

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL STUDIES

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On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Institute for Regional Studies, the HUN-REN CERS organised a three-day event series in May 2024 in the Granary visitor centre of the Bishopric of Pécs. On the first day, the 10th Village Conference was held, and the international "RKK40" anniversary conference in English on the second and third days.

The legal predecessor of the Institute for Regional Studies, the Transdanubian Research Institute (DTI) was founded in Pécs in 1943. The Centre for Regional Studies (CRS) was established in 1984 on the basis of the DTI, which has been an academic research institute since 1955, and has acquired a networked organisational structure based on regional units, which it has preserved even after its integration into the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies (CERS) of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2012. The institute is a leader among national research institutes in regional science, not only owing to its size, but also due to the presence of its four scientific departments in various regions of the country, providing valuable local knowledge and embeddedness. The understanding of the spatial patterns of natural, social and economic resources and the reduction of spatial disparities, which are key to the country's competitiveness and balanced development, requires a complex social science approach. The Institute for Regional Studies of the CERS, the base institute for regional science in Hungary, has the critical mass for interdisciplinary research in economics, geography, sociology, political science and law, providing expertise in the above fields.

The colleagues of the HUN-REN CERS Institute for Regional Studies (IRS) are dedicated to strengthening the position of regional science in Hungary through their research, teaching, doctoral school management and science organisation activities. All of them are committed to advancing this field of science; at the same time, they intend to maintain a balance between domestic and international research and publications in the interests of Hungarian and, within this, rural science. This dual commitment is based on values rooted in IRS's past, building a bridge between past and future (<https://rki.krtk.hun-ren.hu>).

The conference celebrating the 40th anniversary was entitled „Regional and rural development trends over the last forty years”. Over the two days, a morning block of plenary sessions, a round table and 17 parallel sessions were organised. The opening plenary session featured distinguished speakers. Tibor Navracsics, Minister of Public Administration and Regional Development, was the guest of the conference, and in his presentation he reviewed the past decades of Hungarian regional development, from the initial challenges of the years before the regime change (the housing crisis due to accelerating urbanisation, the industrial decline due to the weak competitiveness of the economy, the weakness of territorial decision-making levels due to over-centralised decision-making, the relatively small size of rural economic poles), to the crisis triggered by the change of regime, which exacerbated territorial disparities. In the 2010s, policymakers faced a number of difficulties, some of them inherited, including institutional weaknesses, persistent regional disparities, the effects of climate change, the difficulty of accessing some areas by public transport, the depopulation of villages and small rural towns, and the sectoral approach to development policy at the expense of targeted territorial aid. The fact that the gap in GDP per capita has not narrowed in recent decades and the persistence of the relative backwardness of the north-east and south-west regions of the country were mentioned as the major challenges for the country's regional development policy. Population growth can only be observed in the Budapest agglomeration, around Győr and in the eastern basin of Lake Balaton, while Budapest is also experiencing population loss. Looking ahead to the future of national regional development policy, the Minister highlighted three main pillars. Firstly, the place-based approach, the role of functional zones reaching across administrative borders, secondly, the renewal of the financing system, in which sectoral and territorial investments are to be integrated in complex territorial programmes, supported by a territorial development fund. Thirdly, the renewal of the institutional system to make it more people-centric, with an emphasis on multi-level governance, cooperation between local actors and government bodies and the creation of a new territorial support service.

The second speaker of the plenary session was Roland Jakab, CEO of HUN-REN, who gave an overview of the current situation of the research network and the ongoing developments affecting the network. He stressed that both within the network and the network's management centre, the aim is to focus on higher efficiency, high-quality research, innovation and their complex impact. The speaker detailed the process of the revision of the HUN-REN strategy and the work of the different national and international actors involved, as well as the different aspects of the renewal, the connected programmes and initiatives.

Following the CEO, Imre Fertő, Director General of the HUN-REN CERS, gave a presentation on the characteristics of the research centre, its mission and the impact of the

teaching and research work carried out within its framework. The official opening and welcoming speeches were coordinated by Viktor Varjú, Director of the IRS. The plenary session was started by Franziska Sielker, lecturer at the Technische Universität Wien and the University of Cambridge, who spoke about cross-border cooperation between cities and regions from a European perspective. She referred to the growing trend in the number of cooperation projects, the available support frameworks, the various types of cooperation and mentioned some typical examples, including cooperations along the Danube River. She also presented new framework conditions and thematic elements for future trends, including the impact of climate change, the green transition, demographic transition, digitalisation and artificial intelligence, industrial transition and the autonomy of supply chains, geopolitical challenges and the expected diversification of EU funding mechanisms. The second speaker was James W. Scott, professor at the University of Eastern Finland and HUN-REN CERS IRS researcher, who gave a presentation titled "Tracing multifarious links between borders, geopolitics and geographical imaginations". He presented the work of IRS's Borders Research Group, the different interpretations of borders and their significance in the space covered by European integration. As an example, he mentioned the situation in the Carpathian Basin and the difficulties in institutionalising cross-border cooperation. The unravelling of the difficulties of such cooperation is progressing slowly in Europe, reflecting an evolutionary process of social innovation and institutional change. The plenary session was concluded by József Benedek, professor at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, who presented the latest results of the work of the Sustainable Development Research Centre of the University. Their research focused on the measurement, visualisation and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), using innovative monitoring methods and GIS tools. Their aim was to respond to the challenge that monitoring of the SDGs at regional and local level has not yet been implemented. The SDG performance toolkit at the local level has shown that urban regions are more sustainable than rural areas, due to the fact that only three of the 17 SDGs address environmental sustainability, while the others measure the social and economic dimensions of sustainability. Their SDG Index has been adopted in the international assessment toolkit.

During the first day of the anniversary conference, sessions were held in four different venues, followed by a round table discussion to round off the day's professional programme. The topic was the re-industrialisation of developed and peripheral regions of Hungary, which was discussed by the participating experts through the examples of Győr and Pécs. The discussion was moderated by Zoltán Gál, senior research fellow at the HUN-REN IRS and lecturer at the University of Pécs, with invited speakers Gábor Lux (HUN-REN IRS), Judit Berkes (HUN-REN IRS and Széchenyi István University, Győr) and András Trócsányi

(University of Pécs). The main lessons of the debate are that, in a broader European context, Europe is not in a position to take the lead in the ongoing industrial revolution, while the results of the re-industrialisation of Central and Eastern Europe are mixed. The regions that have benefited from the inflow of foreign direct investments have experienced a significant boom, while those that have not have become peripheral. However, for the region as a whole, the FDI inflows have resulted in an asymmetric dependency, and the initial benefits can no longer be reaped, the growth rate has slowed down, and alternative development opportunities need to be explored. The different development paths of the two cities, Pécs and Győr, are rooted not only in their geographical location but also in their distinct history, as Győr specialised in mechanical engineering activities during the industrial revolution, which could be easily converted to meet the changing needs of the post-transition era. While specialisation in high value-added industries provided Pécs with considerable prosperity, after the 1950s this development was interrupted and, with the decline of the industrial sector, it was unable to use its mining knowledge as a base for development. At the same time, in Pécs the knowledge provided by the university was not adapted to the needs of the local economy, while Győr was able to meet this challenge. Pécs lacks the critical mass to rely on its cultural industries, while Győr is also vulnerable due to the one-sided sectoral dominance of the automotive industry. Győr may find it easier to attract higher value-added alternatives, while Pécs can also identify sectors that can ensure long-term development on a small scale but in a diverse range (high value-added manufacturing industries and innovative sectors drawing on the university's knowledge base), as they are characterised by stable family businesses, a good knowledge base, slow growth, process innovation and the application of I4.0 solutions. But a sad experience of local, innovative initiatives in peripheral areas in Western Europe, too, is that they can no longer find the path to growth locally, so these businesses move on to larger market opportunities, to capitals or from Hungary to Western countries. Large-scale, leapfrog growth cannot be expected in Pécs and its region, but through gradual development and medium-scale innovation, following the example of rural Germany and rural Austria or even the Czech Republic, the region can stabilise its position.

The rest of the conference was divided into 12 sessions, with 90 speakers presenting their research. The sessions were structured around a few well-defined themes. The main themes of the programme were mainly related to sustainability in environmental, economic and social terms. Not only were there parallel sessions on sustainability, but also a plenary lecture by József Benedek, as outlined above. Demographic challenges, which are of far-reaching importance for the development of human capital, have been approached from several angles. A recurrent theme of the conference was cooperation on a wider scale, with a particular focus on cross-border cooperation.

Economic development issues were also highlighted – this was reflected in several parallel sessions and the round table discussion described above. Linked to this was a key message of the conference, namely that any positive change can only be achieved through a gradual and bottom-up approach, supporting grassroots initiatives and through strategic coordination of local actors. Regional scientists tried to analyse territorial disparities at the lowest possible territorial level.

Urban and rural development issues were equally represented among the themes. The role of small-scale, grassroots social initiatives and local institutions was also addressed by the conference programme committee. Accordingly, the message of the conference was that local development should be supported by broad-based, diversified activities, starting on a smaller scale and built up incrementally, as described above.

The anniversary conference was both retrospective and forward-looking, but with a greater emphasis on a strategic approach. The diverse mix of invited guests reflected the openness of the Institute to policy-makers at national and even EU level, as well as to the national and international research community, including those from the Carpathian Basin. As was repeatedly stated at the conference, many of the permanent challenges in the field of regional science have not yet been resolved, and thus, even beyond the next 40 years, a wide range of research directions will continue to emerge for the regional scientists' community.

Figure 1 Key topics of the conference



Source: authors' own elaboration.