

# DOWN TO EARTH AND ITS CURRENT PROBLEMS (on the Results of the International Geographical Congress in Cologne, Germany, 25–30 August, 2012)

The 32<sup>nd</sup> International Geographical Congress (IGC)<sup>1</sup> sponsored by the *International Geographical Union (IGU)* took place Aug. 25–30, in Cologne, Germany. **Geographers from 80 world's countries attended with 2,400 delegates registering at the beginning of the Congress** – the record number in the last one-quarter of the century. The number of the participants could have been even bigger; however, submitted abstracts were first anonymously screened by a double-blind review of a

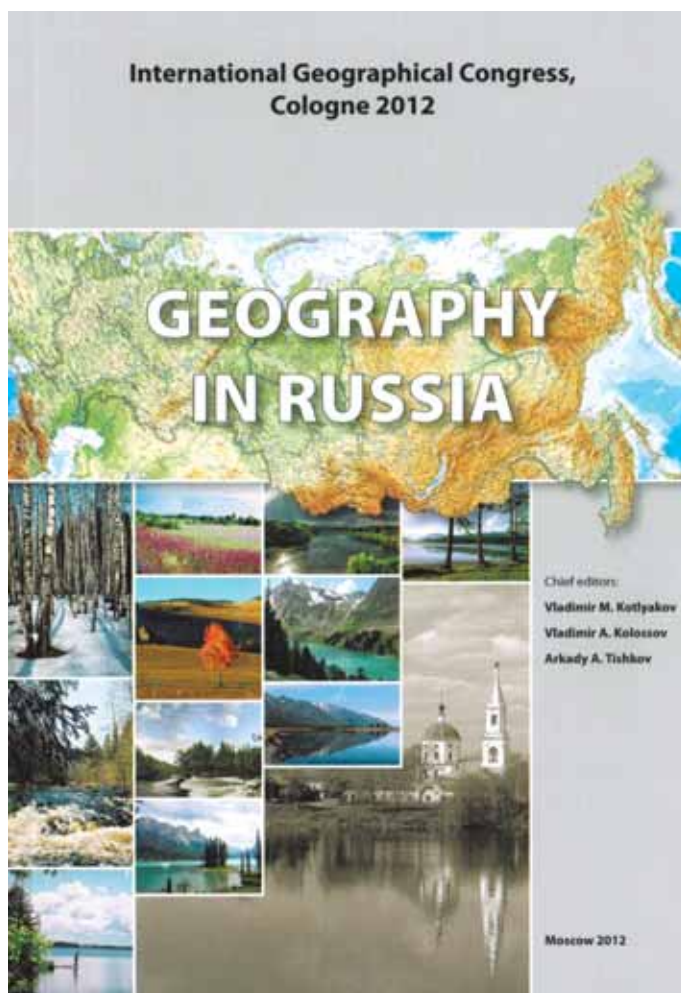
special international academic committee. The competition depended on the themes of the abstracts and the “popular appeal” of the individual sessions of the program already approved by this committee. The selection was conducted regardless of the authors’ standing: some abstracts of the IGU Vice-Presidents and of other known geographers were rejected.

Naturally, the delegation from the host country appeared to be the largest at the



**The City of Cologne – venue of the IGC 2012**

<sup>1</sup> The first International Geographical Congress was held in 1871 in Antwerp. In its present form, the IGU was founded in 1922 in Brussels. The governing body is the Executive Committee consisting of President, eight Vice-Presidents, General Secretary, Treasurer; it is elected by the General Assembly consisting of the heads of the national geographical societies and associations. The IGU structure also includes permanent commissions and research groups. Every four years, the IGU sponsors its Congresses. The Bulletin of IGU is published. The Soviet Union became a member in 1956. Coordination between Soviet geographical organizations and the IGU was achieved by the National Committee of the Soviet Geographers that has been transformed in 1992 into the Russian National Committee of the IGU (currently, Academician V.M. Kotlyakov is Chair and M.D. Ananicheva is Academic Secretary).



### The overview of Russian geography

Congress; it included about 1,000 members. The Russian delegation, along with the Japanese, Austrian, Chinese, and French, was one of the largest and included 100 members. The grant of the Russian Geographical Society (RGS) to the National Committee of the Russian Geographers helped to support participation of Russian geographers in the Congress (Academician V.M. Kotlyakov, Head). The delegation primarily included representatives of academic geography (Institute of Geography of RAS – 12 people, Institute of Geography of SB RAS – 5 people, Pacific Institute of Geography FEB RAS – 5, etc.), as well as a group of scientists from the Geography Faculty of Moscow

State University, headed by Academician N.S. Kasimov (over 30 people). The RGS grant also supported 15 young scientists from Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Irkutsk. The National Committee of the Russian Geographers and the Institute of Geography of RAS had published (for the Congress) a brochure, "Geography in Russia"<sup>2</sup>, a catalog of the Exhibition on the Russian geographical literature, and a booklet on the upcoming IGU Regional Conference in 2015 in Moscow. The Russian delegation held a reception where it presented uniquely designed souvenirs to the guests.

<sup>2</sup> Geography in Russia. Eds.: Vladimir M. Kotlyakov, Vladimir A. Kolosov, Arkady A. Tishkov. Moscow, 2012. 104 p.

The presence of the participants from Asian, African, and Latin American countries was especially important as these regions, as a rule, are not well represented at the IGU events. A special meeting of 60 participants from 12 African countries, headed by Professor Chris Mutambirwa from the University of Zimbabwe, was organized. Its purpose was to discuss prospects of a more significant participation of these countries in the IGU activities and geography development issues in Africa.

The Congress took place at the University of Cologne, i.e., one of the oldest and largest universities in Germany. "Down-to-Earth" call became the motto of the Congress, which can be interpreted as "Let's get closer to the Earth" or "It is time to deal with the Earth's problems". At the formal opening ceremony of the Congress that took place in a new spacious and comfortable area of the Cologne Philharmonic Hall, Rector of the University, Professor Axel Freimuth, expressed his gratitude for a chance to conduct such an event in Cologne. Frauke Kraas and Dietrich Soyez, co-Chairs of the Organizing Committee, emphasized the importance of the main Congress's topics: interrelation between transition to sustainable development, globalization, urbanization, climate change, preservation of biodiversity, and "green economy". An impressive presentation by Anne Glover (Great Britain), European Commission chief scientific adviser, caused an emotional response of the audience: she encouraged geographers to "yell" about the results of their research, i.e. to more actively bring the information to the attention of political leaders and the general public.

The Congress program was extremely diverse and innovative in its form. Thus, for the first time ever, it included sessions organized by the IGU commissions and thematic meetings initiated by different groups of scientists. There were about 400 of scientific sessions only. Daily, there were "scheduled" lectures (key lectures) by leading scientists and practitioners on the current and

generally important issues, which sparked great interest ("Society and Environment", "Urbanization and Demographic Change", "Global Change and Globalization", and "Risks and Conflicts"). The largest auditorium of the University with capacity for 1,000 people often could not accommodate all wishing to attend. Latecomers had to comply with the strict German rules of fire safety that do not allow standing in a lecture and regretfully went to other events.

Many introductory presentations and public lectures discussed the emergence of a new era – the Anthropocene. On a rigorous evidence-founded basis and using graphs and models, it was shown that human activity on the planet in the last century represented a powerful geological force causing *irreversible changes in the geosphere*, which can serve as an important argument to isolate, following the Pleistocene and Holocene, this new period.

The commissions (in the IGU, there are 40 in total) met in auditoriums specially designated to ease navigation in this "Congress Babylon". Several sessions were devoted to the problems of the use of economic mechanisms in the natural protection, sustainable resource management, and environmental issues of urbanization. The discussions also covered the concept of ecosystem services and approaches of "green economy" in the form declared at the World Summit "Rio+20".

Virtually all IGU commissions, groups, and projects had their organizational meetings ("business meetings") where reports of the chairpersons were presented, leadership elections were held, and commissions received new or replaced their members. Russian scientists kept their appointments in some IGU commissions: Geoinformatics (Professor V.S. Tikunov), Political Geography (Professor V.A. Kolosov), Evolution of the Environment (Professor A. Velichko), Biogeography and Biodiversity (Professor A.A. Tishkov), Karst (E.V. Trofimova), Health Geography (Professor S.M. Malkhazova), Cold Regions Environment (T.K. Vlasova), Stability of



**Members of the Russian delegation in front of the Cologne University building**

Water Resources (Professor N.I. Alekseevskiy), Hazards and Risks (Corresponding Member of RAS S.A. Dobrolyubov).

Overall, the Russian participants, including young geographers, whose attendance was supported by the RGS grant, presented more than 70 papers and posters. In this respect, we can mention the delegations from the Geography Faculty of Moscow State University, headed by Academician N.S. Kasimov, whose members made presentation at the meetings of over 10 commissions (Professors N.I. Alekseevskiy, S.M. Malkhazova, A.I. Alekseev, and others), the Pacific Institute of Geography FEB RAS (Academician P.Ya. Baklanov, Professor S.M. Govorushko, and others), the Institute of Geography of SB RAS (Professor L.M. Korytniy and others), the Institute of Geography of RAS (Professors V.A. Kolosov, A.A. Tishkov, T.K. Vlasova, Ye.V. Trofimova, M.D. Ananicheva, E.A. Belonovskaya, A.A. Medvedev, and others). However, the Russian geographers practically did not participate in the work of commissions on historical geography, geographical education, tourism geography,

applied geography, landscape science, urbanization and transportation geography, history of geographical cognition and some other disciplines.

Some Congress activities were targeted to geographers-practitioners and experts in the field of geoinformatics. Just before the start of the Congress, a special session on the problems of the development of geography in Europe was held. Thus, it is difficult to establish the exact number of the Congress participants.

One of the special sessions was devoted to the ambitious project of the IGU, initiated, albeit in a somewhat different form, by a former IGU President Adalberto Vallega. The project aims at establishing the International Year of Global Understanding by the UN General Assembly. In order to be implemented, this project has to be supported by UNESCO. One of its objectives is to improve the international position and the social role of geography. It should include research and programs to improve geographic education and dissemination

of geographical knowledge in a globalizing world. The main idea is to promote awareness of each person that their daily activities impact the environment on a global scale. The International Year of Global Understanding is also aimed at facilitating the integration of natural and social sciences, at providing scientific and social support for priority directions of UN and UNESCO, and on using positive results of the previous UN Years with the goals of achieving sustainable development. A booklet on this subject, including in Russian, was distributed among the participants. The project was presented by its coordinator Professor Benno Werlen (University of Jena), by a former President of the IGU Professor Bruno Messerli (Switzerland), and by Professor John Pickles (University of North Carolina, USA).

The other two special sessions hosted presentations of two IGU projects, "Geographical Magazines of the World" and "Sustainable Development of Cities" (the research advisor for both – Professor Ton Dietz from the Netherlands). The first project has been completed in general and its results include the creation of an online global database and a search engine on international and national geographic magazines available at the IGU site ([www.igu-online.org](http://www.igu-online.org)). The second project, implemented jointly by Dutch and Chinese experts, on contrary, is just beginning. Its mission is to create a website on sustainable urban development, recognized by the international scientific community and practitioners of municipal government, and then to create an IGU-sponsored center for sustainable cities certification.

Special attention of the IGU Organizing and Executive Committees was directed toward youth. The Congress held the traditional International Olympiad for high school students on geography; as usual, it was well attended: 128 participants from 32 countries participated. The Olympiad program consisted of a written part, a multimedia test, and a field part. In addition,

participants made poster presentations on the theme "Water Resources and Water Use Problems". The group of winners, who took the first twenty places by the total score, was dominated by students from Eastern and Central Europe, and the main prize was won by a contestant from Singapore. The winners were celebrated by high officials and all the participants at the opening ceremony of the Congress. The Russian participants were also not without rewards. The Russian team won two medals: "silver" by Maria Samoletova from St. Petersburg and "bronze" by Yegor Shustov from Slyudyanka (Irkutsk region). But most importantly, at the Olympiad, there was an atmosphere of friendship and prestige of geographical knowledge.

The Youth Forum was an important part of the program and its poster session of papers presented by young scientists was, admittedly, extremely successful. Usually, poster presentations remain on the periphery of the major events, but this time, the presentations were well attended and were often complemented with discussions in a relaxed atmosphere often resulting in the establishment of possible scientific cooperation. The Youth Forum also included interactive classes, "Science Project Management", "Thesis Work Optimization", "Publications in English: Where, When, and How", "Academic Text Art", "Collegiate Career Steps", "European Grants", "International Career Prospects for Bachelor-Students", etc.

The success of the youth programs was secured by special youth grants from the IGU and the organizers of the Congress. The program of the Congress, for the first time ever, included a special session for teachers of high school geography including discussions of issues of connecting academic research with training courses supported by federal and state ministries of education. The Organizing Committee has developed and implemented a program "IGC School – IGC in School», where a number of famous geographers gave public lectures at



At the Russian exposition of geographical literature

lycees and gymnasiums in North Rhine-Westphalia.

As usual, at the Congress, there was an exhibition of geographical literature, multimedia products, maps and atlases, which involved several major international publishers, as well as geographical societies of some countries. Russian exposition was one of the most representational. After the work of the exhibition, its materials were transferred to the University of Leibniz (Leipzig), where there is a large collection of the Russian-language scientific literature.

Concurrently with the Commissions' sessions, there were meetings of the IGU higher body – the General Assembly. The General Assembly elected President of the IGU. For the first time ever, this position is held by a representative from Russia – Professor **V.A. Kolosov**, Laboratory of Geopolitical Studies of the Institute of Geography of RAS. Previously, he served as the IGU Senior Vice-President. **This is a great success of the national academic**

**geography and recognition of Russian geography.**

In different years, the positions of the IGU Vice Presidents were held by Academician I.P. Gerasimov, Academician V.M. Kotlyakov, and Corresponding Member of RAS N.F. Glazovskyi. This time, the presidential elections were uncontested. The precedent was set in 1996, when V.M. Kotlyakov (as the IGU Vice-President from 1988 to 1996) withdrew his candidacy in favor, in his opinion, of a more successful candidacy of a Swiss scientist – Bruno Messerli (the IGU President from 1996 to 2000).

**V.P. Singh** (India), **Dietrich Soyey** (Germany), **Joos Droogleever Fortuijn** (The Netherlands), and **Jarkko Saarinen** (Finland) were elected as new members of the Executive Committee and as Vice-Presidents of the IGU.

At the final meeting, it was confirmed that in the coming four years, there will be three IGU regional conferences: in Kyoto (Japan,



**V.A. Kolosov – the newly elected President of the International Geographical Union**

2013), in Krakow (Poland, 2014), and in Moscow (Russia, 2015); the cycle will be completed by the IGU 33<sup>rd</sup> Congress in Beijing. On the occasion of the upcoming regional conference in Moscow, the Russian delegation hosted a reception, to which the IGU President Ronald Abler (2008–2012) and other members of the IGU Executive Committee, leading geographers of the world, leaders of the national delegations, co-Chairs of the Congress Organizational Committee Frauke Kraas and Dietrich Soye, and Counselor of the Consulate General of

the Russian Federation in Bonn V.A. Pyatin were invited.

It is impossible to cover all interesting events and activities that took place during the Congress. The days in Cologne were filled not only with meetings and presentations, but also with friendly dialogue and wonderful evenings in this amazing city.

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