during the 1950s; second, Yugoslavia's involvement in implementing

³ Other members of the delegation included Nada Novosel, Deputy Secretary for Education and Science of the Socialist Republic of Croatia; Branko Đorđević, Assistant Director of the Federal Institute for Economic Planning; Božo Marenić, a member of the Yugoslav Institute for Economic Research; and Vidojka Kozak from the Republican Institute for Economic Planning of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia. (AY, 319, 51, 419).

UNESCO's recommendations on eliminating negative tendencies in textbooks, a role in which it was given prominence as a Balkan country not aligned with either of the two major blocs; and third, Yugoslavia's participation in UNESCO's activities related to higher education and the development of global information networks. Even after the complete decentralization of the Yugoslav educational system following the constitutional changes of 1974, UNESCO continued to exert a strong influence on schooling and to provide technical and educational assistance across all six Yugoslav republics (Šuvar, 1977).

In overall the internal integration of Yugoslavia into the UNESCO system was determined by foreign policy circumstances and the global trends in international relations following the Second World War. In the subsequent period, particularly during the anti-colonial wave and the affirmation of the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia and UNESCO established mutually deepened and stable relations. The influence of UNESCO proved to be particularly significant in supporting Yugoslav educational reforms and the process of modernization of higher education.

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