

CHRONICLE

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Report on the 2014 Regional Conference of the International Geographical Union

Krakow, 18–22 August, 2014

The International Geographic Union (IGU) has long history in uniting geographers from all over the world by organising large-scale congresses around the globe every four years. Between the congresses smaller-scale regional conferences give the chance to gather and discuss research results and to develop disciplines. This year the regional conference was held in Krakow following the 2013 conference in Kyoto. Even though, it was ‘only a regional conference’ great number of researchers attended from a wide range of countries from all over the world, for example from China, Nigeria or Brazil. The timing of the conference coincided with the 650th anniversary of the Jagiellonian University, which provided excellent spiritual setting for the conference. The Opening Ceremony and the Ice-breaker party took place in the Auditorium Maximum of the Jagiellonian University, in the very centre of the city, only few blocks away from the historical Old Town and



Jagiellonian University building for natural sciences (Photo: Zita MARTYIN)

Wawel. The regular conference venue was the newly-built and easily accessible Campus where sessions, workshops and the closing ceremony took place in three buildings.

The number of participants at the conference far exceeded the expectations, more than 1,400 presentations, lectures and posters were delivered in 41 sessions and in four special workshops. The theme of the conference was “Changes, Challenges and Responsibility” that drew attention to the constantly changing environment, society and economy which stimulate geographers to find new methods and to develop new ideas in order to understand better the outside world. The conference not only emphasised the importance of recent geographical and interdisciplinary researches but also the responsibility of researchers to find solutions for actual problems, safeguarding sustainability for the future.

Numerous presentations focused on climate change and its effects on the physical and social environment. For example, the Hazard and Risk Commission’s Disaster and Resilience session put the emphasis on regionally developed but globally adaptable methods for impact and risk assessment, for instance landscape hazards such as floods or earthquakes. Several types and aspects of hazards and risks were presented from flash floods to droughts

and from tsunami to nuclear vulnerability. The presenters of the session highlighted that it is crucial to combine risk indicators with socio-economic indices. Moreover, time-space modelling of the behaviour of the society should be a more decisive factor in assessments. Different viewpoints from social geography were applied in traditionally physical geographical topics such as gender, political power, vulnerability and deprivation which are strengthening the original synthesising feature of geography.

Participants could also discuss the effects of migration from different points of view. The numerous and various sessions showed how diverse this topic is. Not only the economic drivers but also the political, religious and environmental factors were in focus. Presenters described the reasons and the outcomes of migration which is undoubtedly but not exclusively a local issue. Mentioning only a few examples without completeness, there were presentations about sacralisation



Globe fountain situated at the main entrance of the building for natural sciences (Photo: Gábor LADOS)



St. Mary's Basilica at the main market square of Krakow (Photo: Zoltán Kovács)

of public spaces in Poland, emigration of young and skilled Spaniards, or climate refugees.

Intense discussion took place about the role of scale and the reliability of census in the Urban Commission: Urban Challenges in a Complex World's session. The question rose whether national census data and their spatial resolution are adequate to measure current versatile changes in the urban environment. Unanimously, experts emphasised the need of better, extensive and specialised databases, which would provide more up-to-date and accurate information in the field. Additionally, these databases would be more cost-efficient to operate and to be maintained, than organising national censuses in every ten years. The session provided insights to new theoretical and methodological approaches for instance in the case of the real estate market in Fukushima, the diversifying Polish metropolitan areas or the segregation in post-socialist cities like Budapest.

The conference provided not only high quality presentations, but also opportunities for recreation and possibilities to get to know Krakow and Southern Poland a little bit better. As an outdoor social event, participants could visit the Stara Zajezdnia restaurant in the former Jewish quarter of Krakow called Kazimiers. Those who were interested had the opportunity to visit and experience the charming atmosphere of Krakow's Old Town including the Wawel and the historical city centre.

For those who were less in the tourist mood, an approximately three hour long guided tour introduced the former socialist new-town Nowa Huta. This programme focused not only on the development of the new-town which is nowadays a district of Krakow, but also let an insight to the evolution of the Solidarity movement, which had strong roots among the workers of the Nowa Huta metallurgical complex. A small exhibition presented

original relicts and items and contemporary art works portraying the role of the movement in the transition. Nowa Huta is today under architectural protection, as a perfect example for Soviet planning idealism of the 1950s. A semicircle shape is enmeshed by avenues and boulevards meeting in the very centre which is called today: Reagan square. The buildings are representing the socialist realism doctrine, the so called Stalin-baroque style. Maybe one of the most interesting imprints of the transition into capitalism in the district is the functional change of the Świt (Down) Cinema. The building was designed and built in the early 1950s, and nowadays the former palace of the socialist propaganda is the palace of consumer society as a home of a TESCO supermarket.

It is worth mentioning that this year, even more than earlier, many representatives, researchers and PhD students of the Hungarian geographical community attended the event and presented an inspiring lecture at the IGU Regional Conference in Krakow. Almost all main research centres were represented, like the Geographical Institute and the Institute of Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and also the country's leading universities like Debrecen, Miskolc, Nyíregyháza, Pécs and Szeged. Hungarian geographers arrived not only from Hungary, but also from the Carpathian Basin (Babeş-Bolyai University) and from the Hungarian Diaspora from all over Europe (highlighting only a few cities: Turku, Vienna, Joensuu, Berlin, and Groningen) to present their research results.

As a conclusion, the IGU Regional Conference was far more worldwide than the organisers and the participants expected. Outdoor programmes gave the opportunity to discover Krakow and its surroundings and to know each other better, strengthening the connections among geographers which hopefully will lead to fruitful cooperation. The various and wide-range geographic and interdisciplinary topics gave the possibility to the attendants to get a little insight how recent geographical researches take the responsibility to accept the challenge of environmental, social and economic changes. The next IGU regional conference will take place in Moscow in August 2015, however, for Hungarian geographers and colleagues working in Central Europe the main attraction will probably be the 5th Congress of EUGEO to be held in Budapest, 31 August – 2 September 2015.

GYULA NAGY