

Address to the scientific symposium of the Rumanian Regional Science Association

5-6th April 2002

Ladies and Gentleman,
dear Affiliates to the Rumanian Regional Science Association. On behalf of the Regional Science Association International Council as well as on behalf of the European Organizing Committee of the Regional Science Association I am pleased to send to the Rumanian colleagues participating to this important national scientific symposium my best wishes and my admiring acknowledgement for the commitment with which, in for Rumania difficult times, they search and teach for the progress of the objectives of our science.

Let me start this address by stating that the regional science is a young science, which developed practically after the second world war, thanks to the theoretical contributions of an American scientist, Walter Isard, who was trying, developing what was in the origin an European approach, to integrate the space in the economic analysis. The initial part of the Regional Science Association International was founded in 1954 to promote the free exchange of ideas related to regional science. RSA membership today is drawn from all parts of the world, and includes people from a whole wide range of academic disciplines and professions who share an interest in spatial issues.

The European Regional Science Association was created at the beginning of the sixties of the former century to foster the exchange of ideas at the European level and to promote studies focusing on space, utilizing innovative tools, methods and theoretical frameworks specifically designed for regional analysis, as well as concepts, procedures and analytical techniques of the various social and other sciences. From this statement one can gather that the Regional Science Association pursues the theoretical analysis of spatial and regional problems and processes through an approach which intends to make place for the contributions of different disciplines. Next to economics and economic geographic it is useful to quote the political and social sciences as well as planning. On the methodological side mathematics, statistics, and some of the engineers' sciences (like for instance geodetic or traffic management and planning) have also made important contributions to the advance of regional science.

It seems to me further useful to remind that the regional science has beside the analytical also a normative side. Regional policy and later urban development have been central discussion topics in the European congresses, since the beginning of the activity of the European Association, back in the sixties of the former century. The content of the papers which are presented in the annual European congresses (between 250 and 450 every year) is much related to the political preoccupations which dominate the political debate in the regions and countries from which the participants to the congress are originating. I recall at this point that in Europe, there are currently sixteen national sections or language-based associations of the RSA with more than 1'000 members. Nevertheless some topics have emerged, over the last three to five years which constitute a common ground of research and discussion in the congresses and summer schools of the European Regional Science Association and which distinguish the European pattern of development of the regional science from that which one can find in the North American or in the Pacific Association, the two other continental branches of the Regional Science Association International.

Let me turn now to some of these trends in order to offer you a kind of summary of the state of the scientific discourse inside our science at the European level. I will not be able,

of course, to review the totality of the topics, but I will restrain myself to those which, I think, can be of interest also to you.

With the possible extension, in the next future, of the EU-membership to 12 new states, EU population and surface are going to be increased of about 1/3. EU GNP however will only grow of about 5%. At the same time the development disparities between the richest and the poorest European regions will double. The size of the population living in the poorest regions will also double. A new group of countries will enter the EU: the group of those countries whose income per head is smaller than 40% of the European average. If we take now the spatial dimension into account we notice that the enlargement of the EU will not reduce the present economic concentration in the central regions of the Union. The regional disparities in welfare levels will therefore continue to possess a spatial dimension along the centre-periphery divide. In the future however the periphery of the EU will be poorer than the actual periphery. This situation raises a formidable challenge for all those people, regional scientists included, who work to fulfil the cohesion objective of the European Union. As the second report of the European Commission on cohesion, published last year, shows, the actions and initiatives promoted by the EU in order to contain the economic and welfare disparities among the member states and among the regions have to be reinforced in view of the future enlargement of the Union membership.

A large debate involving researchers and planners, on the one side, and representative of the elected bodies, on the other side, is going to take place over the next years around the main themes of the regional development and of the regional policy in Europe. It will move from the observation that in the United States of America there is more regional equilibrium than in the future enlarged European Union. Large economic disparities between the European regions should therefore not be accepted as an unchangeable reality. With appropriate measures and programmes, which will vary according to the reasons for the existing lag in development, one should try, over the middle and the long term, to accelerate the economic growth of these regions. As underdevelopment usually concerns rural regions, a particular attention should be devoted to the future of the agriculture in these regions. Another important discussion theme will be in the next future, as it has been in the past fifteen years, the restructuring of old industrial regions. In an economy which is going to be more and more globalized, competition in the markets for labour intensive, and natural-resources-intensive goods will be further increasing. The actual controversy between EU and US about protectionism in the steel market is a good representation of the kind of conflict which will taken place in the future, between the large economic areas of this world, if the problems of industrial restructuring are not dealt with the necessary care. To diversify, is in this case imperative. But how to do it, it is a question which needs to be analysed region by region. A third discussion instance will be represented, in the future enlarged Europe, by those regions which suffer from handicaps of a geographical or natural origin. These can be very isolated regions in need of an adequate transport infrastructure, in order to improve their links to the neighbouring markets or ecologically damaged regions which need a long period of restoration and renewal. As in many cases old industrial, or ecological damaged regions are also urban regions, the urban issues, both the economic as well as the social ones, will also be part of the debate about the future of the European regions.

All the topics I mentioned are part of the daily preoccupations in teaching and research of the regional scientists, independently of the place in which their are working. I am pretty sure that these topics, together with others, more related to the present development aspects of your country, are also occupying much of the discussion devoted to regional

problems and policies in Rumania. If this is so, you are sharing, of course with a different perception of the things which happen and of the things one should do, in the international scientific debate which takes place today at the European level. This means that what you are searching about in Rumania is also of relevance for the international debate.

Let me state finally that if the centre-periphery issue is going to grow in importance, both in the political as well in the scientific debate, at the European level, over the next years, it is important that not only the voice of the central regions but also that of the peripheral region should be heard. Regional problems, as I rapidly tried to point out in this short address, cannot be analysed and solved with general models or ready made recipes, but need to be approached on the spot by representatives of the scientific and of the political world, who work out solutions which are suitable to the historical and cultural frame of the involved regions and are accepted by their populations. It is however equally important that the analyses and the solutions worked out in the peripheral regions should be made known at the centre, using the channels which help to the transmission of scientific knowledge at the international level. We think at the European Regional Science Association to be able to assume this task, at least with respect to the debate on regional development and regional policy. Please help us with your precious contributions to fulfil this important mission.

I thank Prof. Daniela Constantin and her colleagues of the Rumanian Regional Science Association for the honour to address myself to the participants of this important symposium. I excuse myself for not being able to travel to Rumania, this time, and I wish to the your national symposium and to you all the best of successes.

Angelo Rossi

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Past member of committee of the French speaking section of the ERSA

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