

Report on **ABS Europe Conference 2016:**

Differences and Discontinuities in a “Europe without Borders

“Mobility and borders at scale: Georgia between European and non-European space”

Paper presented by KUBS’s Edward Boyle (Faculty of Law, Kyushu University)

October 4-7 2016, University of Luxembourg, Belval, Luxembourg



On October 4-7, the Association for Borderlands Studies held the second of its biennial European Conferences at the University of Luxembourg. This was the second of the ABS’s European conferences, with the first having been held in conjunction with the inaugural world conference in Joensuu and St. Petersburg back in June 2014. Being a standalone event this time, it was a much smaller and more intimate event than two years previously. The theme of the conference this year was differences and discontinuities in contemporary European borders, making reference to the migration crisis that over the last two years has threatened to derail the European project of expanding the zone “without borders”. It was therefore fitting that the conference was held at Belval in Luxembourg, barely meters from France and mere tens of miles south of Schengen, where the agreement associated with open borders in Europe was signed, and in a founding member of the organization that would go on to become the European Union.

The conference’s location was mentioned by many of the speakers, who pointed to the multifaceted role of borders in Luxembourg’s development and contemporary situation. This applied equally to the university itself, which forms one partner in a University of the Greater Region which, like the region itself, is very much centred upon Luxembourg. The location of the university amidst the tastefully-maintained remains of a deindustrializing Europe spoke to both past convictions that the free movement of coal and steel would be of net benefit to all and the more uncomfortable results of where this policy have led in the present, which have yet to be worked out but are in any case leading to a drastic shake-up in the political landscape of both Europe and many of its constituent members.

With that said, however, the majority of the conference was looking at more traditional topics for border studies in Europe, of regional development, cross-border cooperation and the experience of migration within this European space. It was largely left to the plenary paper by Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary to ask pertinent questions about whether we “Can we go on talking borders while people die crossing them?”, in which she raised some rather uncomfortable issues for the field that the conference subsequently did little to dispel, drawing attention to the consensual nature of the border studies field and the way in which the field has developed precisely as borders became central to political narratives in Europe. While much of the field clearly opposes many aspects of the border industry that has grown up over the last twenty years, they are also directly imbricated within it. Given these circumstances, it remains incumbent upon all of us to consider how exactly we can bring together “Knowledge, Politics, Advocacy” in border studies.

KUBS’s Edward Boyle’s paper did not rise to this challenge, which remains for another day, but did seek to look at how the outer boundary of this formerly borderless European space is constructed, and still understood as such from beyond its borders. Looking at “Mobility and borders at scale: Georgia between European and non-European space”, it sought to examine Georgia’s position on the edge of Europe, and served to highlight the multiscale production of borders in the modern world. Together with papers by Paul Fryer and Lucas Oesch, in the context of this conference the panel was a rare attempt to seek to look at borders beyond Europe’s hardening boundaries.

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