



**INTERNATIONAL
UNIVERSITY SEMINAR
FOR BALKAN STUDIES
AND SPECIALIZATIONS**



36th International Scientific Conference

Aristocracy and Meritocracy – The Balkans and the Black Sea Region

CALL FOR PAPERS

The International University Seminar for Balkan Studies and Specializations at the South-West University Neofit Rilski (Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria) is pleased to invite you to participate in the annual International Scientific Conference on the topic:

Aristocracy and Meritocracy – The Balkans and the Black Sea Region

05—06 November 2026

South-West University Neofit Rilski, Blagoevgrad

The aristocracy, which has not lost its power and influence, which has left a serious mark on the history of Europe since the *Belle époque*, but which has long fallen out of the focus of science and politics, after being forced to step down from the historical stage after the First World War, has begun to strongly attract scientific interest since the early 1980s. It owes it to the book by the American historian Arno Mayer – *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War*, which launched the thesis of an agrarian society, little influenced by the industrial revolution and political modernization, which produced the stability of monarchical rule and the weak resistance of the emerging middle class, creating conditions for the old upper aristocracy to survive the revolutions. His rather controversial conclusions and generalizing characteristics of the aristocratic class (by birth and merit), which dominated the development of Europe in the 19th century, provoked a continued interest in more nuanced research on the historical weight of the aristocracy in individual countries, respectively in the processes of socio-political and cultural-economic modernization: urbanization, social policies, reforms, including electoral and educational, strengthening of parliamentary regimes, which stabilized the third estate (producing the new bourgeois meritocracy), economic transformation (reconciling the interests of the landowners with those of the emerging industrial elite).

In turn, paradigm shifts in the social sciences and humanities, often derived from the political upheavals of the final years of the last century, when war and peace dominated public debates, naturally turned their gaze to the history of ideas and revived interest in conceptual history, while directing the research focus to the multinational experience of aristocratic empires, such as Austria-Hungary, for example. By drawing attention to the overlap between imperial structures and the subsequent national fragmentation of territories and communities after the collapse of the centuries-old empires (1917–1923), advanced paradigms put the emphasis on how to make sense not only of the traumatic impact of the imperial past on the present, but also to examine the

imprint that the aristocracy in Western Europe leaves on history thanks to state policies that stimulated polyethnicity as a factor of social well-being.

In the context of achievements in the social sciences and humanities in the study of a not only negative historical past of the aristocracy, inspiring intellectual commitments to deepen the understanding and comprehension of the processes and phenomena of the 19th century, which changed the world, and whose legacy remains difficult to assimilate even today, the current round table seeks to fill gaps in studies of the Balkans, turning its attention to the importance of classes that have long shaped its history: the aristocrats and the meritocrats. Given that the Balkans and the Black Sea region have historically functioned as a crossroads of empires, cultures and political models, where the concepts of hereditary power (aristocracy) and belonging to the elite based on personal merit and abilities (meritocracy) constantly intertwine, predetermine and interact, the organizers of this conference have the ambition to encourage, among others, discussions in search of answers to the question: To what extent do contemporary societies in the region succeed in building working meritocratic systems or rather reproduce new forms of closed, privileged elites?

Main emphases:

- **Historical perspective:**

The role of the Byzantine, Ottoman and local aristocracies; the transition from clan to bureaucratic and military meritocracy in the great empires.

- **Modernization and new elites:**

The formation of national intelligentsia and bourgeois meritocratic elites in the 19th and 20th centuries as an alternative to traditional noble castes.

- **Special Focus:**

The influence of the Dual Monarchy and its aristocratic elite on the emancipation of the Balkan elites and the modernization of the Balkan states and societies – diplomacy, economy, culture, and agriculture.

- **Aristocracy and meritocracy after the First World War: rupture/continuity?**

- **The Socialist Experiment and the “Nomenklatura”:**

- The Fate of the Old Elites and the Creation of the “New Class” (Milovan Djilas) in the “People’s Democracies” after the Second World War
- The Ideological Paradox between the Proclaimed Meritocracy and the Birth of a New Party Aristocracy.

- **Contemporary Dimensions:**

- Reproduction and Transformation of Elites in Post-Socialist Societies
- Meritocracy and Social Mobility
- The Challenges of Meritocracy in Today’s Balkan and Black Sea Societies; the Influence of Oligarchic Structures and Nepotism.

- **Geopolitics and Leadership:**

- How Contemporary Political and Economic Elites in the Region React to Global Crises and Security in the Black Sea Zone
- Cultural Representations of Elites
- Ethnographies of Contemporary Elites – Lifestyle, Culture, Legitimizing Discourses

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- Liberal Transformations and Conservative Resistances: Technocracy and the Decline of Traditional Elites (Meritocrats and Aristocrats)?

We welcome the scholarly contributions from a broad range of disciplines, including history, microhistory, conceptual history, anthropology, ethnology, literary studies, theology, sociology, philosophy and the arts.

We encourage the applications by scholars who research the past and present from different interdisciplinary perspectives within the humanities and social sciences.

- **Working languages:** Bulgarian and English.
- **Time for presentation of a paper:** 15 minutes.

Deadline for submitting an application for participation (title and abstract, respectively in Bulgarian and English for Bulgarian participants, and in English for foreigners):

July 31, 2026.

E-mail: bforum@swu.bg

Note: Papers in Bulgarian must be accompanied by presentations in English.