

Association for Borderland Studies 1st World Conference

9-13 June 2014, Joensuu, Finland – St. Petersburg, Russia

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The Association for Borderland Studies's first ever World Conference was held on June 9-13 in Joensuu, Finland and St. Petersburg, Russia. The event was hosted by the VERA Centre for Russian and Border Studies at the University of Eastern Finland in cooperation with the Centre for Independent Social Research and the European University at St. Petersburg, Russia. While the Association was initially formed in 1976 by scholars focussed upon the United States-Mexico borderlands, it was decided in 2012 that it had become necessary to renew some of the traditional logistical and organizational practices in order to better accommodate the ever more international and diverse membership base. Rather than merely initiating yet another competing border conference series among dozens of established and high profile events, the goal was to provide a gathering not tied to one specific location, which can bring together various scholarly networks and the wider border studies community.

The basic premise of the first ABS World Conference was that while all the borders throughout the world are prone to the same global phenomena, there are various different context specific responses to these trends. All borders are unique. Talking about borders in general fashion thus obscures more than it illuminates. As verified, for example, by recent developments in Ukraine, the issue of borders, their functions and changing significance and symbolism presently looms larger than at any time since the end of the Cold War. The commonplace of global de-bordering, supported by optimistic notions of globalization and a new post-Cold War world order, has succumbed to the reality of increasing complexity and instability in the world system. We can recognize global megatrends that are changing the nature of borders while, at the same time, there are obviously different regional responses and counter tendencies in these trends that we need to pay attention to in our work.

The ABS World Conference offered a weeklong program bringing together an interdisciplinary cohort of not just academics, but also representatives of government agencies, other public bodies and NGOs from the Americas, Asia, Africa, Australasia and Europe. While the official conference program did not commence until the Monday morning, a number of pre-conference events took place during the preceding weekend. In the afternoon of June 7, after the closure of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) Executive Committee meeting, a videoconference took place with CBC promoters in other continents to commemorate the "African Borders Day" and in order to support the proposal of declaration of 7th of June (Day of African Borders) as the International Day of Integration across National Boundaries. Participants from South and Central America, Africa, the EU and the Russian-Ukrainian borders connected with Joensuu via videoconference, where a number of AEBR and ABS representatives had the chance to participate as well. The videoconference was monitored by the AEBR Secretary General, Martin Guillermo Ramírez, and streamed from the premises of the Regional Council of Northern Karelia. Dr. Jussi Laine delivered a statement and greetings on behalf of the ABS and the upcoming World conference organizers during the videoconference. The participants of the videoconference decided to send a letter to the heads of states, requesting support for the initiative to propose the General Assembly of the United Nations the establishment of 7th of June as the International Day of Integration across National Boundaries. The participant considered that the relevance of this initiative was not only symbolic, but would also contains two significant factors. On the one hand, it is about the promotion of peace and understanding between

neighbouring communities on both sides of national boundaries, but it is also about an African initiative to become global.

The cooperation between ABS and AEBR continued the following day, when a joint pre-conference Round Table Meeting “Co-operation between research community and regional actors in CBC was organized. A number of representatives from the Canadian led “Borders in Globalization” (BIG) project also took part in the event. The roundtable moderated by the ABS past-president Prof. Victor Konrad, Carleton University in Canada, rounded up 40-plus participants from the AEBR Executive Committee, representatives from the BIG project, local stakeholders as well as other participants of the ABS conference. It aimed to bring together stakeholder from the different sectors of the society to ponder, among other things, how high-level academic research on borders and cross-border cooperation could be translated in to practice for the benefit of the broader community, and which kind of methods and networks could be used for the common interests. The event concluded with lively discussion, a joint lunch and networking opportunities.

The official kick-off of the World conference took place on Monday, June 9, 2014. A conscious effort was made in both appealing to the Association’s past while looking towards a more expansive future in its plenary sessions. Speakers provided a marvellous cross-section of the potential of this gathering for the future. The opening ceremony consisted of the inaugural address as well as welcome words by the organizers, the Rector of the University of Eastern Finland, Dr. Tarja Cronberg from the European Parliament, and last but certainly not least by the President of the Association for Borderlands Studies, Dr. Martin van der Velde. It was followed by the first of the keynote presentations delivered by Prof. Oscar J. Martinez, producer of ground-breaking work on the US-Mexico borderlands as well as a founding member and a former president of ABS, who demonstrated the Association’s connections with its own past.

Another highlight of the first day was the concluding special plenary, in which Prof. Anssi Paasi (University of Oulu, Finland) and Prof. David Newman (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel) revisited their highly cited 1998 paper “Boundaries and Fences in a Postmodern World” published in *Progress in Human Geography*. Since then, the paper has become a seminal article in the emergence and renaissance of border studies, perhaps largely because its, then, revolutionary focus on the need to infuse the study of borders with new meanings in the light of the globalization debate, drawing on social and political theory well beyond the traditional geographical and political science focus on the topic. After the plenary session, Prof. Newman was presented with an award, marking his retirement from editing the *Geopolitics* after fifteen years, by his successor Dr. Virginie Mamadouh. Along with keynote presentations from two distinguished border scholars from Russia and Finland, Prof. Alexander Filippov (Higher School of Economics/Russian Academy of Sciences) and Prof. Anssi Paasi (Univeristy of Oulu), the organizers had invited presentations from acknowledged leaders in the field, Prof. Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary (Université Joseph Fourier) and Prof. Paul Nugent (University of Edinburgh). All the featured presentations pointed towards a bright future for border studies in different and exciting new ways.

The main substance of the conference was of course its parallel sessions, 111 in total. They were filled with presentations ranging from fascinating case studies to more theoretically inclined and methodological ones. The same globalization that has driven the expansion of the geographical spread of the association’s members and concerns was also visible in this decision to cross the border during the conference. Given the ABS’s devotion to the greater understanding of borders through multidisciplinary approaches and perspectives from all border contexts worldwide, the themes of the session provide a far-reaching cross-section of today’s border studies. The still-ongoing tug-of-war between Russia and Ukraine only underlined the importance and significance of what the conference sought to achieve, bringing home to everyone the

importance of further work on the borders that exist between us and how they are functioning today, in a world crisscrossed by markers and means of inclusion and exclusion. However, the conflict caused a number of practical, last minute, complications. As a number of participants could not, or chose not, to get the Russian visa, several panels originally scheduled to be held on the Russian side had to be rescheduled for the first two days of the conference organized on the Finnish side. This obviously meant that the number of simultaneous parallel sessions was higher than planned, but fortunately the unexpectedly high participation rates guaranteed sufficient attendance in all of the rooms. On the Russian side, the sessions had to compete in popularity with the World Cup in Brazil, which happened to kick-off on the very same day the ABS conference moved to the Russian side. Despite the large screens conveniently placed in the every corner of the bar at the hotel the conference was held, there was no doubt that the sessions drew the longer straw.

The excitement and enthusiasm of the sessions on offer during the four days of the conference were matched by the more social sides of the occasion. These included a delightful reception generously hosted by Mayor of Joensuu in the city's Art Museum. During the reception the three winners of the Student Paper Award were also announced. Another experience to remember was certainly the bus ride between the two venues taking six busloads of excited participants on an illuminating – though long – ride through the divided region of Karelia from Joensuu through Eastern Finland to the Russian metropolis of Saint Petersburg. Stops were made first on the Finnish side at Imatra and then in historic city Vyborg, which Finland lost to the Soviet Union during World War II in 1944. Getting a sizeable and highly international group of scholars across the strictly controlled border in an organized and timely fashion was of course the culmination point of that trip that had caused a lot of apprehensions during the months leading to the conference, especially given the contemporary geopolitical climate. The vigorous preparatory work paid off and the six busses crossed the border with relative ease, but not completely without problems. The impact of the contemporary political tensions was felt most tangibly by a Ukrainian participant, who was regrettably ultimately refused entry to Russia.

I take great pride in saying that we received 537 proposals from 64 different countries. Due to the logistical, financial – as well as geopolitical – reasons, the actual numbers certainly came down from that a little bit, but still more than 420 participants from 53 countries made their way to the conference – far more than the 250 participants that organizers had anticipated. To me these numbers indicate that there is a strong demand for this kind of global gathering and that the ABS, supported by its even more international membership, is truly becoming a global association. I take it also as a testament to the success of our original vision to provide a broader forum for border dialogue in order to expand the traditional geographical and disciplinary borders of the association itself, foster its global reach by encouraging participation from all corners of the world, and to strengthen the overall profile of border studies internationally by pushing forward the 21st century scholarship on borders and borderlands.

In addition to individual participants, our aim was to bring together other relevant border studies networks to discuss issues of common concern. On behalf of the organizers, I wish to thank one more time in particular ABORNE – the African Borderlands Research Network, the Association of European Border Regions, the Finnish Association for Russian and East European Studies, and the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies for their financial and scientific contribution to the conference. I am especially thankful to our colleagues from ABORNE, cooperation with whom resulted in allowing for African border experiences to be better represented than is frequently the case at these events. In addition to ABORNE chairman Prof. Nugent's keynote address, ABORNE and the African Union Border Programme (AUBP) held a joint book

launch of several recent volumes during the conference, and organized seven Africa-themed panels and round tables as part of the overall conference program.

While the ABS world conference can be deemed as a practical manifestation of the association's recent vision that seeks expansion and internalization, it was clear from the very outset that both the ABS and this very conference needs to continue to retain simultaneously its original emphasis on the study of the United States-Mexico borderlands region as one of its key focal areas. We were honoured to have three of the original-founding members of ABS (Martinez, Ganster and Kruszewski) as well as a very representative line-up of its other former presidents. It must be acknowledged that without their hard efforts, extensive knowledge and passion, we would not be as an association where we are now.

In all, the first ABS World Conference did not only convene the largest and most representative gathering of border specialists from around the globe, but also this first international conference of its kind established a benchmark for the development and integration of border studies. We believe that with the World conference, border studies have achieved a new level of expression and interaction. The challenge now is to take border studies to greater heights of understanding, knowledge and policy impact. I hope to see you in four years' time at the next ABS World Conference!