

## ANNIVERSARY EDITORIAL: 15 VOLUMES OF EUROPEAN COUNTRYSIDE ISSUED

Milada Šťastná, Antonín Vaishar, Leoš Pavlata<sup>1</sup>



**Abstract:** The paper evaluates the first 15 editions of the European Countryside magazine in relation to the EURORURAL conferences and international projects of the Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology of the Mendel University in Brno.

**Keywords:** Mendel University in Brno, Faculty of AgriSciences, Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology, EURORURAL conference, international projects

### 1. Introduction

In 2023, the European Countryside journal completed its 15th volume. Compared to other journals, it is not too much, but it can be said that the idea of publishing such a focused journal has taken hold and is still viable despite the turbulent development in the sphere of scientific publications. In 2024, the AgriFaculty of the Mendel University in Brno will celebrate its 105th anniversary. The recent period meant the interruption of physical contacts between scientists, which also affected the regular EURORURAL conferences. That is why we have decided to organize the eighth EURORURAL' 24 international conference in 2024, which is supposed to renew this tradition. The purpose of this paper is to look back at the past period and outline future possibilities in a situation that is going through a series of crises that we could not count on fifteen years ago.

At the beginning of the new century, the Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology, Faculty of AgriSciences of the Mendel University in Brno, managed to accredit the program of the follow-up Master's degree in Rural Development. At that time, we faced the problem of internationalizing the accredited program. Internationalization was supposed to be anchored on three pillars: participation in international projects, organization of international conferences and publication of an international journal. Ideally, these three activities should be interconnected.

At the time, the most important international project in which the department participated was the DERREG (Development of Europe's rural regions in the era of globalization) project within the EU

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Ing. Dr. Milada Šťastná, ORCID: 0000-0002-4507-6207, e-mail: stastna@mendelu.cz; Ass. Prof. RNDr. Antonín Vaishar, CSc., ORCID: 0000-0003-3754-7600, e-mail: anotnin.vaishar@mendelu.cz, Prof. MVDr. Leoš Pavlata, Ph.D., ORCID: 0000-0001-8233-2946, e-mail: leos.pavlata@mendelu.cz, Faculty of AgriSciences, Mendel University in Brno, Czechia

7<sup>th</sup> Framework Program, which was coordinated by Professor James Wood from the Welsh University in Aberystwyth. Mendel University was given responsibility for the Dissemination work package, which allowed us to mandate participation in the EURORURAL conference and special issues for European Countryside for project accountants as almost mandatory. The implementation of the internationalization of the Rural Development program could begin.

## 2. European Countryside

When planning the concept of the new journal, the executive editor's experience with the management of the Scopus journals *Zprávy Geografického ústavu ČSAV* and *Studia Geographica* in the 1980s and with the establishment of the *Moravian Geographical Reports* journal, which is today the highest-ranking geographical magazine in Czechia and probably in Central Europe in terms of impact factor, was used. The above-mentioned activities also brought several international contacts, which could be used when building a new journal. At the same time, it was also decided that the journal will be published exclusively in online form. The advantage is that there are no technical limits for the number and distance of articles, nor any special demands on the quality of graphic attachments. Colored attachments are welcome at no extra charge.

The original goals were not very high. The idea was to enable publication by our own staff, colleagues from cooperating institutions and to enable the exchange of scientific information on an international scale. We originally thought about a regional focus on Eastern (post-socialist) Europe, but we later decided to expand our focus to the whole of Europe. After all, the sociologically oriented journal *Eastern European Countryside* exists and is published by the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Since our journal was originally based to a large extent on personal contacts, we did not consider an over-European reach.

It was clear from the beginning that the journal had to be published in English, as the national market was so limited that the effort would have minimal effect. From the beginning, the journal was built as an international one, which meant respecting the relevant customs, for example, in matters of the double-blind review process, plagiarism and other ethical issues and so on. However, these at first glance complications later turned out to be very beneficial for establishing the journal on the international scene.

At the beginning of the publication of each journal, several fundamental questions must be resolved: its legal status, funding, a team of editors and reviewers. Of course, the key question at the beginning is where to take the authors to get started. It was obvious that the owner of the journal must be Mendel University as a legal entity. The university delegated the powers associated with publishing the journal to the AgriFaculty. The AgriFaculty agreed to publish on the condition that we would not request any funding.

It was clear that authors would have to pay for publishing. Even though the initial payment was quite low (75 EUR per a paper) it was somewhat risky, because it could discourage some authors at a time when we did not offer inclusion of articles in prestigious databases. However, the authors could use funding from the projects, or they could pay for the publication within the conference fee of the EURORURAL conference, so this path turned out to be feasible. After all, private payment was also feasible, especially for Western authors. Of course, the Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology bears part of the overhead costs, although the editorial team works partly in their free time.

Unlike most Mendel University journals, we opted for an external publisher. This was the company De Gruyter, later SCIENDO. At that time, this company was just starting to publish magazines and books in Central Eastern European countries, and we were one of the first customers. SCIENDO arranged for us to be included in important databases of scientific literature and offers additional services. The important thing is that the articles in *European Countryside* are usually ranked relatively high and therefore the probability of their citation increases.

In terms of work management, three teams were established. The Advisory Board consists of recognized international experts in the field, obtained mostly based on personal contacts. Individual European states are usually represented by one expert. The task of the members of the Advisory Board is advisory activity

and also the representation of European Countryside in their countries. They can participate in the editing of special issues. The actual publication is managed by the Executive Board, in which the individual faculties of Mendel University are represented, as well as experts from other domestic workplaces. Members of the Executive Board perform the work of editors of individual contributions. Therefore, in addition to professional erudition, coverage of the fields in which our authors publish is a decisive criterion. The publishing itself is managed by the Editorial Team, consisting of a managing editor, an executive editor, a technical editor and a language editor.

The first issues of European Countryside were covered by contributions from the EURORURAL'08 conference and articles related to the DERREG project. This succeeded in creating a solid, truly international and relatively high-quality beginning of the journal. Contributions by other authors gradually began to arrive, supplemented by numbers from other scientific projects and conferences of our and collaborating institutions. Special keywords on selected current problems of rural development are also popular. The decisive share of contributions is made up of research papers. Supplementary contributions are Editorials, and then short communications, which introduce the reader to the empirical facts of new problems or territories without being supported by deeper theory, or, on the contrary, research notes, which, on the contrary, deal theoretically with some problems and lack sufficient empirical evidence for them.



*Fig 1. Annual meeting of the Executive Board in the pre-covid period. Photo: J. Zloch*

Working with reviewers is quite demanding. In the beginning, the possibility of acquiring a register of potential reviewers was rejected. On the contrary, we promise that we will not contact reviewers more often than once a year, in reality usually at other intervals as well. Among the requirements for reviewers, in addition to expertise and independence, is a minimum of a Ph.D. We also monitor the number of citations of their works in the Web of Knowledge system. The principle is to have at least two reviewers, usually from different countries. We try to ensure that one of the reviewers is from the authors' region (knows the situation) and one, on the other hand, from another region (can express himself with insight). We currently need to reach an average of 7 to 8 experts to get one reviewer. This is not such a problem for the journal management, but it sometimes makes the whole process disproportionately long for the authors. For our part, we consider reaching out to a large number of potential reviewers as a kind of advertisement for the journal. Recently, however, we sometimes encounter a very unfavorable phenomenon, when experts who promise a review do not meet the deadline and stop communicating. In that case, we have to start the whole process again. Reviewers are rewarded with a discount on their eventual publication in European Countryside.

Customer care is an important part of our work. We have not adopted any digital impersonal contribution management, which is financially demanding without bringing corresponding benefits. Our writers communicate with live editors. They submit articles in a definitive form without the need to dissect them into parts. They may not become part of registries that require information that is not necessary for the publication of articles and may be used to create various databases or that want information about the race and gender of authors, which can be very sensitive if misused. Of course, the absence of digital communication must be replaced by continuous personal communication with authors, which lasts every 365 days of the year.

We also consider the care of readers essential. Readers receive information on our website <http://www.european-countryside.eu/> where there is a direct link to every post since the beginning of the journal. After each number is drawn, the selected experts receive the relevant information. The mailing list originally had around three thousand addresses. Based on the rules of the GDPR, the list has less than five hundred items of experts who have expressed a desire to receive this information and another 200 addresses of Ukrainian experts who we are trying to engage in the exchange of information in this way. On the contrary, Russian addresses were eliminated.

After receiving an article, its correspondent is determined based on the topic. The task of the reporter is to monitor the contribution, propose opinions in the initial evaluation, possibly co-propose reviewers, propose opinions on the received review opinions and opinions on publication after receiving the revised articles. The initial evaluation is mainly focused on the compliance of the contribution with the aim and scope of the European Countryside, possible plagiarism based on the anti-plagiarism program borrowed from SCIENDO, or basic structural or professional deficiencies. The conclusion can be accepted into the external review process, rejected without an external review process, or revised before the external review process.

After receiving at least two relevant peer reviews, the reporter and the executive editor will prepare an opinion for the authors, which will determine whether it is realistic to revise the contribution and in what direction. This opinion also deals with cases where opinions contradict each other or are not relevant for our journal. We do not return revised articles to the original reviewers, as we do not want to burden them more than once and we also do not want the reviews to become a ping-pong game between authors and reviewers. We follow the idea that the purpose of publishing a journal is to publish articles, not to reject them. That's why we try to direct the authors based on reviews to improve their works, if possible – especially if publication is prevented by formal deficiencies.

The final decision is made by the Executive Board. Even after that, the articles still need to be worked on, especially from a technical and linguistic point of view. Finally, a complete number is compiled, DOIs are assigned, and after review, the number is sent to the publisher. The original range of individual issues was around five articles, currently, the range is up to double. This number is limited by the limited capacity of the relatively small implementation team.

Over the past 15 years, the Executive Board's work system has gradually changed based on the development of the external situation and on the basis of the experience of its own and other journals. Executive Board meetings have changed from face-to-face meetings to digital communication and one annual meeting, which is more conceptual and celebratory in nature. This helped us deal with the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic. We also had to respond to security requirements. Therefore, we have removed attachments from the initial information. Based on experience, individual actions and forms also developed. Certificates were developed for both reviewers and authors. The website is updated at least four times a year after each issue. Current information can be found on Facebook. Unfortunately, due to rising costs, the article processing fee had to be increased, which now amounts to EUR 190.

The design of the journal also changed. A front page with a map of the countries covered by the article has been introduced. It also includes hashtags. Highlights were added and the fonts used were also changed. We also have a new logo.

Our journey was not without problems, which arose most often from the Czech scientific bureaucracy, allegedly motivated by an effort to increase the quality of scientific publications, but in fact more focused

on the fight for the distribution of funding for science based on scientometric criteria. Fortunately, our magazine was conceived from the beginning as international and independent of external funding. That's why it always put up with these compilations.

Since 2012, European Countryside has been tracked in the SCOPUS database. Later, the journal was included in Clarivate Analytics' Emerging Sources Citation Index, which meant that citations of its papers were counted in the Web of Knowledge system from the very beginning in 2009. Finally, European Countryside also received an impact factor for the first time in 2022.

Within the first 15 editions of European Countryside, 426 articles on 7,707 pages were published. From a regional point of view, practically all of Europe is covered, with minor exceptions. Recently, authors from the V4 countries have made up a significant share. The magazine has a relatively wide scope. Contributions relate to rural geography, rural sociology, rural tourism, rural landscape, the importance of multifunctional agriculture for rural development, etc. Articles in European Countryside are quite often cited. In the Web of Knowledge and SCOPUS databases, each paper is cited more than six times on average.

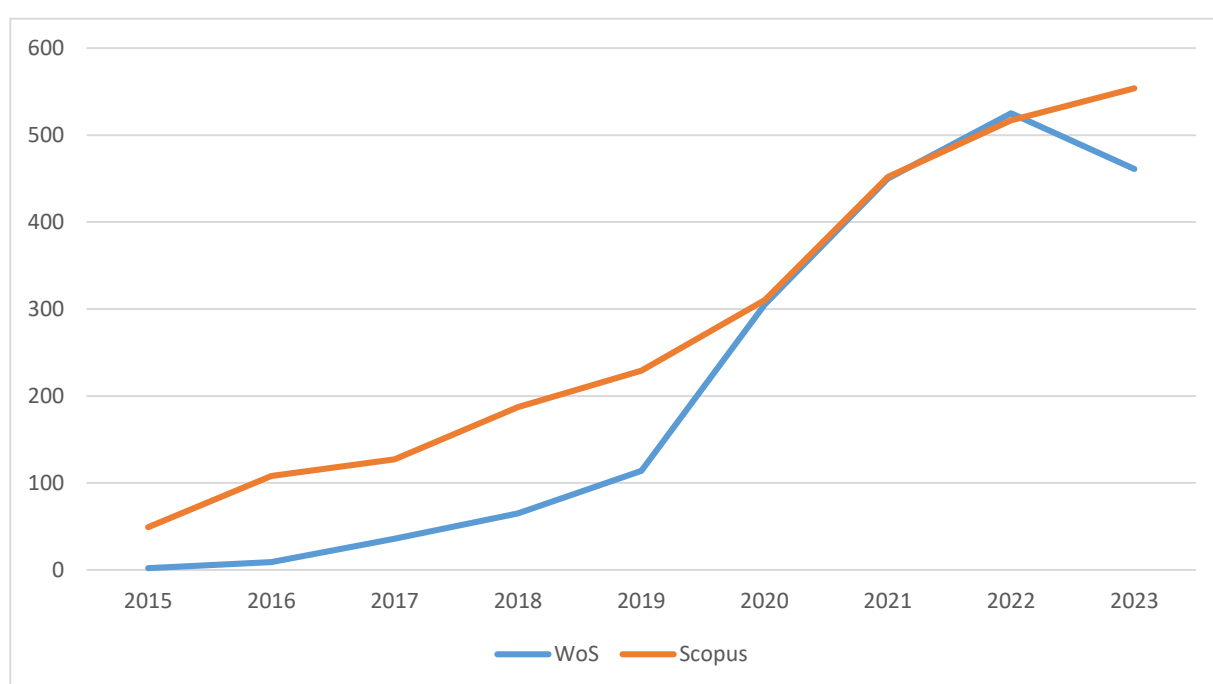


Fig 2. Development of quotations in Web of Knowledge and SCOPUS databases (10 March 2024).

### 3. 105 years of the AgriFaculty and international activities of the Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology

The Faculty of AgriSciences of Mendel University directly follows the University of Agriculture, which was founded in 1919 as the fourth university in Brno following the establishment of independent Czechoslovakia. The Faculty of Agriculture was created from the original economic field in the 1950s. The name of the university was changed to Mendel University in Brno in 2010, thus the school applied to the legacy of perhaps the most important scientist who worked in the city.

Currently, the university has 5 faculties in Brno and Lednice, 1500 employees and 8,900 students, of which 20% are foreign. In terms of number of students, it is the third largest university in Brno after Masaryk University and the Technical University. It includes the school farm in Žabčice and Lednica with 2,000 ha of fields and vineyards and 200 dairy cows, the school forest enterprise in Křtiny with 11,000 ha of forests, a botanical garden and arboretum, a fodder station in Vátín, modern laboratories, food semi-operations (bakery, malt house, university brewery, meat and dairy semi-factory, confectionery workshop), technical testing rooms for the operation of agricultural machinery and precision agriculture, fish farming, beehives,

university dormitories, canteens, kindergarten for employees' children and other facilities. The Faculty of AgriSciences has 15 scientific departments, about 2,100 students, 34 bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree programs.



*Fig 3. Mendel University – the main building. Photo: Archives of Mendel University*

The Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology of the Mendel University in Brno was founded in 1990 on the initiative of Professor Vaníček under the name Department of Landscape Ecology, as the first and for a long time the only university workplace in the republic with this name. The first leader was Jiří Pall, who headed the department for 12 years. From 2003 to 2014, the head of the department was František Toman, who was replaced by the current head Milada Šťastná. Currently, the department has 28 employees – 1 professor, 6 associated professors, 12 assistant professors, 5 Ph.D. students, 4 technical and administrative staff.

The publication of the *European Countryside* journal was made possible by the department's regular participation in solving international projects. The DERREG Project, which was responsible for the birth of the magazine, was mentioned above. Others followed. The ReSOURCE project under the title *Turning Problems into Potentials*, solved within the framework of the INTERREG – Central Europe program, was devoted to the revitalization of post-mining regions. Another project of this program was *Traditional and Wild*, which was devoted to the revitalization of the tradition of sustainable collection of medicinal herbs in Central Europe. The issue of brownfields was dealt with by the project AKTION Austria – Czech Republic entitled *Old Burdens and Brownfields* in the area of Brno-East. The *Borders and Borderlands* within the Central Europe project was financed by the Visegrad Fund.

A qualitative leap occurred in 2020 when the Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology became the first at Mendel University to be the coordinating workplace of the SPOT (Social and Innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism and its Potential towards Deepening Europeanization) project of the HORIZON 2020 program. Currently, the department participates in the solution of another project of

the HORIZON 2020 program FLIARA (Female Lead Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas). Of course, for every solved project several proposals were processed but not accepted for financing.

The preparation, solution and implementation of international projects entails a number of international contacts with important European scientific workplaces and stakeholders. The results of the solutions are valuable material for the dissemination of scientific publications in which European Countryside participates.

#### 4. EURORURAL' 24 Conference

The idea of the EURORURAL conferences originally came from the period of the previous political system, when it was very difficult for Czech scientists to travel to Western countries. That is why the tradition of organizing international conferences was established at the Institute of Geography of the then Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, led by the question: If our workers cannot travel abroad, let us invite foreign experts to us. The result was the biennial CONGEO conferences, which attracted an interesting audience in the intimate atmosphere of small Moravian towns. Many of the participants probably came to see what it looks like behind the Iron Curtain. The CONGEO conferences remained at the Academy of Sciences, but the overall concept was used for conferences within the Rural Development program at Mendel University in Brno.

Since 2008, the conferences have been held every even year at the end of the summer holidays. A leading topic is always chosen, which responds to current problems of rural development and also to resolved international projects. However, there is a relatively wide scope for the presentation of other topics from the field of rural development. This is so that we do not limit potential participants if the chosen topic does not relate to their research issues.

We follow the idea that, in addition to the presentation and discussion of expert opinions, the purpose of international conferences is to establish interpersonal contacts between experts from different countries and regions. That is why we place great emphasis on the social framing of the event: coffee breaks, social dinners, excursions in Brno and full-day excursions in the Moravian countryside, combining a tour of historical heritage (UNESCO World Heritage as a rule), natural beauty and gastronomic experiences.



*Fig 4. Participants of the EURORURAL'08 Conference. Photo: M. Tichá*

The professional program of the conference usually consists of an introductory plenary session, discussions in specialist sections (according to the number of participants), a poster section and a final evaluation meeting. In the past, we tried a new format of the conference, which would not consist of traditional presentations accompanied by a short discussion, but which would emphasize the discussion

on selected topics. However, this form did not prove very successful. The participants are apparently used to established procedures, and in addition, their workplaces, which finance their participation, require specific results, such as presentations and contributions to proceedings.

The publication strategy does not include the conference proceedings, because this type of publication usually disappears quickly in the libraries and desks of the participants, and if not, their importance in the framework of scientometric analysis is minimal as well as its dissemination reach. That's why we publish a collection of extended (one-page) abstracts of presentations and posters, so that participants can remember the individual performances, and at the same time, we offer the publication of full contributions in the internationally impactful *European Countryside* journal, included in all important databases.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an online conference was held in 2020, but the conference did not take place in 2022. This year (even at the invitation of some foreign participants), we are trying to renew the tradition of a personal meeting of European experts dealing with the countryside. At the same time, we rejected proposals to organize a hybrid conference, because in our opinion, it does not fulfil our main idea of cooperation between experts of different specializations and from different countries on a personal basis. It will be possible to use this cooperation not only for regular contacts but also when setting up teams for various scientific projects and for other forms of cooperation.

Participation in the conference is suitable for experienced scientists, who can renew or obtain new contacts and information here, or arrange further cooperation. Coordinators of international programs can also use the conference for meetings of research teams. In such a case, the organizers are ready to set up a special section for them. However, budding researchers and doctoral students can also participate in the conference – either with a poster or a presentation, who can get some of the first experiences at a relatively low cost. Organizers can create space for them in the poster section.



*Fig 5. Excursion in small town of Boskovice: EURORURAL'10. Photo: M. Tichá*

The intention to organize the conference in the original pre-COVID spirit is perhaps a somewhat nostalgic effort to restore a broken tradition in new conditions. Based on the interests of the participants, we can adjust the future strategy. The professional level of the EURORURAL'24 conference is ensured by the experience of the organizers and tradition. The city of Brno is a suitable place due to its location almost in the middle of Europe. As a university town with five public, one state and several private universities, it has the necessary infrastructure and atmosphere. Despite the unfortunate events at Charles University's Faculty of Arts in December 2023, Czechia is one of the safest countries in the world, both in terms of low

crime rates and in terms of the accessibility and readiness of emergency services. Staying here is not expensive, especially for guests from Western Europe. An excellent public transport system allows for hassle-free movement around the city. Although it also has many historical monuments and cultural attractions, unlike Prague, it is often referred to as a city for life.

Our ambition, which understandably depends mainly on the participants, is to discuss current challenges related to the development of the European post-industrial countryside. One group of challenges arises from overall modernization. It is about multifunctional rural development, shifting activities from manufacturing to non-manufacturing sectors, improving the quality of life of rural residents, gender issues and the like. The second group of challenges is represented by responses to current crisis situations. It can be the increasing risk of natural disasters related to climate change (floods, drought, forest fires) or social or society-induced crises such as pandemics, the consequences of uncontrolled migration, energy crises, war conflicts and terrorism. There is a lot of research on all these challenges. However, few address the impacts at the rural level. At the same time, it is likely that the projection of the studied phenomena into the specific conditions of the countryside may be different in many cases.

The conference with the topic European Countryside and De-Globalization will be held on 2–5 September 2024 at the Mendel University in Brno. Experts who are interested in sending additional information can contact the address [eurorural20@seznam.cz](mailto:eurorural20@seznam.cz) without obligation. This expression of interest will enable the organizers to orientate themselves in the number and structure of possible participants and formulate a realistic conference program and budget accordingly. In the spring of 2024, registered applicants will receive a circular with a more detailed program, application form, calculation of the conference fee according to the services ordered, individual deadlines for early application, submission of summaries to the Collection of Abstracts, etc. and other practical information. Of course, pre-registration is not a condition for participation, and payment of the conference fee will be binding.



*Fig 6. EURORURAL'18: social dinner. Photo: M. Tichá*