

Eduardo Oliveira

## Conference Report

# *Building Bridges: Cities and Regions in a Transnational World*

*2016 Regional Studies Association, annual conference,  
Graz, Austria, 3–6 April 2016*

### **Introduction**

Cities and regions are central spatial scales for investigating the nature, dimensions and impacts of political, economic, social and environmental change. Since 1965, the Regional Studies Association (RSA) has been devoting attention to the theoretical development, empirical analysis and policy debate of issues at urban and regional scales. The 2016 RSA annual conference took place in Graz (Austria), between 3 and 6 of April. The theme of the conference was 'building bridges: cities and regions in a transnational world'. The RSA annual event was hosted by the 'Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz'. The scientific committee consisted of Michael Steiner, Jörn Kleinert and Johannes Mossböck. The University of Graz, an institution of higher education founded in 1585 by Archduke Charles II of Inner Austria, is Austria's second oldest university and one of the largest in the country. The conference brought together senior and early-career academics, as well as a good number of policymakers with the objective of initiating an interdisciplinary dialogue about the future of a transnational world of urban and regional cooperation.

Graz welcomed the delegates with a very warm early spring, and both the weather and the programme made it a privilege to attend the conference. The four plenaries, as well as the 98 parallel sessions, took place in an intensive three-day programme. Several special sessions, including those oriented to academics in the early stages of their careers, also strengthened the conference programme.

### **Plenary sessions**

Within a multidisciplinary programme, this report focuses primarily on plenary and special sessions. With often thought-provoking presentations, the plenary sessions covered different topics from structural transformation in regional economics in the

USA, to EU cohesion policy and worldwide demographic and migration challenges in the context of economic and financial crises. The plenary sessions focused on the themes presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Plenary sessions, RSA annual conference 2016**

Plenary	Presentation	Speaker
Opening plenary	Linkages and Structural Transformation in Regional Economies	Geoffrey Hewings
	Formal and Informal Institutions as Drivers of Diversification in European Regions	Ron Boschma (speaker) with authors Cortinovis, Nicola; Xiao, Jing; Van Oort, Frank
EU Cohesion Policy with Reflection on Third Country Liaisons	The Emerging Challenges for EU Cohesion Policy	Philip McCann
	What Can Regional Studies Tell Us about Why We Have an EU Cohesion Policy, and Does it Make Sense?	Iain Begg
	Refugee Integration in Times of Crisis	Jenny Phillimore
Immigration, Migration and Refugees	The Myths and Veracities of the European Migration Challenge	Martin Kahanec
	Migration Challenges in the Western Balkans	Erka Caro
Building Bridges – Macroregional Perspectives	Crises, Causes, Consequences: How a Mismanaged Crisis is Causing a Populist Backlash	Ewald Engelen
	Transforming Europe – between Convergence and Diversity	Wolfgang Schüssel

Source: The plenary presentations can be accessed through the following link, <http://www.regionalstudies.org/conferences/presentations/plenary-presentations-graz-2016>.

In the opening plenary session, Geoffrey Hewings (*University of Illinois, USA*) focused on regional competitiveness and complementarity. By exploring the links between and within regions, Hewings underlined the demographic challenges and opportunities as well as the ongoing changes in the organisational structures of firms through the example of car manufacturers in the USA. Ron Boschma (*Utrecht University, The Netherlands*) presented the preliminary results of a working paper on research conducted in 118 European regions. The aim of the study is to deepen the understanding of the role of institutions as drivers of diversification in European regions. The ‘quality of institutions’ and ‘regional diversification’, as well as ‘social capital’, were the key

concepts that emerged from Boschma's presentation, together with a preliminary conclusion that institutions matter for regional diversification.

Philip McCann (*University of Groningen, The Netherlands*) opened the second plenary session of the first day of the conference, with the challenges for the European Union's cohesion policy taking centre stage. Special focus was given to the analysis of pre/post-crisis in EU-15, EU-17 and regions in decline. Philip McCann also highlighted the changes in labour productivity, mainly due to demographic changes, which will also create challenges for the EU's cohesion policy. From the London School of Economics, Iain Begg presented to and discussed with a fully packed auditorium 'Why We Have an EU Cohesion Policy', questioning whether it makes sense. Begg underlined the misconceptions of the concept of cohesion. This is in line with Molle (2015), who emphasised that cohesion was introduced into EU policy without a precise definition. Despite the fact that the European Union has adopted several strategies to cope with a set of interrelated problems and spatial imbalances (Molle, 2014) – for instance, the Europe 2020 strategy – a handful of challenges remain unresolved, as Begg has argued. For instance, Begg has suggested that it is necessary to give real substance to multi-level governance and to look again at the notion of the 'regional'. It is also necessary to think beyond 2020 and reframe objectives to address patterns of migration.

Migration and demographic challenges evolved into transversal topics of discussion throughout the plenary sessions. This was also a central argument of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on demographic change and shrinking cities, which was based on a wide range of case studies from across the globe (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). The report accentuates the fact that OECD countries have been experiencing a decline in their urban populations over the past few decades owing to suburbanisation and de-industrialisation. This has resulted in a wide range of socioeconomic issues, such as increased unemployment rates, decreases in revenues and the degradation of properties. In addition, given the global demographic change and the local dynamics of the global economy (and of the effects of the global crisis), it is very likely that urban shrinkage will become an even more widespread phenomenon in the near future in Europe's urban areas, stated Großmann et al. (2013).

Aware of the migration and refugee challenges faced by European regions, the RSA sought to contribute to the debate through a plenary session. First, Jenny Phillimore (*University of Birmingham, UK*) discussed refugee integration in times of crisis. Phillimore's presentation provided a clear, humanised and well-informed picture of the integration of refugees and migrants in Europe. It contributed not only to the policy discussion on European integration, but also provided the delegates with concrete and real examples of the desires of individual migrants and how they might contribute to reframing the European integration agenda. Martin Kahanec (*Central*

*European University in Budapest, Hungary*) contributed with an academically informed presentation to clarify some misunderstandings over the impact of large numbers of migrants in the labour markets and welfare systems. Kahanec underlined that immigrants in the EU contribute to GDP and taxes. Moreover, immigration responds to skill gaps in the labour market. Erka Caro (*University of Jyväskylä, Finland*) particularly focused on recent migration dynamics, typologies and flows in the Western Balkans (WB) and in Europe. Erka Caro's starting point was that WB countries are trying to manage large waves of migrants, but they lack the adequate institutions, legal and policy frameworks to manage these flows. Furthermore, the WB countries are challenged by changes in their internal economic, social and political environments. A call for effective regional cooperation was made.

The final plenary session of the 2016 RSA conference was dedicated to macro-regional perspectives in Europe. Ewald Engelen (*University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*) discussed how a mismanaged crisis is causing a populist backlash by underlining four storylines as probable causes. This was a very timely and interesting discussion in which Engelen explained the effects of the crisis on economic activity in the EU and the USA, arguing that such crises result in a tendency within financially driven capitalist systems to overestimate capacity. The conference ended with Wolfgang Schüssel (former Federal Chancellor of Austria, 2000–7) discussing divergence and diversity in Europe. Schüssel provided a strong statement on restoring trust in Europe by underlining the need for more bottom-up policy/decision-making. He also highlighted that regions matter in Europe. This statement could be analysed in light of Charron et al.'s 2012 study on 'regional governance matters'.

## Special sessions

The multidisciplinary and diverse programme of the 2016 RSA conference was composed of 18 special sessions.<sup>1</sup> Special sessions covered topics such as 'entrepreneurial cities and regions', 'territorial governance', 'regional development' and 'EU integration'.<sup>2</sup> Urban issues, such as 'urban tourism' and 'urban-rural linkages', were also explored in Graz. Despite the scientific richness of the presentations, I underline here the sessions that targeted early-career researchers: (1) 'Early Career Researcher's Event: Creating Impact', and (2) 'Early Career Special Session on the Relation between Early Careers and the Job Market'.

The early career researcher's event on creating impact brought together David Bailey (*Coventry University's Business School, UK*), Sally Hardy (*RSA CEO, UK*) and Paul Hildreth (*Bartlett School of Planning, UK*). David Bailey debated the relevance of

1 See <http://www.regionalstudies.org/conferences/special-sessions/graz-special-sessions>.

2 See <http://www.regionalstudies.org/conferences/presentations/rsagraz2016-fullpapers> and <http://www.thers-ablog.com/2016/03/mentoring-and-support-on-phd-studentship.html>.

engaging with the press by sharing research finding interviews. Sally Hardy touched upon the impact of social media in making academic research known worldwide. She convincingly stated that in today's academic setting, something more than 'publish or perish' is necessary to share publications and engage with readers. Sally offered three curious taglines: (1) 'be discovered or die', (2) 'be visible or vanish' and (3) 'be cited or suffer', and other publishing tips which could help researchers in paving their careers. This is also in line with recent posts published in the *Regional Studies Blog*.<sup>3</sup>

The second early-career session saw Margareta Dahlström (*Karlstad University, Sweden*), Derek Roberts (*Copperbelt University, Zambia* and 2016 RSA conference bursary winner) and Andrew Beer (*RSA Chair and University of South Australia Business School*) inspire the audience. Michael Taster, a PhD student at the University of Sheffield who was co-sponsored by the RSA and Taylor & Francis, also joined in the conversation. The key message from this session was that PhD students and early-career academics are advised to be active in their field. Engaging with senior researchers, with the public via social media or the press is paramount to building and further solidifying an academic career. Moving between fields of expertise and engaging with non-conventional academic research were also identified as value-added activities.

## Awards

The Association builds its community in many ways, one of which is through the recognition of excellence. To achieve this end, a number of awards are made each year, and some of this excellence was recognised in Graz. Christophe Sohn and Julien Licheron, both from the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research, were awarded with the Best International Conference Paper.<sup>4</sup> The paper entitled 'From Barrier to Resource? Modelling the Border Effects on Metropolitan Functions in Europe' examines the effects of state borders on the performance of metropolitan areas in Europe. Eduardo Medeiros (*Lisbon University, Portugal*) was awarded the Best Early Career Conference Paper for his paper on 'Territorial Impact Assessment and Public Policies: The Case of Portugal and the EU'.<sup>5</sup> This paper tries to summarise the developments that occurred in the implementation of Territorial Impact Assessment procedures, both in the European Union and in Portugal specifically. Medeiros focused his analysis on the growing importance of the use of a more holistic and 'territorial' perspective in evaluating the impacts of public policies.

3 See <http://www.thersablog.com/2014/11/paving-way-to-career-turning-point-with.html>.

4 See <http://www.regionalstudies.org/conferences/presentations/best-international-paper-rsagraz2016>.

5 See <http://www.regionalstudies.org/conferences/presentations/best-early-career-rsagraz2016>.

## References

- CHARRON, N., LAPUENTE, V. and DIJKSTRA, L. (2012), 'Regional governance matters: a study on regional variation in quality of government within the EU', EU Directorate-General for Regional Policy, [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docgener/work/2012\\_02\\_governance.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/work/2012_02_governance.pdf) (accessed April 2016).
- GROBMANN, K., BONTJE, M., HAASE, A. and MYKHENKO, V. (2013), 'Shrinking cities: notes for the further research agenda', *Cities*, **35**, 221–25.
- MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ, C., KUBO, N., NOYA, A. and WEYMAN, T. (2012), Demographic change and local development: shrinkage, regeneration and social dynamics (OECD Working Papers), Paris, OECD Local Economic and Employment Development, <http://www.carltd.com/sites/carwebsite/files/Demographic%20Change%20and%20Local%20Development.pdf> (accessed April 2016).
- MOLLE, W. (2014), 'Competitiveness, EMU and cohesion experiences in the past (2000–2013); assessment of the present (2014–2020) and lessons for the future (2020 and beyond)', *International Journal of Management and Economics*, **44**, 39–50.
- MOLLE, W. (2015), *Cohesion and Growth: Theory and Practice of European Policy Making*, Abingdon, Routledge.
- RSA (REGIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION) (2015), Regional Studies Association development plan, 2015–2020, [http://www.regionalstudies.org/uploads/RSA\\_Development\\_2015\\_2020\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.regionalstudies.org/uploads/RSA_Development_2015_2020_WEB.pdf) (accessed April 2016).