

LONG PROGRAM DESCRIPTION SLAVIC PHILOLOGY AND ITS CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The Graz-based network “Slavic Philology and Its Cultural Contexts” (A-37) was established in Zagreb over 20 years ago, developing and expanding ever since. Today, 22 institutions from 14 different countries from Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe are participating in the network, which means that nearly every CEEPUS member state is represented.

According to the title, the emphasis of this network is placed on Slavic Philology, meaning that not only the improvement of language skills on an academic level, but also the exchange of theoretical and methodological approaches to philological questions are of great importance. Therefore, one of the network’s main objectives is to facilitate cooperation between the participating Central, Eastern and Southeastern European institutions by intensifying philological education and thereby stimulating communication and exchange. Besides the emphasis on the improvement of language skills and the enrichment of philological knowledge, another key factor in this network is the transfer of cultural knowledge. The network emphasizes the importance of intensive engagement with Slavic Philology and Slavic Studies, which contribute to a deeper understanding of Slavic cultures and their histories and help situate them into a wider sociopolitical and sociocultural context.

Given the fact that most of the network partners have already joined the European Union while some others have reached the status of candidate countries, a better understanding of Slavic cultures and a profound knowledge of Slavic languages and history should be seen in a wider context, especially in the light of cultural, political, legal, and economic relations. Numerous Western and Central European companies have been expanding into Eastern and Southeastern Europe, thereby contributing to the growing interest in and need for young professionals who are well versed in Slavic languages and cultures. The increasing demand is also reflected in the rising number of students of Slavic languages in Central and Western Europe.

The fact that not only Slavic countries are involved in this network puts it into the wider geographical and historical context of the former Eastern Bloc resp. of Southeastern Europe and enables a broader understanding of cultural and historical bonds through constant bidirectional exchange and cooperation. Albania, Hungary, and Romania, countries in which Slavic languages are spoken by national minorities, share the history of Ottoman and/or Austrian reign and the period of socialism in the 20th century with their Southern Slavic neighbors. A similar situation obtains for the Western Slavic countries, whose societies and economies integrated into the European Union faster than their Southern counterparts. Austria seems to be the connecting element in this arrangement, especially since it includes Slavic minorities as well as different Slavic migrant groups who fled to Austria due to the 1990ies’ Yugoslavian Wars or had come as migrant workers even earlier.

From this perspective, focusing on language is important, since dissemination of particular minority languages or, generally speaking, of less widely used languages which have fewer native speakers helps preserve them. Another reason why dealing with Slavic languages and cultures on an academic level is important is the fact that up to now cultural transfer has only gone in one direction, namely from the West, containing Central Europe, to the East and Southeast. Western

European languages have been taught in Eastern European schools and universities for centuries, while Western interest in the languages of the Eastern neighbors can be seen as a newer, contemporary phenomenon. Therefore, using the current trend to deepen the bonds between academic institutions of the countries taking part in this exchange program is a great value, as it leads to mutual transfer of cultural and educational knowledge. A program like CEEPUS is able to offer this important possibility of exchange and can therefore help leave such unidirectional influence in the past. Austria in its historic role as the link between East and West, and especially Graz in this case, play a decisive role in the organization of this cooperation.

Besides the importance for the EU-integration and cooperation between EU- and non-EU-countries, that is, between former socialist countries and the countries of the European West, this program also allows to bring the countries, which were involved in the Yugoslavian Wars in the 1990ies, and their academic institutions together. Since language and cultural heritage are important factors in the process of nation and state building, a philological approach helps us understand the historical development of and current situation in these countries. Considering the complex situation concerning the Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian language, the contribution of the respective philological institutions to this network and their participation in the proposed project can be regarded as steps towards harmonization.

Due to the fact that this network has been constantly growing numbers of participating units and countries (e.g. the inclusion of Bosnia and Herzegovina through the accession of the University of Bihac in 2014, the accession of the Department of General Linguistics at the University of Belgrade and the Department of Central and East European Intercultural Studies at the University of Warsaw in 2018, as well as the inclusion of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Maribor in 2019), it is safe to say that it can be considered an efficient platform for further cooperation, which is – above all – reflected in the newly established “Teaching Project on Current Research Trend in Slavic Studies”.

In summary, it can be stated that there are 2 important levels to this network: while the network as a whole creates intensive environments for improving language, linguistic and (inter-)cultural competence, which is useful as a soft skill for further ventures in the fields of culture, politics, and economics, the teaching project focuses on the exchange of professional academic knowledge enabling the sharing of most recent research topics, theories and methodologies in teaching Slavic Philology.