

Rooms of their own:

New residencies supporting the ‘small’ languages of the Western Balkans

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Translation in Motion is a three-year initiative co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. It was launched by **RECIT**, the European Network of International Centres for Literary Translation, in 2020, in partnership with a cluster of translation centres from eight European countries from the Western Balkans, and the EU.

Translation in Motion’s ambition is to aid the increase in numbers, diversity and quality of literary works available to readers across Europe. The project partners will organize translation workshops in Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia, and RECIT will map all literary translation residencies in Europe. In 2022, the partner residency centres will host 20 literary translators working between the languages of the Western Balkans and other European languages.

New residencies sprouting

Literary translators’ residency programmes have been a part of the translation landscape in Europe for a long time and many of them are members of the **pan-European RECIT network**, established in 2000. Today, a new group of translation residencies is on the rise in Southeast Europe. Alongside Goga in Novo mesto (Slovenia), Udruga Kurs in Split (Croatia) and the Literature and Translation House in Sofia (Bulgaria), literary organisations in Skopje, Tirana, Belgrade and Cetinje have expanded their work to function also as translation residencies.

These centres were mostly initiated by prominent writers and intellectuals such as Vladimir Arsenijevic in Serbia, Robert Alagjovovski in North Macedonia or Arian Leka in Albania, by literary organisations, publishers and by organisations within the book sector. Because they are essentially civic initiatives run by independent cultural organisations, these centres rarely receive support from state and municipal institutions, and the significance of their work often goes

unrecognised by public bodies. The high degree of economic uncertainty makes these centres dependent on project-based funding and therefore vulnerable. **The international Traduki network**, which helped to kickstart them, still remains the major source of financial support when it comes to creating networks between literary agents and translators inside the region.



Map of Translation Centres
Photo: Next Page Foundation

Multiple roles for residencies

Older translation residencies elsewhere, Goten in North Macedonia, Krokodil in Serbia and Poeteka in Albania offer a

space for focused creative work and in this way contribute to the translation diversity in Europe. The centres are located in the capitals (Belgrade, Tirana, Skopje) rather than in the tranquillity of small towns surrounded by nature, and their programmes are exclusively for translators from the local language.

Given the lack of large-scale public programmes for the promotion of national literatures – that elsewhere would provide information, books, mobility grants, awards and many other resources to aid translators and book professionals in their work – the new Balkan translators' residencies are a direct entry point to the local cultural scene. They act as literary agents for the literature of the source language, knowledgeable liaisons, and welcoming hosts, all at the same time.

In other words, while a traditional translators' centre offers its guests a creative retreat and inspiring meetings with fellow professionals, the new ones also function as a trampoline for the residents to the otherwise inaccessible local cultural and linguistic life.

During her residency in Tirana within the **Translation in Motion** project, **Zuzana Finger**, a literary translator from Albanian, Czech, Slovak, Serbian and Hungarian into German, said: "Being in the country offers the best opportunity to experience and keep up with current language developments and changes, as dictionaries (...) quickly become outdated." During her residency at Poeteka, Finger worked on a German translation of Albanian poetry, and she lay great emphasis on the importance of face-to-face interaction, i.e. "the opportunity to have an analogue



Sofia Literature and Translation House
Photo: Milena Selimi

exchange with the translated writers, as personal conversation is constructive, associative and creative, and so is the work of literary translators.”

Promoting and protecting “small” languages

Residencies are a way to motivate and support emerging translators of less-translated languages – like the French translator [Marie van Effenterre](#) who completed her very first translation of a Serbian novel, *Zabluda Svetog Sebastijana* by Vladimir Tabasevic, during a residency at Krokodil in 2021. Residencies are also a way to back the efforts of well-established translators, because as professionals working with lesser-known literatures they frequently find themselves in the role of literary agents and promoters for authors, titles or even entire cultural contexts.

Slovene translator [Sonja Dolzan](#) who worked on the translation of the novel *He oдам никаде* by Rumena Buzarovska from Macedonian, stresses this aspect

of the role of translators: “After the residency, I will be more successful in presenting contemporary Macedonian literature to Slovenian publishers who are interested in translating works by Macedonian authors.”

“There I can be isolated and at the same time be in the right crowd”

Depending on the local specificities, translation centres might differ on a formal level, both organisational and financial, but they share a common mission to support the creative work of translators and to seed new cross-border professional connections. The Bulgarian translator Neva Micheva writes about her experience in an honest and frank manner:



Yana Genova
*Photo: Next Page
Foundation*



Neva Micheva
*Photo: Sofia Literature
and Translation House*



Monica Dimitrova
Photo: Irina Fomina

“Whenever somebody asks me, why do I go to a rented room in another country to do exactly what I do at home, my answer is this: there I can be isolated and at the same time in the right crowd. Translators’ residencies are the best places for us to be both completely closed and open, to share solutions and new knowledge, to understand and feel understood, to practise different languages, connect with the world and stay culturally awake. Translation is about all of this.”

Although translation centres differ in many specific ways, residencies are the background champions of literary translation, and thankfully, their indispensable role is slowly gaining more appreciation, as we see new centres emerge across Europe.

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