

## **Identity and language shift among Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers in Croatia\***

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The language Vlashki/Zheyanski, spoken in two areas--the Šušnjevice area and Žejane--of the multilingual, multiethnic Istrian peninsula of Croatia, evinces strong loyalty on the part of its elderly speakers, yet in both areas a language shift to Croatian is well underway. Vlashki/Zheyanski is a severely endangered Eastern Romance language known in the linguistic literature as Istro-Romanian.

So that we could study the domains and frequency of use of the language and equally to examine speaker attitudes about language and identity we administered a questionnaire to speakers in both locations. Our sample included responses from individuals in four age groups. Our discussion here focuses on 16 men and women from the two older groups, 51-70 and 71-and-older.

In Žejane, speakers saw knowledge of the language and family lineage as defining components of being a "real" member of the community. The name for the language, Zheyanski, comes from the village name. Hence, someone who speaks the language also asserts village belonging and village affiliation is at the core of speakers' identity. In terms of national identification, whether Croatian, Italian, and/or Istrian, Zheyanski speakers by and large showed little enthusiasm for any of the three choices. In terms of language use, all respondents continue to use the language on a daily basis but report that they speak mostly Croatian to their grandchildren.

In the Šušnjevice area, people used the same criteria, language knowledge and family lineage, to define group membership and feel close affiliation to their home village. Unlike in Žejane, the name of the language, "Vlashki," does not correspond to a unitary group name accepted and liked by all. In terms of larger identity, villagers embraced identities that they share with their Croatian-speaking neighbors: Most felt "extremely Istrian," and at least "fairly Croatian." The language shift to Croatian is also more advanced here: All the speakers report speaking mostly Croatian to their children.

While speakers in both Žejane and the Šušnjevice area endued their language with a critical role in their identity, this attitude toward Vlashki/Zheyanski does not manifest itself in their communication with younger generations where other social forces have caused them to shift to the use of Croatian.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. The goals of the study

Vlashki/Zheyanski is a severely endangered Eastern Romance language--spoken in two different locations on the Istrian peninsula in Croatia--known in the linguistic literature as Istro-Romanian because of its historical connections to Romanian. The terms Vlashki and Zheyanski are the speakers' own names for two geographically distinct varieties that are fully mutually intelligible but also easily identifiable as different by their speakers.

In this paper, we report on the results of a sociolinguistic questionnaire study designed to examine the degree of language endangerment and shift in Vlashki/Zheyanski-speaking communities and speaker attitudes about language and identity.

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### 1.2. Location of the Vlashki/Zheyanski-speaking communities

The speakers live in the northeastern part of Istria, a historic region located in the northwest of the Republic of Croatia, between the Gulf of Trieste and the Kvarner Gulf in the Adriatic Sea. Speakers of the Zheyanski variety live in the isolated mountain village of Žejane close to the Croatian border with Slovenia. Further south and across the mountains from Žejane, speakers of the Vlashki variety inhabit five villages a short distance from one another, ringing the northern portion of the Čepić Valley at the foot of the Učka Mountain. The largest village of the five is Šušnjeвица. The two places, Žejane and the Šušnjeвица area, are now divided by an administrative provincial border.

The mountainous area in the north has always been difficult to access directly from the valley further south. The Šušnjeвица area and Žejane are around fifty kilometers apart and there are now good roads around the mountain connecting them. However, the two groups of speakers seem to have had little if any interaction in the course of their history in Istria. Today, as in the past, residents of the Šušnjeвица area and Žejane are oriented toward different urban centers for work, business, and schooling.

### 1.3. Demographics

According to the 2011 census, there are 406 people living in the villages where Vlashki/Zheyanski is spoken. Of the 406 residents of the villages, according to our estimate, around 120 are fluent and active speakers of the language.

In Žejane, there are 130 inhabitants, including 45 active and fluent speakers, close to 35 percent of the village population. In the Šušnjeвица area, 276 inhabitants live in the five villages, including roughly 75 fluent and active speakers, a bit more than a quarter of the population of these villages.

Among the speakers, the great majority are over fifty years old. These older speakers are fluent, balanced bilinguals in Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian. Many speakers who started school in the 1950s, and even the 1960s, report having been monolingual in Vlashki/Zheyanski before school. Younger speakers are typically Croatian-dominant, and many learned Vlashki/Zheyanski as a second language.

There seem to be few, if any, fluent and active speakers of the language in the population under the age of 25, hence few if any among preschool and school-age children. In Žejane, according to the count done in 2009, there were only six speakers between the ages of 25 and 50 years old and there were no fluent and active speakers under the age of 25.

We estimate that there are an additional 450 speakers of Vlashki/Zheyanski elsewhere in Croatia, primarily in neighboring towns and cities such as Matulji, Opatija, Rijeka, Kršan, Labin, Pazin, and Pula. Outside Croatia, there may be another 400-500 speakers, primarily in the United States, especially New York City, and in western Australia. In all, there are roughly 1,000 speakers in the world, and the language is severely endangered.

#### 1.4. External social causes of language shift

Historically, the number of people in the Vlashki/Zheyanski-speaking villages has been small, with village size similar to the size of other villages in the area. In the half-century before World War II, most village families lived on subsistence agriculture and sheep herding but complemented these traditional occupations through some family members engaging in small businesses, industrial work, and service jobs in local towns and cities, such as Opatija, Rijeka, Pula, and Trieste. For example, men in Žejane prepared and sold charcoal and wood for heating, many of those in the Šušnjeвица area were miners and sailors, and young women from both locations worked in private homes.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, there was some movement of people from the villages to the city as well as immigration to foreign lands. In general, however, population growth in the villages in the late nineteenth and across the early twentieth century was large enough to offset the population losses that occurred during the years of the two world wars. Thus, the 1880 Austrian census lists the total population in the Šušnjeвица area and Žejane and 2467 (*Naselja i stanovništvo RH 1857-2001*),<sup>1</sup> and a 1945 Yugoslav regional census gives it as 2255.

In sharp contrast, immediately after World War II, massive depopulation of the villages began, and it has continued virtually to the present day. The most recent census, taken in 2011, shows the population of the villages to be less than one-fifth of what it was in 1945. The depopulation, specifically outmigration abroad, began immediately after the war. It was part of a significant depopulation of the Istrian peninsula more generally. In two large waves, most Italian Istrians, but many others too, left the region in reaction to the political and social changes that followed the war, when Istria was joined to other Croatian-speaking territories and became part of socialist Yugoslavia. Already within the first eight years after the end of World War II, the villages' population had shrunk by more than a quarter.

Additional factors in post-WWII outmigration involved the socio-economic processes of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization, in ways parallel to what took place in other areas of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Gal 1978). The arduous agricultural lifestyle in the rather poor northeastern area of Istria has become increasingly devalued and has gradually been abandoned. Increasingly, younger villagers have sought more lucrative employment, mostly in industrial and service jobs, and have chosen to live outside of the villages. The institution of universal elementary education in Croatian as well as free and accessible high school education has provided young adults with the resources for greater social mobility. Further, the greater mobility, coupled with regional depopulation, has been

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<sup>1</sup> See also Orbančić 1995:60 and Filipi 2003:88, whose numbers are slightly lower as they do not include the numbers for one of the villages.

accompanied by a more widespread practice of intermarriage, not only among those villagers who left, but also among those who stayed.

Modernization processes have led to the gradual rejection of a very local and largely self-sufficient agricultural lifestyle. The Vlashki/Zheyanski-speaking villages have lost the geographical and cultural isolation that supported the almost exclusive use of the local language by most villagers. In the process, a range of new social domains opened up in which Croatian, not Vlashki/Zheyanski, was useful, even necessary. Previously, the Catholic church had been the main site of exposure to the majority Croatian language. Education, in Croatian or--between the two world wars--in Italian, was not widely available. Now, education became widespread, employment outside the village a norm, and new media--such as newspapers, radio, and television--omnipresent.

#### 1.5. History of the language and the area

It has not been established beyond doubt when Vlashki/Zheyanski separated from Proto-Romanian and indeed whether it is a sister or a daughter of the Daco-Romanian branch of Proto-Romanian (Kovačec 1998:242-244, Frățilă and Sârbu 1998:13-19, but cf. Niculescu 1990:59-70). However, most evidence points to its speakers' migration away from the rest of Proto-Romanian speakers at some point in the second half of the first millennium. This was prior to the beginning of Hungarian linguistic influence on Daco-Romanian (Frățilă and Sârbu 1998:13-17, Niculescu 1990:67, Mallinson 1990:303). While Daco-Romanian has many lexical borrowings from Hungarian, Vlashki/Zheyanski has none.

There is greater consensus that at the beginning of the sixteenth century speakers of today's Vlashki/Zheyanski settled in Istria, specifically in the places where their descendants live today (Kovačec 1998:242-244). These settlers migrated there from northern Dalmatia, in the same historical period when large numbers of Croatian-speaking people were also moving from Dalmatia to Istria.

The original settlers migrated into an area in central and northeastern Istria, which was then part of the Holy Roman Empire and ruled by the Habsburgs. The larger portion of the Istrian peninsula was under the control of the Venetian Republic at the time. After the fall of Venice in 1797, the entire territory of Istria became part of the Austrian Empire and then Austria-Hungary from 1867 until 1918. After World War I, Italy annexed Istria. The region then remained part of Italy until 1943. After World War II, Istria was placed within the borders of socialist Yugoslavia, specifically within the Republic of Croatia. This was the first time in Istria's history that the region and its majority Croatian speakers were in the same state with other Croatian-speaking territories. Since 1991, Istria is part of the independent Republic of Croatia.

As this description makes clear, Istria has been a political borderland throughout its history. Only around 60km at its widest point and 120km at its longest, Istria has been crisscrossed by political borders and has been fought

over by a succession of rulers and states. Today Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers, like other people in Istria, speak of four generations of their families born in four different states—Austria-Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Croatia—without ever having left home. Thus, different generations of the same family can easily claim different, as well as multiple, national allegiances. Istria has also been a cultural meeting ground, one characterized by a multilingual and multiethnic population throughout most of its history. Croatian, Italian, and Slovenian speakers have been its main ethnolinguistic components for centuries. Today, Croatian speakers are the large majority in Istria but there is also a significant population of Italian speakers. Overall, however, as previously noted, the population in Istria today is far smaller than it was 100 years ago (Cukrov 2001:30).

Throughout their five centuries in Istria, Vlashki-speaking and Zheyanski-speaking settlers have shared their history yet have had little contact with one another. Over the course of these centuries, their villages have been part of the same larger political entities, even when they were in different smaller administrative units within them. Today, Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers live in two different administrative regions of Croatia: Vlashki speakers live in the Šušnjeveca area, which is in the Istrian Region. Zheyanski speakers live in the village of Žejane, which, while it is geographically on the peninsula of Istria, has been included in the neighboring Primorsko-Goranska Region since the 1990's. The Istrian Regional government promotes political regionalism and officially supports multiculturalism and multilingualism. Two of the languages spoken in the area--Croatian and Italian--are co-official. In the Primorsko-Goranski Region, Croatian is the official language.

State schooling dates to the 1880's in Žejane, the northern village, and to the beginning of the twentieth century in Šušnjeveca (Beltram and Jakovljević 2005, Legac 1983). Prior to that, some villages did have small parochial schools. Formal education before World War I was not extensive, and it was in Croatian. Beginning in 1923, at a time when Istria was a part of Italy, the Fascist government brought schooling to all the Vlashki-/Zheyanski-speaking villages and made Italian the language of instruction for all children. During the Italian period, most children attended school for five years. In 1945, with Istria now part of socialist Yugoslavia, Croatian became the language of instruction once again. In 1951 the government extended universal education to eight years (Beltram and Jakovljević 2005). In sum, education went from being sporadic to regular and universal, and the number of years that everyone went to school jumped from a few years to five to eight. The medium of instruction in schools went from Croatian to Italian and then back to Croatian.

Schools have provided no institutional support for Vlashki/Zheyanski, and neither has the Catholic Church, with all church activities--apart from the Latin Mass prior to the 1960's--being carried out in Croatian. In addition, Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers have always used their language in spoken situations only, as any written document was in Croatian or, between the world wars, in Italian.

## 2. The sociolinguistic questionnaire study

### 2.1. The questionnaire and the sample

The goal of our study was to examine domains and frequency of use of Vlashki/Zheyanski as well as speaker attitudes about the language and its relation to their identity. Our questionnaire consisted of 105 questions divided into four sections: personal details; domains and frequency of language use; language competence in Vlashki/Zheyanski, Croatian, and Italian; and language attitudes and identity. In addition to questions for which the respondent chose from a set of answers, we had several open-ended questions that enabled speakers to elaborate on their views. We prepared the questions in Croatian, and fluent speakers of Vlashki/Zheyanski translated the questionnaire into Vlashki/Zheyanski and subsequently administered it early in 2013.

We divided the study participants into groups based on residence, age, and gender. We had 16 participants from each of three locations--Žejane, the Šušnjevića area, and New York City--for a total of 48. For a given location, we took four speakers from each of the following four age groups: 71 and over, 51-70, 31-50, and under 30, with an equal number of female and male participants in each age group. The study participants were native speakers of Vlashki/Zheyanski and completed the questionnaire in their native language; the only exceptions arose because the community members administering the questionnaire were unable to find the requisite number of fluent speakers in the youngest age group. In these cases, the questionnaire was administered in Croatian if in Croatia or in English if in New York.

In this paper, we look at a subset of the total number of questionnaires. Specifically, we focus on 16 participants, namely the two older groups, all native Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers, in the two locations in Croatia.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2. Respondents' attributes

Table 1 presents the 16 participants in our study.

Table 1. Respondents.

Variety	Sex	Age	Years of Schooling		Variety	Sex	Age	Years of Schooling
Vlashki	F	84	3		Zheyanski	M	83	5
Vlashki	M	78	6		Zheyanski	F	77	5
Vlashki	F	76	5		Zheyanski	M	76	5
Vlashki	M	75	6		Zheyanski	F	73	6

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<sup>2</sup> In examining the responses that people gave us, we have sometimes felt stymied by the small number of respondents for a given age group in a particular place. We had to remind ourselves that in fact our sample represents a considerable portion of the Vlashki- and Zheyanski-speaking populations of the native villages.

Vlashki	M	61	12		Zheyanski	F	69	11
Vlashki	F	61	12		Zheyanski	F	65	8
Vlashki	M	60	8		Zheyanski	M	64	12
Vlashki	F	51	11		Zheyanski	M	54	12

Subsequently, we refer to respondents on the basis of the variety they spoke, their sex, and age. Thus, ZF77 refers to the 77-year-old Zheyanski-speaking female respondent.

Whether from Žejane or the Šušnjeveca area, the sixteen participants have similar backgrounds. With regard to employment, all but one of the speakers held jobs outside the home, women as well as men. Two women from the younger group in the Šušnjeveca area worked in offices; the other 13 jobholders all had blue-collar positions.

When there are differences, they are most often based on age. The older age group consists of people 71 and over, i.e. born between 1929 and 1940. Each person in that group has between three and six years of elementary education. It is only with the “younger” age group, those 51 to 70, that more extensive education took place. Thus, six of the eight respondents in this group have a high school education. In each location, the oldest person attended school in Italian only, while the second oldest started school in Italian but then continued in Croatian after World War II. The rest of the people in the older age group and everyone in the younger age group attended school in Croatian.

All 16 respondents were child bilinguals and fluent in Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian. Four speakers report having been monolingual in Vlashki/Zheyanski before they started school.

We asked respondents to grade their skills on a scale of 1 to 5, and we indicated that 5 was “best.” This use of a 1-5 scale taps into local educational practice.

All 16 speakers rated their skills in speaking and understanding Vlashki-Zheyanski as a 4 or a 5, usually a 5, and all but one evaluated their Vlashki-Zheyanski proficiency as equal to or greater than their Croatian proficiency.

In addition, 15 of the 16 respondents say that they understand some Italian, and 12 of them say that they speak some Italian; however, most respondents—all but three—rate their Italian much lower than their Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian.

### 2.3. Patterns of use of Vlashki/Zheyanski

#### 2.3.1. Frequency of use of Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian

In order to get a sense of the patterns of use of the Vlashki/Zheyanski among the speakers of the two oldest age groups and examine the level of language shift to Croatian in the two locations, we looked both at the amount of the Vlashki/Zheyanski use relative to Croatian and the choice of language made by speakers in interaction with different interlocutors and in different social domains.

We asked the respondents to report on how often they use Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian at home and in the village. As noted above, the respondents in both locations are native speakers of Vlashki/Zheyanski. Moreover, with the exception of one speaker in each location, all of the respondents are active users of the language.<sup>3</sup> They report using it every day both at home and in the village.

While the frequency of use of Vlashki/Zheyanski in home and in the village is essentially comparable in the Šušnjeвица area and in Žejane, there are important differences in the status of Croatian, specifically in the home. Seven of the eight respondents from the Šušnjeвица area report using Croatian too on a daily basis at home (and the eighth uses it “sometimes”). In contrast, only three of the respondents from Žejane report using it daily; two others use it sometimes, and the remaining three use it rarely. In the village domain, the two locales are comparable, with half of the respondents in each place using it daily and the others using it much less.

We also asked speakers to report on a change in the frequency of their use of Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian in the course of their lifetime (“now” versus “before/in the past”). They report using Vlashki/Zheyanski as often today as they did in the past. (The lone exception is the Zheyanski speaker mentioned in footnote 3 whose wife is a Croatian speaker. He reports that in the past, presumably prior to his marriage, he routinely used Zheyanski in the house, whereas now he rarely uses it in that domain.) If the frequency of occurrence of Vlashki/Zheyanski has not changed, it stands in sharp contrast to Croatian. Specifically, Croatian is now present on an everyday basis within the communities. Its role is far greater in both domains than was the case in the past: In the Šušnjeвица area, for example, of the eight respondents, only one person reported using Croatian on a daily basis in the village in the past. (She is discussed in footnote 3.) All the others report having used it rarely or never. Now, however, five of the eight respondents there say that they use Croatian every day in the village.

### 2.3.2. Language choice with different interlocutors

So that we could establish how the language choice is made between Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian according to the participants, we asked speakers to indicate their language choice with regard to several types of interlocutors--different close family members including spouses as well as relatives, friends, and neighbors. They also indicated their language preference with respect to other specific social domains: work, school,

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<sup>3</sup> The two exceptions are noteworthy. The youngest respondent from the Šušnjeвица area reports that, when she was growing up, she spoke both Croatian and Vlashki to her parents, but more Croatian. She reports further that she spoke only Croatian to her older sibling(s). In Žejane, one of the respondents in the 51-70 group reports that he is married to a Croatian-speaking woman and rarely speaks Zheyanski at home. In his case, however, his language behavior in the village is the same as for others of his generation, i.e. he reports using Zheyanski every day.



everyday life (such as shopping), at village social events, and at church-related event in the village. Here we limit ourselves to respondents' reports of their interaction with close family members.

In answering the question, "What language do you speak to \_\_\_?," a respondent had five choices to which we later assigned numerical values:

- (5) Only Vlashki/Zheyanski,
- (4) Mainly Vlashki/Zheyanski with some Croatian,
- (3) Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian about equally,
- (2) Mainly Croatian with some Vlashki/Zheyanski, and
- (1) Only Croatian.

We established above that the home domain is not reserved exclusively for Vlashki/Zheyanski in either location, but also that in the Šušnjevića area the majority of speakers report an equally frequent use of Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian, while in Žejane Croatian is used less than Vlashki/Zheyanski at home. A look at respondents' language choices with different family members provides corroborating evidence for this geographic difference.

We asked respondents about language use with a range of relatives, from previous generations (parents and grandparents), their own generation (siblings), and subsequent generations (children and grandchildren). In both the Šušnjevića area and Žejane, regardless of the respondent's relation to the relative: if the relative was in the same or an older generation, the usual answer was "Vlashki/Zheyanski only."

The exceptions merit discussion. While everyone reported speaking only Vlashki/Zheyanski to their paternal grandparents, three respondents stated that they spoke only Croatian to their maternal grandparents. Presumably these are all instances where the respondent was the child of intermarriage. In one case, the respondent (VM60) nevertheless reported speaking only Vlashki to his other relatives, including his mother, and in a second, the respondent (ZF69) reported speaking mostly Croatian to her mother but only Vlashki to her father. In the third case, the respondent (VF51) spoke mostly Croatian to both her parents and only Croatian to her older brother(s). This last respondent is the youngest person in the groups under study in this sample; as such, her age may also be a factor in her shift to Croatian.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, then, when the respondents were growing up, Vlashki/Zheyanski dominated in their homes and villages. For the respondents to address elders or even siblings in a language other than Vlashki/Zheyanski was exceptional. However, the Vlashki-speaking respondents show a difference with regard to addressing their spouses and,

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<sup>4</sup> If respondents did not have contact with particular relatives or not did not have relatives of a certain type (e.g. younger sister), they did not answer the question. Apart from the speakers noted above, the only respondents who report speaking to their mother or father in any way other than "only Vlashki/Zheyanski" are two people who did not provide an answer in the box for language spoken to maternal grandparents, thereby leaving open the question as to whether or not the two respondents' mothers (and their mothers' parents) were Croatian-speaking. Of the two, ZF65 spoke mostly Zheyanski to her parents, and ZM54 spoke Zheyanski and Croatian equally to his.



Spouse	1	5	5	4		2	4	1	--
Children	1	2	1	2		2	2	1	--
Grandchildren	1	1	--	2		--	1	1	--

Table 5: Žejane: Language choice with spouse, children, and grandchildren.

	ZM	ZF	ZM	ZF		ZF	ZF	ZM	ZM
	83	77	76	73		69	65	64	54
Spouse	5	5	5	5		1	4	1	3
Children	5	4	5	4		5	5	1	2
Grandchildren	2	2	3	2		2	2	--	2

Even with the shift, however, the two speaker groups are not quite identical in terms of their language choice with grandchildren. In the Šušnjeveca area, four of the five respondents with grandchildren report speaking only Croatian to them; there is a lone respondent there who reports using mostly Croatian with his grandchild(ren) rather than only Croatian. In contrast, in Žejane, one respondent reports using Zheyanski and Croatian equally, and all six of the others with grandchildren report using mainly Croatian—but no respondent in Žejane reports using Croatian exclusively.

### 2.3.3. Identity

#### 2.3.3.1. National identity, regional identity, and “Istrianness” among Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers

Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers are a part of a linguistic enclave that does not hold official minority status in Croatia. Almost all of Croatia’s 22 officially recognized minorities are national minorities related to populations elsewhere, usually in neighboring national states (cf. Tatalović 2005).

One such minority group is Italians, who are the largest group in Istria apart from Croatians. Moreover, as noted earlier, Italy governed Istria between the two world wars. Thus, the two dominant groups in Istria have, over the last century, been Italians and Croatians.

The question arises as to how Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers frame their identity.<sup>5</sup> Because of the origin of their language, others have often associated Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers with a Romanian identity. However, the speakers themselves have not embraced Romanian national affiliation, as we also show below, for reasons of history and geography (cf. Vrzić 2010).

In addition to individuals choosing national identities such as Croatian, Italian, and Slovenian on censuses, in the Yugoslav Regional Census of 1945 a small proportion of the population declared their identity in terms of regional affiliation, instead of the national one, in the Šušnjeveca area. The proportion of the population in this area who chose regional affiliation was similarly small in 1981. In 1991, however, the number of people declaring regional affiliation soared to nearly half the population in

<sup>5</sup> While we address the entirety of Vlashki and Zheyanski speakers, we note that the groups have separate histories with little interaction in modern times.

the Šušnjeвица area. (As can be seen in Table 6, residents of Žejane did not choose this option. Most respondents there, like most of those in the Šušnjeвица area who did not opt for regional affiliation, declared Croatian identity.)

It should be noted, that the number of people who opted for a regional affiliation on the 1991 census in the Croatian-speaking villages and towns neighboring to Šušnjeвица was also very high, but not so high as in the Šušnjeвица area itself.

Table 6: Census respondents who opted for “regional affiliation” rather than a national identity (such as “Croatian” or “Italian”) in the 1945, 1981, and 1991 censuses.

		Total population	Regional affiliation	Percentage
Šušnjeвица area	1945	1596	64	2.9
	1981	463	26	3.6
	1991	408	184	45.1
Žejane	1945	651	0	
	1981	250	0	
	1991	189	8	4.2

The 1991 census was an important one in Croatian history. It coincided with the establishment of the independent state of Croatia, following secession from the Yugoslav federation, and with a period of significant political turmoil and armed conflict in Croatia and other former Yugoslav republics. It was significant in that it showed, in a rather dramatic way, the importance of regional belonging in Istria, which was boosted by a resistance to the homogenizing Croatian nationalist political ideology of the period. Including all of Croatian Istria--both the Istrian administrative region and the Istrian counties and towns of the neighboring Primorsko-Goranska administrative region--more than 37,000 people, more than 16 percent of the population, opted to express a regional identity in 1991 (Duda 2005:758).

While the proportion of people selecting regional affiliation on censuses in Istria as a whole has gone down since the politically turbulent time of the 1991 census, Istrian regional identity is still represented by significant numbers in the area. On the 2011 census, more than 12 percent of the people (over 25,000) reported regional affiliation instead of Croatian or another nationality in the Istrian administrative region, making Istrian identity the second most represented identity group in the Istrian Region after Croatian.

The phenomenon of regional identity in Istria or “Istrianness“ has been studied closely by several different social scientists (Ballinger 2004, Banovac 2004, Sujoldić 2008, Cocco 2010 among others) since the 1990's. Allegiance to Istrian regional identity is found among people of all ethnic backgrounds, but mostly among Croatian speakers (Cocco 2010:14). While the high number of people who opted for regional identity on the 1991 census

was interpreted as resistance to the policies of social and cultural homogenization being propagated by the Croatian nationalist government at that time (Cocco 2010:14ff.), Istrianness is recognized to have deeper and more complex roots.

Regionalism in the area is a political stance that goes beyond simple opposition to the extremes of Croatian nationalism; to an even greater extent, it is a cultural identity of people who have lived on the political border and in a multicultural environment for generations and who wish to protect the specific “social, cultural and economic features of the border region“ (Cocco 2010:17). As such, Istrianness need not be construed as mutually exclusive with a Croatian national identity (cf. Banovac 2004). Rather, Istrianness can be seen as an expression of “the progressive values of the Western democracy [...] opposed to the military hostility and the violent ethnic politics of the former Yugoslavia, which are perceived as detrimental to the local context of hybridism” (Cocco 2010: 17-18, reporting on Šantić 2001). In a similar vein, Ballinger (2004) talks about “Istrianness“ as a hybrid identity and about Istria as a historic borderland. A similar view is expressed by Sujoldić (2008), who frames Istrian identity as multicultural and inclusive. Scholars’ attention to Istrianness comes as a response to its expression on the censuses, especially the 1991 Croatian census. However, already in the nineteenth century Austrian ethnographers were discussing the existence of a population of mixed ethnicity and a hybrid cultural and supra-ethnic/national identity in Istria. They used the terms *Verschmelzung*, or melting, and *Hybridismus*, or hybridity, to refer to it (Nikočević 2008: 68, 150, 184).

#### 2.3.3.2. National and regional identity of the Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers in our study

We asked our respondents to answer the following three questions with regard to their group identity: “How Istrian do you feel?”, “How Croatian do you feel?”, “How Italian do you feel?”, as these are the identity designations that are in dominant use in the region and on the censuses. We allowed the respondents to grade their sense of allegiance to them on a five-point scale: “Not at all”/“A little”/“Fairly”/“Very”/“Extremely.” In displaying the results, we present two sets of tables. First, in Tables 7a, for the Šušnjeveca area, and 7b, for Žejane, we use a check mark to indicate a positive response to the identity question, without taking into account the strength of the respondent’s allegiance.

Table 7a: Identity choices among Vlashki-speaking respondents.

Respondents	Istrian	Croatian	Italian
VF84	✓		
VM78	✓	✓	
VF76	✓	✓	✓
VM75	✓	✓	
VM61	✓	✓	

VF61		✓	✓
VM60		✓	✓
VF51	✓	✓	

Table 7b: Identity choices among Zheyanski-speaking respondents.

Respondents	Istrian	Croatian	Italian
ZM83	✓		✓
ZF77		✓	✓
ZM76	✓	✓	✓
ZF73	✓	✓	
ZF69		✓	
ZF65		✓	
ZM64	✓	✓	
ZM54	✓	✓	

As Tables 7a and 7b show, most respondents (13 out of 16) expressed allegiance to more than one identity, with two speakers claiming all three identities. With three possible identities to choose from and respondents free to choose as many as they pleased, there were seven possible patterns. The sixteen respondents chose six of the seven patterns, with “Italian only” the only one not selected.

In all, 14 of the 16 respondents answered that they felt Croatian (the exceptions being the oldest speaker in each location), eleven said that about Istrian, and six about Italian. The most common pattern (seven out of 16) was allegiance to Istrian and Croatian identity but not Italian.

As a comparison of Tables 7a and 7b shows, the two locations show only minimal differences with respect to the identity choices expressed by respondents. However, respondents at the two locations differ dramatically in the strength of allegiance that they express. This can be seen by comparing Tables 8a and 8b.

Table 8a. Vlashki-speaking respondents: The strength of their allegiance.

Respondents	Those giving a positive answer to the question,											
	How Istrian do you feel?				How Croatian do you feel?				How Italian do you feel?			
	+1	+2	+3	+4	+1	+2	+3	+4	+1	+2	+3	+4
VF84												
VM78												
VF76												
VM75												

VM61	■	■	■	■	■	■						
VF61					■	■			■	■	■	
VM60					■	■			■	■	■	
VF51	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				

+1 = A little. +2 = Fairly. +3 = Very. +4 = Extremely.

Table 8b. Zheyanski-speaking respondents: The strength of their allegiance.

Respondents	Those giving a positive answer to the question,											
	How Istrian do you feel?				How Croatian do you feel?				How Italian do you feel?			
	+1	+2	+3	+4	+1	+2	+3	+4	+1	+2	+3	+4
ZM83	■								■	■		
ZF77					■				■			
ZM76	■	■			■	■			■			
ZF73	■				■							
ZF69					■	■						
ZF65					■							
ZM64	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				
ZM54	■	■			■	■	■					

+1 = A little. +2 = Fairly. +3 = Very. +4 = Extremely.

The Vlashki-speaking respondents expressed greater affiliation across the board: Of their sixteen positive responses, fully twelve were “very” or “extremely.” In contrast, of the Zheyanski speakers’ fifteen positive responses, only three were “very” or “extremely.”

### 2.3.3.3. Local and ethnic identity

After we had elicited from respondents how Istrian, then Croatian, then Italian they felt, we asked whether these terms (specifically, the ones to which they had responded positively) were sufficient to describe their group identity. In each location, five out of the eight respondents said yes. When asked for other terms, both those who said that the terms were not sufficient and those who found them sufficient then offered other descriptive group identity terms.

The terms that were volunteered differed between the Šušnjeveca area group and the Žejane group. All Zheyans mentioned the term “Žejanci,”

i.e. “Žejane people,” as a necessary identity term in addition to the national and/or regional designations. One person in Žejane also mentioned the term “Romanian.” In contrast, among the Šušnjevice area respondents, there was more variety. Two people mentioned terms derived from the village names, four people mentioned “Vlach” and one person offered the term “Romanian/Vlashki Istrian”. It should be noted that no respondent mentioned in this context the group term “Ćiribirici,” which is widely used to refer to Vlashki speakers by the surrounding Croatian-speaking populations.

Further open-ended questions asked respondents to provide their opinions about the terms “Vlach”, “Istro-Romanian” and “Romanian”, which are also often used by outsiders. The name “Vlach” has been reported in the literature as speakers’ own collective term in the Šušnjevice area in earlier times (Kovačec 1998:235). The term is one used by Slavic populations of the Balkans to refer to several different groups in the area who speak Eastern Romance languages related to Romanian; moreover, for centuries it has been the traditional outsider term in literature for these groups (Skok 1973:606-608, Mirdita 2007).

As for “Istro-Romanian,” it is an outsider term commonly used in linguistic and other literature, as well as in the media, to refer to the speakers of Vlashki/Zheyanski. It was introduced into usage by nineteenth century linguists. The term has since gained wider currency in the literature and the media. In the last few decades, the term has become better known to the speakers themselves as it has been used in the Croatian media as well.

The Šušnjevice area and Žejane groups differed in their reactions to these terms. Three people from the Šušnjevice accept the term “Vlach” and all of them find the term “Istro-Romanian” acceptable to a degree. Most (seven out of eight) express their acceptance of the term by opposing it to some other term they like less: Three speakers find “Istro-Romanian” preferable to the term “Vlach,” which they consider somewhat derogatory as well as non-unique, as it is used for other populations in the area and beyond it; four respondents find “Istro-Romanian” preferable to the term “Romanian”, which they associate with a different language and group.

Respondents from Žejane unanimously reject the term “Vlach” and three explicitly reject both “Istro-Romanian” and “Romanian.” For five respondents, the latter terms are acceptable to a degree: Two accept “Istro-Romanian”, one accepts “Romanian” and two do not make the choice between the two terms explicit. A couple of respondents provide the linguistic relationship between Zheyanski and Romanian as a justification for their acceptance. However, even when accepting “Istro-Romanian” or “Romanian,” no respondent in Žejane expresses any enthusiasm for either term.

In conclusion, there seems to be a lack of a widely shared--and, importantly, liked--ethnic group name among the Vlashki speakers. The group terms introduced and used by outsiders, notably “Istro-Romanian,” are never volunteered but are accepted by the people in the Šušnjevice area with caveats--in opposition to other, less preferable group terms such as



“Romanian” and “Vlach.” In contrast, Zheyanski speakers are unanimous in their support for the use of the village-derived group name, corresponding to the language name, which they all volunteered. This demonstrates the importance that the village affiliation has to them. Perhaps because of this, they show less acceptance for the outsider group terms, such as “Istro-Romanian,” and find the term “Vlach” completely irrelevant to them.

#### 2.4. Social attitudes

Our questionnaire also contained twenty statements expressing opinions related to the language status (economic, social and symbolic), language vitality and desirability of institutional support for the language and identity (cf. Komondouros & McEntee-Atalianis 2007). Respondents graded the statements related to these themes on a five-point Likert scale.

Respondents from the Šušnjeвица area and Žejane demonstrated very similar views on a number of statements. With regard to the social status of the language, the majority agree that Vlashki/Zheyanski has an inferior social status in Istria. In both locations, people are evenly divided as to whether or not its social status has improved. A similar division exists among them as to whether or not there is a stigma associated with the language, that is, whether they feel comfortable speaking the language in public, but opinions in Žejane are slightly more positive than in the Šušnjeвица area. With regard to the economic status of the language, virtually all respondents agree that Croatian is the language young people must learn to succeed, but Zheyansians, unlike the Šušnjeвица area people, mostly disagree with the statement that young people need to leave the village in order to succeed. In both locations, the large majority of the respondents would like to have more opportunities to both speak and improve the language and feel that the government is not doing enough to support it.

With regard to the subjective sense of the language’s vitality, people from Žejane demonstrated significantly less concern about this than did the people from the Šušnjeвица area: The minority in Žejane, only three out of eight people, believe that their language might disappear in the future. Parallel to that, the large majority in Žejane believe that there will always be speakers of Zheyanski in their village and only one person believes that Zheyanski is only for the use of the old people. In the Šušnjeвица area, everyone expressed concern about the possible disappearance of Vlashki in the future.

With regard to the symbolic status of the language and the role it plays in people’s identity, Vlashki and Zheyanski speakers largely share beliefs. They agree that it is important to preserve Vlashki/Zheyanski and pass it on to future generations and that their culture is strongly linked to the Vlashki/Zheyanski language. They expressed pride in their village affiliations and agreed that language plays a defining role in their identity. However, there is a difference between the respondents from the two locations with regard to bilingual practices, such as code-switching and the use of Croatian in communication among Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers. In the Šušnjeвица

area, all eight respondents expressed their opposition to codeswitching and six of eight felt that the use of Croatian by speakers able to speak Vlashki weakened the group's identity. In contrast to the greater unanimity in the Šušnjeвица area, respondents in Žejane were divided with regard to language protection: three out of eight did not object to mixing Croatian with Zheyanski, and four out of eight did not see the use of Croatian among Žejane speakers as weakening group identity.

In summary, both the Vlashki and Zheyanski speakers express strong ethnic pride and the conviction that their language plays an important role in their identity. They also like the idea of passing the language on to future generations and using the language more in their lives. The Vlashki speakers, however, seem to be more pessimistic with regard to the future of their language, that is, the possibility of its survival in the community.

### 3. Discussion and conclusions

Our respondents' judgments on language use confirm that language shift from Vlashki/Zheyanski to Croatian is under way in both the Šušnjeвица area and Žejane. Speaker judgments regarding the domains and frequency of use of Vlashki/Zheyanski also indicate that language shift to Croatian is more advanced in the Šušnjeвица area than in Žejane. The Vlashki speakers discussed in this paper--those speakers who are 51 years of age or older--have shifted to the predominant or exclusive use of Croatian in communication with their children. This generation is the pivot generation in the Vlashki-speaking area, the one that has brought about language shift. The same is not true of the Zheyanski speakers in this paper's sample, most of whom still communicate primarily in Zheyanski with their children. However, the language use of their children, whose usage patterns we do not discuss directly here, seems to have changed in relation to their own children, our respondents' grandchildren, as reflected in our respondents' report that they speak mostly Croatian to them.

The Vlashki and Zheyanski speakers also differ with respect to their awareness of the endangered nature of the local language in their communities and their attitudes toward their language, in particular, toward code-switching between Vlashki/Zheyanski and Croatian and the use of Croatian among Vlashki/Zheyanski speakers. These differences seem to correlate to the difference in the advancement of language shift in the two locations: The Vlashki speakers are reasonably pessimistic about the chances for their language's survival into the future and, at the same time, express stronger attitudes of language protectionism, in the face of this doomed prospect. As a group, Zheyanski speakers demonstrate less awareness of the language shift in progress and do not all oppose bilingual language practices.

It was not our goal in this paper to explain the reasons for language shift in these communities. We believe that a complex range of socio-economic and historical factors would need to be looked into and appealed to in order to do that (cf. Himmelman 2010). Speakers engage in everyday interactions and make language choice decisions under the pressure of a

range of socio-economic factors, such as changing local economies, migration patterns, marriage customs, and others. In the communities we studied, the dramatic depopulation of villages since 1945, loss of their geographic isolation due to modernization, and the replacement of the traditional agricultural lifestyle with industrial and service employment are undoubtedly the main socio-economic factors of language loss. In conjunction with these, however, it seems probable that people's conception of their identity has played a role in this process as well.

The difference in the advancement of language shift between the Šušnjeвица area and Žejane might partially be the difference in the conception of identity between the two locations, which in turn can be related to the villages' locations and the effect of depopulation on the communities. The Šušnjeвица area is composed of several villages and adjoining hamlets, many of which were dramatically and quickly depopulated in the period following World War II. In communities where identity is defined in terms of family lineage and language and where other aspects of their culture are indistinguishable from those of their neighbors, depopulation has direct detrimental effects on such communities and their language use, especially when the villages and hamlets are also dispersed, as they are in the Šušnjeвица area. The Vlashki-speaking villages are surrounded by a number of nearby Croatian-speaking villages. Increasingly frequent contact and the routinization of intermarriage under circumstances of intense recurrent depopulation have heightened the difficulty of (re-)establishing and maintaining a viable cultural boundary with their neighbors. This is expressed and, in turn, possibly compounded by the fact that no ethnic name is both widely accepted and liked by everyone, in particular no ethnic name that is cognate with the name of the language.

Similar socio-economic changes affected Zheyanski speakers, but, as inhabitants of a single village in an isolated location, they seem to have had an easier time identifying their community in unique terms and maintaining a sense of sufficiently distinctive village belonging--and authenticity. Another circumstance might have contributed to a temporary advantage for the Zheyanski speakers over the Vlashki speakers in terms of language maintenance: Žejane lies close to the Slovenian border, outside the Istrian Administrative Region that was established in 1991. While the village is part of Istria in a geographic and historic sense, it is not part of its „core“ area. Instead, it is located on the northern border of the Istrian borderland region. Studies exist on other communities on the northern Istrian border that have embraced a “border identity,” marked by “persistence of ambivalent and blurred local group identities” (Nikočević 2005:250), especially in terms of membership in any particular nation. While Zheyanski speakers are like the Vlashki speakers with respect to embracing multiple identities, they are different from them and more like their immediate neighbors in northern Istria in that they expressed reserve toward larger group membership, whether national or regional. This disposition, compounded by other factors discussed earlier, has reinforced for Zheyanski speakers the value of their

distinctive village and language affiliation and postponed, but not dismissed, the need for language shift. As argued by Vrzić elsewhere (2013), in this kind of social context, where identity is transient and pressure for national homogeneity weaker, there is likely less immediacy to assert strongly one's special identity as well as less immediate pressure and need to assimilate.

A final point we'd like to address here is ethnic pride and language loyalty. It may seem surprising that both Vlashki and Zheyanski speakers express strong ethnic pride and place great importance on the role of their language in their identity when, at the same time, language shift to Croatian is well under way in Žejane and largely completed in the Šušnjeveca area. However, other studies of endangered language communities show that continued reference to an in-group language as one of the important symbols of a group's identity is disassociated from everyday language practices, even though the latter is a domain where the shift away from the use of the in-group language may be quite apparent. Among numerous examples, we mention Scottish Gaelic-speaking fisherfolk (Dorian 1980), a Taiap-speaking village in Papua New Guinea (Kulick 1992), and Greek-speaking Istanbulites/Constantinopolites (Komondouros and McEntee-Atalianis 2007, McEntee-Atalianis 2011). While speakers are aware that the local language and the language of wider use have very different instrumental values, the local language may continue to fulfill its symbolic function for speakers even after it is largely abandoned in everyday use due to socio-economic pressures. As long as there are bilingual speakers or even passive bilinguals, it may continue to provide them with a sense of local authenticity and anchor a key aspect of their multiple and layered identities.

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