

FINAL REPORT

My overall research project and its relation to my linguistic goals

For the past 6 months, my overall research project in Albania has been an extension of my recently-concluded MA studies at the University of Toronto, in preparation for both future work in the region and possible PhD studies in the near future. My research during this time has focused primarily on the confrontation/resolution of traumatic memory through the 're-signification' of heritage sites. Briefly, the premise is that significant heritage sites from the Communist/Socialist era in Albania can reveal much about local interaction with and resistance to state authority, and they hold promise as a means of confronting the personal and collective traumas of the recent past. The primary argument is that these sites should be 're-signified' to serve as both memorials and teaching tools for the next generations, rather than erased from the landscape. This kind of 're-signification' of heritage that represents a traumatic past has taken place in post-colonial and post-conflict contexts, as well, and these situations can serve as a model for how this process might work in a post-Communist society. The final two sentences of my MA paper read: "Across Albania, many tangible reminders of the traumas of the Communist past remain unacknowledged, while others have been leveled before their relationship to local memory had been explored. In the coming years, the processes of making heritage and writing history will continue, but Albanians today have the opportunity to employ these processes in a way that heals past traumas and preserves their material heritage in commemoration of local resistance, resilience and inspiration." This is the jumping off point for the research I wanted to conduct while in Albania on an American Councils grant. In addition to continuing my research, my ultimate goal is to put my experiences to use by guiding policy and implementing programs that help people preserve and develop their cultural identity on their own terms.

My linguistic goal, therefore, was to achieve a level of fluency that would allow me to discuss such difficult and contentious subjects as the Communist period, its legacies today, the shortcomings of the current governance system and the recurring traumas in contemporary Albanian society. As I could already read and write Albanian reasonably well, my primary focus for my American Councils Title VIII SEEL studies was to develop conversational fluency—leading me to opt (during the latter portion of my grant period) for a very intensive and extremely beneficial course of one-on-one tutoring sessions, rather than strictly classroom study. Of course, my concurrent goal was to improve my reading and listening comprehension, in order to more effectively monitor local news (newspapers, TV, etc.) for

ongoing trends in governance, history and cultural heritage and to read Albanian-language books in support of my ongoing research.

Achieving these goals—the importance of time in the field

Over the course of my grant period with the American Councils Title VIII SEEL program, I was able to achieve all of these goals, none of which would have been possible without being able to spend a significant amount of time living and studying in Albania. Conversational fluency needs the most time and dedicated effort, since it can really only develop through massive exposure to the language in an immersion context. In North America, Albanian conversation would be difficult to come by, and speaking Albanian with a non-English speaker—where there is no temptation to switch into English—would be impossible. In Albania, particularly outside of Tirana, such interactions are commonplace. For this reason, the time I spent working and studying in Gjirokastra (a town in southern Albania) was a major boost to my language skills, even though I was not enrolled in formal classes for those two weeks. Even more crucial, however, were the regular one-on-one tutoring sessions conducted by a retired member of the University of Tirana philology faculty. During these sessions, we covered complex grammar concepts and discussed for hours on topics ranging from history to politics to literature, improving my vocabulary and ease of communication at the same time.

Of course, tutoring sessions were not the only way to improve my vocabulary and reading skills while in Albania. In September, I took part in an intensive language study course at the University of Tirana, which encouraged group discussion, as well as the development of reading and writing skills. At the same time, this course provided me with access to the University of Tirana library—a treasure-trove of Albanian-language resources largely unavailable elsewhere in the world. Later, I also incorporated readings and discussion of Maks Velo's book *Hetimi (The Investigation)* into the one-on-one tutoring sessions, which I did for three reasons: 1) to improve my vocabulary, especially in relation to the Albanian Communist period; 2) to begin to gain some familiarity with modern Albanian literature; 3) to help me understand the system of state oppression and terror that accompanied Albanian Communism, in order to gain insight into recent history and its effect on present-day Albanian society. While I could perhaps have read *Hetimi* outside of Albania (provided I could find it), the experience of reading it in context and accompanied by discussion with a woman who grew up during that difficult period was unparalleled.

In conjunction with these studies, I regularly monitored local media—watching local TV news, reading newspapers and cultural publications. Some Albanian-language news channels are available to view online, and I have done so from the US. However, the amount of media readily available (from corner newspaper stands to channel surfing on broadcast television) increases exponentially once in the country. Not only did these interactions with Albanian media vastly improve reading and listening comprehension; they also kept me up to date on the latest political and cultural happenings.

Residing in Albania also provided many opportunities to attend Albanian-language events/outings. Among others, I attended a linguistics seminar held at the National Library, several plays and art openings and a historical conference on ‘Tirana after 100 years of independence’, at which the Prime Minister, the Mayor and several prominent historians spoke. Not only did these sorts of events improve my language skills; they also gave me insights into social life in Albania and allowed me to connect with influential organizers and policy-makers interested in my work and studies.

While I succeeded in achieving my language goals of increased reading and listening comprehension and ease of conversation, it is important when learning a language not to become complacent. Continual engagement is the key to language fluency, and I intend to build upon the base that my American Councils Title VIII SEEL grant has provided throughout my future time in Albania. While I will continue to read and watch television in Albanian, the crucial step will be to continue holding conversations in that language—a task which becomes easier as my Albanian improves enough that I can substitute it easily for English.

My future research—utilizing my language skills and informing US policy

Having established such a strong foundation in Albania, I plan to continue working and researching here for some time. The crucial step now is for me to immerse myself in Albanian society while exploring further possibilities for the ‘re-signification’ of heritage that represents traumatic memory. The improved language skills that I gained through my experiences as an American Councils Title VIII SEEL fellow will allow me to do just that—digging deep into state archives, staying tuned to local media and engaging in conversation with Albanians. Increased knowledge of standard, literary Albanian has also boosted my ability to understand the Albanian dialects spoken in Macedonia and Kosovo, allowing me easier access in the Albanian-speaking parts of those countries. This access will be invaluable as I seek to make regional comparisons for how post-Communist heritage has been

confronted (or not) in former Yugoslavia, as well as exploring the links between approaches to post-Communist heritage and post-conflict heritage (such as in Kosovo).

Ideally, my research will help US analysts and decision-makers develop more effective policies for Albania and the entire Western Balkan region. In particular, I hope it will lead to a fuller understanding of the workings of a society seemingly stuck in a continual 'transition'. By studying people's interaction with the heritage and memory of the Communist past, we can gain insight into the ongoing influence of the past system on current systems of governance and business. This is not to say that 'Communists' are running Albania today; rather, the unaddressed traumas of the system of government and system of life that was forcibly instituted by the regime of Enver Hoxha play a continuing role in the problems of mistrust, inefficiency and corruption that continue to plague public life. Approaching and coming to terms with the heritage of the Communist past ('re-signifying' it) may provide one means of addressing the traumatic memories ingrained in society—something which erasing and superficially 'forgetting' this heritage could never achieve. Acts of remembering and forgetting can be tied through cultural monuments to acts of both reconciliation and destruction. To support lasting peace and development in the Balkans through US policies, decision-makers need to better understand the links between collective memory, traumatic heritage and national/local governance and development. Through my research, I hope to further this understanding by providing crucial insights into the perspectives and progression of memory in Albania and the ways in which this memory affects the challenges that the country faces today.

In order to facilitate access to the results of my research, I plan to publish several articles, as time and the progression of my work allow. The first of these, entitled "Chiseling Away at a Concrete Legacy: Engaging with Communist-era Heritage and Memory in Albania," was co-authored with an Albanian colleague and is currently under review for publication by a US journal. In addition, I am working on writing and producing a booklet that explains the physical and psychological effects of the massive concrete defensive works constructed by the Albanian Communist regime. This bilingual (English and Albanian) publication will provide a general overview of this concrete heritage, past and present, and then focus particularly on a high-level nuclear shelter located in the World Heritage city of Gjirokastra, in southern Albania.

Ultimately, my goal is to engage openly, continue to learn and communicate in Albanian and make the results of my research as accessible as possible, both in Albania and in the US. My time as an American Councils Title VIII SEEL Fellow gave me a strong foundation upon which to build. Now I am excited to take advantage of my increased access and ability to communicate, in order to continue

pursuing my research in Albania and contribute, in some small way, to the understanding and preservation of human heritage.

Attach a list of any talks, briefs, lectures, and/or held meetings with Embassies, NGOs, or Government officials about your research:

- Sali Berisha, Prime Minister of Albania, 7 November 2011
- Arjan Prifti, Onufri Iconographic Museum, Berat, 16 November 2012
- Remzi Lani, Albania Media Institute, 12 December 2011
- Gasper Gjeluçi, National Democratic Institute, 8 January 2012
- Zamir Tafilica, Shkodra Historical Museum, 11 January 2012
- Fatmir Musaj, Director, Albafilm Studios, 17 January 2012
- Albjon Bogdani, Museum of Communist Objects (MOKO-Tirana), 27 January 2012
- Mirela Cupi, US Embassy, 9 February 2012
- Filiz Yilmaz, Turkish Cultural Center, February 2012
- Sadi Petrela, Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization, ongoing – October 2011-February 2012
- Lejla Hadzic, Cultural Heritage without Borders, ongoing – January-February 2012
- Ilda Mara, Argjiro Foundation, publication *Art & Trashëgimi (Art & Heritage)*, ongoing – January-February 2012