

FOREWORD

The bi-lateral geographical seminars had initiated by Polish geographers after World War II. The seminars gave an excellent and practically the only opportunity to develop personal contacts and to discuss new trends and methods of geography with Western colleagues. In 1959, I spent 4 months at the Institute of Geography, Polish Academy of Sciences, and I learned a lot there professionally – and also about the mechanism of contact-building across the rather closed Iron Curtain. Let me mention here the name of the late Professor Leszczycki and Kostrowicki, who helped me enormously during my international scientific career.

Following the Polish experiences, I succeeded to organize French–Hungarian (1962), then British–Hungarian, Polish–Hungarian and US–Hungarian Geographical seminars. In 1971, the International Geographic Union organized its very first regional conference (on the geography in Europe) in Budapest – when Prof. Leszczycki was the president of the IGU and myself headed the Hungarian National Committee of the IGU.

Now, the world is open for the present generation. There are many opportunities to develop international relations, to develop multinational projects, to carry out researches abroad. The bi-lateral seminars are over – except the Polish–Hungarian one. Today, we start the XV. Polish–Hungarian Seminar, what we enlarged and transformed into an East-Central European Regional Seminar – as a follow up of the Warsaw Regional Forum.

But one could question: what are the reasons for a regional cooperation and exchange of ideas besides the great number of other opportunities? I have four responses for such a question.

The first aim may be to test and – if necessary – to modify regional models and methods what are generally used in regional researches. These models were formulated mostly in the most developed countries (first of all in the US and UK), based on the socio-economic processes of these leading economies. It is well known that East Central European regional processes show a lot of special peculiarities, not only because of the consequences of communist period and the paths of transition but even of a longer period of history. I feel that, in the excitement of many new phenomena, the theoretical researches have been somewhat neglected in our region although our experiences may be useful for the whole emerging economies' world.

The second reason for such a seminar that it could contribute to our competitiveness in a globalizing world, may contribute to transnational regional develop-

ment plans, to a co-ordinated application of the geographical knowledge in regional policies. “Catching up with the West” has been a century-old desire in our countries. Now we have a unique opportunity to reach this aim within a few decades – but it wouldn’t mean at all a simply copying of Western regional processes. Regional development processes – like economic rise and decline of regions, the formation of settlement network, etc. – have of a long-term character, consequently we should transform and modernise our – somewhat traditional – East-Central European regional structure.

The final result will be necessarily different than the northern or western European development – what is evident, it is a part of the European diversity. The differences are not the simple consequences of the 45 years of Communist rule, but they express partly the continuation of those endemic processes, which evolved before World War II, during the whole modernisation era of East-Central Europe. These processes didn’t disappear entirely, just they became deep-frozen during the state socialist period, they were conserved in traditional value judgements (e.g. in the symbolic values of the city centres), in the social memory and they resurfaced during the transition. It is our evident duty to analyse and to define these specific East-Central European features.

My third answer is that our cooperation may contribute to insert between global and local the transnational macro-region, as a possible territorial framework for regional development. Whereas the small-scale transborder cooperation are quite successful in many cases, there are very few serious attempts to prepare development schemes of larger regional units, like the Carpathian Region, or the Central Danube Valley. It’d be desirable if joint researches would explore the opportunities of the potential of large-scale regional development within East-Central Europe. It is evident, that empirical studies are generally limited on the regional processes within a single country, but we shouldn’t neglect the thinking in larger territorial frame, to set up programs for diminishing regional differences within East Central Europe (and not just within the countries), and for a better use of the economy of scale and the potential of a cultural network offered by a larger transnational region. We should not start with too ambitious government programs, rather to offer opportunities to local small and medium-sized enterprises, civil associations, employment in tourist and cultural industries, etc. The mutual economic interest gives a stronger cohesion than political slogans.

My favourite example is the Regio Basiliensis, the transnational region in the lower Rhine Valley, with Basel as a center, covering Swiss, German and French territories. This region started the transnational cooperation more than forty years ago, on the basis of business cooperation. The official – government – approval came much later. Besides the economic advantages, this cooperation contributed to the diminishment of the traditional French-German animosities. This outcome may

be the fourth reason of the East-Central European cooperation in regional researches: to contribute – modestly – to a better understanding and to diminish animosities among the different nations of East Central Europe.

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