

Trip to Macedonia began professor's eminent career as language expert

By William Harms

News Office

As a linguist and expert on Eastern European languages, Victor Friedman, (Ph.D., '75) Professor and Chairman of Slavic Languages at Chicago, has seen first-hand how political changes bring changes in the use of languages.

In the Caucasus Mountain area between Asia and Europe, a region about the size of Vermont, dozens of languages are getting new life as a result of the breakdown of central Soviet power, said Friedman, who did research in the area this past summer.

"This is a classic example of an area where languages multiply and pile up rather than being absorbed and leveled out," Friedman said. "If we include the three trans-Caucasian republics—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—and the north Caucasian Republics of Adygeia, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and North Ossetia, all of which were or are part of the Russian Federation, the total number of languages spoken is approximately 50.

"Of these, about 35 are indigenous, native to the Caucasus and belong to three families. There are also four branches of

Republic of Macedonia for the United Nations Protection Forces.

In this position, Friedman monitored Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish newspapers, television and radio and talked to politicians. He filed reports on media news coverage and later returned to the region for the Council on Foreign Relations on a fact-finding mission.

He is circumspect about his evaluation of the political situation in the area, however.

"One meeting with a Balkan leader taught me that I get a headache when I am lied to for more than 30 minutes at a stretch," he said, declining to elaborate. "In two other countries, all the leaders have pursued basically the same foreign policy with respect to one of their neighbors regardless of the regime. In yet another country, change of regimes has allowed for some improvements, but a combination of internal and external instability threatens to eviscerate the very concept of 'leader'.

"The one Balkan leader that I have met on more occasions than any other impresses me as a man of tremendous strength and ability, one who successfully kept war away from his country," Friedman said. "The future of that country, unfortunately, may depend on external events and there are both internal and external threats to stability."

Friedman, who developed an early interest in Macedonia (formerly part of Yugoslavia), is something of a celebrity there. He studied Macedonian while pursuing a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures and in Linguistics at the University—the first dual degree granted in the divisions. He came to the University from Reed College, where he received a B.A. in Russian in 1970. Before joining the Chicago faculty, he served on the faculty of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

"I entered graduate school knowing that I wanted to do something on South Slavic and that I was interested in Caucasian languages, but not much beyond that," he said. "One day during my first year in graduate school, one of my professors, Zbigniew Golab, asked me if I would like to go to Macedonia that summer. He had an extra invitation from the Seminar for Macedonian Language, Literature and Culture and had thought to recommend me. I was eager to go and thanks to financial help from my parents and the Slavic Department at Chicago, I did," he said.

When Friedman traveled to Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, for the first time in 1971, it was still part of Yugoslavia. At that time, its political climate was improving and the economy was picking up. "Life was traditional, but comfortable. Every night during the warm weather, virtually all of Skopje would be out at the main square in the center of town. There was music, dancing and drinking almost every night. By the end of August, I had decided: 'I'm going to write my dissertation on this language.'"

Friedman wrote *The Grammatical Categories of the Macedonian Indicative*, the first book published in North America on the modern Macedonian language. As a result of the book and other scholarship, he was elected in 1994 to the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is only the second U.S.-born American to be elected to the academy since its founding in 1967.

In 1991, Friedman was given the University of Skopje's golden plaque award and received the "1,300 Years of Bulgaria" jubilee medal from Bulgaria in 1982. Friedman is now the only American, and probably the only person in the world, to have been honored by both Bulgaria and Macedonia for contributions to their languages.

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Indo-European languages. Some of these languages have definitely received more attention since the breakup of the U.S.S.R., and a number have instituted various reforms. Some of the smaller Dagestani languages have been given official status and are used in schools and in the press," Friedman explained.

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-Victor Friedman

"On the other hand, 'Russification' continues to advance in the cities of the members of the Russian Federation both due to influence of the central government and due to the need for a lingua franca," he added.

The Caucasian languages are extremely difficult to learn because they are so different from Indo-European languages, Friedman said. "But that is precisely what makes them so interesting and rewarding to study." Learning the language of a specific group of people provides more than an understanding of the language, he adds. "It is impossible to attain more than a superficial understanding of a culture without learning the language of the bearers of that culture," he said.

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