

DOI 10.51558/2490-3647.2026.11.1.447

UDK 316.334.3(497.11):323.26

Primljeno: 27. 02. 2026.

Izvorni naučni rad
Original scientific paper

Nikola Perišić

THE PERCEPTUAL DISCOURSE OF VOTERS IN SERBIA ON STUDENT PROTESTS AND THEIR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT*

Student protests in Serbia have been ongoing since December 2024 and arose from demands to find those responsible for the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad Railway Station. These protests have grown into one of the most massive gatherings in the modern history of Serbia, which has allowed their popularity to grow within the public opinion. This can be considered one of the reasons why students have come out with a political demand to call early parliamentary elections and the intention to nominate a Student List in these elections, which should consist of university professors and other public figures who have gained a public image in recent years of fighting against the current government in Serbia. These facts prompted us to conduct 10 focus groups in order to determine the perception that the Student Movement has among voters in Serbia. When creating the research, care was taken to ensure that the focus group participants were individuals belonging to different gender, age and educational structures. Each focus group was attended by 10 respondents, and the focus groups were organized in different cities in Serbia: two each in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš, and one each in Subotica, Kragujevac, Užice and Požarevac. The central research question that was asked of the respondents was which discourse can be considered dominant in voters' perception of student political activity. The focus group participants most often described it as "brave", believing that students managed to restore "hope" and "future" through their political engagement, and they particularly emphasized the "unity" present in student protests.

Key words: discourse; Serbia; student protests; parliamentary elections; focus groups

* The paper was presented at the Scientific Conference "Social Sciences and Humanities Facing the Challenges of the 21st Century", which was held at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tuzla on December 12, 2025.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following the tragic collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad Railway Station, which resulted in the loss of human lives, a strong public reaction emerged, with citizens demanding accountability for the incident. This event became the catalyst for a series of protests that quickly expanded and developed a clear symbolic and organizational structure. Protest gatherings began daily at 11:52 a.m., precisely at the time when the canopy had collapsed, and lasted for as many minutes as there were victims of the tragedy. In this way, the protests also assumed a commemorative character, combining demands for justice with remembrance of the deceased. The protests were particularly marked by the organization and engagement of students from various university centers across Serbia, including Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, and other cities. Students organized daily gatherings in front of their faculties, which over time became not only sites of protest but also spaces for broader political and social dialogue. Their visibility in public spaces, coupled with the continuity of the protests, contributed to the student movement becoming one of the key actors in social developments during this period.

By late November 2024, tensions escalated, and several serious incidents occurred. During commemorative events outside certain faculties, attacks involving vehicles and attempts to forcibly disrupt the protests were recorded. These events further unsettled the public and deepened feelings of insecurity among students, while simultaneously contributing to the radicalization of their demands and methods of action. As a direct consequence of these incidents, students decided to implement faculty blockades, which soon encompassed all faculties in the three largest university centers Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš while some faculties in Kragujevac and Novi Pazar joined sporadically.

The faculty blockades continued until the summer of 2025, significantly impacting the functioning of the higher education system. Only during the summer was it decided that classes and make-up sessions would be conducted online, and examination periods would be held to allow the new academic year to begin in November. Between winter 2024 and summer 2025, numerous mass protests were held in Belgrade and other cities across Serbia, organized by students. Public attention was particularly drawn to the decision-making processes within the student movement. Students promoted direct democracy through plenums held at all faculties, which became central spaces for discussion and decision-making regarding the movement's strategy and demands. This organizational model was perceived as an alternative to existing po-

litical structures and party-based modes of action.

Initially, students' demands focused on increasing budget allocations for education and science, prosecuting those responsible for attacks on students during protests, and publishing complete documentation regarding the reconstruction of the collapsed canopy in Novi Sad. Over time, however, these demands were consolidated and radicalized, culminating in a single key demand: the calling of snap parliamentary elections. In this context, students announced their intention to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections through a "Student List," which would include university professors and other public figures recognized as long-standing critics and opponents of the current government in Serbia. Although no official candidate names have been announced, public speculation regarding potential candidates has persisted for months. Furthermore, the student movement has increasingly distanced itself from existing opposition parties and political movements in Serbia, emphasizing that it does not wish to collaborate with them. This context of student political engagement served as the basis for conducting focus groups with citizens of diverse socio-demographic and political profiles, aimed at examining how the student movement and its role in contemporary Serbian political life are perceived.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Student protests represent one of the most significant forms of unconventional political participation, that is, political action that occurs outside formal institutional channels but aims to influence political decisions, public policies, and the behavior of political elites (Lončar & Spasojević 2022). In the classical typology of political participation, Barnes and Kaase (1979) distinguish conventional forms, such as voting and party membership, from unconventional forms, which include protests, demonstrations, and other forms of collective action. Within this framework, student protests are recognized as a legitimate, albeit conflictual, form of political engagement characteristic of contemporary societies. Protests are defined as unconventional political actions typically undertaken by groups with limited access to formal decision-making channels and institutional power (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995).

Theories of political participation indicate that protest activity often intensifies under conditions of low institutional trust and feelings of political exclusion, particularly among younger generations who perceive formal political channels as insufficient for representing their interests (Dalton 2008; Norris 2011). In this sense, student protests do not necessarily represent a rejection of democracy; rather, they can be

seen as an attempt to redefine and expand it through additional forms of participation. Accordingly, contemporary literature increasingly links student protests to the concepts of participatory and deliberative democracy. Pateman (1970) emphasizes that direct citizen involvement in decision-making strengthens a society's democratic capacities, while Habermas (1996) highlights the importance of public deliberation and rational discourse in legitimizing political decisions. Student protests particularly those employing plenums and open discussions can be regarded as practical applications of these theoretical models, as well as tests of their viability in real political contexts.

It is evident that student protests are not exclusively reactions to specific educational policies; rather, they increasingly encompass broader social and political demands, ranging from opposition to authoritarian tendencies and corruption to issues of social justice, equality, and institutional democratization (Altbach 1989; della Porta 2015; Kousis 2018). Thus, student protests serve as an important indicator of democratic culture, political legitimacy, and public perceptions of political elites within a given society. The resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald 1977) provides an analytical framework for understanding the organizational capacities of student protests. Unlike spontaneous, short-lived expressions of discontent, student movements rely on relatively stable networks, symbolic capital, and spatial resources provided by universities and faculties. These resources facilitate rapid mobilization, continuous gatherings, and high visibility in public spaces. Although students generally lack substantial material resources, this deficit is compensated through horizontal organizational structures, intensive use of digital platforms, and strong media presence (Tilly & Tarrow 2015; Earl & Kimport 2011). Such organizational forms contribute to inclusivity and flexibility but may simultaneously complicate long-term strategic planning and the sustainability of political engagement. From the voters' perspective, these organizational features of student protests can be ambiguously perceived: as evidence of authenticity and autonomy, or as signs of irresponsibility, lack of seriousness, or political immaturity (Norris 2011; Van Aelst & Walgrave 2002). These perceptions directly influence the dominant discourse regarding the legitimacy of student political engagement and, consequently, the level of public support it receives.

Analyzing voter perceptions requires drawing on theories of political discourse and meaning construction. Here, discourse is understood as a set of interpretive frameworks through which individuals and groups make sense of social phenomena (Foucault 1972; Fairclough 1995). Student protests do not possess inherent meaning; rather, their political significance is produced through public narratives, media rep-

resentations, and voters' everyday interpretations. In this regard, voters respond not only to the concrete demands of the protests but also to the symbolic messages they convey: who is protesting, on whose behalf, against whom, and with what political consequences. Students are often perceived through discursive dichotomies—as idealists opposing political elites, yet simultaneously as potential instruments of opposition or “foreign” interests, especially in societies with low institutional trust (Schedler 2013). Voters' perceptual discourse thus represents a key factor in transforming student protests from social movements into politically relevant actors. If protests are perceived as legitimate, inclusive, and authentic, they can contribute to the redefinition of the political landscape. Conversely, if the dominant discourse frames them as elitist, destabilizing, or irresponsible, their political potential may be seriously constrained.

Contemporary literature on social movements highlights the tension between movement autonomy and institutionalization through political parties or electoral processes (Michels 1911; Offe 1985). Student movements often legitimize themselves precisely by distancing from party systems, emphasizing direct democracy, plenums, and horizontal decision-making. However, transitioning from protest spaces to institutional arenas through the formation of political lists or participation in elections changes how voters perceive student engagement. At that point, students cease to be solely social actors and become part of political competition, opening space for new interpretations, expectations, and critiques. In the context of Serbia, where the political scene is highly polarized, this transformation particularly influences voters' perceptual discourse, who increasingly evaluate student engagement not only through moral or symbolic dimensions but also through the lens of political efficacy, responsibility, and governance capacity.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The research methodology is based on qualitative methods, primarily focus groups, which were conducted from September 25 to October 15, 2025, across the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Focus groups were selected as the main research method due to their ability to provide a deeper understanding of citizens' attitudes, perceptions, and discourses regarding current socio-political processes, particularly the phenomenon of student political engagement. A total of ten focus groups were conducted, each comprising ten participants, resulting in a total sample of 100 respondents.

The focus groups were organized in various cities throughout Serbia to ensure territorial and social diversity within the sample. Two focus groups were held in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, the country's largest university and political centers, while one focus group took place in each of the cities of Subotica, Kragujevac, Užice, and Požarevac. This distribution allowed for comparisons between large urban centers and smaller cities, providing insights into potential regional differences in perceptions of the student movement.

Participant selection considered diverse socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, and educational level, to ensure heterogeneity and the inclusion of different perspectives. The age distribution included younger, middle-aged, and older participants, while educational categories ranged from secondary education to higher education. Political affiliation was not a criterion for participation; however, when participants voluntarily disclosed their political orientations or preferences, this information was noted, allowing for additional analysis of the political context in which their views were formed. During the focus groups, discussions addressed several thematic areas. Special emphasis was placed on how participants perceived the activities of the Student Movement, including its authenticity, organizational structure, and political legitimacy. The discussions also examined the extent to which participants believed that student political engagement could influence the redistribution of power within Serbia's political landscape, as well as the perceived political potential of a prospective Student List participating in parliamentary elections. Trust, expectations, and potential risks associated with students entering institutional politics were also addressed.

The central research question, both within the focus groups and in this study, concerns the identification of the dominant discourse in voters' perceptions of student political engagement. The analysis focused on recognizing patterns in participants' narratives, including support, skepticism, or ambivalent attitudes toward the student movement, as well as understanding the broader socio-political context in which these attitudes are formed.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of voters' perceptual discourse in Serbia regarding student protests, based on focus group findings, indicates that student political engagement is predominantly articulated through normative, symbolic, and emotional categories rather than solely through instrumental-political criteria, such as policy proposals, institutional

effectiveness, or immediate political outcomes. This mode of perception aligns with contemporary literature on unconventional political participation, which emphasizes that citizens often evaluate social movements through the lens of moral legitimacy, authenticity, and symbolic power, rather than through classical representative political criteria (Dalton, van Sickle & Weldon 2010). Most focus group participants agreed that the emergence of the Student Movement has transformed the political landscape in Serbia, which has long been perceived as closed, predictable, and dominated by the same political actors and patterns of behavior. In this context, students are perceived as “new political actors,” injecting freshness and dynamism into a space voters frequently describe as exhausted and delegitimized. Such a perception corresponds with theoretical insights regarding the role of “new actors” during periods of political representation crises, when traditional parties lose the capacity to articulate social discontent (Mair 2013).

Notably, focus group participants who identified as voters of the Serbian Progressive Party evaluated the potential entry of a Student List into the electoral arena as a potentially more serious opponent to the government than existing opposition actors. This finding suggests that the legitimacy of student political action transcends conventional party divides and that students are perceived as actors unburdened by the negative perceptions that accompany opposition parties. In the literature, this phenomenon is interpreted as a consequence of low trust in professional politicians and growing demand for “authentic” political representatives (Rosanvallon 2008; Hay 2007).

Conversely, older, opposition-oriented voters often compared the current student protests with those of 1996 and 1997, highlighting as a key similarity the struggle against authoritarian governance. These comparisons are not merely nostalgic but serve clear symbolic and interpretative functions. The rebranding of 1990s banners, such as the inscription “Belgrade is (again) the world,” alongside the reappearance of symbolic elements like the Ferrari flag, functions as a bridge between past and contemporary forms of resistance. According to collective memory theory, such symbolic continuity allows protests to be embedded within a broader historical narrative of democratic struggle, further strengthening their legitimacy (Assmann 2011). An additional symbolic dimension is evident in the use of visual identities, such as the fist in the late 1990s and the “bloody hand” in contemporary protests. Visual symbols play a crucial role in modern protest movements as they enable rapid emotional identification and clear demarcation between “us” and “them” (Jasper 2011). In this sense, the continuity and transformation of symbols reflect both reliance on historical ex-

perience and adaptation to the contemporary political context. The most favorable attitudes toward student political engagement were expressed by young people under 30, who also represent the most stable potential electorate for a student political option. This finding aligns with research indicating that younger generations are more inclined toward unconventional forms of political participation and respond more strongly to symbolic and identity-based aspects of politics (Inglehart & Welzel 2005).

The frequent description of student protests by focus group participants as “courageous” suggests that voters perceive student actions as acts of moral and civic bravery within a political system experienced as closed, hierarchical, and minimally responsive to citizen demands. In political action theory, the attribution of courage is often linked to actors operating under conditions of power asymmetry who assume personal and collective risk in pursuit of broader societal interests (Tilly 2004). Thus, student protests are symbolically positioned as legitimate carriers of resistance, even when their institutional capacities remain limited. The discursive use of terms such as “hope” and “future” further indicates that voters interpret student protests not merely as responses to specific policies or government decisions, but as symbols of broader societal change. These terms carry a strong temporal dimension, implying a projection of an alternative political and social order. Norris (2011) emphasizes that a sense of political efficacy and hope for change is a key factor in legitimizing unconventional forms of participation, especially in societies with low institutional trust. The emphasis on “unity” within student protests highlights the central role of collective identity in the perception of movement legitimacy. Social movement theories stress that the perception of cohesion, solidarity, and common purpose is critical for public support of collective action (Melucci 1996). In the context of Serbia, where the political space is characterized by deep polarization and fragmented opposition actors, student protests are constituted in voters’ discourse as a normative counterpoint to dominant political patterns. Unity is therefore perceived not only as an organizational feature but as a moral value that endows students with a higher degree of political authenticity.

From a discourse theory perspective, this symbolic positioning of student protests can be interpreted as the construction of a “positive other” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), in which students assume the role of bearers of non-institutionalized yet normatively desirable politics. This discourse implicitly delegitimizes existing political elites, perceived as alienated, interest-driven, and incapable of articulating collective societal needs. Students thus do not appear as anti-political actors but as a corrective to institutional politics, aiming to restore democratic norms and confidence in collective ac-

tion. It is important to note that voters evaluate student protests within this discursive framework primarily through affective and normative categories rather than their programmatic articulation or immediate political outcomes. Legitimacy is built predominantly through emotions and symbolic considerations, consistent with contemporary research emphasizing the growing importance of emotions, identity, and symbolism in shaping political attitudes (Van Zomeren 2016). However, as della Porta and Diani (2020) caution, high symbolic capital may generate unrealistic expectations regarding the speed and depth of political change, potentially leading to disappointment if tangible results do not materialize.

Despite these risks, focus group discourse indicates that the dominant narrative positions student protests as an indicator of a society's democratic potential rather than a destabilizing factor. In this regard, student protests occupy a significant place in Serbia's contemporary political imagination, being perceived as actors who not only articulate existing social dissatisfaction but also contribute to the restoration of faith in participatory democracy, collective action, and the possibility of societal change. Certain challenges identified by voters for the Student Movement include its heterogeneity and the choice of further action strategies, while depersonalization is viewed ambivalently: positively, because ruling parties and elites cannot target specific individuals, yet negatively, due to the lack of clear responsibility. The heterogeneity of student protests stems from the fact that students do not constitute a homogeneous social group but include individuals from diverse social, class, ideological, and political backgrounds. This diversity, while contributing to inclusivity and broad mobilization, may also hinder the formulation of unified goals and coherent demands. According to Melucci (1996), contemporary social movements function as "networks of meaning," in which different identities and interests temporarily converge around a shared interpretative framework without permanent ideological homogeneity. Similarly, Snow et al. (1986) emphasize that the success of collective action depends on processes of "frame alignment," i.e., the movement's ability to connect diverse interpretations of problems into a coherent narrative. In the context of student protests, failure in this process may lead to internal conflicts, fragmented demands, and weakened public support.

Leadership constitutes a second key challenge. Student protests are often organized through horizontal, informal, and deliberative structures, deliberately avoiding hierarchy and personalized leadership. This organizational model stems from a normative commitment to participatory democracy and the prevention of co-optation by political elites (Polletta 2002). However, as Freeman (1972) notes, the absence of

formal structures does not imply the absence of power but often results in invisible hierarchies and accountability issues. Consequently, the lack of recognizable leaders can complicate communication with institutions, media, and the wider public, as well as negotiations over concrete political demands. Gerbaudo (2012) and Castells (2012) highlight that contemporary protests often develop forms of “soft” or symbolic leadership, enabling coordination without formal hierarchy, yet the effectiveness of such leadership heavily depends on context and the duration of protests.

A third significant challenge concerns strategic planning and long-term vision. Student protests often arise as reactions to specific events or decisions, which enhances their spontaneity and mobilization potential but simultaneously limits the development of long-term strategies. Gamson (1990) emphasizes that successful social movements must combine disruptive forms of action with clear political articulation and strategic objectives; otherwise, protests risk remaining symbolically potent but politically ineffective. Furthermore, the long-term success of protests depends on the ability to seize favorable political opportunities and translate protest energy into lasting forms of political influence (Tarrow & Tilly 2001).

These structural challenges directly affect voters’ perceptual discourse. Research indicates that the public evaluates protests not only based on their goals but also on organizational form, leadership visibility, and strategic clarity (Koopmans 2004). While some interpret the heterogeneity, horizontality, and spontaneity of student protests as evidence of authenticity, democracy, and moral legitimacy, others view these same characteristics as signs of political immaturity, irresponsibility, or lack of capacity for serious political engagement. Thus, the legitimacy of student political engagement in public discourse is shaped by an ongoing tension between normative democratic ideals and expectations of political efficacy. In this regard, student protests can be understood as an ambivalent phenomenon: simultaneously a laboratory of alternative political participation models and an actor constrained by the structural limitations of unconventional political action. Analyzing these challenges is therefore crucial both for understanding how Serbian voters perceive student protests and for assessing their potential to evolve from a symbolic phenomenon into a long-term politically relevant factor.

4.1. Focus group in Belgrade¹

The discourse of focus group participants reveals the most pronounced level of political polarization, which is consistent with its status as the main political, institu-

¹ Focus groups were conducted on September 25 and 26, 2025

tional, and media center in Serbia. This polarization is manifested not only through differentiated evaluations of student protests, but also through the intensive use of ideologically structured interpretative frameworks, in which the same phenomenon is simultaneously constructed either as an expression of democratic revitalization or as a potential source of political destabilization. Such a dual perception corresponds to findings in contemporary literature on post-industrial political cleavages, which suggests that politically and symbolically central contexts tend to generate intensified interpretative competition over the meaning of social movements (van Sickle & Weldon 2010).

In this context, students are most often interpreted through the prism of national visibility and institutional challenge, whereby their role is not perceived exclusively as socio-protestive, but also as potentially politically subjectivizing. Focus group participants in Belgrade more frequently than in other cities consider the possibility of institutionalizing the student movement, including its potential “transition” from a protest to a party framework. Such an interpretation indicates a high degree of politicization of perception, in which protest actors are rapidly reinterpreted through the logic of representation and electoral-political competition. This finding is consistent with Mair (2013), who emphasizes that in contexts of crisis of party representation, new social actors are perceived as potential substitutes for delegitimized party structures, even when they do not articulate such ambitions themselves. Additionally, Rosanvallon (2008) argues that declining trust in professional political elites increases the demand for “authentic” political actors, which in the Belgrade discourse contributes to the projection of the student movement as a latent political alternative.

At the same time, the symbolic capital of protests in Belgrade is the most pronounced, but also the most susceptible to political instrumentalization. High media exposure and the centralization of political communication contribute to the rapid reinterpretation of protest symbols—visual identities, slogans, and narratives—through existing political cleavages, as well as their incorporation into broader strategic discourses of various actors. In this sense, the symbolic dimension of protests functions as a space of “struggle over meaning,” which aligns with the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), according to which political discourses are constituted through the continuous articulation and rearticulation of hegemonic signifiers. Furthermore, Jasper (2011) emphasizes that symbols in protest movements play a crucial role in generating emotional resonance, but also in enabling their rapid political appropriation, which is particularly pronounced in highly polarized environments. In this way, the symbolic resources of the student movement in Belgrade func-

tion simultaneously as a mechanism of internal cohesion and mobilization, and as an object of external political instrumentalization, thereby reinforcing the ambivalence of its public perception. This dynamic is consistent with the findings of Jasper (2011) and Tilly (2004), who argue that the symbolic power of protests increases in proportion to their interpretative openness, but also to the risk of their political co-optation into broader structures of power.

4.2. Focus group in Novi Sad²

In Novi Sad, the discourse emerging from focus group participants is characterized by a somewhat more pronounced distance from dominant central political narratives, particularly those emanating from the national political and media center. This interpretative distance does not necessarily imply political disengagement, but rather reflects a tendency toward a more critical and reflexive stance vis-à-vis nationally framed political discourses. Such positioning is consistent with literature on peripheral civic publics, which suggests that political meanings in secondary urban centers are often filtered through locally grounded experiences of governance and civic participation rather than through centralized partisan frameworks (Tarrow 2011; della Porta & Diani 2020). Within this context, student activism is predominantly interpreted as a form of civic autonomy and localized political articulation rather than as a direct extension of party-political competition. Participants tend to frame student mobilization as an expression of participatory citizenship and deliberative engagement, emphasizing its capacity to open public space for non-institutional forms of political expression. This aligns with theories of “subpolitics” and everyday democracy, which highlight how political agency is increasingly exercised outside formal institutional arenas through civic initiatives and social movements (Beck 1997; Norris 2011).

A distinctive feature of the Novi Sad discourse is the recurrent emphasis on horizontality and the non-violent character of protests. The absence of strong hierarchical leadership structures is not interpreted as a weakness, but rather as a normative advantage that enhances legitimacy, inclusiveness, and democratic authenticity. This perception resonates with contemporary social movement scholarship, which argues that horizontal organizational forms have become a defining feature of post-2000 protest cycles, particularly in contexts where distrust toward political elites is high (Castells 2012). At the same time, non-violence is constructed not only as a strategic

2 Focus groups were conducted on September 30 and October 1, 2025

choice but also as a moral boundary that distinguishes legitimate civic protest from delegitimized forms of political contention (Jasper 2011). Finally, participants in Novi Sad demonstrate a lower tendency to frame student activism in explicitly partisan terms or to anticipate its direct transformation into an electoral actor. Instead, there is a stronger emphasis on its role as a corrective civic force within the broader political system. This interpretation corresponds to Mair's (2013) argument regarding the declining capacity of party systems to monopolize political representation, as well as Rosanvallon's (2008) notion of "counter-democratic" forms of oversight and civic vigilance, in which social movements function as external checks on institutional power rather than as competitors within it. In this sense, student activism in Novi Sad is primarily constructed as a democratic resource embedded in civil society rather than as a vehicle for party-political articulation.

4.3. Focus group in Niš³

In Niš, the prevailing interpretation of student protests is strongly framed through the lens of socio-economic inequality and regional marginalization. Focus group participants tend to situate student activism within a broader structural narrative of uneven development, in which peripheral urban centers are perceived as systematically disadvantaged in relation to the political, economic, and symbolic centrality of Beograd. This interpretative frame reflects not only immediate grievances but also a deeper perception of spatially embedded inequalities that shape political opportunity structures and access to institutional influence. Within this context, students are primarily perceived as actors who articulate the accumulated dissatisfaction of peripheral urban constituencies rather than as isolated or purely generational political agents. Their mobilization is thus interpreted as a form of collective voice for structurally marginalized regions, translating socio-economic frustrations into publicly visible political claims. This finding is consistent with comparative social movement research, which emphasizes that protest behavior in contexts of territorial inequality often takes on a "representational" function for broader social groups that lack direct institutional channels of influence (Tarrow 2011).

The Niš discourse therefore reveals a stronger socio-structural dimension of political perception compared to more ideologically or symbolically oriented interpretations observed in other urban contexts. Rather than focusing primarily on identity, symbolism, or party competition, participants emphasize material inequalities, uneven

3 Focus groups were conducted on October 4 and 5, 2025

regional development, and perceived asymmetries in resource distribution. This aligns with theories of political contention that highlight how grievances rooted in structural inequality are often translated into collective action frames that emphasize fairness, redistribution, and equal access to political recognition (della Porta & Diani 2020). At the same time, the perception of students as representatives of peripheral dissatisfaction indicates a broader process of “spatial politicization,” in which geographical location becomes a key variable in shaping political identity and interpretative frameworks. Such dynamics are well documented in the literature on center–periphery cleavages, which argues that territorial inequalities often generate distinct patterns of political mobilization and protest legitimacy (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). In this sense, student protests in Niš are not only understood as episodic political events, but also as expressions of long-standing structural tensions within Serbia’s uneven socio-political landscape.

4.4. Focus group in Užice⁴

In Užice, the focus group discussions demonstrate a pronounced local embeddedness of political attitudes, where student protests are frequently interpreted through analogies with established forms of local civic activism. Rather than being framed primarily as a nationally coordinated political phenomenon, student mobilization is situated within a repertoire of locally recognizable practices of collective action, which draws on everyday experiences of community organization, solidarity networks, and municipal-level engagement. A salient feature of this discourse is the strong emphasis on the moral dimension of resistance. Participants tend to interpret protest activity less through instrumental or party-political categories and more through normative evaluations of justice, dignity, and civic responsibility. This moral framing aligns with broader scholarship on social movements, which highlights the centrality of “moral shocks” and ethical evaluations in sustaining collective action, particularly in contexts where formal political institutions are perceived as distant or unresponsive (Jasper 2011).

Furthermore, the discourse in Užice is marked by a strong identification with the collective identity of “small communities” in contrast to a perceived centralized political system. This center–periphery interpretative schema constructs local identity as a resource of authenticity and solidarity, while simultaneously positioning the political center as distant, bureaucratic, and insufficiently responsive to local needs.

4 Focus group was conducted on October 8, 2025

Such patterns are consistent with theories of social capital and community-based civic engagement, which suggest that smaller communities often generate stronger horizontal ties and norms of reciprocity that shape political interpretation and participation (Norris 2011). In this framework, student protests are frequently analogized with local traditions of civic resistance and community-based mobilization, reinforcing their legitimacy through continuity with familiar forms of collective action. This interpretative mechanism reflects what Melucci (1996) conceptualizes as the production of collective identity within social movements, where shared meanings are constructed through culturally embedded narratives and locally grounded experiences. Consequently, in Užice, student activism is not perceived as an external or abstract political phenomenon, but rather as an extension of established local repertoires of civic engagement embedded in the moral economy of small-town solidarity.

4.5. Focus group in Požarevac⁵

In Požarevac, a more pragmatic discourse predominates, in which the student movement is primarily evaluated through the lens of its potential consequences for institutional stability and local political relations. Rather than being interpreted solely in normative or symbolic terms, student activism is assessed in relation to its possible impact on governance continuity, administrative predictability, and the functioning of established political arrangements at both local and national levels. Within this interpretative framework, there is a notable presence of sympathy toward student demands, particularly those articulated in moral or civic terms. However, this sympathetic stance is simultaneously accompanied by a heightened degree of caution regarding the broader political reach and transformative capacity of the movement. Such ambivalence reflects a form of “constrained support,” where approval of protest claims coexists with concern over systemic disruption, a pattern frequently identified in research on public attitudes toward contentious politics in stable but politically polarized environments (Norris 2011).

From a theoretical perspective, this type of evaluation aligns with rationalist and institutionalist approaches to social movements, which emphasize how actors outside the movement assess protest activity in terms of costs, risks, and implications for institutional order (Tarrow 2011). In this sense, student protests are not rejected, but rather conditionally endorsed, depending on their perceived compatibility with

5 Focus group was conducted on October 11, 2025

existing governance structures and their capacity to produce change without undermining institutional continuity. Moreover, the cautious framing of students' political potential reflects broader dynamics of political trust and perceived efficacy. As Rosanvallon (2008) argues, contemporary democratic publics often oscillate between normative support for civic mobilization and concerns about its destabilizing effects on representative institutions. Similarly, Mair (2013) highlights that in contexts of perceived institutional fragility, citizens tend to evaluate new political actors through the prism of system preservation rather than transformative enthusiasm. Consequently, in Požarevac, student activism is primarily situated within a pragmatic evaluative register that balances moral approval with systemic caution.

4.6. Focus group in Kragujevac⁶

In Kragujevac, the focus group discussion reveals a strong symbolic linkage between historical narratives of political resistance and contemporary student protests. Participants frequently situate current student mobilization within a longer temporal continuum of democratic struggle, thereby embedding present-day activism in locally resonant histories of collective contention. This interpretative frame contributes to the construction of a historically grounded political identity in which contemporary protests are not perceived as isolated events, but as part of an ongoing trajectory of civic resistance and democratization. A particularly salient feature of this discourse is the perceived continuity in the struggle for democratic values. Students are often framed as inheritors of locally rooted traditions of political mobilization, suggesting that their activism draws legitimacy not only from present grievances but also from historically accumulated narratives of resistance. This form of meaning-making aligns with scholarship on collective memory and contentious politics, which emphasizes that social movements frequently derive symbolic strength from their ability to connect contemporary action to culturally embedded historical repertoires (Assmann 2011).

Within this framework, collective memory operates as a structuring resource that enables actors to interpret present political events through familiar historical templates. The invocation of past struggles serves to reinforce the moral legitimacy of current protests while simultaneously situating them within a broader narrative of unfinished democratic transformation. As Melucci (1996) argues, collective identity in

6 Focus group was conducted on October 13, 2025

social movements is continuously constructed through the integration of past experiences, present action, and projected futures, thereby creating a coherent interpretative field that sustains mobilization over time. Furthermore, the Kragujevac discourse reflects what could be described as “localized mnemonic politics,” in which historical references are not abstract or nationalized only, but deeply embedded in local civic identity. Such processes are consistent with theories of “sites of memory” and localized commemorative practices, which highlight how specific urban contexts become carriers of political meaning through repeated symbolic activation of historical events (Assmann 2011). In this sense, student protests gain additional legitimacy by being symbolically aligned with place-specific traditions of resistance.

Finally, the framing of students as heirs to established traditions of political mobilization underscores the intergenerational dimension of democratic continuity. This perception resonates with Tarrow’s (2011) argument that social movements often rely on “repertoires of contention” that are historically transmitted and adapted to contemporary conditions. Consequently, in Kragujevac, student activism is not merely understood as a contemporary response to political circumstances, but as a continuation of a historically grounded civic lineage that reinforces its normative and symbolic authority within the local political imagination.

4.7. Focus group in Subotica⁷

In Subotica, the discourse is additionally shaped by a multicultural and transnational context, which contributes to a broader interpretative framework in which student protests are understood as part of wider European patterns of civic activism. Rather than being framed exclusively within a national political logic, student mobilization is frequently situated within comparative reference points that emphasize cross-border similarities in protest repertoires, democratic engagement, and civil society development. This transnational framing aligns with scholarship on Europeanization from below, which highlights how local political actors increasingly interpret collective action through supranational normative and cultural templates (Tarrow 2012). Within this context, participants place particular emphasis on pluralism and inclusivity as key normative dimensions of student activism. These values are not only understood as organizational principles of the protest movement, but also as broader democratic ideals that reflect the social composition and cultural heterogeneity of the local envi

7 Focus group was conducted on October 15, 2025

ronment. Such interpretations resonate with deliberative democratic theory, which stresses the importance of inclusiveness and diversity as foundational elements of legitimate collective decision-making and civic participation (Habermas 1996).

Moreover, the Subotica discourse reflects a tendency to interpret student protests through a “cosmopolitan civic lens,” in which political engagement is evaluated in relation to broader European democratic standards rather than solely domestic political cleavages. This perspective is consistent with Inglehart and Welzel’s (2005) argument that post-materialist value orientations, including tolerance, diversity, and participatory inclusion, are more likely to emerge in contexts exposed to cultural heterogeneity and transnational interaction. In this sense, student activism is not only perceived as a national political phenomenon, but also as an expression of broader European civic norms that prioritize openness, pluralism, and inclusivity. Consequently, in Subotica, the legitimacy of student protests is strongly reinforced by their alignment with multicultural values and transnational democratic imaginaries, which situate local contentious politics within a wider European framework of civic participation and democratic culture.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the perceptual discourse of voters in Serbia regarding student protests and their political engagement, taking into account the broader socio-political context in which the protests emerged, relevant theoretical approaches to political participation and social movements, as well as empirical findings derived from focus groups. The analysis demonstrates that student protests in contemporary Serbia cannot be understood merely as episodic expressions of social discontent; rather, they constitute a complex political phenomenon that occupies a significant position within the political imagination of voters.

The research findings indicate that voters predominantly interpret student political engagement through normative, symbolic, and affective categories, such as courage, hope, future, and unity. This discursive framing corroborates contemporary literature emphasizing the growing importance of emotions, identity, and symbolism in shaping political attitudes, particularly in contexts of representative democracy crises and low institutional trust. Students are perceived by a substantial portion of respondents as carriers of authentic, non-institutionalized politics that challenge delegitimized political elites and entrenched party structures. Notably, the legitimacy of the student

movement in voter discourse often transcends existing partisan divisions. The fact that even some supporters of the ruling party view the student political option as a potentially relevant political opponent highlights both the depth of the crisis of political representation in Serbia and the strong symbolic capital that students currently possess. At the same time, comparisons with the 1996/97 protests and the use of similar symbols point to a continuity of collective memory of democratic resistance, further legitimizing contemporary student protests as part of a broader historical struggle against authoritarian tendencies.

However, the analysis also reveals that this positive discourse is accompanied by ambivalent expectations and reservations. The heterogeneity of the student movement, horizontal organizational models without clearly defined leadership, and uncertainty regarding long-term strategic planning represent key challenges shaping voter perceptions. While some interpret these characteristics as evidence of democracy, inclusivity, and resistance to co-optation, others view them as indicators of political immaturity and limited capacity for long-term, responsible political engagement. Thus, within voter discourse, a clear tension emerges between normative democratic ideals and expectations of political efficacy. Overall, student protests in Serbia can be understood as an ambivalent yet highly significant political actor: on one hand, a symbol of hope, moral renewal, and the possibility of social change; on the other, a movement confronted with the structural constraints of unconventional political participation.

Their further political potential will largely depend on the ability to translate symbolic capital and high voter expectations into clear political objectives, sustainable strategies, and recognizable forms of accountability, especially in the context of potential entry into institutional politics. In conclusion, the perceptual discourse of voters regarding student protests represents a crucial analytical indicator of the state of democratic culture in Serbia. How citizens interpret student political engagement reflects broader processes of eroding trust in institutions, as well as the enduring demand for new forms of political participation and representation. In this sense, student protests are not merely a reaction to specific political events, but both a symptom of and a potential corrective to the contemporary democratic order in Serbia.

REFERENCES

1. Altbach, Philip G. (1989), "Student political activism", in: Philip G. Altbach (ed.), *Student political activism: An international reference handbook*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1–16.
2. Assmann, Jan (2011), *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
3. Barnes, Samuel H., Max Kaase (ed.) (1979), *Political action: Mass participation in five Western democracies*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills
4. Castells, Manuel (2012), *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*, Polity Press, Cambridge
5. Dalton, Russell (2008), *Citizen politics: Public opinion and political parties in advanced industrial democracies*, CQ Press, Washington
6. Dalton, Russell, Alix van Sickle, Steven Weldon (2010), "The individual–institutional nexus of protest behaviour", *British Journal of Political Science*, 40(1), 51–73.
7. Della Porta, Donatella (2015), *Social movements in times of austerity: Bringing capitalism back into protest analysis*, Polity Press, Cambridge
8. Della Porta, Donatella, Mario Diani (2020), *Social movements: An introduction*, 3. ed., Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford
9. Earl, Jennifer, Katrina Kimport (2011), *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the Internet age*, MIT Press, Cambridge
10. Fairclough, Norman (1995), *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*, Longman, London
11. Foucault, Michel (1972), *The archaeology of knowledge*, Pantheon Books, New York
12. Freeman, Jo (1972), "The tyranny of structurelessness", *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 17, 151–164.
13. Gamson, William A. (1990), *The strategy of social protest*, Wadsworth, Belmont
14. Gerbaudo, Paolo (2012), *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*, Pluto Press, London
15. Habermas, Jürgen (1996), *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*, MIT Press, Cambridge

16. Hay, Colin (2007), *Why we hate politics*, Polity Press, Cambridge
17. Inglehart, Ronald, Christian Welzel (2005), *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
18. Jasper, James M. (2011), "Emotions and social movements: Twenty years of theory and research", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37, 285–303.
20. Koopmans, Ruud (2004), "Protest in time and space: The evolution of waves of contention", in: David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi (ed.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, Blackwell, Oxford, 19–46.
21. Kousis, Maria (2018), "Theorizing local anti-austerity protest dynamics", *Sociological Research Online*, 23(1), 19–37.
22. Laclau, Ernesto, Chantal Mouffe (1985), *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, Verso, London
23. Lončar, Jelena, Dušan Spasojević (2022), "Noise against the dictatorship: Battle for symbolic representation", *Sociologija* 64(2), 227–247.
24. Mair, Peter (2013), *Ruling the void: The hollowing of Western democracy*, Verso, London
25. McCarthy, John D., Mayer N. Zald (1977), "Resource mobilization and social movements", *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(6), 1212–1241.
26. Melucci, Alberto (1996), *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
27. Michels, Robert (1911), *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, Free Press, New York
28. Norris, Pippa (2011), *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
29. Offe, Claus (1985), "New social movements: Challenging the boundaries of institutional politics", *Social Research* 52(4), 817–868.
30. Pateman, Carole (1970), *Participation and democratic theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
31. Polletta, Francesca (2002), *Freedom is an endless meeting: Democracy in American social movements*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago
32. Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018), "The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)", *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(1), 189–209.
33. Rosanvallon, Pierre (2008), *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

34. Schedler, Andreas (2013), *The politics of uncertainty: Sustaining and subverting electoral authoritarianism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
35. Snow, David A., E. Burke Rochford, Steven K. Worden, Robert D. Benford (1986), "Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation", *American Sociological Review*, 51(4), 464–481.
36. Tarrow, Sidney, Charles Tilly (2001), *Dynamics of contention*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
37. Tilly, Charles (2004), *Social movements, 1768–2004*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder
38. Van Aelst, Peter, Stefaan Walgrave (2002), "New media, new movements?", *European Journal of Communication*, 17(4), 465–493.
39. Van Zomeren, Martijn (2016), "Building a tower of Babel?", *Political Psychology*, 37(S1), 87–114.
40. Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brady (1995), *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge

PERCEPTIVNI DISKURS BIRAČA U SRBIJI O STUDENTSKIM PROTESTIMA I NJIHOVOM POLITIČKOM ANGAŽMANU

Sažetak:

Studentski protesti u Srbiji kontinuirano traju od decembra 2024. godine i proizašli su iz zahteva za pronalaženje odgovornih za pad nadstrešnice na Železničkoj stanici u Novom Sadu. Ti protesti persali su u jedne od najmasovnijih skupova u savremenoj istoriji Srbije i to je omogućilo da njihova popularnost raste u okviru javnog mnjenja. Upravo to se može smatrati jednim od razloga zbog kojeg su studenti izašli sa političkim zahtevom da se raspišu vanredni parlamentarni izbori i namerom da na tim izborima kandiduju Studentsku listu koju bi trebalo da čine univerzitetski profesori i druge javne ličnosti koje su poslednjih godina stekle imidž u javnosti da se bore protiv aktuelne vlasti u Srbiji. Te činjenice su nas podstakle da uradimo 10 fokus grupa kako bismo utvrdili percepciju koju Studentski pokret ima među biračima u Srbiji. Prilikom kreiranja istraživanja, vođeno je računa da učesnici fokus grupa budu pojedinci koji pripadaju različitim polnim, starosnim i obrazovnim strukturama. Na svakoj fokus grupi učestvovalo je 10 ispitanika, a fokus grupe su bile organizovane u različitim gradovima u Srbiji: po dve u Beogradu, Novom Sadu i Nišu, a po jedna u Subotici, Kragujevcu, Užicu i Požarevcu. Centralno

istraživačko pitanje koje je bilo postavljeno ispitanicima je koji diskurs se može smatrati dominantnim u percepciji birača studentskog političkog delovanja. Učesnici fokus grupa su ga najčešće opisivali kao „hrabro“, smatrajući da su studenti kroz svoj politički angažman uspeali da vrate „nadu“ i „budućnost“, a posebno su istakli „jedinstvo“ koje je prisutno u studentskim protestima.

Ključne reči: diskurs; Srbija; studentski protesti; parlamentarni izbori; fokus grupe

Author's address

Adresa autora

Nikola Perišić

Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade

nikola.perisic@ips.ac.rs

