



**United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors**

Inspector General

UNCLASSIFIED

MEMORANDUM

SEP 29 2009

TO: DG/HR – Ambassador Nancy Powell

FSI – Dr. Ruth A. Whiteside

FROM: OIG – Harold W. Geisel, Acting 

SUBJECT: Balkan Language Issues, ISP-I-09-72

Summary

During a recent OIG inspection of embassies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, the inspection team heard concerns from Foreign Service officers and embassy managers regarding the Department's practice of treating Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian as three separate languages for both training and assignments purposes, although they are essentially dialects of one language. This practice costs the Department money for training and testing, and keeps employees--who are needed in the field--in training that may not be necessary. In addition, this practice does not facilitate creating a cadre of language-qualified employees who can fill positions throughout the region. OIG recommends that the Department treat the three regional variants of Serbo-Croatian as one language for both training and assignments purposes.

Background

Following the break-up of Yugoslavia and the creation of the separate countries of Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, most recently, Montenegro, the Department decided to treat the language known as Serbo-Croatian as three separate languages—Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian—for both training and assignments purposes. Despite the new names, these regional variants remain basically the same linguistically, with slight variations, including the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in Serbian. These variations could be accommodated in conversion courses or advanced country-specific training as part of the overall training program.

The policy of having separate language-designated position proficiency requirements in Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian means that an employee with proficiency in one of these variants of Serbo-Croatian who has been assigned to a position requiring another variant must either test at the required level or get a waiver. The employee may be forced by timing considerations to take most, if not all, of the 44-week course to achieve the required proficiency level in the “new” language. This policy discourages language-qualified officers from bidding on many of the

nearly 100 language-designated positions in these four countries, including two positions in Kosovo.

Precedents

There is precedent for the approach we are recommending in 3 FAH-1 H-3912, which states that Bosnian, Croatian, Serbo-Croatian, and Serbian “shall be grouped together and treated as a single language for the purpose of establishing eligibility for language incentive pay.” There also are precedents in the Arabic studies program, which is taught at FSI as one language, even though it has several variants. In addition, all the major American universities with well-established Slavic language programs, including Harvard and UCLA, treat these three dialects as one language.

Benefits

This approach would be more cost effective for the Department. Additionally, FSI training would become stronger by not being “Balkanized” and this would help create a cadre of language-qualified regional experts, while also providing tangible evidence of U.S. support for increased cooperation among the nations of the former Yugoslavia.

Recommendation 1: The Foreign Service Institute should establish one program for teaching Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian, offering conversion courses and advanced country-specific training as part of the overall training program to accommodate the variations among these three dialects. (Action: FSI)

Recommendation 2: The Bureau of Human Resources should revise the language proficiency requirements so that proficiency in any one of the regional variants of Serbo-Croatian could be used to meet the proficiency requirement for a language-designated position in any of the countries in the region using a variant of the language. (Action: HR)

Cc: EUR/SCE