



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Sonja Grimm,
Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg,
Germany

REVIEWED BY

Sergiu Misoiu,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania
Sari Madi,
Montreal University, Canada

*CORRESPONDENCE

Sarah Anne Rennick
✉ s.rennick@arab-reform.net

RECEIVED 08 August 2025

REVISED 12 November 2025

ACCEPTED 18 November 2025

PUBLISHED 10 December 2025

CITATION

Rennick SA and Žilović M (2025) Seeking a way in/resisting a way out: labor market dualization and democratic transition in Serbia and Tunisia.
Front. Polit. Sci. 7:1682080.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1682080

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Rennick and Žilović. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Seeking a way in/resisting a way out: labor market dualization and democratic transition in Serbia and Tunisia

Sarah Anne Rennick^{1,2*} and Marko Žilović³

¹Arab Reform Initiative, Paris, France, ²American Graduate School in Paris, Paris, France, ³Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

Studies investigating the political relevance of labor market dualization have gathered compelling evidence that labor market status shapes workers' political preferences and their modes of participation, shedding significant light on shifts in partisan politics and socio-economic policies, as well as broader transformations to political systems. Yet, the study of labor market dualization in contexts of democratic transitions, and their role in shaping transitional processes, has been largely uninvestigated. In particular, two fundamental questions, lying at the nexus of labor market segmentation theory and democratic transition theory, remain unanswered: how does the context of democratic transition inform political participation of labor market insiders and outsiders, and what is the impact of their mobilization on transition processes? To answer these questions, the paper considers two instances of dualized labor market mobilization under democratic transition: the Union of Unemployed Graduates in Tunisia during the period 2011–2014, and industrial workers in Serbia in the early 2000s, who were under severe threat to lose their insider status with the shift to a liberalized economy. Drawing on Della Porta et al.'s (2016) theorization of the interactionist and relational dimensions of social movement action, democratization, and revolution, we posit that democratizing regimes are able to exploit demands for labor market insider status to stabilize transition processes. The paper finds that, despite many contextual differences between the two cases, the politics of labor market inclusion and exclusion displayed remarkable similarities. First, both cases show how organized actors in the field of labor contestation were channeled into modes of participation that acquiesced to the technocratic and procedural logic of the transition. Second, in both cases, contestation against the democratic transition's political economy and its impact on labor market outsiders/future outsiders was able to be assuaged not through systemic change but rather through a strategy of fragmentation and limited concessions. As an implication, we find that while these strategies proved effective at reducing street level contestation they may have also reduced workers' substantive evaluation of democratic transition, which in turn left Serbia's and Tunisia's democracies more vulnerable to the threat of future reversals by populist leaders.

KEYWORDS

labor market dualization, contentious politics, democratization, Tunisia, Serbia

Introduction

While labor market dualization – the division of the labor market into insiders (who benefit from stable, secure jobs and associated benefits) and outsiders (in precarious or informal jobs and lacking social protection) – exists everywhere, how it is structured and addressed institutionally reveals deeper political choices regarding state-labor relations and the nature of the political economy. Studies investigating the political relevance of dualization have confirmed that labor market status shapes workers' political preferences and their modes of participation, shedding light on shifts in partisan politics and socio-economic policies, as well as broader transformations to political systems. Yet, the study of labor market dualization in contexts of democratic transitions, and their role in shaping transitional processes, has been largely uninvestigated. This is a surprise considering the importance of labor politics in both classical (Luebbert, 1991; Stephens et al., 1992) and contemporary (Caraway et al., 2015; Bishara, 2020; Dean, 2022) studies of democratization. Perhaps one reason is that the political economy literature on labor market dualization has often focused on advanced industrialized democracies. Yet, segmented labor markets are a common feature of developing countries or transitioning economies too. Thus, we should also expect the labor market divide between insiders and outsiders to shape the politics of democratic transition and consolidation in important ways.

In fact, we argue that contexts of democratic transition represent a particularly salient subset of cases for investigating how mobilization is both informed by labor market dualism and mutually constitutive of the political system. Democratic transitions see not only the adoption of new institutional frameworks but also changes at the level of political elites, structure of the economy, and political priorities in general. These shifts can change how different segments of labor are situated in relational terms, their possibilities for organization and participation, as well as the broader discursive and normative environment in which their claims are enunciated. Just as importantly, shifts at the level of prevailing economic systems have particularly salient impacts on how labor market insiders and outsiders are positioned economically and normatively. They thus are exposed to new pathways for political mobilization and participation, but also different possibilities to achieve labor inclusion and benefits – or indeed are confronted with pending exclusion. These shifts inform their appetite and capacity for transformative potential, and how the emerging political system is negotiated for the achievement of their priorities. In particular, two fundamental questions, lying at the nexus of labor market segmentation theory and democratic transition theory, remain unanswered: how does the context of democratic transition inform political participation of labor market insiders and outsiders, and what is the impact of their mobilization on transition processes?

To answer these questions, the paper conducts case-oriented comparative analysis, based on a most-different design, of two instances of dualized labor market mobilization under democratic transition: the Union of Unemployed Graduates (better known under its French name, the *Union des Diplômés Chômeurs* or UDC) in Tunisia during the period 2011–2014, who had faced systemic exclusion under the previous regime; and industrial workers in Serbia in the early 2000s, who were under severe threat to lose their insider status with the shift to a liberalized economy. The two cases are

selected for their shared theoretically informed periodization and their shared outcome, despite difference in terms of context and positionality of the labor market challengers. Tunisia and Serbia represent two notable cases of democratic mass uprisings in European neighborhood (Serbia's 2000 Bulldozer revolution and Tunisia's 2011 revolution), and both cases of mobilization occurred in the context of ambiguous and highly contingent transition, when the direction of transitional politics (toward democratic stabilization or autocratic restoration) was indeterminate. While in both cases the transition corresponded with neoliberal economic choices, the sequencing differed markedly between the two. In Tunisia, the neoliberal turn began several decades prior to the 2011 revolution; the economic policies of the subsequent democratic governments were thus defined by relative continuity. In this way, the struggle of labor market outsiders mobilizing for insider status concerned radical systemic economic reform to meet demands of inclusion. By contrast, in Serbia, economic policies of Milošević's authoritarian regime in the 1990s were defined by evasion of neoliberal reforms in an attempt to preserve statist policies of the preceding four decades of socialism. Consequently, economic policies after 2000 were marked by a stark policy reversal and belated implementation of neoliberal economic reforms. In this way, the mobilization of labor market insiders, threatened with a loss of status, called for greater policy continuity. Despite these contextual differences between the two countries and the differences in what types of policy reforms labor market challengers were claiming to guarantee insider status, both saw a period of democratic regime stabilization.

Analytically, we argue that labor market status is a lens to assess how positionality within political economies shapes solidarities, identities, and policy preferences; structures modes for organization and political mobilization; and creates different possibilities and priorities for reconfiguring democratizing political systems more broadly. Empirically, the paper draws on semi-structured interviews with the mobilized groups under consideration, their allies and coalition partners, political elites with whom they were interacting, and key informants through fieldwork carried out in Tunisia (March–May 2024) and Serbia (January–April 2024). The empirical materials were first assessed at the individual case level to determine how outsider status/threat of outsider status informed the content of mobilization, how groups were structurally placed and organized in the broader political arena, and how shifts in the availability of resources and opportunities informed their modes of mobilization and participation. In a second stage, we then conducted the comparative analysis, assessing the impact of this mobilization on the democratic transition. Our case-oriented comparison enables us to highlight what we believe are deeper commonalities in the politics of dualized labor market reform (or the lack of it) and its mutually constitutive impact on democratic transitions that follow on the heels of mass uprisings.

The paper finds that, despite different sequencing of political and economic liberalization in the two cases, and myriad of other differences between them, the politics of labor market inclusion and exclusion displayed remarkable similarities. First, both cases show how organized actors in the field of labor contestation were channeled into modes of participation that acquiesced to the technocratic and procedural logic of the transition. Second, in both cases, contestation against the democratic transition's political economy and its impact on labor market outsiders/future outsiders was able to be assuaged not

through systemic change but rather through a strategy of limited concessions that encouraged fragmentation. In identifying the link between labor market dualization and regime stabilization during democratic transition, we thus put forth the theoretical hypothesis that limited concessions to challengers break up the capacity for contestation and incentivize support to transitional processes, both of which stabilize the democratic transition.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We begin by briefly reviewing the extant literature on labor market dualization in the context of advanced democracies and authoritarian or hybrid regimes, while highlighting the aspects of this literature that inform our examination of the same phenomenon in the context of democratic transition. The next section situates our work in the tradition of social movement approaches to democratization and theorizes how the politics of dualized labor mobilization was shaped by the preceding years of labor movement organizing and by the politically fluid moment of democratic transition. The third section outlines materials and methods that we have relied upon in this study, while the subsequent sections present our two case studies and discussion of how they compare to each other. The conclusion reiterates the main contributions of our research and its wider implications.

Labor market segmentation, contentious politics, and democratization

The study of labor market dualization has most often been utilized to assess shifts in partisan politics and socio-economic policies; nonetheless, studies that focus in particular on labor market outsiders and their various forms of political engagement and activism have become increasingly prevalent (Della Porta et al., 2016). Within democratic contexts, the majority of studies have focused on how labor market segmentation informs voting patterns, policy preferences, and party affiliations (Bürgisser and Kurer, 2021; Gelepithis and Jeannet, 2018; Rovny and Rovny, 2017; Schwander, 2020; Eom and Kwon, 2024). Yet, the extent to which labor market status correlates to votes for either left-leaning or right-leaning parties, or indeed extreme left or right parties that proffer populist promises or anti-system challenges, has been ambiguous and shifting over time (Lindvall and Rueda, 2012; Branco et al., 2024). What these studies and others do strongly confirm is that transformations to the labor market and nature of work itself has heterogenized the profiles of outsiders and thus reshaped our understanding of class-based politics (Häusermann et al., 2020). A subsidiary strand of this literature has focused on the relationship between labor market status and forms of political engagement/disengagement. With regards to conventional politics, the literature on outsiders in democracies consistently shows lower voter turnout and less political engagement, theorized to be the result of fewer material resources, diminished political socialization and skills acquisition, and micro-structural processes of alienation and self-isolation (Häusermann, 2020; Schwander, 2019; Duman, 2025; Kerrissey and Schofer, 2018; Verba et al., 1995; Emmenegger et al., 2015). However, the research in the field of contentious politics finds that labor market outsiders are not politically apathetic but rather may utilize other vectors than the ballot box, where market status informs organizational, strategic, and ideational aspects of

disruptive or extra-electoral mobilization (Giugni, 2008; Della Porta et al., 2016; Mattoni, 2015; Siisiäinen et al., 2015; Pilati and Perra, 2022).

The net result of this literature is that the political participation and mobilization of outsiders can have a wide range of impacts on politics in democracies in institutional, relational, and policy terms. What of the case of authoritarian and hybrid contexts? Here, the literature is much less developed (Bishara, 2021), although emerging results seem to indicate that insider-outsider cleavages have similar impacts in terms of political mobilization patterns and policy outcomes (Hertog, 2025). Labor market dualization in non-democratic contexts is often structured by clientelism and the deliberate utilization of insider status as a core element of the authoritarian bargain: the exchange of insider status for political loyalty and regime maintenance (Desai et al., 2009; Assaad, 2014). In this sense, dualization is not simply a result of economic dynamics and labor policies but indeed is deliberately fostered to produce quiescent political insiders, in what Schlumberger coins “patrimonial capitalism” (Schlumberger, 2008). Importantly, it has also shaped how political participation of outsiders occurs and provided a formula for absorption of contestation (Badimon, 2013; Astapova et al., 2022). Indeed, evidence seems to indicate that the mobilization of outsiders around their socio-economic demands is in fact more easily tolerated precisely because it can be detached from political claims through the deployment of piecemeal concessions, acting as a release valve or a means of containing oppositional energy to well-defined perimeters (Lorentzen, 2013).

However, how labor market outsiders or those losing insider status participate politically in contexts of democratic transition, and how this participation is both shaped by and shapes the process itself, has rarely been directly addressed. Most of the work that indirectly speaks to this topic has been done in the literature on post-communist transitions in the 1990s. Post-communist economic reforms imposed large but unevenly distributed social costs on the societies (Ghodsee and Orenstein, 2021), with the opposition to privatization and other pro-market policies particularly strong in the countries such as Slovakia (Fisher, 2006), Romania (Mișcoiu, 2021), or indeed Serbia where the initial years of transition were dominated by authoritarian parties using nationalist and protectionist appeals to postpone or avoid proper dismantling of the communist system. In response, the reformist governments often sought to “divide and pacify” labor by expanding dualization and strategically shifting surplus workers from overemployed socialist enterprises into outsider or outsider-like statuses in the informal economy (Greskovits, 1998; Vanhuyse, 2006; Ther, 2018, pp. 161–208). Because the potential for unrest was the greatest “precisely among threatened workers, before they become unemployed” (Vanhuyse, 2006, p. 37), the governments sought to preempt troubles through policies that encouraged “exit” rather than “voice.” Removed from everyday workplace interactions that priorly structured their solidarities, the surplus workers became preoccupied with individualized survival strategies that made their collective action more difficult (Vanhuyse, 2006, p. 64), while weakened and fragmented trade unions (Varga and Freyberg-Inan, 2015; Cosma and Mișcoiu, 2024) were supplanted by the NGOs and informal citizens’ initiatives as the main mobilizing agents in post-communist societies (Crăciun and Rammelt, 2025). Drawing on these insights, we posit that democratizing regimes are able to exploit demands for labor market insider status to stabilize transition processes.

Theorizing the relationship between democratization and contentious politics

Based on the assumption that labor market outsiders mobilize politically to move to insider status or receive associated benefits, while threatened labor market insiders mobilize to preserve the existing privileges of stable employment, this study is situated within the field of social movement theory and its deployment to understand the relationship between democratization and contentious politics.

Early theorization placed emphasis on meso-level dynamics of mobilization and the processes of interaction within the political sphere in order to identify mechanisms explaining democratic outcomes. In exploring the role of social movements in producing political change, for example, [Giugni et al.'s \(1999\)](#) volume posits that social movements are able to produce democratization when they are organized around a wide variety of claims including explicit demands for democracy, when social movements are incorporated into coalitions with opposition elites, and when popular mobilization occurs early on in the transition process. Moving beyond this more static approach, [McAdam et al. \(2001\)](#) emphasize the processual and interactionist dimensions, identifying causal mechanisms of democratization stemming from contentious politics. Adding new empirical cases, [Tilly and Tarrow's \(2015\)](#) later volume furthers this meso-level and interactionist analysis of the mechanisms explaining social movement outcomes in relation to democratization. Maintaining the primacy of political opportunity structures in their analytical model, the authors explore regime type and the ability to regulate collective action and the space and rights given to the citizenry. As they explain, such an approach allows for assessing how episodes of contention reshape political relations, institutions, opportunities, and repertoires of action in feedback loops that lead to either increased democratization or de-democratization. In his study on cycles of protest and the impact on democratization in Serbia under Milošević, for example, [Vladislavljević \(2016\)](#) theorizes a dialectic relationship between competitive authoritarianism and popular protest, arguing that regime type facilitates both the organizational and motivational capacity for mobilization and, in turn, that popular uprisings shape elite interests and institutional frameworks, which can ultimately lead to democratic opening. As he argues, popular protest has a longer-term and cumulative 'constitutive' influence on regimes. Similarly, [Zunes \(2022\)](#) research on Brazil, South Korea, and Kenya demonstrates how mass uprising can lead to a gradualist approach to democratization through building mechanisms for sustained and routinized popular pressure, developing crucial ties to political insiders, and establishing alliances with opposition figures.

The contentious politics approach has also led to innovations in theory of revolution and the link to democratization ([Allinson, 2019](#)). [Della Porta \(2016\)](#) work in particular seeks to explicitly address the interactionist and relational dimensions of social movement action, democratization, and revolution and most directly informs our own theoretical approach. She problematizes the seeming lack of success of mass mobilization to effectively produce democratic regime change by moving away from viewing outcomes in absolute terms, instead emphasizing the relational dimensions of political transition. She posits that changes take place in encounters between social movements and authorities in a processual manner that takes into account countermoves, allies, and reciprocal adjustments. Democratic

openings thus present structural features that change the realm of possible actions and interactions by influencing resource availability, affective and cognitive processes, and relations between elites and challengers, which in turn influence institutional dimensions. As she argues, mass uprisings against autocratic regimes may thus still have democratic effects even when protestor demands are not met, what she refers to as "eventful democratization" ([Della Porta, 2016](#)). These democratic effects can be measured in the higher or lower degree of development of citizen rights in the post-mobilization period, including recognition of rights to protest, institutional access, and sensitivity to social justice, as well as the cumulative acquisition of new material and immaterial resources and ideational frames that can contribute to further democratization in a longer processual timeframe.

Drawing on these insights, we argue that the fact that both cases of mobilization under consideration here came after mass popular uprising is not incidental but instead fundamental to understanding the relationship between labor market outsider mobilization and democratization. Building off the analytical framework outlined in the introduction to this special issue, we theorize that democratic transitions in the aftermath of popular uprising reshape how labor market outsiders/future outsiders are situated vis-à-vis other sociopolitical actors, produce new institutional and relational pathways to access the political sphere and elites, see the rise of new ideologies and discourses that inform their own frames, and provide new material and immaterial resources to actors. Via a deep contextualization of democratic transitions as the outcomes of deeply fluid popular uprisings, our theoretical framework allows us to identify how changes in institutional, relational, and symbolic dimension at the macro- and micro-levels informed the modes and means of participation of labor market outsiders and threatened insiders, based on a relational ontology between mobilization and democratic transition.

Materials and methods

Research design is based on case-oriented comparative analysis ([Ragin, 2000](#); [Della Porta, 2008](#)). This comparative method is used to explore similar contextual factors and processes, with emphasis on thick description to generate generalizable knowledge. Each case is treated as a complex configuration of interacting factors, with the analysis aiming to understand the internal processes and interactions that contribute to specific outcomes. The comparative method, in turn, is utilized to identify patterns of similarity.

Case selection was based on a most-different design that nonetheless represents the same theory-driven periodization (post-uprising contexts of democratic transition) and outcome (democratic regime stabilization). The cases of labor mobilization were structurally different in the position of challengers (with the Tunisian UDC representing clear outsiders and the Serbian industrial workers representing highly threatened insiders), yet in both cases their mobilization was undertaken specifically to guarantee insider status.

This study draws on fieldwork and a range of empirical materials in order to assess (1) how shifts at the institutional, relation, and discursive levels informed political mobilization of labor market outsiders under consideration here; (2) the impact of these mobilizations on the democratic transition more broadly. Data collection is based on multiple triangulation ([Denzin, 2017](#)) situated

within qualitative methodologies. The use of multiple triangulation is justified to increase reliability and validity of our explanations and to overcome specific obstacles to data collection, given in particular the historical nature of the Serbian case and to overcome biases inherent in actors' accounts.

Empirical materials were gathered via both desk research/archival research and fieldwork to conduct semi-structured interviews. This included publicly available materials such as official political discourses and other communiqués in the press and social media, and materials generated by mobilizing groups with regards to their claims, including slogans, visual iconography, and statements in the press and social media. These materials were complemented by originally produced data, and namely semi-structured interviews carried out with representatives of labor market outsiders/future outsiders and leaders of their organization structures; their key allies or partners in mobilization and political representation; political elites with whom they were interacting; and other key informants such as journalists, external supporters to the democratic transition such as the EU and other international organizations, and other civil society groups participating in the democratization process. Sixteen interviews were conducted in Tunisia in March–April 2024; and nine in Serbia in January–April 2024.

In addition, traditional desk research was deployed to permit a general understanding of the political and discursive opportunity structures in which mobilizing actors were embedded and their impact at the system level. Based on insights from social movement theory, we identified key macro-structural features produced by the democratic transition that informed political mobilization of labor market outsiders/future outsiders: the distribution of power post-uprising, including the level of contestation or fractures among elites and the degree to which citizens are incorporated into decision-making processes; the extension of political rights and the lines of inclusion/exclusion in terms of political goods distribution; the capacity for and utilization of repression; the stability vs. fluidity of political institutions; and the discursive field of legitimized claim-making.

At the individual case level, narrative analysis (Somers, 1994) was utilized for the treatment of semi-structured interview data and the accounts of actors to understand their mobilization, strategic choices, and obstacles encountered to achieving gains. We then used case-oriented comparative analysis to compare findings between the Tunisian and Serbian cases, and in particular to identify plausible mechanisms generate theoretical hypotheses regarding the relationship between labor market dualization and democratic transition.

Tunisia's Union des Diplômés Chômeurs (UDC): from mass mobilization for structural change to individualized negotiation for insider status

The political implications of outsider status pre-2011

Insider-outsider labor market segmentation in Tunisia prior to the 2011 revolution mirrored that of other Arab authoritarian states, in which insider status served as a fundamental component of the social contract and in which rigid division became a structural feature of the political economy. The development model adopted by Tunisia in the

wake of independence in the 1950s, and upon which the authoritarian bargain hinged, promised a generous system of social benefits in exchange for diminished political rights, achieved through interventionist state practices in the economy and in the labor market in particular (Hertog, 2022). This saw the swelling of the public sector as a means of extending insider status and thus absorbing populations into loyalist relationships. While this model did prove successful in advancing development along at least some indicators (Hertog, 2016), its real success was in the realm of social and political control (Hibou, 2006).

By the 1970s, however, the financial burden borne by the state proved untenable, ushering in an era of neoliberalization and the adoption of market-oriented policies alongside the rolling back of state-led social welfare provisions. This macroeconomic restructuring kicked into high gear upon the ascension of Ben Ali to the presidency in 1987 with the integration of Tunisia into the global economy; yet, much like its predecessor, the new political economy saw social spending and the provision of economic insider status act even further as a tool of authoritarian reproduction (Tsourapas, 2013). Meanwhile, mushrooming unemployment and under-employment, increasing income disparities and the regionalization of poverty, as well as the diminishment of workers' rights and privileges in the public sector, fueled widespread discontent in the decade preceding the revolution (Chomiak, 2011; Kaboub, 2013).

Among the sectors most adversely affected were youth, and graduates of higher education in particular, who faced an estimated unemployment rate of 45% by 2009 (Hibou et al., 2011). Nonetheless, public sector employment and its importance in maintaining a degree of social peace, as well as its value in the eyes of unemployed graduates, did not diminish. In this way, the regime was able to utilize the offer of public sector employment as a tool to assuage grievance and quell potential political dissent. For example, the regime initiated a program of temporary, precarious public sector employment for university graduates, the "barn work program," creating a guise of insider status yet lacking the associated benefits and rights (Han, 2024). Suspended between insider-outsider labor market status, young graduates often preferred to wait out their situation in the hope that by playing by the regime's rules – essentially, remaining politically silent – full insider status would eventually be granted. As Weipert-Fenner (2020) writes, this dynamic successfully encouraged those in outsider status to remain "depoliticized," refraining from participating in large-scale collective action and alliance-building in favor of small-scale negotiations for individualized labor market inclusion plans.

UDC, the politicization of outsider identity and mobilization

Within this context, the political mobilization of the UDC in the years prior to the 2011 revolution was an unexpected format and method for claim-making in pursuit of labor market inclusion. The organization was formed in 2006, growing quickly from a few hundred individuals to thousands with representation offices across the country¹, yet never acquired formal legal status. While many of its members, including its founders, had previously participated in the state-sanctioned student union, endowing them with concrete

1 T.I11, executive director of UDC partner organization, 26 April 2024.

knowledge of union organizing, their ability to translate these experiences into independent labor activism for the unemployed remained limited. The UDC, denied formal organizational status, found itself instead under the umbrella of the *Union générale tunisienne du travail* (UGTT), Tunisia's largest and most important federation of trade unions centered on the public sector. Partially coopted by the regime at the highest echelons of its hierarchical structure (Beinin, 2015), the UGTT nonetheless maintained a degree of autonomy from the state and ability to advocate for its members at the lower rungs and local branches. In this way, the UGTT was both submissive to the regime at the level of its bureaucracy but could also function as a space of dissent and channel for the expression of social, economic, and political demands (Yousfi, 2023). As such, it was able to both act as an ally to social movements and forces of contestation while also providing an official institutional mechanism for the protection of workers and their rights, going so far as to assist in the repression of workers strikes on occasion (Jöst, 2020).

This complex relationship with the regime in the years preceding the revolution, along with the federation's priority to protect labor market insiders, proved an uneasy fit with the UDC who, from the outset, positioned itself in an openly oppositional role to the regime. Indeed, while for some members of the UDC outsider labor market status was simply a result of the political economy and its inability to generate enough jobs, for a specific subset of members – and in particular those in the leadership structure² – exclusion was understood as a deliberate form of political punishment resulting from participation in anti-regime and anti-system protests.³ The result was the politicization of a collective identity proper to the group, in which unemployment as university graduates came to be understood not as an individual problem to be weathered but rather symptomatic of an unjust political system.⁴ As one interviewee explains, the UDC developed a restrained collective identity that failed to gather all unemployed youth, instead uniting members around a specific political consciousness.⁵

This relational positionality vis-à-vis the regime and the UGTT, as well as the diagnostic of unemployment in political terms, had two notable impacts on the mobilization of the UDC in the pre-revolution era. First, the UDC adopted a blatantly political slogan, “work, freedom, and national dignity,” which, as one interviewee explained⁶, bridged the demand for socio-economic rights with political rights and drew a direct connection between the injustice of unemployment with the injustice of the political system. Second, in the absence of formal institutional mechanisms for negotiation, and given inherent tensions in sheltering under a union federation that ultimately worked to represent those on the other side of the labor market divide, the UDC privileged disruptive tactics such as sit-ins and protests that openly sought political contestation. Most notably, the UDC co-mobilized in the movement of the Gafsa mining basin in 2008, where its slogan was widely adopted and where demonstrations

against rural unemployment and poverty in Tunisia's neglected hinterlands transformed into mass, though highly regionalized, anti-government protest. In this way, while the crux of the UDC's mission was to push for labor market inclusion for university graduates, the development of oppositional consciousness and overtly political symbolic content, alongside participation in broader social movements that linked socio-economic rights with political ones, would pave the way for lay the UDC to emerge as a major player in the 2011 revolution.

2011 revolution and macro-level opportunity structures

The Tunisian revolution of 2011 ushered in an unprecedented moment of democratic transition and a radical change in the structure of elites, institutions, and ability of citizens to exercise political rights. Yet, while the revolution's foundations lay in socio-economic grievances and the failures of the regime to meet its end of the social contract, addressing these grievances and establishing a more equitable and distributive economy fell by the wayside as governance challenges and elite political bargains became the forces driving the transitional process. Socio-economic transformation was sidelined in favor of institutional reform, and party politics and the continuation of neoliberal logics overtook popular demands for social justice.

The monthlong popular uprising of the Tunisian revolution was not a singular incident arising out of nowhere but rather the newest iteration in a series of protests by workers and local-level syndicates who had been garnering critical skills in protest organizing in the lead up to 2011 (Zemni, 2013). As with the Gafsa uprising of 2008, the role of unions, and notably the local chapters of the UGTT and UDC, proved fundamental in structuring the fluidity of the 2011 uprising. Over the course of the month, the movement spread across the country as well as across sectors; yet, it was the eventual adhesion of the national leadership of the UGTT, after some prevarication, and the general strike called across the country, that forced the departure of Ben Ali (Zemni, 2013), allowing the organization to emerge as a key player in the democratic transition (Bishara, 2020).

The aftermath was a formal period of fraught and contentious democratic transition, commencing with the formation of an interim government and ending with parliamentary and presidential elections in October and November 2014. The departure of the former president saw the establishment of a temporary authority structure, bringing together an uneasy coalition of former regime insiders with new revolutionary forces and an ideological mixture stretching from leftist-secular forces to the long-repressed Islamist factions, including the Ennahda party. By October 2011, elections had taken place for the National Constituent Assembly, tasked with drafting Tunisia's new constitution, resulting in the establishment of the Troika government from 2011 to 2013 in which three ideologically diverse political parties (Ennahda; the historic oppositional Congrès de la République; and the left-wing, secular Ettakatol) were gathered in a wide governing coalition, nonetheless favoring the dominant Islamist faction. While the constitution-writing process involved constant negotiations between the parties, it was also largely inclusive of civil society, who was provided with official venues for consultative processes and who was able to advocate for claims and have direct access to parliamentarians in order to influence the constitution's content.

Despite this largely inclusive approach, this period saw intense popular protest against the government, seen as ineffective in responding to revolutionary demands and complicit in the

2 T.I14, UDC executive bureau member, 28 April 2024.

3 This group, referred to as the *Mafrouzeen Amniya* (the blacklisted by the Ministry of the Interior), formed a specific social movement. For more, see Han, 2022.

4 T.I16, UDC executive bureau member, 28 April 2024.

5 T.I1, UGET member, 27 March 2024.

6 T.I6, UDC national bureau member, 23 April 2024.

whitewashing of former regime insiders, alongside exponential political polarization (The Carter Center, 2015). The generalized atmosphere of political and social tensions ended in two high-profile political assassinations in 2013 that threatened to derail the democratic transition altogether. Finding the country in a dangerous state of power vacuum, a group of civil society actors under the leadership of the UGTT stepped in to mediate a way out of the impasse. By October 2013, they had proposed a roadmap to guide the remaining period of the democratic transition, which included electoral, constitutional, and governmental components and which was based around a new grand bargain of among the country's political elites (McCarthy, 2019). This bargain, which would guide the remainder of the political transition, amounted to a pacted settlement across elites and a consensus-based approach to decision-making, in which stability in the transition process was primed above all else (Yardımcı-Geyikçi and Tür, 2018). The primary political parties proved willing to make important concessions, critical to the finalization of the constitution and its eventual adoption in December 2013, but also to their own political futures. An interim technocratic government assumed power until the elections of 2014.

Underscoring these tumultuous 3 years, the Tunisian democratic transition was guided by three overarching and interlinked logics that shaped political priorities and behaviors. First, the near collapse of the transition and the ensuing pacted governance model translated into two political priorities that overshadowed revolutionary demands: securing the institutions of democracy; and guaranteeing access to power of political parties over accountability to their constituents. The result was a procedural approach to the democratic transition and the inability or unwillingness of its leaders to make undertake large-scale reforms (Rennick, 2025). The most obvious result was the lack of any progress in responding to socio-economic demands or improving the country's economic situation (which, on the contrary, became progressively worse over the decade following the revolution). Second, and linked to the first logic, the Tunisian democratic transition was inscribed in the continuation of neoliberalism that not only marked the structure of economy but also the rights-based and individualized approach to citizenship. As Han (2022) relates, this neoliberal ethos guiding the transition process acted as a constituting force on collective actors: instead of collectivized claims and a recognition of structural features of marginalization, neoliberalism pushed for an individualization of problems and the framing of their solution as a question of rights exertion. Third, redress for the crimes and injustices of the authoritarian past were to be officially channeled through the formal transitional justice process that Tunisia put into place during the transition period (see Jmal's article in this special issue). Notably, the transitional justice process was to cover a broad range of issues, including politically-motivated exclusion. It is within these macro-level institutional and relational features that we can assess how the UDC mobilized for labor market inclusion during the years of democratic transition.

Post-revolution mobilization: from street protest to individualized negotiation

The 2011 uprising saw the UDC come to the fore as a revolutionary force, providing the group with a high degree of popular legitimacy and an ear with transitional authorities. As one interviewee, a former MP of Ennahda, explains: "They held political weight in the aftermath of the revolution. The UDC played a role in the national dialogue and was

seen as a revolutionary actor, particularly in remote regions."⁷ This recognition translated into new access to authorities and decision-making tables, which was to be leveraged in efforts to achieve labor market inclusion. Likewise, the freeing of the civic space and extension of political rights allowed for the legal incorporation of the UDC and the organizational development of the group. Nonetheless, the UDC still found itself limited in its margins of maneuver. And while ultimately the group was able to secure a certain number of public sector jobs for its members, the individualization of its claims and streamlining through formal negotiation processes ultimately undermined the group's legitimacy with its members, leading to its eventual demise.

At the organizational level, the UDC's post-revolution trajectory revealed a paradoxical situation of organizational independence embedded within hegemonic relational hierarchies. On one hand, the ability to at last formally register provided the UDC leadership with impetus for the refining internal structures and decision-making procedures. The group, which according to interviewees had upwards of 6,000 members in 2011–2012 and hundreds of local committees across Tunisia, formalized a decentralized model that nonetheless established a clear divide in decision-making power with regards to contentious vs. conventional political participation. As one interviewee, a member of the executive bureau, explained:

The regional offices can make decisions and organize their mobilization in isolation from the executive bureau and the administration body. The executive bureau, the administrative body, and other offices reunite to discuss significant issues... [If] there is an invitation to participate in a conference with progressive political parties and CSOs, the administrative body has the final say on whether to participate or not⁸.

In this way, engagement at the formal political level was decided by those in the leadership structure, providing them with important leeway in critical strategic decisions regarding the modes and content of political mobilization. Yet, despite formal organizational independence, the UDC remained partially under the thumb of the UGTT as well as leftist political parties, and notably the Worker's Party, that were politically enfranchised through transitional electoral instances. This translated to mediated access to power, in which the UDC was left out of critical collective consultation and negotiation processes, and in which the priorities of the UGTT and those of the Worker's Party took precedence. This had a doubly detrimental impact: not only was the UDC dependent on the will of others to represent its interests in formal political circles, it also undermined the group's credibility among some members. As one interviewee recounts:

Their concern was to maintain ties with the political party; there was no detachment from the party. As a result, there were many resignations from the UDC, and it was more difficult to mobilize because it was too closely tied to the party... The party's focus was not on strengthening the UDC's organization, nor was there any

7 T.I13, former MP Ennahda, 20 March 2024.

8 T.I14.

*desire for structure. They wanted it to remain under the party, and the party was paternalistic toward the UDC.*⁹

Within this particular configuration of relations with others in the political and public arenas, the UDC adopted a bifurcated strategy comprising mobilization in both contentious and conventional politics. Throughout the period of democratic transition, the group, and in particular at the level of its local chapters, continued to participate in street protests and large-scale sit-ins in protest of both socio-economic structures and the direction of the transition itself. In this way, the UDC maintained its pressure as a revolutionary force, demanding a radical restructuring of the economy and a new redistributive framework and linking these to broader claims of political rights and freedoms. At the same time, the UDC's executive office also sought to participate in structured negotiations with decision-makers in order to secure public sector employment for its members. While ostensibly the two strategies were designed for different purposes, UDC leaders recognized that the ultimate benefit of street protest was less in achieving revolutionary goals than in increasing pressure for concessions.¹⁰ Indeed, over the course of the democratic transition, the UDC executive bureau increasingly moved toward structured negotiations for individual job placements rather than large-scale socio-economic changes. This was in part a response to the prevailing neoliberal economic orientation and the feeling that political authorities were unwilling to consider deeper structural change. It was also, however, a response to increasing levels of repression that the UDC faced when deploying disruptive mobilization tactics. To this point, the last major national mobilization of the UDC took place in 2013; by 2014, members were increasingly turning to hunger strikes for their own employment (Weipert-Fenner, 2020).

By 2014, the UDC's strategy at the executive level had shifted to focus more explicitly on labor market inclusion for members and in particular for the *Mafrouzeen Amniya*, those that had been explicitly backlisted by the former regime for political opposition. In this vein, the UDC presented specific lists to committees to negotiate labor market inclusion on a case-by-case basis, and encouraged members to also pursue the formal path of the transitional justice process on an individual basis.¹¹ In so doing, the UDC was able to secure a limited number of jobs. As one member of the executive bureau relays:

*Some members had been unemployed for as long as 20 years—they were in their 40s and still without work. Seeing justice served for these individuals gave hope to others. The younger UDC members were enthusiastic to be part of this process, as it showed them that the UDC could achieve tangible gains.*¹²

However, this sentiment was not to translate into organizational durability. On one hand, while the UDC local chapters did participate in cross-mobilizations with other unemployed groups and for other social justice related causes, the group's primary *raison d'être* was the achievement of labor market inclusion for its members. As

Weiper-Fenner explores, this ultimately fostered the fragmentation of the UDC and its isolation, a probable deliberate strategy, which deprived the organization of both critical resources and the ability to achieve greater gains (Weipert-Fenner, 2020). On the other hand, the leveraging of political access by the executive bureau for the purpose of negotiating a limited number of employment opportunities ultimately undermined the organization of its legitimacy within its own membership structure. As one interviewee states, the recruitment process of UDC members – generally those in leadership roles – through the structured negotiations (and in parallel transitional justice process) represented a “deadly blow to the UDC.”¹³

Serbian post-communist labor movement: fragmented trade unions and wildcat strikes

The political implications of insider status pre-2000

In Serbia, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, decades of authoritarian communist rule ideologically committed to full employment provided workers with relatively modest wages, but also “an extraordinary degree of job security by Western standards” (Vanhuyse, 2006, p. 13), and a comprehensive package of welfare services and benefits. Access to the welfare state was generally conditional on formal employment in the hegemonic state sector of the economy, (Arandarenko and Pavlović, 2023), and many welfare services and benefits, such as childcare, healthcare, housing, and vacations, were, in part, provided directly through the workplace. By touching on so many aspects of their employees' lives, a socialist enterprise acted as a sort of community hub that helped define the social identity of its workers. Larger companies also took on an active role in the local community by financing sports teams, providing scholarships and a promise of future employment for students, and often by dominating local politics. Workers' identification with their workplace may have been particularly high in socialist Yugoslavia, where workers' self-management was the official state ideology and, at least sometimes, workers' assemblies played a meaningful role in co-managing the enterprises (Music, 2021).

Post-communist reforms, thus, provided an immediate threat to both material and ideational interests of labor market insiders, many of whom were surplus workers in the new market economy. This helps explain the appeal of anti-reformist leaders such as Slobodan Milošević, whose authoritarian and war-mongering rule in Serbia in the 1990s promised minimal market reforms and continued job security for workers of loss-making socialist enterprises. This promise proved difficult to uphold, however, as the Serbian economy plummeted into deep recession due to the breakup of the Yugoslav market, the costs of the war, and comprehensive sanctions imposed by the UN. While Serbia lost about half of its GDP between 1989 and 1995, unemployment stabilized at a relatively modest 12–13% throughout the 1990s (Žilović, 2025), thanks mainly to the administrative ban on dismissals adopted in April 1992. The government instructed companies to furlough excess workers by

9 T.I11.

10 T.I14.

11 This was confirmed in all interviews with UDC activists as well as partner organizations.

12 T.I16.

13 T.I15, UDC executive bureau member, 23 April 2024.

placing them on an “enforced vacation” (*prinudni odmor*) for the duration of international economic sanctions against the country.

Out of about 2,500,000 persons in formal employment, anywhere between 800,000 and 1,000,000 workers remained furloughed for the better part of the 1990s (Uvalic, 2010). Furloughed workers remained formally employed and entitled to half of their salary, although the payments, just like for the non-furloughed workers, were irregular and continuously devalued by a galloping hyperinflation. Furthermore, furloughed workers remained eligible for the benefits still associated with formal employment, as well as for the occasional distribution of in-kind relief through the branches of the state-backed trade union, the Association of Independent Trade Unions of Serbia (SSSS). These perks provided vital components of many workers’ survival strategy amid a wider economic collapse. Importantly, many of the furloughed workers remained emotionally and practically attached to their enterprises, as well as vulnerable to blackmail and clientelist rewards dished out by the ruling party-affiliated managers in Serbia’s unreformed economy.

The enforced vacation status helped the regime cushion the socio-economic fallout of the economic crisis of the 1990s by effectively blurring the boundary between safe employment of labor market insiders and precarity of labor market outsiders. The notionally temporary character of this measure further reinforced the government’s message that the economic crisis was caused by external factors and that everything would go “back to normal” as soon as “unfair” international sanctions were lifted. Throughout the 1990s, the working class, along with pensioners and rural dwellers, remained the bedrock of Milošević’s support, and industrial workers and trade unions were conspicuously absent from the several waves of protests against the regime. And while prolonged economic crisis may have dampened the enthusiasm for the regime among the workers over the course of the 1990s, a combination of protective socio-economic policies, workplace pressures and benefits, and nationalist propaganda aired by the regime-controlled media was sufficient to discourage them from seeking an alternative to the ruling party (Gordy, 1999).

Prescient contemporary trade unionist voices warned that by accepting the regime’s labor policy, the SSSS was also agreeing to become “an organization of non-employed, passive, socially vulnerable population, and not an organization representing the interests of an active working class” (Mesman, 2012, pp. 121–122). But in the context of war and nationalist mobilization, it was difficult for such voices to break through. Failing to take over the SSSS in the internal elections of 1992, a dissident trade unionist faction left to establish a separate association of trade unions, Independence. Operating under difficult conditions - the government denied its request for a share of the legacy union’s valuable properties, and its anti-war stance and effort to prioritize workers’ issues were branded “unpatriotic” by the regime and the SSSS leadership - Independence appealed mainly to a segment of white-collar workers (Mesman, 2012, pp. 146–147). Meanwhile, the victorious conservative faction in the SSSS turned the largest trade union into a reliable ally of Milošević’s regime. The SSSS refrained from confronting the government and worked instead to mobilize social support for the regime. Indolence of the SSSS leadership reinforced the image of the umbrella organization as irredeemably bureaucratized, and opened room for various sectoral, regional, and even shopfloor-level trade unions to pursue their own policies. While most remained formally

attached to the SSSS, they acted in an increasingly autonomous way, dealing with the immediate and particular needs of their members and organizations. Large policy issues, however, remained absent from the agenda of increasingly fragmented and politically demobilized trade unions in Milošević’s Serbia.

It was only in the aftermath of the NATO bombing campaign in 1999 that the working class became more politically active. Not only was the regime embarrassed by having to cede control over Kosovo, but its ability to meet even basic socio-economic needs was further hampered by the economic impact of the NATO campaign. The protests in the fall of 2000 in defense of the electoral victory of Vojislav Koštunica, the presidential candidate of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), were the first to feature large working-class participation. It was also the first time that the repertoire of opposition protests included strikes and walkouts, with the strike of the country’s largest and economically vital Kolubara coal mine playing a pivotal role in the uprising. Workers’ mobilization against Milošević, however, largely bypassed institutionalized trade unions, proceeding instead through wildcat actions, often spearheaded by a few opposition activists among the workers (Rusovac and Jovetić, 2002). The working class of Serbia, thus, entered the post-revolutionary democratic era loosely allied with the parties of the new democratic regime: celebrated for its decisive contribution in the mines of Kolubara, but organizationally fragmented, held politically suspect for its long quiescence to authoritarian rule, and structurally weak in a devastated economy.

A failed attempt to co-determine transition policies after 2000

The ousting of Milošević in October 2000 was followed by the parliamentary election in December 2000, in which the DOS coalition secured a two-thirds majority. The results gave the government a strong mandate, but the internal structure of the 18-member coalition comprising a broad cross-section of Milošević’s opponents complicated matters. Two major poles within the coalition soon coalesced around the liberal Democratic Party (DS) of the newly appointed Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić and President Koštunica’s more conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). The two factions clashed over identity matters related to the responsibility for Serbia’s war policies in the 1990s; on matters of economic reform, however, the two parties were broadly in agreement. Dire economic consequences of Milošević’s attempts to evade market reforms in the 1990s made the belated shift to neoliberal policies appear inevitable. This facilitated the outsourcing of key economic ministries to non-party experts, many of whom were Serbian nationals with prior experience in market reforms elsewhere in post-communist Europe. The broad political backing that they received both internally and from the international financial institutions endowed these technocrats with political authority to shape reformist policies with little input from organized labor.

The large wave of bottom-up mobilization of workers that followed on the heels of the October 2000 revolution largely eschewed broader policy issues and focused on the inherited problems of specific workplaces, such as backlogged wages, unpaid pension contributions, or animus against specific company managers (Novaković, 2017). Dissatisfied workers usually sought to bring their demands directly to the government. Yet, despite this surge of workers’ post-revolutionary activism, the movement failed to successfully

organize around a shared, wider vision. The mobilizing power of the umbrella associations remained limited, undercut by pervasive organizational fragmentation, as well as by the government's strategic exploitation of the movement's internal cleavages.

In the immediate post-revolutionary political context, the leadership of the SSSS was taken over by a charismatic and experienced regional trade unionist, Milenko Smiljanić, who sought cooperation with the rival Independence and strived to shed the negative image of the SSSS. He, however, found it difficult to displace regional and sectoral chapter leaders with political ties to the former regime and virtually impossible to re-centralize the SSSS organization. Union funding, for instance, continued to favor basic chapters, and their regional and sectoral associations over the central organization in an 85:15 proportion.¹⁴ Independence, meanwhile, was caught between its ambition to displace the SSSS by taking principled stances in defense of the working rights and leveraging its stronger relations with the new governing elites. Its European partner unions urged restraint too, arguing that the new government needed breathing space to put necessary reforms in place.¹⁵

The first sign of the inability of the workers to shape a wider policy environment was the government's adoption of the new privatization law that centralized the sales procedure and reduced the percentage of company shares that could be preferentially purchased. Though both union associations opposed the bill, their objections were easily pushed aside by the government riding the crest of post-revolutionary popularity. The next conflict took place in March 2001 when the unions opposed the government's plan to increase payroll taxes and further liberalize prices of basic consumer goods. This time, the two associations tried to strengthen their hand by calling for a symbolic one-hour general strike. Yet, while the SSSS claimed more than 730,000 participated, the list comprised mostly loss-making companies already operating at the bare minimum, with most of the "striking" workers furloughed for many years, highlighting the unions' structural inability to impose economic costs on the government.

The government was more responsive to protests organized by politically or economically influential local or sectoral trade unions, such as in the *Zastava* conglomerate employing approximately 20,000 people in the city of Kragujevac. The majority, however, were furloughed, with only 6,500–7,000 in active employment, and the flagship auto plant operating at a loss (Brkić, 2001). In April 2001, the management announced that the factory was to be closed for a week due to a lack of supplies. A group of angry workers stormed the company gates, occupied the building, and demanded that government ministers visit the factory and provide guarantees of a quick return to work. The government delegation showed up the same night, promising immediate financial injection and the formation of a task force to restructure the conglomerate.

Such combativeness, however, concealed a deeper divergence of interest within the *Zastava* workforce between those on their way out and those in the remaining profitable sections of the enterprise. The restructuring plan presented by the government's team in July 2001 deepened these latent divisions by announcing the conglomerate was

to be divided into 29 independent companies, while 15,000 employees in total were to be made redundant. Though two government ministers and an acting CEO narrowly escaped lynching by a section of workers when the program was announced, the plan was still adopted with a strong majority in the workers' referendum organized 2 weeks later. With management's strong campaign in favor of the plan, the militant faction of threatened workers was outvoted by a coalition of those attracted by generous severance packages and workers in the few sectors that still operated profitably. The vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce at the time described concessions as "extraordinary and hardly applicable to other enterprises."¹⁶

A few days after the workers' occupation of *Zastava* in April, likely unnerved by the militancy of a section of the labor movement, the prime minister invited leaders of the two unions for a meeting. They jointly announced a plan to establish a formal tripartite dialogue between the government and national organizations of labor and capital. However, with the umbrella organizations lacking authority to rein in militant union chapters, the body met rarely and never developed a real bite, not even after it was belatedly given a firmer legal grounding in 2004. The government and the trade unions were at loggerheads by October 2001 when the two associations called for the resignation of the labor minister and a general strike in opposition to the proposed tightening of labor laws.

What made the October conflict particularly flammable was that the announcement of a general strike coincided with an ongoing or rumored strike in large public utilities against the government's decision to freeze salaries. Public utility employees were not only numerous and well organized, but unlike most of the industrial workers, their work stoppages imposed real economic costs. While the government acted quickly through piecemeal concessions to prevent a wider workers' front from coalescing, by the end of the day, Kolubara coal mines, with its 17,000 employees, stopped working. They demanded a 50% salary increase to account for the rising costs of living, cancellation of the wage freeze bylaw, and withdrawal of the labor law proposal from parliamentary procedure. Within days, thousands of miners from the coal mines of Kostolac, Resavica, and Aleksinac joined the strike too. The miners' unionists talked about bringing their protest to the streets of Belgrade on the anniversary of the revolution that brought down Milošević. The government blinked within a week. It negotiated a 15% wage increase and a generous package of bonuses for the miners.

The government's capitulation to coal miners sparked a wave of similar strikes in companies such as the national oil industry, NIS, and in the major copper mine in Bor. The prime minister also held a three-hour-long meeting with the SSSS leader Smiljanić, but he was not willing to compromise on the key parts of the labor law proposal. On October 16, unions brought 10,000–15,000 people in front of the national parliament and the SSSS claimed 150,000 workers joined the strike nationally. However, the gathered crowds in each city were small, encouraging the police to intervene. On the day of the second union protest, October 23, officials of the former regime were seen among the protesters, while sections of the crowd shouted support to

14 S.I2 vice chairman of the SSSS in the early 2000s, 31 January 2024.

15 S.I6 former chairman of the Independence, 19 March 2024.

16 S.I5 vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce in the early 2000s, 5 April 2024.

Slobodan Milošević. This provoked a public acrimony, with the Independence chairman demonstratively leaving in the middle of the protest and the SSSS chairman later publicly renouncing the former officials' support. A day later, the two union associations announced they were freezing the strike, unconvincingly claiming a victory because the government had agreed to consider 50 amendments submitted by the unions.¹⁷ The law was adopted 2 months later without any of the major amendments being accepted. The SSSS leader meekly commented that "now the law is a fact, what is left is to monitor its application and react when needed" (*Glas Javnosti*, 2001).

Discussion

Comparing the cases of post-uprising mobilization of labor market outsiders in Tunisia and those threatened with losing insider status in Serbia demonstrates several points in common that are revealing of how democratic transitions sublimate contestation.

First, both cases show how organized actors in the field of labor contestation were channeled into modes of participation that acquiesced to the technocratic and procedural logic of the transition. In the case of Tunisia, the logics of the transition established the parameters for virtuous vs. deviant political behavior, where street protest and contentious forms of engagement were increasingly repressed in favor of participation in formal venues and through official political actors. This was underscored by an ethos of individualization, where collective actors were pushed to reframe issues of rights and justice through an individualized lens. The UDC bent to this logic at all levels. Having faced arrests and other forms of repression when engaged in street mobilization and disappointed with the lack of progress on broader social justice issues, the UDC instead found a certain degree of success when willing to subscribe to the procedures of the transition. Through its points of access to decision-makers as a representative organization of unemployed graduates, the group was able to lock in gains, albeit limited, by either submitting lists with specific names to government committees or encouraging individual members to utilize the transitional justice process for their claim-making process. In Serbia, with the necessary legislation in place, the privatization process started in earnest in Serbia in January 2002. It led to officially registered unemployment nearly doubling within 3 years (*Žilović, 2025*) as restructuring, takeovers, and liquidations led to job losses. Public opinion surveys repeatedly showed unemployment as the public concern number one. Yet, after October 2001, labor peak organizations were increasingly restrained in their actions, tangled in toothless and ritualized tripartite social dialogue with government and employers. Relations between the SSSS and Independence also deteriorated, as

Independence rekindled the old dispute about legacy union properties, and the SSSS countered that Independence should be excluded from the tripartite dialogue because membership attrition meant it no longer met the legal threshold of representativeness. Successive governments never tackled either of the two issues, content to use the threat of property redistribution and membership recount as leverage against the two associations.¹⁸

Second, in both cases, contestation against the democratic transition's political economy and its impact on labor market outsiders/future outsiders was able to be assuaged not through systemic change but rather through a strategy limited concessions that encouraged fragmentation. In Tunisia, the granting of insider status to a limited number of UDC members was in part able to occur thanks to the existing fragmentation of the group both within its organizational structure but also within the broader arena of labor contestation itself. The UDC's simultaneous decentralized decision-making process with regards to local mobilization and highly centralized decision-making with regards to national strategy and – importantly – relationship to transitional authorities created an inherent degree of tactical and strategic fragmentation. While those in the local branches – isolated from other labor contestation movements – deployed increasingly desperate tactics such as hunger strikes to call attention to their plight, those in the executive bureau were able to parlay their notoriety and positionality into formal negotiations while nonetheless lacking full operational autonomy. In this context, the granting of concessions to a limited number of UDC members, alongside parallel processes of granting labor market insider status to other outsiders mobilizing along different venues, had the impact of further contributing to the ultimate neutralization of the group. By providing insider status to the most senior members of the organization, the leadership and organizational memory and know-how was undercut; meanwhile, the granting of concessions to some in the absence of structural change for all had the impact of undermining the credibility of the UDC altogether, and figured into a larger strategy designed to reward fragmentation of challengers (*Han, 2022; Weipert-Fenner, 2020*). In Serbia, the sight of small groups of workers from various companies from around the country blocking traffic in downtown Belgrade or camping in front of government building remained a common sight throughout the 2000s. Their highly particular concerns, however, remained addressed haphazardly, if at all. With the peak organizations reined in, large industrial trade union chapters downsized and broken up, and still powerful public utility unions pampered with privileges, the wider workers' mobilization never materialized. The government's strategy of limited concessions, designed to exploit internal divergence of interest and organizational fragmentation of the labor movement, paid off. Although fiscally expensive at times, the strategy was successful in pacifying the labor and forcing it to work within the logic of electoral democracy and liberal economic reforms.

Third, comparing the Tunisian and Serbian cases demonstrates how labor market segmentation and the pursuit of insider status was constitutive of the democratic transition itself. The bending to the procedural processes of the transition in pursuit of insider status lent strength to the process and its main players (the parties in Tunisia,

¹⁷ Interview with a source working in the government at the time, reveals that the technocrats in charge of economy-related portfolios privately understood such meetings largely as an opportunity to teach the unionists basics of economics. (S.I.8, a high-ranking staffer in the PM's Office, 22 April 2024). The attitude seems to have been reciprocal, with the unionist recalling in our interviews how they relished explaining to the ministers "how things really work."

¹⁸ S.I.7 labor law expert, 18 March 2024.

the new government in Serbia) and also reduced street-level contestation and the ability to mount large-scale challenges. It also reveals, though, that the transitional authorities were able to buy the peace not through meeting structural demands but through ad-hoc offers of inclusion, much like the regimes *before* the mass uprisings. This ultimately shows continuity in exploiting labor market challenges and claims for insider status for stabilizing a political regime, which is all the more striking given that the previous regimes of Tunisia and Serbia did not have the same political economies in place. This ultimately reveals that the political mobilization of outsiders in the democratic transition had a positive impact on the transition process, not because it increased the legitimacy of the transition or its institutions but rather because it provided a mechanism for responding to contestation and grievances in a way that contributed to the procedural logic of the transition itself without fundamentally calling into question the political economy or challenging labor market dualization.

Conclusion

This paper makes two distinct contributions and draws a broader implication about the relationship between contentious politics, labor market dualization, and democratization. At the empirical level, we reveal how the political priorities of the democratic transition in Serbia and Tunisia shaped the claim-making of worker groups; how their structural and relational positioning in the transitional context informed their modes of representation and margins of maneuver; and how the broader logics of the processes of transition informed strategic choices. At the theoretical level, the paper adds to the literature on the political relevance of insider-outsider labor market divides by revealing how contexts of democratic transition not only reshape patterns of political participation by potential challengers but indeed create mutual incentives for the easy absorption of outsiders/future outsiders in a manner to reinforce the broader logics of the democratization process. In so doing, the paper puts forth a theoretical argument that labor market dualization can contribute to the stabilization of democratic transitions by creating mechanisms for challenger neutralization and incentivizing support to transitional authorities and processes.

An implication stemming from these contributions is that while in both cases political mobilization was able to be channeled in a manner that strengthened the procedural dimensions of democracy, the neutralization of socio-economic demands via limited concession-making may have had a negative impact on the substantive faith in democracy. In the long run, such strategies in both Tunisia and Serbia likely contributed to alienating large segments of the working class and unemployed/under-employed while eliminating the ability of unions to act as vehicles for long-term integration of these groups into democratic regimes. The longer-term impact of these strategies was visible in both cases. In Serbia, starting from late 2002, a hardline nationalist Serbian Radical Party experienced a surprising resurgence largely on the back of the working class support, which it courted with a mixture of anti-western grandstanding and economically populist promises. Likewise, in Tunisia, the populist and anti-establishment rhetoric of Kais Saied registered strong appeal with the long-term

unemployed, and in particular youth, whose disillusionment with the failure of the democratic transition and its elites to address the structural dimensions of socio-economic exclusion helped propel the future autocrat to the presidency. The democratic backsliding in both countries is often seen as rooted in deep ideological polarizations of their societies (between nationalists and liberals in Serbia and between Islamists and secularists in Tunisia). Without disputing importance of these ideological macro-level conflicts, our article draws attention to some of the underappreciated economic causes of democracy's promise and failure in Tunisia and Serbia. In echoing Piven and Cloward (1978) and Fraser (2009, 2023), these cases highlight a paradox of labor market outsiders/future outsiders and their relationship to democratic transition: while their mobilization can be partially channeled into pathways that reinforce procedural dimensions of democratization, democracy also promotes stability and order in a manner that prevents the type of deep structural change that could meaningfully address their outsider status.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by The studies involving humans were approved by Prof. Dr. Anja Osei, FU Berlin Prof. Dr. Anke Höffler, University of Konstanz Prof. Svend-Erik Skanning, Aarhus University Members of the external steering committee of the Embrace project (Horizon id: 101060809; topic - HORIZON-CL2-2021-DEMOCRACY-01- 04). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

SR: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. MŽ: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Investigation.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. The paper is part of the Horizon research project “Embracing Change: Overcoming obstacles and advancing democracy in European Neighbourhood” (EMBRACE) founded by the EU (Grant agreement: 101060809).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial

intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

- Allinson, J. (2019). A fifth generation of revolution theory? *J. Hist. Sociol.* 32, 142–151. doi: 10.1111/johs.12220
- Arandarenko, M., and Pavlović, D. (2023). Egalitarianism and redistributive reform in Serbia after 2000. *Econ. Ann.* 68, 7–36. doi: 10.2298/EKA2337007P
- Assaad, R. (2014). Making sense of Arab labor markets: the enduring legacy of dualism. *IZA J. Labor Dev.* 3:6. doi: 10.1186/2193-9020-3-6
- Astapova, A., Navumau, V., Nizhnikau, R., and Polishchuk, L. (2022). Authoritarian cooptation of civil society: the case of Belarus. *Europe-Asia Stud.* 74, 1–30. doi: 10.1080/09668136.2021.2009773
- Badimon, M. E. (2013). Does unemployment spark collective contentious action? Evidence from a Moroccan social movement. *J. Contemp. Afr. Stud.* 31, 194–212. doi: 10.1080/02589001.2013.781319
- Beinin, J. (2015). *Workers and thieves: Labor movements and popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Bishara, D. (2020). Legacy trade unions as brokers of democratization? Lessons from Tunisia. *Comp. Polit.* 52, 173–195. doi: 10.5129/001041520X15657305839654
- Bishara, D. (2021). Precarious collective action. *Comp. Polit.* 53, 453–476. doi: 10.5129/001041521X15960715659660
- Branco, R., Miró, J., and Natili, M. (2024). Back from the cold? Progressive politics and social policy paradigms in southern Europe after the great recession. *Polit. Soc.* 52, 630–661. doi: 10.1177/00323292241226806
- Brkić, Miša. 2001. "Zastava: U raljama radničke klase." *Vreme*, April 26. Available online at: <https://vreme.com/vreme/zastava-u-raljama-radnicke-klase/>
- Bürgisser, R., and Kurer, T. (2021). Insider-outsider representation and social democratic labor market policy. *Socio-Econ. Rev.* 19, 1065–1094. doi: 10.1093/ser/mwz040
- Caraway, T. L., Cook, M. L., and Crowley, S. (2015). *Working through the past: Labor and authoritarian legacies in comparative perspective*. Ithaca and London: ILR Press.
- Chomiak, L. (2011). The making of a revolution in Tunisia. *Middle East Law and Governance* 3, 68–83. doi: 10.1163/187633711X591431
- Cosma, D. C., and Mișcoiu, S. (2024). Leadership. Decision-making. Legitimacy. How deliberative are the labor unions in Romania? *Stud. Univ. Babeș-Bolyai Stud. Eur.* 69, 23–52. doi: 10.24193/subbeuropa.2024.1.02
- Crăciun, C., and Rammelt, H. P. (2025). *Power and protest in central and Eastern Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dean, A. (2022). *Opening up by cracking down: Labor repression and trade liberalization in democratic developing countries*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Della Porta, D. (2014). "11 comparative analysis: case-oriented versus variable-oriented research." *Approaches and methodologies in the social sciences* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), 198.
- Della Porta, D. (2014). *Mobilizing for democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Della Porta, D. (2016). *Where did the revolution go?: Contentious politics and the quality of democracy*. Cambridge studies in contentious politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Della Porta, D., Silvasti, T., Hänninen, S., and Siisiäinen, M. (2016). *The new social division: Making and unmaking precariousness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Denzin, N. K. (2017). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Desai, R. M., Anders, O., and Yousef, T. (2009). The logic of authoritarian bargains. *Econ. Polit.* 21, 93–125. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0343.2008.00337.x
- Duman, A. (2025). Informal workers as outsiders: political participation and voice across MENA countries. *Polit. Stud.* 00323217251315520. doi: 10.1177/00323217251315520
- Emmenegger, P., Marx, P., and Schraff, D. (2015). Labour market disadvantage, political orientations and voting: how adverse labour market experiences translate into electoral behaviour. *Soc. Econ. Rev.* 13, 189–213. doi: 10.1093/ser/mwv003
- Eom, J. H., and Kwon, H. Y. (2024). Job insecurity, economic resources, and democratic backsliding: evidence from South Korea. *Democratization* 31, 1140–1159. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2023.2287086
- Fisher, S. (2006). *Political change in post-communist Slovakia and Croatia: From nationalist to Europeanist*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fraser, N. (2009). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world*, vol. 31. New York: Columbia university press.
- Fraser, N. (2023). *Cannibal capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet and what we can do about it*. London and New York: Verso books.
- Gelepathis, M., and Jeannet, A.-M. (2018). The political consequences of outsider labour market status in the United States: a micro-level study. *Soc. Policy Adm.* 52, 1019–1042. doi: 10.1111/spol.12277
- Ghodsee, K., and Orenstein, M. (2021). *Taking stock of shock: Social consequences of the 1989 revolutions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Giugni, M. (2008). Welfare states, political opportunities, and the mobilization of the unemployed: a cross-national analysis. *Mobilization* 13, 297–310. doi: 10.17813/maiq.13.3.px4848183v2t073w
- Giugni, M., McAdam, D., and Tilly, C. (1999). *How social movements matter*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Glas Javnosti (2001). *Usvojen Zakon o Radu*. Belgrade: Glas Javnosti.
- Gordy, E. D. (1999). *The culture of power in Serbia: Nationalism and the destruction of alternatives*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Greskovits, B. (1998). *The political economy of protest and patience: East European and Latin American transformations compared*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press.
- Han, S. (2022). Transitional justice for whom? Contention over human rights and justice in Tunisia. *Soc. Mov. Stud.* 21, 816–832. doi: 10.1080/14742837.2021.1967129
- Han, S. (2024). Performing (against) the state. *Mediterr. Polit.* 30, 799–822. doi: 10.1080/13629395.2024.2380969
- Häusermann, S. (2020). Dualization and electoral realignment. *Polit. Sci. Res. Methods* 8, 380–385. doi: 10.1017/psrm.2018.48
- Häusermann, S., Kemmerling, A., and Rueda, D. (2020). How labor market inequality transforms mass politics. *Polit. Sci. Res. Methods* 8, 344–355. doi: 10.1017/psrm.2018.64
- Hertog, Steffen. (2016). "Late Populism: State Distributional Regimes and Economic Conflict after the Arab Uprisings." Project on Middle East Political Science, June 2. Available online at: <https://pomeps.org/late-populism-state-distributional-regimes-and-economic-conflict-after-the-arab-uprisings> (Accessed July 17, 2025).
- Hertog, S. (2022). Segmented market economies in the Arab world: the political economy of insider-outsider divisions. *Soc. Econ. Rev.* 20, 1211–1247. doi: 10.1007/s12116-024-09455-x
- Hertog, S. (2025). When rentier patronage breaks down: the politics of citizen outsiders on gulf oil states' labour markets. *Stud. Comp. Int. Dev.* 1–32. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0343.2008.00337.x
- Hibou, B. (2006). *La Force de l'obéissance: Économie Politique de La Répression En Tunisie*. Paris: La Découverte.

- Hibou, B., Meddeb, H., and Hamdi, M. (2011). Tunisia after 14 January and its social and political economy: The issues at stake in a reconfiguration of European policy. Copenhagen: Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network Copenhagen.
- Jöst, P. (2020). Mobilization without organization: grievances and group solidarity of the unemployed in Tunisia. *Mobilization* 25, 265–283. doi: 10.17813/1086-671X-25-2-265
- Kaboub, F. (2013). The making of the Tunisian revolution. *Middle East Dev. J.* 5:1350003–1. doi: 10.1142/S179381201350003X
- Kerrissey, J., and Schofer, E. (2018). Labor unions and political participation in comparative perspective. *Soc. Forces* 97, 427–464. doi: 10.1093/sf/soy044
- Lindvall, J., and Rueda, D. (2012). “Insider-outsider politics: party strategies and political behavior in Sweden” in *The Age of Dualization: The changing face of inequality in deindustrializing societies*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 277–303.
- Lorentzen, P. L. (2013). Regularizing rioting: permitting public protest in an authoritarian regime. *Q. J. Polit. Sci.* 8, 127–158. doi: 10.1561/100.00012051
- Luebbert, G. M. (1991). Liberalism, fascism, or social democracy: Social classes and the political origins of regimes in interwar Europe. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mattoni, A. (2015). “The many frames of the precarious condition. Some insights from Italian mobilizations against Precarity” in *The new social division: Making and unmaking precariousness*, eds. D. della Porta, S. Hänninen, M. Siisiäinen and T. Silvasti (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK).
- McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., and Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge studies in contentious politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCarthy, R. (2019). The politics of consensus: Al-Nahda and the stability of the Tunisian transition. *Middle East. Stud.* 55, 261–275. doi: 10.1080/00263206.2018.1538969
- Mesman, Tibor (2012) “Strategic Choices during System Change: Peak Level Unions and Their Struggles for Political Relevance In Post-Socialist Slovenia, Serbia and Poland.” Central European University. Available online at: http://politicalscience.ceu.edu/sites/politicalscience.ceu.hu/files/basic_page/field_attachment/pphmet01.pdf (Accessed August 15, 2025).
- Mișcoiu, S. (2021). *Democratic consolidation and Europeanization in Romania: A one-way journey or a return ticket?* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Music, G. (2021). *Making and breaking the Yugoslav working class: The story of two self-managed factories*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press.
- Novaković, N. G. (2017). *Radnički Štrajkovi i Tranzicija u Srbiji Od 1990. Do 2015. Godine*. Belgrade: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung-SEE & Institut Društvenih Nauka.
- Pilati, K., and Perra, S. (2022). The insider–outsider divide and contentious politics: the tripartite field of the Italian labour movement. *West Eur. Polit.* 45, 1283–1309. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2022.2030593
- Piven, F. F., and Cloward, R. (1978). *Poor people’s movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. New York: Vintage.
- Ragin, C. C. (2000). *Fuzzy-Set Social Science*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Rennick, S. A. (2025). Losing support to democracy: political socialization, popular conceptualizations, and the formation of political grievances among marginalized youth in Tunisia. *Mediterr. Polit.* 30, 338–362. doi: 10.1080/13629395.2023.2297119
- Rovny, A. E., and Rovny, J. (2017). Outsiders at the ballot box: operationalizations and political consequences of the insider–outsider dualism. *Soc. Econ. Rev.* 15, 161–185. doi: 10.1093/ser/mww039
- Rusovac, Olivija, and Jovetić, Lidija. (2002). “Da Li Su Radnici Subjekt Društvenih Promena.” *Republika: Glasilo Građanskog Samooslobođanja*, November 16. Available online at: http://www.yurope.com/zines/republika/arhiva/2002/297/297_15.html (Accessed August 18, 2025).
- Schlumberger, O. (2008). Structural reform, economic order, and development: patrimonial capitalism. *Rev. Int. Polit. Econ.* 15, 622–649. doi: 10.1080/09692290802260670
- Schwander, H. (2019). Labor market dualization and insider–outsider divides: why this new conflict matters. *Polit. Stud. Rev.* 17, 14–29. doi: 10.1177/1478929918790872
- Schwander, H. (2020). Labor market insecurity among the middle class: a cross-pressured group. *Polit. Sci. Res. Methods* 8, 369–374. doi: 10.1017/psrm.2019.11
- Siisiäinen, M., Luhtakallio, E., and Kankainen, T. (2015). “The transformation of jobless movement and the segregation of the unemployed in Finland since the 1990s” in *The new social division: Making and unmaking precariousness*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.).
- Somers, Margaret R. 1994. “The narrative constitution of identity: a relational and network approach.” *Theory Soc.* 23: 605–649. JSTOR.
- Stephens, J. D., Rueschemeyer, D., and Huber Stephens, E. (1992). *Capitalist development and democracy*. New edition Edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- The Carter Center. 2015. *The Constitution-Making Process in Tunisia: Final Report, 2011–2014*.
- Ther, P. (2018). *Europe since 1989: A history*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Tilly, Charles, and Tarrow, Sidney. 2015. *Contentious politics*. Second Edition. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tsourapas, G. (2013). The other side of a neoliberal miracle: economic reform and political de-liberalization in ben Ali’s Tunisia. *Mediterr. Polit.* 18, 23–41. doi: 10.1080/13629395.2012.761475
- Uvalic, M. (2010). *Serbia’s transition: Towards a better future*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vanhuysse, P. (2006). *Divide and pacify: Strategic social policies and political protests in post-communist democracies*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press.
- Varga, M., and Freyberg-Inan, A. (2015). Post-communist state measures to thwart organized labor: the case of Romania. *Econ. Ind. Democr.* 36, 677–699. doi: 10.1177/0143831X14548770
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., and Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Vladislavljević, N. (2016). Competitive authoritarianism and popular protest: evidence from Serbia under Milošević. *Int. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 37, 36–50. doi: 10.1177/0192512114535450
- Weipert-Fenner, I. (2020). Unemployed mobilisation in times of democratisation: the Union of Unemployed Graduates in post-ben Ali Tunisia. *J. North Afr. Stud.* 25, 53–75. doi: 10.1080/13629387.2018.1535317
- Yardımcı-Geyikçi, Ş., and Tür, Ö. (2018). Rethinking the Tunisian miracle: a party politics view. *Democratization* 25, 787–803. doi: 10.1080/13510347.2017.1422120
- Yousfi, H. (2023). Organization and organizing in revolutionary times: the case of Tunisian general labor union. *Organization* 30, 624–648. doi: 10.1177/13505084211020186
- Zemni, S. (2013). “From socio-economic protest to National Revolt: the labor origins of the Tunisian revolution” in *The making of the Tunisian revolution: Contexts, architects, prospects*, ed. N. Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Žilović, M. (2025). Postkomunistička tranzicija Srbije u uporednom i istorijskom kontekstu. *Polit. Persp. Čas. Istraž. Polit.* 15, 7–38. doi: 10.20901/pp.15.1.01
- Zunes, S. (2022). People-powered and non-violent social movements: forcing gradualist democratic reforms in authoritarian societies. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 3:721055. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2021.721055