

### **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: SQUARING THE CIRCLE – NAVIGATING CHANGES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

In the modern age, characterised by rapid technological advancements, shifting power dynamics, and pervasive global challenges, the complexity of international relations has become increasingly evident. Contemporary conflicts, challenges, risks, and threats jeopardising global, regional, and national security are constantly transforming. Understanding these phenomena is crucial for advancing scholarly research and guiding state institutions in navigating crises in international relations (Đorđević and Cvetković 2024).

For that purpose, the international scientific conference *Squaring the Circle: Navigating Changes in Contemporary International Relations* was held at the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade in Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, on June 4th and 5th, 2024. The conference, co-organised by the Institute of International Politics and Economics (IIPE) and the University of Belgrade-Faculty of Security Studies, was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.

The conference, which served as a unique platform for scholars and practitioners to critically assess current tumultuous changes in global relations and the likely dynamics in the future, aimed to provide space unimpeded by widening groupthink in the world, even academia. The two-day event unfolded in two plenary sessions—the opening and the closing—and three parallel thematic sessions focused on mapping out and unearthing global, regional, and subregional changes. Experts and representatives from sixteen countries presented their contributions and participated in a lively exchange.

During the conference opening ceremony, the Rector of the University of Belgrade, Professor Vladan Đokić, underlined the importance of this scientific event in the prominent work of the University nowadays. In his opening address, H.E. Mr Marko Đurić, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, pointed out that Belgrade is currently the best place in Europe for free debating the ongoing changes in international relations. The minister underscored the complexity of the challenges, causing severe and serial crises that undermine

order and feed instability, making global peace and security precarious. The Dean of the University of Belgrade Faculty of Security, Professor Vladimir Cvetković, described the state of world politics as restructuring, pregnant with the creation of a new form of modern global order. In concluding the opening session, Professor Branislav Đorđević, Director of the Institute of International Politics and Economics, reminded participants of the fact that the IIPE and the Faculty of Security Studies cooperate traditionally in organising prestigious scientific events and that the scientific conference *Squaring the Circle: Managing Changes in Contemporary International Relations* would be a new intellectual jewel (see: Serbian MFA [2024]; IIPE [2024] on this subject).

The first working panel, “Global Changes and the Role of Great Powers”, moderated by Aleksandar Mitić, aimed to decipher the current challenges and transformations the global system emerging from the peaceful end of the Cold War has faced. While Dejan Mihailović underlined the possibility of global conflict among different forms of capitalism because of contemporary system crises characterised by wartime economies and ecological collapse, Richard Sakwa and Alfred de Zayas discussed challenges to the United Nations system and its importance for preserving global peace. Sakwa highlighted the challenges as a consequence of actions misaligned with the UN Charter. De Zayas continued emphasising the lack of authority and credibility within the United Nations system, which requires institutional reform. A significant change in contemporary international relations is the growing influence of transnational actors as opposed to the dominant state-centric system (Baker 2024). Roozbeh B. Baker, therefore, pointed out the new field of “transnational studies” and offered a theoretical lens for assessing the agency of transnational actors in shaping the behaviour of states. Slobodan Janković and Aleksandar Mitić analysed strategic narratives of the great powers, presenting opposing visions of world order and their potential for realisation. Vladimir Trapara and Ana Jović-Lazić examined the rules-based order concept in international relations, contrasting it with alternative proposals from various countries. Dušan Proroković and Nenad Stekić focused on the People’s Republic of China. They explored the growing economic power of China, highlighting the transformative effects of its growth and the emergence of new contours of world order in its aspirations to be positioned as a critical player in global affairs (Proroković and Stekić 2024b). On the other hand, Erin Rowland Carlin emphasised the importance of micro-level research for understanding crises and focused on the process of peace mediation and the role of mediators. Mihajlo Vučić concluded by reflecting on the legal implications of freezing Russian Central Bank assets to pay reparations to Ukraine, warning it could further erode relations between the West and Russia (see, e.g., Proroković and Stekić [2024a] on this subject).

The European security architecture and the role of regional actors within it were the topics of the second working panel, moderated by Nevena Šekarić-Stojanović. Paolo Sellari and Stefano Valente discussed the place and role of the Mediterranean in contemporary international relations. Sellari problematised the established historical-economic constant of the role of the Mediterranean as a pivotal point in global trade flows, emphasising its main role as the point of passage. Valente argued through the evolution of the concept of the Eastern Basin that the region is becoming increasingly important in the broader oceanic order related to the complex multipolar world order dominated by regional and transnational balances. Birgül Demirtaş portrayed *à la carte* global order and regional actors in the context of the war in Ukraine. She argued that more flexible types of partnerships were preferred instead of stable alliances in a changing environment (Demirtaş 2024). Case studies of regional powers like Turkey and Serbia showed that they conducted an “*à la carte* foreign policy” towards the war in Ukraine by criticising in parallel Russian aggression, maintaining relations with Moscow, and abstaining from the European Union’s sanctions (Demirtaş 2024). Ekaterina Entina highlighted the shifting balance of power in Southeast Europe due to the influence of non-Western actors and new value chains, changing the region’s geopolitical landscape. Conversely, Igor Istomin dissected the threatened European security, contrasting multilateralism with block structures post-World War II. Aleksei A. Davidov referred to evolving US relations with Central and Eastern Europe, noting a shift from post-Cold War cooperation to new confrontations with China and Russia. The positions and relations of states in the changed European security architecture were also discussed on this panel. Poland’s role in the changing geopolitical environment through the Three Seas Initiative was the topic of Marko Babic’s presentation. Tony Mileski analysed the Prespa Agreement’s impact on North Macedonia’s EU accession, noting challenges despite NATO membership in 2020. In the conclusion of the panel, Dejan Vuletić explored Russia-Turkey relations and their implications for the Western Balkans, highlighting their pragmatic partnership based on mutual distrust of the West and economic cooperation (see, e.g., Proroković and Stekić [2024a] on this subject).

The third panel, moderated by Bogdan Stojanović, addressed the conflicting interests of global actors in the Balkans, the relevance of the BRICS, regional issues, the Ukraine crisis, potential new crises, energy security, green transition, and regional economic cooperation opportunities. Alexis Troude highlighted the strategic interests of global powers in the Balkans, focusing on Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence, Western companies’ interests in natural resources, and the EU as a destabilising factor. Francesco Barbaro described the Balkan geopolitical puzzle as a futile effort to square a circle, presenting the region as transitional with conflicting global interests. Aleksandar Raković

highlighted the preservation of Serbian identity in Montenegro from 2017 to 2023, noting the lack of significant foreign interference. Building on the discussion on foreign factors in the Western Balkans, Bojan S. Dimitrijević, Milenko Đeletović, and Ivica Lj. Đorđević compared the BRICS with the G7 and the EU, discussing reforms, de-dollarisation, and opportunities for Serbia-BRICS cooperation. When speaking about energy security in the Western Balkans, Jelena Zvezdanović Lobanova highlighted the region's limited progress in renewable energy development and emphasised the need for a synergy between energy security and environmental protection. EU membership is still the shared prime foreign policy goal among the Western Balkan countries, Sanja Jelisavac Trošić and Mitko Arnaudov reassessed. They examined the determinants influencing the policy goals of the Western Balkans Six, noting that slow regional cooperation progress had a significant impact (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2024). Building on the previous, Marina Kostić Šulejić and Veljko Blagojević analysed Serbia's and Croatia's policies in the context of the Ukraine crisis's tenth anniversary, predicting potential new crises caused by polarisation and militarisation in the Balkans. In concluding remarks, Bogdan Stojanović and Nataša Stanojević presented the survey's results on the rise of pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia, particularly after 2022. They found that perceptions of Kosovo and Metohija issues have significantly influenced pro-Russian attitudes. Meanwhile, negative views of non-traditional values and disappointment with the European Union played a lesser role (Stojanović and Stanojević, 2024).

In concluding the review of this conference, it is appropriate to say it was a tour de force. The conference outputs will be invaluable reading for new and seasoned students in International Studies and the general public interested in getting the most up-to-date available knowledge on changes in an ever-evolving global landscape. Consequently, discussions offer necessary insights and charted possibilities for untying the knots of the unknown in contemporary international relations and effectively squaring the circle for navigating changes successfully.

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