

Title VIII Southeast European Language Training Programs – Zadar, Croatia  
by Alexander M. Groce

The Title VIII Southeast European Language Training Program administered by the American Councils generously awarded me a 2011-12 grant to complete three months of individual Croatian language study in Zadar, Croatia, the capital of Northern Dalmatia and the home to one of the major national universities, the University of Zadar. During these months of language study I was able to critically advance my knowledge of Croatian, bringing my proficiency level to an advanced stage in all modalities, but with special strides made in writing and speaking. The period of the award, combined with the flexibility to choose my location and even the institution with which I preferred to be affiliated, both contributed to a dynamic language-learning and cultural experience which has greatly contributed to my academic pursuits and will serve well in the future as I continue to engage with Croatia and the Balkans region.

My language goals were tailored to provide me with the requisite fluency to pursue literary and cultural Croatian studies with the eventual goal of integrating such a skill set into a teaching and mentoring career in academia. My particular field of expertise is Slavic literature and culture, in which I am pursuing a doctorate, and Croatian is the third Slavic language that I have studied in this field. My familiarity with other, culturally or linguistically related, Slavic nations, and my extensive residence in several countries such as Russia and the Czech Republic, prepared me to approach Croatia and the broader Yugoslav region with an eye towards the cultural nuance that expresses itself in the political and linguistic divisions rife in the region. I chose Croatia, perhaps the most pointedly different Slavic culture, and certainly the most historically Western-oriented nation remaining in the non-EU Balkans, partly in order to fill lacunae in my study of Eastern Europe. A systematic approach to the former Eastern-bloc countries is largely impossible and perhaps unadvisable, but a strategic approach to the cultures has allowed me to use my knowledge of the larger region to build a comprehensive outlook that aids me in addressing

the region in research and teaching. The fluent knowledge of Croatian, a language that, while distinct from other languages of the region, is still mutually intelligible with the official languages of four other countries, will assist me in addressing the wider region in my work. Also, due to the particular outsider status that Croatians have always maintained in relation to the political groupings in which they have historically participated, the language is perhaps more necessary for wider cultural studies than other, similar languages in Serbia, Bosnia, or Montenegro.

My interests in the region are based on my wider study of literature and much of the lesson structure that was developed with my instructor focused on developing a mastery of different registers of the literary and vernacular language. The variety of local dialects in Croatia is one of the extraordinary features of the language, and the Dalmatian region boasts several dialects due to its unique geography and the mix of islands and isolated mainland enclaves. And while a literary language does exist, it is more heavily informed by regional dialects and the ability to distinguish dialectical features is one of the sine-qua-non of Croatian literary studies, a feature which distinguishes the cultural bases of this nation from other, larger, nations and cultures that I have studied.

During the period of study I met for class on weekdays. Most lessons involved grammar exercises tailored to my needs and covering a wide range of topics in and outside of grammar primers and textbooks; oral exercises which emphasized critical skills needed for communication both practical and formal; and focus on literary texts with some exegesis performed in Croatian as an aid to developing a formal register for research and in the classroom, as well as translation technique.

The teaching staff was extremely helpful and devoted to teaching the language and culture, and I was able to interact with the larger academic community outside of the formal instruction conducted by affiliated members of Zadar University. Additionally, the freedom to coordinate an independent schedule and to work with a variety of language teachers who were willing to develop a variety of techniques meant that I could hone language learning techniques over the course of the three-month pe-

riod, making the endeavor useful not simply for the benefits accrued in my study of Croatian, but also as a general pedagogical exercise, something which I hope I can bring to Slavic language instruction at my institution stateside.

Additionally, some classroom time focused on honing my cultural perceptions and learning to recognize the distinct social rhythms of the Croatian “everyday” and some of the vital subtext and historical layering of local customs and traditions. My experience in the region and my extended residence in Zadar have allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of Croatian culture and politics. My time there, in the wake of the sentencing of Generals Gotovina and Markač, two figures who were and remain extremely popular in the Zadar region due to their particularly harsh experience during the “Domovinski rat” or “Homeland War” and because of significant demographic and historical trends in the region, made me sensitive to the fault lines that run beneath modern Croatian society and beneath the political life of this quickly Europeanizing nation. The process of EU-membership negotiations, which culminated with the announcement of Croatia’s imminent accession in July, also provided a window onto European integration and the attitudes of Balkan societies to Western institutions. Croatia’s economic hardships and the particular strata of the seasonal economy that operates on the coast and divides Croatia rather discordantly between tourism and shipping and industry and agriculture were on particular display in the city of Zadar, and the culture and literature based learning that I was pursuing mixed productively with other such pragmatic and political discourses which surrounded me.

My experience in the region was rich and rewarding, and I bring back knowledge and familiarity with the region that I look forward to sharing with a range of specialists and learners. I hope that my experience and my continued participation in the field will be of use as we continue to search for ways to effectively address issues in the region and to effectively integrate the changing realities of the region into an expanding dialogue.