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Introduction

The 19th Annual International Conference of the Serbian Political Science Association (SPSA) was held on 25 and 26 October 2025 at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade. The Conference Organising Board jointly decided to dedicate the conference primarily to the recent political and social developments and events in Serbia. The end of 2024 and the whole of 2025 were marked by student blockades and civil protests that developed into a wider social struggle for institutional accountability, the rule of law, university autonomy, and solidarity among diverse social groups. These developments raised fundamental questions about the functioning and resilience of democratic institutions, the relationship between citizens and political authorities, and the possibilities and limits of collective action under increasingly autocrat political leadership.

The conference was organised against a broader international backdrop of democratic contestation and institutional transformation. Recent developments in Georgia, Türkiye, France, and Greece, as well as the wider challenges to the international order following the election of Donald Trump as the president of the USA, provided an important comparative and international context for understanding contemporary political challenges and social uprisings. Against this background, the title of the 19th International Conference of the Serbian Political Science Association was “Institutions as Battlegrounds: State Capture, Resistance and Academic Freedom under Siege”. The title reflected the conference’s central concern with institutions not simply as formal structures of governance, but as arenas in which competing political interests, social actors, and visions of democracy confront one another. The year 2025 was particularly significant for social engagement, the struggle for justice, and for democracy in Serbia. In addition, the legacy of 5 October 2000, the mass mobilisation that led to the overthrow of Milošević and his regime, called for

fresh insights and analysis 25 years on. The conference also aimed to explore, among other topics, the similarities and differences between mass protests of citizens and political actors during the 1990s, in 2000, and the student-led protests that emerged in late 2024 and continued throughout 2025 and 2026. Such comparisons offered an opportunity to examine changing forms of political mobilisation, repertoires of contention, state responses, and the changing relationship between social movements and formal political institutions.

The conference brought together over 200 participants from 20 countries who presented their latest research at 29 panels. Two keynote lectures, delivered by Pippa Norris (Harvard University) and Donatella della Porta (Scuola Normale Superiore), added further value to the event and stimulated discussion on broader questions of democracy, political participation, protests and institutional change. Drawing on diverse theoretical frameworks and disciplines within the social sciences and humanities, participants analysed a wide range of issues such as student protests and their role in democratic processes, new forms of political engagement and anti-party sentiment, the possibilities and challenges of direct democracy, media (freedom) and their role in democratic processes, challenges to regional and global orders, university autonomy and academic freedom in the era of (new) authoritarian regimes, state capture, corruption and clientelism and many others.

The edited volume under the same title as the conference represents its second major outcome. Following the conference the editors were invited to select a number of papers presented at the 19th International Conference of the Serbian Political Science Association for publication in a thematic issue of the Faculty of Political Science's periodical, *Godišnjak Fakulteta političkih nauka* (ISSN 1820-6700). This thematic issue provided an important opportunity to present to local and regional academic audiences revised and substantially developed versions of five papers originally presented at the conference. This edited volume has a complementary, but broader, ambition: to make the research presented at the conference accessible to a wider academic community. In particular, seven of the research articles included in the volume are published in English, thereby facilitating dialogue with scholars beyond the Serbian and regional academic contexts.

The edited volume, *Institutions as Battlegrounds: State Capture, Resistance and Academic Freedom under Siege / Borba za institucije: zarobljena država, napad na akademske slobode i otpor* consists of six thematic sections. Although each section focuses on a distinct set of questions, the parts are closely intertwined. We therefore encourage readers to approach the volume not simply as a collection of separate contributions, but as a set of connected interventions that illuminate different dimensions of contemporary political and institutional transformations. The theoretical approaches, empirical findings and conceptual debates developed in one section frequently resonate with and complement those presented in others.

The first part, “Akademske slobode, autonomija univerziteta i studentski protesti / Academic Freedom, Autonomy of University and Student Protests”, explores academic freedom from both broader theoretical and more specific empirical perspectives. It opens with an analysis of tensions between structural reforms and value-based governance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), with a critical focus on the erosion of academic freedom in Serbia (cf. “Serbia’s Paradox: De jure vs de facto Academic Freedom within the EHEA / Paradoks Srbije: de jure nasuprot de facto akademskoj slobodi u okviru EPVO” by Lazar Živanić). The section then turns to the initiative “Faculties at the Crossroads”, which is explored by academics who were themselves among its organisers. Their contribution connects the ideas of civil disobedience with the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, and with the broader aim of defending university autonomy (cf. “Građanska neposlušnost u cilju odbrane autonomije univerziteta u Republici Srbiji / Civil Disobedience in Defence of University Autonomy in the Republic of Serbia” by Dejan Pavlović and Jovana Bila Dubaić). The role of cultural and expressive forms of protest is further explored through an analysis of spoken word, visual art, silence and music and the ways in which these forms shaped dissent and activism within the initiative (cf. “‘Faculties at the Crossroads’: Universities Between the Sound of Silence and the Voice of Dissent” / “‘Fakulteti na raskrsnici’: univerziteti između zvuka tišine i glasa pobune” by Nataša Janković, Vladimir M. Ranković and Zorka Milivojević). Finally, this section offers a comparative analysis of student protests, especially those of 1996/97 and 2024/25, with the aim of mapping the evolution of state responses under different types of political regimes using the theoretical framework of competitive authoritarianism (cf. “Old Tactics, New Regime: Repression of Student Protests in Serbia / Stare taktike, novi režim: represija nad studentskim protestima u Srbiji” by Ela Zeković).

The second part, “Građanski i studentski otpor: analize i perspektive / Civic and Student Resistance: Analyses and Perspectives”, brings together four papers that examine resistance, protests, political participation and mobilisation from different perspectives and within heterogeneous theoretical frameworks. Several contributions focus on particular forms of mobilisation and their institutional and societal consequences, while others address broader conceptual foundations of resistance. Bojan Cvejić offers a comparative analysis of reporting by the Serbian daily press on the protests held on October 5 2000, and March 15 2025 (cf. “Dnevna štampa u Srbiji: kako se izveštavalo o protestima 5. oktobra 2000. i 15. marta 2025. godine / Daily Press in Serbia: Reporting on the Protests of October 5, 2000, and March 15, 2025” by Bojan Cvejić). This part of the volume is also devoted to empirical research on the presence, forms, and sources of antipolitical sentiment among students participating in the blockades in Serbia from late 2024 and during 2025. Understanding antipolitics as a structurally conditioned phenomenon, Sead Međedović argues that antipolitics emphasises the paradox of a student movement that simultaneously possesses the potential for political revitalisation while facing limi-

tations stemming from its own antipolitical narrative (cf. “Antipolitika među studentima u blokadi: empirijsko istraživanje / Antipolitics among Students in Blockades: An Empirical Study” by Sead Međedović). Finally, Milan Podunavac and Zoran Stojiljković explore civic and student resistance at a more general and abstract level. Their contributions provide valuable essayistic contribution to the field of political science (cf. “O osnovama pokoravanja, pravu na otpor i građanskoj neposlušnosti / On the Foundations of Submission, The Right to Resistance, and Civil Disobedience” by Milan Podunavac and “Studentske blokade, marševi i mobilizacija građana: od dramaturgije protesta do strategije promena? Jedna do kraja neispričana priča/Student Blockades, Marches, and the Mobilization of Citizens: From the Dramaturgy of Protest to a Strategy for Change? An Unfinished Story” by Zoran Stojiljković).

The third part, “Afekti, emocije, motivi i politička mobilizacija / Affects, Emotions, Motives and Political Mobilization”, turns to the affects and emotions and their role in political reasoning and mobilisation. The first paper examines the mismatch between political behaviour and family-shaped political narratives in the context of mass protests in Serbia during 2024–2025. Focusing on participants who supported the anti-government protests despite coming from different family political environments, the analysis sheds light on the complex relationship between political socialisation, normative social influence, and individual political action (cf. “Motivacija za učešće u masovnim protestima u Srbiji (2024–2025) između porodične političke socijalizacije i normativnog socijalnog uticaja: ‘Ko ne skače, taj je čaci’ / “The Mismatch between Political Behavior and Family Political Narratives in the Context of Mass Protests in Serbia (2024–2025): ‘Those Who Don’t Jump Are Čaci!’” by Sofija Ljubišić). The affective and emotional dimensions of the student-led protests in Serbia 2024/2025 are explored further by Luka Božović. Through ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, the author examines how emotions shaped mobilisation, participation, and persistence of collective action within the student movement 2024/2025 (cf. “The Role of Emotions and Affect around Student Protests in Serbia / Uloga emocija i afekta u kontekstu studentskih protesta u Srbiji” by Luka Božović). The final contribution in this part of the edited volume deals with the analysis of the transformation of the personality cult in Serbia. Through a comparative analysis of four leaders (Josip Broz Tito, Slobodan Milošević, Zoran Đinđić, and Aleksandar Vučić), the author employs the categories of symbolic power, institutional configuration, mediatisation, and emotional mobilisation to explain how the cult of personality is shaped and transformed in different political and institutional contexts (cf. “Evolucija i transformacija kulta ličnosti u Srbiji: od institucionalnog autoriteta do simboličke personalizacije vlasti / The Evolution and Transformation of the Personality Cult in Serbia: From Institutional Authority to the Symbolic Personalisation of Power” by Danijel Sporea).

Authors in part four, entitled “Zarobljena država: korupcija i klijentelizam / State Capture: Corruption and Clientelism”, focus on the relationship

between political power, institutions and the distribution of public resources. Starting from the surprising correlation between the representation of local governments in the National Assembly of Serbia and patterns of resource allocation to local subdivisions, the authors analyse the relationship between deputies' places of residence and financial transfers from the national level to the local level. Their analysis considers subsidies, local budget expenditures, and surpluses or deficits in order to assess whether and how national political representation affects local fiscal dynamics (cf. "Sending the Money Back Home? Pork Barrel Politics in Closed-List PR / Novac ide kući? Politika teritorijalne raspodele budžetskih sredstava u proporcionalnom sistemu sa zatvorenim listama" by Dušan Vučićević, Dejan Bursać, and Viktor Stamenković). The second contribution in this section examines the paradoxical relationship between the free market and authoritarian control. Drawing on four case studies (China, Russia, Hungary and Serbia), Marko Tmušić analyses how the political capture of independent regulatory and economic institutions fosters clientelism, stifles competition, and undermines fundamental market rules (cf. "Captured Institutions and the Free Market: The Paradox of Authoritarian Capitalism / Zarobljene institucije i slobodno tržište: paradoks autoritarnog kapitalizma" by Marko Tmušić).

Part five of the edited volume, "Komparativna politika / Comparative Politics", broadens the geographical and analytical scope of the volume by examining political and institutional developments across several Southeast and Central European contexts. Filip Denda and Danica Radifković analyse the role of civic resistance in initiating institutional reforms based on three case study countries, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia in which different social tragedies revealed the systemic weaknesses and institutional vulnerabilities. Comparing institutional patterns across three different contexts and identifying common causes of institutional incapacity, the authors give an insight into the causes of civic discontent while offering a theoretical interpretation of why formal institutions have further deepened citizens' distrust and contributed to their organised resistance (cf. "Institucionalna propustljivost i institucionalni odgovori na građanski otpor: uporedna analiza državnih mjera i reformi nakon tragedija u Crnoj Gori, Srbiji i Sjevernoj Makedoniji / Institutional Permeability and Institutional Responses to Civic Resistance: A Comparative Analysis of State Measures and Reforms after Tragedies in Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia" by Filip Denda and Danica Radifković). Following the comparative perspective, Mira Šorović examines parallel political trajectories in Hungary and Türkiye during the period between 2010 and 2025, focusing on the rise of illiberal democracy seen as a contemporary political phenomenon. Providing a qualitative analysis of constitutional changes, legislative reforms, and political narratives in these two countries, the author aim to understand the broader context of contemporary authoritarian tendencies emerging within formally democratic systems (cf. "Iliberalne demokratije na djelu: uporedna analiza političke transformacije Mađarske i Turske (2010–2025)

/ *Illiberal Democracies in Practice: A Comparative Analysis of the Political Transformation of Hungary and Turkey (2010–2025)*” by Mira Šorović).

The final part of the edited volume, entitled “Međunarodni odnosi i međunarodna politika / International Relations and International Politics”, presents two chapters dealing with the broader scene of international relations and transformations of the global order. The two contributions in this section engage with fundamental questions concerning international law, global power, political leadership, and the changing international system. Building on Martti Koskenniemi’s insight that values such as justice, peace or security conceal deep disagreements over political choices, distributional priorities, and ideological conflicts that cannot be resolved through technical legal means, Miloš Hrnjaz explores the role of international law in shaping a new global order, with a focus on the concept of the New Global South. The contribution argues that although international law is shaped by politics, it is not entirely determined by it, and that its normative and structural features continue to influence how legal arguments are constructed, contested, and institutionalized (cf. “What Is International Law for in Rethinking the Future of the World Order: New Global South Perspective / Koja je uloga međunarodnog prava u promišljanju budućnosti svetskog poretka: perspektiva Novog globalnog juga” by Miloš Hrnjaz). The final contribution turns to the United States and the changing meaning of American exceptionalism under Donald Trump’s presidency. Nevena Jovanović critically examines the transformation of the concept through an analysis of Trump’s speeches and strategic documents. The author argues that the reinterpreted myth of American exceptionalism provides a legitimizing framework for Caesarist patterns of political leadership under conditions of a crisis of hegemonic consensus. The analysed transformation, it is argued, is equally important for both internal dynamics of American democracy and international order (cf. “Cezaristička transformacija mita o američkoj izuzetnosti / The Caesarist Transformation of the Myth of American Exceptionalism” by Nevena Jovanović).

This final part of the edited volume represents an important link between the 19th and 20th Annual International Conferences of the Serbian Political Science Association (SPSA). While the 19th annual conference and the present volume were primarily concerned with institutions as sites of political struggle, resistance and democratic contestation, the 20th SPSA conference will turn more explicitly towards the changing international environment. The 20th Annual International Conference of the Serbian Political Science Association will be held in October 2026 under the title “Preoblikovanje svetskog poretka / Reordering the World”, with a particular focus on international relations and international politics. As the SPSA’s jubilee conference, it will provide an opportunity to reflect on the transformation of the contemporary world order and its implications for states, societies, and political institutions. We warmly encourage scholars and researchers working in these and related fields to participate in this important event.

Finally, we want to thank all the authors who submitted their work for consideration in this edited volume and contributed to the intellectual success of the conference. We are equally grateful to the reviewers for their dedicated hard work throughout the review process, as well as to the members of the International Selection Committee of the conference for their effort and guidance. We thank the Serbian Political Science Association (SPSA) and the Faculty of Political Science (University of Belgrade) for their support and for providing the opportunity to organise the conference and to bring together scholars from Serbia, the region, and beyond. We hope that this volume will contribute to ongoing academic debates on democratic resilience, institutional transformation, state capture, civic resistance, and social transformation, while also providing a lasting scholarly record of a particularly important period of political and social engagement in Serbia and beyond.