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INŠTITUT ZA NOVEJŠO ZGODOVINO

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Petra Kavrečič Božeglav*

Women's Branches of the Sts Cyril and Methodius Society as Agents of Social and Economic Development in Border Regions: An Introduction

IZVLEČEK

ŽENSKÉ PODRUŽNICE DRUŽBE SV. CIRILA IN METODA KOT AKTERKE SOCIALNEGA IN GOSPODARSKEGA RAZVOJA V OBMEJNEM PROSTORU: UVODNA RAZPRAVA

Prispevek obravnava razmerja in prepletenost med nacionalnim gibanjem ter gospodarskim in socialnim razvojem. S poudarkom na ženskemu nacionalnemu aktivizmu v etnično mešanem perifernem (obmejnem) prostoru raziskava preučuje avstro-ogrsko deželo Avstrijsko primorje kot primer nacionalno heterogenega prostora, v katerem so se ob neenakem dostopu do političnih, gospodarskih in kulturnih virov soočali različni nacionalni interesi.

V takšnih okoljih so imele gospodarske in socialne strategije pomembno vlogo pri oblikovanju in utrjevanju nacionalnih zahtev, saj so delovale kot ključne akterke, prek katerih se je nacionalna pripadnost ustvarjala, krepila in ohranjala v vsakdanjem življenju. Ženske so se v tem procesu izkazale kot pomembne, vendar pogosto spregledane akterke, ki so delovale na stičišču gospodarskih praks, družbenih dejavnosti in nacionalne mobilizacije.

Ključne besede: Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda, ženske podružnice, Avstrijsko primorje, ekonomsko in socialno življenje

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relations and interconnections between the national affirmation movement and economic and social development. Focusing on women's national activism in an ethnically diverse peripheral (border) area, the study examines the Austro-Hungarian land of the Austrian Littoral as a case of a nationally heterogeneous space, in which competing national projects developed under unequal access to political, economic, and cultural resources.

In such contexts, economic and social strategies played a vital role in shaping and reinforcing national claims, serving as key tools for creating, negotiating, and maintaining national identity in everyday life. Women emerged as significant, yet often overlooked, participants in these processes, operating at the crossroads of economic activity, social engagement, and national mobilisation.

Keywords: Sts Cyril and Methodius Society, women's branches, Austrian Littoral, economic and social life

Introduction

This paper explores the relations and interconnections between the national affirmation movement and economic and social development. Focusing on women's national activism in an ethnically diverse peripheral (border) area, the study examines the Austro-Hungarian land of the Austrian Littoral as a case of a nationally heterogeneous space in which competing national projects developed under unequal access to political, economic, and cultural resources. In such contexts, economic and social strategies played a vital role in shaping and reinforcing national claims, serving as key tools for creating, negotiating, and maintaining national identity in everyday life. Women emerged as significant, yet often overlooked, participants in these processes, operating at the crossroads of economic activity, social engagement, and national mobilisation. Through activities such as charitable work, education, cooperative organisation, and consumption-oriented initiatives, women "transferred" national ideologies into tangible social and economic practices. Urban centres served as primary sites for the institutionalisation of these forms of national-economic activism, from which they spread into rural environments, thereby expanding the reach of national movements within local social structures.

The present study is part of an ongoing research project titled *Women's National Activism: The Activities of the Women's Branches of the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius on Slovenia's National Borders*, which explores "the public role of women in the process of national affirmation and the emergence of national movements". The project focuses on the activities of the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius, with particular emphasis on women's involvement in the public sphere within nationalist and national

defence contexts. The study concentrates on the period marked by the formation and consolidation of national ideas within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, characterised by an ethnically and nationally diverse population. The lands of the Empire, such as the Austrian Littoral, were inhabited by Slovenians, Croats, Germans, Friulians, and Italians. As stated in the project: "To achieve national affirmation and assert their political, cultural, educational, and economic demands, national elites across these communities established national organisations, including independent women's associations". This study aims to highlight women's engagement in social and public spheres, an aspect that has been largely overlooked or marginalised in existing historiography, particularly in studies of smaller centres and peripheral regions.¹ As the study is still in its early stages, only preliminary findings will be presented.

The paper is based on the study and analysis of historical sources and published literature that address the formation, work, and role of the Sts Cyril and Methodius Society. The sources include archival materials, journalistic articles, scientific studies, and so on. The sources have been primarily collected in the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia and partly in the State Archive in Trieste. The present study specifically addresses the role of women's participation in national associations in peripheral (border) areas, the structure and functioning of social networks, and their public engagement in associations. By examining these associations, this study highlights how women's activism intersected with broader social, political, and national developments, particularly in ethnically mixed and borderland regions.

Austrian Littoral Case Study

The Austrian Littoral represents a particularly interesting case study because it became an integral part of the Habsburg Empire only at the beginning of the 19th century and was established as a separate crown land in the mid-19th century, during its final territorial configuration and as a modern administrative unit. As a result, the territory was shaped by different political regimes and specific historical circumstances, leading to a highly ethnically diverse region inhabited by Slovenian, Italian, and Croatian communities, as well as Friulians and, notably, Germans, who primarily formed the political elites.

The formation of the crown land commenced after the collapse of the Republic of Venice in 1797. Following a transitional period under Austrian and French rule, the territory of the former Venetian Istria was allocated to the Habsburg Monarchy in 1814. The crown land included the Margraviate of Istria, the County of Gorizia and Gradisca, and the Imperial Free City of Trieste.² The term Littoral was a 'strategic'

1 See: *Women's National Activism: The Work of Women's Branches of the Society of St. Cyril and Methodius on the Slovenian National Borders* – Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, accessed on 1 March 2026, <https://inv.si/en/projects/zenski-narodni-aktivizem-delovanje-zenskih-podruznic-sv-cirila-in-metoda-na-slovenskih-narodnih-mejah>.

2 Petra Kavrečič Božeglav, *Turizem v Avstrijskem Primorju: zdravilišča, kopaljšča in kraške jame (1819–1914)* (Koper:

choice made by Vienna to highlight Trieste's role as a major port city, despite only part of the crown land being coastal.³ The name was translated into Slovenian as *Avstrijsko primorje*, from which the term *Primorska* later developed. This name is still used today to refer to the western part of Slovenia. Simultaneously, the territory also acquired the Italian name *Venezia Giulia*, a term adopted after 1863 by Italian nationalists who considered the region to be historically Italian.⁴

During the 19th century, society in the Austrian Littoral was profoundly influenced by the emergence and consolidation of national ideas. In the context of the revolutionary movements collectively known as the "Springtime of Nations", the promotion and assertion of collective identities moved to the forefront of political agendas, while the creation of nation-states became a key political goal. National identity expressed itself in various forms. In response to the turbulent decades of the mid-19th century, the Austrian Empire introduced a series of important constitutional reforms in the 1860s. The revolutions and conflicts of the late 1840s and 1850s had fostered a sense of national discontent and revealed the structural weaknesses of the imperial bureaucracy and military, prompting the emperor and the state to implement reforms. With the adoption of the February Patent (Legal order) in 1861 as the Imperial Constitution, the Austrian Empire became a constitutional parliamentary monarchy.⁵

The national claims and aspirations of various ethnic communities within the Austrian Empire were also expressed through the establishment of associations and societies that covered cultural, political, and social activities. These organisations became important tools for expressing collective and national identities, especially in a multi-ethnic and politically complex setting such as the Austrian Littoral. The legal framework for establishing associations was initially set by the Imperial Patent of 26 November 1852 and later by the Law of 15 November 1867. According to the 1852 Patent, creating an association required a special state concession, provided that the association was founded under a previously approved statute. Membership was open to anyone who met the required conditions and followed social regulations, regardless of whether the number of members had been predetermined.⁶

The Law of 1867 relaxed these requirements significantly, reflecting the broader liberalising and constitutional reforms of the 1860s. According to this legislation, it was enough to submit a written notification to the provincial political authorities before starting an association's activities, along with five copies of the statutes.⁷ This legal framework supported the growth of national and cultural associations, enabling

Založba Univerze na Primorskem, 2017). Branko Marušič, "Zahodno slovensko ozemlje: Iskanje ozemeljske istovetnosti," in Peter Štih and Bojan Balkovec, eds., *Regionalni vidiki slovenske zgodovine* (Ljubljana: Zveza zgodovinskih društev Slovenije, 2004), 59.

3 Marušič, "Zahodno slovensko ozemlje," 59.

4 Petra Kavrečič Božeglav, "Tourism and fascism: tourism development on the eastern Italian border," *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 60, No. 2 (2020): 115.

5 *Österreichisches Kaiserliches Patent vom 26. Februar 1861*, accessed on 23 February 2026, <https://www.verfassungen.at/at-18/februarpatent61-i.htm>.

6 AST, Archivio di Stato di Trieste, i. r. Luogotenenza del Litorale, Atti generali – Società, 1814–1918, binder 27, fol. 10, class. b/v, Associazioni nazionalistiche, anni 1890–1916.

7 AST, binder 27, fol. 10, class. b/v, Associazioni nazionalistiche, anni 1890–1916.

ethnic groups to organise more freely and participate in public life. This change was especially important in border regions, where different national identities coexisted. In such areas, like the Austrian Littoral, the newly formed women's associations played a vital role. They encouraged women's involvement in civic life, built networks across towns and communities, and helped spread national ideas. Through lectures, publications, and local initiatives, these organisations not only promoted cultural and educational development but also enabled women to participate in political and social discussions, often in spaces where their public presence had previously been limited. The combination of legal reforms, the rise of national awareness, and the growth of associations created a context in which women could actively help shape both national identity and local civic life.

National Defence Organisations

With the new legislation on associations, adopted in 1867, which permitted the establishment of political societies, the first mass organisations also emerged, which, according to the national principle, brought together members of specific nationalities. As mentioned, the legal and organisational structures for associations provided an important pathway for women's participation in the public sphere, especially within national and cultural movements. Women's branches of societies, such as those affiliated with the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius, could operate within these legal frameworks, enabling them to organise cultural, educational, and charitable activities while simultaneously affirming a national identity.

National defence organisations actually originated in the 1880s. In the years before World War I, Germans, Italians, Slovenians, and Croats (the latter two often working together) built a broad network of national defence groups, mainly to promote the creation of schools and private school associations, and to oppose the denationalising policies of the state authorities.

The first private school organisation in the territory of the Cisleithanian part of the state, which is the subject of this study, was the German *Deutsche Schulverein*, founded in 1880. The organisation advocated for language rights and the establishment of schools, especially in border areas with mixed national populations where Germans lived alongside other groups such as Czechs, Slovenians, and Italians. The Italian community in Austro-Hungary's territory (Tyrol, Gorizia, Trieste, Istria, Dalmatia) also had its own national society, *Pro Patria*, established in 1886. It set up branches and educational institutions in regions inhabited by Italians and Friulians, as well as along the ethnic border. Subsequently, the *Lega Nazionale* was founded.⁸

⁸ Robert Devetak, "Boj za slovenske šole in delovanje ženskih podružnic Družbe svetega Cirila in Metoda na Goriškem in Gradiškem v obdobju pred prvo svetovno vojno," *Zgodovinski časopis* 74, No. 3/4 (2020): 367–68. *Lega* replaced *Pro Patria*, as the latter had been banned by the state authorities in 1890.

The Slovenian community grew more aware of the need for a national defence organisation covering most of Slovenian territory, leading to the founding of the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius. The organisation “played an important role in Slovenians’ efforts to resist the increasingly intense Germanisation and Italianisation of the border areas. By establishing private kindergartens and schools in the most ethnically endangered parts of Slovenian land, it aimed to address the injustices of official educational policies... Within its means, it tried to act as a counterbalance to the *Schulverein* and *Lega Nazionale*,”⁹ thereby opposing “the gradual process of Germanisation and Italianisation of Slovenian school youth”.¹⁰

The Society was established in Ljubljana in 1885 and operated as a private organisation for national defence education. It founded 27 kindergartens and 10 elementary schools throughout Carniola, the Littoral, Carinthia, Styria, and Istria. Before the First World War, about 280 branches functioned within the Society, with roughly 18,000 members enrolled. At least in its early years, the Society acted as a pan-Slovenian, non-political organisation; however, a strong religious motive was continually emphasised. The general aim of the Society was “to support and promote Slovenian education in all respects on a Catholic–national foundation. To this end, the association establishes and maintains schools and kindergartens for Slovenian children, or assists in their establishment and upkeep, appoints teachers, grants subsidies and awards, and publishes relevant writings and books”.¹¹

The Society was funded through various sources, including membership contributions, donations, and funds raised from organised public events, all of which required prior approval from the authorities. Additional income was generated through organised lectures, social gatherings, theatrical performances, and similar events.¹²

The main focus of the national defence organisation was on providing proper education, which involved organising schools and lectures in various national languages. It is well known that education is a vital factor that not only leads to higher levels of knowledge but also fosters a sense of national identity and belonging. One reason for these measures was that, despite modernising schools and establishing a solid legal framework for general education and better teacher training,¹³ the Monarchy failed to adequately address the issue of national equality. The curriculum served as a general framework for the whole country, while the provinces had autonomy in choosing the language of instruction. In multicultural environments, the future of schools was influenced by the more economically powerful nations, since municipal council representatives were elected based on a property census. Consequently, the language of

9 Devetak, “Boj za slovenske šole,” 370. Andrej Vovko, “‘Stare’ podružnice ‘Družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda’ na Goriškem v letih 1885–1918,” *Goriški letnik*, offprint 6 (1979): 67.

10 Barbara Šatej, “Prispevek k delovanju sežanske ženske podružnice Družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda,” *Kronika* 63, No. 3 (2015): 576.

11 AST, binder 27, fol. 10, class. b/v, Associazioni nazionalistiche, anni 1890–1916, Ženska podružnica družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda in Sesana.

12 Ibidem.

13 Mirjana Kontestabile Rovis, “Pogledi na delovanje in usposabljanje bodočih učiteljev na učiteljskišči Koper: 1947–1968” (doctoral thesis, University of Primorska, 2024), 15.

instruction was determined by provincial school authorities, which, in the provinces inhabited by Slovenians – apart from Carniola – were mostly managed by German and Italian officials.¹⁴

The Sts Cyril and Methodius Society and Its Work

As mentioned, the main aim of the Sts Cyril and Methodius Society was to “comprehensively support and promote Slovenian education on a Catholic-national basis”. They achieved this by building and maintaining school buildings and kindergartens, employing teachers, providing support and awards to students, and publishing Slovenian books. Through its activities, the Society became an important centre of Slovenian national awakening, especially in ethnically “endangered” parts of Slovenian territory where no other Slovenian associations or organisations existed.¹⁵ The societies had mixed membership, including both men and women. Most were composed of mixed membership. Their activity levels were highest either at the very beginning of their formation or following a period of successful revitalisation. Their activities focused on fundraising and organising annual assemblies, as well as various gatherings that included speeches, declamations, singing, theatrical performances, orchestral and drum performances, celebrations, and dances. These events also included bonfires and the so-called “flower days”, during which girls and young women sold flowers to raise funds. Another important activity of the branches, especially in border areas, was the collection of books.¹⁶

The Society's bulletin highlighted the purpose and importance of the Society, clearly presenting the much-needed appeal and information about its establishment: “But for *Slovenianness*, too, the dawn of better days has arrived. In our age, culture is spreading into all national circles. Education in particular is that source from which people gain general enlightenment as well as religious and national conviction, when it is based on the only true foundation, the mother tongue. Whoever forbids a people its language in schools and imposes a foreign tongue upon it restrains, with a cruel hand, the most tender feelings toward nation and homeland. And alas, God! A German society has been established among us which, under the pretext of wishing to provide the children of its own nation with instruction in their mother tongue, is founding schools in our Slovenian regions and inviting Slovenian children into them, to instil, through a foreign language, hatred toward their own nation into their young hearts.”¹⁷ This quotation comes from the Society's own periodical, initially titled *Vestnik šolske družbe Cirila in Metoda* and, after 1904, *Koledar šolske družbe Cirila in Metoda*. The publication appeared once a year (later every two or four years). The first issue contained

14 Ibid., 16. Stane Okoliš, *Zgodovina šolstva na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana: Slovenski šolski muzej, 2008) 80, 82–84.

15 Devetak, “Boj za slovenske šole,” 370–71.

16 Andrej Vovko, *Odborniki in članstvo podružnic Družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda 1885–1918* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2004), 9.

17 *Vestnik šolske družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda* 1, No. 1 (1887): 4–5.

the historical background explaining the reasons for and necessity of establishing the Society, the report from the founding assembly, and lists of members and patrons. It also included reports from meetings as well as scholarly and literary contributions. Additionally, it provided a list of branches established up to 1887. At that time, the Society had 64 branches with a total of 4,180 members. Subsequent issues followed a similar format but gradually became more detailed and extensive. They included information on financial reports, schools and kindergartens, library holdings, educational materials, benefactors, as well as announcements and advertisements.

In regions inhabited by diverse national groups, such as Istria, Gorizia, and other parts of the Austrian Littoral, the effort to establish the Society as well as kindergartens and schools aimed at resisting the Germanisation and Italianisation of the population was particularly strong to prevent the children of Slovenian parents from distancing “from their national identity” and developing “contempt for their mother tongue”. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Society’s second assembly was held in Trieste, where the first kindergarten was established, alongside the creation of the first women’s branch.¹⁸ With the establishment of private kindergartens and primary schools in the nationally most “endangered” areas of Slovenian territory, the Society “sought to remedy the injustices of official school policy, since in many places Slovenians did not have schools in their own language, even though, due to their numbers, they were fully entitled to them”.¹⁹ According to the historian Andrej Vovko,²⁰ the greatest achievements were made in the Trieste area and also in Goriška.

Certainly, the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius could not compete on equal footing with the *Schulverein* and *Lega Nazionale*, which were supported not only by Austrian Germans and Italians but also by Germany and Italy. In the Slovenian lands, however, it pursued a very important mission by relying on the support of nationally conscious Slovenians.²¹

In this context, branches operating in the border regions were often critical of the attitudes of the central branches in Carniola, where issues of preserving and safeguarding Slovenian national interests were largely absent. Branches from the Littoral repeatedly voiced their dissatisfaction with the indifference shown by the central Slovenian region. As reported in the *Novice* newspaper, they emphasised the disproportionate burden they carried in preserving the Slovenian community in borderland and multi-ethnic areas: “This year, we from the Littoral have contributed more to the Society than it has given to us. However, it cannot be expected that the people of the Littoral should bear all the costs alone year after year, especially as these expenses continue to increase. If this is what is expected of us, then the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius is of no real use to us, since its primary purpose is undoubtedly to support Slovenians

18 Ibid., 24.

19 Andrej Vovko, “Stare’ podružnice,” 67.

20 Andrej Vovko was a Slovenian historian, one of the most productive authors about the activities of the Sts Cyril and Methodius Society. For further information, see: *Slovenski biografski leksikon, Andrej Vovko*, accessed on 2 March 2026, <https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi815803/>.

21 Vovko, “Stare’ podružnice,” 67.

along the linguistic borders in maintaining essential schools and kindergartens. What will happen to us if our willingness to make sacrifices here at the border diminishes, while in Carniola it remains as insignificant as it was in 1890? ... Your sacred duty is to ensure the national survival of Slovenians along the linguistic borders”.²²

This statement reflects the frustration felt by Slovenian communities in border regions, especially in the Littoral, towards the central Slovenian territory. It highlights a constant feeling of vulnerability and a strong consciousness of the need to defend their linguistic and national rights. The issues related to language equality and representation in public life were often less apparent to those living in areas where Slovenians were in the majority. As a result, communities along linguistic and ethnic borders aimed to have their voices heard, underlining that their efforts and sacrifices in pursuing shared national goals were significantly greater.

Women's Branches of the Sts Cyril and Methodius Society in Border Areas

With the “growing awareness among national elites that national consciousness needed to be spread among women of all social and societal groups opened up new opportunities for them in the sphere of national and public engagement”.²³ In fact, the cooperation within “associations represented one of the most important opportunities for women's public and national work ...” as “women had been active in reading rooms and national societies”.²⁴

The women's branches of the Society served as key advocates of its ideas and as a modernising influence within the organisation's activities in peripheral areas. In practice, women were the most active members of the Society. It was the first organisation to attract large numbers of Slovenian women, irrespective of class background or educational level. Members came from various occupational backgrounds, including teachers, kindergarten teachers, civil servants, landowners, merchants, innkeepers, and milliners. However, in membership lists, their affiliation was often recorded in relation to their husbands' or fathers' occupations. Family ties were common, with husbands and wives, fathers and sons, and mothers and daughters frequently belonging to the same branch.²⁵

The Society recognised women's particular capacity to contribute to charitable activities supporting its mission and objectives.²⁶ Therefore, women, who fought for emancipation, became actively involved in this process and “in the second half of the 19th century, the role of women in shaping national consciousness steadily increased,

22 “Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda,” *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* 44, 6 November 1891, 357–58.

23 Devetak, “Boj za slovenske šole,” 375.

24 Ibid.

25 Vovko, *Odborniki in članstvo*, 9–10.

26 Šatej, “Prispevek k delovanju,” 576.

manifesting primarily through their entry into public life and active involvement in the fields of national defence, education, and culture”.²⁷ The women’s associations and their work played a significant role in reinforcing national identity. This was especially emphasised in ethnically diverse border areas and in rural regions where most of the Slovenian population resided. Education, particularly education in Slovenian – the establishment of schools in the Slovenian language was therefore crucial. However, this was not the only activity or role they engaged in.

Within Austro-Hungary, urban centres played a vital role in fostering the development of women’s national associations. These societies later served as advocates and organisational models for branches established in rural areas, especially in border regions and regions with mixed nationalities. Women’s branches and their activities thus became key agents of national consciousness in these settings, while also promoting the idea of women as equal participants in public life.

Women’s branches of the Society were also established in the Austrian Littoral. According to data gathered by the Slovenian historian Andrej Vovko, the Austrian Littoral had ten women’s branch committees in the Gorizia region, two in the port city of Trieste, and none in the Slovenian part of Istria.²⁸ Istria held a particular position because the Slovenian population was largely absent from urban centres. This imbalance was also evident in politics: the region’s representatives in the Vienna parliament during the 1848 election were all Italian, except for the electoral curia in Podgrad, where the *Reichsrat* representative was Slovenian. In Podgrad, a branch of the Society was established in 1886 with an all-male governing board. Besides this branch, only three others existed in Istria: one in Breg near Trieste, established in 1911; one covering Klanec, Ocizla, and Materija, founded in 1910; and another for Kozina and its surroundings, also established in 1910.²⁹ Archival sources related to the Society also reveal aspects of the situation in rural areas. In a letter from the village of Dekani dated 1893, the teacher requested Slovenian books as prizes for the most diligent pupils at the local school. The letter was written by the headmaster Ivan Kuret, who also emphasised the challenges posed by the activities of the Italian organisation *Lega Nazionale*, which encouraged inhabitants of peripheral areas to enrol their children in Italian schools.³⁰ Another example comes from the village of Krkavče in 1895, where the auxiliary teacher Henrik Šonc first expressed his appreciation for the Society’s generous donation that helped build the village school, and then asked for additional funds to purchase educational materials for the poor children attending it.³¹ A similar letter of gratitude for the Society’s support was sent from the same school in 1898, signed by Jakob Čemažar, the school’s headmaster and catechist. Once again, it highlighted the

27 Devetak, “Boj za slovenske šole,” 373.

28 Vovko, *Odborniki in članstvo*.

29 *Ibid.*, 447–50.

30 SI AS, Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, AS 622, Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda v Ljubljani (1886–cca. 1952), binder 3, fol. 2333, 15 July 1893. A letter from Ivan Kuret, the headmaster of the school in Dekani, to the Society.

31 SI AS 622, binder 4, fol. 2992, 23 January 1895. A letter from Henrik Šonc (?), an auxiliary teacher in the school in Krkavče, to the Society.

difficult situation faced by Slovenian schools in the region. A persistent problem was opposition from the local municipal commissioner, who opposed the annual lump-sum funding for essential school materials. The report also referenced the activities of irredentist groups, which were inviting members of the population to move to the Italian side while simultaneously attempting to establish a school there.³²

The critical situation in rural areas was recognised. However, the first female branches were established in urban settings, most notably in Trieste, the principal Austrian port, commercial hub, and economic centre, in 1887, followed by a branch in Gorizia in 1889.³³ From that “starting point”, the Society engaged in activities in peripheral regions, including smaller towns and villages, where it often played a decisive role and, in some cases, was the only institution fostering national affiliation in rural areas. This is evident from the examples above. Even in villages where branches were not formally established, the Society's involvement was still evident through donations of funds, books, and other educational materials.

As we have already mentioned, the growth of national consciousness was closely linked to the establishment of Slovenian-language schools, which helped increase levels of education and general knowledge. The importance of education was also highlighted in other contexts, such as in Istria, in a letter from a teacher about the situation in the province of Styria (the eastern part of today's Slovenia). The letter was sent to the Society requesting support in acquiring and distributing books. The teacher stressed the significance of books for education, moral development, and the cultural shaping of young people, especially in rural areas. It emphasises that such support would foster intellectual growth, moral development, and the region's overall benefit.³⁴ The significance of knowledge and higher education in the Slovenian language, both written and literary, was a crucial factor in promoting national consciousness. Another example is the letter from Komen,³⁵ once again addressed to the main organisation in Ljubljana, advocating for the establishment of higher schools for girls, or at least for financial aid to enable Slovenian-language education for girls in advanced classes: “Therefore, if we genuinely wish to stand on our own, we must pay special attention to the education of the youth, so that we can shape them into strong and aware individuals, conscious of their national mission. The upbringing of our youth, particularly the younger generations, forms the foundation of social progress and the strength of our nation. Only when education is firmly grounded in national principles and rooted in a sincere love for the homeland can we raise capable people. Only then can we preserve our own nation and language, enabling them to resist and

32 SI AS 622, binder 5, fol. 4266, 19 December 1898. A letter from Jakob Čemažar (?), the headmaster and catechist in the school in Krkavče, to the Society.

33 Šatej, “Prispevek k delovanju,” 577–78.

34 SI AS 622, Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda v Ljubljani (1886–cca. 1952), binder 4, fol. 2598, a letter from the teacher, Peter Kavčič, Leskovec pri Ptuj, Prošnja za darovanje knjig, ki bi vplivale na gospodarsko izobraževanje. Ptuj, sent to the Society on 27 December 1893.

35 In Komen, the men's branch was established in 1891. There was no women's branch. – Vovko, *Odborniki in članstvo*, 383–84.

endure.”³⁶ This letter is written in an idealistic tone, emphasising the crucial role of education in the Littoral, which was perceived as “endangered” by German and Italian influence. It also stresses that the elites must first be educated in Slovenian, so they can act as advocates and exert influence to promote Slovenian-language education among other social groups.

After the important initial step, other activities undertaken by the Society’s members proved to be significant as well. The Society’s work and educational efforts expanded into additional areas, especially in rural regions, where they supported agricultural production through instruction in cultivation techniques and the prevention of crop diseases. In this way, the Society played a vital role in promoting broader economic development. In this sphere, as in the social sphere, the women’s branches have been very active.

In fact, the proportion of independent women’s branches within the Slovenian Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius was relatively high. In 1900, it accounted for 38,8 per cent of all members of the Society, excluding women in mixed branches, whose inclusion would have further increased their share. As early as the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius’s regular assembly in 1893, held in Sežana in the Karst region, it was already observed, based on a review of the development and growth of its branches, that women’s branches made up the majority. The total number of branches from 1885 to 1918 was 336.³⁷

In the Austrian Littoral, the women’s branches were, as mentioned, established in the city of Trieste and in Gorizia, as well as in smaller towns like Kobarid, Ajdovščina, Sežana, Tolmin, and in rural areas such as Brje near Rihemberk, Dornberg(k), Pevma, Prvačina, and Ročinj.³⁸

Throughout their work, promoting education for economic development was important. In the previously mentioned branch of Dornberk, a cultural celebration was combined with a lecture on viticulture. In the local newspaper *Soča*, published on 17 August 1901, an invitation to attend an event was published: “In Dornberk, tomorrow, the 18th of this month, at 5 p.m., the women’s branch of the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius will hold a festivity... The honourable public is most cordially invited to this celebration, which will also include a visit to the construction of the Vipava railway at Dornberk, currently at its busiest and most interesting stage, and a complete novelty for the people of our region. Friends of viticulture will be aided by guides who will show them the plantations of American vines, both dry- and green-grafted.”³⁹ As noted by the historian Robert Devetak, the lecture on viticulture was important

36 SIAS 622 Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda v Ljubljani (1886–cca. 1952), binder 2, fol. 1738, a letter from Justina Štrukelj, sent from Komen to the Society in Ljubljana on 8 July 1892. The letter also addresses other issues, including the lack of interest in establishing a women’s branch in Komen and, consequently, the need to support the already existing men’s branch.

37 Vovko, *Odborniki in članstvo*, 12.

38 Vovko, *Odborniki in članstvo*: Ajdovščina (1892), Brje near Rihemberk (nowadays Branik) (1908), Dornberk (1892), Gorica (1889), Kobarid (1894), Pevma (1909), Prvačina (1894), Ročinj (1899), Sežana (1892), and Tolmin (1892).

39 “Domače in razne novice. Dornberk,” *Soča*, 17 August 1901, 3.

because, at the beginning of the 20th century, the sector faced a crisis caused by downy mildew and phylloxera.⁴⁰ We can see from this example that the aim of raising awareness and knowledge among the rural population was recognised by both the Society and the female branches.

Women before Men. The Sts Cyril and Methodius Female Branch in Sežana

A branch was also established in Sežana in 1892 for the town and its surrounding area. The women's branch was founded before the men's, which was established in July 1893.⁴¹ It was no coincidence that the branches were located in areas of growing economic importance. In the second half of the 19th century, Sežana experienced significant growth. A key factor in this development was the construction of the Southern Railway in 1857, which connected Vienna with Trieste and passed directly through its territory. From a teamsters' village along the main Vienna–Trieste road, Sežana evolved into a lively urban settlement and the administrative centre of the Karst. As noted by the historian Barbara Šatej, Sežana's position within its national structure was also distinctive, as "the majority of the population was Slovenian, while Italians and Germans, mostly from higher social classes, made up a smaller proportion."⁴² The town's rapid economic growth and population increase were accompanied by social and cultural development, which was closely linked to a vibrant national movement. The so-called *tabori* (mass political rallies/manifestations) of 1870 in Sežana furthered cultural life and the establishment of associations. Among those formed and active in Sežana until World War I were both the women's and men's branches of the Sts Cyril and Methodius Society.

The first president of the Sežana branch was Marija Mahorčič, the wife of the local mayor and provincial deputy Rajmund Mahorčič.⁴³ We have limited information about her, mostly concerning her husband's political career. Both came from families of innkeepers. Marija, born Jeršan, was the daughter of innkeeper Anton Jeršan – Gnezde from Unec and Terezija, who was the daughter of Gašper Obersnel – Gasparot from Divača. The Mahorčič family owned an inn in Sežana, renowned for its good food and wine. Her husband was also recognised as an advocate for the economic issues of the Slovenian countryside and was among the first national awakers from the Karst. The Mahorčič family⁴⁴ originally came from rural areas near Naklo, close to

40 Devetak, "Boj za slovenske šole," 380.

41 Vovko, "Stare' podružnice," 90. *Vestnik šolske družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda* 7, No. 7 (1893): 152.

42 Šatej, "Prispevek k delovanju," 578.

43 Rajmund Mahorčič was a Slovenian politician (the mayor of Sežana and provincial deputy in Gorizia). – *Slovenski biografski leksikon, Rajmund Mahorčič*, accessed on 2 March 2026, [https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi922620/.Rajmund_\(Frančišek_Karol\)_Mahorčič](https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi922620/.Rajmund_(Frančišek_Karol)_Mahorčič) | *Obrazi slovenskih pokrajin*, accessed on 2 March 2026, <https://www.obrazislovenskihpokrajin.si/oseba/rajmund-francisek-karol-mahorcic/>.

44 Ibid.

Motovun, and was well acquainted with the local rural economy. As innkeepers, they had direct insight into an important segment of economic life and actively contributed to fostering and promoting the local economy within a broader national context. Due to health issues, Marija resigned from her presidential duties at the branch's general assembly on 11 March 1894.

Marija Mahorčič was succeeded by Zinka (Terezija) Rybář, wife of the politician and diplomat Otokar Rybář.⁴⁵ The presidents and more active members of the Society were usually related. Marija Mahorčič's husband, Rajmund, was the brother of Emilija Mahorčič, Otokar's mother. Another president was Franja Gulič, daughter of a wealthy innkeeper from Tacen near Ljubljana. She married Karel Gulič⁴⁶ and moved to Sežana in 1876. Karel was a landowner, merchant, and innkeeper. In 1881, after her husband's death, she took over his business, successfully managed the teamsters' inn and the public weigh station, and oversaw the large estate. At the same time, she actively engaged in the town's social life.⁴⁷ As Barbara Šatej noted, the members of the branch were mostly the wives of Sežana's wealthier citizens, who also financially supported the association.⁴⁸ However, it is also clear that women active in the branch (presidents, deputies, committee members, secretaries, treasurers) operated autonomously and independently, with well-defined ideas, tasks, and objectives across several projects, such as organising meetings and events.

The Assembly in Sežana

The "revolution" in transport (steam railway) significantly improved transport networks and, consequently, the accessibility of various locations. Although the railway was not primarily designed to promote new leisure activities, it indirectly made it easier to reach places seeking to establish themselves as tourist destinations. Travel became faster, more affordable, and more widely accessible, as railway fares were considerably lower than those of stagecoach services. The introduction of timetables enabled scheduled stops (of varying lengths) in selected towns, as well as the continuation of journeys to other destinations.⁴⁹ Within this broader context of enhanced accessibility, the town of Sežana benefited from its strategic transport location and proximity to increasingly popular tourist sites, such as the karst caves of Vilenica, Divaška Vilenica, and Škocjan. As tourism gradually grew in economic importance, cave tourism also became part of this wider process. The significance of this activity is further demonstrated by the organisation of events during Society meetings.

45 Slovenski biografski leksikon, *Otokar Rybář*, accessed on 2 March 2026, <https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi530001/>.

46 Franja Malenšek (por. Gulič) Mahorčič | *Obrazi slovenskih pokrajin*, accessed on 2 March 2026, <https://www.obrazislovenskihpokrajin.si/oseba/franja-malensek-por-gulic/>.

47 Šatej, "Prispevek k delovanju," 580–81. In her paper, Šatej extensively wrote about female presidents and their family ties.

48 Šatej, "Prispevek k delovanju," 581.

49 Kavrečič Božeglav, *Turizem v Avstrijskem Primorju*.

The Society organised an assembly annually. The one on 26 July 1893 was held in Sežana, only a year after the female branch was founded. The Society's annual assembly took place in different towns each year, ranging from larger places like Ljubljana, Kranj, and Maribor to smaller ones such as Bled, Postojna, and Sežana.

After the official ceremonies, assembly, and protocols, the gathering continued more informally. The assembly and the joint lunch were held in the garden of the provincial deputy Mahorčič (alternative locations were arranged in case of bad weather). The afternoon programme included an excursion to Divaška Vilenica (now known as Divača Cave), which had been discovered in 1884 by a local resident, caver, and guide Gregor Žiberna.⁵⁰ The costs of the approximately two-hour cave tour (including entrance fee and candles) were mainly covered by the Society, with an additional contribution from the attendees. Alternatively, participants could visit the Lipica Stud Farm.⁵¹ The organisers estimated that around 200 people would take part in the excursion.

As the Society's *Vestnik* publication stated: "During the visit to the cave, the excursionists also realised that our homeland still holds many attractions that are unknown even to its own compatriots. Slovenian societies in particular are encouraged to organise visits to this Vilenica..."⁵² The potential for economic development and the increased visibility of the region's natural resources and attractions have been recognised, and significant efforts have been made to promote these sites. Other organisations and individuals also visited the cave. The report paid particular attention to the cave's administrators, who had arranged for the cave to be further illuminated for the occasion of the visit.⁵³

This example highlights the broader importance of the Society's involvement in the life of the Slovenian community, showing that its activities went beyond mere cultural or educational engagement and made tangible contributions to both the economic and social spheres, strengthening a sense of belonging and Slovenian identity.

Conclusion

My research examines the connection between national movements and policies of national affirmation, along with their effects on economic and social development. The example of the female branches of the Society of Sts Cyril and Methodius shows that, among their activities, women not only contributed to shaping the school system, raising funds for poor children, occasionally substituting for it, and promoting the Slovenian language, but also improved the social conditions of the Slovenian

⁵⁰ *Slovenski biografski leksikon*, Gregor Žiberna, accessed on 2 March 2026, <https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi900072/>.

⁵¹ SI AS 622, Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda v Ljubljani (1886–cca. 1952), binder 2, fol. 1738, Description of the programme of the Sežana assembly, sent to the Sts Cyril and Methodius Society in Ljubljana, 11 July 1893.

⁵² *Vestnik šolske družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda* 7, No. 7 (1893): 66–67.

⁵³ See note 51 and 52.

population. In doing so, these branches helped improve the economic status and influence of the Slovenian community in the Austrian Littoral.⁵⁴ Within the Society, women from all social backgrounds were welcomed, and it was recognised that they could play a vital role in expanding branches, increasing financial resources, and strengthening national awareness. The involvement of women was especially important for the “national” cause, notably in areas such as information and education, establishing Slovenian schools – particularly in rural areas – collecting funds, and organising lectures for the local population.

During this initial phase of research, I can only provide partial data and tentative conclusions, illustrated with a few examples. Accordingly, this paper represents only the first stage of research, offering preliminary insights into women’s involvement beyond the “traditional” roles of mothers, carers, and housekeepers. Even at this early stage, it is clear that women not only engaged in society and public life to support children’s education and participate in charitable work, but also took on active roles in broader spheres, including social and economic life. This is exemplified by the case of the female branch in Sežana, which, although still a village during the period studied, was an important economic and social centre for the Slovenian community. In this predominantly Slovenian village, women also had the opportunity to participate in national movements and social and cultural affirmation. They seized this opportunity successfully.

This early research highlights women’s involvement and contributions, demonstrating that their engagement had a tangible impact on both community development and cohesion, as well as the economic and social life of the Slovenian population. Their work shows that female agency was indeed a key factor in the development of national identity and in the implementation of practical measures to support education, social welfare, and cultural promotion. Future research can build on these insights by exploring the long-term effects of women’s involvement in local communities and their lasting influence on Slovenian national and social life. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of recognising women not merely as supporters of societal functions but as active agents shaping cultural, economic, and political landscapes.

54 Devetak, “Boj za slovenske šole,” 382.

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ŽENSKÉ PODRUŽNICE DRUŽBE SV. CIRILA IN METODA KOT AKTERKE SOCIALNEGA IN GOSPODARKEGA RAZVOJA V OBMEJNEM PROSTORU: UVODNA RAZPRAVA

POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava razmerja in prepletенost med nacionalnim gibanjem ter gospodarskim in socialnim razvojem. S poudarkom na ženskem nacionalnem aktivizmu v etnično mešanem perifernem (obmejnem) prostoru raziskava preučuje avstro-ogrsko deželo Avstrijsko primorje kot primer nacionalno heterogenega prostora, v katerem so se ob neenakem dostopu do političnih, gospodarskih in kulturnih virov soočali različni nacionalni interesi.

Posebej je obravnavano delo ženskih podružnic Družbe sv. Cirila in Metoda v Avstrijskem primorju. Ženske so aktivno sodelovale pri oblikovanju šolskega sistema, zbiranju sredstev za revne otroke, ga ponekod tudi deloma nadomeščale in prispevale k spodbujanju slovenske rabe jezika, hkrati pa prispevale k izboljšanju socialnih razmer slovenskega prebivalstva. S tem so podružnice spodbujale tudi krepitev gospodarskega razvoja.

V obmejnih, etnično heterogenih okoljih so imele gospodarske in socialne strategije pomembno vlogo pri oblikovanju in utrjevanju nacionalnih idej, saj so spodbujale

krepitev nacionalne pripadnosti na vseh ravneh življenja. Ženske so se v tem procesu izkazale kot pomembne, vendar pogosto spregledane akterke, ki so delovale na stičišču nacionalne mobilizacije, družbenih dejavnosti in gospodarskih praks.

Družba sv. Cirila in Metoda je v svoje vrste sprejemala ženske iz vseh družbenih slojev, pri čemer je bilo prepoznano, da lahko odigrajo ključno vlogo pri širjenju podružnic, povečevanju finančnih sredstev in krepitvi narodne zavesti.

V tej začetni fazi raziskave lahko predstavim le delne podatke, ponazorjene z nekaj primeri. Prispevek tako predstavlja zgolj prvo fazo raziskovanja in ponuja uvodni vpogled v udejstvovanje žensk onkraj »tradicionalnih« vlog mater, skrbnic in gospodinj. Že iz te preliminarne raziskave pa je razvidno, da se ženske niso vključevale v družbeno in javno življenje le z namenom podpore izobraževanju otrok in dobrodelnemu delu, temveč so prevzemale tudi aktivne vloge na širših področjih, vključno z družbenim in gospodarskim življenjem.