

Introduction by the Guest Editor:

Still Relevant? The Importance of National Interest in the Theory and Practice of Foreign Policy

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The current issue of *International Problems* revisits the concept of national interest and its implementation problems. The idea for the topic of this issue arose from the project “National Interests of the Republic of Serbia: from Contestation to Legitimation – NATIONAL(s)”,² funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (program IDEAS) and implemented by researchers from the University of Belgrade—Faculty of Political Sciences (FPS). It was made possible by the joint recognition of the FPS project team and the Institute of International Politics and Economics that such a topic is relevant and very much needed in current geopolitical circumstances.

Although a contested and somewhat neglected concept in contemporary academic debates, national interest remains an important idea and a measure for the evaluation of states’ foreign policy actions. Global powers and small states both strive to properly define and implement their national interests and use various strategies in that regard. This issue covers both types of states, with three papers dealing with American national interests and four with Serbia’s attempts at defining, implementing, and legitimising national interests. While the United States operates within the framework of foreign policy strategies, as Stevan Nedeljković aptly presents in his paper dealing with the “offshore balancing”, the role of short-term events (such as elections) and personalities (e.g., ambassadors or presidents) in defining national interests must not be neglected. These factors are tackled in two papers. One is by Dragan R. Simić, who analysed the contemporary political polarisation in the US and its impact on the presidential candidates’ positions on national interests. The other is by Saša Mišić and Dragan Živojinović, who delve into history to discuss the role of George Frost Kennan in shaping American national interests and relations with the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

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On the other hand, the Republic of Serbia, as a small state, also invests in defining and pursuing its national interests. This task might be more challenging for small states than great powers, as they tend to have fewer national resources and less leverage in the international arena. Thus, the historical and geopolitical context in which they operate is harder to influence and must be taken into consideration more carefully. Nevertheless, small states (however defined) are not powerless, and their actions matter in contemporary international relations marked by increasing interdependence, the importance of international organisations and international law, and democratisation. Foreign policy choices and actions influence others as well as a country's relations with the broader world and its immediate surroundings, as Dragan Đukanović and Marko Dašić point out in their paper on the positioning of Serbia in the Central European context.

In this issue, the authors tackled the various ways of implementing national interests, like Miloš Hrnjaz and Aleksandar Milošević do in analysing the implications of participation of Serbia in (sub)regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Open Balkans. The term "national interests" is often taken to legitimise statesmen's actions, but sometimes, the defined national interests also need legitimisation in the wider international arena. Legitimising national interests is especially important for Serbia, which is not only a small but a stigmatised country, primarily due to the experience of the 1990s break-up of Yugoslavia. The destigmatisation process is indispensable for successfully attaining national interests and is rightly pursued through the regional and sub-regional integration processes. However, that is not the only way, and by dissecting the case of the International Commission for Missing Persons, Vesna Knežević-Predić and Janja Simentić Popović explore how this can be accomplished through participation in international organisations and using international law.

Finally, the irrevocable relationship between foreign policy conduct and national interests is brought to us by the paper of Milan Krstić and Nikola Jović. They have developed the national interest implementation matrix for measuring Serbia's foreign policy achievements, which can be replicated and used to evaluate other countries' foreign policies.

The papers presented in this issue show that the concept of national interest remains relevant for studying the foreign policy conduct of states, both small and big, despite the theoretical differences in its understanding and definitions. Regardless of their non-unified approach to studying national interests, the authors shed new light on how national interests are defined, legitimised, and pursued and whether and how they can be used to evaluate foreign policy performance.