

National interest implementation Matrix: Evaluating and measuring Serbia's achievements

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Abstract: This paper develops a matrix for measuring the realisation/degree of successful implementation of the national interest of the Republic of Serbia. The theoretical foundation of this matrix is “thin” constructivism in international relations, which is based on ontological inter-subjectivism and epistemological positivism. The methodology relies on two main pillars: the first defines Serbian national interests and their hierarchy, while the second measures the extent of their implementation/realisation. These pillars utilise a mix of various data collection and analysis methods, including desk research, descriptive statistics, content analysis, public opinion polls, and expert surveys. This paper’s primary theoretical aim is to enhance national interest in international relations by providing a tool to measure its implementation. The main empirical and policy goal is to assess the current state of Serbia’s national interest implementation. The analysis reveals that the implementation rate of Serbia’s national interest is just over 40% (an index score of 2.61 on a 1-5 scale). The paper also pinpoints specific areas that require policy improvements to enhance this score in the future.

Keywords: national interest, implementation matrix, Republic of Serbia, measuring, thin constructivism, inter-subjectivity, foreign policy strategy.

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Introduction

National interest is one of the most contested concepts in political science. Approaches to the ontology of national interest in international relations (IR) vary from completely objectivistic to entirely subjectivistic (Frankel 1970, 16). This concept is also an essential tool of political action, used by decision-makers and other stakeholders to mobilise support for the pursuance of a concrete policy and/or legitimise its implementation (Rosenau 1968). Even though world politics witnesses the rise of the influence of non-state actors, nation-states are still the most important units in the international system. Therefore, the concept of national interest is still very relevant to describe and prescribe (foreign) policy (Nye, 1999).

This paper focuses on the policy-prescription dimension of this concept. To make a concrete policy useful, rational, and adjustable to changing circumstances and hold policymakers accountable for their decisions, it is important to develop instruments for measuring the fulfilment of the national interest. However, matrices developed for this purpose are still very rare. This paper develops the National Interest Implementation Matrix, designed to measure the success of implementation in the case of the Republic of Serbia. By providing an answer to how to measure the implementation of Serbia's national interest, the paper contributes to the empirical literature on its foreign policy.

To address this research question, we first assess what Serbia's national interests are. They are formally proclaimed by the National Security Strategy (MoD 2019, 31-34). However, this strategy does not offer a clear hierarchy between different interests. The ranking of different (even conflicting) national interests seems blurry even in politicians' everyday speeches and acts. Different societal groups have different positions about which national interests should be prioritised (Viskovic 2018). Through a thorough analysis of how decision-makers articulate this topic and how the public and experts understand it, the paper explores the hierarchization of Serbian national interests and measures their implementation.

The theoretical approach is based on constructivism. International society is approached as ontologically inter-subjective and socially constructed through internal interpretations. Therefore, we follow a dynamic in the decision-makers-public opinion-experts triangle. However, like Wendt (1999), we adopt a positivistic epistemological approach, claiming that implementing national interests could be measured with appropriate methods. Desk research of primary and secondary sources, a public opinion poll, and an expert survey are used as the main data collection methods, with content analysis, descriptive statistics, qualitative and quantitative expert assessment, scaling, and indexing being the main data-analysis methods.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Considering that the primary goal of this paper is to evaluate the degree to which Serbia's national interests are implemented, we focus on two critical issues: (1) conceptualisation and (2) measurement (Mnuck et al. 2020, 331). The main conceptual division regarding national interest in IR theory is between "objectivists", claiming that it exists independently of the views of individuals or groups, and "subjectivists", assuming that it varies depending on perceptions (Jović and Krstić 2024; Miletić 1978). The more precise classification outlines two triptychs: deductive/systemic/enduring and inductive/synthetic/temporary (Giusti 2022, 53).

Adcock and Collier (2001, 532-533) highlight that the stance on one concept depends on understanding other connected concepts or on the theoretical approach. The first triptych mostly corresponds to the realist school, perceiving national security and survival in the anarchic international system as the enduring core of national interest (Burchill 2005, 45; Trifunović and Ćurčić 2021, 82). The neoliberal paradigm also focuses on the systemic origin of interest and its objective essence, but claims that states focus on a broader range of interests besides survival, such as welfare or independence (George and Keohane, 1980). The second triptych consists of critically orientated approaches, most notably behavioralists (Giusti 2022, 25), classic liberal pluralists, or Marxists (Krasner 1978, 20-30), focusing on the particular interests of individuals, groups, or classes that stand behind proclaimed "national" interests.

This paper adopts a relatively middle-ground approach between two triptychs based on IR constructivism. Although Burchill (2005, 205) locates constructivism in the subjectivist camp of the literature, this approach is distinctive in its ontological inter-subjectivism. The inter-subjectivity approach perceives national interest as discursively and practically shaped by shared understandings of this concept within a group, influenced by various internal and external social elements (Weldes 1996). Constructivism treats national interest as temporary/changeable, but it also acknowledges that its content could endure for a long period due to the relative stability of social structures. Wendt (1999, 235-237) even adds a systemic element to his constructivist analysis, claiming that states usually have similar interests: survival, welfare, independence, and collective self-esteem.

The question of measuring is essentially connected with the epistemological approach. While positivists assume it is possible to gather knowledge about reality using adequate methods relatively accurately, interpretivists focus on "discourse, context, or traditions" (Furlong and Marsh 2010, 199). The first triptych is generally associated with positivism, and the second with interpretivism. However, this is

not strict, considering that scientific “realism” combines ontological positivism with epistemological interpretivism (Furlong and Marsh 2010, 204-205). Drawing on Wendt’s (1999) constructivism, this paper adopts positivist epistemology, assuming that the concept of national interest, despite its intersubjective ontology, could be relatively precisely conceptualised and measured using appropriate methods.

The second measuring-related question is what data we rely on to determine the content and measure the implementation of national interests. Chong-Han Wu (2017) developed a pioneering comparative matrix of indicators for measuring the national interest, starting from the assumption that the main national interest of all states could be grouped into well-being in the fields of security, community, and economy. While acknowledging that these interests are expected for most states, we believe that the conceptualisation of interest and the following operationalisation of indicators must be contextualised to the example in which we inquire. Regarding data, we assume that the implementation could be measured using relatively reliable, unbiased data, such as indexes based on statistical results or expert assessments.

Our starting assumption is that complex social phenomena should be investigated at the level of the structural components that constitute them and then through the measurement of those components. Since the positivist turn in the social sciences, measurement is viewed as a “general process by which numbers are assigned to objects so that it is also understood which types of mathematical operations can be legitimately used” (Alaimo 2023, 36). By collecting data and measuring them, we create a “process that allows the social scientist to move from the realm of abstract, indirectly observable concepts and theories into the world of sense experience” (McGaw and Watson 1976, 205). We strive to consider two key aspects of measurement: reliability and validity. Reliability means that the process and method of measurement are repeatable by any other researcher. Validity is achieved when the results “meaningfully capture the ideas contained in the corresponding concept” (Adcock and Collier 2001, 530).

Building on the mentioned theoretical foundations and approach to measurement, the methodological approach developed in this paper is based on two pillars. The first pillar is designed to outline Serbian national interests and their hierarchy of importance, focusing on three analytical units that participate in articulating the national interest: political elites (decision-makers), public opinion, and experts. We conduct the following steps:

- 1) Desk research is conducted to gather the essential strategic documents and relevant recent program speeches of Serbian high officials, whose content is then analysed to outline what *decision-makers* present as the main national interest;

- 2) A public opinion poll on a representative sample is conducted to gather data about citizens' perceptions of national interests, which are then analysed using descriptive statistics to outline the hierarchy that *public opinion* makes between interests;
- 3) An expert survey with more than 30 participants is conducted to gather data on *experts'* stances on national interests, which is then analysed using descriptive statistics.

The second pillar is based on the combination of three methods, of which the first one is the most dominant. However, to decrease the possibility of subjectivity, which might arise from relying only on the first method, we conduct the following steps:

- 1) Authors' qualitative assessment of the implementation of national interests based on the data collected in desk research, indicating the fulfilment of the concrete goals listed in the National Security Strategy, which is then quantified and scaled in grades (1 to 5);
- 2) Correction of the findings from previous steps (to avoid potential subjectivity) through the inclusion of the findings of the expert poll, designed to evaluate the implementation of Serbian national interests;
- 3) Calculating the Implementation Index by summarising the values from the previous two weighted with their relative importance measured in the first pillar.

National Interest of Serbia: Outlining the Components

Studies of Serbia's national interests usually start with analysing official normative acts—laws, strategies, resolutions, etc. (Novaković 2013). Lipovac and Dimitrijević (2015; 2017) analysed the speeches of Serbian prime ministers from 2007 to 2017 to classify the intensity of national interests using Neuchterlein's matrix. Building on these studies, we analyse Serbian strategic documents to outline formally defined national interests. Considering that the strategic framework changes occasionally, we also focus on the program speeches of decision-makers to catch a more dynamic articulation of national interests. Afterwards, we analyse the public opinion poll and expert survey findings. We use Neuchterlein's (1976) matrix to classify national interests' intensity: (1) existential, 2) vital, 3) important, and 4) marginal.

Analysis of Strategic Documents

The National Security Strategy outlines the following national interests (MoD 2019, 31-34):

- 1) preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity;
- 2) preservation of internal stability and security;
- 3) preserving the existence and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live, as well as national minorities and their cultural, religious, and historical identity;
- 4) preservation of peace and stability in the region and the world;
- 5) European integration and membership in the European Union;
- 6) economic development and overall prosperity;
- 7) preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia.

There is no mention of ranking the interests by their relative importance/priority. Some interests are additionally emphasised in other normative acts. Considering the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, the first two interests seem the most important. Also, the 2005 National Strategy for EU Accession (still formally valid) proclaims EU membership as a strategic goal. Strategies in other fields emphasise economic development as a strategic interest. Therefore, certain interests seem to be more in the spotlight, but the hierarchy remains blurry due to the unclarity of the National Security Strategy.

Analysis of program speeches of decision-makers

The Government of the Republic of Serbia has the formal authority to define the country's foreign and security policy. Therefore, we focus on the government programme represented to the National Assembly by the Prime Minister before the election of the Cabinet. Considering that Serbia has only recently changed its government (the current one was elected in May 2024), we will analyse the programme speeches of the current and previous governments.³

The programme of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić from 2022 mentions national/state/citizen interests 12 times. In order of appearance, the two interests

³ We acknowledge the fact that the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has the biggest influence on the shaping of foreign and security policy in practice, despite his limited formal authority. However, considering that his inaugural speech from 2024 did not directly involve concretisation of the national interest (POTRS 2022), we will focus only on speeches of prime ministers Vučević and Brnabić.

mentioned the most explicitly are: (a) EU membership and (b) protection of territorial integrity. Even though economic development is not explicitly mentioned as the national interest, this domain is stressed as crucial in several parts of the document. The following interests are also labelled as important: independence (“full independence of Serbia in decision-making”); preservation of political stability and economic empowerment of the Serbs in Kosovo (including the return of property to Serbs and return of refugees) with parallel continuity of dialogue with Priština; and respect of the fundamental rights, language, identity, religion, and cultural heritage of Serbs in the region (Brnabić 2022).

The programme of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević from 2024 also mentions this term more than a dozen times. The most explicit reference was in the foreign policy section, which emphasises that the entire foreign policy “must have its grounding in the national interests of the Republic of Serbia”, outlining the two most important components of the national interests: a) defence of territorial integrity; and b) preservation of all developmental potentials. Membership in the EU was also stated as a “strategic goal of the Republic of Serbia”, which is “in the interest of our economy (...) and therefore in the interest of the state and citizens”. Therefore, EU membership seems to be secondary to the highest interest: economic development. Similarly, the preservation of peace in the regional and global context was also mentioned in the context of something necessary for economic growth (Vučević 2024).

In two analysed programmes, the following interests were emphasised: preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity; preservation of internal stability and security; and economic development and overall prosperity (Table 1). The lowest ranking is the preservation of the environment and resources, the only interest from the Strategy that was not explicitly mentioned and labelled as the national interest in the two programs.

Table 1. Hierarchy of Serbia's National Interests as Defined by the Last Two Prime Ministers⁴

Level	Interest
Existential	Preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity
	Preservation of internal stability and security
	Economic development and overall prosperity
Vital	European integration and membership in the European Union
	Preservation of the peace and stability in the region and the world
Important	Preserving the existence and protection of the Serbian people (...)
Marginal	Preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia

Public opinion poll

The public opinion poll was conducted from August 5 to 15, 2022, for the scientific project National(S), funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. The TAPI (Tablet-Assisted Personal Interview) survey method involved conducting face-to-face interviews with 1,186 respondents, selected by using a representative three-stage random stratified sampling method, with a confidence interval of $\pm 2.8\%$ and an expected incidence rate of 50%. The questionnaire consisted of 48 questions, primarily close-ended, and aimed to investigate perceptions of Serbia's national interest. Respondent randomisation occurred at three levels: polling stations, households, and selecting the household member with the nearest upcoming birthday. The demographic data shows our sample corresponds to census data (49.5% of respondents were male and 50.5% were female). The average age was 48 years, with almost 53% of them from urban areas and 47% from rural settings. One-quarter (25%) of respondents completed only primary education, 54% finished secondary education, and 21% obtained higher education degrees.

Citizens perceive that the seven national interests outlined in the Strategy are (completely or mostly) important (Table 1). However, EU membership is perceived as important only by a relative majority (49.3%), making it the lowest-ranked interest. The highest ranked is the preservation of internal security, as the only interest ranked by more than two-thirds of participants (72.2%) as "completely important" (in addition to 21% perceiving it as "mostly important"). Other interests

⁴All tables and graphs in this paper resulted from the research conducted within the project National Interests of the Republic of Serbia: from Contestation to Legitimation – National(s), supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia No. 7752625.

had positive scores of more than 80% of respondents (“completely” and “mostly important” combined—between 86.3% and 89.4%). Considering minimal differences, it is hard to hierarchise interests between 2nd and 6th place.

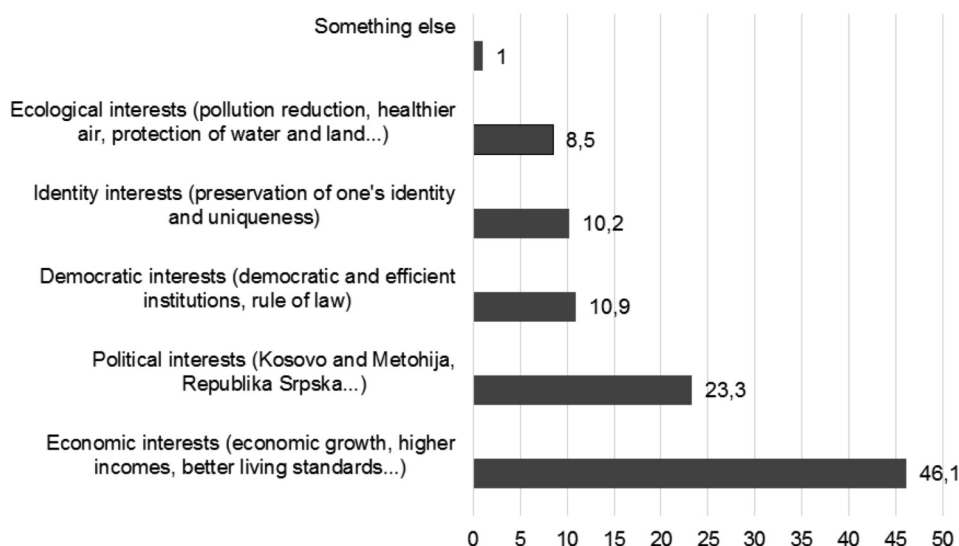
Table 2. Perceived Importance of Categories in Serbia’s National Interest

	Not at all	Mostly no	Neither yes nor no	Mostly yes	Completely	Don’t know
Preservation of sovereignty	0.4%	0.5%	4.7%	29.7%	62.4%	2.2%
Preservation of territorial integrity	0.5%	1.2%	8.4%	25.1%	63.4%	1.5%
Preservation of political independence	0.7%	1.5%	8.5%	25.2%	62.6%	1.5%
Preservation of Serbia’s military neutrality	2.2%	2.4%	10.7%	24.9%	56.9%	2.9%
Preservation of internal security	/	0.4%	4.9%	21%	72.2%	1.3%
Preservation of Serbian identity and tradition	0.6%	1.4%	7.3%	25.3%	64.3%	1.1%
Preservation and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live	0.9%	1.6%	9.5%	24.6%	61.5%	1.9%
Preservation of national minorities in Serbia	1.1%	2.4%	11.1%	25.3%	57.9%	2.2%
Preservation of peace and stability in the region and the world	0.7%	2.1%	6.3%	23.6%	65.2%	2.1%
Membership in the European Union	21.5%	7.6%	15.9%	22.1%	27.2%	5.7%
Economic development and overall prosperity	0.3%	1.6%	7.6%	23.2%	65%	2.3%
Preservation of the environment and natural resources of Serbia	0.3%	2.3%	8.5%	25%	61.7%	2.2%

To further rank national interests, we draw on a question in which citizens had to choose one out of the different offered groups of interests as the most important. To make the question less abstract, we grouped interests into five broader categories and explained their content (e.g., economic interests—economic growth, higher

income, a better living standard). Answers to this question indicate the dominance of economic interests as the most favourable choice for 47% of respondents, with the solid second position of “political interests” (such as the preservation of Kosovo and Metohija as a part of Serbia). Other groups (identity, ecological, and democratic interests) all had similar ranks, between 9% and 11% (Graph 1).

Graph 1. Perceived Importance of Serbia's National Interests



Combining the findings from the first and second questions, we can conclude that, besides preserving internal stability and security, economic development and overall prosperity could be qualified among the most important (“existential”) interests in citizens’ view. The following tier (“vital”) are “political” interests: the preservation of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and the preservation of peace and stability in the region and the world. A bit lower (but still “important”) are identity interests (preserving the existence and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live, as well as national minorities and their cultural, religious, and historical identity) and ecological interests (preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia). The last place (“marginal”) in a citizens’ view is reserved for European integration and membership in the European Union, as previously mentioned.

Table 3. Classification of Citizens' Preferences Using the Nuechterlein's Scale

Level	Interest
Existential	Preservation of internal stability and security
	Economic development and overall prosperity
Vital	Preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity
	Preservation of the peace and stability in the region and the world
Important	Preserving the existence and protection of the Serbian people (...)
	Preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia
Marginal	European integration and membership in the European Union

Expert survey

An expert survey was conducted June from 1 to 10, 2024, for the scientific project National(S). The survey was electronically distributed to a panel of 45 people identified by the authors as relevant experts in international relations, foreign policy, and security (35 researchers from universities and institutes, ten former diplomats, or think-tank experts). The survey was anonymous, and it was distributed and analysed using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of six sets of questions about the hierarchy of Serbian national interests, the state of their implementation, and the influence of the war in Ukraine on them. More than 70% of the contacted experts completed the survey (32/45). Considering the relatively smaller size of the expert community, we treat this as a reliable illustration of the attitude of Serbian experts in this field.

Table 4. Estimated importance of the following national interests for the Republic of Serbia today (small n = 32)

	Not at all important	Less important	Partially important	Very important	Of key importance
Preservation of sovereignty (...)			1	16	15
Preservation of internal stability and security			1	13	18
Preservation of the existence and protection of the Serbian people (...)		1	7	20	4
Preservation of peace and stability (...)		2	2	17	11
European integration (...)		2	10	13	7
Economic development and overall prosperity			2	14	16
Preservation of the environment (...)	3	2	4	12	11

The findings confirm the dominance of the preservation of internal stability and security (18 experts consider it “of key importance” and 13 consider it to be “very important”). Behind them are the preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, as well as economic development and overall prosperity. Similar to the attitude of citizens, EU membership is at the bottom of the hierarchy. Still, this does not mean that experts consider this interest to be marginal, considering that a clear majority of 20 experts claim that this interest is either very important (13) or of key importance (7), with an additional ten experts considering it to be at least partially important. In that sense, this result is close to the score of the following two interests, some of which even have fewer answers that they are “of key importance”. Therefore, we leave the “marginal” category empty (Table 5).

Table 5. Classification of Experts’ Preferences Using the Nuechterlein’s Scale

Level	Interest
Existential	Preservation of internal stability and security
	Preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity
	Economic development and overall prosperity
Vital	Preservation of the peace and stability in the region and the world
Important	Preserving the existence and protection of the Serbian people (...)
	Preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia
	European integration and membership in the European Union

Summary: A three-tier model for calculating the relative importance of national interests

To calculate the relative value of national interests, we triangulate the data gathered from analysing stances on national interests among three tiers of the model (decision-makers, public opinion, and experts). For interests classified as “existential”, we assign 5 points; for “vital”, 4 points; “important”, 3 points; and “marginal”, 2 points. We establish the hierarchy based on the final score.

Table 6. A three-tier model for calculating national interests

Interest	Decision-makers	Public opinion	Experts	Total	%
Preservation of internal stability and security	5 (existential)	5 (existential)	5 (existential)	15	18,5%
Economic development and overall prosperity	5 (existential)	5 (existential)	5 (existential)	15	18,5%
Preservation of sovereignty (...)	5 (existential)	4 (crucial)	5 (existential)	14	17%
Maintenance of peace and stability (...)	4 (crucial)	4 (crucial)	4 (crucial)	12	14,5%
European integration (...)	4 (crucial)	2 (marginal)	3 (important)	9	11%
Preservation and protection of the existence of the Serbian people (...)	3 (important)	3 (important)	3 (important)	9	11%
Preservation of the environment (...)	2 (marginal)	3 (important)	3 (important)	8	9,5%

National Interest of Serbia: Measuring the Implementation

To measure the degree of implementation, similarly to Nedeljković and Dašić (2024), we take as indicators concrete, narrower goals defined by the National Security Strategy for each interest. The total number of indicators is 32. The degree of implementation is calculated by the average value of all indicators for one interest. The grade for implementing an indicator is assigned based on analysing the relevant sources for the situation in that field. The grading scale is from 1 (not implemented at all) to 5 (completely implemented), with the possibility of assigning the mid-grades (1.5-4.5). The grade assignment is conducted by the authors of the paper, who have expertise in Serbian politics and foreign policy. Each assignment is briefly explained. To avoid bias and subjectivity, we correct the grade of implementation assigned by authors with the average value for the implementation of each indicator assigned by experts in the mentioned expert survey. The final implementation value for each indicator is calculated as the average of a grade assigned by authors and a grade from an expert survey.

INTEREST 1: Preservation of internal stability and security—score 2.37

Indicator 1.1: Protection of human and minority rights and freedoms of citizens—2.86 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.71)

The Freedom House (2003) report classifies Serbia as “partially free”, with a constant backsliding for almost ten years. Organisations from Serbia also have a series of complaints (BCLJP 2024). Reporters Without Borders warned of the decline of media freedom (RWB 2024). The EU progress report classifies Serbia as having only “some level of preparation” and “limited progress” in negotiating Chapter 23, including fundamental rights (EC 2023). However, despite some controversial situations (e.g., the prohibition of a festival promoting cooperation with Albanians, “Mirdita–Dobar dan” in 2024, or the partial recalling of the Euro-Pride in Belgrade in 2022), flagrant cases of breaking minority rights are still exceptions.

Indicator 1.2: The rule of law and further development of democracy and democratic institutions—2.2 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 1.89)

The EU progress report (EC 2023) criticises the inefficiency of the prosecution and certain fallacies in the judiciary system. Controversies regarding the recent removal of certain prosecutors exemplify the existing problems (Inasajder, 2024). Regarding democracy, the ODIHR/OSCE reported many problems in the Serbian elections. Freedom House (2023) classifies Serbia as a hybrid regime, while Serbian expert organisations claim that elections are not free and fair (CRTA 2023). However, the recent formation of the parliamentary working group, which should handle the ODIHR recommendations, slightly improves the impression.

Indicator 1.3: Improving the security of citizens, the state, and society—2.41 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 2.31)

Despite the relative efficiency of police and intelligence, the fact that Serbia had two mass murders in only two days in 2023 (one of them in elementary school) indicated the fragility of the citizens’ security. These events have also triggered the biggest protest gathering of Serbian citizens this century. Also, the femicide rate in Serbia is high in comparison to European standards (Pavlov, 2023). However, certain recent acts, such as the moratorium on issuing new weapon permits, might have positive effects.

Indicator 1.4: Normalisation of conditions and relations in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija—1.85 (authors: 2, expert survey: 1.7)

Normalisation dialogue is in a deep crisis, despite agreements from 2023. Many agreements (including establishing the Community/Association of Serb-Majority

Municipalities) have still not been implemented. The security situation for Serbs worsened after Serbs in the North left Kosovo police and other institutions in 2022. Instead of a politically compromising solution, the government in Priština just filled the institutional vacuum with Albanians (including special police forces). Although this is primarily a fault of the radical agenda of Aljbin Kurti's government, the armed incident in Banjska in 2023 demonstrated that Belgrade does not have total control over security dynamics among local Serbs and that violence could occur from extreme wings on both sides. Still, the dialogue remains formally active.

Indicator 1.5: Efficient public administration—2.61
(authors: 3; expert survey: 2.22)

This is one area in which Serbia witnesses continuous progress, especially when it comes to digitalisation and the introduction of e-government services. However, there are still some “dark pockets” of inefficient state administration, especially when it comes to corruption in certain sectors. In that regard, Serbia is among the worst states in Europe.

INTEREST 2: Economic development and overall prosperity—score 2.73

Indicator 2.1: Improvement in citizens' standard of living—2.85 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.69)

According to World Bank data, Serbia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita has steadily increased over the past 12 years. For instance, the GDP per capita in 2012 was \$5,340, reaching its highest level in 2023 at \$7,740 (TA 2024a). Another important indicator of the citizens' standard of living is the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). A temporal analysis over the past 12 years shows that PPP has been rising. The initial position in 2012 was \$16,900, increasing to \$24,500 in 2023 (TA 2024b). However, since 2022, a significant rise in food prices has threatened the standard of living. According to data from the National Bank, consumer prices in Serbia increased by 11.9% from 2021 to 2022 (RZS 2023).

Indicator 2.2: Economic growth—2.91 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.81)

According to World Bank data, Serbia's GDP has increased by \$31.88 billion over the past 12 years. In 2012, the GDP was \$43.31 billion, rising to \$75.19 billion by 2023 (TA 2024c). However, examining the last three years, a more sensitive growth and progress index, the Full-Year GDP Growth, reveals a downward trend since 2021. In 2021, the full-year GDP growth was 7.389%, but it declined to 2.528% by 2023 (TA 2024d).

Indicator 2.3: Improvement of education, scientific, and technological development—2.37 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 2.23)

Regarding innovation and overall advancements, Serbia moved up two places in the Global Innovation Index last year, from 53rd to 55th (WIPO 2023). However, in a comparative context, Serbia holds a poor position (32nd out of the 39 ranked European economies). Innovation and technological progress are closely linked to education. According to the PISA test data over the past decade, the average results were roughly the same in mathematics, reading, and science, indicating slow or minimal progress in the education system. Serbia's average score in science for 15-year-olds is 447 points, compared to the OECD average of 485 points (OECD 2024).

Indicator 2.4: Improvement of economic and energy security—2.77 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.53)

According to the World Energy Trilemma Index, energy security has remained relatively unchanged over the last decade. However, since 2020, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, each subsequent year has shown slight improvements in energy stability, security, and equity (WEC 2023). Examining various energy security factors from 2011 to 2021, Serbia has made progress in energy import dependency and diversity of electricity generation, especially after finishing the interconnector with Bulgaria.

INTEREST 3: Preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity—score 2.79

Indicator 3.1: Deterrence from armed threats and effective defense—3.73 (authors: 4; expert survey: 3.45)

The Global Firepower Index ranks the Serbian Army 56th in the world, which is a better score than any other Western Balkan state. From neighbours, only Hungary (54) and Romania (47) have a higher rank than Serbia (GFI 2024). Serbian military power is rising. Serbia is among the smaller percentage of states that spend more than 2% of their GDP on defence (World Bank 2024). The most important global actors acknowledge Serbia's military neutrality. The announced purchase of the French aircraft "Rafale" could further improve capabilities.

Indicator 3.2: Preservation of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija in the Republic of Serbia—1.78 (authors: 2; expert survey: 1.56)

There is a longer negative trend in this regard. Many Serbian institutions (such as the interior or judiciary) were removed from North Kosovo in the mid-2010s,

while the Community/Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (agreed in 2013/2015) has never been formed. Belgrade has recently accepted removing many remaining elements of its presence/sovereignty. The latest concessions included the acceptance of RKS (“Republic of Kosovo”) car plates and all documents issued by the government in Priština (e.g., ID cards). Moreover, in the 2023 Brussels/Ohrid Agreement, Belgrade accepted not to block membership of Priština in international organisations. However, the statement that there is no possibility for formal recognition of Kosovo or its UN membership indicates at least some red lines.

Indicator 3.3: Strengthening the reputation and international position of the Republic of Serbia—2.72 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.44)

Serbia has recently enhanced its strategic partnership with the People’s Republic of China (“Community of the Common Destiny”), parallelly aiming to establish a strategic dialogue with the US. The strategic partnership with Russia is still valid, while relations with the EU are of a special character due to Serbia’s candidacy. Serbia has general confirmation from all four foreign policy “pillars” regarding its international position. Hosting a specialised EXPO 2027 indicates an improved reputation. Still, despite the somewhat lower number of states that supported it, Serbia failed to prevent the adoption of the Resolution on Srebrenica in the UNGA (proclaimed by the government to be problematic), which indicates limits to its influence.

Indicator 3.4: Prevention and elimination of separatist activities—2.92 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.83)

Political representatives of national minorities are integrated into political institutions in Belgrade and Novi Sad (AP Vojvodina) and local governments in Vojvodina and Southwestern Serbia (Sandžak). Interethnic relations with the Hungarian national minority are often considered the best ever. There are no active separatist movements. However, the fact that a politician associated with Aljbin Kurti recently got elected as mayor of Preševo (a municipality with an Albanian majority) and that certain Albanian politicians make an analogy between the agreed Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities in Kosovo and their desires for similar autonomy in south Serbia indicate that the potential for radicalisation still exists.

INTEREST 4: Preservation of peace and stability in the region and the world—score 3.19

Indicator 4.1: Contribution to the development of international relations by internationally taken obligations—3.19 (authors: 3.5; expert survey: 2.87)

Serbia proves to be a relatively reliable partner and fulfils its obligations in the international arena. No major obstacles in this field exist comparable to those derived from the non-completed cooperation with the ICTY during the 2000s. Serbia respects the Dayton and Kumanovo Agreements, which are crucial for regional stability. However, although Priština is more to blame for the unfulfilled aspects of the normalisation dialogue, Belgrade also still avoids implementing some of its obligations from the agreements.

Indicator 4.2: Contribution to the preservation of international peace and security—3.5 (authors: 4; expert survey: 3)

The National Assembly (NSRS 2023) allowed the government to send its troops to 12 different UN missions, seven EU missions, and one EU crisis battlegroup (HELBROC). Serbian security staff currently participates in nine missions: four UN-led (Cyprus, Lebanon, the Central African Republic, and the Middle East—south Lebanon and Sinai), four EU-led (two missions in Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Mozambique), and one multinational operation led by the US (Sinai/Egypt). This is an intensive engagement for a country of Serbian size and wealth.

Indicator 4.3: Respect for international law and improvement of mutual trust—3.24 (authors: 3.5; expert survey: 2.97)

Serbia generally respects international law and principally condemns (at least declaratively) the breaking of its norms, even when friendly countries (such as Russia) conduct it. Serbian security policy is based on relative transparency when it comes to buying arms. However, sales of arms are not so transparent, considering recent allegations that ammunition and arms produced in Serbia end up in conflict areas (such as Ukraine or Israel) without the formal permit or public confirmation of the Serbian authorities for these transactions.

Indicator 4.4: Contribution to strengthening regional stability and improvement of good neighbourly relations—2.78 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.56)

Specific Serbian initiatives, such as the Open Balkan project, which established the common labour market with Albania and North Macedonia, were very positive. The strategic partnership with Hungary is very developed, while relations with

Romania and Bulgaria are positive and stable. Relations with Montenegro are better than before 2020, despite occasional turbulence. However, relations with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosniak politicians) could not be qualified as cordial. While the causes of such a situation lie on all sides, it is evident that Serbia is investing less positive effort in these relations than it used to.

Indicator 4.5: Strengthening comprehensive bilateral relations with all countries while respecting mutual interests—3.5 (authors: 4; expert survey: 3)

Serbia's nine strategic partnerships with geopolitically diverse actors (China, Italy, France, Russia, Azerbaijan, Greece, Hungary, the UAE, and Egypt) confirm the achievements in this area. The successful de-recognition campaign, in which more than a dozen states withdrew recognition of Kosovo, was the consequence of raising cooperation with many actors worldwide. However, relations with some increased countries (such as Germany, the leading Serbian economic partner) recently derogated, indicating limits in achievements in this field.

Indicator 4.6: Strengthening active participation in the work of international organizations—2.94 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.88)

Hosting the specialised EXPO 2027, delivered to Serbia by the Bureau for International Exhibitions, presents a significant achievement. Serbia presided over the OSCE in 2015, while Serbian ex-minister Vuk Jeremić presided over the UNGA in 2013. President Vučić has recently announced Serbia's ambition to qualify for the non-permanent seat in the UNSC (Cvetković 2024). Still, Serbia has recently failed to prevent the start of the accession procedure in the Council of Europe for Priština. Also, Serbia is still not a member of the WTO.

INTEREST 5: Preservation of the existence and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live, as well as national minorities and their cultural, religious, and historical identity—score 2.65

Indicator 5.1: Development of demographic potential—1.67 (authors: 1.5; expert survey: 1.83)

Serbia is the 9th country in the world according to the number of people it loses annually (Lukić 2023). The fertility rate is decreasing, with 2023 being the year with the all-time lowest number of newborns (RZS 2024a). The emigration rate is between 40.000 and 60.000 a year, while the poll conducted by the Umbrella Organisation of the Youth of Serbia (Stojanović et al., 2023, 198) shows that half of the young citizens want to leave Serbia. Demographic trends and brain drain

negatively influence the Serbian economy (Radonjić and Ostojić, 2023). Recent immigration from certain countries (e.g., Russia and Ukraine) has only slightly improved the situation.

Indicator 5.2: National unity and development of cultural, religious, and historical identity—3.05 (authors: 3.5; expert survey: 2.61)

The Day of Serbian Unity, Liberty, and National Flag, introduced in 2020, indicates that the government invests substantial symbolic and political resources for this purpose. Financial support to the Republic of Srpska entity and municipalities with a Serb majority in the region indicates the readiness to invest financial resources. However, the blurring of the differences between the state and political leaders in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (and the labelling of those who criticise leaders as “traitors”) and the transformation of discourse in pro-government media from patriotic to discriminatory towards other states and ethnicities indicate many downsides of the current “top-down” approach.

Indicator 5.3: Improving the position of the national minorities—3.11 (authors: 3; expert survey: 3.21)

The situation is relatively positive and stable. Mechanisms for minority protection function quite well. Certain national minorities, such as Hungarians, have witnessed significant progress in political influence, but with a negative demographic trend. This negative trend is common for almost all minorities in Serbia due to the low fertility rate, emigration, and gradual assimilation. The exceptions in this regard are Bosniaks and, to a certain extent, Albanians. However, the glorification in many public spaces of people convicted of war crimes, which seems to be tolerated by authorities, sends a negative message to certain minority groups.

Indicator 5.4: Improving the position and protecting the rights and interests of the diaspora and Serbs abroad—2.79 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.57)

The preservation of the Republic of Srpska in BiH does not seem to be vitally endangered, despite political disturbances (contested election of the current High Representative, his unilateral decisions to change and impose laws, avoidance of the Presidency of BiH in the decision-making process regarding the UNGA Resolution on Srebrenica, etc.). The position of Serbs in Montenegro is better nowadays than until 2020, when the government endangered the Serbian Orthodox Church. Institutional protection of Serbs in Croatia is in place, but the number of Serbs decreased due to low fertility, gradual assimilation, and the low return of Serb refugees. In certain countries in the diaspora, such as the US,

progress in organising the Serb community is visible, while in others (such as Germany), the diaspora remains politically atomised.

Indicator 5.5: Protection of cultural and historical goods important for the Republic of Serbia and its citizens—2.62 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 2.73)

Financial investments in certain cultural and historical memorials are visible, from the renovation of the Golubac fortress to the renovation of museums in Belgrade. However, there are still significant problems in this regard. Many memorials are not adequately treated. The former concentration camp “Staro sajmište” (led by the Nazi occupation forces) is not adequately memorialised, and the Museum of Genocide Victims does not have its own building. Some old historical buildings in Belgrade recently vanished due to the failure of institutions to prevent their demolition in the wave of “new urbanism”, focused mainly on the interests of investors.

INTEREST 6: Shaping a modern and developed society based on common European values that are part of the Serbian national identity and historical heritage—score 2.28

Indicator 6.1: Shaping a modern and developed society based on common European values that are part of the Serbian national identity and historical heritage—2.24 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 1.97)

Serbia is economically closely tied to the EU. Nearly 60% of Serbian foreign exchange of goods is conducted with EU countries, which are also the biggest investors and donors (RZS 2024b). The convergence of EU economies is constantly progressing, including incorporating business and economic values. However, many other values, such as freedom of speech, the quality of democracy, and the level of tolerance for differences, seem to be in crisis. Politicians mostly justify EU membership goals through economic benefits and technical aspects, avoiding the debate about other values and their implementation.

Indicator 6.2: Achieving internal readiness for membership in the European Union—2.06 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 1.62)

Serbia has not opened any new negotiation clusters since 2021 of negotiations since 2021. Although this is the consequence of the stalemate in dialogue with Priština, variations in internal readiness are also an issue. As stated in the last EU progress report, Serbia needs further progress in many areas (EC 2023). Also, the support of Serbian citizens for EU membership (one of the crucial drivers of the

integration pace) is decreasing and is below the level of an absolute majority (MEI 2023, 5).

Indicator 6.3: Improvement of national security and defence through the process of European integration—2.53 (authors: 3; expert survey: 2.06)

As mentioned, Serbia participates in many EU defence missions, including the one EU battle group (HELBROC). Other aspects of security and defence cooperation with EU countries are pretty developed. However, in the foreign policy aspect, there is a decreasing tendency towards Serbian alignment with the EU declarations and measures (sanctions) adopted in the scope of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (ISAC 2024).

INTEREST 7: Preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia—score 1.93

Indicator 7.1: Monitoring, assessment, planning, and taking measures to mitigate the impact of climate change—1.86 (authors: 2; expert survey: 1.71)

The University of Notre Dame (ND) ranked Serbia 92nd in the index that measures states' climate change vulnerability (Energetski portal 2024). Serbia is in the first position on this negative list among European states. However, relevant experts from this field claim that the state is not doing enough to counter these harmful and potentially very vulnerable threats.

Indicator 7.2: Flood and fire protection—2.46 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 2.41)

Serbia has developed a solid fire protection infrastructure. It was also active in helping neighbouring countries fight fires, such as Greece or Montenegro. However, regarding floods, it seems that Serbia is not investing enough in prevention. The Notre Dame University (NDU 2022) ND Gain index points to the low dam capacity. Therefore, Serbia faces severe floods almost every year, although they are not as devastating as those in 2014.

Indicator 7.3: Improving the quality of the environment—1.54 (authors: 1.5; expert survey: 1.57)

The State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) reports indicate that air quality constantly decreases (Spasić 2024). The National Ecological Association claims that the air was overpolluted in many places in Serbia, most notably in Belgrade. Certain municipalities in Serbia (such as Zrenjanin) still do not have drinkable water in the pipeline. There are rising doubts that new investments in

mining might additionally pollute water and land, although potential investors claim that there are no reasons for concern (Rio Tinto, 2024).

Indicator 7.4: Efficient management of hazardous waste—1.57 (authors: 1.5; expert survey: 1.63)

The City of Belgrade still has severe problems with waste management. Municipal waste is not managed correctly and is often considered “Serbia’s untapped resource” (Balkan Green Energy 2022). However, recently, it seems that Serbia has been trying to catch up with EU requirements on these issues and improve its situation with new projects.

Indicator 7.5: Improving the ability and capacity for resource management—2.21 (authors: 2.5; expert survey: 1.93)

Serbia has adopted a legal framework that should provide better resource management. However, ecological activists raise doubts about whether the exploitation of resources in certain mines (such as Bor and Majdanpek) meets environmental standards and whether the possible exploration of lithium in the Jadar region might harm the environment. Also, according to the ND Gain Index (NDU 2023), access to improved sanitation facilities remains problematic.

Summary: National Interest Implementation Rate

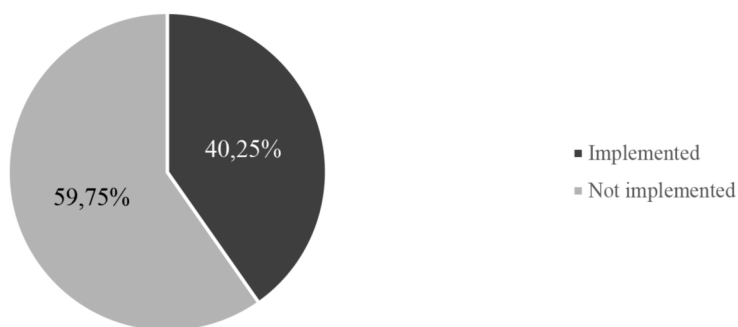
The final calculation is based on the average value of scores for all interests (determined in the second part of the paper) weighted by their relative importance (defined in the first part). The National Interest Implementation Rate for Serbia in 2024 is 2.61 (on the 1 to 5 scale), 40.25% of the maximum possible value (100%). Taken separately, only one interest is implemented more than half (>50%), while two are less than one-third (<33.33%) implemented (Graph 3). This indicates a need to improve implementation in these areas (Table 7).

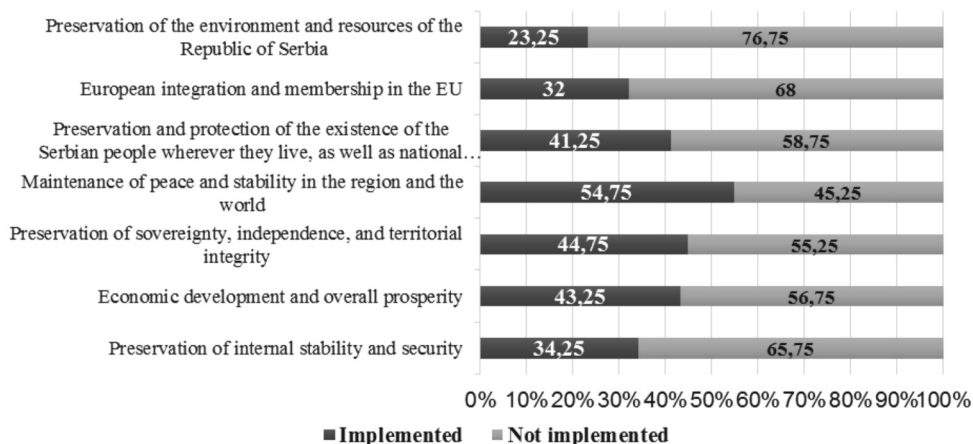
Table 7. National Interest Implementation Index (Serbia 2024)

	Weight	Score
<i>Preservation of internal stability and security</i>	18,5%	2.37
<i>Economic development and overall prosperity</i>	18,5%	2.73
<i>Preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity</i>	17%	2.79
<i>Maintenance of peace and stability in the region and the world</i>	14,5%	3.19
<i>Preservation and protection of the existence of the Serbian people (...)</i>	11%	2.65
<i>European integration and membership in the European Union</i>	11%	2.28
<i>Preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia</i>	9,5%	1.93
TOTAL INDEX VALUE	100%	2,61 (40,25%)

Graph 2. National Interest Implementation Index (Serbia 2024)

National Interest of the Republic of Serbia



Graph 3. Implementation of Different National Interests in % (Serbia 2024)

Discussion

The main objective was to create and test the National Interest Implementation Matrix for the Republic of Serbia. The second goal was to evaluate and quantify Serbia's progress towards achieving its defined national interests by combining desk research, content analysis, public opinion polls, and expert surveys. The matrix creation presents a methodological innovation that requires further validation under different circumstances or timeframes in future studies. Our approach, based on "thin" constructivism (ontological inter-subjectivism and epistemological positivism), has proven to be sufficiently insightful and reliable. Data collection and analysis in this framework have yielded results that indicate the implementation rate of Serbian national interests is just over 40% (an index score of 2.61 on a 1-5 scale). These data suggest considerable room for improvement, particularly in domains with the lowest score: preservation of the environment and resources, European integration and membership in the EU, and preservation of internal stability and security.

We also believe it would be helpful to analyse the need for reduction to a smaller number of more up-to-date indicators using the Delphi method. In this case, experts could evaluate which indicators will be crucial for implementing national interests in the future and weigh them accordingly. The model could also be expanded to include opposition politicians and other stakeholders. Additionally,

interviews with politicians about how they perceive national interests might provide further valuable insights, especially regarding how decision-makers prioritise national interests. Increasing the number of authors involved in the evaluation and the number of surveyed experts could further enhance the accuracy of the findings. Nevertheless, we consider that the matrix is already a valuable tool for analysis and that its results could benefit both policy and theoretical studies of (Serbian) national interests.

Conclusion

Our unique blend of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of policy implementation in the Republic of Serbia. The findings reveal a moderate to low implementation rate of proclaimed national interests and highlight critical areas where further action is needed. The results of this pioneering study contribute to the empirical literature on Serbian foreign policy by offering a tool for assessing national interest fulfilment across different periods. Future research should focus on refining the matrix and exploring additional factors influencing the implementation. By addressing the identified gaps and incorporating feedback from various stakeholders, Serbia can enhance its policy strategies and better align its actions with national priorities and public expectations.

This research was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. Grant No: 7752625. Project name: National Interests of the Republic of Serbia: from Contestation to Legitimation – National(S).

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**MATRICA IMPLEMENTACIJE NACIONALNOG INTERESA:
VREDNOVANJE I MERENJE POSTIGNUĆA REPUBLIKE SRBIJE**

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad razvija metodološku matricu za merenje ostvarenosti/stepena uspešnog sprovođenja nacionalnog interesa Republike Srbije. Teorijska osnova ovog indeksa je „tanki” konstruktivizam u međunarodnim odnosima, koji se zasniva na ontološkom intersubjektivizmu i epistemološkom pozitivizmu. Metodologija se oslanja na dva glavna stuba: prvi definiše srpske nacionalne interese i njihovu hijerarhiju, dok drugi meri stepen njihove implementacije/ realizacije. Ovi stubovi koriste mešavinu različitih metoda prikupljanja i analize podataka, uključujući kancelarijsko istraživanje, deskriptivnu statistiku, analizu sadržaja, ispitivanja javnog mnjenja i ekspertske ankete. Primarni teorijski cilj ovog rada je da unapredi literaturu o nacionalnom interesu u međunarodnim odnosima pružanjem instrumenta za merenje njegove implementacije. Glavni empirijski i društveni (praktično-politički) cilj jeste procena trenutnog stanja sprovođenja nacionalnih interesa Srbije. Analiza pokazuje da je stopa implementacije nacionalnog interesa Srbije nešto preko 40% (skor indeksa – 2,61 na skali od 1-5). Dokument takođe identifikuje konkretne oblasti u kojima su potrebna poboljšanja politike da bi se ovaj rezultat poboljšao u budućnosti.

Ključne reči: nacionalni interes, implementacija, matrica, Republika Srbija, merenje, „tanki” konstruktivizam, intersubjektivnost, strategija spoljne politike.