

Croatia and Waldorf Early Childhood Education

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Croatia is a small middle European and Mediterranean country, stretching along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea. Its coastal regions are called Dalmatia, Kvarner and Istria. Inland from the coast, along the direction of the coast, there stretches the Velebit mountain range belonging to the central mountain region called Lika. North from Lika there lies the capital of Zagreb and the hills of Zagorje and Međimurje, while the grain plains of Slavonia are located further to the northeast.

The current population of Croatia is about 3,8 million. Its GDP per capita is about USD 22.000, which is less than half of the GDP per capita of the countries such as Austria, Germany, Finland, and slightly less than, let's say, Portugal and Slovakia.

In most of its parts Croatia is scarcely populated, due to the nature of its landscape and historical and economic factors. The consequence thereof is that it is rich in wilderness of different geographical and biological types. It is the home of eight national parks, and of twelve nature parks. The nature in all its parts is stunning. The most popular is the Adriatic Sea coast with its archipelago of over 1100 islands, islets and reefs. Many of the islands are inhabited, and have been inhabited for hundreds of years, witnessing with its architecture, food and other traditions the cultures that have exchanged over the area throughout the centuries. From pre-ancient times, the Illyric tribes, over the ancient Greeks and Romans, Croatians as Slavic people, Turks, Venetians, Hungarians, Austrians...

Inland from the coastal region there lies another exotic wilderness region, the region of Lika, with its long mountain range of Velebit geographically separating the coastal region from the inland parts of the country. In the mountains of Velebit there exist completely inaccessible parts, where no human foot has ever stepped in. It is the home of populations of bears, wolves, lynxes, foxes, roes, deer, owls, and a plethora of rare plants, with a richness of natural sounds and majestic silence in the dead of the night.

One of the largest European wetlands, the national park of Kopački Rit is in the north-east of Croatia, near the town of Osijek, in the triangle between the rivers of Danube and Drava, home to hundreds of plant and animal species, with emphasis on many, many species of birds.

Over the centuries the area of Croatia, not only the coastal region, but also all over the inland, has been a meeting, crossing and colliding point of various cultures conquering or withdrawing, who all left strong imprints over the ultimately remaining culture of the region. As already mentioned, the ancient Greeks populated most of the islands, then the Romans, who inhabited the islands and the coastal towns, and left us the heritage of some wonderful architecture such as the Diocletian Palace in Split, and the Arena in Pula. Then, the Venetians inhabited the coastal islands and towns, mixing with the already present Slavic population of Croats. The Ottoman Empire spread over most of Croatia for several centuries, and so did the Hungarian, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the Second World War Croatia became a constituent republic of the south-Slavic federal state of Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia was dismantled in 1991, into independent national states, which was unfortunately followed by a fierce regional war that lasted for about five years. Much political, economic and social damage was sustained in the country. There was much suffering. The economic, political and social changes led to the distortion of the entire society, and the country is still striving to re-build and organize itself to the benefit of its people. Unfortunately, there are various colliding and confusing interests at stake. The wonders of tourism leave a bright, flashy and attractive image, which many times is only a surface of layered complexity.

Despite questionable trends and tendencies of various individual or group interests, most Croatian inhabitants carry an abundance of optimism within themselves, developed over the centuries and centuries of living under changing conquerors and rulers, maintaining the Slavic Croatian language and local heritage, surviving changes, occasional abundance, frequent famine and scarcity, and peace times exchanging with war times. In the entire turbulent historical heritage, the people of the region have always had the opportunity to live with mixed nationalities and religions, exchanging and joining views and approaches arising out of different cultural backgrounds. There have been times of brotherhood, friendship and peace, but also the times of animosity, hatred, and fury, unfortunately. One cannot but hope that in the future the optimism and faith will give strength to the brotherhood, friendship and peace.

So, in the prevailing atmosphere of brotherhood, friendship and peace, there appeared the first Waldorf kindergarten in Croatia (at the time still part of Yugoslavia) in mid 1980's in Zagreb, founded by Nada and Mladen Maljković. On this foundation, the Croatian Waldorf history continues to develop, briefly described as follows, from the perspective of the present moment in time. The natural, cultural, religious and national diversity of the country certainly results in the great diversity of form and expression of our Waldorf early childhood education groups appearing as daycare groups, private kindergartens, groups within state kindergartens, playgroups, or anything else alike.

When it comes to the current organization of the Waldorf early childhood education (WECE) in Croatia, it must be mentioned that recently the statutory form of daycare has become increasingly popular, because it foresees much simpler statutory and technical prerequisites for the foundation of a small ECE group than those prescribed for a foundation of an institutional kindergarten. The limit to the number of children in a daycare group is twelve, and one founder (or two people as founding partners) is only entitled to run one group. The law prescribes the condition that two carers be present at all times to the number of twelve children, meaning four carers over the daytime in two shifts.

The working hours are stretched from early in the morning, to late afternoon following the parents' working hours. Such is the case with working hours both with the institutional kindergartens and the daycares.

Most local governments partially subsidize institutional kindergartens, state and private, and the daycares, in equal amounts as portions of monthly tuition per child. When such is the case, the situation is really good and feasible. However, that is not always the case. Some local governments do



not subsidize the daycares or differentiate the amounts of subsidies approved for kindergartens from those approved to daycares, or differentiate based on the ownership type, whether it is a state or a private kindergarten.

An overview of the coverage by the Waldorf training education shows that most of the teachers and carers in the WECE groups in Croatia have completed or are in the course of completing of one of the two existing Waldorf teacher training seminar in Croatia. Both in the Waldorf daycares and in the Waldorf kindergartens many of the personnel have completed both the state university ECE teacher's education of three (B.A.) or five (M.A.) years in duration, as well as the three-year independent Waldorf teacher training seminar. There are exceptions, of course, where there are non-qualified teacher's aids, but that seems to be an exception. It leaves a very positive picture of the Waldorf ECE, since there is a general shortage of ECE teachers in the country. Unfortunately, the natality rate has also been drastically falling over the past decade, reinforced by recent economic emigration to Western EU countries where about half a million of inhabitants emigrated within the last decade, lowering the country's population to about 3.8 million.

Dubrovnik

To begin with the far south of the Croatian Adriatic coast, it should be mentioned that there used to be an early childhood education play group in Dubrovnik, founded and led by Sonja Karamehmedović until her retirement. It was in operation for about twenty years.

Split

In Split there are three non-state Waldorf kindergartens currently operating, with six groups encompassing about 120 children. One of the kindergartens was founded by the Split Waldorf Education Association in 1999, the other two were privately founded, in 1996 and 1998 respectively. One of these groups is an early years group.

There is also a Waldorf group in a state kindergarten outside of Split (the town of Kaštele).

An initiative has recently become active in Split and is currently working on the opening of a Waldorf primary school.

Zadar

In Zadar there is a group of people constituting an initiative to found the first Waldorf early years group in that part of Dalmatia, the Croatian coastal region.

Rijeka

In Rijeka there is a non-state Waldorf kindergarten founded in 1996 by the Waldorf Education Association of Rijeka, and there is a state kindergarten that has been working with elements of Waldorf for about 34 years. There are five groups in these two kindergartens, encompassing about a hundred children. Furthermore, there is a daycare group outside of the town of Rijeka.

There is also a primary and secondary Waldorf school in Rijeka, which has been operating for about 25thirty years

Istria

Just recently two Waldorf schools have been founded in Istria, one in Brtonigla and one in Vodnjan. There is a small WECE group in Vodnjan, and a small forest WECE group operating near the school in Brtonigla.

Zagreb

In Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, there are WECE groups in six state kindergartens, making up for seven groups, one of which is a Waldorf early years group. There is also a private Waldorf kindergarten consisting of two groups at two different city locations. There are five daycare groups in the city, practically functioning like full operation micro kindergartens.

A Waldorf elementary school has been in operation for over thirty years in Zagreb. A Waldorf secondary school was founded two years ago.

Samobor

Samobor is a small, picturesque town located near Zagreb, surrounded by wonderful hillside nature and typical continental European wildlife and many inhabited villages. In the town itself there is a private Waldorf kindergarten, encompassing about 25 children, and just recently a WECE group is being initiated in one of the two local state kindergartens. A forest/countryside daycare kindergarten has been in operation for six years in the countryside near the town of Samobor, on the edge of a beautiful local nature's park connecting that part of Croatia with the neighbouring Slovenia.

Čakovec

Čakovec is a small and picturesque town in the region of the village of Donji Kraljevec, famous in Waldorf circles, as it is the village where Rudolf Steiner was born. For now, there is only a group in the state kindergarten where elements of WECE are included. However, the association WUPAM has been very active in the region and has recently instigated an initiative to found a Waldorf primary school.

Osijek

Last but not least, in Osijek, over the last decade there has been a vivid and strong association of citizens promoting Waldorf education. A Waldorf primary school was founded recently, as well as a small daycare WECE group. The two have been cooperating closely over the years. Osijek is in the eastern continental part of Croatia, leading its influences and contacts over to the Waldorf movement in the neighbouring Serbia.

The greatest challenges we face in the Waldorf movement is the cooperation and communication among ourselves as Waldorf kindergarten teachers, the communication and cooperation with parents, the cooperation and communication with the standard education academic circles and kindergartens and schools, the visibility and reputation in broader public.

We are happy and grateful for having been accepted to the community of IASWECE and hope to improve all these aspects to the benefit of the development of Waldorf in Croatia and in the world. Our umbrella association for ECE and schools is the Waldorf Alliance Croatia (in Croatian: Savez waldorfskih institucija i inicijativa). Thank you.

Lasta Pavić Orešković, was born in Zagreb in 1973. She enrolled in the Faculty of Law in Zagreb and became an expert on maritime law. Faced with the challenge of choosing between a high-level career in the industry and contributing to society in a different way, she decided to redirect her time and energy to her private life and training in the teaching profession. She completed a three-year study programme in Waldorf education at the Institute for Waldorf Education (IWP) in Zagreb, and a three-year pre-diploma university study programme in early childhood and preschool education at the Faculty of Education of the University of Zagreb. She represents Croatia in the Council of IASWECE.