

ELASTIC BORDERS RESEARCH PROJECT

NEWSLETTER #1
OCTOBER 2023

Updates from our researchers currently on
fieldwork in Greece, Tunisia, Canary Islands

Reports from our researchers attending
expert sessions in Brussels and London

Discussion Lab in Graz
with international guests

EDITORIAL

by Bilgin Ayata



*Prof. Dr. Bilgin Ayata
is the director of the research
project „Elastic Borders“*

Welcome to the first edition of the Elastic Borders Research Project's Newsletter!

About a year has passed since the launch of our research project at the [University of Graz](#) which is generously funded by the [Nomis Foundation](#). I assembled an excellent [team](#) of researchers who will carry out fundamental research on the transformation of borders in the 21st century for the next four years. A first group started in November 2022, while a second group of researchers joined the team in March 2023. Our main objective is to develop an empirically grounded new theory of the border that takes into account contemporary changes through digitalization, globalization and securitization. Building on the concept of elasticity in physics, we argue that contemporary borders are best understood as elastic. Much like pliable material, contemporary borders have evolved into highly dynamic entities, capable of stretching and retracting well beyond their conventional physical demarcations. This innovative perspective finds its vivid embodiment in the external frontiers of the European Union, the focal point of our study. Across two research units, my team is exploring how a) elastic borders are enabled through legal and technological innovations and how b) border elasticity affects socio-political developments on the ground. [Research Unit 1](#) provides a comprehensive view of developments at the EU level, while [Research Unit 2](#) carries out ethnographies in critical nodes of the EU external borders in Greece, Tunisia and the Canary Islands.

It is a true privilege to have the opportunity to conduct such a comprehensive study at this important historical juncture, where once again, in Europe, the topics of border security and asylum are at the forefront of heated political debates. Unfortunately, public discussions are guided by strong emotions rather than empirics and analysis; by and large, the

same questions are raised and the same solutions are proposed. In the border zones themselves, we observe an intensification of the criminalization and dehumanization of migrants, as well as an increase in violence and deaths at the border. Our researchers Artemis Fyssa and Chiara Pagano were able to observe firsthand the effects of the deadly shipwrecks in Greece and the abandonment of 350 Black migrants in the desert between Tunisia and Libya in extreme heat. Researching borders at this point in time is a challenging undertaking that places exceptional responsibility on the entire team, both in terms of academic rigor and excellence, as well as in regard to the ethics of the research. What is and should be the role of research and the researcher under these conditions? One response to this vital question is to approach it through constant critical inquiry and self-reflexivity. We continuously discuss the challenges and responsibilities of our scholarship and have made it an essential part of our research process. Another response involves active and transparent science communication. This newsletter, which will be published every four months, is a part of that effort. We recently also launched our social media accounts on [X and Instagram](#), as well as our [website](#). Moreover, as of this fall, we are collaborating with the online magazine [Eurozine](#) where our researchers will publish brief insights into their subprojects for a non-academic public. This is in addition to our forthcoming academic publications and presentations. The next newsletter will appear in January 2024 and will contain updates as well the introduction of affiliated researchers and their projects. I am very happy that [Dr. Carolyn Defrin](#) will join our team for two years with her Marie Skłodowska Curie project on the role of the arts and artistic practices at the border – a fascinating expansion of our interdisciplinary scope.

With best wishes,
Bilgin Ayata

UPDATES FROM THE FIELD

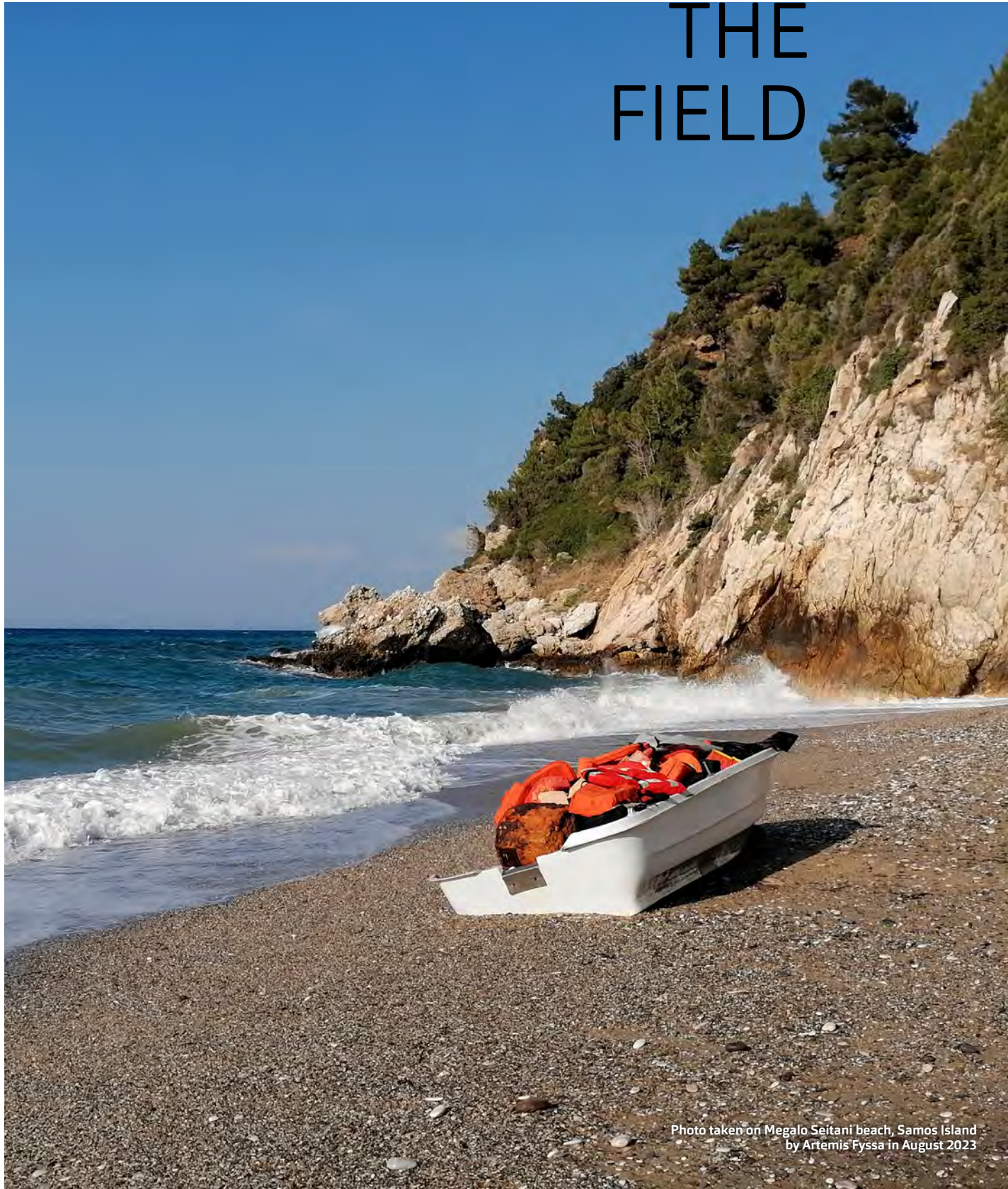


Photo taken on Megalo Seitani beach, Samos Island
by Artemis Fyssa in August 2023

NOTES FROM SAMOS

by Artemis Fyssa

“ONE DAY, SAMOS WILL BE NO LONGER KNOWN FOR PYTHAGORAS, BUT FOR ITS CAMP.”



After a preliminary visit to Samos in February 2023, I returned in July to begin my extended fieldwork. At present, the Aegean islands are experiencing a surge in arrivals. In the aftermath of the deadliest [shipwreck](#) thus far in Pylos on 13-14 June 2023, where approximately 700 migrants drowned, allegedly due to the faulty maneuvering of their vessel by the Greek Coast Guard, the Greek authorities have been in the limelight regarding pushback operations. FRONTEX, although [scrutinized in the past](#) for its involvement in pushbacks, appears to be taking on a monitoring role that restricts the pushback operations allegedly carried out by Greek state entities. Put simply, the decrease in pushbacks is reflected in an increase in arrivals. According to official statistics, in early July, [501 migrants](#) were held in the Closed Control Access Center (CCAC) in Samos. This number had risen to [3,268](#) by mid-September. During our visit to Samos with Prof. Bilgin Ayata in February 2023, the camp commander gave us a tour with notable pride in the new facility, considering it an improvement over the previous Hotspot facility known for its miserable conditions. Despite the highly publicized model structure that this EU-funded camp is supposed to represent, the interviews I have conducted in Samos since July align with policy reports that paint [a grim picture](#) of the CCAC. Inadequate medical care and [legal support](#), water shortages, unsanitary hygiene conditions, overcrowding, arbitrary detention, constantly shifting administrative procedures, prison-like architecture and enforced curfews contribute to a multitude of human rights violations. My interviews focus on understanding how the presence of the CCAC and the designation of Samos as a Hotspot area have impacted the island. So far, I have been struck by how more and more locals are becoming integrated

into the island's border management apparatus. The inauguration of the CCAC in 2021 as the new model camp for the Greek islands has put renewed emphasis on Samos, resulting in ambivalent feelings among the local community. As one of my interview partners put it dryly: One day, Samos will no longer be known for Pythagoras, but for its camp.

Another observation I made is the normalization of dehumanization of migrants at various institutional levels in Greece. In late August, the northern land border region Evros was swept by a devastating wildfire. One journalist commented that “the only comforting thing is that we did not mourn any human lives beyond the unfortunate 18 [migrants] who perished in the Dadia forest” (A. Douvara, journalist at the [Greek Public Television Chanel 1](#) 23/08/2023). As the fire raged on, the Greek government issued evacuation orders using emergency text messages, yet the “unfortunate” migrants were left helpless. The devaluation of migrants' lives was not confined to the Greek media; it was a narrative embraced by both the Minister of Migration Policy, [Dimitris Kairidis](#), and Prime Minister [Kyriakos Mitsotakis](#). Their rhetoric implied that individuals crossing Greek borders “illegally” bear responsibility for any misfortunes that befall them, even going so far as to imply that they themselves might have ignited the forest they sought refuge in. As the fires in Evros kept burning for [more than two weeks](#), local vigilantes unleashed a pogrom against migrant individuals. They often filming themselves while abducting and apprehending them, posting videos on social media. The outcry that followed resulted in the [arrest of the vigilantes](#). No arson charges were brought against the migrants; however, they were placed under administrative detention for unauthorized border crossing.



Artemis Fyssa is the principal researcher for Subproject 4, responsible for the case study on Samos island.

She explores the local impact of the elastic border and is currently doing her fieldwork on the island.

NOTES FROM THE TUNISIAN-LIBYAN BORDER ZONE

By Chiara Pagano



Tunisian customs patrol boat, Zarzis port, July 2023.
Photo by Chiara Pagano.

Since the beginning of the year, Tunisian authorities have been leveraging the issue of migration, diverting the attention away from a severe economic crisis disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. In February, Tunisian President Sa'ied gave a speech describing the influx and presence of Sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia as an international criminal plan to [“change the composition of the demographic landscape in Tunisia.”](#) The speech directly targeted Black non-citizens, which unleashed [a wave of violence](#) against Black individuals in Tunisia. In response, requests for embassy-assisted returns from Tunisia soared, while boat departures to Italy also increased.

When I began my extensive ethnographic research in the governorate of Médenine in July, my observations unfolded against the backdrop of structurally intertwined mobility regimes (i.e., summer increases in undocumented departures of young Tunisians to Europe, the return of the diaspora from Europe, and an influx of international budget tourism) evolving alongside unprecedented state-sanctioned violence against irregularized Black migrants across the Tun-

sian-Libyan border region (a more detailed analysis is forthcoming in [Eurozine Magazine](#) in October).

Between 5 and 6 July, another shipwreck in the Gulf of Gabes claimed multiple lives, with most of the missing hailing from the governorate of Médenine and Tataouine. The Zarzis fishermen's association organized Search and Rescue (SAR) operations, de facto replacing the mistrusted Tunisian Coast Guard and safely bringing 11 people to shore. Both the diaspora and local residents mobilized in solidarity with the families of the disappeared. Yet I could not help but notice how this went hand in hand with strong value judgments from the local community, as these very same families were considered responsible for allowing their children, who were minors, to embark on perilous journeys to Europe. This highlighted the multilayered (re)composition of frontier communities and their struggles in coping with deadly border regimes.

THE GOVERNORATE OF MÉDENINE BECAME A FOCAL POINT FOR STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACK MIGRANTS



Meanwhile, [heightened EU pressures on the government to establish a new strategic partnership for development and migration](#) triggered an increase in state violence, as Tunisian authorities aimed not so much to prevent irregularized Black migrants from reaching Europe but to push them to leave Tunisia. The governorate of Médenine became a focal point for state violence against Black migrants. This followed organized civilian pogroms and protests in the city of Sfax, resulting in state-led deportations of at least 1,200 Black migrants to the desert borders with Libya and Algeria. Subsequently, their movement within the country was violently restricted to the southernmost governorates. This resulted in the sustained militarization of public spaces well beyond official border posts. This situation persisted until August 10th, when an agreement was reached between the Libyan and Tunisian governments to redistribute the remaining 350 individuals stranded at their desert borderlands, after a tug-of-war that had claimed the lives of more than 25 people.

Overall, the state migration policy itself stood out as the truly destabilizing factor for border societies. Until November 2023, I will continue to closely follow the developments on the ground and offer snapshots of my fieldwork in our project's social media outlets.



Dr. Chiara Pagano, principal researcher for Subproject 5, investigates the socio-political effects of the EU's elastic border in Tunisia. She is currently conducting fieldwork in the governorate Medenine at the Tunisian-Libyan border.

NOTES FROM TENERIFE

BY MIRCO BUOSO



Boat installation at the University of La Laguna, Tenerife, commemorating migrant deaths at sea. Photo by Mirco Buoso.



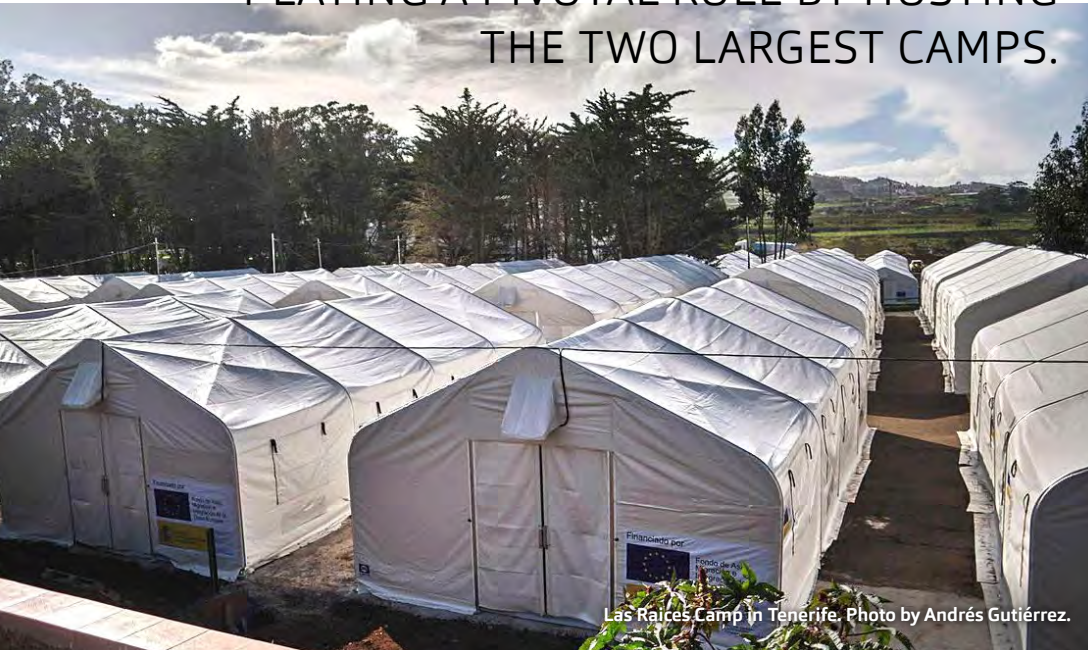
Mirco Buoso is the principal researcher for Subproject 6 exploring the emergent elastic border zone in Tenerife, an outermost region of the EU.

Over the past few years, the Canary Islands have witnessed a stark increase in boat arrivals departing from West Africa via the Atlantic, known as one of the most dangerous routes to reach Europe. In preparation for my fieldwork, I communicated with colleagues in our research team who had already conducted ethnographic research at pivotal arrival points in Greece and Italy. These places have become highly militarized spaces, and I had envisioned finding a similar situation in Tenerife.

However, my first visit to Las Raíces refugee camp presented a strikingly different picture: a rudimentary surveillance system, the absence of law enforcement, and lack of high-tech suggested a rather demilitarized space. Instead, the entrance is guarded by two guard posts, each equipped with a circular mirror so the private security guards stationed at these posts can see onto the street outside. Nevertheless, Tenerife is rapidly expanding its migration and border infrastructure due to the increasing arrivals.

The Canary Islands, renowned as a prime tourist destination, conceal an uncharted role in border control and migration management in the Atlantic Ocean. Located 1500 km from the Spanish peninsula and less than 100km from Morocco, the archipelago bridges Africa, the Americas, and Europe. As an outermost EU region and part of the Schengen Area, the Canary Islands also constitute its southernmost border. It was here, in 2004, that the [only recently established Frontex launched its first mission](#). Looking at the present, the archipelago's borders remain in constant transformation. This border extends and retracts through new cooperation agreements and the adoption of the [Plan Canarias](#). This plan has led to the creation of seven macro camps across the seven islands, with Tenerife playing a pivotal role by

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Las Raíces Camp in Tenerife. Photo by Andrés Gutiérrez.

hosting the two largest camps, totaling more than 2,600 places. Additionally, new reception centers for unaccompanied minors are being opened on the Island as I write.

After an exploratory field visit in May, I arrived in Tenerife in August and joined a volunteer group to familiarize myself with local developments. These groups gather daily outside Las Raíces Camp just a few meters from the main entrance. Here, hundreds of refugees gather around various volunteers who offer Spanish lessons, free legal counsel, and other services or items. It is a vibrant space of encounter between the entrapped refugees and local solidarity groups.

Institutions on the island have recognized the archipelago's new role in migration management and responded with various initiatives. For instance, in May, the University of La Laguna in Tenerife erected a memorial at the heart of its main campus. This memorial features an African wooden boat (patera) commemorating "thousands of people from Africa, who died during the last three decades on the so-called Canary route," as the inscription on the

memorial states. It establishes a direct link between the colonization of Africa and present-day migration, echoing the call for restorative justice. Conversely, the Canarian government, in a significant move, designated September 10 as Canarian Migration Day. This commemorative day links Canarian emigration past—recalling the 1919 shipwreck in which 400 Canarian migrants died while trying to reach Cuba—to the present migratory situation. The day aims to celebrate the positive values of migration and foster hospitality, empathy, solidarity, and cooperation.

Conference Reports

EXPERT SESSION ON FRONTEX AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

BY ALEXANDRA BOGOS

As I delved deeper into my investigation of the EU legislative framework on migration, I participated in an engaging dialogue at the European Parliament in Brussels in May this year. The central topic of discussion was Frontex's role and responsibility in the ever-evolving landscape of border management.

Frontex, the European Border and Coastguard Agency, has undergone a significant expansion in both its mandate and its budget since the implementation of its [2019 Regulation](#). This regulation not only gave Frontex an enhanced role in border zones in EU member states, but at the same time it outlined a role for the Agency to operate outside EU territorial confines, reaching places like the Western Balkans, Moldova, Mauritania, Senegal, Niger, and more. Despite explicit obligations to uphold fundamental rights, the Agency has come under increased scrutiny since 2020 for its [involvement in pushbacks](#) of people on the move.

Frontex's adroit avoidance of accountability for its unlawful actions stirred concern among civil society organizations, journalists, academics and the European Parliament. The expert session that I participated in was coordinated by the [\(B\)OrderS Centre of Queen Mary University of London](#), in collaboration with the [Observatori de Dret Públic](#) (IDP) Barcelona and members of the European Parliament. The discussions highlighted contrasting views of EU institutions and Frontex. They defended the alleged progress made by the Agency in the last few years, while academics advocated for clearer definitions of "shared responsibility" and civil society actors demanded more accountability and oversight.



Alexandra Bogos is the principal researcher for Subproject 1, examining the EU legal framework that enables border elasticity.



The European Parliament. Photo by the European Union

This year, the European Commission is set to [evaluate the implementation of the 2019 Frontex Regulation](#). I anticipate that it will re-open the Regulation and, given the current political leaning of the Commission, it is likely that fundamental rights commitments will be further diminished. Of particular concern is the Agency's obligation to suspend, terminate, or withdraw from countries where fundamental rights are violated. Given the recent [judgement by the EU Court of Justice](#), which highlighted Frontex's apparent impunity, broader questions about the accountability of EU Institutions come to the fore. I left the conference with the question of whether and how the malleability in the commitment to fundamental rights and accountability facilitates border elasticity—a question I will explore further in the coming months.

ITFLOWS POLICY CONFERENCE, BRUNEL UNIVERSITY

BY LAURA JUNG



Digital technology, such as artificial intelligence, plays an increasingly critical role in bordering practices. Image by Seventh Sense AI.

As part of my research into the science and technology which increasingly puts borders on the move, I encountered [ITFLOWS](#), an EU-funded research project seeking to develop an AI-based migration prediction tool which also conducts social media analysis to measure attitudes to migration. AI-powered technologies are currently transforming border surveillance and enforcement, analyzing large datasets, conducting automated risk analysis, assessing behaviors and emotions, and making predictions about the trajectory and number of people on the move. The EU is investing massive amounts in the research and development of these technologies, with approximately €250 million spent on border security research since 2014 ([Stewardship](#)). Frontex and the European Commission have named the development of AI-powered predictive technology a priority ([EPRS 2021](#)), leading to increased research activity in that field.



Dr. Laura Jung is principal researcher of Subproject 2, investigating the science and technology that enables the EU's elastic border.

This is the background against which I attended the ITFLOWS policy conference at Brunel University, London, in April this year. During the day's session on human rights, bias, and policy implications, I noted a number of recurrent themes raised in the discussions: On the one hand, there was a widespread sense that AI-powered predictive technology is advancing

at breakneck speed, and that the majority of applications in the field would be used to bolster a securitarian agenda of restricting movement. ITFLOWS is an unusual contender in this space as it positions itself as a means to harness technology to the task of securing the human rights of people on the move. On the other, there was uncertainty over the efficacy and scope of existing (as well as planned) regulatory frameworks to minimize harmful effects of such technologies. Looming over this were larger questions: whether and to what extent purpose limitation of such technologies was possible at all, given the revolving door between EU agencies, NGOs, and the private sector, and which applications were being developed and deployed outside of public scrutiny.

I leave the conference with an appreciation of the complex social and political forces shaping research and development of border surveillance technology: while our perception of this field is dominated by interlocking state and corporate interests in seamless surveillance, human-rights-focused researchers and practitioners have a hand in shaping this research agenda, too.

DISCUSSION LAB

BY TALIA BARONCELLI



Discussion lab with Charles Heller at the University of Graz in April.
Photo by Mirco Buoso.

As part of our ongoing conceptual discussions, our project team met with an international lineup of distinguished scholars, activists and journalists in a series of discussion labs around issues of bordering practices in Europe. The discussions facilitated interdisciplinary exchange of empirical findings and theoretical insights pertaining to the concept of borders and border movements. The meetings occurred alongside a public lecture series on “[Bordering Europe](#)” that Prof. Bilgin Ayata, Dr. Laura Jung and Dr. Chiara Pagano co-organized together with other members of the Cluster „[Migration, Borders, and Mobilities in, around, and across Europe](#).” This Cluster is part of the Field of Excellence “Dimensions of Europe” at the University of Graz and is led by Prof. Bilgin Ayata and Prof. Ulrich Ermann.

Architect **Dr. Charles Heller**, director of the Geneva-based Border Forensics agency initiated the discussion lab in April. He shared insights on visual mapping and other methods based on recent investigations of the agency. In May, political scientist **Dr. Saskia Stachowitsch** (CEU Vienna) presented the role of risk analysis as a pivotal force shaping European border security policies, focusing on the gendered and racialized characterizations of people on the move by Frontex. Journalist **Stavros Malichudis** (Solomon Magazine, Athens) highlighted the erosion of human rights in Greece and how border surveillance at the

Evros border zone between Greece and Turkey is conducted unevenly, with the state deploying both “high-tech” and “low-tech” methods. The continuities of state practices of violence in various international contexts were traced out in the workshop with legal scholar **Prof. Dr. Penny Green** (Queen Mary University of London) with examples of the encampment of the Rohingya. Theologist **Dr. Valeryia Saulevich** (University of Graz) focused on the macro level of social interactions, highlighting the implications of Church asylum in Austria. With political geographer **Prof. Corey Johnson** (University of North Carolina at Greensboro), we discussed the concepts of sovereignty and para-sovereignty. Johnson infused the discussion of the border/bordering with spatio-temporal observations and approaches from the field of geography. Fruitful discussions with anthropologists **Dr. Sebastian Cobarrubias** and **Dr. Maribel Casas-Cortes** (Zaragoza University) on the concept of externalization and theories of the border closed the discussion lab meetings for the summer.