

## **DRIVING FACTORS TO SELF-MARGINALITY BY IDENTITY EROSION WITHIN ROMANIAN GEOGRAPHICAL HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Citation:** Gavriș, A. (2024). Driving Factors to Self-Marginality by Identity Erosion within Romanian Geographical Higher Education. *Revista Română de Geografie Politică*, 26(2), 78-89. <https://doi.org/10.30892/rrgp.262102-377>

**Abstract:** The landscape of Geography within Romanian Higher Education might be at a crossroad. This is due to the over-focus on scientometric evaluations and the lack of tradition coupled to international research. In this context, we aim to highlight the role of Romanian geographers in the decline of their societal relevance, which is partly driven by an erosion of their internal identity. We identify the key factors contributing to Geography's marginalization within the Romanian academic framework and societal interests. Our analysis reveals a fragmentation of Geography as a discipline and scientific field, driven by centrifugal forces and a neglect of its foundational practices as parts of political influences.

**Key words:** Higher Education, Geography, Identity Erosion, Marginalisation

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Our presentation for the Romanian Human Geography reveals another page of the “permanent identity crisis” unfolding in Geography (Peet, 1998). Outside of the aggression of other related fields and the excessive desire to increase the Geography’ share to interdisciplinary approach, geographers themselves make a huge contribution to the marginality of Geography in Romania. Analysing this last issue we present the main driving forces that push Geography to the periphery of Romanian fields of study and interests in society. In such a context, we search to depict what is the “contribution” of the Romanian geographers to the deterioration of their role in society, by internal identity erosion of Geography. To do this we approach Geography mainly through its human direction, although the complex situation in Romania makes a geographer be identified through its multi-faced approaches (environment, physical Geography, GIS, etc.). Setting the scene of discussion, we unfold the

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self-marginality of Romanian Geography in three direction: research, education and practical involvement, contextualizing the many challenges that weigh on the fields development and its actors.

### **A QUIET EVOLUTION AND A SMALL ROLLER-COASTER**

The trajectory of Romanian Geography was kind of a roller-coaster. From the height of first theoretical courses taught by Simion Mehedinți at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sandru and Cucu, 1966) and the political school developed in the interwar period, Geography fell to mostly a support for national agenda in the communist period. After that, Geography recorded another boom, at least from the perspective of the number of students pursuing this field, while more recently, Geography could be treated as a marginal field enclosed into the Geosciences imposed directions of former Geography graduates. Overall, Geography advanced from a descriptive-explanatory discipline to a systemic view discipline that integrated the interaction of geospheres (Ianoș et al., 2018), while, with few exceptions, only after the year 2010 glimpses of international research started to materialize.

The roller-coaster evolution was due to geopolitical challenges and the political atmosphere shaping people and spaces. In the case of geopolitical influence on Romanian Geography, the field moulded as a response to the first World War, when the good contacts with German researchers stopped. Back-then in the inter-war period, Geography was central to the formation of national identity, education and support towards political formation of the newly established Romanian state (Vălsan, 1921). Consequently, Romanian Geographers leant towards French Geography and its ideas about how borders and territories are shaped through political manoeuvres. This influence rendered a preference for trying to emulate the French culture, an aspect visible in the formation of many geographers until late 1990s and practised through bilingual journals (Romanian and French).

Another geopolitical force intervened during the communist era when the Russian perspective on environment and the descriptive productions in economy shaped the formation of researchers. In the first case, it was an attempt to theorize the environment as a mix of interactions between the human production and the geomorphological characteristics (Martiniuc and Băcăoanu, 1964; Rădulescu, 1972). Secondly, this approach translated into a pressure of reporting the economic production in a spatial perspective (Popovici et al., 1980). This made Geography as a means to propel national aspirations of development, mostly shaping the depiction of country characteristics. Because of these, the period was abundant with monographs and atlases describing at various scales geographical features starting with geomorphology, climate, continuing with demographics and urban or rural descriptive features and ending either with tourism or environment (see, as example, *The Monograph of Romania People's Republic* – published under coordination of Russian geographers in 1960, and the *Atlas of Socialist Republic of Romania* from 1972-1979).

From a political point of view, Geography was shaped according to Mehedinți's disciples (Ianoș et al., 2018). These seniors focused on parts of the systemic view thinking envisioned by their master and enhanced geomorphology at Cluj-Napoca, human Geography at Iași or a mix of approaches at Bucharest. The research that stemmed from this attempt to develop specific teaching

regionalized the field and collaboration as there was under a tacit agreement on the division of interests and their spatial coverages (Simandan, 2002). Furthermore it emphasised a trend towards analysing Geography under a regional perspective with national flavours. This fragmentation maintained over the years, and the relationships among researchers appeared to be not only spatially disrupted, but political shaped, becoming more fragmented after 1990 when geographic teaching and research bloomed in other Romanian cities. Under this challenge Romanian Geography emphasised the importance of local professors instead of placing the focus on debates and critical intervention in geographical ideas.

The post-communist period involved a powerful shock at first. It was a shock caused by the lack of resources (financing, connections, research sources, etc.). This shock was amplified during the linguistic transition of publishing in English instead of French. Furthermore, the publications focus meant changing the local perspective to the theoretical and sophisticated research of the Anglo-American research engine.

During the first years of the 90's, several Romanian geographers capitalized the former contact with David Turnock (University of Leicester), who organized the last bilateral geographical colloquium British-Romanian in September 1993 (Turnock, 1993), and the opportunities offered by European TEMPUS-PHARE Program, after 1995. In this context it emerged the EU-Phare TEMPUS JEP 11070/96 – "Geography Initiative on Tourism in Higher Education", with the participation of University College Chichester and Babeș-Bolyai University (Bodocan, 2019). Other contacts with several British researchers emphasised the critical direction in Geography, only later on reached the Romanian geographical research. Back then, the research remained focused on empirical studies, with some attempts trying to develop ideas in connection with more and more contacts with German and English geographers. Despite the many limitations of the communist period, a trend appeared toward urban and territorial system planning (Ianoș, 1987) which continued until 2000, and gradually started to connect with Anglo-American research perspectives.

It was a period about which Simandan (2002) suggested that Romanian Geography seemed backward and dominated by Bohemian methodologies (Simandan, 2005). Indeed, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the conversation with the international arena, and especially Anglo-American community limited to small projects in which Romanian geographers mainly supported fellow international peers with data and information about the socio-economic transformation that took place back then. While many papers were published on various contexts related to Romania in international journals, few included Romanian authors. Also, small European projects accentuated the regionalisation of Geography as Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara focused on relations with German and Scandinavian researchers, while Iași, Bucharest or Craiova had stronger connections with French researchers. That is why, at the time, Geography appeared to follow societal needs with targeted analysis, plans and reports disseminated in mainly national journals and strategies, but related with the new European Union planning and political perspectives.

Romania could not connect to the international research arena as long it lacked resources. Only when the National Research Agency offered access to some international publications after 2005, Romanian Geographers could observe the topics of interest and the modern scientific approach within the

discipline. Since then, Romanian Geography entered within the conversation realms by publishing papers in renowned journals and sometimes being involved in European research projects or Fulbright scholarships. As such, from a publishing perspective Romanian Geography was not backward any more. Plenty of papers appeared in top journals, yet the publication flow showed a tendency towards multidisciplinary or area study journals and journals with a very specialized focus in climatology, geomorphology, GIS or environment studies and in general other connecting spheres than the sphere of Human Geography. The situation expanded as a consequence of marginality created from within Geography as we detail next.

### **DRIVERS OF SELF-MARGINALITY**

In this section we present what are the main driving factors to self-marginality and identity erosion within the Romanian Geography. We frame self-marginality between the visible results produced by geographers themselves through research, teaching and social responsibility related actions and non-actions. Geographers' actions unfolds through destructive consequences for their discipline as they grow attached by other sciences. This centrifugal move saps into the geographical potential to develop new own concepts and methods for their science, preferring to circulate "invasive" tools for geographical science and discipline. Such a development has an important role to diminish the capability of Geography as a fully-fledged science and discipline. Regarding non-action there are two aspects: one represented by the reactive and non-proactive behaviour vis-à-vis of knowledge production on the spatial dynamics, and another one built on attempts to encourage the assimilation of the new concepts and methods coming exclusively by other sciences, by a large imitation process.

Identity erosion within the Romanian Geography is explained by the contradiction between an important number of geographers and their obscure presence as a prestigious corpus in society. If previously, inclusively the communist period, the geographers were well appreciated by their works and performance in the teaching process and required analyses, now they are regularly removed from different decision bodies at various institutional levels. Trying to find a response to decay between number and visibility, we observe a great gulf among the Geography' decision-makers at different levels and the majority of geographers. The lack or superficial knowledge of human resources in Geography, overlapped on their arrogant positions exaggerating scientometric performances at individual level, accentuates transforming trends from good geographers into civil servants, limiting their creativity in science and higher education teaching. The implementation of a destructive vision to impose promotion criteria, for example, from top to down, without an evaluation of the teaching staff system in Geography, their role in society and their professorship correspondence with other social science disciplines, is just an internal identity erosion of Geography and its self-marginality, too.

### **ARENA OF STRUGGLES**

Table 1 highlights the main factors that cripple Geography. There are two main categories: a) Factors connected with the weak position of Geography in the creation and functioning of institutional framework of higher education at central and regional levels, and b) Factors connected with the discriminatory

trends promoted in the eligibility of the Ministry Education councils' members, and of the research projects managers. Because for the readers it is not difficult to understand why Romanian geographical higher education records a dimmed perspective, our discussion overviews the factors in their interrelations with each other making references to other international similar cases.

**Table 1.** Driving factors of marginality

Item	Driving factor group	Driving factors (a selection)
1.	Factors related to the weak position of Geography in the design and operation of the higher education institutional framework at central and regional levels	Weak capacity to use Geography for knowledge production and development within national institutions. For example, establishing planning directions is mainly reserved to architects or economists despite their poor spatial understanding of space leading to many complicated situations.
		Geographical concepts are better used in discourse and narrative by other disciplines. Therefore, Geography is unable to demonstrate its efficiency in research and higher education through its own core concepts and ideas.
		Chaotic reactions of geographers to changes promoted by different national councils that focus on hierarchies and less on quality.
		Lack of a strong geographical task force to catalyse the geographers' proposals for defining a realistic vision on the national role of Geography.
		Inertia of professional, scientific, and civic geographical associations that do not work on developing synergies and coherence towards the improvement of the institutional framework.
2.	Factors related to the discriminatory trends promoted in the eligibility of the members of the councils within the Ministry of Education, and of the research project managers	The selection of the members of the national council commissions based only on their research activity explains some paradoxes.
		The stability of the same core researchers in the Committee creates conditions to change the criteria and standards, from one mandate to another, in correlation with their own new scientometric indicators. This creates high unpredictability and frustration for the next candidates.
		Criteria and standards are used by the Ministry of Research as eligibility instruments for project managers, eliminating researchers with good results and good ideas but not meeting the geoscience standards promoted by the ministry.
		Evaluation of research activity based exclusively on the Q1 and Q2 journals, and not on the ideas expressed in the published articles creates a feeling of giving up deep reflection topics and moving towards grievance research.

Romanian Geography lacks the contact with international disciplinary history. This is in line to what Johnston (2015) notice in the case of Anglo-American departments, but from a different perspective. The difference stems from the ignorance on local geographical tradition and the pressure rendered in

the years of communism towards hard sciences in the detriment of human and economic approaches that only had to emphasise the ideology successes. In other words, political fluctuations transferred on Geography evolution after 1990, impacting on the lack of theoretical focus in research. Unconnected to geographical roots, local or international, Romanian Geography appears as a mix of geomorphology, climatology, ecology and other branches of Geography usually focused on quantitative analyses or encyclopaedic knowledge, glued together with technical prowess (GIS and Remote Sensing). That is why Geography appears as an ordeal for many students (Simandan, 2002), radical and critical interventions being cast aside for not having a quantitative approach.

A major problem of Romanian identity erosion in Geography stems from the poor use of geographical concepts. Instead of a global focus correlative with other scale analysis, most of Romanian geographers tend to downplay their concepts and methods and promote alternatives from other disciplines with indistinct connection to the geographical theories and practices. As in other marginal locations (Saguin et al., 2022), Geography in Romania remains obscure for its utility. Geography is overshadowed by either neoliberal economics or planning fields (read architecture) on one side or polytechnic faculties where distant geographical approaches are integrated in technical topics. Also, because of the traditional emphasise in the high-school curricula there is a gap between the theory and the perceived knowledge, descriptive approaches being preferred.

The increasing complexity and refinement of research coupled with a reductionist perspective of science (Pitman, 2005) made geographers to pursue other disciplines and departments. The pressure of quantitative and positivist requirements made Romanian geographers to resemble more to an economist, sociologist, urbanist, demographer, engineer, etc. based on their research. It is like they forgot to be geographers and deepen the inquiry through a geographical holistic and spatial view anchored in social theory. Such situations allowed researchers from other disciplines to record groundbreaking successes in top Geography journals. If one looks in such journals (Antipode, Geoforum, Political Geography), it may notice that Romanian sociologists publish analyses and frame theory in a manner similar to Western Geography unlike many Romanian Geographers who tend to focus on case studies and area studies in multi-disciplinary journals. This occurs as the anthropogeographic perspective on the space is better coupled with a trend towards critical theory, yet supported through drops of - what we notice from the margins - grievance perspectives, imaginaries or specific hegemonies (Bański and Ferenc, 2013; Lawhon, 2013; Bekaroğlu and Yazan, 2023).

Other issues with human Geography in Romania stemmed from the adoption of neo-liberal university values that pursue a meritocratic approach based on bland numbers and less on quality (Ianoş, 2017; Gavriş, 2020; Viiu and Păunescu, 2021). Under Bologna transformation framework STEM disciplines rendered a more favourable position in rankings and financing, limiting the support for Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines. With no surprise it was the clear mirror of the aggravating situation presented in US “when higher education - public and private - adopts a specialization whose purpose is to attend to a certain market-friendly politics” (Bernardes et al., 2017; 954). The trend surfaced elsewhere in international arena (Head and Rutherford, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Saguin et al., 2022), with Geography slowly appearing to

lose its identity. In such regards, the call for grants favoured topics with a bias on STEM sciences or key fields like energy, material science, space science from a military perspective, agriculture or biology. Consequently the research orientation in Geography skewed towards topics favouring a physical, ecological or land use perspective that drove forward technical approaches, minimizing theoretical research. The focus on specific directions and funding made geographers to be locked in priorities that reflect national or European strategies that in the end cripple the discipline and promote multidisciplinary directions where Geography is buried under the political influence or the prestige of other disciplines.

In an environment dominated by the uncritical adoption of external values (Patapievici, 2014), Romanian universities adopted a mix of audit and accountability procedures (Gavriș, 2020). In the case of Geography such procedures showed their effects in the evaluation and promotion metrics that are powerfully connected to the view that Geography belongs, or in fact is, to what most members of CNACTDU commission call “Geosciences” and geographers should accept the transition to become geoscientists. The problem grew as the Earth Science commission comprised mostly former Geography graduates, specialized in the Physical Geography branches, closely connected to geology, climatology, palaeontology, or remote sensing. They argued that Geography should be replaced by Geosciences in research, a direction that determined Ministry of Education to replace Geography in schools with more societal appropriate disciplines (environmental disciplines for example). Furthermore, under-representation of Human Geography, created another paradox: doctoral theses and habilitation are evaluated by geologists or climatologist, hydrologists and similar fields of research.

Talking about criteria, another point of disrupting Geography research and education relates to promotion criteria. Specifically, a Geographer has to obtain, as a director, minimum two national research projects of at least 80,000 Euros to become professor! The alternative is to be member of several international projects or a leader in such a project, a situation usually developed through social capital. Because of grants primacy in Geography, lower-tier researchers/professors cannot compete to other colleagues from other disciplines. For example, in other Social Sciences from Romania, colleagues have opportunities to advance on very loose criteria or at least criteria that shape better the professorship status alongside the research. One analysis made by a colleague in discussion list mentioned that out of 15 research fields from the University of Bucharest, only in Geography there is the necessary criterion of grant director. On the other side, the time of publishing in Physical Geography and related disciplines is shorter (few months) in comparison to Human Geography where for a Romanian researcher it usually takes 2-3 years to advance the theoretical field in middle tiered journals. All these are parts of a neo-liberal conception that efficiency, metrics and grants might build up the strengths of geographies, while in fact slowly cripple the science. It is what Lahiri-Dutt (2019, 859) present about the neo-liberal institutionalizing of metrics that marginalize “geographers who pose critical questions”, while “those who are perceived as weak in a masculine research environment are seen as dispensable”.

### **LESSONS FOR GEOGRAPHY TEACHING**

The factors of self-marginality in Romanian Geography obviously diffused over Geography teaching as well. When someone in Romania is asked about

Geography, the trend is to display a general knowledge about the physical and political characteristics of the country or the inquired local space. This has a lot to do with the way Geography teaching emphasises local, regional and national characteristics. Because the focus of most graduates is to become teachers, faculties used to drive forward this kind of education.

The safe opportunities of becoming a teacher and the illusions of easy earnings through tourism drove many students to enroll in Geography faculties. In the 2000s national statistics recorded high numbers of students enrolled in Geography (about 10,000, with a maximum of 19,000 in 2010), this being the second largest number of enrolled students after China. This explosive boom from less than 100 students in 1989 propelled Geography as one of the most popular fields in the first two decades of the transition. The situation was a paradox: the increase of geographers' number was in contradiction with the visibility of Geography as a science and discipline.

After the booming years of 2000s, Geography teaching had to adapt to market pressure. The curricula changed little, instead specializations like GIS, Tourism Geography or Territorial Planning gave a second wind to human geographers who had to find solutions for preserving their discipline.

The climate changed even more after 2010 as there were too many students in Geography faculties and few teaching jobs given that the demographic dynamics shifted towards negative trends alongside migration. This miss-match could be observed also from the focus on Geography Olympiads where Romanian is usually in the top three nations. Unlike Singapore, another top contender in the Geography Olympiad, the Romanian students winning such a competition, usually do not pursue an academic career and tend to not apply Geography in their jobs, a situation echoing that Geography education is disconnected on Geography research and the Geography of education (Butt, 2019; Puttick, 2022). Such a situation built on how Romanian Geography position in research, education and society was perceived - a classical discipline, without a real research core field that tends to emphasize a preference towards memorizing mountains, rivers, countries and cities.

Romanian Geography curriculum comprises a mix of disciplines. Students have to learn in the same year (3<sup>rd</sup> as an example) compulsory disciplines (Physical Geography of Romania, Geography of Continents, Environment Geography, Human Geography of Romania and several more topics) followed by a few specialization disciplines, all these targeting the development of school teachers enhanced with a general geographical knowledge. This is similar with what Simandan (2002) described more than 20 years ago, just that now students have to confront almost to the same curricula, but in three years. In general, geographic knowledge targets a general preparation without a focus on critical thinking, mainly driven by encyclopaedic and descriptive knowledge coupled with a pursue towards superlatives, spectacular and a basic gaze on the geographic components. Such approaches lead students to equip themselves with a plethora of software and instructions required by the physical, regional and environmental teaching branches of Romanian geographical departments as alternatives to the overwhelming amount of information, but missing critical insights about the use of technology in Geography.

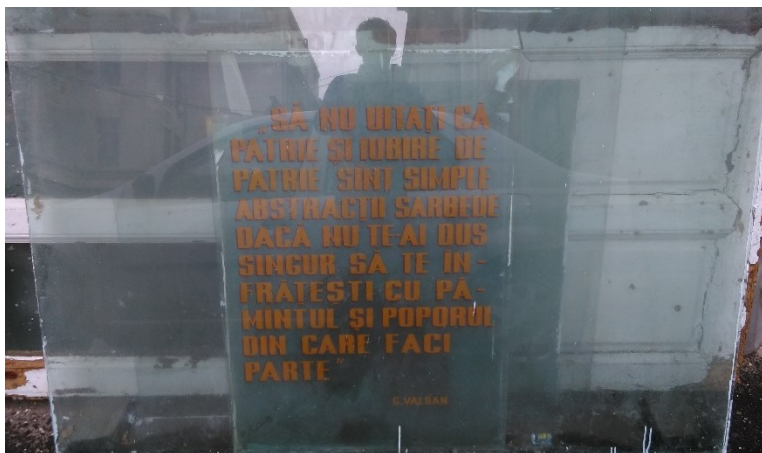
Fortunately, students have the option to select some minor topics among which Volunteership also plays its role. Because of volunteership and research



centres, community engagement is now more visible especially in the environmental direction of Human Geography, although it is driven from geosciences perspectives. Also, several professors acknowledged the issues of mainly preparing teachers and conduct open research centres where students can expand their education, skills and perspectives through research.

Another challenge of the Romanian teaching dynamics in Geography relates to how professorship is mostly associated with a full researcher norm, despite the teaching workload, many times overburdened with administrative chores. Consequently, teaching service is considered marginal in evaluations. The race for grants makes some colleagues to prioritize administrative requirements of grants at the expense of teaching hours. Given the institutional pressure towards professors to publish internationally, students remain stuck in old manuals, while professors rarely publish Geography books in Romanian. With professors caught in the race for grants and survival in academia, there is also the challenge of consecutive deadlines that diminishes the time for reflection and advancement of pedagogy or increase of involvement in theoretical endeavours.

Simandan (2002) emphasises that place marks the evolution of a 'good geographer'. Such is the evolution of Romanian geographical discipline in higher education. Powerfully influenced by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition, Romanian Geography remains anchored into the words of what is considered one of the central figures of the discipline, George Vălsan: "Do not forget that homeland and homeland love are simple insipid abstraction if you have not gone alone to become brother with the land and the people that you belong" (figure 1). This idea is representative for the evolution of geographical thought in Romania and its local focus. It is a local based perspective, one that attempts to build mainly teachers and national researchers, instead of shaping and infusing internationally driven ideas and contexts. This comes at least from the perspective of non-Human Geography approaches, which has captured the teaching and research. Specifically, to develop other strands of research, human or environmental, one still has to learn Geomorphology and Physical Geography, supplemented with the Geography of Romania. Such an approach results from the way faculties of Geography are defined as hubs for preparing teachers and less for developing skills applicable regardless of conditions.



**Figure 1.** George Vălsan quotation thrown in the courtyard (Faculty of Geography, Bucharest) (Source: Cezar Buterez)

Representative for how Geography decided to steer its direction was the fact that Vâlsan quotation, carved and displayed in one of the main rooms from the Faculty of Geography in Bucharest, was thrown away and considered garbage. Nowadays, in place of the placard, technology gadgets and wires shape the minds of professors and students alike. This technological impulse reflects in the large interest of acquiring GIS and remote sensing skills shaping a procedural learning (Simandan, 2013). Unfortunately, critical reflection and humanistic perspectives on how Geography evolves are usually disregarded. For example, the annual students' symposium from Bucharest (started in 1990s) has a 100% percent top places occupied by papers in which GIS or environmental techniques support the analyses. This might be a consequence of siliconization of urban Romanian (McElroy, 2020) in the '90s and the influence of the Environment Science programme that existed in the same period within the Bucharest Faculty of Geography.

The factors described throughout this paper furthermore lead to a fragile position of Geography in schools. With the advent of digitisation and market friendly politics promoting specific disciplines, Geography seems futile. It is the case of recent plans of national education bodies that restarted initiatives through which Geography role should be diminished from teaching and replaced by more "actual" disciplines. Unfortunately, this trend is the consequence of how Geography representatives (leaders from Faculty of Geography in Bucharest and Institute of Geography of the Romanian Academy) describe the field: Geography is a natural science / exact science.

### **ALTERNATIVE CONCLUSION**

The same phenomena of self-marginality, reflected here for Romanian Geography, marks the former socialist countries, which have embraced similar standards for Human Geography by using exclusively some of the research criteria offered by Clarivate Analytics. Romanian Geography has about 75% physical geographers and 25% human geographers, a structure inherited and kept from the communist period. Consequently, Romanian Human Geography is included in the group of Earth Sciences, having the criteria used for Geology, Climatology, Geophysics, Geomorphology, Biogeography, and Environmental sciences. Between all these sciences there are huge differences linked with the publication possibilities and the Article Influence Score (AIS) values (a unique indicator selected by the Earth Sciences Commission). This explains why among full professors and assistant-professors in Human Geography, at the national level, only five of them reach just minimal standards.

The main challenge for Geography is how could be loved by geographers! The source of this challenge is the reality that the present-day preoccupations of geographers is to help more other fields and less their own science. Looking both in a national and international context, we conclude that there are enough reasons for concern in Geography:

- as a field:
  - diminishing of Geography presence in all curricula regardless of education cycle;
  - removal of Geography from the national tests and bacculaureate;
  - a lower presence in schools.
- as a science:

- accentuating the “aggressions” of other disciplines;
- weak interest for Geographical revival;
- “Sirens’ songs” emerging from other scientific approaches lead geographers to pursue other fields of research;
- the importance of technical approaches coupled with the core thinking that Geography is an Earth Science.
  - as societal presence
- winning research projects might be considered an accident
- low involvement in local and regional communities
- fewer publications in Romanian.

Looking to the IGU (International Geography Union) reports and their analyses, alongside other international report, geographical Higher Education appears to move towards consolidation. But, carefully analysing the dynamics of initial geographical concepts (region, geosystem, cultural landscape) and methods (including maps), it results a single possible conclusion: there is a dissolution of Geography as a discipline and science, due to centrifugal trends and neglect of the solidity of its own methodological tools.

### Aknowlegments

Many thanks to Ioan Ianoș and Cezar Buterez.

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Submitted:  
July 22, 2023

Revised:  
August 20, 2024

Accepted and published online:  
September 20, 2024