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Message Regarding Academic Freedom

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On July 10-14, 2018, the Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS) held its Second World Conference in Vienna and Budapest. The meeting was attended by more than 500 border scholars from 54 countries, including renowned experts and practitioners, spanning all fields of the humanities and the social sciences. The ABS is the world's largest academic organization dedicated to the systematic study and exchange of ideas, information and analysis of international border, and the processes and communities engendered by such borders. The Second ABS World Conference had as its central topic Border-Making and its Consequences: Interpreting Evidence from the "post-Colonial" and "post-Imperial" 20th Century and was co-organized by the University of Vienna and the Central European University on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The dissolution of empires such as the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman in the early 20th century, as well as the creation of new states and/or borders in Western Europe, are momentous historical events with consequences reaching far beyond Europe. One of the lessons that emerged from these historical events is that nationalisms that insist on single identities and cultural homogeneity are constant sources of conflict and human suffering. Whereas borders and the creation of new nation-states were considered a solution to war after WWI, subsequent events and the disaster of WWII have proved otherwise. Still, borders are regarded as marks of national identity by state elites even in the post-colonial world, and any societal change contrary to these nationalistic views are strongly resisted, and result on angry rhetoric and misguided border policies.

At the Second ABS World Conference, we paid attention to the historical and contemporary dynamics of border creation, border management and border shifting, as well as the consequences of these practices for the societies concerned. We sought to gain deeper insight into the similarities and differences in the way borders are made around the world, as well as the forms and functions borders fulfil throughout time. We also explored ethical questions that emerge from border politics and border-making. On a more visionary note, the conference considered borders and borderlands as spaces of encounter and plurality. Indeed, the possibility of pluralism, not as a collection of separate cultural realms as some could envision, but as a context where shared commitments, and not necessarily shared values, could allow for more inclusive understandings of community and more accommodating attitudes to multiculturalism and migration.

We relished the opportunity to discuss our research free of constraints and in an environment where academic freedom was fully exercised and respected (as laid out in Article 13 of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights). Because of this we condemn any political attempt to limit academic freedom in higher learning institution throughout the world, including the research of topics such as borders, migration and gender, or the choice of disciplinary approaches such as sociological research. We close this letter expressing our solidarity with the institutions and individual scholars in Hungary, Russia and Turkey whose academic activities are facing the hostility of those that see academic freedom as a threat.

Dr. Francisco Lara Valencia, President

Association for Borderlands Studies

Dr. Machteld Venken, Chair,

Second ABS World Conference