

Report on the Annual International Conference of Regional Studies Association

The 16th annual international conference of Regional Studies Association was held in the city of Pécs, Hungary between May 24 and 26, 2010. The city is the European Capital of Culture in 2010 and thus the meeting has acquired a specific atmosphere. The motto of the conference was “Regional Responses and Global Shifts: Actors, Institutions and Organisations”. Almost 600 experts gathered from more than 50 countries of the world, and this exceeded the previous expectations thoroughly. They basically represented the regional science, although besides regionalists, there were the representatives of other disciplines (geography, sociology, economics etc.) in a large number too. The conference venue was the Faculty of Law and Economics of University of Pécs, but the host institute was the Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In spite of that the number of participants was much higher than it had been expected, the rooms at the university provided space enough. Moreover, the relatively favourable weather has also promoted this as the gardens and parks of the campus could also be used during the conference breaks. However, what was not favourable at all that the beginning of the conference coincided with the church holiday Whitsun. But it could not be taken into account two years ago, when it had been decided about the date and venue of this conference. At that time it seemed that by 2010 a new conference centre would have been built and connections of air traffic of the city were to be established to make the accessibility of Pécs easier. Regretfully, these investments were not to be realized in time, thus there were participants, who rent a car or took a taxi to travel from Budapest to Pécs. On the eve of the conference, on Sunday afternoon a walking sightseeing tour was organized.

The conference started with a plenary session on Monday morning. The large room was jam-packed with participants; some even were sitting on the gallery. First, the chair of RSA, David BAILEY greeted the participants, then the host and local organizer professor Gyula HORVÁTH (who is also the director of Centre for Regional Studies) addressed them. He emphasized that Pécs is the traditional centre of the region and the birthplace of regionalism in Hungary. On the other hand, the high number of the participants also indicates that regional science is a dynamically developing one, spreading all over the world rapidly. He expressed an opinion that this conference is an excellent possibility for the development of East–West cooperation.

The next speaker, Dirk AHNER (Director General, European Commission, Belgium) spoke about Cohesion Policy. The key issues of his presentation were the followings:

- What are the main drivers of regional growth?
- What is the place of EU regions in the global environment?
- What are the specific challenges faced by less developed regions?

AHNER demonstrated that Europe has been divided into three parts by regional innovation performance, also emphasizing that “...Cohesion Policy made a major contribution to the economic development of assisted regions”.

John BACHTLER (University of Strathclyde, UK) also dealt with Cohesion Policy. He outlined future prospects while past morale was also evaluated. In his paper entitled “The future of Cohesion Policy: Lessons from evaluation” he showed the new EU priorities (growth based on knowledge and innovation, an inclusive high employment society, green growth: a competitive and sustainable economy). In the future he feels need the revision of Cohesion Policy and its adjustment to the new challenges. The eligibility criteria have

to be modified and made more effective. In the future the most important key issues are the followings:

- policy goals: classifying the objectives of the policy,
- funding: maintaining a viable EU-wide policy,
- governance: ensuring adequate institutional capacity,
- performance: ensuring that the policy is effective,
- accountability: making the achievements visible.

Peter HEIL (Director of Consultancy Services) spoke about the Hungarian experience of Cohesion Policy and about those lessons which Hungary can provide for EU. (The presentation bore the title “Cohesion Policy in the practice, the case of Hungary”). He remarked that although lots of changes are necessary, he hopes that one thing will not be changed by the new government, namely the network of EU institutions, because it is built out in Hungary adequately and operates well.

The second day of the conference started with a plenary session too. Its theme was: International Perspectives on Regional Studies. The four speakers analyzed the role of regional science and regional studies and their future in four continents of the world. Andrew BEER (Flinders University of Australia) summarized the Australian experience. The case of Australia is a special one, because its economy is based on resources. On the one hand, he explained the reasons for which “Australia’s pattern of regional development diverges substantially from the European or American experiences.” So far, besides the major research themes (divergence or convergence in regional income and growth, spatial centralization of economy, indigenous issues, suburbanization), some others (networks, learning regions, regional innovation system) were neglected. Nowadays, the impacts of an on-going population growth on the economy and the environment are also an important research topic to study. The climate change and adaptation research have merged over the past two decades and the political concerns of climate change’s impacts are also dealt with. Finally, he summed up the main characteristics of regional research in Australia, which are the followings:

- focussed on non-metropolitan issues,
- more empirical than theoretically informed,
- small scale,
- grounded in practice,
- aware of and keen to engage with international debates.

Professor Henry YEUNG (University of Singapore) examined the contribution of economic geographical studies “in understanding the changing dynamics of capitalism in East Asia during the past three decades. He emphasized that during the 1970s East Asia has undergone tremendous changes and nowadays we can see the different types of capitalist developments, which have produced distinctive geographies of regional economies. In his presentation he has distinguished three waves of flows and networks: first in Japan, then in NIEs and now in China. He also dealt with the theoretical frameworks and epistemological issues of East Asian capitalism.

Professor Mark PARTRIDGE (Ohio State University) informed the audience on the regional studies from the viewpoint of America and of the Americans entitled: “Regional Studies – a perspective from North America”. He stressed that internal migration is very high in North America; they are very mobile nations. About 30–40% of US population move almost yearly. He guessed that migration is the source of the success or its condition. In the past the main directions of the internal migration were those regions (the coasts, the Sunbelt, and the arid Southwestern US) which were characterized by high natural amenities, but “relatively fewer economic opportunities”, because Americans like oceans, mountains

and sunshine. Climate change, however, will alter the landscape and affect the migration pattern. It will reshape the regional pattern of employment opportunities and the quality of life. Thus, new challenges are in front of the researchers, and regional studies can help in the solution of these paramount issues.

Ivan TUROK (Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town) discussed the African perspectives of regional studies. In his presentation, the relationship was analyzed between the urbanization and development. Currently, urbanization is the fastest in Africa, however, it has not been accompanied by greater economic dynamism, and the reasons were also explained. Turok also discussed "...the topical idea of enhanced interregional integration through cross-border collaboration to promote prosperity by overcoming the fragmented political geography of the continent." At the end of his presentation he stated that regional studies in Africa are characterized by several specific features:

- significant regional development challenges,
- many unanswered questions,
- no single growth path,
- economy-geography relationship vital.

On both days the morning plenary sessions were continued into different sessions focused on special themes. The number of sessions has almost reached 140, which were organized around 14 main themes. Their mention is important, because, in fact, they have determined the themes of coordinated sessions:

- Innovative strategies and practices of firms in regional development
- Labour markets and labour organisations and their continued relevance for regional development
- Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) and Civil Society Organisations (CSO): facilitators of regional development?
- Regional policies: government and quasi-government initiatives
- Reassessing EU Regional Policy
- People in regions: leadership, collective action and regional development
- Financing regions: global financial crisis and beyond?
- Cooperation across borders
- Global environmental change and the future of regional development
- Theory and research in regional studies
- Spatial planning in cities and regions
- Experience economy and experience society; culture, leisure and experiences in spatial strategies
- Creative regions in a creative economy
- Regional policy and development in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe.

Of the major themes, which had been divided then into several smaller topics, the first was the most populous one. Taken altogether, the participants could make a choice of more than 500 presentations. They were usually lasting 20 minutes, followed by questions and remarks. The number of participants in each session was quite different, which depended on various factors. Of the many interesting sessions and presentations only some can be mentioned below. Éva KISS and Gabor LUX organized the session "Industrial Restructuring and Policy in CEE countries" with a purpose to discuss the connections of the East Central European industrial restructuring and regional policy. Of the four speakers one was Polish and three were Hungarians. Wiesława GIERANCZYK (Nicolaus Copernicus University) spoke on industrial innovativeness, which plays an important role in the restructuring process of Polish industry. It differs "...from the direction and the pace of the respective processes in Hungary. The high-tech sector in Poland has been growing more

slowly than low-tech sector, while in Hungary has been observed otherwise relations. So, the policies aimed at the restructuring processes in Hungary showed to be quite effective." Gábor Lux (Centre for Regional Studies) sought the response to the question "Path-dependent upgrading or radical restructuring in Central Eastern Europe?" "In the longer-term, a slower and less radical development path mainly based on incremental industrial upgrading and network-building appears to have a greater potential in restructuring than radical change." The presentation of Éva Kiss (Geographical Research Institute) was aimed, on the one hand, to demonstrate the role of industrial parks in the restructuring of industrial space, on the other hand to analyze their transport connections. She demonstrated that industrial parks have played a relevant role in shaping the new industrial space and transport connections are still important factors among those of location choice. Andras Grosz (Centre for Regional Studies) examined the role of regionalization efforts in the innovation policy. The major conclusion was that the influence of the regions on the science, technology and innovation policy is very limited, almost negligible. "In fact, we cannot speak about real innovation policy."

Among the speakers of other sessions there were also several Hungarian colleagues, mostly of them from the Centre for Regional Studies. Professor Gyula HORVÁTH has stressed that "the decentralization of science and R+D has a number of positive effects on the improvement of the regions. ...The Lisbon criteria cannot be met without decentralization". Zoltán GÁL demonstrated how cross-border financial exposures contributed to the polarization of the post-crisis European financial landscape. Gábor NAGY focused on the major changes in Hungarian urban network in the period of transition based on the theory of uneven development and core-periphery relations and post-socialist studies. The major question he raised was: what are the most important new elements of the renewed spatial and hierarchical structure of the country? Judit TIMÁR and Erika NAGY looked for the answer for the question: "...to what an extent local urban policies are responsible for social imbalances?" Based on the comparison of revitalization programmes of 14 Western and Eastern European small and medium sized towns, they "... have come to the conclusion that the economic and social conditions and opportunities for urban development are partly different in the East and the West".

Presentations of several sessions have also dealt with the social and economic impacts of the current crisis. Of them, the presentation by professor David BAILEY is worth mentioning entitled "Regional Responses to Recessions, the West Midlands Task Force". According to him, the recent economic crisis is very different from the previous ones. As a result, the unemployment rose very fast and the output drop was the largest in West Midlands. As a consequence "Task Forces were set up across the English regions in late 2008 in order to support key firms and sectors (car industry, building) and vulnerable places".

Helena LENIHAN with co-author (University of Limerick, Ireland) also examined the impacts of the crisis. They tried to respond to the question, namely: "Is a strong indigenous manufacturing base a necessary condition for sustainable economic growth?" They compared the case of Ireland and Sweden by using different factors and have found that the Swedish economy has been impacted to a lesser degree by the crisis than Ireland which has primarily focused on attracting MNEs. The case of Ireland is very similar to the case of Hungary, because Hungarian industry also depends very much on the FDI. It is partly due to this circumstance that the crisis has affected the Hungarian industry, mainly car industry and electronics, to a large extent.

On the third day the conference was closed with a plenary session. First Kevin RICHARDSON (Newcastle City Council) called the attention of participants for the venue of the next annual meeting (Newcastle). He also listed the major planned themes of the

conference. The presentation of Eric SWINGEDOUW (University of Manchester, UK) was very interesting ("Post-democratic cities: for whom and for what?"). According to his opinion: "...cities are extraordinary laboratories, in which enormous changes have taken place over the past two decades, most dramatically in its modes of urban governing and polic(y)ing. Urban governing today is carried by a wide range of social actors, including private agents, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, as well as the more traditional forms of local, regional and national government." The presentation by professor GRZEGORZ GORZELAK (University of Warsaw) also produced an active interest. Based on seven theses he examined the regional patterns of the post-socialist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Eventually, Gorzelak argued that the EU membership should be considered the end of transformation. Jonathan Potter (OECD) spoke about the entrepreneurship indicator program, how OECD encouraged the SMEs in the different periods. Then Csaba RUZSA (Managing Director, Pécs 2010 Management Centre) held a lecture on the relationship of culture and place. He has told how Pécs won the title of the Capital of Culture, what kind of urban developments were carried out and how the public squares and places were renewed. He also listed the major programs of the Cultural Capital in which art events play an important part.

The conference was basically well-organised. The breaks, meals and evening programs provided good opportunities for the improvement of relationship and stimulated further discussion of different thoughts and ideas.

Taken as a whole, this conference was a good, interesting and inspiring event with a very good atmosphere. Hopefully, many of the participants will visit the annual meeting in Newcastle in 2011

Éva Kiss