
INTRODUCTION

NEW TRENDS IN THE GEOGRAPHICAL ORGANISATION OF SOCIETY: INTEGRATION AND DIFFERENTIATION WITHIN A UNIFYING EUROPE

The papers appearing in this special issue of *European Spatial Research and Policy* result from an international conference on *New Trends in the Geographical Organisation of Society: Integration and Differentiation within a Unifying Europe* held in June 2003 in Prague, Czech Republic. Following the success of the first international conference on post-socialism organised by the Post-Socialist Geographies Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society – with the Institute of British Geographers in May 2001 in London, the location of this international conference of scholars interested in post-communist urban and regional developments was purposefully planned to take place in one of the countries in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. This was to allow delegates from there better access and thus foster a truly east-west meeting.

During the past decade, there have been a large number of events where issues of post-communist transformations were discussed. However, participants from post-communist European countries only occasionally attended conferences in western countries and vice versa. Theoretical frameworks, research themes and research questions, ways of doing empirical research, and other aspects in both parts of the geographical community have been often different. Therefore, the main aim of the conference was to provide an opportunity in a collegiate academic environment for debates and mutual exchanges of research concepts, projects and experiences between geographers from post-communist Central and Eastern European, and Western European countries, whose research focuses on transforming geographies of post-communist Europe. The conference thus intended to stimulate a better understanding and closer co-operation between academics of both 'halves' of Europe.

The conference was co-organised by the Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Faculty of Science, Charles University of Prague in association with the Section of Social and Economic Geography of the Czech Geographical Society and the Post-Socialist Geographies Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers. The collaborative

effort of Czech and British geographers generated attention from participants from all parts of Europe. The city of Prague as the venue location offered not only an attractive urban environment, but also easy access from across Europe.

In view of the eastern enlargement of the European Union and the accession of eight Central and Eastern European countries, the Prague conference was timely and important. Taking a geographic perspective, the conference focused on a variety of issues of societal change in an integrating Europe. Changing geographical organisation of the current societies, together with new forms of integration and differentiation, are developing at a wide range of geographical scales. They reach from supra-national levels to the nation state level, and further to regional and local scales. The insights in events and processes taking place at these different scales give the community of geographers a better, more 'rounded' understanding of the many facets of the development and transformation processes in Europe since 1990. On the one hand, many varied issues require their own, specific scalar approaches. On the other, understanding, explanations and interpretations often require integration of analyses between different scales. In consequence, the notion of 'place' at different scales becomes the common, linking platform of various themes, analyses, and interpretations. Thus, rather than opting for thematic separation, often leading to quite narrow specialist 'clubs', the emphasis of the conference was on a more synoptic view of transformation processes at particular spatial scales and particular types of locale, or on multi-level systems of change. It is in this spirit that the following papers were prepared and have been compiled in this issue. They broadly follow two main thematic routes, one orientated on societal changes at regional, national and supra-national levels, and the other focused on urban and local transformations.

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