

# THE ISTRIAN VLASHKI LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT New York 2005

Each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity.

--UNESCO Ad Hoc Group on Endangered Languages, *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, 2003

## What's the purpose of this project?

The main goal of the Istrian Vlashki Language Documentation Project is to engage the speakers of the Vlashki or Zeianski language, also called Istro-Romanian, in the effort of documentation and preservation of their native language. Istrian Vlashki is a severely endangered language, designated as such by UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Program.

## What are the facts?

A language disappears because its speakers turn to the exclusive use of other languages and stop teaching their native language to their children. According to a recent estimate, there are only about two hundred speakers of Vlashki in Istria. There may be another few hundred speakers abroad, perhaps around two hundred in the New York area. Few children learn to speak Vlashki and most speakers seem to be over 50 years old. This unfortunate situation is likely to lead to its complete disappearance within a generation or two.

## Why does this matter?

Every language is unique and represents an irreplaceable wealth for its speakers, while contributing to the linguistic and cultural diversity that define and enrich our world. A language reflects a singular nature of a people speaking it. This is true even if the language has not been used as a means of written communication and its speakers have not been educated in it. Language contains and expresses knowledge that is lost once it disappears.

## What can be done?

The speakers can be educated about the possibility of the disappearance of their language and about the steps that their community can take to expand and revitalize their use of it. In addition, through documentation, the language and the cultural traditions associated with it can be saved for future generations of community members and scholars. This means that language materials are collected in the audio, video, digital and book format and deposited with special libraries and other institutions committed to take care of them over time and make them accessible to interested parties.

## How can you get involved?

You can make a difference by simply contributing your knowledge of the language and the culture to this documentation project. By sharing conversations, stories, memories, and other forms of language

usage in Vlashki, you will take part in the creation of the "linguistic and cultural archive of the Istrian Vlashki language."

In addition to being an interviewee, you can also be an interviewer, a transcriber, or a translator; you can participate in the demographic study by filling out a questionnaire; you can take part in different community-based projects planned; or you can help by spreading the word about the importance of the Vlashki language use, its documentation and preservation.

Fluent speakers of Vlashki, passive speakers and non-speakers can all participate in the project and make a difference! Any level of knowledge, interest, and time commitment is equally valuable.

## Project Goals

This is a major project that will last several years. Its goals are both community-oriented and academic. Some short-term and long-term goals are:

- Educating the community members about the level of endangerment of their language and the importance of its documentation;
- Audio and video recording of stories, memories, conversations, and other interactions in Istrian Vlashki;
- Training sessions in language description and documentation for community participants;
- Transcription, translation, and analysis of the collected materials;
- Creation of a multilingual project website to serve as a communal space on the Internet;
- Development of culture-and-language projects by the community members to be posted on the Internet and published as books;
- Preparation of an electronic archive of the language that will unite materials created in different places and time periods;
- Preparation of an anthology of Istrian Vlashki texts in book format;
- Creation of an electronic and print dictionary;
- Development of various pedagogical materials designed to teach Istrian Vlashki;

- Creation of the documentary film about the Istrian Vlashki speakers in diaspora and in Istria.

## What's Happening Next?

An informational meeting will take place in the Istria Sport Club, 28-09 Astoria Boulevard, Astoria, New York 11105, on Sunday, November 6, 2005 from 3:00PM to 5:00PM. The project coordinator and its current participants will talk about the project and discuss the ways in which you can participate. To confirm your attendance at the meeting, please call Zvezdana Vrzic, the project coordinator, at 212-769-4296 or Valnea Smilovic, the project participant, at 718-672-6623 by October 29, 2005.

## Project Coordination

The project coordinator and principal investigator is Zvezdana Vrzic. Zvezdana was born and grew up in Rijeka. She is a linguist and an editor at the Random House Publishing Inc. and has a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the New York University.

## Contact

For more information contact Zvezdana by telephone at 212-769-4296 or write to her at [zv2@nyu.edu](mailto:zv2@nyu.edu) or 40 West 86<sup>th</sup> Street, # 7B, New York, NY 10024.

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