University of Arts in Belgrade

Cultural Diplomacy & the Arts in Times of Uncertainty

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Book of Abstracts

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Book Conversation

Understanding Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations

Moderator: Milena Dragićević Šešić, University of Arts in Belgrade, Faculty of Dramatic Arts
Jonathan Vickery, University of Warwick, Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies
Matina Magkou, Université Côte d'Azur
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Key note lecture

Dr Cynthia P. Schneider

Georgetown University, USA

Why Culture Matters

Donald Trump has paid more attention to arts and culture in Washington D.C. than any president since John F Kennedy. Why? Authoritarians, like Trump, and extremists, like the Taliban, recognize the power of arts and culture. They recognize that the narratives of the past, such as architecture, artefacts, and historical accounts, and the present – in film, theater, music, dance, and writing – move people in ways that policy papers and proclamations never will. Trump has taken over the Kennedy Center and has tried to dictate how American history is told in Washington, D.C.'s museums. He wants to control the narratives of past and present. He criticized the Smithsonian Institution for focusing on how negative slavery was, and not emphasizing sufficiently the "brightness" of American history (The New York Times, August 19, 2025). Should democratic societies learn from the authoritarians and extremists, and leverage the power of culture and narrative? This would mean leveraging the power of artists. Some might say that artists and cultural leaders have no power compared to governments and their military might. But people in Serbia know about Otpor! and the importance of artists and activists in turning Milosevic from someone to be feared to someone to be ridiculed. For that matter, the biggest revolution in our lifetime, the overthrow and dissolution of the Soviet Union, would never have happened without artists – eastern and western – giving people a taste of freedom and dissent. This keynote will look at "why culture matters" now, and why culture is key to rebuilding this fractured world.

Conference Papers

Dr Dragan R. Simić

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science, Serbia

Contemporary Global and Strategic Context and Changes in International Order: Changes within the Order or Changes of the Order?

Thirty-five years after the formal end of the Cold War, Liberal International Order is in deep crisis and in the process of big transformation. The United States of America as a predominant Post-Cold War country in World Politics and pivot and creator of that Order, become with two Trump administrations (and especially second) its main challenger and Revisionist Power. Namely, he wants to change that Order because, as he argue, it's not benefiting Unites States anymore but bringing gains to American competitors like Russia and China. The central question of this paper is next one: do we witnessing the transformation of existing International Order and creation of new one or do we have changes within the order? We think that it is more about changes in the Order than the change of the Order itself. Namely, the deep structural pillars of that Order are still strong even that process of the Order undermining distribution of the Power which favors United States of America and West in general. Regarding cultural changes and the impact of different civilizations on the processes and structures of the existing International Order we are witnessing even deeper fault lines between main actors of World Politics. Even that we have Global Order we don't have global culture: Power shift is being followed by cultural groupings and diversification. Actually, we are witnessing process of deglobalisation and rise of national cultures and nationalism.

Dr Ognjen Pribićević

Institute of Social Sciences, Serbia

From Roman Baths and Mosaics to Trump's Harvard

Ever since the time of Rome, art, science, and cultural diplomacy have represented an important part of the so-called soft power of a state. The Roman baths and mosaics fascinated peoples and their leaders around the world. 2,000 years later, representatives of the Trump administration criticized Harvard for allowing the children of high-ranking Chinese Communist officials to study at the best American universities. Something that would once have represented a symbol of American power has become a threat and an undesirable phenomenon. Nothing strange, considering that our civilization reached its zenith as early as the late 1980s, and since then a process has been underway that the famous British historian Gibbon (Edward Gibbon) would have called its decline. We live in a time marked by three major crises. The existing international order, institutions, and, most importantly, the system of values and human capital are collapsing. Violence within and between states, such as that between Russia and Ukraine, and America and Iran, is a fundamental characteristic of our time. The hard power of missiles and tanks has almost completely taken over, while soft power, of which cultural diplomacy is an important part, has been marginalized. However, as has always been the case throughout history, after periods of decline and crisis, people will stand up again and return to science, culture, art with the desire to replace swords and tanks with science, culture, and art. To promote their achievements in a different and peaceful way – through the so-called soft power – using cultural diplomacy itself.

Dr Stevan Nedeljković

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science, Serbia

Restraint or Reallocation? Rethinking U.S. Grand Strategy in a Changing Strategic Environment

Debates over U.S. grand strategy tend to be framed as a binary choice between the preservation of American primacy and a shift toward restraint or retrenchment. This paper argues that such framing obscures a third pattern of contemporary U.S. behavior: strategic reallocation. Drawing on defensive structural realism, U.S. grand strategy is treated here as an adaptive response to changes in the distribution of capabilities, the geography of threats, and the rising costs of sustaining existing commitments. What ultimately determines the nature of this response, however, is the intensity of the pressures involved: where these are considerable, yet not severe enough to place a state's core security at risk, the resulting adjustment takes the form of reallocation rather than retrenchment. This reallocation is reflected in a reordering of strategic priorities - most notably a geographic reorientation toward theaters of greater long-term consequence, above all the Indo-Pacific; a growing reliance on allied burden-sharing; and increased recourse to economic, technological, and diplomatic instruments alongside a more selectively deployed forward military presence. Importantly, this need not entail uniform disengagement from lower-priority theaters, as commitments elsewhere may be maintained, or even temporarily intensified, where the perceived severity of threats so requires. These dynamics are traced across the Trump–Biden–Trump period by means of comparative process tracing of doctrinal documents, defense posture and budgetary data, and official statements concerning Europe, the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and the Western Hemisphere. Despite considerable rhetorical divergence between administrations, the analysis suggests a marked degree of continuity in how shifting strategic pressures have generated reallocation rather than aggregate retrenchment. Ultimately, U.S. grand strategy is better understood as an instance of pressure-driven strategic reallocation, undertaken in pursuit of a continued advantageous international position, rather than as a wholesale transition from primacy to restraint.

Dr Monika Mokre

Institute of Culture Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria

Discursive Formats of the Vienna Festival – Spaces for Contestation or Just Performance?

The Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) takes place every year for five weeks in May and June. It is the most prestigious festival of the city of Vienna and is financed by the city government with 14 million € per year. Since 2024, Milo Rau has been the director of the festival. The Swiss theatre director and playwright is renowned for political theatre productions and attempts to include broader parts of the population in cultural productions. Since 2024, the festival produces one discursive format every year. The "Vienna Processes" of 2024 discussed the politics of the Covid pandemic, attacks on democracy from the populist right, and the democratic legitimacy of civil society protests including political activism within the realm of the arts. The "Vienna Conference" of 2025 dealt with cancel culture and abuse of power in the field of the arts. In 2026, a "Tribunal of Faith" will address power abuse of world religions, appropriation of religious artefacts and symbols, as well as violations of religious feelings. I have accompanied the festival since 2024 in different roles and also have been a member of the juries in 2025 and 2026. In the proposed paper, I want to discuss the goals and effects of these formats: Do they provide spaces for political exchange and reflection or are they merely a performance feigning a political public sphere? In this way, the paper addresses the question in how far artistic practices and cultural institutions can function as forms of critique and resistance, or cultural diplomacy.

Dr Laurent Martin

Sorbonne-Nouvelle university, France

Débat d'idées," public debate: a new tool for French cultural diplomacy?

The "debate of ideas" plays a central role in France's cultural diplomacy strategy. The "Roadmap for Influence," published in 2021, identifies the debate of ideas as one of the spearheads of influence diplomacy. The aim is both to counter the narratives of competing or even hostile powers and to promote democratic values capable of uniting foreign partners. Today, the "débat d'idées" addresses several challenges: competition among international narratives (China, the United States, Russia), the rise of populism and disinformation, and the fragmentation of digital public spaces. It is not merely a matter of disseminating the language or artistic works, but also of promoting an intellectual model based on critical discussion, universalism, and the reasoned exchange of viewpoints. Implemented primarily by the Institut français, the debate of ideas is a vehicle for influence, a defining feature of French identity, and a tool for promoting democratic values. It constitutes one of the major pillars of contemporary French cultural diplomacy, complementing language, education, and artistic creation. We will seek to understand the objectives, actors, and mechanisms of the debate on ideas, as well as to evaluate the results of a policy implemented some fifteen years ago.

Dr Jonathan Vickery
University of Warwick, Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, UK

Civil Society Options for Informal Cultural Diplomacy: empirical and theoretical isssues

International cultural relations is theorised nationally - but can it be practised locally? Cities, local authorities, cultural institutions, may all be aware of a rationale for international engagement, but arguably lack the epistemic capacity to act on it. A civil society arts organisation cannot claim a foreign policy role - but can informally produce the knowledge that a place-based enterprise needs in order to have one. Knowledge production can be a civil society organisation's route into either local ICR policymaking, or more directly, into informal ICR. This paper maps out some options for informal cultural diplomacy conducted through epistemic means.

Dr Nevena Daković
University of Arts Belgrade, Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Serbia

Geopolitics and Geoaesthetics of Film Festivals (Venice, Cannes, Berlin: 2000–2026)

The aim of this paper is to analyse the programs, selected films, and award-winning works of the three major European film festivals—Venice, Cannes, and Berlin—between 2000 and 2026, mapping their evolution amid major crises and conflicts. The film festivals change moving away from manifestations dedicated to elite, curated, and thematically grouped achievements of world cinema and becoming the important spaces of cultural diplomacy (sustained by the privileged status of film and cinema as soft power) within a geopolitically turbulent time. Under the shadow of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and devastating conflicts in Gaza, Cannes, the Lido, and Berlin have become the spaces of dynamic of geopolitical negotiation and the delicate balance between official state policies, critical and subversive cinematic works, and the international public. Within the framework of cultural diplomacy, film festivals play twofold role. They remain a traditional space for marginalized, dissident voices and counter-narratives that bypass state censorship and repression in their countries of origin, (indirectly) challenging official narratives and established relations of political power. Under the pressure of hegemony that persists even within film festivals, they become susceptible to instrumentalisation, appropriation, and the incitement of conflicts and incidents within official festival circles. Despite more than three decades since the end of the Cold War, the shadow of a polarized world seems to endure, while the innovative festival programs continue the tradition of the 1960s and 1970s when the Iron Curtain was lifted through the presentation of Eastern European cinemas (socially critical works and mostly without the approval of the state officials) at world festivals. The analysis of films screened and awarded at these festivals – ranging from the works of Sergei Loznitsa to those of Jonathan Glazer, The Voice of Hind Rajab (Kaouther Ben Hania, 2025), NAZA (Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, 2026), and No Other Land (Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, and Rachel Szor, 2024) – will map the geoaesthetic of festival winners in a time of geopolitical upheavals.

Dr Slobodan G. Markovich

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science, Serbia

Non-State Cultural Diplomacy in Deeply Divided Societies: The Role of Cultural and Intellectual Elites

Deep societal divisions have become a defining feature of many contemporary democracies, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, Croatia, and Serbia. While cultural and intellectual elites in these societies frequently promote inclusive, democratic, and anti-authoritarian values, international perceptions of their countries are often shaped by dominant political actors and prevailing political narratives. This discrepancy is particularly pronounced in smaller states, where external observers tend to equate governmental policies with broader societal attitudes. Even when cultural and academic elites share broadly consensual positions that are inclusive, democratic, and anti-authoritarian—as is largely the case in Serbia—international media coverage frequently marginalises these voices and reduces the image of the country to that projected by its most influential political leader. A typical example is the international perception of Serbia shaped by reactions to events associated with wartime legacies, such as public and state-sponsored commemorations connected with the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić. There is a growing need for a non-state model of cultural diplomacy rooted in the cultural and academic mainstream rather than in state institutions. In deeply divided societies, state-sponsored public diplomacy often reflects the priorities of ruling political elites and may fail to convey the diversity of social and intellectual life. By contrast, networks of scholars, artists, writers, NGO leaders, and cultural institutions can communicate alternative narratives and project values that are democratic, inclusive, and internationally relevant. The Serbian case illustrates both the limitations of state-centred cultural diplomacy and the potential of non-state actors to promote a more nuanced and representative image of society in the international arena.

Dr Aleksandra Kolaković
Institute for Political Studies, Serbia

From Cold War Science to the Modern Polycrisis: The Evolution of Knowledge Diplomacy

The paper analyzes the historical evolution and structural transformation of science, art, and cultural diplomacy, collectively framed as knowledge diplomacy, from the systemic rivalries of the Cold War to the contemporary global polycrisis of 2026. By examining the current landscape through international relations theory, historical institutionalism, and the sociology of science, the paper explores how the traditional liberal model of open science is being redefined toward a "new realism". Structurally, the paper traces how the historical precedents of scientific cooperation, such as the International Geophysical Year (1957/58), provide vital blueprints for navigating the current paralysis of the Arctic Council caused by hybrid threats and securitization. Furthermore, it incorporates the aesthetic dimension of diplomacy, using the frameworks of late 2025 and 2026 to position art as a cognitive catalyst for climate communication. The study examines the institutional emancipation of university networks acting within the "fourth dimension" of diplomacy, the research security paradox surrounding Artificial Intelligence, and the Global South's demands for post-colonial cognitive justice and cultural restitution under the African Union's Agenda 2063. The paper concludes that establishing epistemic and aesthetic resilience, rooted in historical lessons, is essential for overcoming systemic blockades in modern multilateralism.

Dr Raphaela Henze
Heilbronn University in Germany

Coping strategies for cultural organisations facing threats to their artistic freedom

I would be pleased to present the initial findings of a current research project in Belgrade in October. The research project will be conducted from May to September 2026 at NYU in the U.S. with a Fulbright Scholarship. The research project builds on extensive preliminary work on the topic of "Cultural Value." During my research stay in the U.S., I would like to - based on an intensive literature review - conduct a qualitative study in the form of expert interviews to investigate how "cultural value" is (currently) defined in the U.S., what this definition is (historically) based on, how it may differ from the European conception of cultural value, and how creative professionals and cultural organizations are responding to current shifts in the perception of the value of art and culture, particularly from the perspective of (cultural) policy. What adaptation and coping strategies are cultural organizations and creative professionals developing, and can these be compared to the reactions of European cultural professionals to current challenges such as massive budget cuts and threats to cultural freedom? What role do cultural networks play for creative professionals, particularly within publicly funded cultural institutions? The aim of this comparative research project is not only to conduct a scholarly comparison of the understanding of cultural value in different national contexts but also to identify practical coping strategies that can be utilized by cultural organizations currently undergoing transformation in many countries due to numerous external influences.

Dr Milena Jokanović
Art History Department/Art History Institute
Faculty of Philosophy – University of Belgrade

Non-Alignment Revisited: The Potential of Contemporary Art and Curatorial Practice

In recent decades, there has been a growing presence of artistic and research projects addressing the position of socialist Yugoslavia within the Non-Aligned Movement, examining this historical experience from the perspective of current political, economic, and geopolitical relations. Drawing on archival materials, film footage, photographs, and other historical sources, contemporary artistic and curatorial practice reassess the legacy of non-alignment, its models of international cooperation and solidarity, as well as their relevance in the context of today's global divisions. Unlike socialist Yugoslavia, in which the Non-Aligned Movement membership formed part of the state's foreign policy and its relations with countries of the Global South, these contemporary creative practices mediate the heritage and fundamental ideas of non-alignment through artworks and exhibition projects, realized primarily in countries across the region, but also through their international reception and presence in art collections abroad. Through selected relevant examples, this paper will examine the role of artistic and curatorial practices in interpreting this heritage, as well as their potential to function today as space for discussion, new perspectives of cultural relations and collaborations.

Dr Aleksandra Uzelac
Dr Dea Vidović
Institute for Development of International Relations IRMO, Croatia

Culturelink and the changing language of international cultural cooperation

This paper examines the growing prominence of cultural diplomacy as a lens for interpreting international cultural engagement and asks what may be lost when it displaces or absorbs the older vocabulary of international cultural cooperation and international cultural relations. Rather than tracing a linear succession of concepts, the paper treats this shift as a discursive reframing in which different vocabularies continue to coexist while assigning different purposes, actors and values to cross-border cultural action. Culturelink, founded in 1989 by UNESCO and the Council of Europe with its focal point at the Institute for International Relations in Zagreb, offers a productive historical and conceptual entry point into this change. The network grew out of an intellectual and policy genealogy built around cultural development, Non-Alignment, cultural diversity, dialogue, knowledge exchange and network-based cooperation, rather than out of the vocabulary of soft power and national influence. Drawing on the academic literature concerning international cultural relations and Culturelink's publications and archives, the paper analyses Culturelink both as an infrastructure of cooperation and as an epistemic actor. It also considers the politics and structural limits of networks: uneven participation, dependence on institutional backing, projectification and competitive funding. Culturelink's significance lies in exposing a distinct policy logic built around relationships, reciprocity and the joint production of cultural knowledge - a logic worth recovering amid geopolitical fragmentation and heightened competition. The question this raises is what institutional conditions would let international cultural relations remain spaces of dialogue, plurality and shared inquiry.

MA Dušan Medin
University of Donja Gorica,
Faculty for Culture and Tourism, Montenegro

Between Research and Representation: A Reflexive Perspective on Cultural and Scientific Diplomacy between Montenegro and the United States of America

To what extent does a researcher, when speaking about their work abroad, also speak about the country and culture they come from? This paper begins with the premise that cultural and scientific diplomacy takes place not only through official programmes and institutions, but also through individual lives. It also emerges in encounters where a researcher or cultural professional, without a formal mandate, becomes one of the people through whom others come to know their country, heritage, and society. This position raises questions about the responsibility of representation: who decides which stories, in our case, stories about Montenegro, will be told, how different audiences understand them, and what changes when representation becomes a conversation? The paper considers these questions through a reflexive account, a view from within, of experiences gained during 2025 and 2026 in the United States and Montenegro. Participation in a study visit focused on strengthening identity through cultural heritage became the starting point for a series of later encounters in academic and cultural settings. Conferences, lectures, public discussions, conversations about Montenegro's history, present, and heritage, collaboration with American colleagues, and encounters with the Montenegrin diaspora and its legacy allowed me to view the same experience from different perspectives. The paper examines how my role changed across these encounters: from a participant in an exchange to a person who presents his own research, listens to others' experiences, and helps create and sustain new connections. Of course, ties between the United States and Montenegro have a much longer history than the period directly addressed in this paper. That history is reflected in emigration, in relationships among cultural, scientific, and state institutions that have connected Montenegro and the United States for decades, and in the personal stories of many individuals. My own experience therefore provides a starting point for examining how existing ties of cooperation continue through contemporary exchange, and what is needed for occasional encounters to develop into more lasting and stable relationships. Finally, the paper asks whether cultural and scientific diplomacy can be a space in which

a country is represented while understandings of it are also enriched and reconsidered through mutual learning and research.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY & THE ARTS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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