

CASSIRER'S DYNAMIC FORMS: TOWARDS ANALYZING TRANSFORMATIONS IN MARITSA IZTOK

Martina Mineva

University of Plovdiv (Bulgaria)

Abstract. This article examines and tests the analytical potential of dynamic forms, considered through the distinction between *forma formata* and *forma formans* in the work of Ernst Cassirer. This conceptual pair is applied to the problem of ongoing transformations in the Maritsa Iztok (Maritsa East) coal-mining region in Bulgaria (2024 – 2026). The analysis focuses on the tension between the “carbon past” as a stagnant form (*forma formata*) and the innovative impulse as a will to form (*forma formans*) in the course of these transformations. Examples are identified both of the functioning of *forma formata* in established practices and of breakthroughs of *forma formans* (the will to form) through civic initiatives (such as air-quality monitoring) and through the introduction of visionary educational strategies (including AI technologies).

Keywords: Ernst Cassirer; *forma formans*; *forma formata*; will to form; Maritsa Iztok

1. Introduction: Cassirer and carbon routine as a stagnant form

The central philosophical problem in this article focuses on the tension between two states of form defined by Ernst Cassirer in the manuscript of the chapter “‘Geist’ and ‘Life’” (1928) included in the posthumously published fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: forma formata* (formed form) and *forma formans* (“form as form-that-is-becoming”, or the “will to form”) (Cassirer, 1996, pp. 18 – 19, 28). The hypothesis proposed here is that this conceptual pair has an analytical potential that can be tested with regard to a specific aspect of the transformations of the largest industrial complex in Southeastern Bulgaria, Maritsa Iztok (Maritsa East). The high degree of philosophical abstraction of the proposed framework is consciously sought – since it allows the study to maintain the necessary theoretical distance in order to identify “ontological impediments” that purely empirical descriptions from other possible perspectives would overlook. This last is inspired precisely by Cassirer’s observation that “the form does not prove to be such an impediment, but an organ that is always ready, in fact, an

organ whose value rests on its being modifiable and mutable in the highest measure” (Cassirer, 1996, p. 16).

Such an understanding of form requires an anthropological grounding in Cassirer's definition of the human: “instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*” and as living in a reality structured through symbolic forms (Cassirer, 1956, pp. 43 – 44). These forms do not simply mirror the world but constitute the horizon of reality, to the extent that man “cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium” (p. 43). From this perspective, forms are outcomes of continuous processes of formation through which reality becomes accessible and articulable. The distinction between *forma formata* and *forma formans* should therefore be understood not as an abstract opposition, but as a dynamic relation: cultural forms emerge from and depend on ongoing symbolic activity. The **aim of the present study** is to test the analytical potential of this distinction in explaining the transformations of the Maritsa Iztok region.

The very case of the Maritsa Iztok coal basin in Bulgaria today allows for such a theoretical approach, since it is in a state of profound socio-ecological transformation that confronts the local community with an existential clash between the past – as a stagnant form of the carbon status quo – and the future, which presupposes the creative potential of the will to form directed towards possibilities for the active re-creation of the region. This past does not function merely as economic history, but as an industrial tradition which, through stabilized forms primarily of everyday discursive practices, legitimizes an apparent ontological immutability. These generalized observations are derived from work on the project *A Future Trapped in the Carbon Past* (University of Plovdiv, 2024 – 2026).¹ In parallel, research on the just transition in Bulgaria has examined public attitudes, expert discourses, and competing imaginaries, including the project *Public Capacity for a Just Green Transition* (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, BAS), which analyzes representations, social tensions, and civic responses to decarbonization (Jeliazkova et al., 2025). The present study engages with a similar empirical field, approaching it through the framework of dynamic forms to distinguish between competing orientations of practice: maintenance of the status quo and innovation and change. This distinction was operationalized through interview questions on evaluations of the region's past and future, attitudes towards the continuation or closure of the mining complex, alternative life trajectories, and experiences of collective action. More than 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse participants, including local residents (some employed in the mining complex), institutional representatives, NGOs, cultural actors, journalists, and civic initiatives. Drawing on fieldwork from November – December 2024, the material was analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on recurring discursive patterns interpretable, in Cassirerian terms, as *forma formata* and *forma formans*.

The empirical data obtained show that some of the residents' attitudes are strongly fixed and function analogously to Cassirer's concept of *forma formata* – **they harden and “ontologically paralyze” the boundaries of the thinkable with regard to their life trajectories**. Other attitudes, by contrast, are associated with the **search for new forms of investment in the future, that is, they perform functions analogous to *forma formans***. In this light, the carbon status quo itself can be said to function analogously to *forma formata* – a product of the spirit bound to the past, which can be metaphorically described as “paralyzed”, and theoretically conceived through the functioning of form as unconditionally constant and immutable, setting boundaries of the possible (linked to the carbon past) and the impossible (linked to an alternative, new future). “Ontological paralysis” denotes a temporary stabilization or suspension of form-generating activity, which remains transformable. In this sense, the term is compatible with Cassirer's understanding of form as dynamic, and captures moments in which this dynamism is locally constrained but not ontologically exhausted.

The clash arises when this stagnant form “regains itself” and is “born again” as *forma formans* permeated by the “will to form”, which Cassirer describes – following Humboldt's analysis of language – “not as an *ergon*, but as an *energeia*, not merely as something that has become what it is, but which is continuously shaping itself”, thereby destroying the old form to open up the way for the new one (Cassirer, 1996, pp. 19, 16). All of this is visible precisely in the practices (including linguistic ones) from the Maritsa Iztok region, to which we will turn later. To break this inertia, it is necessary to activate *forma formans* bound to the concept of ideas that have a “Janus face” – that is, ideas that “both destroy and create forms”, since they destroy the *forma formata* of inherited models of resignation in order to open up the way to a new “becoming of form” (Cassirer, 1996, p. 20). This process may be described as “de-paralyzation”. Behind this metaphor, we theoretically discern the requirement for such an effort of the will – of *forma formans* permeated by the will to form – that can win space and time for the new in everyday life, transforming innovative labour into agency through which the subject also forms itself by analogy with the aforementioned Humboldtian interpretation of language – not as a finished product (*ergon*), but as pure *energeia*.

2. The theoretical perspective through Ernst Cassirer: The analytical potential of the concept of dynamic forms

The transformation of the Maritsa Iztok region is not merely economic; as Gavin Bridge and Ludger Gailing (2020, p. 1038) point out, it involves a reconfiguration of “energy spaces” (thought of as a *space-making process*), which requires a new political and social economy of transition. The theoretical perspective of Cassirer's philosophy, however, allows innovations to be thought much more deeply – less as an economic act than as metamorphoses of the will that are deeply rooted in

practices. Through this perspective, the subject breaks the “paralysis” of habit in the region, understood not merely as a territory or “energy space”, but much more fundamentally – as a *dynamic ontological field* where old and new forms clash and metamorphose into one another. However, this process of formation unfolds within a differentiated field in which actors occupy unequal positions structured by heterogeneous distributions of economic, cultural, and social resources. These asymmetries shape both their capacity to act and their perception of possible trajectories of transformation, including their ability to impose particular orientations of the future as viable or legitimate. In this sense, the field should not be understood as a homogeneous space of becoming, but as a relational and conflictual structure in which competing orientations of practice, interpretations of the past, and selective appropriations emerge under conditions of asymmetry. This understanding is consistent with Bourdieu’s insistence that “to think in terms of field is to think relationally” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96), a point he himself articulates with reference to Cassirer (“to speak like Cassirer [...] one must think relationally”, p. 228). This reference remains deliberately limited, serving only to emphasize that the dynamics of formation do not unfold in a structurally neutral space, but under conditions of socially differentiated capacities and constraints. Against this background, the analysis returns to its central concern: the dynamics of form within practices as conceptualized by Cassirer.

This allows us to understand how it becomes possible to break the routine in Maritsa Iztok, and how new forms of subjectness arise amidst concerns of maintaining an everyday life oriented towards seeking security and stability in the past. For this reason, unlike authors such as Gregory Unruh (2000) who describe carbon dependence as a techno-institutional phenomenon, through Cassirer’s prism we identify it as a routinized practice based on an “ontological paralysis” of *forma formata*, which very often prevents this very form from “regaining itself” as *forma formans*. In this state of stagnation, we observe an effect analogous to that in the “symbolic matrix of culture” – as a “‘reservoir’ of [...] socially valid forms of interpretation” – thematized by Liliana Deyanova in her reading of Cassirer and her engagement with the problem of the tools through which the spirit objectifies itself, setting the horizon of the thinkable in practices (Deyanova, 1996, pp. 102–104, 29–46). Against this theoretical backdrop, if we turn to the analysis of the interviews from November–December 2024 in the Maritsa Iztok region, we find the following: while some statements and practices legitimize stagnation through various manifestations of *forma formata* – for example, “It has always been this way” (referring to pollution) (Int., Expert, Nov 2024)² – others demonstrate an activation of the creative potential of *forma formans* (“the will to form”) through concrete actions and visionary projects. Thus, in the region’s transformations we can see the dynamic of formation, in which the subject moves *from* passive adaptation to a routine everyday life towards the active state described by Cassirer (1996, p. 15)

as “becoming of form”, thereby freeing the future from the tutelage of forms of practices from the extant past.

The philosophical analysis of innovation and the breaking of industrial routine in the region of Maritsa Iztok through the conceptual pair *forma formans/forma formata* requires a detailed elaboration of Cassirer’s distinction between the dynamic and the static aspects of the spirit. As Sebastian Luft (2015) emphasizes, for Cassirer culture is not a collection of static products, but a living process of formation. This understanding is key to the definition of *forma formans* as a will that enables the subject to continuously “regain itself” from the stagnant structures of the past (Truwant, 2022, p. 125). This is particularly evident in the above-mentioned manuscript of the chapter “‘Geist’ and ‘Life’” (1928) included in the posthumously published fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In this chapter, largely criticizing Nietzsche and “philosophy of life” (*Lebensphilosophie*), Cassirer (1996, p. 15) poses the unsolvable, in his view, “question of how life ‘achieves’ form, how form comes to life” – a question that contains an internal contradiction due to the idealization of “pure” form and “pure” life embedded in it. According to him, if we realize that this is merely an idealization – “merely two accents that we place within the stream of becoming” – such a problem will not arise, especially once we also note that “[b]ecoming is in its essence neither mere life nor mere form; rather, it is the becoming of form – *γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν*, as Plato said” (Cassirer, 1996, p. 15). With this *γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν*, more precisely translated as “becoming *into* form”,³ the emphasis is placed precisely on the dynamic aspect of forms, on their emergence within practices themselves. It is noteworthy that Nietzsche (1968), in his categorical and merciless critique of identical cases – such as logical forms, which he conceives precisely as such – arrives, due to his radical position, at an equally radical solution: their categorical rejection. Yet he himself states something that clearly suggests the possibility of their alternative reconceptualization within a new problematic: “but the form has merely been invented by us; and however often ‘the same form is attained,’ it does not mean that it *is* the same form – what appears is always something new, and it is only we, who are always comparing, who include the new, to the extent that it is similar to the old, in the unity of the ‘form’” (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 282). This is very close in meaning to the way forms are later conceived by Cassirer – as dynamic forms. What comes to the fore as the real problem, however, is not their rejection, but the confrontation with the serious methodological challenges involved in analyzing them as dynamic. In Cassirer, this challenge passes through the legacy of classical transcendentalism, whose limits are put to the test since it becomes necessary to move beyond them. This last is clearly evident when he emphasizes that “[i]t is only by such dynamic comparisons, not in static images, that it is possible to describe form as form-that-is-becoming: *γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν*” (Cassirer, 1996, p. 18). Cassirer develops his argument by stressing that “[j]ust as scholastic metaphysics coined the concepts of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, so the philosophy of symbolic forms must distinguish between *forma for-*

mans and *forma formata*", whose interplay "constitutes the pendulum of spiritual life itself"; further on, he reaffirms that the philosophy of symbolic forms "meets with geist everywhere as not the 'Will to Power,' but as the 'Will to Formation'" (pp. 18 – 19, 28). *Forma formans* is "form-that-is-becoming", a "will to form", while *forma formata* is what this very *forma formans* becomes "for the sake of its own self-preservation" (pp. 18 – 19). Within Cassirer's framework, however, this distinction does not carry a normative valuation: *forma formata* is not inherently negative, nor is *forma formans* inherently positive, but both designate moments within the dynamic of formation, without prescribing a determinate direction of change of practices. In the present analysis, their negative or positive valence emerges only contextually, in relation to the specific empirical configuration under consideration. Cassirer clearly points us towards a sustained consideration of the problem of this dynamic between the two when he states that ideas that "both destroy and create forms" are found most notably in religious, prophetic, and revolutionary minds – ideas that "break up the *forma formata*, but by their readiness to destroy and by the act of destruction itself they open up again the way to *forma formans*", thereby giving rise to a "mutual affection of forces upon one another, putting them into a virtual but quite delicate balance" (p. 20). Hence derives his metaphor that such ideas "appear to the world of these forms to have such a Janus face" (p. 20).

In what way is the description of this dynamic of forms relevant to the analysis of transformations in the Maritsa Iztok region? Practices in the region demonstrate analogous dynamics of forms that – as Cassirer (1996) notes – are "giving shape to themselves in this activation [...] not as an *ergon*, but as an *energeia*, not merely as something that has become what it is, but which is continuously shaping itself" (pp. 15 – 16). Cassirer holds that what is called the "'inner form' [of language] has its true actuality only in the variety of the changing and constantly renewing *acts*" in which the form is "an organ that is always ready" (p. 16; emphasis added). He emphasizes this while discussing language, but explicitly states that it holds for the emergence of *every new form*, and that it is precisely in this way "that unbridgeable gulf between what 'life' demands and what 'form' demands, between the claims of universality and those of individuality" is overcome (p. 16). By all of this, Cassirer approaches a problem that is relevant to the present analysis as well – namely, the problem of the dynamic of logical forms in practice and their temporary character, of the possibilities for the emergence of new forms, and thus for the renewal of the practices in which they function. This becomes particularly evident in his claim that, with regard to forms, "unconditioned constancy and identity holds only if we consider pure logical form *in abstracto*, if we separate it from all its intertwining with the world of becoming and with all the 'applications' that it undergoes" (pp. 20 – 21). The way he attempts to think form – *in concreto* – clearly indicates the direction in which we might orient the conceptual pair *forma formans/forma formata* in order to test its analytical potential through concrete empirical observations in the Maritsa Iztok region. While

theories centered on social structures (Bourdieu, Giddens, Latour, Foucault) or scientific communities (Kuhn, Feyerabend) merit attention beyond this scope, Cassirer's framework is preferred for its focus on symbolic horizon reconfiguration of forms in practice.

3. The dynamic between *forma formans* and *forma formata*: Analysis of field data

Against this backdrop, we can test the analytical potential of Cassirer's concept of the dynamic between *forma formans* and *forma formata* by considering the transformations in the Maritsa Iztok region not merely as an administrative or economic transition, but as practices aimed at activating the will to form, through which alternative new forms of subjectness and participation in everyday life are found. The field data from the region of the Maritsa Iztok coal basin, collected in November – December 2024, reveal a state that, as noted at the outset, may be metaphorically described as “ontological paralysis”. Utilizing the theoretical potential of this metaphor requires engaging with Cassirer's understanding of *forma formata* (formed form). What is meant here is that in the discursive practices of a large part of the local residents, one observes a stabilization of life trajectories in a mode of routine, passive adaptation to the given conditions, and a lack of impulses innovating practices. An emblematic manifestation of this *forma formata* is found in statements such as: “There's no one to help us. We're just peaceful – how should I put it – little souls [*dushitsi*]...” or “since we've survived this far, it means we've got used to the filth, the black air, that black smoke.” (Int., Miner, Nov 2024). These function as practical legitimations of collective helplessness, self-marginalization, and resignation stemming from an inability to identify forms of effective change. In this context, the subject functions as an *ergon* (a finished product) of the industrial past, whose genesis has been forgotten and whose form has acquired unconditioned constancy (although, in fact, this only appears to be so).

The persistence of the carbon status quo is maintained through specific linguistic constructions that function as discursive mechanisms of stabilization – mechanisms for maintaining everyday life and avoiding change. In this context, the statement “People think that nothing will happen” (Int., Resident, Nov 2024) is not merely an expressed opinion; it can theoretically be thought of as an indicator of an “ontological impediment” – a *forma formata* that destabilizes any attempt at innovation by presenting it as impossible. This legitimization of passivity is further reinforced by the consensus regarding stagnation implied in the claim: “They [all] don't want this... [the status quo] is convenient for them.” (Int., Admin, Dec 2024). Here, the implicit “all” sustains the boundaries of the inert functioning of *forma formata*, turning the absence of social resistance into a natural norm that blocks the identification of alternative life trajectories. The fatalistic horizon is finally sealed through

nostalgic normalization in the expression: “But it will never be the same...” (Int., Resident, Dec 2024). Through this explicit “never”, the past is fixed as the only authentic reality, and any transformation is legitimized solely as loss, preventing the subject from “regaining itself” from the stagnant products of routine.

In counterpoint to the inertia of the formed form, one can identify in the interviews manifestations of *forma formans* (“form as form-that-is-becoming” permeated by the “will to form”), which acts as a driving force of innovation. These breakthroughs constitute an effort of the will that succeeds in activating the subjects’ capacity to create forms. Also activated in such cases is what we might describe as “technological activism” related to practices of shared concern. It can be seen in civic initiatives such as the creation of Viber groups for immediate notification in the event of pollution, the introduction of STEM-based education in schools, as well as in statements such as: “We were forced to buy ourselves a station that measures air quality...” (Int., Activist, Dec 2024), marking self-initiated investment in measuring instruments. These are acts of “becoming *into* form”, in which technologies are used to change social behaviour in real time. The fact that activists have begun cleaning dust from their windowsills with magnets shows how an everyday domestic practice is transformed into an experimental verification of the materiality of pollution aimed at proving the presence of heavy metals (Int., Activist, Dec 2024). This can also be interpreted as an act of creative destruction, a refutation of the stagnant narrative in official discourse that “everything is within permissible limits” (Int., Activist, Dec 2024). These acts are examples of the functioning of *forma formans* in relation to the state of passive determination by the past and the supposed “immutability” of the present, in which knowledge is transformed into a tool of active intervention and formation of a new reality. Here, the will to form enables the subject to “regain” its agency, as the subject begins to shape itself not as “something that has become what it is”, but as pure *energeia*.

On the other hand, there are recent studies that focus on visionary projects in education not merely as administrative measures, but as tools for social adaptation and overcoming regional isolation through technology (Osei et al., 2025). There are also studies that highlight the social dimension of the “just transition” in Bulgaria, examining inequalities and affected communities (Andreas et al., 2018). From the perspective of the present article, however, we can see something more: empirical manifestations of the transition from stagnant forms to the “becoming *into* form – γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν” of new practices freed from the tutelage of the extant past. Particularly telling are transitional discursive strategies that propose a structural shift away from dependence on traditional coal mining towards new forms of value creation. In this context, the will to form is activated through a radical rethinking of the regional potential. This is evident in statements such as:

[The Maritsa Iztok region should] begin to shake itself free from heavy industry and start creating value. We have no other resource there except coal, and the most logical thing is to use [the available] human resources. What can we do with these human resources? We can educate them very well, so that they can work with technologies, artificial intelligence, and all these modern topics...

(Int., Admin/Education, Dec 2024)

In this sense, elements such as education, civic participation, and environmental awareness should not be understood merely as instances of social change, but as manifestations of *forma formans* – that is, as reflexive and creative transformations through which the horizon of the thinkable is itself reconfigured. This statement is not merely an expression of desire; it is a practical dynamic in action, one that transforms the individual from a passive *ergon* (a finished product of the industrial system) into a potential bearer of high economic value and pure *energeia*. Here, innovation is legitimized through educational investment, which breaks the “paralysis” of the carbon past and activates the functioning of *forma formans* within the subject. Practices such as children “taking samples from the river for us to measure the ratios of substances” (Int., Education, Dec 2024), or training in tree planting (Int., Education/NGO, Nov 2024), function as ideas with a “Janus face”: they both destroy old models of resignation (*forma formata*) and open up the way to *forma formans* related to a present and a future in which “the young population does not think like [the old one]” (Int., Activist, Dec 2024) (as the fieldwork data once again show). These practical acts of biographical and social renewal demonstrate that innovative practices involve Cassirer’s will to form (*forma formans*), which enables not only adapting to the environment but also actively transforming it.

Although this analysis is focused on the radical potential of dynamic forms permeated by the will to form, it also raises theoretical questions that remain open for future research. One such question concerns the recognition of the carbon past as *forma formata*, which allows us to clearly identify the characteristic features of “paralysis”. But this self-critically opens up yet another horizon: *can this past be thought not only as an obstacle, but also as a necessary “matter” (hyle) to be re-included in the process of form creation so as to serve as the foundation for a new, region-specific “becoming into form – γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν”?* This matter includes the specific industrial discipline, the logic of technical thinking, and collective identity, which until now have functioned as stagnant products of *forma formata*. Turning them into a substrate for a new “becoming into form – γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν” does not mean negating them, but “ontologically transforming” them. For example, the interviews reveal an attitude according to which technical expertise and labour discipline in mining can be “reformatted” as a basis for the new technological and AI sector. This is an example of how old industrial resilience is transformed into energy for a new will to form (*forma formans*). The past thus ceases to exert a paralyzing effect and becomes an organ subject to new modification.

A further clarification concerns the agents of the described transformations. The empirical material indicates that the activation of *forma formans* cannot be attributed to a single social stratum, but unfolds through the interplay of different subjects situated across everyday, civic, and institutional levels. What emerges here is not a centralized agency, but a distributed dynamic in which *the will to form* becomes effective within concrete practices. In this sense, the transition from *forma formata* to *forma formans* is realized as *energeia* within the field of lived experience.

4. Conclusion. The dynamic of forms in acts of “de-paralyzing” regional potential: From industrial habit to living practice

The analysis above has shown that in the Maritsa Iztok region, industrial habit functions as an “ontological impediment” that locks the community in a mode of passive adaptation analogous to Cassirer’s *forma formata*. To overcome this condition, the subject must cease to be a bearer of stagnant forms and activate the potential of its will to form. It is precisely this transformation that underlies “de-paralyzing” as an act of *forma formans* in which the will to form breaks the “paralysis” of the carbon past and establishes new forms of social and economic participation in everyday life. In this way, it becomes possible to theoretically illuminate, on the one hand, the transformation of entrenched industrial habits from an “ontological impediment” into a living practice of new formation. This process transforms the transition from a purely administrative redirection of “human resources” into a practical dynamic in which the past is not a burden but a substrate upon which the subject can build its new agency (*energeia*). On the other hand, the breakthroughs of the will to form observed in the practices discussed above show that innovation is not an externally imposed form, but an internal reclaiming of form and meaning through a critical rethinking of the past. Thus, ways are outlined in which the future can be freed from the direct tutelage of stagnant structures – not necessarily through their mechanical elimination, but through their transformation into a dynamic organ through which the legitimation of new social and economic practices becomes possible. In this perspective, the crucial question is that of the functions of *forma formans* permeated by the will to form, which – as the field research in the Maritsa Iztok region shows – participates in regional transformations in various ways.

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NOTES

1. For recent publications on the Maritsa Iztok region within the project *A Future Trapped in the Carbon Past* (University of Plovdiv), see Asparuhov & Pendzhekova-Hristeva (2025), who analyze the archives of State Security; Kisikova (2025) on transformations of life trajectories; Mancheva (2025) on the anthropology of the lifeworld; and Gavrilov (2025) on the mobilization of social capital.
2. All cited examples from everyday practices are from anonymized semi-structured interviews preserved in their original form in the archive of the project *A Future Trapped in the Carbon Past* (Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, 2024 – 2026). Interviews are cited as “Int., profile, date”.
3. A more precise English translation of Plato’s *γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν*, which Cassirer interprets as *Werden zur Form* in the German original, here would be “becoming into form” rather than “becoming of form” (Cassirer, 1995, p. 15).

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✉ **Dr. Martina Mineva, Assoc. Prof.**

ORCID iD: 0009-0001-9277-9204

Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv
Bulgaria

E-mail: martina_mineva@uni-plovdiv.bg