

EPAINOS prize speech 2021, Frank van Oort

Selecting the best paper of young scientists presented at this ERSA congress for the EPAINOS prize is a very honourable tradition. The future of regional science is with the young researchers, and from this year's submissions to the prize, I can conclude: this future looks bright! The quality of the papers was very high, in terms of relevance of the topics for societal questions, the grounding in theory and relevant literatures, the soundness of the analyses performed, the validity of the results, the organization and presentation of the papers, and the innovative contribution to the field. These were the criteria that the jury of the EPAINOS prize considered, and these criteria were met by many of the longlist of 16 submitted papers. I want to make a big compliment to the submitting young scholars.

To identify the winner of the prize, many good scholars were involved in giving their professional opinion. The chairs and discussants of the sessions where the papers were presented gave their detailed opinion on the criteria mentioned. I want to thank all the reviewers; your help is very much appreciated. Every paper was also evaluated with the same rigor by at least two members of the EPAINOS-jury, which consisted this year of Rosella Nicolini, Vassilis Tselios, Patricia Melo, Michael Wyrwich, Thomas Steifeneder, Katarzyna Kopc-zewska, who also acted as secretary to the jury, and myself. This all resulted in a shortlist of 6 papers, that were evaluated in a new round by all jury-members and then ranked.

The quality of the papers sparked a well-fuelled debate in the jury. Increasingly, empirical papers use state-of-the-art identification methodologies, like panel models, difference-in-difference estimation and

regression discontinuity designs, linked to original urban and regional questions. We applaud these developments, as it shows that causal inference is on top of the young scientists' agenda. It also unites various 'seemingly' varying disciplines like regional science and urban economics. At the same time, methodological rigor does not automatically guarantee novelty, theoretical and conceptual progress, and a full view of policy implications. Regional science research is demanding, and is also in need of qualitative research and, indeed, good interpretations. We looked for these aspects as well.

The jury made the ranking of the papers, and -- ended up with **two** winners, ex aequo. This year EPAINOS prize will therefore be awarded to two young scientists.

One of the winners is **Benoit Dicharry**, for his paper "Impact of European Cohesion Policy on Regional Growth: When Time isn't Money". This paper is at the core of regional science, testing the hypothesis that a fast regional absorption speed of structural and cohesion funds by regions may not be beneficial for regional development. Using a regression discontinuity design with heterogeneous treatments, this hypothesis is confirmed for a large group of more peripheral regions in Europe. The outcomes are robust to changes in specifications, sample compositions and outcome variables. The conclusion of the paper questions the general incentive of the European Commission to fasten absorption of the funds. The paper is well embedded in the literature, uses state-of-the-art estimation techniques, finds important results, and contributes to the important discussion of the impact of policy on regional development. We think that this paper has high potential finding its way into the research field.

The other winner is **Nadia Matsiuk** for the paper “Thrive, Survive or Perish: The Impact of Regional Autonomy on the Demographic Dynamics of Italian Alpine Territories”. This paper analyses whether the autonomous status of a region affects the demographic dynamics of its mountain areas. The analysis relies on spatial discontinuity regression techniques, and links more favourable population dynamics in autonomous regions convincingly to the fiscal autonomy and decentralisation debate. Although the paper explores cases in Northern Italy, its implications are valuable for many other regions, in varying institutional settings, as well. The paper explores a very interesting idea, is innovative and convincing in its methodology, and dares to nuance its own outcomes (even by introducing a “so what” question in the concluding section).

I congratulate Benoit and Nadia with the EPAINOS prize 2021 and wish you both good luck in the future careers. Normally I would now shake your hands, but maybe later (if we are ever allowed again).