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Oliver Pejić*

“Foreign” Businesspeople and Economic Nationalism in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes: Cases from the Maribor Oblast (1922–1929)

IZVLEČEK

»INOZEMNI« PODJETNIKI IN EKONOMSKI NACIONALIZEM V KRALJEVINI SRBOV, HRVATOV IN SLOVENCEV: PRIMERI IZ MARIBORSKE OBLASTI (1922–1929)

Pričujoči prispevek obravnava vlogo ekonomskega nacionalizma v upravni praksi medvojne jugoslovanske države na primeru prošelj tujih državljanov za obrtna dovoljenja v Mariborski oblasti. Po kratkem pregledu relevantne zakonodaje in upravnih struktur se prispevek osredotoča tako na prisotnost nacionalističnega diskurza kot tudi na splošne omembe narodnosti v upravnem postopku. Raziskava ugotavlja, da je narodnostna pripadnost igrala pomembno diskurzivno vlogo v upravnem postopanju s tujimi državljani v medvojni jugoslovanski državi. Čeprav so uradniki narodnost razumeli tako v biološkem (»po rojstvu«) kot tudi v družbenem/ideološkem smislu (»po prepričanju«), so bili zainteresirani predvsem za njeno izražanje v obliki empirično preverljivih praks in vzorcev obnašanja. Raziskava obenem kaže, da se deklarativna pomembnost narodnosti v upravnem postopku

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ni dejansko odražala v praktičnih izidih posameznih prošenj. Ministrstvo za trgovino in industrijo v Beogradu je tako v imenu mednarodne vzajemnosti pogosto podeljevalo koncesije tudi kandidatom, ki so jih negativno ocenile lokalne oblasti.

Ključne besede: Kraljevina SHS, ekonomski nacionalizem, Jugoslavija, državljanstvo, Štajerska

ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses the role of economic nationalism in the interwar Yugoslav state's administrative practice by examining petitions for business permits filed by foreign citizens in the Maribor Oblast. After outlining the relevant legislation and administrative structures, the paper focuses on the presence of nationalist discourse as well as general references to nationality within the administrative process. The study shows that national belonging played an important discursive role in the administrative treatment of foreign businesspeople in the interwar Yugoslav state. While officials understood national belonging in both biological ("by birth") as well as social/ideological terms ("by conviction"), they were primarily interested in its manifestation as empirically verifiable practices and behaviours. All the while, the study shows that the declarative importance of nationhood did not translate into the practical outcomes of individual petitions. In the name of international reciprocity, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Belgrade regularly awarded business licenses to candidates whose petitions were negatively assessed by the local authorities.

Keywords: Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, economic nationalism, Yugoslavia, citizenship, Styria

Introduction

The question of how economic policy should look like in a properly "national" state had been part of a wider dilemma faced by Central and Eastern European statesmen after dynastic authority in the region came to be abruptly replaced by national sovereignty in the wake of the Great War.¹ Like in so many other post-imperial nation-states that had made up the region's political map, economic policy in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was likewise importantly shaped by principles of economic

1 On the wider ramifications of this transition, see Natasha Wheatley, 'Central Europe as Ground Zero of the New International Order,' *Slavic Review* 78, No. 4 (2019): 900–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2019.248>. Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023).

nationalism.² This discourse was particularly present in the state's former Habsburg provinces in the north. There, local economic elites were oftentimes aligned with German, Hungarian, or Italian nationalist projects, which had enjoyed local or, in the case of Hungary, state-level hegemony during the late Habsburg period.³ Since the new kingdom legitimized itself as a nation-state for the "triune" Serb, Croat and Slovene nation, there thus existed a strong expectation that the authorities should somehow support businesspeople who could claim membership in the state's titular nationality against their newly minoritized yet economically oftentimes dominant peers. In Klaus Richter's words, this was in effect a "project of national economic empowerment" intended to "enhance the economic agency of the core national group by taking it from those who had unfairly seized it".⁴

Despite public expectations (as well as anxieties) regarding a new "national" economic policy running high in the new Yugoslav state, practical economic policy did not ultimately lead to radical transformations in the perceived national makeup of the local economic sphere.⁵ Although a short period of "nostrification" had led to the seizure of assets belonging to foreign citizens in the early years of Yugoslav rule, state oversight could effectively be avoided by acquiring Yugoslav citizenship or establishing a majority "native" share in a company's ownership structure.⁶ While the authorities had

2 In this paper, the term "economic nationalism" is not used in its political-economic definition to refer to state-level protectionist economic policies. Instead, it refers to practices, behaviours and policies serving nationalist goals within the economic sphere. To borrow Torsten Lorenz's succinct definition, it entails "economic behavior intended to serve the unity, independence and strength of the nation, and which is determined by non-economic, political purposes". Torsten Lorenz, 'Introduction: Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts,' in Torsten Lorenz, ed., *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts: Eastern Europe in the 19th and Early 20th Century*, Frankfurter Studien Zur Wirtschafts- Und Sozialgeschichte Ostmitteleuropas 15, European Social Science History Conference (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag GmbH, 2006), 9–10.

3 For a local case study on nationalist economic policy in Dualist Hungary, see Anders E. B. Blomqvist, *Economic Nationalizing in the Ethnic Borderlands of Hungary and Romania: Inclusion, Exclusion and Annihilation in Szatmár/Satu-Mare 1867–1944*, Stockholm Studies in History 101 (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2014), 61–160. In Cisleithania, the pursuit of nationalist policy at the local level was most evident in the autonomous statutory towns, which fulfilled first-degree administrative responsibilities equivalent to that of district captaincies. Since their elected municipal councils often consisted of nationalists, the latter were able to use their administrative prerogatives to pursue nationalist goals at the local level. See Jeremy King, 'The Municipal and the National in the Bohemian Lands, 1848–1914,' in William Whyte, ed., *Nationalism and the Reshaping of Urban Communities in Europe, 1848–1914* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 107–08, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306516_2.

4 Klaus Richter, 'Economic Empowerment in Empires and Nation States: East Central Europe from the 19th Century to Today,' *Baltic Worlds* 14, No. 3 (2021): 8.

5 Surveys on the national identity of businessowners that were conducted in 1938/9 by the Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Industry in Ljubljana reveal the persistent prominence of "German" capital in interwar Yugoslav Slovenia's economy; particularly within the historic region of Styria. It is also worth noting that many of these businesses were owned by German-identifying Yugoslav citizens and had been operating continuously since the late Habsburg period. See Tone Zorn, 'Nemški trgovski obrati v Sloveniji v letih 1938/1939 (značaj in lastništvo),' *Kronika* 18, No. 2 (1970): 113–20. Tone Zorn, 'Nemški industrijski obrati v Sloveniji v letih 1938–1939,' *Kronika* 20, No. 1 (1972): 34–38.

6 On the character of "nostrification" in Yugoslav Slovenia, see France Kresal, 'Slovensko podjetništvo v industriji,' *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 34, No. 1 (1994): 57–74. Željko Oset, 'Nostrifikacija premoženja po prvi svetovni vojni s poudarkom na območju sodnega okraja Maribor,' in Željko Oset et al., eds., *Mesto in gospodarstvo: mariborsko gospodarstvo v 20. stoletju* (Maribor: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino; Muzej narodne osvoboditve Maribor, 2010), 77–138. Željko Oset, 'Nadzor premoženja "tujerodcev" po prvi svetovni vojni na Ptujskem,' in Martin Šteiner, ed., *Ptuj v 20. stoletju: zbornik ob 125- letnici ptujskega muzeja* (Ptuj: Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj-Ormož, 2018). While a company was only considered native after more than ½ of its capital was in Yugoslav hands, it is interesting to

indeed initially intensely scrutinized the national loyalties of local businesspeople, the successful acquisition of Yugoslav citizenship ultimately protected ethnically minoritized businesspeople (*inorodci*) from formal discrimination on national grounds.⁷ All the while, the relative weight of nationhood within the petitioning process had been noticeably different for businesspeople who were so-called *inozemci*. Although the latter figured as legal foreigners by virtue of their citizenship, their presumed national belonging—an important asset in the new “national” world—was potentially subject to contestation.⁸ Whether understood in quasi-organicist (“by birth”) or subjectivist/behavioural terms (“by conviction”), nationhood remained a relevant administrative category, and it was also thoroughly scrutinized by the responsible authorities.

The ensuing interactions between foreign applicants for business licenses and the Yugoslav authorities produced administrative cases that offer valuable insights into the practical workings of economic nationalism in one of interwar Central and Eastern Europe’s post-imperial nation-states. The present paper addresses this phenomenon by analysing administrative cases involving foreign businesspeople applying for licenses in the Maribor Oblast throughout the 1920s. The study’s findings contribute to the growing scholarship on the “nationalism-economy nexus” in interwar Central and Europe in two ways.⁹ On the one hand, its source material provides a practical example of how the authorities in one of the region’s new “national” states attempted to administer nationhood as a quasi-objective and empirically verifiable category of belonging.¹⁰ At the same time, its insights into practical decision-making also reveal

note that interwar Romania pursued a more aggressive course. There, nostrification was considered complete when Romanian citizens owned two thirds of a company’s capital and occupied ¾ of its board of directors. See Blomqvist, *Economic Nationalizing*, 254.

- 7 Oliver Pejić, ‘Dometi i ograničenja pripadnosti državnom narodu u Kraljevini Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca: iskustva iz “prečanskih krajeva”’, in Natalija Dimić Lompar et al., eds., *Nova istraživanja jugoslovenske prošlosti: perspektive sa postjugoslovenskog prostora* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2025), 168–74, <https://doi.org/10.31212/2025.nova.istrazivanja.pej.159-180>.
- 8 The post-war border settlements had left hundreds of thousands of Slovene-, Croat-, or Serb-identifying individuals outside the interwar Yugoslav state. At the same time, many of Yugoslavia’s residents also suddenly became legal foreigners as pertinency rights (*Heimatrecht*) became a temporary proxy for citizenship in the Habsburg Empire’s successor states. See Pejić, ‘Dometi i ograničenja,’ 164–65. For a case study on the role of pertinency in post-Habsburg Fiume/Rijeka, see Dominique Kirchner Reill et al., ‘Redefining Citizenship after Empire: The Rights to Welfare, to Work, and to Remain in a Post-Habsburg World,’ *The Journal of Modern History* 94, No. 2 (2022): 326–62, <https://doi.org/10.1086/719447>.
- 9 Stefan Berger and Thomas Fetzter, ‘Introduction,’ in Stefan Berger and Thomas Fetzter, eds., *Nationalism and the Economy: Explorations into a Neglected Relationship* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2019), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789633861998-002>.
- 10 In the (post-)Habsburg space, the administrative objectivization of national belonging saw its first practical implementation in late Habsburg Moravia and became a widespread phenomenon in the interwar period. See Börries Kuzmany, ‘Objectivising National Identity: The Introduction of National Registers in the Late Habsburg Empire,’ *Nations and Nationalism* 29, No. 3 (2023): 975–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12950>. Jeremy King, ‘Who Is Who? National Classification in Imperial Austria, 1867–1914,’ *The Journal of Modern History* 96, No. 2 (2024): 291–331, <https://doi.org/10.1086/730026>. For a representative case study on the objectivization of national belonging in interwar Czechoslovakia’s education system, see e.g. Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008).

the limits of nationalist economic policy in a polity that was characterized by ongoing state-building, regional fragmentation, and divergent elite interests.¹¹

After outlining the relevant legislation and instances of administrative authority, the paper analyses the presence and role of nationalist language within the administrative process while also assessing the practical relevance of nationalist argumentation in the outcomes of individual cases. While top-down instructions from Belgrade obliged the local authorities to routinely interrogate the national credentials of foreign businesspeople, the study shows that their practical relevance remained ambiguous. Although nationalist arguments remained discursively prominent and were heavily employed by both petitioners as well as administrators, the preserved cases indicate that “lacking” national credentials were often overlooked by the central authorities in Belgrade and likely did not play a critical role in determining the successes of individual petitions.

Obtaining a Business License in the Maribor Oblast: The Administrative Process

The Maribor Oblast had been one among two provincial-level administrative units that were newly established via the 1921 Vidovdan Constitution in the Yugoslav state's majority Slovene-speaking northern territories.¹² While its borders did not perfectly align with those of historic provinces, its core consisted of the southern, overwhelmingly Slovene-speaking portion of the former Habsburg Austrian crownland of Styria.¹³ The region was characterized by a majority Slovene-speaking countryside dotted with predominantly German-speaking urban settlements and had been notorious for the intensity of nationalist conflict between locally hegemonic German and advancing Slovene nationalism during the late Habsburg period.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, nationalist

11 Select representative recent examples of case studies that examine the relationship between nationalism and economic actors in interwar Europe's world of nation-states include Blomqvist, *Economic Nationalizing*. Máté Rigó, *Capitalism in Chaos: How the Business Elites of Europe Prospered in the Era of the Great War* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2022). Paris Papamichos Chronakis, *The Business of Transition: Jewish and Greek Merchants of Salonica from Ottoman to Greek Rule*, Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024). Klaus Richter, 'Economic Nationalism, Minority Policies, and the 1930s in Lithuania and Latvia,' in Bradley D. Woodworth et al., eds., *Ethnic Relations in the Baltic Reconsidered*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; Central European University Press, 2026), https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048570447_ch06.

12 Each oblast was headed by a provincial administrator with the title of *veliki župan*, who was directly appointed by the king.

13 The oblast's borders also included the Yugoslav part of the former Cisleithanian crownland of Carinthia, as well as the former Hungarian territories of Prekmurje/Muravidék and Medimurje/Muraköz (today in Croatia).

14 The focal points of German nationalism in Lower Styria were arguably the region's three autonomous towns of Marburg an der Drau/Maribor, Cilli/Celje, and Pettau/Ptuj. Their municipal councils, which were dominated by German nationalists until the end of Habsburg rule, pursued notoriously oppressive policies against the Slovene nationalist movement and its demands for linguistic equality. On the German-Slovene nationalist conflict in Lower Styria, see Janez Cvirn, *Das 'Festungsdreieck': zur politischen Orientierung der Deutschen in der Untersteiermark (1861–1914)*, *Forschungen zur geschichtlichen Landeskunde der Steiermark* 76 (Wien: LIT, 2016). Filip Čuček, *Svoji k svojim: na poti k dokončni nacionalni razmejitvi na Spodnjem Štajerskem v 19. stoletju*, *Zbirka Razpoznavanja*

concerns also remained relevant for local administrative policy within the framework of the new Yugoslav nation-state.

While the oblast was already formally established with the 1921 constitution, it should be noted that its institutions were activated with considerable delay. Provincial-level trade matters were still handled by the so-called Department of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Ljubljana until the latter's disbandment in 1924. After that point, second-degree trade responsibilities passed to the oblast governments, which established special departments for handling economic matters. The oblast administrations remained active until the introduction of a royal dictatorship on 6 January 1929, after which they were replaced by new provincial-level administrative units called *banovine*. These two dates also constitute the basic chronological framework for the present study, which draws from the preserved archival materials of the Maribor Oblast's Department for Trade, Commerce and Industry.¹⁵

Until the introduction of a state-wide unified trade law in 1931, trade legislation in the interwar Yugoslav state was regulated according to inherited legal regimes. In the state's former Cisleithanian territories, the relevant legal framework had been the 1883 Austrian Trade Law (*Gewerbe-Ordnung/Obrtni red*). According to article 8, foreign citizens "are made equal with natives when it comes to starting and exercising a trade by proving formal reciprocity from the state to which they belong. Should reciprocity not be proven, they require a formal permit from the provincial political authorities."¹⁶ In almost every case discussed throughout this paper, administrators referred to article 8 as a formal justification for their decisions. While the 1930s do not fall within the scope of this paper, it is also worth noting that the 1931 Law on Businesses (*Zakon o radnjama*) regulated the legal status of foreign businesspeople in an almost identical manner.¹⁷

While inherited Austrian law thus functioned as the formal legal framework for handling foreign business license petitions throughout the period under investigation, administrative practice was also informed by a range of internal notices issued by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Belgrade. A confidential ordinance that was issued in 1921 and served as a consistent reference point for provincial administrators throughout the period under investigation obliged them to submit every single foreign business petition for inspection to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Belgrade.¹⁸ Although the ministry thus possessed de facto supreme decision-making

= Recognitiones 29 (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2016). Martin Moll, *Kein Burgfrieden: der deutsch-slowenische Nationalitätenkonflikt in der Steiermark 1900–1918* (Innsbruck: Studien, 2007).

15 The present study limits its discussion to petitions filed in the Maribor Oblast because they have been preserved to a satisfactory level. While I have also consulted materials from the analogous department for the Ljubljana Oblast, it appears that almost no administrative cases involving foreign citizens have survived from this collection.

16 "39. Gesetz vom 15. März 1883, betreffend die Abänderung und Ergänzung der Gewerbeordnung," *Reichsgesetzblatt für die im Reichsrathe vertretenen Königreiche und Länder*, 29 March 1883, 115. Translation mine.

17 Article 7 of the law declared equal economic rights for foreign citizens if agreements on reciprocity exist between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and their native state. Should such agreements not exist, decisions on an individual basis were to be made by the provincial administrator (*ban*) or, in cases provided by the law; the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. See *Zakon o radnjama* (Beograd: Državna štamparija Kraljevine Jugoslavije, 1931), 7–8.

18 The ordinance in question was "Pov. III br. 5," issued on 11 February 1921.

power, it apparently did not want to acknowledge this fact to the public; a 1927 notice from the ministry thus explicitly forbade provincial administrators from acknowledging the ministry's authority in their correspondence with petitioners. Instead of referring to the ministry's judgments as "decisions on the merits" (*meritorne odluke*), they were supposed to treat them as mere "internal professional instructions". Conversely, were the provincial governments inclined to reject a petition, they were instructed to justify their decisions on the grounds that the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes did not in fact recognize neither formal nor factual reciprocity with any other state.¹⁹

In 1926, a new internal ordinance from the Ministry introduced an important innovation that very much confirmed the formal relevance of nationhood as an operational category within the administrative process. From that point onwards, petitions were to be accompanied by opinions from the local chambers of commerce, as well as detailed police reports on a petitioner's personal, political, and – critically for this paper – national backgrounds.²⁰ Police reports were to be structured according to a detailed tabular questionnaire that spanned more than twenty questions. Aside from basic personal information, the questionnaire also asked for the following details:

[C]itizenship and nationality; have they filed a petition for acquiring our citizenship; are they of upstanding moral and political behaviour and possess a clean criminal record; if the foreigner is of our nationality, do they have loyal feelings towards the state; are they a communist or a member of some clandestine organization bent on undermining the legal order or the legally established government; are they in the service of some foreign state; can they be considered a strawman owner of a business; ... are they married; do they have children, and do they raise them in our national spirit or not; what schools do the children attend; what language is spoken within the family and at home; does the wife belong to our or some other nationality – specify the nationality?²¹

To speed up the processing of business license petitions, a 1927 ministerial notice that was addressed specifically towards provincial administrators from the former Habsburg parts of the country relegated decision-making to provincial administrators in cases where the foreign petitioner was "of Serbo-Croato-Slovene nationality". To this end, the administrator of the Maribor Oblast once again stressed to his subordinates the importance of "reliably establishing the nationality of foreign petitioners ... Several times, it will be necessary to check the petitioner's claims by means of confidential interrogations regarding their previous lives, public activities, as well as their national and political behaviour in general. If the petitioner has not yet asked for our citizenship, the reason why they have yet to do so must always be specified."²²

19 SIAS 84, t. e. 10, O br. 2022 1927, Ministry of Commerce and Industry to Ljubljana Oblast Provincial Administrator, br. 14782/III, 23 June 1927.

20 SIAS 84, t. e. 5, O br. 3102 1926, Ministry of Commerce and Industry to Ljubljana Oblast Provincial Administrator, br. 17.768/III, 2 November 1926.

21 Ibidem.

22 SIAS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2851/1 1927, Maribor Oblast Administrator to Subordinates, 21 November 1927.

The final innovation to the administrative process throughout the period under investigation came in 1928, when provincial administrators were instructed that proof of reciprocity was no longer necessary for Italian citizens. According to the ministry's interpretation, an 1879 convention signed between Italy and Serbia had already established reciprocity, and a 1920 temporary law extended the validity of international agreements that Serbia had signed with Allied states before the Great War to the entire Yugoslav state.²³ Despite the existence of other similar international conventions, it is interesting to note that comparable privileges were not extended to citizens of any other state during this period. For example, a 1928 commercial signed between Yugoslavia and Germany stipulated that German citizens should have the same rights as "members of the nationality that enjoys the greatest privileges".²⁴ While some applicants explicitly referred to this agreement in their requests, the ministry in Belgrade instructed provincial administrators that they should deny formal reciprocity with Germany and handle all applications from non-Italian citizens according to established procedures.²⁵

Nationalist Discourse and Practical Decision-Making in the Petitioning Process

While nationalist discourse was not universally present in all the cases examined within this study, most of them indeed contained references to a given petitioner's nationality and/or national credentials. Even before the aforementioned 1926 ministerial notice standardized the administrative interrogation of nationhood in the form of a questionnaire, officials on various rungs of the administrative hierarchy would often reference the national belonging of petitioners in their internal correspondence. To cite one example, when forwarding Filip Schnabl's 1925 application for a mixed wares shop in the village of Frankolovo to the ministry in Belgrade, the provincial administrator described him as "an Austrian citizen, a Carinthian refugee, and a Slovene by nationality. He has also filed a petition for acceptance into our citizenship. Because Schnabl is reliable in national terms, it is recommended that his petition be resolved favourably."²⁶

Indeed, it was in fact typical for the authorities to bring up a petitioner's membership in the state's titular nationality as a formal argument for awarding them a business license. Ludovik Jaušnik, an Austrian citizen who had applied for a permit to sell

23 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2760/1 1928, Notice from Ministry of Commerce and Industry, br. 24364/III, 3 November 1928.

24 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2760/1 1928, Maribor Town Magistrate to Maribor Oblast Administrator, štev. 3100/287/29, 4 January 1929.

25 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2760/1 1928, Maribor Oblast Administrator to Maribor Town Magistrate, O br. 582/1, 7 February 1929.

26 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 653/1 1925, Maribor Oblast Administrator to Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 18 March 2025.

timber and agricultural products in the village of Trate, did not gain a positive assessment from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Ljubljana due to the overabundance of similar merchants already working in this area.²⁷ However, the provincial administrator nevertheless recommended his case to the ministry, citing Jaušnik's Slovene nationality as well as repeated attempts to acquire Yugoslav citizenship.²⁸ In its reply, the ministry explicitly stated that the permit should be granted "because the petitioner is a Slovene".²⁹

Nationalist argumentation was even more present in a case involving the company "Seršen & Stegmüller", which developed a patented device for recording the contour of human feet and was applying for a commercial license in Maribor. According to the provincial administrator's assessment, Rudolf Stegmüller was "a Slovene by birth and conviction [*po rodu in mišljenju*], whose name is already reputable among Graz's Slovenes because he used to chair the local *Sokol* as well as the benefactory and educational organization *Domovina* ... Because the new industry would employ a considerable number of native workers and since all shareholders are conscious Slovenes, I believe that the petition should be fulfilled[.]"³⁰ While the authorities apparently treated national belonging as an empirically verifiable category that could reliably be determined by means of external investigation, it is hardly surprising that they also encountered claims regarding national belonging that appeared ambivalent or otherwise disputable. Viktor Ulc, an Austrian citizen and mechanic from the Carinthian town of Guštanj (today Ravne na Koroškem), had apparently claimed Slovene nationality in his petition. However, according to the provincial administrator, this claim "cannot be ascertained considering his mother's pertinency right, as well as the petitioner's behaviour during the Carinthian Plebiscite, when he was employed in German companies in Villach and Donawitz[.]"³¹ He ordered the gendarmerie to conduct confidential interrogations and determine whether the petitioner "publicly declares himself a Slovene".³²

Value judgments related to nationally sensitive practices also arise in the case of Julijana Seidling. Supposedly a native Slovene, she became a Czechoslovak citizen through marriage and was asking for a license to sell confectionary products in the town of Ptuj. The district head's report, which was structured according to the ministry's prescribed questionnaire, contained detailed information on the petitioner's

27 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2527/1 1926, Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Ljubljana to Maribor Oblast Administrator, O br. 30 April 1927.

28 Furthermore, Jaušnik was no longer considered pertinent in his native municipality of Klein, and the question of local demand was likewise supposedly not relevant for free trades such as his. SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2527/1 1926, Maribor Oblast Administrator to Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 6 March 1927.

29 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2527/1 1926, Ministry of Commerce and Industry to Maribor Oblast Administrator, 14 March 1928.

30 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 1679/1 1925, Maribor Oblast Administrator to Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 28 October 1926.

31 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 1006/8 1928, Maribor Oblast Administrator to Prevalje District Captain, 11 April 1928.

32 Ibid.

sociolinguistic practices.³³ While her husband was a Czechoslovak citizen and declared himself of Czech nationality [*narodnost*], the district captain was apparently not convinced and hypothesised that "this might be understood in the sense that he is a citizen of the Czechoslovak Republic".³⁴ In his conclusion, he opined that "since her husband has yet to ask for our citizenship and since she; a Slovene by birth; and he; supposedly a Czech by birth; raise their children in the German language, I cannot recommend a positive resolution to this petition".³⁵ All the while, it is worth noting that overtly critical assessments of people's national behaviour were rare among the preserved cases, and the authorities typically only advised against granting licenses due to lacking professional qualifications and/or lack of local demand for a given trade.

While none of the preserved cases contain the original petitions, some preserved appeals show that the petitioners themselves could likewise use nationalist arguments to justify their own cases. One particularly illustrative case involved France Šunko, an Austrian citizen who lived in Nova vas near Maribor and attempted to procure a butcher's license. After the ministry had mistakenly rejected his petition, he employed a lawyer and produced a lengthy appeal that not only contained model examples of nationalist discourse, but also revealed a rather typical life-story plagued by the troubles of citizenship acquisition in post-Habsburg Europe:

I have already been in Yugoslavia for 23 years and am a son of Slovene parents, whose pertinency right lies on occupied land. I, as well as my parents, have always been of Slovene conviction, and I have also been raised in a national spirit. However, since my father did not take care of his right of option, therefore I, too, remain an Austrian citizen. However, I have long ago filed a petition for our citizenship, but this petition has yet to be resolved. ... Since I am a Carinthian Slovene and have been living for 23 years in this country, to which I formally do not belong but am nonetheless [its] member ... in spirit and nationality, the provincial administrator should have taken this into account and granted my petition for a butcher's license; especially because I have long been a member of all our national associations.³⁶

By treating people's public as well as private practices (language usage, participation in voluntary associations, education, political behaviour etc.) as relevant indicators of their "true" national belonging, the authorities evidently operated with a definition of nationhood that was intuitively subjectivist and consciousness-based yet at the same time deductible from empirically verifiable practices.³⁷ In their parlance,

33 "The petitioner is married; she has a 7-year-old son, with whom his father and mother mostly speak German; in her confectionary and candle-making shop, where there are six Slovene workers, the petitioner mostly speaks Slovene, and her husband can just barely speak Slovene." SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2527 1928, Ptuj District Captain to Maribor Oblast Administrator, 11 June 1928.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 900/2 1926, France Šunko to Maribor Oblast Administrator, 25 October 1926.

37 In his recent study on administrative practices in Cisleithanian provinces that had reached "national compromises", Bórris Kuzmany has called this administrative procedure the "objectivization of national identity". In his definition,

the latter form of national belonging was typically referred to as nationality “by conviction” [*po mišljenju/prepričanju*] and did not necessarily coincide with an individual’s nationality “by birth” [*po rodu/rojstvu*]. Ultimately, this dual understanding of nationhood allowed officials to describe Marija Mörtl, an innkeeper from Račje who had applied for a seamstress’s license, with the following seemingly pleonastic phrase – she was “a born Slovene, and of Slovene nationality as well”.³⁸

By and large, this “empirically verifiable” dimension of nationhood was also politically consequential and therefore held primary relevance in administrative proceedings. This bias is particularly evident in the 1928 case of Jakob Pauša/Pauscha, an Austrian citizen and cooper from Maribor. As per the previously mentioned 1927 provincial administrator’s notice, police authorities were supposed to conduct detailed examinations of a petitioner’s national behaviour to understand whether they truthfully belonged to the titular nationality. However, in Pauscha’s case, the police officially abandoned such inquiries because he was “a Slovene by birth but of German convictions [*nemškega mišljenja*]”.³⁹ He had “spent a longer period among Germans, which is proven by the attachments to his petition; has a German for a wife; and German is spoken in his family”.⁴⁰ Since he could not demand privileged treatment as a member of the titular nationality, additional inquiries in his case appeared redundant.

All the while, some cases also reveal the situational importance of an individual’s presumed biological nationality. When investigating the background of Arnošt Kohnstein, a leatherworker and furrier from Maribor, the authorities identified him as an “Israelite” of Czechoslovak citizenship and Czech nationality. While his Jewish religion evidently did not disqualify him from being categorized as a Czech in terms of his public national practices and private convictions, an official nevertheless found it necessary to underline his Jewish religion in a corresponding police report.⁴¹ Likewise, the perceived relevance of biological nationhood is revealed in some of the documentation produced by the petitioners themselves. In what seems to have been a pre-emptive safeguard against the administration’s potential antisemitism, a petition that lawyer Vekoslav Kukovec produced in the name of Hugo(n) Schmook, a Viennese businessman and owner of a timber impregnating company in Hoče, explicitly referred to the owner’s Roman Catholic birth certificate as evidence for his “of Aryan descent” – a fact that was also underlined by one of the officials.⁴²

On the one hand, the above cases demonstrate that national belonging had been treated as a valid category in the administrative process and that nationalist

“[t]he starting premise was that, although a person’s self-identification with a national group is a deeply subjective feeling, genuine self-identification will also display objective traits, such as speaking the group’s language or sharing its customs, whether in private or in public.” Kuzmany, ‘Objectivising National Identity,’ 987.

38 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 3014/1 1928, Pro domo note, s. d.

39 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 1293/1 1928, Maribor Right Bank District Captain to Maribor Oblast Administrator, 28 April 1928.

40 Ibid.

41 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2250/1 1926, Maribor Police Commissioner to Maribor Right Bank District Captaincy, 11 January 1927.

42 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 531 1925, Hugo Schmook to Maribor Right Bank District Captaincy, 25 May 1925.

considerations were featured prominently in the formal arguments accompanying the assessments of applications. All the while, the question remains to what extent lacking national credentials could affect the practical outcome of individual petitions? It has already been mentioned that we only sporadically encounter cases of local officials explicitly advising against individual petitions on the grounds of questionable national behaviour.⁴³ However, even when their critiques were based on professional and/or economic arguments (e.g. lacking local demand for a given trade), the preserved cases show that the Ministry of Commerce and Industry often disregarded the advice of lower-ranking authorities and awarded business permits even to petitioners who were negatively evaluated by their subordinates.

Perhaps the most vivid example of this discrepancy is provided by the case of the Celje seamstress Josipina Recht. A Czechoslovak citizen of German nationality, she received negative assessments by every single responsible body ranging from the provincial administrator to the district captain; the local police authorities; the Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Industry in Ljubljana; as well as the local cooperative of tailors and seamstresses.⁴⁴ While the latter had accused Recht of illegal work and disloyal competition against native professionals, she apparently enjoyed the support of her local clientele and was able to produce a list of signatures from "Celje's ladies" that recommended her case.⁴⁵ In any case, the ministry in Belgrade approved her petition, and the provincial administrator was forced to grant her a permit on formal grounds of reciprocity.

It has already been mentioned that the Ministry of Commerce and Industry did not formally recognize the existence of reciprocity between Yugoslavia and other states. Although the consulted cases were preserved fragmentarily and do not allow for firm quantitative conclusions, they do contain some indirect evidence regarding trends within the ministry's informal decision-making patterns. According to one source, the latter had become overwhelmingly liberal by the late 1920s. In a 1928 internal note contained in the aforementioned case of Marija Mörtl, an official recorded that "[a]s it is evident in the cases regarding which the Min. of C. and I. expressed its opinions, foreigners should be consistently allowed to practice trades in our country".⁴⁶ While further research would be necessary to confirm this thesis, Belgrade's lax attitude towards foreign businesspeople could partially be understood as part of a wider policy of encouraging foreign investment in the interwar Yugoslav state. While provincial elites may have felt a heightened nationalist sensitivity towards increasing the presence of foreigners within the local economic sphere, the state's central elites had a vested financial interest in welcoming foreign capital and were also involved in a range of notorious corruption scandals involving foreign business interests.⁴⁷

43 See the cases of Viktor Ulc and Julijana Seidling.

44 SIAS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2693/1 1927.

45 SIAS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 2693/1 1927, Pro domo note, s. d.

46 SIAS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 3014/1 1928, Pro domo note, s. d.

47 Sergije Dimitrijević, *Strani kapital u privredi bivše Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Nolit, 1958), 231–35. For a recent case study on corruption in the interwar Yugoslav state, see Klaus Buchenau, *From Grand Estates to Grand Corruption: The Battle over the Possessions of Prince Albert of Thurn and Taxis in Interwar Yugoslavia*, Balkan Studies Library 33 (Boston: Brill Schöningh, 2023).

Finally, a liberal approach towards reciprocity could also be explained by the desire to avoid international disputes as some rejected petitioners turned to their native states' consular services. Aside from the previously mentioned France Šunko, the only other preserved case where a petitioner suffered an initial rejection from the ministry was that of Ernest Dibelčar, a Czechoslovak citizen and tinsmith from Apače. Despite receiving positive assessments from the local authorities, the ministry had initially rejected his petition in 1925. Around a year later, Dibelčar filed a new (and this time successful) petition that was now accompanied by a letter from the Czechoslovak embassy in Belgrade. The latter not only emphasized his Czech nationality and long-term residence in Yugoslavia but also drew attention to the fact that the Czechoslovak authorities supposedly did not constrain Yugoslav businesspeople in any way and acted in the spirit of reciprocity.⁴⁸ Very similar arguments were made by the Swiss consul in Zagreb in a 1929 letter of recommendation for Fric Blumer, a Swiss citizen who worked as a taxi driver in Celje. Aside from listing Blumer's national, professional, as well as personal credentials, he claimed that there were pre-war legal agreements obliging Serbia and Switzerland to reciprocity in trade matters; that Yugoslav citizens experienced no barriers to exercising trades in Switzerland; and that the ministry in Belgrade had yet to decline a Swiss citizen's petition for a business license in Yugoslavia.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Across interwar Central and Eastern Europe's new world of nation-states, political elites had at their disposal a diverse yet ultimately limited array of legal political instruments and strategies with which they were able to pursue nationalist goals within the economic sphere. Using the interwar Yugoslav state's Maribor Oblast (1922–1929) as a case study, the present article has examined how business licenses for foreign citizens could have functioned as a potential sieve for restricting access to the local economy on national grounds. While its findings may be considered illustrative of economic nationalism's local manifestations in early Yugoslav Slovenia, different dynamics could be expected in other provinces given the pronounced internal heterogeneity of the interwar Yugoslav state. Future comparative research using materials from other oblasts as well as later time periods could thus offer productive insights into economic nationalism's regional specificities in relation to interwar Yugoslavia's diverse imperial legacies and local cultures.

In its overview of the relevant legislation, the article has shown that the manoeuvring space for concessions-based administrative exclusion had already been created by legislation inherited from the Habsburg period. All the while, subsequent ministerial

48 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 1285/8 1928, Czechoslovak Embassy in Belgrade to Minister of Commerce and Industry, 23 March 1926.

49 SI AS 91, t. e. 2, O br. 3106/1 1928, Swiss Consulate in Zagreb to Maribor Oblast Administrator, 4 January 1929.

ordinances throughout the 1920s elevated the relative importance of nationhood and national credentials within the petitioning process. In line with these confidential ordinances, provincial and local authorities were explicitly obliged to pay attention to a petitioner's national belonging; the latter was treated as a legitimate and empirically verifiable category, and the authorities also developed specific methodologies to enable its determination. While they operated with both organicist as well as subjectivist/sociological definitions of nationhood, the authorities were evidently primarily interested in the latter, to the extent that convictions-based national belonging manifested itself in tangible behaviour and was ultimately considered politically consequential.

Aside from tasking the authorities with policing people's national behaviour, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry's internal notices also produced an informal decision-making hierarchy that diverged from the inherited Austrian Trade Law. While provincial and district authorities as well as local chambers of commerce were obliged to provide assessments of people's petitions, the ministry in Belgrade was ultimately responsible for making final decisions in a petition's outcome. While officials on all rungs of the administrative hierarchy often employed nationalist arguments to support or critique individual cases, it remains questionable to what extent lacking national credentials could have affected a petition's practical success – the ministry routinely overlooked the negative opinions of local authorities and awarded permits to businesspeople whose requests were deemed unsuitable on professional and/or pragmatic/economic grounds. Whether this discrepancy in policy was perhaps a consequence of diverging interests between political elites within Yugoslavia's centre and peripheries or could be explained through different means remains a question to be explored in further research.

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**»INOZEMNI« PODJETNIKI IN EKONOMSKI NACIONALIZEM
V KRALJEVINI SRBOV, HRVATOV IN SLOVENCEV:
PRIMERI IZ MARIBORSKE OBLASTI (1922–1929)**

POVZETEK

Pričujoči prispevek obravnava vlogo ekonomskega nacionalizma v upravni praksi medvojne jugoslovanske države na primeru prošenj tujih državljanov za obrtna dovoljenja v Mariborski oblasti. Prispevek sprva ponudi pregled relevantne zakonodaje in notranjih direktiv, ki so opredeljevale upravljanje s prošnjami tujih državljanov v obravnavanem obdobju. Medtem ko je nasledeni avstrijski obrtni zakon predstavljal osnovni zakonodajni okvir do leta 1931, so upravno prakso definirale predvsem številne zaupne okrožnice in dopisi, ki so prihajali z Ministrstva za trgovino in industrijo v Beogradu. Omenjeni dopisi so tudi nalagali velikim županstvom in njim podrejenim sreskim oblastem, da morajo natančno raziskovati narodnostno pripadnost kandidatov, ki so se potegovali za obrtna dovoljenja. Slednja je po ugotovitvah raziskave igrala pomembno diskurzivno vlogo v upravnem postopanju s tujimi državljani. Uradniki so narodnost razumeli tako v biološkem (»po rojstvu«) kot tudi v družbenem/ideološkem smislu (»po prepričanju«), a so bili občutno bolj zainteresirani za njeno sociološko dimenzijo – ta se je navsezadnje tudi odražala v oprijemljivih in policijsko izsledljivih praksah ter je nosila tudi politično težo. Raziskava končno kaže, da je imelo nacionalno profiliranje posameznikov kljub izraziti prisotnosti nacionalističnega diskurza v samem upravnem postopku le vprašljiv vpliv na izid posameznih prošenj. Kritične ocene lahko le redkoma pripišemo vprašljivemu nacionalnemu obnašanju kandidatov, ministrstvo za trgovino in industrijo pa je pogosto podeljevalo obrtna dovoljenja tudi tistim prosilcem, ki so prejeli izrazito negativne ocene s strani podrejenih oblasti. Nadaljnje raziskave bi bile potrebne za ugotavljanje motivov, ki so tičali za liberalno politiko beograjskega ministrstva, mogoče pa je predvidevati, da je bilo slednje predvsem zainteresirano za vzdrževanje meddržavne vzajemnosti in tujim vlagateljem prijaznega poslovnega okolja, pa čeprav je bila takšna politika navskriž z nacionalističnimi interesi na lokalni ravni.