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## Article

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# The 20th Jubilee Colloquium on Regional Sciences: A Conference Report

Viktorie Klímová, Vladimír Žitek, Milan Viturka<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The history of the International Colloquium on Regional Sciences reaches back to 1998. Over the years, its format has dramatically changed and the Colloquium has become a respected event, which attracts dozens of experts from the field of regional research every year. The contributions focus on the issue of regional disparities, the impact of the public administration activities, the evaluation of the economic, innovation and knowledge potentials of regions, as well as spatial aspects of transport, tourism, population, business environment, and the environment as such. The critical discussions have successfully led to consensus concerning the complex and often long-term problems in the economy of regions. Additionally, the assessment of the impacts of public policies, in particular regional development programmes, is significant. Participants' contributions not only enrich the practice, but many of them considerably extend the theoretical foundations of regional sciences. The Colloquium is also a platform for the creation and development of the links between researchers and academic institutions. All of this represents a significant potential for future years of this event.

**Key words:** region, regional development, competitiveness, innovation, regional disparities, territorial public administration, tourism, rural areas, environment, labour market

**JEL Classification:** R11, R12, O12, O18, Z32

## Introduction

The tradition of bringing together experts within the research into various issues or aspects associated with the regional dimension was established in 1998. The joint effort of Assoc. Prof. Jiří Vystoupil and Ing. Antonín Hlaváček, who was at the time the Head of the Department of Regional Economics and Administration, Faculty of Economics and Administration, Masaryk University, gave rise to the first year of the Colloquium. The Colloquium, as the name indicates, did not aim to be a conference. The intention was that people dealing with similar topics will meet at the same table. Still, the atmosphere was not the one of a coffee break and the submitted presentations were passion-

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ately discussed. As time went on, the format of the event has changed as well as the head of the organizing department with Assoc. Prof. Milan Viturka taking the chair. The Colloquium started to be organized as a regular conference and the original intention is only indicated in its name. A significant change was brought about by the changed organizing person, taken over by Dr. Viktorie Klímová, as well as a general increase in interest in regional issues. Since 2012, the conference has always had over 100 active participants so it can be rightly referred to as the largest joint event of regional scientists in the Czech-Slovak environment. Besides the participants from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, it is regularly attended by colleagues from Poland, but also Hungary, Germany, Ukraine, and some South American countries.

### **From Šlapanice to Kurdějov**

Since this is a regional-focused event, the venue is of particular importance. From the very beginning it was clear that the event cannot leave the South Moravian region, so the organizers look for a place there where the Colloquium could be held every year. In recent years, the choice of location has been significantly complicated by the limited availability of sufficiently large halls. The first two years were held in the facilities of the Masaryk University in Šlapanice. They were also the only ones which lacked the typical Moravian atmosphere, though even this is not entirely true. Then, the event was moved to the heart of South Moravia, under the Palava hills and to the Lednice-Valtice area. Pavlov near Mikulov and Lednice were the venues of eight years of the Colloquium. For the sake of completeness, the fourth year was held in Znojmo. The following three years, i.e., 2009–2011, the Colloquium took place in Bořetice. Then it returned to the Lednice-Valtice area, more specifically to Valtice, straight to the castle, where the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> years were held. The road map is complemented by Hustopeče (2014–2015) and Čejkovice (2016). The jubilee 20th Colloquium will take place in the representative halls of the Kurdějov Hotel, in a village of the same name.

### **The celebrities of the Colloquium**

The quality of a conference is most indicated by the persons that participate, especially if they keep coming back. This is one of the most important advantages of the Colloquium on Regional Sciences. We can say that within the 20 years of the Colloquium everyone who is notable within the regional research has attended it at least once. And many of the major figures of the Czech-Slovak regional sciences participate repeatedly. It is difficult to name the individual persons, in particular as nobody should be omitted. Still, we feel urged to mention at least some (hopefully, the others will forgive).

In the first place, Professor Karel Skokan, who passed away a few weeks ago. We will not forget his learned speech, friendly comments on younger colleagues' presentations and boundless helpfulness. His presentation in 2014 symbolically closed his regional research. The fate did not give him space to proceed.

Another major character is a truly regular participant, Prof. René Wokoun. Whether he worked at the University of Economics in Prague, J. E. Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, or College of Regional Development, he always found the time to come. His unmistakable figure and willingness to discuss current topics help form the spirit of the

Colloquium. In spite of his uncompromising comments on some presentations or opinions, he is always a fair partner for discussion.

Prof. Jaroslav Macháček from the University of Economics, Prague, and Assoc. Prof. Václav Toušek from the Palacký University in Olomouc are experienced researchers with broad professional perspectives. On the one hand an economist, on the other hand a geographer, they always come back to the Colloquium in order to provide the participants with their insightful views of major regional issues.

Naming distinctive personalities, we cannot omit the above mentioned, Assoc. Prof. Milan Víturka. This representative of the "locals" is well-known not only for his presentations dealing with the issues of the quality of business and social environment evaluation, but also his ability of a critical discussion on many other topics, whether they are closer to regional economics or geography.

Out of the Slovak colleagues, we need to mention Professor (now Emeritus) Jozef Tvrdoň and Professor Elena Žárská from the Faculty of National Economy - University of Economics, Bratislava. Although each of them deals with a different regional issue, they both have had an essential effect on the current form of the Colloquium. Their contributions to the theory of regional development on the one hand, and the economy of municipalities on the other are always valuable parts of the program and the proceedings.

For many years now, the conference program has been enriched by colleagues from Nitra: Assoc. Prof. Viera Papcunová from Constantine the Philosopher University, and Assoc. Prof. Jana Jarábková from the Slovak University of Agriculture, as well as many other experts from these institutions. The contributions of these two ladies are traditionally the pillars of specifically focused sections, which they often moderate with success.

Further, we can list Assoc. Prof. Radoslav Kožiak with his colleagues from the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. Their precise handling of the issues from the fields of competitiveness and innovation has become the expected moment of the Colloquium. Therefore, they have repeatedly had the opportunity to speak at the plenary, as their ability to attract other participants is truly unique.

In recent years, Prof. Ivana Kraftová from the University of Pardubice, her husband Prof. Jiří Kraft (Technical University of Liberec) and her colleagues have also become significant figures of the Colloquium. Their performances are very substantive, constructive and full of stimuli and inspiring ideas.

However, the conference is unimaginable without many other faces. These are our colleagues from Ostrava, Olomouc, Opava, Ústí nad Labem, České Budějovice, Košice, Bratislava, Jihlava, Prague, Pilsen, Brno, Žilina, or Polish universities.

### **Thematic focus**

It is typical of European regional scientists that they see regions as territorial units in between the state and municipalities, which gives rise to the need for a specific approach to their issues. In this sense, the Colloquium focuses on (DREA, 2017):

- the questions addressing regional disparities in the context of the policy of economic, social and territorial cohesion;
- the impact of activities of public administration institutions within the implementation of public policies in the municipalities, cities and regions;
- the evaluation of economic, innovation and knowledge potentials of Czech, Slovak and European regions;
- the spatial aspects of transport, tourism, population, business environment and the environment as such.

The specific focus of individual presentations and sections has naturally been changing in the course of time. The cause is particularly the urgency of subtopics, which depends on the political and economic cycles, as well as the shifts in the research into specific areas of regional studies. In this context, the topicality of the issues is common across workplaces, only the approaches to their solution differ. And this is where such colloquia come in handy - they provide the discussions and confrontations of opinions, thoughts, attitudes and approaches leading to the formulation of new knowledge and the acquisition of unique experience.

The first years were devoted to elemental questions of regional sciences, such as the analysis of selected segments, or assessments of the role of various strategic documents and their impacts on regional development. At the time when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were going through the economic transformation with the understandable effects on the research sector, did not know the date of entry into the European Union, and did not have an implemented and stabilized system of territorial public administration, many of the topics seen through the present lens seem to be difficult to understand. However, they were at the center of expert and research interests of universities and other workplaces at the time.

The contributions at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century widely reflected the questions of what advantages this or that method of territorial arrangement would have and what impact the final decision would have on the change of various characteristics and processes in the regions. The following years were considerably affected by the "European" topics: the evaluation of the effectiveness of pre-accession development programmes, as well as the impacts of EU policies. In particular the economic and social cohesion policy significantly influenced the regional scientists' approach to most research topics.

After 2005, the presentations started to be dominated by the competitiveness of regions in all possible forms and contexts. This term, although maybe "overused", corresponded with the approach applied then to the solution of regional problems. These were perceived as a result of the continuous competition among the regions for external resources, as well as their efforts to stimulate their non-used or sleeping endogenous potential. This was reflected in the research into the development of regional characteristics, as well as the creation and implementation of public policies, in particular the regional policy. A related term was regional disparities, finding their causes and their possible elimination.

With the approaching 15<sup>th</sup> year, the focus of presentations markedly shifted towards the issues of quality assessment, especially the quality of services and the quality of life, but

also analyses of the effect the knowledge economy had on the changes in the regional development. This direction in regional economics research plays a key role today. New topics have been added, including innovation, smart cities, and cooperation. The need to focus on the internal factors of the regional economy, their possible enhancement in favour of the development of the territory, has prevailed in most models.

The scientific methods used by researchers in the field of regional sciences have also developed significantly. The need to describe and explain the processes and phenomena but also to quantify them has led to a widespread application of statistical and econometric methods. Their use has brought very interesting results in some respects. However, many traditional methods are indispensable even though the research topics have changed. These include in particular the interview and other field surveys, which have always been in the ranges of tools used by regional scientists.

### **The present**

This year's jubilee colloquium will offer a wide range of extremely interesting presentations (Klímová and Žitek, 2017), such as literature research done by Eva Poledníková and Michaela Staníčková, who discuss the development potential of European regions, or their immunity against economic fluctuations. Jiří and Ivana Kraft ponder the effects of various forms of support for small and medium-sized enterprises in the Czech Republic when compared with other European countries. Eva Hamplová and Jaroslav Kovárník present disparities in the distribution of business entities in the years 2010–2016 and thus open up the discussion on what they are caused by. Pavel Zdražil and Petra Applová (microregions), Gabriela Antošová, René Wokoun and Helmuth Gómez (South Bohemian destinations), and Michaela Chomjaková with colleagues (disparities of Slovak regions) turn their attention to the impact of regional development programs.

A number of authors explore the issues of research, knowledge and innovation, which are devoted a separate section organized in cooperation with the Research Institute for Innovation (RINSTIN). Dorota Bednarska-Olejniczak with her husband Jarosław discuss the essence and purposefulness of strategy on the example of the "Regional Innovation Strategy for Lower Silesia Voivodship (region) for the years 2011–2020". The Halásek sisters evaluate the indicators of research and development in the Czech regions; Viktorie Klímová and Lucie Winklerová deal with the barriers to innovation creation in enterprises; Michal Tvrdoň examines tertiary education in the Moravian-Silesian region.

A considerable space is devoted to the labour market, both employment and unemployment. Lenka Ližbetinová examines the attitude of university students in the South Bohemian region towards possible enhancement of their career potential; Martina Hedvičáková and Libuše Svobodová assess the impact of the fourth industrial revolution on the labour market as well as the need for education system restructuring. Environment focused presentations will be given by Angelika Švecová and Eva Rajčáková, who focus on identifying the different availability of environmental infrastructure in the regions and evaluate the cohesion policy's contribution to the improvement of the situation in the Slovak Republic. Martin Boltižiar with co-authors draw attention to the role of environmental burdens as a factor limiting the development of the territory.

The rural areas, cooperation of municipalities, and suburbanisation have been classical issues of regional sciences for several years. This year's Colloquium is no exception. Jiří Ježek revives the debate about mergers of municipalities and ponders their advantages in comparison with cooperation of municipalities. Milan Midler and Alena Dubcová present a view of suburbanization that occurs in the commercial sphere in connection with the requirements for a sufficiently large open area. A number of authors will present various research perspectives on tourism, both a static view of destinations and a dynamic view of tourist arrivals. Jiří Malý and his colleagues will show us the vision of a web portal focusing on the industrial heritage, which they consider a potential for tourism at many sites. Alžběta Kiráľová and Iveta Hamarneh see various sports events organized and held in regions as a driver for their development.

Management of territorial public administration and its financing is an evergreen of similar conferences, the Colloquium of Regional Sciences being no no different. Elena Žárska and Monika Vámošová analyse the administrative capacity of municipalities up to a thousand inhabitants in the context of public administration decentralisation in Slovakia. Viera Papcunová and Eva Balážová assess the changed value of the assets of allowance organisations established by Slovak municipalities after 2000. Jana Janoušková and Šárka Sobotovičová meditate on the use of the local coefficient, which can increase the municipality's yield on property taxes.

Some of the other presentations are difficult to classify into groups; yet, Milan Víturka and Jiří Vystoupil's contemplations over two important atlases created in Brno will not escape listeners' attention. Michal Pink and Josef Smolík debate the impacts of cooperation of far-right and populist parties in regional elections. Regional scientists' attention is also on the effects of the migration wave and the integration of migrants at the regional level - in the works of Jaroslav Macháček as well as Tomáš Malatínek and Nataša Urbančíková.

### Conclusion

The International Colloquium on Regional Sciences is finishing the second decade of its existence. In 20 years, a stable platform for the presentation and discussion of the results of regional science research in a wide range of disciplines, but especially regional economics and social geography, has been created. Representatives of Czech, Slovak but also Polish universities and other institutions have found high-quality opponents and supporters of their thoughts and conclusions. The topicality of the issues, sharing of experience and the possible establishment or deepening of cooperation have become good reasons to share the Colloquium values in the form of active participation in its program. The present situation provides optimistic prospects towards further organisation of the Colloquium in the future, whether the form will be the same or slightly modified.

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