

# Contribution of CEEPUS in fostering cross-border academic cooperation between Serbia and Croatia<sup>1\*2</sup>

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## Introduction

*Article 1: The cooperation among Contracting Parties in the field of higher education and related research, in particular inter-university cooperation and mobility, shall be promoted in accordance with this Agreement.*

*Agreement concerning the Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies ("CEEPUS III"), 2010*

The *Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies* (hereinafter: CEEPUS) is a higher-education cross-border mobility program, intended for advancing academic cooperation between the member-countries and their participating institutions from across Central and Southeastern Europe (CEEPUS III Agreement 2010). It ranks among the most recognizable platforms for international higher-education collaboration that is specifically aimed at Central and Eastern European countries (Scheck, Zupan and Schuch 2015: 3). Unlike Erasmus+ that evolved from being an instrument for EU cohesion, that gradually assumed a more international and even global character, the geographic scope of CEEPUS has remained limited to the eastern, or perhaps rather, “non-western” part of the European continent. This paper explores the bestowal of CEEPUS to more proximate collaboration between its two contracting parties, Serbia and Croatia. However, considering the relative unfamiliarity with CEEPUS in the academic literature, the author will firstly briefly present the main features of that program.

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1 \* The paper presents the findings of a study developed as a part of the research project “Serbia and Challenges in International Relations in 2022”, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, and conducted by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade.

2 The research was presented at “The International Conference on the Future of Peace: The Role of the Academic Community in the Promotion of Peace”, co-organised in August 2022 by the Croatian Association of the Club of Rome, the University of Zagreb and the Inter University Centre Dubrovnik.

The program was officially established in 1993 through signing a CEEPUS (I) Agreement in Budapest by the designated state officials of Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia (Council of Europe – Nordic Council of Ministers 1997: 139). Another legal basis for such cooperation stems from the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, especially its Article 18 (that refers to Obligation not to defeat the object and purpose of a treaty prior to its entry into force) (UN 1969). In 1994, the supranational Central CEEPUS office (hereinafter: CCO) was established in Vienna, as well as respective national CEEPUS offices (hereinafter: NCOs), nominated and supported by each government (Council of Europe – Nordic Council of Ministers 1997: 139). The “CEEPUS enlargement” ensued with Croatia in 1995, Czech Republic in 1996 and numerous other countries as the years passed. Serbia and Montenegro joined the program in 2004, and continued to participate separately once their state union dissolved in 2006 (CEEPUS platform 2022b). Each CEEPUS member country has its own national quota, funding and coverage scope, which is determined by the respective contracting party, that is, the government (Scheck, Zupan and Schuch 2015: 3).

The program has so far enabled over 75,000 academic exchanges and included over 1,800 institutions (CEEPUS platform 2022a). What is interesting is that the expansion of CEEPUS has coincided with these countries’ “return to Europe” through the course of the European integration processes. Since the Thessaloniki summit which recognized the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans (2003), numerous countries from the CEE region have elevated their status both towards the European Union and the Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies, as Table 1 indicates.

Having in mind the abovementioned, it can be said that the two processes have been complementary, despite the obvious differences between different countries pertaining to fulfilling the EU membership criteria over the observed period. However, the added value of CEEPUS is that it has continued to serve as an academic bridge between the countries which have meanwhile succeeded in joining the European Union, and those that have yet to achieve that strategic goal. What is encouraging in that regard is the fact that at the time CEEPUS had been established, following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, not a single country was a member of the European Union (not even Austria). Although, the two international organisations are indeed organically separate and are largely beyond comparison (considering the wide political, economic and social scope of the EU, on one hand, and a narrow academic focus of CEEPUS, on the other), the overall idea – to deepen the cooperation and enable greater cohesion between countries in several European regions – is similar. Both processes have left deep marks in deepening the cross-border institutional ties in higher-education domain, and assisted the peaceful and cohesive tendencies in the eastern part of the continent that has long been exposed to non-democratic ideologies and occasionally also witnessed un-peaceful tendencies.

*Table 1: Overview of EU and CEEPUS integration processes during the past 3 decades.  
Author's own elaborations based on sources (CEEPUS platform 2022b;  
European Commission 2022; Univerzitet u Sarajevu 2022)*

<b>Name</b>	<b>CEEPUS accession year</b>	<b>CEEPUS status</b>	<b>EU status</b>	<b>Year of EU accession/latest status change</b>
<b>Austria</b>	1993	NCO CCO (HQ)	EU member	1995
<b>Albania</b>	2005	NCO	Accession negotiations	2022
<b>Bosnia-Herzegovina</b>	2007	NCO	Potential candidate	/
<b>Bulgaria</b>	1993	NCO	EU member	2007
<b>Croatia</b>	1995	NCO	EU member	2013
<b>Czechia</b>	1996	NCO	EU member	2004
<b>Hungary</b>	1993	NCO	EU member	2004
<b>North Macedonia</b>	2005	NCO	Accession negotiations	2022
<b>Moldova</b>	2010	NCO	Candidate	2022
<b>Montenegro</b>	2004	NCO	Accession negotiations	2012
<b>Poland</b>	1993	NCO	EU member	2004
<b>Romania</b>	1998	NCO	EU member	2007
<b>Serbia</b>	2004	NCO	Accession negotiations	2014
<b>Slovakia</b>	1993	NCO	EU member	2004
<b>Slovenia</b>	1993	NCO	EU member	2004
<b>Kosovo1*</b>	/	"CEEPUS contact point" for universities of Priština, Peja, Prizren, etc.	Potential candidate	/

1 \* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Considering the aforementioned, the author argues that the importance of initiatives like CEEPUS is not limited to the academic dimension, whose international goals frequently focus on increasing the number of international partnerships. The broader problem nucleus of this paper is situated in the area of examining the evolution of CEEPUS ties between the two member countries – Serbia and Croatia. More specifically, the author aims to investigate the degree to which CEEPUS cooperation has advanced, considering the traditionally challenging relations between Belgrade and Zagreb. The author intends to show that this academic program has achieved significant results, which contrasts with the problematic collaboration between Serbia and Croatia in some other domains. Those considerations are indicative of significant role of the two academic communities, whose collaboration-promoting activities may serve as an example for deepening partnerships in other domains.

## Methodological and theoretical considerations

*It was found that Erasmus students were more interested in other European countries and in other European peoples and cultures than non-mobile students. The experience of studying in another country made them feel more European.*

*Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Report 2015: 2.4*

The research problem derives from a certain paradox. Namely, despite the stagnant and troublesome high-political relations over the last decade between Serbia and Croatia, CEEPUS, as a state-funded program, has yielded significant results when it comes to academic mobility and institutional cooperation between the two countries, reflecting positively both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Accordingly, the author poses a question: how has CEEPUS contributed to upgrading the collaboration between Serbia and Croatia and what are its chief manifestations, especially in the higher-education area?

The author hypothesises that the expansion of CEEPUS cooperation between Serbia and Croatia since 2013/2014 can be traced through increased numbers of institutional networks (and participating units), as well as number of mobility of students and academic staff in both directions. Apart from that, an another hypothesis is that the growing cross-border CEEPUS ties between the two neighbouring countries empowers the academic community and gives it greater visibility as promoters of stable, sustainable and peaceful collaboration. Given the linguistic, social and other kinship, the author argues that the elevated ties between Serbia and Croatia have the potential to resonate in the broader context, both bilaterally (across different policy domains) and regionally, in the Western Balkans context. For instance, CEEPUS activities in many networks are carried out in the polycentric language that used to be

called Serbo-Croatian (language varieties used in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro), which not only facilitates lecturing and studying activities, but also represents a favourable feature of the mobility experience *per se*, at least among the respective CEEPUS member countries. Increased cooperation between Serbian and Croatian HEIs poses an example to the other partners to engage more.

The author chiefly applies a comparative analysis method, which relies on the data obtained from the CEEPUS platform (including both its publicly visible segment (front-end) and its back-end part, accessible only to National CEEPUS Offices).<sup>3</sup> For instance, the author juxtaposed the available data for incoming mobility in both Serbia and Croatia during certain periods and attempted to explain such trajectories. Apart from that, to a lesser degree, the author used a historical method to argument certain changes, variations and phenomena. As regards the sources, as mentioned above, the author largely relied on the data obtained from the CEEPUS platform. In addition, having in mind the multidisciplinary focus of this subject matter, the author also interpreted various legal and political acts and documents and integrated contributions of academic literature in domain of political sciences and education policies, aiming to highlight the scientific relevance of this domain.

Apart from the aforementioned, the author considers it necessary to delineate and interpret the most basic terms and aspects, starting with the notion of academic mobility. As per a recommendation issued by the Council of Europe in that domain back in 1995, academic mobility stands for cross-border study, teaching or research activities over a limited duration of time, following which the academic member returns back to his/her home country/institution; the concept is not intended to enable or include permanent migrations (as per paragraph I, Council of Europe Recommendation No. R (95) 8). As per the next paragraph, that sort of mobility is carried out through specific exchange programs, like those arranged inter-governmentally, inter-institutionally or in some other way, and may also include individual proposals by students and staff (the so-called “free movers”) (Ibidem). Consequently, CEEPUS represents a classical inter-governmental exchange program that offers multilateral cooperation to institutions and their respective individuals, students and teaching staff alike. Its flexibility, and added value, is illustrated by the fact that it enables many *freemover* exchanges each year, enabling the academic members to realise their stays in institutions that are not directly connected with their home faculties (Foundation Tempus 2022). The author finds that such a form of facilitated mobility (combined with much less paperwork comparing to other academic programs) valuable for CEE/SEE HEIs, that are still lagging behind their Western

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3 The author would hereby like to commend the National CEEPUS Office Serbia (Foundation Tempus) for granting access to the data which has been essential for this research. In addition, the author also expresses gratitude to the representatives of the National CEEPUS Office Croatia (Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes) and Central CEEPUS Office in Vienna, for their interest pertaining to this study project.

European neighbours regarding the number of realised exchanges, achieved international projects etc. Programs like CEEPUS are beneficial in efforts to narrow the long-standing gap between the “old” and the “new” democracies in Europe and in achieving a greater degree of cohesion in academic domain.

According to the current CEEPUS work program (2021-2023: 1), the cooperation is realised through the multilateral thematic networks, which number at least three partner higher education institutions (hereinafter: HEI) from at least three member countries. However, in practice, the number of participating HEIs is almost always higher, sometimes considerably. For instance, the network coordinated by the University of Belgrade’s Faculty of Mining and Geology, named “Earth-Science Studies in Central and South-Eastern Europe” ranks among the program’s oldest existing and largest, assembling as many as 18 HEIs from 10 CEEPUS countries, with more than 1500 individual realised academic mobility (CEEPUS platform 2022c; CHIRS-0038: EURO Geo-Sci 2022). Since the foundation of the program, its disciplinary scope has evolved from primarily technical-sciences domain towards inclusion of all other academic areas (social sciences, arts and humanities, natural sciences, etc.); likewise, the networks themselves have become increasingly multifaceted. As pertains to the actual activities, CEEPUS is primarily aimed at academic staff who conduct lecturing activities, and students across all levels of studies (CEEPUS III Work Programme (2021-2023): 1-2). The academic exchanges primarily take part within the established networks, although a *freemover* option offers a cross-border mobility option independently from the networks, which represents as a very positive feature from the perspective of its end users.

CEEPUS goals are also aligned with the progressive internalisation of higher education, which, among other forms of cross-border cooperation, also encourages greater international academic mobility (Carvalho et al. 2022). As per Teichler (2017: 180-181), who refers to several sources, HE internalisation correlates with 6 key international manifestations: knowledge transfer, physical mobility, cooperation and communication, education and research, reputation, and similarity (which includes aspects like Europeanisation, convergence, globalisation, etc.). It could be argued that CEEPUS tools may apply, to a varying degree, in all of these aspects, including its indirect supportive role for Europeanisation efforts. In Serbia, the internalisation in higher education is still dominantly related to the mobility aspect; consequently, programs like CEEPUS play a major role in that regard (MPNTR 2019: 107). That doesn’t necessarily need to apply to Croatia, considering its more advanced status in different international integrative processes; however, the impact of CEEPUS in that country should not be discarded, especially considering its bilateral and regional dimensions. According to Mitchell (2012: 493), the civic understanding of student exchange is founded on the premise that international programs like Erasmus, by assembling persons from various ethnic and regional backgrounds, are very valuable for promoting a sense of belonging to a common European identity and for Eu-

European integration goals *per se*. Similar logic can be applied to CEEPUS, which, although it focuses on a geographically smaller area than Erasmus (also further: E+), still encompasses a large part of the continent, with the majority of members already in the EU (nine countries), and the rest included in the Union's accession agenda (including Moldova, as of 2022). Actually, CEEPUS is recognised as a supportive instrument in the context of EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR 2020: 22), as one of the macro-regional strategies of the European Union. In that regard, CEEPUS is seen as an indirect contributor to the European integration process.

The 2015 Council of Europe report underlined the two basic contributions of international mobility programs for Europe: the contribution to Europe's economic development and international strength and the promotion of intercultural understanding, including the inter-European identity cohesion and a *vital role in promoting peace, mutual understanding and tolerance...as one of the major goals of European construction* (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Report 2015: 2.4). Although this specific document fails to explicitly mention CEEPUS, but only refers to E+, DAAD and similar initiatives, the author considers CEEPUS to be very conducive in that regard, despite its more modest financial and other means and scope comparing to Erasmus. In addition, insufficient research regarding the contribution of CEEPUS in domain of international cooperation increases the academic input of research such as this one and aims to contribute to increased academic visibility of this program.

Pertaining to the relevance of academic mobility for more inclusive and reliable international cooperation, Snow analyses one of the most prestigious exchange programs – that of William Fulbright. She notes that Fulbright perceived the program fellows as natural candidates for peace-promoting actions, as “*knowledgeable interpreters of societies...equipped and willing to deal with conflict or conflict-producing situations on the basis of an informed determination to solve them peacefully*” (Snow 2021: 2). The mobility, according to Snow, through the means of direct exposure and experience, leads towards empowering the 21<sup>st</sup> century transcultural individuals (Ibidem). Considering the aforementioned, the fellows who have been subjected to positive, transcultural transformative experiences, may also be perceived as morally obliged to contribute to a more peaceful educational and local surrounding, at least from the viewpoint of that author. Likewise, Vaideanu (1986: 87) analyses the favourable position of HEI to act as peace promoters, due to the fact that: (1) the internationalisation of HE provides additional cross-border space to academics; (2) the disciplinary importance of peace research is increasing; (3) the academic influence and close contacts with the younger generations are frequent and comprehensive (4) the fact that HEI are valued members in most societies, even beyond their academic facilities. The HEIs represent the working space of the academic community, which is defined as “group of professionals and students who work towards the same goal, that is,

the academy: the construction of knowledge by means of dialogue and reflection” (Beltrán 2009: 40).

In other words, HEIs are expected to host and facilitate the dialogue within the academic community, which consists of both students and academic staff. The culture of dialogue, inherent to the academic institutions, should be replicated even outside the amphitheatres, and the responsibility does not solely regard the teaching and research staff, but also the students. Transcultural (including peace-promoting) activities are primarily expected of those members of the academic community who have been subjected to transformative international exchange experiences, and who perceive such initiatives as valuable for achieving a more stable and prosperous region and the continent. By the “region”, the author refers to the Western Balkans as part of both EU and CEEPUS domains (Petrović 2020: 169).<sup>4</sup> That regional context represents a background for examining the evolution of CEEPUS cooperation between Serbia and Croatia over the preceding decade.

The author aims to show that, considering the post-conflict regional setting, the impact of programs like CEEPUS extends beyond the higher-education matrix, assuming also a qualitative social-political role, which reflects positively even beyond the institutional aspect. An example of political symbolism is the rotating presidency principle, whereby a CEEPUS member country obtains the opportunity to “chair” (host, co-organise and contribute to strategic processes, meetings, events, etc.) (CEEPUS 2022d). Croatia presided over the program three times, the last being between 2017 and 2019, when it passed the presidency to Serbia (2019-2021) for the first time. Instances like this one signal that both Zagreb and Belgrade have also demonstrated a significant high-level interest - and engagement - in the implementation of this program during the past several years. That also includes increased academic bilateral cooperation, as the next segment of this paper aims to show.

## Research findings

This section presents the data that show the expansion of cooperation between Serbian and Croatian higher-education institutions over the past decade, by selecting four specific academic years (ideally, each equidistantly apart, however, due to COVID-19, there were some exceptions to that principle). The author will firstly present the upgrade in cooperation in domain of institutional networks, followed by the aspect of individual academic mobility.

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4 The author refers to Töglhofer’s 2013 observation that: ‘...Croatia itself now has the right to participate in decision-making in all policy areas, including the EU’s enlargement policy towards the accession candidates in the Western Balkans, whose ranks it so recently left.’ Petrović, M. (2020) Dynamic regional political concepts and the European integration process. In: B. Stojanović and E. Ponomareva (ed.), *Russia and Serbia in the contemporary world: bilateral relations, challenges and opportunities*. 167-185. Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics.



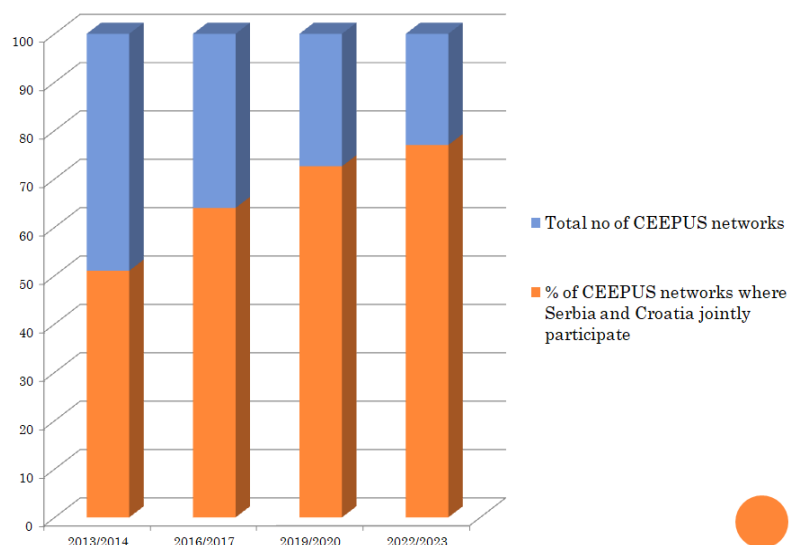
## CEEPUS networks from the perspective of Serbo-Croatian cooperation

According to the current working program, CEEPUS networks are institutional consortiums comprising at least three higher education institutions from at least three member countries (CEEPUS III Work Programme (2021-2023): Article 1). Considering that the focus of this research regards the Serbo-Croatian collaboration, the author will focus on those networks where the HEIs from the two countries jointly participate.<sup>5</sup> In further text these consortiums will be named *jointly-participating-networks* (JPNs). The table below shows the increase of network cooperation during the observed period (from 2013/2014 onwards - four distinct academic years, each 3 years apart).

Table 2: Overview of increase of CEEPUS institutional networks since 2013/2014 onwards.  
Source: CEEPUS platform 2022e (front-end)

Academic year	Number of totally approved JPNs	Number of all approved networks
2013/2014	41	81
2016/2017	58	90
2019/2020	77	106
2022/2023	91	118

Figure 1: The rising share of Serbo-Croatian JPNs within all approved CEEPUS networks.  
Author's own elaborations based on Table 2



5 CEEPUS networks are by rule multilateral, comprising HEIs from at least 3 countries, according to the current Work Program 2021-2023.

The table above shows that Croatian and Serbian HEIs have significantly increased the potential for mutual cooperation through CEEPUS. While the share of JPNs was around 50% in 2013/2014 (41 networks out of 81 approved networks in total), by 2022/2023 the share increased to 77% (out of 118 totally approved networks, Serbian and Croatian HEIs are joint participants in as many as 91, as the graph above depicts).

While the number of all approved CEEPUS networks “only” enhanced by 46% (from 81 in 2013/2014 to 118 in 2022/2023), the quantity of JPNs rose by as much as 122% (from 41 to 91 over the same period). That means that the Serbian and Croatian universities have been connecting through consortiums on a significantly faster rate in comparison to the growth of networks in total. The increased interest for international bilateral cooperation in the context of network cooperation is favourable both in terms of these countries and CEEPUS as a program whose aim is to increase academic cross-border connectivity.

A model example of mutual cooperation is the VetNEST – Veterinary Network for Student and Staff Transfer that has been in existence for over 15 years (CEEPUS platform 2022f). The network is coordinated by the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Zagreb and assembles twelve veterinary institutions from across the Central and Southeast Europe (including those from Tirana, Sarajevo, Wroclaw, Brno, Belgrade, Skopje, etc.) (Ibidem). Academic partnership between Croatian coordinator and the Serbian partner (Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Belgrade), is illustrated by the continuous support of the National CEEPUS Office Serbia for the organisation of veterinary summer school for CEEPUS students in the Balkan Mountains in South-eastern Serbia (FVM 2022). *Inter alia* as a result of individual academic projects like this one, the VetNEST has been awarded the CEEPUS Minister’s Prize for 2022 (an international acknowledgment for best performing networks) (VEF 2022).

Another important marker in domain of evolving Serbo-Croatian CEEPUS cooperation is the participation of HEIs from the two countries in the networks that are coordinated by the “other side” (for instance, the number of Serbian universities in Croatian-coordinated CEEPUS networks). Since 2013/2014 onwards, Croatian coordinators have almost “by default” included Serbian partners into their CEEPUS networks, as the table 3 depicts.

*Table 3: Participation of Serbian HEIs in Croatian-coordinated CEEPUS networks.  
Source: CEEPUS platform 2022e (front-end)*

Academic year	Number of networks coordinated by Croatia	HEIs from Serbia included in how many	Participation share
<b>2013/2014</b>	4	4	100%
<b>2016/2017</b>	5	5	100%
<b>2019/2020</b>	8	8	100%
<b>2022/2023</b>	12	11	92%

However, as the table below shows, Serbian coordinators have started including Croatian partners into (almost) all their consortiums only recently.

*Table 4: Participation of Croatian HEIs in Serbian-coordinated CEEPUS networks.  
Source: CEEPUS platform 2022e (front-end)*

Academic year	Number of networks coordinated by Serbia	HEIs from Croatia represented in how many	Participation share
<b>2013/2014</b>	6	4	67%
<b>2016/2017</b>	9	6	67%
<b>2019/2020</b>	11	9	82%
<b>2022/2023</b>	16	15	94%

The fact that “only” 67% of Serbian coordinators had included Croatian partners back in 2013/2014 contrasted with the situation on the other side, where the Croatian coordinators had included the Serbian HEIs in all their networks. What could that mean? Although, the quantitative aspect is insufficient to draw broader conclusions, several thought-provoking claims could be made here. One would be that the Serbian coordinating universities were occasionally reluctant or insufficiently interested in including the Croatian partners. The other one would be that the Croatian institutions were occasionally reluctant or insufficiently interested to participate in the Serbian-coordinated networks. The third one would be that occasionally both sides showed the lack of interest to cooperate through connecting in the networks coordinated by the other side. The fourth one might comprise any other argument – the lack of contacts at the time, the different disciplinary and other focuses, other difficulties and challenges. Be it as it may, as of 2022/2023, Serbian HEIs participate in almost all Croatia-led networks (11 out of 12) and Croatian universities take part in almost all Serbia-coordinated consortiums (15 out of 16). The increased interest for mutual cooperation through participating in each-others networks, but also in other networks, combined with the increased number of networks per se and the larger growth speed of JPNs, constitute a very convincing argument that the two academic communities are already deeply connected in the context of CEEPUS.

The author has also analysed the institutional collaboration in domain of social sciences. Why? Because the classification of social sciences also includes important peace-studying domains like political sciences, peace and conflict studies, security, human rights, legal, economic and other disciplines. Considering the wide research focus and the lack of appropriate technical filters, and the fact that the projects aimed specifically at safeguarding and advancing peace are only indirectly present (as part of other broader areas), the author will only present general data, retrieved from the front-end of the official CEEPUS database.

*Table 5: The share of social sciences, business and law as part of jointly-participating networks.  
Source: CEEPUS platform 2022e (front-end)*

<b>Academic year</b>	<b>No of approved JPNs grouped into “Social sciences, business and law” domain</b>	<b>No of all approved JPNs (all domains)</b>
<b>2013/2014</b>	11	41
<b>2016/2017</b>	14	58
<b>2019/2020</b>	18	77
<b>2022/2023</b>	27	91

As table 5 depicts, the share of *Social sciences, business and law (SSBL)* as important peace-promoting-areas within all JPNs slightly expanded during the observed period, from 27% in 2013/2014, over 24% (2016/2017); 23% (2019/2020) to 30% in 2022/2023. Whereas the quantity of totally approved JPNs increased by 122%, the No of *SSBL* expanded by 145%, meaning that the share of social-sciences JPNs as part of all JPNs is experiencing a rise. However, there might be further room for improvement, and HEIs might use the insufficient network focus in peace-building discipline to collaborate more closely in that specific domain.

### ***CEEPUS mobility from the perspective of Serbo-Croatian cooperation***

Approximation between the Croatian and Serbian higher education institutions may also be observed in domain of realised academic exchanges through CEEPUS. The obtained data has been transposed into individual tables (below) for greater comprehensibility. Please note that the national quota of each country is expressed in the so-called “scholarship months” (further also: SM), which designate the awarded period of stay per academic year. The national quota for incoming mobilities varies from one country to another. In case of Serbia, it is 300 scholarship months, and in case of Croatia it is 450 scholarship months (Matijašević Obradović, Carić and Zarubica 2020: 572; AFMEP 2015).

*Table 6: The value of awarded CEEPUS scholarship months for Serbian participants at Croatian HEIs. Source: National CEEPUS Office Serbia 2022.*

<b>Academic year</b>	<b>Value of awarded CEEPUS SMs for Serbian participants at Croatian HEIs</b>
<b>2013</b>	28,5
<b>2016</b>	60,5
<b>2019</b>	83
<b>2021</b>	89,9

Table 6 (above) shows a striking progression in terms of awarded scholarship months in Croatia for Serbian students and teaching staff during the observed period. Between 2013 and 2021, the quantity of awarded scholarship months rose by 215%. The number of awarded scholarship months is closely tied with the quantity of individual mobilities as such, having in mind that many exchanges are short (for example, academic staff rarely conducts activities for longer than 0.5 or 1 scholarship months; also, many students opt for short-term stays, shorter than 3 months). That means that the increased number of awarded scholarship months also indicates an increased number of realised mobilities as such.

*Table 7: The value of awarded CEEPUS scholarship months for Croatian participants at Serbian HEIs. Source: National CEEPUS Office Serbia 2022.*

<b>Academic year</b>	<b>Value of awarded CEEPUS SMs for Croatian participants at Serbian HEIs</b>
2013	16
2016	35
2019	49,2
2021	45,5

Table 7 also shows a significant progression in case of awarded exchanges for Croatian members of academic community in Serbia. Between 2013 and 2021, the number of awarded scholarship months increased by 184%, from 16 to 45,5. The decrease between 2019-2021 (from 49,2 down to 45,5) may be attributed to the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of that fact, the expansion is significant.

Considering that the annual national CEEPUS quota for incoming participants is 300 scholarship months in case of Serbia and 450 SM in Croatia, it can be said that each National CEEPUS Office, as a scholarship grantor (apart from the HEIs who nominated the respective individuals) highly endorsed the other side, considering that in 2021 Croatia awarded close to 90 scholarship months to Serbian participants,

whereas Serbia allocated 45,5 months to Croatian counterparts. Percentage-wise, the number of awarded scholarships for the other side represents between 15-20% of each country's national quota, which is an exquisite result, considering how many other countries also participate in the Central European Exchange Program for University Studies. Those results illustrate very proximate and dynamic ties between the two academic communities in the context of CEEPUS. Located below are the tables which present more specific data regarding the exchanges in both directions.

*Table 8: Incoming CEEPUS mobility from Croatia to Serbia.  
 Source: National CEEPUS Office Serbia 2022.*

Academic year	No of incoming academic staff from CRO to SER	No of incoming students from CRO to SER	Total no of incoming fellows from CRO to SER	Total no of awarded SM for those mobilities
2013/2014	7	7	14	16
2016/2017	28	14	42	35
2019/2020	34	20	54	49,25
2021/2022	30	23	53	45,5

As Table 8 (above) shows, a significant increase of incoming CEEPUS students and teaching staff from Croatia was recorded in Serbia during most of the observed period (from 2013-2020). A slight decrease since 2019/2020 onwards can be attributed to the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused significant disruptions to mobility per se (Petrović 2021: 87). The most frequent exchanges have been ongoing between the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, University of Zagreb and University of Slavonski Brod, as sending institutions, and the University of Novi Sad, higher-education bodies in Subotica and University of Belgrade, as host institutions.

*Table 9: Incoming CEEPUS mobility from Serbia to Croatia.  
 Source: National CEEPUS Office Serbia 2022.*

Academic year	No of incoming academic staff from SER to CRO	No of incoming students from SER to CRO	Total no of incoming fellows from SER to CRO	Total no of awarded SM for those mobilities
2013/2014	10	15	25	28,5
2016/2017	33	24	57	60,5
2019/2020	43	24	67	83
2021/2022	66	35	101	89,9

According to the data presented in Table 9, there has been a continuous, albeit uneven, growth of incoming CEEPUS mobility from Serbia to Croatian HEIs throughout the designated timeframe. The rate of increased quantity of academic staff who stayed at Croatian universities between 2019 and 2021 is a bit surprising. The author argues that that increase could perhaps be explained through the compensation of the previously delayed activities as a consequence of the pandemic, although other arguments are also plausible (for instance, some summer schools occasionally gather large numbers of academic staff). The most frequent exchanges have been ongoing between the University of Novi Sad, University of Belgrade and the Polytechnic School Subotica, as sending institutions, and the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, University of Zagreb, University of Slavonski Brod and University of Rijeka as receiving institutions. In cases of both countries, the average number of awarded scholarship months is below 1 per person, which indicates that most of the stays are of short duration.

On one hand, the limited national quota (and related resources) occasionally also lead to situations that applications have to be turned down due to exhaustion of available scholarship months, having in mind high interest of applicants, not only from Croatia and Serbia, but also in broader terms. However, the fact that a single scholarship month (and related resources) can be used to accommodate 2 or even more individuals, depending on the purpose of stay, represents a favourable feature of CEEPUS, as it allows greater degree of flexibility and more options for the applicants comparing to some other academic programs. That positive feature is especially valuable for Serbia and Croatia that are, among other things, geographic neighbours, so the physical flow of mobilities is frequently carried out in short-term, rather than longer duration.

## **Conclusion and final remarks**

Cooperation between Serbian and Croatian HEIs has witnessed a significant expansion over the past decade, both in terms of participation through JPNs and the quantity of awarded exchanges on both sides. As of 2022/2023, over 90% of networks coordinated by Serbia and Croatia contain mutual partnerships, indicating a significant interest for mutual cooperation. The share of realised mobilities between the two countries takes up between 15-20% of each country's national quota, which shows that the CEEPUS ties between the two academic communities are very extensive, especially when taking into account that the program comprises over a dozen other countries. Although the COVID-19 crisis seems to have affected mobilities during the past several years, the number of JPNs continued to increase by over 10% since 2019/2020 onwards, indicating a sustained interest in collaboration between Serbian and Croatian universities. That also applies to the field of social sciences, whose share within JPNs increased during the past several years.

The author perceives this to be a positive development considering that the social sciences have so far been somewhat underrepresented comparing to other domains like technical sciences, but also from the viewpoint of academic contribution of those disciplines to the subject of peace research. Considering the recent past of the Western Balkans, aspects like peace, stability, Europeanisation, democratisation continue to represent a relevant academic subject, which might lead to expansion of institutional partnerships in that regard.

From the perspective of Serbia, these positive developments might correlate with several factors. Since 2015, a new National CEEPUS Office – Foundation Tempus – was nominated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. Since then, with support of the Ministry, numerous changes have been introduced, ranging from the communication aspect with all the stakeholders, to the aspects like accommodation planning, mobility oversight in liaison with the universities, intensive promotion, informative and other campaigns, proximate international cooperation and frequent contacts with other NCOs (including the Croatian office), and so on. Specific examples include the increase of the national quota (from 150 in 2015/2016 to 300 since 2017/2018 onwards); greater accommodation possibilities in close contact with the dormitories; the increase of scholarship amounts; the increased visibility of the program for the outgoing candidates (electronically, but also physically, as part of the Foundation Tempus Information centre in downtown Belgrade), and other. The long-awaited law confirming the participation of Serbia in CEEPUS was passed in 2017, which constituted part of the preparations to qualify for the presidency over the program that was eventually granted for the period 2019-2021 (CEEPUS III law, 2017). Croatia passed the CEEPUS presidency to Serbia in 2019. During the 2015-2019 period, over 900 students from Serbia realised their mobility abroad (including Croatia), while over 750 students and academic staff from CEEPUS countries, many of whom from Croatia, performed their activities at Serbian HEIs (Fondacija Tempus 2019).

The increased interest for mutual cooperation through participating in each-others networks, but also in other networks, combined with the increased number of networks *per se* and the larger growth speed of JPNs, constitute a very convincing argument that the two academic communities are already deeply associated in the context of CEEPUS. That might have positive implications not only for the two countries and academic societies, but also in the broader context. Expanding institutional ties are beneficial in terms of greater role and visibility of the academic community in promoting a stable, sustainable and peaceful cooperation, both bilaterally and in the Western Balkans context. It should be noted that former Yugoslav republics comprise 40% of all CEEPUS states. Ability to cooperate in mutually intelligible language area is an additional benefit of CEEPUS program that is being widely used by Croatian and Serbian participants and it additionally contributes to the feeling of common belonging (on the Central European and broader European



level). Considering the fact that Croatia is an EU member, and that Serbia has been negotiating its accession since 2014, coupled with the fact that the Europeanisation process ranks among the most comprehensive and ambitious transformative developments (including the domain of higher education), CEEPUS cooperation can be perceived as indirectly conducive for the approximation to European standards in that regard. Actually, the potential of CEEPUS to contribute to EU goals has already been recognised by the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR 2020).

Whereas each network and mobility can be viewed as positive in terms of cooperation strengthening, there might be an additional space for social sciences institutions which focus specifically on the future of peace or peaceful initiatives as such. Social sciences have always been less represented within CEEPUS comparing to technical sciences, although the situation seems to have been changing during the past several years. Although each collaboration may be viewed as favourable in the peace-promoting context, it could be argued that social sciences, due to their disciplinary focus, might explore that subject more thoroughly and in greater detail and provide more in terms of societal, academic and other dialogue. Apart from the positive Croatian-Serbian experience in domain of approximation between the two academic communities and other stakeholders, there are also some additional indicators that show that the role of CEEPUS surpasses the HE domain and contains a peace-promoting character. The most recent instance includes the support of senior officials of Croatia, Serbia and other member states in March 2022 in formally granting the possibility of participation in CEEPUS exchange to Ukrainian students and academic staff, regardless of the fact that Ukraine is not a member country (AMPEU 2022). Such a symbolical gesture in the context of the military assault on Ukraine represents an additional illustration on how mobility programs like CEEPUS may play a broader social-political role which extends beyond the boundaries of higher-education collaboration.

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