

Ivo Turk. *Žumberak: Demographic Problems and Possibility of Revitalization*. Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2021, p. 198

Book Review

This book is primarily a demographic one, but some of its parts can be an important addition to ethnographic researches of this relatively insufficiently researched area, speaking in ethnographic and cultural anthropological terms. The author cites some works and authors from various disciplines dealing with this area, but also points out a systematic demographic analysis that so far has not been made. The author's scientific engagement with this area was triggered by the beauty of the region and the fact that it has not been used enough qualitatively. The book analyses the historical and economic causes of depopulation and infrastructural (from traffic to telecommunications), and consequently the economic isolation of the Žumberak region, where the unfavourable trend of population decline continues to happen. A generation of ethnology students from the mid-1990s, I was a part of, also got acquainted with this problem during an organized study trip to Žumberak. As an anecdote, we were retelling for a long time the fact that the local Greek Catholic pastor tried to persuade us to look for our love and life happiness in Žumberak, given the large number of bachelors (students of ethnology were then mostly girls) there. This problem has remained relevant to this day, i.e. it even has got worse. Children in the population make up a small portion, the number of the old population in Žumberak is growing (there are still significantly more men, however the oldest age groups are dominated by women, given their longer average life expectancy). In 2016, at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, Dutch photographer René Pronk (who was living with his family in Žumberak at the time) documented in an exhibition "Obrisi života" a simple and almost unimaginable modest everyday life of the elderly Croatian rural population, especially the one from Žumberak, which he witnesses every day. The entire Žumberak Nature Park is "only sixty kilometres away from Zagreb", so the author concluded that this almost magical area (intentional reference to the phrase *terra magica* with which, among other things, the region of Istria was branded (the region was mentioned several times in this book as a desirable example of branding) had numerous developmental opportunities. The reality in which distance is measured by distance from Zagreb is by no means desirable, and the author of the book writes about this fact in more details while explaining the processes of deperipheralization and its (potential) positive effects for the region like Žumberak.

The promotion of the book was held in the outdoor space of the visitor centre of the Public Institution "Žumberak – Samoborsko gorje Nature Park" in Budinjak and this experience made us who came to the promotion highly aware of the problems of Žumberak. An hour and a half drive (for a distance of the already mentioned sixty kilometres), an almost near-collision with a local driver and an encounter with llamas

that picked the food near the road (in the vicinity of Bio park and restaurant Divlje vode) and the lack of telecommunication channels demonstrated to me plastically what the author wrote about; of course the author analyzed the causes of such a condition and supported it all with figures, analyses and scientific observations.

The introductory part of the book is followed by a description of the territorial area of Žumberak through history and a detailed description of the part covered by the analysis as well as the reasons for this (e.g. the village Drage that belongs to Žumberak is today in Slovenia and therefore it is not taken into account). This is followed by a quite detailed, but not tedious overview of the history of Žumberak, which represent a good basis for understanding the demographic processes in the area in the past, but also a necessary introduction to contemporary demographic issues. With the abolition of the Military Frontier at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and at that time Žumberak experienced an agrarian overpopulation, given that it was an area of immigration) the demographic decline followed. Of course it was expected to certain extent, because the economic and political situation changed significantly. However, it is clear from the book that the demographic collapse of Žumberak could have been prevented or at least mitigated if the modernization-transition processes were initiated and implemented on time. As these processes were almost completely absent, it was difficult to expect any improvement in Žumberak without a well-designed and generously funded strategy.

It should be mentioned that the administrative fragmentation of Žumberak (which is not the exclusivity of that area) does not allow this region to be approached as the planning region. Namely, the territory of Žumberak is divided by two counties and several smaller local units, which is another weight for the development of Žumberak.

The major part of the book the author dedicated to a meticulous demographic analysis by sub-regions of Žumberak, moreover from settlement to settlement. At the very beginning of that part, he listed all the changes that took place in settlements names. Then he described the demographic trends in the mentioned sub-regions of Žumberak in logically limited time periods descriptively and in tables and graphs. The censuses available to the author for analysis range from the 1857 census to the 2011 census (given that the book was published before the 2021 census). Figures from these censuses were compared in the analysis, although the censuses were not conducted upon the same methodology (some censuses were based on *de iure* principle, i.e. included the permanent population, while others were based on *de facto* principle, i.e. included only the present population). The author simply did not have another possibility.

The situation the author presents in detail (by settlements and years) is not unexpected and unknown - the numbers are just falling, it seems that demographic collapses follow one another, and economic and traffic indicators are very poor. Žumberak does not rank well on the education scale either, although the number of educated people is higher than before. With no investment in infrastructure - and the author numbers the existing macadam roads in Žumberak - only nature has prospered, so reforestation is underway in Žumberak. It is nature and its riches that represent the trump card on the basis of which the author sees, or imagines (depending on the perspective), a

brighter future for Žumberak. The well elaborated possibilities for the revitalization of Žumberak, which the author also suggests, add value to this book. The possibilities for sustainable development of tourism are listed in detail, the need for branding individual local foods as well as branding of the entire region is emphasized. The only question left is whether and when someone will want to take advantage of these development opportunities. The example of the part of Žumberak that belongs to Slovenia (called Gorjanci) shows that it can be done differently. There, it seems, development policy went into a different direction and advocated balanced development of rural peripherals. The author sees the departure of some children from Žumberak to primary school in Metlika (Slovenia) as a problem regarding education, although he emphasizes the practicality of this solution. The attitude that these children might not know the Croatian language and history well enough seems too cautious to me, given the context of the European Union. Namely, bilingualism and getting to know other cultures in the context of the European Union, in my opinion, can represent the added value to these children in education.

In the last part of the book, the author conducted structured interviews with two very well-informed local actors who gave their views on the development potentials of Žumberak from different angles and thus rounded off this book. This book is unavoidable for anyone who wants to scientifically deal with this area, but also for all interested stakeholders who can get an insight into several excellent scientifically based proposals for creating public development policies for Žumberak.

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