

Economics, Nationalism and Politics in Central and South-Eastern Europe:

Introduction to the Thematic Section

Ekonomija, nacionalizem in politika v Srednji in Jugovzhodni Evropi: uvod v tematski sklop

Economic nationalism has long occupied a central place in the political, social and economic history of Central and South-Eastern Europe. In regions marked by late imperial rule, uneven industrialisation, multi-ethnic settlement and shifting state borders, the economy was rarely perceived as a neutral sphere governed solely by markets, contracts and prices. It was also a field in which communities imagined their future, defended their status, mobilised resources and measured the strength of national claims. Financial institutions, cooperatives, shops, factories, labour markets, credit relations and consumer choices could all acquire national meaning, helping define who belonged to a community, who could legitimately represent collective interests, and who was marked as foreign, dependent or suspect.

The significance of economic nationalism lay in its capacity to link everyday economic practices to broader nation-building projects. Before World War I, such practices often emerged below the level of the state, especially in imperial settings where national movements had not yet controlled public administration or economic policy. After 1918, some of these ambitions were incorporated into official policy, while others continued to operate through local institutions, administrative routines and public debate. Economic nationalism was thus both a programme and a language: a set of measures aimed at strengthening a national economy, and a vocabulary through which economic conflicts could be interpreted and politicised.

The articles in this thematic section approach economic nationalism not merely as tariffs, protectionism or state-led industrial policy, but as a flexible process that moves

between ideology and practice, law and everyday life, and national aspiration and economic necessity. It can stimulate institutional creativity and local mobilisation, but it can also produce exclusions, hierarchies and conflict. It can promote development while narrowing access to resources, and strengthen communities while hardening the boundaries between them.

This thematic section brings together four contributions that examine economic nationalism in Central and South-Eastern Europe through case studies of the late Habsburg province of Carniola and interwar Yugoslavia. The first article, the earliest chronologically, complements the workshop papers by extending the discussion of economic nationalism through the related concept of in-betweenness, thereby showing how the two perspectives illuminate the same historical processes. The remaining three articles were presented at the *WEast 2025 Ljubljana Workshop: Economics, Nationalism and Politics in Central, East and South-East Europe*, held on 19–20 June 2025 at the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana. The workshop was organised as part of the postdoctoral project *Financial Networks in the Shadow of Economic Nationalism: A Comparative Study of the Territories of Slovenia and Vojvodina from 1867 to 1929* (Z6-50192) and the research programme *Economic, Social and Environmental History of Slovenia* (P6-0280), in cooperation with *WEast: The Eastern European Economic History Initiative* and with support from the *European Historical Economics Society* (EHES) and the *Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency* (ARIS).

Nataša Henig Mišičič's opening article examines the Carniolan Savings Bank in Ljubljana during the 1870s and 1880s. Rather than treating the savings bank as an institution with a fixed national identity, the article traces the gradual nationalisation of meaning around an organisation that presented itself as provincial, charitable and formally neutral. Debates over language, schooling, donations, lending and capital management transformed the savings bank into a contested site where economic authority, philanthropy and representation were reinterpreted through national categories. The article shows that economic nationalism not only created new national institutions but also redefined existing ones.

Ivan Smiljanič's contribution shifts the focus to entrepreneurial ambition and collapse. Through the case of Anton Kajfež, a Kočevje merchant, innkeeper, timber trader and landowner, the article reconstructs the social and political stakes of local economic power in the early twentieth century. Kajfež invested in industry, housing, and financial institutions, and supported Slovenian organisations in Kočevje, a town shaped by the presence of the Gottscheers, a local German-origin group. When his overextended business empire collapsed in 1928, the bankruptcy damaged local Slovenian institutions and was interpreted through competing national narratives, illustrating how economic nationalism could magnify both success and failure.

Oliver Pejič's article examines the administrative machinery of the interwar Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes by analysing craft and trade permit applications in the Maribor oblast between 1922 and 1929. It shows that economic nationalism

was embedded not only in public rhetoric but also in routine bureaucratic practice. Officials operated within a legal framework largely inherited from Austrian trade law (1883) while responding to confidential instructions from Belgrade that encouraged inquiries into applicants' nationality. Yet nationality itself could be understood through birth, conviction, language use, public behaviour or civic engagement. The article thus reveals the gap between nationalist expectation, administrative classification and policy implementation.

The final article by Neja Blaj Hribar asks who was counted as foreign in the labour market of the Drava Banovina in the 1930s. By comparing state regulations on work permits with Slovenian press discourse, the article shows that "foreignness" was neither purely legal nor purely social, as legislation defined foreigners by citizenship and permit requirements. Yet public discourse applied the language of foreignness more broadly, extending it to migrants from other Banovinas, rural newcomers, refugees and socially marginal workers. Economic nationalism in labour markets therefore operated through overlapping hierarchies of legal status, national origin, social position and mobility.

Taken together, the four articles span different sites and scales: a savings bank, a merchant's business network, licensing offices, and labour markets. They also draw on a range of evidence, from institutional records and newspaper polemics to administrative files, legal provisions, and public discourse. This range shows that economic nationalism did not operate in a single register. It was material, because it affected access to credit, permits, employment and markets; institutional, because it shaped the legitimacy of financial institutions, firms and administrative decisions; discursive, because economic conflicts were translated into national language; and social, because ordinary people encountered it in practical questions of work, trust, consumption and belonging. Together, the articles present economic nationalism as a multi-layered force produced through institutions, entrepreneurs, officials, workers, consumers and commentators. By tracing it through local archives, business failures, bureaucratic files and newspaper debates, they show how national economies were imagined and contested in everyday economic relations.

Nataša Henig Mišič