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Bridging the 'International-Local Gap' in Peacebuiling Through Academic Cooperation: The Balkan Master's Program in Peace Studies

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Introduction

The creation of a region-specific academic program in peace studies offers an innovative solution to bridging the international-local gap in peacebulding. It represents an alternative approach to mainstream peace and conflict studies that are often dominated by a strong emphasis on liberal democracy and (neo-liberal) market economy, both in theoretical discourse and in empirical measurements. A regionally oriented academic program therefore represents a shift of paradigm towards locally informed theoretical and practical notions of peace that are often insufficiently addressed or even detached from one another, in line with recent critical literature on peacebuilding.

Starting in 2011 three major public universities in the Balkans (University of Belgrade, University of Sarajevo and University of Zagreb) partnered up with Swiss academics and practitioners (University of Basel and the Institute for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation) to design and implement a peace studies program. The Balkan Master's Program in Peace Studies [hereafter, the program] is specifically tailored to the post-conflict Balkans, a region still encountering many obstacles in local and cross-national efforts to (re)build self-sustainable peace. In fall of 2015 the program started accepting students at the universities in Belgrade and Sarajevo. The idea behind the regional master program is to advance a local understanding of peacebuilding, while educating a future generation of students to create their own visions for sustainable peace. Not only are these topics regionally significant, but the process itself is relevant as it brings together students and teachers from different countries and fosters mobility and exchange. The long-term cooperation between

academics throughout the post-conflict region in creating the master program, as well as the envisaged mobility of teachers and students, creates an opportunity for universities to bridge the international-local divide and become active participants of locally informed peacebuilding. In that sense it is not only the curriculum that matters, but also the form in which it was created and is implemented.

In the following the Balkan Master's Program in Peace Studies is analysed in three sections. The first section explores social and political factors prevalent in the region in relation to higher education and cross-border university cooperation and highlights the gap between international and local approaches to peacebuilding. The second section follows the establishment of the program and identifies local voices, issues, and concerns that impacted the design of the curricula and provided initial feedback on the completed program. The final section concludes and explores the practical and theoretical implications of peacebuilding through academic cooperation in the region.

Conflict and Peace and Public Universities in the Balkans

The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s had a profound effect on the countries of Southeast Europe. The conflict resulted in a large number of casualties, population movement, new borders, and restored national identities. The core conflict played out between ethnic populations of Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks[1] from 1991-1995 and was most pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). We shall not go into detail on accounts of these well-studied conflicts or their aftermath, but rather refer to works by other scholars (Nakarada, 2008; Ingrao, 2009; Jovic, 2009, Tepsic et al., 2016).

The implications of the Yugoslav wars were immense and worth noting. The region experienced a significant loss of life and massive displacement, both refugees and IDPs. Of the total number of an estimated 140.000 casualties, over 100.000 are attributed to the war in BiH alone, and of the 4 million estimate of displaced people over half were from BiH (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2009; Zwierzchowski & Tabeau, 2010; Hovy, 2002). Before the war this former socialist republic within Yugoslavia was likened to a leopard's skin where ethnic groups, mostly Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, lived next to each other in areas of high

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[1] These three ethnic groups share the same language and are physically undistinguishable, but belong to different religions, orthodox-christian, roman christian, and islam, respectively.

diversity (Bieber 2006, p. 14). The same can be said for large parts of Croatia and the Vojvodina province within Serbia. Casualties and large-scale displacement profoundly changed the ethno-geographical distribution resulting in large pieces of land dominantly populated by single ethnic groups (Ramet & Valenta, 2016). Post-war generations, especially youth now attending university, had much lesser chances of growing up along with peers of different ethnicity. Ethnic homogeneity was the new norm in post-conflict Yugoslav states. Even minor differences between ethnic groups became emphasized in public discourse through a pronounced 'othering' process. Another significant implication was the economic devastation of the Yugoslav republics and now independent countries. Croatia saw a decrease in GDP of 41% between 1990 and 1995; Serbia of 59% and GDP fell in BiH by a staggering 83% (Druzic, 2007; Simon, 2003; Jaksic & Bomestar, 2011). Since then the economy has partially recovered but only Croatia has seen GDP return to pre-war levels. The effect of economic decline took its toll on education and university mobility. Students had less means to pursue studies away from their family home, which effectively cocooned them form interacting with peers of different ethnicity. In addition, new international and within-state borders further obstructed student mobility by introducing separate and at times incoherent laws governing higher education and stringent residency requirements. The obstacles for student of different ethnic groups to meet and study together were stacked against them.

The Yugoslav wars significantly impacted Universities in the region. Reflecting the identity dimension of conflict, universities became split along ethnic lines (Sabic El-Rayess, 2009). This was most pronounced in BiH, but also affected neighboring countries. The three Balkan universities whose political science/international relations departments will be in the focus of this chapter exemplify this trend. All three universities established political science as separate departments during the 1960s, their origins closely linked to the schooling of cadres under guidance of the ruling Communist Party of Yugoslavia. The decade leading up to the wars of the 1990s brought about a more nationalist and exclusionary discourse among intellectual elites and at universities. Wartime displacement coupled with inherited institutional legacies of ideological favoritism, nepotism, and corruption resulted in an ethno-national homogenization of faculty and curricula, a process that continued after the wars. Today, the ethnic identities of students and faculty largely mirror the ethnically homogenous post-war societies in which they are embedded. In addition to demographic changes universities introduced or boosted curricula aimed at reinforcing national identities, nationalist policies, and interpretations of history (including the Yugoslav wars). Public universities with close ties

to state structures and dependent on public financing were frontrunners in this regard[2]. Course syllabi, reading lists, and library holdings indicatively included largely writings of scholars of corresponding ethnicity. Mutually exclusive interpretations of conflict, a nationally biased view of the region, along with significant 'othering' were an inevitable result. As such universities reflect "the social context of conflict and function as perpetuators of conflictual identities rather than as arenas of social transformation" (Milton & Barakat, 2016: 414).

At the same time all ex-Yugoslav universities share the common goals of institutional internationalization and comparability of studies, mainly through implementing the Bologna Process[3]. This has made curricula in the three countries more alike, increased cross-border exchange and opened up the possibility for the creation of joint-degree programs. The process presents an ideal roadmap to forward peacebuilding between countries and groups in the region. In addition, the higher education frameworks in BiH, Croatia, and Serbia are in many ways similar. The language of instruction in all three countries is almost the same,[4] while English language is widely understood. The countries have comparable primary and secondary education systems and similar levels of education in their populations (World Values Survey, 2016). Their university curriculum practices are closely related, and they share a history of over 70 years of joint higher education development (from 1918-1991). The opportunities for cross-border cooperation exist but are rarely utilized. Informal ties between researchers in different countries exist and the three universities have signed official cooperation agreements, but there is no regular faculty and student exchange or joint study program either between the countries, or the three universities. The trend towards international cooperation largely exists side-by-side with the opposing trend of increasing academic nationalization. National curricula, along with particularistic interpretations of conflict still dominate the institutions while individuals, not the universities, mostly make use of active cross-border cooperation.

The 'International-Local' Gap

The issues of reconciliation and peace in the Balkans have largely evaded universities in the region. From the start this discourse has largely been informed by a Western (and Northern)

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[2] The University of Belgrade favored the Serb version, Sarajevo and Zagreb the Bosniak and Croat version, respectively. While private universities exist in all three countries, their significance for peacebuilding and societal impact are not very significant.

[3] Croatia joined the Bologna Process in 2001, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Serbia in 2003. See European Higher Education Area for more details (www.ehea.info)

[4] Latin and cyrillic script are both used, but cyrillic is not understood everywhere.

understanding of the conflict and addressed at the individual country levels. The proposed remedies to stabilize the region have also largely come from outside. All three countries have seen their fair share of foreign-led intervention and assistance, whether through the UN, NATO, EU, or other international organizations and national agencies. Most of these institutions pursued agendas in line with a liberal approach to peacebuilding (Gilbert 2012, Juncos 2012, Lemay-Hebert 2009, 2011). Following the Yugoslav wars liberal peacebuilding became the dominant conflict resolution approach in political science and practice across the globe. The basis for this approach was the assumption that peace and social progress could be brought about through "external engineering of post-conflict societies through the export of liberal frameworks of 'good governance', democratic elections, human rights, the rule of law, and market relations" (Chandler 2010: 137–138). Through the introduction of democracy and free market economies former adversaries were expected to begin acting cooperatively. Under international guidance and pressure, institutional reforms were implemented quickly after the end of hostilities, while privatization of state enterprises followed soon thereafter. In its ultimate form liberal peacebuilding focuses on building or strengthening governmental institutions and regulatory frameworks with subsequent electoral and economic liberalization (Paris, 2004). With a focus on outcomes rather than process and on structures rather than actors the agency in liberal peacebuilding lies mostly with international institutions. Local ownership as "the extent to which domestic actors control both the design and implementation of political processes" (Donais 2009: 4) was accepted in theory by international staff but rarely practiced.

The critical literature on peacebuilding built a strong argument for an alternative approach and shift of paradigm towards locally informed notions of peace, both in theory and practice. It introduces the notion of hybridity as a contextual "emerging social construct (…) a long-term process involving social negotiation, co-option, resistance, domination, assimilation, and co-existence" (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2015: 220-221). Multiple local and international actors are involved around various issues and where everyone influences everyone else who is involved, including state and societal institutions both from the global north and south (Mac Ginty, 2011: 89). The resulting liberal-local hybrid "implies an emancipatory form of peace that reflects the interests, identities, and needs of all actors" through creating an everyday post-Westphalian peace. The focus is on local agency, autonomy and resistance with the aim of creating a self-sustaining peace that goes beyond state-centric notions of state building (Richmond, 2010: 26, 29). While this approach opens up the possibility to recognize and interact with the local, hybrid-liberal peacebuilding is still developed from a Western

understanding of peace and conflict. It acknowledges local agency but does not aim to bridge the gap in power relations between local and international actors. Any local-international hybrid peace therefore reflects existing power asymmetries that are almost always skewed against local agency. Only a contextually grounded local understanding of peace is able to overcome this through a regionally contextual understanding of peace to which international actors would need to adapt.

While education and research are not explicitly part of the liberal peacebuilding agenda, universities have the potential and social responsibility to explore and formulate a locally informed bottom-up approach to peacebuilding that may not necessarily reflect either liberal or hybrid peacebuilding. As a response to externally driven processes, "domestic research capacity for the production of knowledge in recovery-related fields could enable conflict-affected societies to assume genuine ownership of reconstruction" (Milton & Barakat, 2016: 410). In this sense there are a number of ways to understand the role of academia in peacebuilding. On the one hand universities offers space for theoretical challenges to Western concepts of peacebuilding to take root, while on the other they circulates this knowledge through teaching, exchange, and academic cooperation. Doing this within a post-conflict region introduces contextual attributes inherent to local culture and peacebuilding dynamics. The idea is to create a local understanding of peacebuilding, informed by critical theory and local/regional experience, through academic cooperation, dialogue, and networking, while also educating a future generation of students to advance a local awareness of a substantive peace.

In ex-Yugoslav states, a scientific approach to peace is still at an initial stage. With reference to the recent violent past, peace studies, inter-cultural dialogue and nonviolent conflict resolution are crucial in research, teaching and practice. Developing a local understanding of peacebuilding through cross-border academic cooperation and teaching is prerequisite for self-sustainable and locally-owned peace in the region. The importance of local initiatives is recognized in literature as "academic links across dividing lines of conflict that emerge organically from locally embedded agency of individuals and academic communities are more effective than externally devised schemes grafted on to conflict-affected contexts" (Milton & Barakat, 2016: 415). Through supporting university capacities for academic research, along with a pooling of personnel in peace research and teaching, a regional scientific approach to peacebuilding can be identified. The result could be a much stronger role of the academic community in putting peace on the societal and political agenda throughout the region. In addition regular people-to-people contacts established amongst researchers and students

through academic cooperation will go a long way towards overcoming mutual stereotyping and confronting past trauma.

Local Voices in Conflict-Affected Societies

Having in mind the context where even critical discourse about conflict and subsequent peacebuilding (and state building) efforts in the Balkans is dominated by Western scholars, the need for a locally grounded program in peace studies is of utmost importance. This kind of internally (as opposed to externally) driven academic cooperation (Milton and Barakat, 2016) intends to change one-dimensional narratives that enforced a two-sided understanding of actors involved and a simplification of causes that led to the most violent conflicts in the Europe since WWII. Voices of local scholars and their work were most often overlooked or labeled as biased depending on their ethnicity and/or social background leaving the space for explanation to those whose methodologies and epistemologies are tailored for 'adequate interpretation'. Hence, events that took place in the region in the 1990s (conflicts phase) and 2000s (peacebuilding phase) are in many instances 'westernized', simplified or misunderstood, leaving 'balkanization'[5] still to be defining the process in the region (for different interpretation see Jovic, 2001).

In addition to this, the intent of the program is to stimulate the exchange of teachers and young generations (students) who became isolated from their peers in other countries of the region during the 1990s. Building on the contact hypothesis theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1958), the program aims to reestablish trust by turning the 'other' into a friend rather than an enemy. In the context of the Balkans, this aspect is crucial since 'othering' is most often reinforced and followed by stigmatization and stereotyping. As Lister (2004: 103) suggests "how we name things, affect how we behave towards them. The name, or label, carries with it expectation." The role of education, especially primary and tertiary sector, is essential in this process since curricula, schoolbooks and reading materials often foster negative representation of other groups (Tepsic et al., 2015; Pavlovic et al., 2015; Puhalo et al., 2010), thus challenging prospects for self-sustaining peace.

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[5] The term is often used to describe disintegration followed by violence, ethnic divisions and long-term instability. It also serves for illustrating state corruption, inefficiency and irresponsibility. The term 'balkanization' has transcended the field of political sciences, and is today widely used in migration studies, law, psychology, or even medicine.

Accepting that for establish cooperative relations, in addition to intensive contacts, it is important to have: (i) groups of equal status (professional or educational); (ii) common goals; (iii) interdependent group cooperation; and (iv) contact supported by a legal institutional framework (Cuhadar & Dayton, 2011: 277) the program objective is to bring students in the region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia) who are interested in peace studies to enroll at their respective higher institutions, work with peers at home but also spending time at other Universities where the program is held, collaborate in joint regional research projects and obtain academic degrees recognized in all three higher education systems.

Having in mind that the program in locally grounded, with the aim of offering an alternative interpretation of the events that occurred in the Balkans in the past two decades, but also re-establishing broken ties between former warring parties, it could be seen as a "counterinsurgency toolkit, with the emphasis placed on 'hearts and minds' and on co-opting local communities" (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013: 771). The result of this counterinsurgency is: (i) the establishment of the Balkan peace master program (officially called 'Regional Master's Program in Peace Studies') at the Universities of Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Zagreb; (ii) with an identical, theoretically-informed, first semester and country specific second specialization semester, (iii) where classes are taught by local academics who are teaching and offering different perspectives at all three universities, (iv) with the possibility for students to spend the second semester in the other two countries and (v) where classes are held in English, exposing local perspective to international students, and challenging prevailing stereotypes and prejudices about the region, firmly embedded in international public discourse.

In the following pages, we describe the process of designing and implementing the Balkan Master's Program in Peace Studies.[6] Curricula development was conducted between 2011-14 with an emphasis based on a needs assessment for a locally grounded peace program and subsequent capacity building for teachers engaged in the program.[7] The second phase from 2015 onward saw the launch of the MA program and included an evaluation of student expectations from the program, while the third phase was implemented at the end of the first academic year (2015/16) to assess to which degree these expectation have been fulfilled.

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[6] www.see-peace.net

[7] This phase was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation as part of the SCOPES program (Scientific co-operation between Eastern Europe and Switzerland) and in cooperation with the University of Basel and the Institute for Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding (ICP) from Switzerland

Design Phase

As part of curricula development the project team conducted a cross-country survey in May 2012 in order to identify whether students and professionals interested in pursuing further academic studies are interested in a locally grounded program in peace and conflict studies. The online survey was sent to undergraduate students studying at the Universities of Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb. The 265 responses were used as input for further curricula design and for identifying which fields of study (within peace studies) students recognize as important for additional professional (practical) improvement.

From the responses, it was clear that most of the surveyed students (almost 93%) are familiar with peace studies as an academic discipline, but less than half (49%) took courses dedicated to peace research or conflict analysis during their undergraduate studies. In Belgrade and Zagreb, students were able to follow one undergraduate course related to peace, conflict and peacebuilding. At the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo they had more choice since the Faculty established the Department for Security and Peace Studies during the 2000s but, as students recognized, the curricula predominantly focused on political sciences and security studies with very few courses on peace-related topics. Graduate programs offered at the Universities of Belgrade and Sarajevo included peace studies only as a module within international studies. This resulted in large sections of curricula being detached from core issues discussed in the field. The Faculty of Political of Sciences in Zagreb did not offer any graduate program of this kind. All three Universities at that time did not consider introducing an interdisciplinary peace program as part of their PhD studies although a substantial number of thesis (in countries of the region and especially abroad) have been analysing conflicts in the Balkans and peacebuilding efforts that emerged after the violence had stopped. Therefore, the establishment of several (or one regional) master program proved to be highly important in closing the gap created by the reform of elementary and secondary education where issues of conflicts in former Yugoslavia, reconciliation, transition justice have been integrated in history textbooks and formal curriculum, leaving higher education to tackle this issue in inconsistent and very often non-institutional manners.[8]

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[8] Thirty percent of interviewed students said that they have been involved in training and workshops dedicated to conflict settlement or inter-cultural dialogue organized by various local NGOs.

Even though students did not have many opportunities to learn about some of the above-mentioned topics, a majority of them (80,3%) answered positively when asked about the possibility to enroll in a program that would be peace oriented. In addition, there was a clear indication that a regional approach would be most suitable since 83,7% of student expressed the intent to study in other countries of the region, not only in their home country. For the project team, this was a clear signal that youth was ready to establish or to engage in more intensive contacts with their peers, and more importantly, to learn and discuss topics that are still consider very sensitive or controversial in public discourse (violence, war crimes, refugees, genocide, etc.). Asked about the reasons why they would study peace studies in the region, students gave diverse responses: from those who have been active in the local peacebuilding community and need more theoretical knowledge (and *vice versa*) to those seeking better job opportunities, improved communication skills or/and conflict settlement techniques. Most importantly, students emphasized the need to better react to conflict potential still prevailing in the region ("[*N*]egative *prospects in the region*"), to engage in local peacebuilding efforts ("[*C*]onstrained *post-conflict development of the region due to the inadequate conflict resolution approach*"), or to foster inter-ethnic cooperation ("[*D*]*eeper insights on reconciliation in the region and necessary skills for this process*"). Thus, it was clear that countries of the region needed systemic effort (at the higher education level) that would provide knowledge and skills in peace studies so far lacking at the institutional or community level. This situation was best described by a student from Croatia:

> *"I am coming from the conflict-affected city of Vukovar. My entire life has been filled with various efforts aimed at reaching a normal, undivided, and peaceful coexistence of all citizens of Vukovar. I have participated in numerous seminars, trainings, and workshops dedicated to questions of peace, tolerance, non-discrimination, peaceful settlements of disputes, etc., but I think we desperately need a program of this kind."*

Finally, these inputs were decisive factor in determining further specialization for each country program whereby conflict resolution practice and techniques, post-conflict development through peacebuilding, and regional security cooperation were chosen as most important for students at the Universities in Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Zagreb, respectively. Designed (and subsequently accredited) in this manner the Regional Master's Program in Peace Studies was able to respond to the needs present in the region, but also to attract international students who are interested in the recent history of the Balkans or in local peacebuilding processes that are occurring at the moment.

Implementation Phase

Enrollment in the program began in Belgrade in Sarajevo[9] for the academic year 2015/16 with one-third of applicants being international students.[10] Reasons for applying to the program varied from the wish for further education ("*I would like to learn more about conflict prevention, management, resolution and transformation, and about post-conflict reconciliation*"); pricing ("[*A*] *similar program in the USA would cost me easily 10 times the amount*"); the possibility of regional mobility ("[*T*]*he context of regional cooperation between universities from the West Balkans is what drew my attention*"); to the interdisciplinary approach of the program ("*I think that the direction of study is well suited to my personal and professional outlook, not just because of the topics of peace and conflict resolution but because it is multidisciplinary and encompasses humanitarian, rights and legal approaches that can be linked with international cooperation and solidarity*"). Overall, students coming from the region and abroad both agree that the Balkans as a conflict affected region is a suitable place for establishing a program with the main focus grounded in issues concerning peacebuilding, humanitarian efforts, local development and reconciliation ("*I was motivated to apply for the Regional Master's Program in Peace studies due to its location*"; "[*M*]*ore in-depth understanding of current and past conflicts, particularly those related to the Balkans*"). This is was best described by an applicant from Switzerland who emphasized the importance of the region's past for the purpose of studies:

> "*Getting to know more about the regional context in the Balkans (history, living conditions, culture), to be able to understand (to see the origins of) the previous and actual conflicts, and to get to know about tools and ways to solve them.*"

Additionally, many applicants felt very strongly about the role universities could (and should) have in promoting peace and reconciliation in the Balkans. Although educating for peace stood out as the most prominent role of higher education institutions ("*Teaching and upbringing students for peace, may, in the long run, pacify this tumultuous region*"); breaking stereotypes and prejudices ("[*E*]*xchange of students is one of the roles probably because we are learning*

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[9] The accreditation procedure at the University of Zagreb is still ongoing.

[10] Applicants were coming from different regions including citizens of Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Netherlands, Switzerland, Montenegro, USA, Palestine, Turkey, Cameroon, China, etc.

also by getting to know each other, so prejudices and hostility based on daily newspaper articles are not something that creates our picture of other societies"); nurturing intercultural dialogue ("*I believe that a university can offer an excellent track for bringing in the lessons of so-called 'field' experiences and foster intercultural understanding, a space for peaceful dialogue and well as discussion about peace*"); or relating education with practice-oriented approaches prove to be as equally important ("*It seems to work well when practitioners can pass in and out of the academic space and where universities circular create spaces that have a component of the 'real life experience' as well as the theoretical*") all proved to be equally important. It seems that in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding universities in the Balkans are valued, both internally and externally, as important vehicles of conflict management and, more importantly, also for conflict transformation and transcendence (Galtung, 2004), or in the words of one of the applicants:

> "*Education is critical in helping generations move past the legacies of conflict, and therefore a university can have a highly influential by not only providing a space for research and encouragement of individuals interested in promoting peace, but also by fostering an environment and resources for relevant workshops, initiatives, etc. that can promote peace at the local and international level. In addition, the example of reconciliation and reach of these efforts can be multiplied by entering in collaborative relationships with the universities....*"

It should also be noted that the program brought professors from the region closer together by engaging them in its implementation. Intensive mobility of academic staff (especially at the University of Belgrade where numerous professors from Sarajevo and Zagreb are teaching) exposed students to different interpretation of conflicts and possibilities of reconciliation in the region. These meetings also engaged different faculty in discussion and critical (re)evaluation of issues consider socially sensitive (war crimes, ethnic divisions, history revisions, etc.), a process that was not common in previous years. Frequent academic visits consequently led to stronger institutional links between the three faculties and a joint regional conference on different interpretations of causes of the Yugoslav wars (*Interpretations of Yugoslav Conflicts and its Consequences: From Radical Disagreement to Dialogue*). By applying Ramsbotham's (2010) concept of agonistic dialogue academics from all three faculties (with fellows working abroad) gave very different interpretation of the events that occurred in the region during the 1990s while not accepting these differences as 'metaconflicts' but legitimate perspectives of each conflict party. Further collaboration of this kind is needed to develop jointly-led courses (and textbooks) on conflicts in the Balkans. What is clear at this point is that

the implementation of the program intensified contacts between students and professors in the region, triggered discussion on important and sensitive issues still present in the post-conflict context, and exposed international students to local perspectives not present (or prominent) in Western academe.

Post-Implementation Phase

After the first year of conducting the program, several conclusions can be drawn based on experiences of students who attended the program. After spending time in a conflict-affected region the expectation of international students seem to have largely been met. Through day to day contacts with their peers, classes conducted by professors working at the three local Universities, and testimonies of those directly affected by conflict (refugees, IDPs, etc.) or who participated in the conflict (as part of *Discussions series*[11]), they gained deeper insights into the past and present of conflict. Students also learned firsthand about the context in which violence occurred, gaining more nuanced understanding of the effects of the wars (*"When you study in a country that has had war and have students who are natives of that country and have been through it, it shows you just how the affects decades after still run very deep"*). This kind of 'insider perspective', in their own account, not only improved knowledge and opened up different perspectives, but increased compassion, sympathy and solidarity for students coming from the region (*"A deeper understanding and appreciation for how perceptions of life are formed"; "[T]*he *fact that being in the place sharing with its people and learning from its academics enriched the knowledge, elevating that knowledge to a more human level, it stops being just an object of study and it gets to touch you even more")*. Students from the region, on the other hand, mainly emphasized inter-cultural dialogue and friendships gained during the program. The overwhelming importance of these two aspects can be explained by the deep isolation the region, and especially Serbia, has been through during most of the 1990s and early 2000s as these students were growing up. The lack of contacts with peers from Europe (and worldwide) could be seen, in their perspective, as serious obstacles for future professional and personal development.

There was a high level of mutual agreement among local and international students regarding the Balkans as suitable place for studying peace related issue and that has remained after the

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[11] As part of its activities, the program included a series of talks with people who were involved in humanitarian efforts and implementation of peacebuilding strategies in the Balkans.

end of the program. This aspect is, interestingly, valued even more by international students ("[*I*]*t is perhaps the ideal location because as a location it encompasses not only regional history but readily exploitable contradictions that are inherent to grasping what lies at the roots of conflict"*). It seems that local students tend to underestimate the importance of locally grounded programs (including the Regional Master's Program in Peace Studies) and perceive them as 'the second to best alternative' compared to academic programs offered by institutions from more developed countries. In the context of extensive liberal peacebuilding and state building promoted in the region for the last two decades (most prominently in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo), followed by high acceptance of Western norms and customs (including universities and other higher education institutions) these attitudes are understandable.

Aside from problems resulting from lack of information on political issues and prevalent stereotypes about Balkan peoples, international students did not report any other concerns in their relation with family members or close friends in their home country. Some of the responses even included the need for deeper self-reflection about the situation back home as a direct consequence of living in a post-conflict environment. (*"It influenced me in a way that I have much more knowledge of what is out there rather than only seeing an ocean")*. However, some students from the region have suggested that interaction with international students reinforced their belief in limited knowledge by outsiders about the Balkans and the past events *("It has shown that foreigners are full of stereotypes due to bad image in the media, Serbia got in the last 20 years during the wars. I hope that my participation in the program has shown the better picture of Serbia"*). The program intended to change this perception by offering different (and sometimes conflicting) views of past events, which was, in their own words, welcomed by international students.

In addition, the program was successful in motivating students to pursue further academic or professional careers in peace studies or related fields. Most students expressed the intent to pursue doctoral studies in nationalism, social anthropology, identity politics, reconciliation and peace studies, or to seek employment in organizations such as the International Red Cross Committee, the OSCE, humanitarian relief organizations or NGOs dealing with human rights. From the beginning, the inter-disciplinarity has been highlighted as the key feature of the program, as well as the discipline of peace studies. Hence, the spectrum of student choices also shows the complexity and interconnectivity of various issues that are vital for any success

in peace or development work. The following student statement portrays precisely this perspective:

"I gained a much deeper and broader understanding of the social and political contingencies for peace and conflict resolution. What was particularly useful to me was that these aspects as well as technically useful for my work having a wide range of academic perspectives, not only peace studies and international relations but political science, social sciences and social-psychological studies also presented a genuine and crosscutting social justice viewpoint. I feel that not only did my knowledge of peace studies and peace research methodology increase significantly, so did my ability to apply this knowledge practically, which I have been doing increasingly already during the course. The course in fact also helped me to answer many of the life/work/existential dilemmas and epistemological questions that had built up over time in my mind relating to the legitimacy, practicality and honesty of peace and development work. I am coming out of this course having learned a lot about peace and conflict in many dimensions and also with the foundations of new paths forward."

Finally, student responses stressed the importance of a more practice-oriented approach through which the knowledge gained would be applied to real-life scenarios ("[*T*]o *make the program more appealing and interesting would be to balance out the theoretical part and practical part. Need for real live scenarios, debates, improvisation to get us thinking and more willing to participate in discussions*"). Although aimed at the peace program the criticism in question should be taken as a systemic deficiency in the higher education in all three countries. This can be seen as an impetus to continue higher education reforms in the region.

Conclusion

The lengthy accreditation and cautiousness of University of Zagreb administrators to enter in institutional cooperation with other countries of the region, twenty years after the end of conflicts, shows how prevalent mistrust still is in the Balkans. There are other issues in the program implementation that still need to be addressed; such as sufficient command of English language, the level of tuition fees, lack of adequate infrastructure, links to practitioners, and study trips in the region. Yet, above all, there seems to be a consensus on the significance an academic program can have in promoting post-conflict coexistence in the Balkans. The Regional Master's Program in Peace Studies builds on the idea that peace

processes are not (and should not) be externally driven, but locally initiated reflecting the regional context.

The fact that students from abroad come to study with their peers from the region demonstrates that the prevailing stereotypes about the region and past events can also be undermined and subverted. 'Over-exposure' of international students to various interpretations of the events and the role of (international and domestic) actors shows historical and political complexities of the region that have been overlooked in conflict management and resolution, but more importantly post-conflict peacebuilding today. As Milton and Barakat suggest, Universities should promote "critical thinking skills that enable students to challenge established truths, decode and resist the messages of power-holders and violent ideologues, and creatively respond to conflict-induced challenges" (2016: 413).

It is still early days to evaluate the full impact the Regional Master's Program in Peace Studies might have on universities and societies in the Balkans. Nevertheless, this postgraduate program has a clear intellectual agenda and the potential to say something new and different: to challenge particularistic ideas of insular educational politics and build ties between students and teachers in a post-conflict region still dominated by mutual mistrust.

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Annex:

Table: Courses offered at the Regional Master's Program in Peace Studies			
First semester	*course offered at:*		
Theories and Typologies of Conflicts	BG[i]	SA[ii]	ZG[iii]
Methodology of Peace Research	BG	SA	ZG
Culture of Peace	BG	SA	ZG
Regional Perspective on Conflicts and Peace	BG	SA	ZG
Politics of Resistance and Civil Disobedience	BG		ZG
Conflict Resolution and Conflict Management		SA	ZG
Human Security/ Globalization and New Challenges to Peace	BG	SA	ZG
Transitional Justice		SA	
Geopolitics of War and Peace			ZG
Second semester	*course offered at:*		
Conflict Resolution Practices	BG		
Peace and Development	BG	SA	
Peace Journalism and Conflict Resolution	BG		
Paths to Reconciliation	BG		
Political Regulation of Ethnic Conflicts and Relations	BG		
From Humanitarian Aid Toward Development		SA	
State-Building and Post-Conflict Development		SA	
Peace Education and Ethics		SA	
Security and Cooperation in South-East Europe			ZG
Conflict Potential and Borders			ZG
Peacekeeping Operations – UN and Regional Organizations			ZG
Community Security Concept			ZG
State Building and Society Building in Post-Conflict Regions			ZG

[i] - University of Belgrade - Faculty of Political Sciences
[ii] - University of Sarajevo - Faculty of Political Sciences
[iii] - University of Zagreb - Faculty of Political Sciences