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Report of the 2nd Congress of the Polish International Studies Association Global International Relations: Challenges and Developments, 6-8 November 2024, Kraków, Poland

The 2nd Congress of the Polish International Studies Association was held in Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, from November 6 to 8 2024. The Polish International Studies Association (PISA) is a nationwide scientific association aimed at integrating researchers engaged in the study of international relations. The PISA was established to address the need for institutionalized collaboration among scholars from various disciplines who conduct research on international issues. The association serves as a platform for the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and interdisciplinary cooperation in the analysis and interpretation of international relations. The activities of PISA contribute to the consolidation of the academic community interested in the multifaceted study of international relations.

The board of the PISA consists of scholars and academics representing diverse institutions. The board members are as follows: prof. Marian Edward Haliżak – as Chairman, prof. Andrzej Mania, prof. Marek Pietraś, prof. UŁ, dr hab. Radosław Bania, prof. Katarzyna Żukrowska, dr Łukasz Fijałkowski and prof. UAM, dr hab. Przemysław Osiewicz. Over the course of two days, the Congress hosted a total of 61 panel sessions, featuring the active participation of 336 scholars and experts. Given the extensive scope of the Congress, I present a selection of key panels in which I personally participated, highlighting their significance within the broader programme.

The programme commenced on November 6 with an introductory methodological workshop, followed by the formal opening of the Congress during the plenary session on November 7. The conference explored the concept of Global International Relations (Global IR). Its primary aim was to address the limitations of traditional Western-centric IR theories by incorporating perspectives and experiences from the non-Western world, including the Global South. IR seeks to broaden the discipline by emphasizing the interconnectedness of states and societies across all regions – East, West, North, and South – without replacing existing theories but challenging them to recognize the non-Western contributions.

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The plenary panel *Global IR: Challenges and Opportunities* was dedicated to exploring the complexities and prospects inherent in the Global IR framework. With emerging powers like China, India, Indonesia and Middle East gaining prominence, and Western countries facing growing pressures, the inclusion of non-Western perspectives is increasingly essential for a comprehensive understanding of global politics.

The first panel '*The Ambivalence of Sacredness' in Global International Relations: Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Religion's Presence in a Changing World* commenced with a presentation on *Religion, Postsecularism, and Global Research in International Relation*. Dr Anna Solarz analyzed the marginalization of religion in Western-centric international relations, particularly since the Westphalian synthesis and the dominance of secularism in the 1970s. She stressed how events like the fall of the Iron Curtain, shifts in state identities and the rise of religious conservatism in the U.S. underscored religion's critical role in shaping international relations. Central to the presentation was the concept of the ambivalence of sacredness, illustrating religion's dual capacity to generate and resolve conflicts. She emphasized the second wave of interest in religion following the 9/11 attacks and identified the theoretical glass ceiling that limits its integration into Global IR frameworks. Advocating a postsecular approach, she stressed the importance of incorporating religious perspectives and interfaith dialogue into IR analyses. The presentation called for revising secular assumptions to better account for religion's growing influence in global dynamics, particularly in relation to ideologies such as Islam.

On the other hand, dr hab. Wojciech Grabowski analyzed secular authoritarianism in the Persian Gulf, focusing on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He highlighted how these regimes strategically manage religion to consolidate power, counter political Islam and legitimize authority through religious symbolism while suppressing fundamentalist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. He emphasized the contrast between Gulf secular authoritarianism and postsecularism, noting the diminishing role of religion in politics. Initiatives such as Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" seek to garner public support, particularly among youth, and curb Islamic fundamentalism while balancing modernization with tradition. The presentation underscored lack of Islamic-Western dialogue, which reinforces secularization trends in the region and limited political reform despite significant social and economic changes, framing new authoritarianism as a strategy for stability amid geopolitical and societal pressures.

Dr hab. Cezary Kościelniak analyzed the transformation of Vatican diplomacy under Pope Francis, emphasizing the concept of the Church of the Peripheries, which prioritizes support for smaller states and promotes cultural inclusivity through the de-Westernization of Vatican foreign policy. The key shifts include the rejection of the just war doctrine in favour of pacifist conflict resolution, demonstrated by Vatican efforts in the Ukraine war, and the development of a new 'Ostpolitik', fostering dialogue with peripheral and developing countries.

Following the break, the second session of the panel titled *'The Ambivalence of Sacredness' in Global International Relations: Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Religion's Presence in a Changing World* commenced, continuing the in-depth exploration of this subject. Dr Paulina Napierała analyzed Black Liberation Theology, a movement that emerged in the 1960s among African Americans as a protest against white theology and a tool for social, political, and economic emancipation. She highlighted James Cone's pivotal role in advancing the movement and fostering dialogue with the Latin American and South African liberation theologies, influencing initiatives like the World Council of Churches' "Programme to Combat Racism".

Dr hab. Joanna Kulska examined the role of religion in Global IR, emphasizing its inclusion as a previously marginalized dimension in international relations. She stressed the shift from viewing religion solely as a source of conflict to recognizing its potential in conflict resolution through a holistic and relational approach. It elucidates religion's dual role in fostering cultural dialogue, shaping global theoretical and practical transformations, advocating for its integration into a more inclusive discipline of international relations.

Dr Karolina Zielińska analyzed the Abraham Accords, highlighting their transformative impact on the Israeli-Arab relations. While religion was previously marginalized in peace efforts, opposition often arose from the Jewish and Islamic religious groups. The agreement prioritized mutual respect, coexistence, and combating extremism through interreligious dialogue. She linked the accords, emphasizing interfaith dialogue and extremism prevention, to the Gulf States' deradicalization strategies post-Arab Spring and addressed challenges from Hamas's 2023 offensive.

Dr hab. Elżbieta Szyszlak emphasized the role of religion in cultural security, particularly its contribution to preserving identity and cultural heritage. She stressed how religion and religious institutions safeguard national and social identity while influencing foreign policy and international relations. Integrating religion into cultural security strategies is essential for addressing global challenges, as religion holds stabilizing potential in regional and global contexts, fostering dialogue and cooperation, especially given its renewed prominence.

The second day included a roundtable discussion *The Middle East in the Global Power Game: Challenges and Opportunities for the Region*, assembling experts to examine critical dimensions of the Middle Eastern geopolitics, with a focus on great power rivalries, Iran's regional policy, and Egypt's mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Prof. dr hab. Radosław Fiedler provided an incisive analysis of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East amid intensifying competition with China and Russia. He underscored the region's geostrategic importance and highlighted the U.S. efforts to sustain influence, manage alliances, and navigate the challenges of regional instability. The presentation also identified significant opportunities, including prospects for economic and political partnerships shaped by shifting power dynamics.

Dr hab. Przemysław Osiewicz delved into Iran's multifaceted regional strategy, analyzing its political, economic, ideological, and military dimensions. He critically assessed Iran's evolving approach under the presidencies of Hassan Rouhani, Ebrahim Ra'isi, and Masoud Pezeshkian, noting both the consistencies and shifts in Tehran's policies. He emphasized Iran's persistent endeavors to solidify its regional influence despite external sanctions, geopolitical pressure, and internal socio-political challenges.

Dr Michał Lipa examined Egypt's pivotal role as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He detailed Cairo's longstanding diplomatic engagement with Israel and its active involvement during the recent Israel-Hamas conflict. Lipa's analysis highlighted Egypt's realist approach, which prioritizes regional stability through advocacy for ceasefire agreements, prisoner exchanges, and a staunch opposition to the relocation of Palestinians to the Sinai Peninsula. This discussion provided a comprehensive perspective on the dynamic Middle Eastern landscape, addressing geopolitical tensions, regional ambitions, and practical stabilization efforts. The presentations underscored the critical roles of diplomacy, great power rivalries, and local initiatives in shaping the region's future. Additionally, the discussions highlighted the implications of the recent U.S. presidential election and the impact of President-elect, Donald Trump's foreign policy approach on the Middle East, particularly in the context of shifting alliances and evolving regional strategies.

The second part of the panel continued to address critical perspectives on the Middle East. Dr hab. Grażyna Strnad examined the Middle East's growing significance in the policies of Korean Peninsula states, highlighting deepening economic and diplomatic ties. She positioned the Middle East as a strategic partner in East Asia's geopolitical initiatives, driven by global power realignments. Dr hab. Adriana Łukaszewicz provided an evaluation of Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030", emphasizing progress in social and economic reforms, including increased female participation and economic diversification. However, she noted that many goals remain unachieved. Her analysis also explored perceptions of these reforms within Saudi society and global markets, as well as their implications for the kingdom's foreign policy priorities. Muhammad ibn Salman's approach reflects a pragmatic strategy to enhance Saudi Arabia's global image, diversify the economy, and address domestic societal expectations, while maintaining a delicate balance with conservative traditions. An example of this modernization is the implementation of the *Tawakkalna* application, which, beyond its initial use for health services, has evolved into a broader digital platform facilitating women's greater participation in public life. It enables digital access to services such as mobility permits, official documentation, and appointments, thereby reducing bureaucratic barriers and offering greater autonomy to women in navigating societal structures. However, the *Tawakkalna* application has also been criticized for its intrusive nature, as it enables extensive state surveillance and imposes strict control over individual freedoms, raising concerns about privacy.

Dr Jarosław Kardaś analyzed Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East during Vladimir Putin's fourth term, detailing Moscow's strategic partnerships with former adversaries, such as Turkey, and traditional allies, like Syria. He emphasized the Middle East's emergence as Russia's second most significant foreign policy focus, as documented in its 2016 and 2023 strategic frameworks. His assessment critically evaluated the effectiveness of Russia's regional strategies in advancing its geopolitical ambitions.

The Congress provided a forum for examining the origins, evolution, and critical perspectives of Global IR, emphasizing its significance in analyzing the shifts within the international order. Religion was highlighted as both a source of identity and a key factor in global politics, necessitating its integration into IR analyses, which challenged the secularization thesis that has dominated traditional frameworks. Discussions underscored the critical role of Middle Eastern states in Global IR, with Islam profoundly influencing the region's political, economic, and cultural dynamics. This interplay between religion and statecraft demonstrates how local practices shape broader geopolitical structures. The key insight was Global IR's effort to decenter Western perspectives, integrating narratives from the Global South and emerging powers. The socio-economic transformations in regions like the Gulf further underscored the importance of adopting an inclusive approach to understanding global complexities. The congress concluded with a call to reconceptualize Global IR by incorporating regional and non-Western perspectives to address contemporary global challenges comprehensively.

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