



REGIONAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN ROMANIA THROUGH THE LENS OF THE FIRST TEN CONFERENCES OF THE ROMANIAN REGIONAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

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Abstract

This paper proposes a bird's eye view on the regional science research in Romania, focusing on the contributions developed by the members of the Romanian Regional Science Association. The inquiry into the history of this association and its conferences has been conceived as a modality to address the main research challenges and results in relation to the transformations faced by the Romanian economy and its regions after the fall of the communist regime in December 1989.

Keywords: networking, conferences, research topics, regional science, regional development practice

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Introduction

The history of the institutional roots of regional science in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is deeply anchored in the process of radical changes undergone by the former communist countries in the 1990s. The melting of the ‘iron curtain’ not only triggered the reshaping of Europe and its regions (Boettcher et al., 1993) but also created the favourable circumstances for the creation and revitalisation of the national sections of the European Regional Science Association (ERSA) in this part of Europe. At present ERSA – one of the supranational associations of the Regional Science Association International (RSAI) – counts 19 active associations (usually named ‘sections’), out of which 6 are established in the aforementioned countries². Their successful development made ERSA and RSAI entrust them with the organising of noteworthy, large-scale events such as the ERSA congresses (e.g. Zagreb, Croatia – 2001, Lodz, Poland – 2009, Bratislava, Slovakia – 2012), the RSAI world congress (Timisoara, Romania – 2012), ERSA summer institutes (in Split, Budapest, Bratislava), etc.

At the same time the growing participation of East European regional scientists in important regional science meetings enriched the approaches of the classical topics with fresh perspectives, specific to the transition economies and also entailed the emergence of new issues, reflecting the phenomena and concerns associated with regional development in their countries (Constantin, 2013). As remarked by Geenhuizen and Nijkamp (1996), “the major changes in the economy” and “the rise of new spatial policy questions” represented two important sources of “new combinations” (p. 224) in regional science, able to reinvigorate it in a period of ‘crisis’ in terms of relevance and perspective (Bailly and Coffey, 1994). For example, the transition to the market economy raised a series of questions such as the theory and policy concepts on transformation processes, the strategies for economic restructuring, macrostabilisation, privatization, the solutions to the decline of the old industrial regions, the competition and complementarity between Eastern and Western Europe and so on. The subsequent EU enlargement put an even stronger emphasis on regional topics related research, pointing to the new perspectives for convergence/divergence in regional growth, new location and specialization patterns, endogenous regional development,

² <http://www.ersa.org/member-area/sections-88/>

the spatial dimension of environmental sustainability, etc. (Constantin, 2007).

In the outlined context this paper proposes a spotlight on the contribution of the Romanian Regional Science Association (RRSA) to the development of regional science research, discussing the results and the perspectives created by the first ten conferences of the RRSA. It is organized into two main sections. First, the main coordinates that shaped the development of the RRSA are presented. Second, the relevant facts and figures for the first ten RRSA conferences are highlighted, in order to reveal the distinguishing features and outcomes of the regional science research in Romania. Finally, some concluding remarks are formulated.

RRSA: development coordinates

In the first transition years the regional dimension of the corresponding strategy and reform was almost entirely neglected, despite some firm signals coming from the academic and research community as a result of analyzing the economic reality at regional and local level. Only in 1995, when Romania started the preparations for accession to the European Union, the regional development strategy and the national spatial plan were developed, representing the background of subsequent decisions and actions (Constantin, 2002). The actions in economic practice were accompanied by an increasing interest in the field on the education and research side, leading to the establishment of the RRSA in July 2001. The nucleus was represented by a group of academics from Bucharest University of Economic Studies, where regional economics discipline had been introduced in its curricula in 1995, followed by other disciplines in the next decades (e.g. regional analysis and forecasting, regional and urban planning, regional statistics, regional econometrics, etc.). Soon afterwards the RRSA was enlarged with many new members, organized quality meetings with notable international participation and, after a carefully prepared application had been submitted, it was accepted as a section of the ERSA at the ERSA Congress in Dortmund, in 2002.

At present the RRSA counts more than 90 dedicated members (economists, sociologists, geographers, architects, engineers, mathematicians), with a mature and deep interest in regional science as well as in the association's activities. More than 50% have been RRSA members for at least 10 years. The newcomers are in a high proportion young researchers who also prove dedication for membership renewal. Many members come from universities and

research institutes but individuals from ministries, county councils, regional development agencies, NGOs, consultancy firms, etc. are also active members of the RRSA. The association has constantly expanded its geographical coverage, so that it displays a well-balanced regional distribution: all eight Romanian development regions and all big cities, with important university and research centres are represented in the RRSA³.

All RRSA members are integrated in a dense, well-articulated, reliable network that offered a double-way support for a productive dialogue between science and practice. Thus, the members of the RRSA coming from the scientific community contributed to laying the foundations for the regional strategies and policies in both pre-accession and post-accession to the EU periods. Research topics like the reform of public administration in the perspective of EU integration, criteria for re-structuring the administrative-territorial units, convergence vs. divergence in regional growth, the capacity of absorption of the EU funds in Romania, the involvement of Romanian universities in urban restructuring and regional development, regional specialisation and geographical concentration of economic activities in Romania, cluster policies for underdeveloped regions, the objective of economic and social cohesion in the economic policies of the EU New Member States, geography of crisis in CEE, growth – innovation competitiveness in CEE made the ‘headlines’ in this respect.

The RRSA members also participated in the debates organized on subjects of major interest for the future of regional development in Romania. Thus, the RRSA was represented by its president in the Academic Group for Romania’s Regionalisation established by the Ministry of Regional Development at the beginning of 2013 and had representatives belonging to the academic community in the Consulting Committee for Territorial Cohesion and the Consulting Committee for Regional Operational Programme set up by the same ministry in the context of the preparations for the 2014-2020 programme period.

On their turn, the RRSA members acting in the regional development administrative institutions supported the researchers in the process of collecting the necessary data and information for their projects and for developing relevant case studies included in the lectures and seminars of various regional science disciplines.

³ <http://www.rrsa.ro/en/index.html>

Since 2007 the RRSA has had its own journal, namely the *Romanian Journal of Regional Science*⁴, with two issues per year. The journal has a large international participation, with more than half of the articles authored by foreign scholars, thus stimulating the creation of bridges between Romanian and foreign researchers. It is indexed in many international databases (e.g. RePEc-Ideas, EBSCO, DOAJ, Cabell's) and the articles have a large number of citations in other journals.

The RRSA has constantly encouraged the dissemination of the research results in regional science and the debates on 'hot' subjects in regional development by organizing very attractive meetings: conferences, round tables, workshops, seminars, etc. The next section examines the contributions in this respect of the first ten conferences of the RRSA.

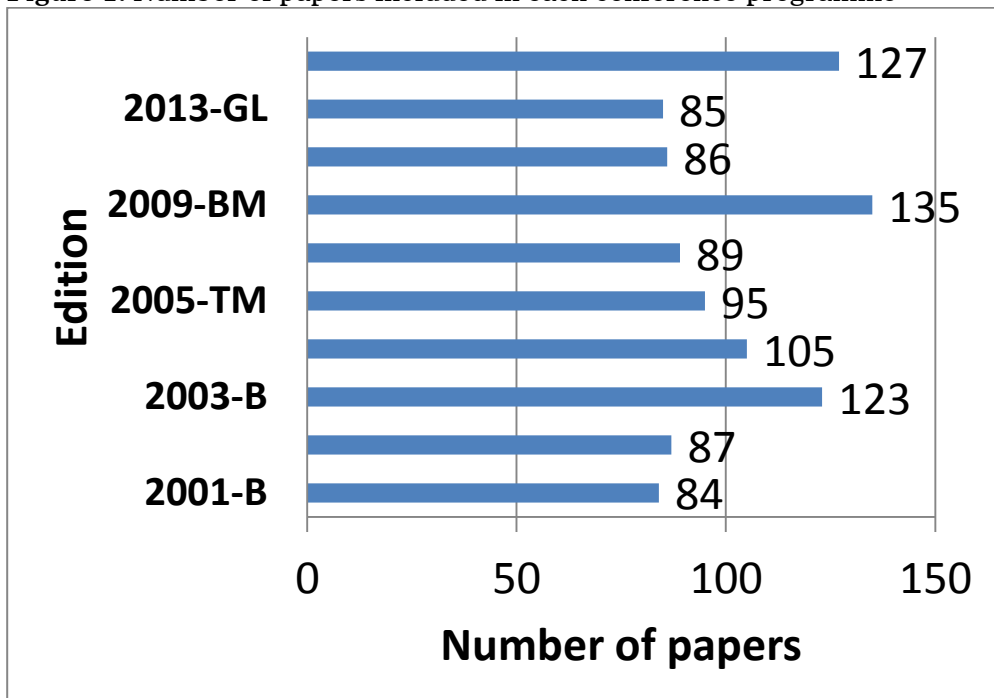
The first ten conferences of the RRSA: facts and figures

The first international conference of the RRSA was organized in 2001, followed by annual meetings until 2005, inclusively. Afterwards an international conference was held every two years, smaller scale meetings being planned between two consecutive conferences. The latest international conference – the 10th – took place in Suceava, in May 2015. Table 1 and Figure 1 present the city, the co-organiser university and the number of papers included in the programme for each conference. This number varied from 84 papers at the first conference, in 2001, in Bucharest to 135 in 2009, in Baia Mare. Other conferences with a number of papers above 100 were held in Bucharest, 2003 (123), Galati, 2004 (105), Suceava, 2015 (127).

⁴ <http://www.rrsa.ro/rjrs>

Table 1: Conference city and co-organisers

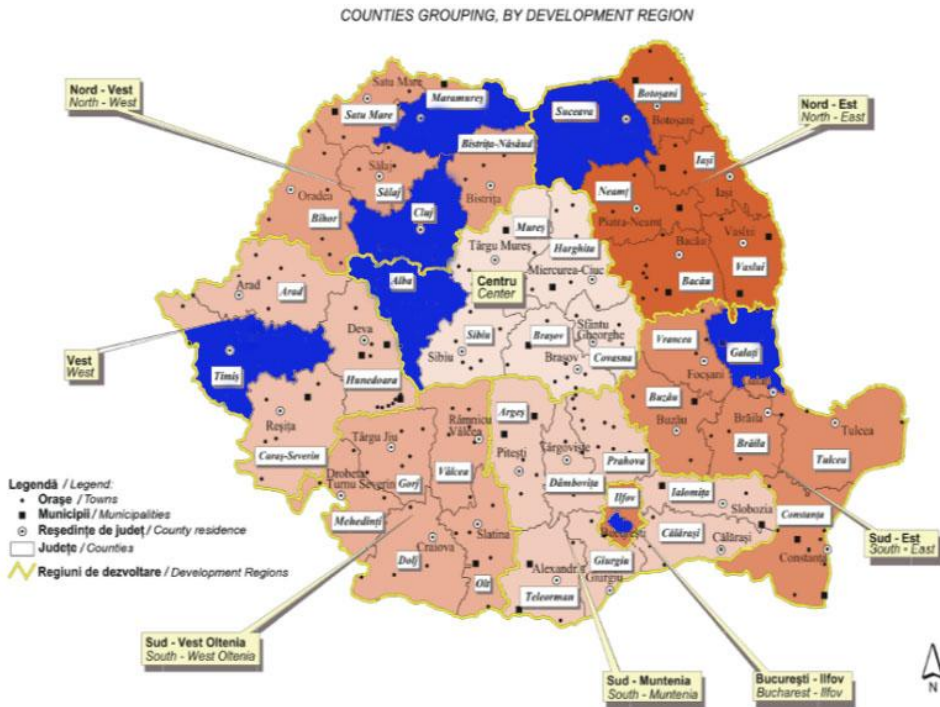
Conference Nb.	Year	City	Co-organiser
1	2001	Bucharest	Bucharest University of Economic Studies
2	2002	Bucharest	Bucharest University of Economic Studies
3	2003	Bucharest	Bucharest University of Economic Studies
4	2004	Galati	"Danubius" University
5	2005	Timisoara	West University
6	2007	Alba Iulia	"1 Decembrie 1918" University
7	2009	Baia Mare	North University
8	2011	Cluj-Napoca	"Babes-Bolyai" University
9	2013	Galati	"Danubius" University
10	2015	Suceava	"Stefan cel Mare"

Figure 1: Number of papers included in each conference programme

Source: author's representation, based on www.rrsa.ro data

Also, Map 1 offers an image of the region and county where the conference was held, demonstrating the constant preoccupation of enlarging the geographical spread of the host area.

Map 1: The geographical distribution of the counties that hosted RRSA conferences



Note: the host counties are highlighted in blue.

The conference topics were chosen in close relationship to the questions of high interest at national and international scale in each time period (Table 2). For example, when Romania was engaged in the preparations for accession to the EU the main topics were “Opportunities and Constraints in the European Integration Process” (2002) or “Regional Development and Structural Equilibrium of National Economy” (2004) while, after accession, the emphasis was placed on “The Impact of Romania’s Accession to the EU on Regional Structures” (2007), “Regional Structural Changes in the EU” (2011), “Regional Development and <Europe 2020> Strategy” (2015). Under the ‘umbrella’ of the main topic a series of issues were selected as constant or special themes of the parallel sessions. In the former category can be mentioned regional growth theories and models,

regional statistics and planning, regional econometrics, regional labour markets, migration, sustainability and regional development, infrastructure and regional development, knowledge economy – the regional dimension, tourism and regional development, SMEs, entrepreneurship and regional clusters, local economy and administration, cross-border cooperation, etc.. In the latter category are included the regional perspective of European integration, structural and functional changes at regional level, regional and urban competitiveness, the economic crisis effects on territorial cohesion, learning regions and territorial capital, shrinking cities, etc.

Each conference had as keynote speakers distinguished scholars from Romania and from abroad (Table 2), whose presentations became real sources of inspiration for the ongoing research projects of the RRSA members. Also, prominent representatives of regional development practice at EU and national level delivered messages of a major importance, able to shape the vision of regional policy in the forthcoming years. Thus, at the 10th conference in May 2015 Mrs. Corina Cretu, the European Commissioner for Regional Policies sent a message about the priorities of her mandate, concentrating on investment in real economy, the consolidation of administrative capacity and good governance, zero-tolerance policy towards fraud, and the preparation of the cohesion policy after 2020 (Cretu, 2015). Representatives with top positions in the Ministry of Regional Development, regional development agencies, county councils, etc. expressed and explained highly relevant policy options too, stimulating animated debates.

Table 2: Conference topics and keynote speakers

Conference Nb.	Topic	Keynote speakers
1	Current Issues of Regional Development in Romania	Geoffrey Hewings, U.S. Peter Nijkamp, the Netherlands (messages)
2	Opportunities and Constraints in the European Integration Process	Angelo Rossi, Switzerland (message)
3	Theories and Models of Regional Competition	Charles Leven, U.S.
4	Regional Development and Structural Equilibrium of National Economy	Manfred M. Fischer, Austria
5	Partnerships for Regional Development	Takeo Ihara, Japan
6	The Impact of Romania's Accession to the EU on Regional Structures	Jean-Marie Huriot, France
7	Territorial Cohesion: Growth-Convergence-Competitiveness	Ewa Bojar, Poland Dan Candea, Romania
8	Regional Structural Changes in the EU	Gyula Horvath, Hungary Dan Candea, Romania Maciej Turala, Poland
9	Regional Development between Recent Experiences and Future Challenges	Peter Nijkamp and Karima Kourtit, the Netherlands Maciej Turala, Poland
10	Regional Development and "Europe 2020"	Manfred M. Fischer, Austria Jouke van Dijk, the Netherlands Gheorghe Zaman, Romania Gyula Horvath, Hungary

Going further to the content of presentations in the conference sessions, a constant feature was the endeavour of each participant to contribute quality papers, some of them launching new concepts, ideas or anticipating solutions for phenomena that started to manifest with higher intensity after a good number of years. For exemplification, three issues have been selected.

First, it is the RRSA framework that the philosophy of the EU structural-type assistance in the pre-accession period was clearly conceptualized and explained, serving as background for outlining relevant topics in the nationally funded project competitions. Thus, in her paper Nica (2001) emphasized that the EU support via pre-accession instruments has a twofold significance: "on the one hand the financial aid was viewed as a way of reducing economic and social disparities between the candidate and the EU member countries; on the other hand, working with pre-accession instruments, creating the

institutional framework for measures implementation, action monitoring and impact evaluation allowed the candidate countries' authorities to get used to European Commission's procedures and, thus, to be prepared for the administration of the much higher amounted financial funds after accession to the EU" (translation from Romanian and quoted by Constantin, 2006, p.6). In the same context criticism was formulated with regard to the regional development planning at the beginning of 2000s, pointing to the prevalent sectorial orientation that determined, in many situations, an ineffective distribution of development funds. The proposed solution was the change of emphasis to a complex area programme-project package approach, aiming to turn to good account the endogenous development potential (Pascariu, 2002; Simion, 2002; Nicolae and Constantin, 2001). This idea, which was paid a special attention by the policy-makers, can be considered the root of the current orientation on 'integrated regional investment', a basic option included in the Romania-EU Partnership Agreement 2014-2020 and in the derived Regional Operational programme for the same period.

Second, the papers presented at the RRSA conferences had a conspicuous contribution to the way of approaching the regional cluster issue in the case of Romania. They have succeeded to change the narrow and, in many cases, unrealistic focus on clusters 'à la Porter' only to a more nuanced view, in accordance with the country's realworld. The attention was drawn to the quite large number of clusters with strong spatial concentration of firms but weak internal local bonds, indicating that in many regions cluster development is behind the expectations and the cluster support policies should be adapted to the specific regional context (Constantin et al., 2011; Pauna, 2013; Radu, 2013). This view was in line with the ideas expressed in previous papers by Rosenfeld (2002), Leick (2010) and the cluster typology proposed by Torre (2008). This typology combines the cluster groups based on the localization of inter-firm relations with the groups resulted from the organization of inter-firm relations, leading to four clustering cases, each of them requiring policies adapted to their features.

Third, the debates on the migration phenomenon fostered by the RRSA conferences revealed some facts considered 'marginal' in a period when a huge proportion of studies were concentrated – with good reasons, otherwise – on the out-migration of Romanian workers. At that time little attention was paid to the fact that, after accession, Romania had become the Eastern border of the EU, linked with the

Middle and Far East by a 'green boundary' quite easy to cross and, as a consequence, a complex immigration management framework would have been necessary, with a special emphasis on the hosting of refugees and asylum-seekers (Constantin et al., 2008; Zaharia; 2007; Roman and Roman, 2009; Patache, 2007; Constantin, 2005). Now, in the context of the current refugee crisis that the EU countries are painfully confronted with, the proposals formulated good years ago by the Romanian researchers with regard to receiving and treating of refugees and asylum seekers are seen in a totally different light, confirming a 'forward-looking' orientation of the debates stimulated by the RRSA conferences.

Concluding remarks

From its formal establishment in 2001, the RRSA has proven to be a strong, effective and supportive network for regional science research in Romania, with a deep integration in the regional science international community. It is also characterized by member affiliation diversity and an interdisciplinary orientation that enabled its members to participate in important national and international research projects and to develop valuable papers which contributed to both the advance of regional science in Romania and to viable solutions for regional development practice. The ten RRSA conferences organised up to present demonstrated a solid continuity in participation and the capacity of the papers to connect the current realities to the past phenomena that influenced them as well as to the future challenges, with anticipating approaches in national and international context.

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