

THE PERCEPTION AND VISIBILITY OF THE STATE ON THE ISLAND OF ŽIRJE, CROATIA

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ABSTRACT: Žirje is the most remote island in Croatia's Šibenik archipelago. Due to long-lasting historical isolation for military reasons, the gradual reduction of agriculture and low capacities for tourism, the island is losing its socio-economic vitality. In qualitative research, islanders emphasised their conceptualisation of the state as the central actor when describing economic, demographic and ecological challenges and advocated for strong interventionism in revitalisation and development projects. This analysis is based on three topics that illustrate a layered relationship between the islanders and the state. The first level of analysis is the role of the state towards the development and maintenance of public infrastructure; the second is the relationship of islanders towards the existing legal framework and public law; and the third is the analysis of the active connection of the local population to state public institutions and community on the Žirje. For locals, the state is an emotionally charged presence characterised by disappointment and frustration yet coupled with a persistent hope for benevolent intervention to address their challenges.

KEYWORDS: island depopulation, state, infrastructure, isolation, Croatia, Žirje.

Introduction

We don't say isolation – we say paradise.
(Jere, around 45)

By employing dialectic reflection within the framework of anthropology and Island Studies, this article contributes to discussion on states' roles on islands. Based on ethnographic data, we discuss the kinds of roles that states have had towards small islands and compare this to what their roles are today. It is clear that the results of state strategies have been diverse in the Republic of Croatia and, in some cases, they have been questionable or without positive

outcomes in terms of better social and medical care, the building of infrastructure or the instigation of new projects.¹

The Croatian islands are fragmented, situated on the periphery of the Croatian coastal region and often positioned at the margins of modern social and economic networks. Small and remote islands are particularly vulnerable in demographic and economic terms (Faričić & Čuka, 2020). In the Croatian context, 'small' islands typically cover limited geographic areas with low population densities.² Research shows that in the last decades, islanders from many small islands were left to their own initiatives and strategies for coping with global social-economic trends and crises (e.g., Podgorelec & Klempić Bogadi, 2013, Petrović et al., 2020). Furthermore, contemporary life on small islands is often far from demographically sustainable and such islands do not share the economic development that some had during the second half of the 20th century when they were infrastructurally less connected but more successful in balancing various economic activities (Baldacchino, 2010; Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018; Kordej-De Villa & Starc, 2020; Starc, 2020).

For centuries, Croatian islands like Žirje have been governed by powers from the mainland, including the Venetian Republic, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Yugoslavia, often making them peripheral territories shaped by external decisions. This longstanding history of distant governance has left island communities reliant on, yet often disappointed by, state intervention. Today, this complex relationship persists, as local committees and municipalities on small islands like Žirje still operate within national policies that can limit their autonomy and responsiveness to local needs. This dynamic fosters an ambivalent outlook among islanders, who simultaneously advocate for stronger state involvement and feel let down by its perceived inefficiency. A more detailed exploration of these layered relationships between the island and the state will follow in the next section.

The island space is in opposition to the outside space; it is "clearly possessed by values" (Schenkel, 1997, p. 34), either as a space in which one is exiled against one's will (prison, asylum, quarantine) or as a space offering a wilful escape (asceticism, solitude, rest). Be it scientific research or philosophical, literary or tourist narratives, islands have been and remain spaces of fascination and imagination. According to Gillis (2004), islands have, through history, been symbols and "master metaphors" in the Western imagination, and isomania has contributed to the diachronic construction of the concepts of island isolation, loneliness and exoticism. Deleuze (2004, p. 10) reflects philosophically on desolate islands

¹ An illustrative example is the island of Hvar, where the western part has developed significantly through tourism and is economically advanced. In contrast, the eastern part lacks basic communal infrastructure, leaving over 500 households without access to drinking water (see Perinić Lewis 2024).

² According to Nenad Starc (2006), a small island in the Croatian context can be defined by its limited area and population, which are significantly smaller than UNESCO's criteria of 10,000 km² and 50,000 inhabitants. Croatian islands collectively cover around 3,110 km², and, as shown by the 2001 census, their total population barely exceeds 120,000. Even the largest Croatian islands, such as Cres and Krk, which are over 400 km², are still far below UNESCO's threshold. Starc emphasises that none of the smaller Croatian islands exceeds 20 km² and the current populations on these islands are generally fewer than 100 people, with some islands being completely uninhabited. He provides the example of Unije, a small island in the northern Adriatic Sea, situated between Istria and Lošinj, with an area of only 16.77 km² and a coastline of 36.6 km. Starc's definition highlights the specific characteristics of small islands in Croatia, where the concept of a small island is shaped not only by size and population but also by factors like geomorphological distinctiveness and cultural significance within the local community context.

through separation and creation, so that deserted islands seem to represent a point of origin or a point where you can reset your life. Edmond and Smith (2003) present islands as places of opportunities and promises, while Dace Dzenovska (2014, 2018, 2020) describes empty or isolated spaces that are losing the qualities of vitality. The state emphasises the exclusiveness of the island position; however, it is necessary to adjust the visions of development to that of the islanders, i.e. to direct the development towards the people who live on a particular island. Regarding all the abovementioned aspects, it seems that the role of the state is critical for small islands to remain places of life, rather than isolation (Weiss, 2010), but there are always questions of whether this is really possible and whether the state can prevent the emptiness that is becoming small islands' reality (Baldacchino, 2008; 2010; Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018).

Baldacchino and Starc (2020) ask, in their social-economic and demographic analysis of Croatian islands, how strong the power of state intervention is nowadays. Due to their specific isolation, small islands need much more than financial and political support or declarative 'lists of good intentions'. Islanders, on the other hand, after years of adapting to European sustainability policies, green economy transitions and sustainable tourism, advocate for concrete benevolent state interventionism, which is noticeably contrary to one of the dominant discourses of our times – the neoliberal state – which leaves economic initiatives to the free market (Peternel & Doolan, 2023). Therefore, today, in times of liberal capitalism, the state's relationship towards islands is complex and sometimes a completely contradictory and reflexive process that often does not resonate with dominant economic and demographic challenges. On the one hand, the state cares for islands, protecting them with multiple laws and thus including them in all valid international strategies for protecting natural resources. On the other hand, private or state investments in island infrastructure falter due to the questionable sustainability of projects related to low demographic potential and economic non-profitability. These are the consequences of the conflict between the neoliberal and social roles of the state. Small islands' inhabitants of an older age are therefore condemned to build their own tenacity and resilience strategies (Podgorelec & Klempić Bogadi, 2013; Starc, 2020), while the young often see a better future on the mainland rather than fighting an unequal battle with globalist trends (Babić & Lajić, 2001; Babić et al., 2004; Mikulandra & Rajhvajn Bulat, 2022).

The History of Governing Croatian Islands

The Croatian islands have long been under the dominion of the mainland (the Venetian Republic, Croatian dukes and kings, the Republic of Dubrovnik, French administration, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy, Yugoslavia) so that decisions on islands' development have long been made on the mainland.³ Islands were the locus for use and exploitation. From the early Middle Ages, the socioeconomic system was marked by colonial regimes that lasted until the 19th century. In 1815, the eastern Adriatic islands were annexed to the Austrian monarchy, and they were reorganised in 1867 as part of the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which maintained control until 1918. Then, for the first time, the islands became

³ The Croatian islands today fall under multiple administrative levels: municipalities, local committees and regional governance. These levels are often governed from the mainland, limiting local decision-making powers and affecting the islands' infrastructure, public services and economic support.

the objects of mainland-derived macroeconomic and overall development policies. Policy measures were applied to the islands as they were considered part of the mainland. The islands became tools in the extension of monarchical interests. Upon entering the Triple Alliance, Austria-Hungary focused on securing safe navigation in the Adriatic. This involved constructing fortresses and harbours in Eastern Adriatic coastal towns and outer islands, assembling fleets, and carefully planning navigation routes. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, inherited islands from Austria-Hungary that were equipped with infrastructure but did not have a properly formed island development policy. In the period between the two World Wars, two distinct mainland-driven island policies emerged. The first was an Italian policy, which was completely irredentist. The second was a Yugoslav policy, which notably lacked a focus on maritime management, coastal development or island-specific initiatives.

Throughout the period of socialist Yugoslavia, the concern for island specificities remained relatively consistent. The islands were regarded primarily as reservoirs of potential workers but not as places where the socialist economy could take root. Larger islands became the sites of coastal factory outposts. Tourism in Yugoslavia started to develop in the late 1950s and continued until the end of the 1980s. Island tourism was mostly locally planned. The imposition of island policy from the mainland continued after Croatia gained independence. The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia was adopted on 22 December 1990. Article 52 states:

The sea, seashore, islands... and other natural resources... which are specified by law to be of interest to the Republic of Croatia shall enjoy its special protection. The manner in which any resources of interest to the Republic of Croatia may be used and exploited... shall be regulated by law.

The Islands Act was adopted in 1999, and the new Islands Act in 2018. The Centre for Islands established at the Ministry of Maritime Affairs in 1994 still functions today as the Islands Directorate of the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds (Kordej-De Villa & Starc, 2020).

The Overlapping of the State, Islands and Isolation

While Žirje is a small island (15 km²) with a small population (around 50), due to the strategic military interests of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) and its important role in the defense of Croatia in the Homeland War starting in 1991, it became a unique island in the Croatian archipelago. For these reasons, its historical, social and cultural development differs from other Croatian islands.

From the anthropological perspective, it is impossible to state all of the personal stories describing the everyday life of a small island in many states, but it is possible to describe how particular islanders nowadays think about the states through history. As Armstrong (2022, p.1) writes, it is not easy to “navigate this difficult passageway in the hope that we might carve out a way of engaging with islands and islanders on their own terms (Baldacchino, 2008), in a way that includes a variety of island perspectives and voices”. Vis, Lastovo and Žirje, the outer islands of the Croatian archipelago, possessed a strategic location in the Adriatic Sea and were military bases of the Yugoslav People's Army that were isolated during the period of the SFRJ. One result was that access to foreign citizens was prohibited until

1989 for military security reasons. The islands of Vis, Lastovo and Žirje were thereby barred from welcoming tourists for fifty years (Kordej-De Villa & Starc, 2020) and large areas of these islands were declared restricted military zones. The military bases on the islands were built on communal pastures used for grazing livestock. Since the 1950s, the land has been restricted from communal use, prohibiting islanders from accessing or utilising it. Up until the present, the owners and co-owners of the land have not been financially compensated by the state of the SFRJ or the Republic of Croatia (Kale, 2009; Kale, 2019). All military bases on the outer islands behind the barbed wire fence looked similar: one side faced the open sea, with cannon systems positioned to prevent potential invasion by foreign vessels and some posts included a missile defence system. Nearby were the associated military camps for the accommodation of soldiers. Favourably situated bays were used as military harbours including underground ammunition depots and fuel tanks (Dika, 2020, p. 38). The small island of Žirje served for half of the 20th century as a military base. The island was home to the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) or, more precisely, young soldiers from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Slovenia who were serving their compulsory 12-month military term. In addition, the islands of Žirje and Kaprije were under the zone of prohibited underwater activities, and the great aquatory located west and southwest of Žirje was a zone for the training of naval forces (Faričić & Magaš, 2004, p. 146). At the same time, islanders lived in Selo ('the Village'), the only inhabited place on the inner island, which was without tourist capacities and was only partially open to domestic guests. Although they were similarly affected by their military status, the islands of Vis and Lastovo, as larger and more significant islands, stand out for their numerous settlements and larger populations compared to Žirje. Their economic potential was also more pronounced and enhanced by industries such as fish processing factories, which contributed significantly to the local economy and development (Karač et al., 2009; Škreblin et al., 2002). At the same time, Žirje stands out as a small island facing isolation more intensely. After an early demographic and economic decline, beginning with a viticulture crisis and phylloxera's appearance in the early 20th century, the island of Žirje had to cope with the challenges of maintaining vital activities. The dominant military presence affected recovery from economic decline in more complex ways than on other smaller islands in the Adriatic. The overlapping crises and the military presence and the lack of tourist or industrial potential intensified Žirje's challenges and specific isolation. Even nowadays, Žirje shares the problems of all other small and even larger Croatian islands but still has to cope with the degrading consequences of its specific history.

Armstrong (2022) and Edmond & Smith (2003) define the island in the same way that Fassin (2015) interpretes the state – as an emotional construct. Fassin's fluid perspective of the state is outlined as a historically rooted construct that is created, experienced, interpreted, remembered and felt (Fassin, 2015). In this context, Armstrong and Fassin's phenomenological positions are theoretically related as they describe islands and states as fantastic, almost cult-like constructs that come into being via individual sensations and experiences marked by multidimensional historical, social, psychological and cultural determinants. For Fassin (2015), the state can be a geopolitical fact, a civic service or an administrative-legal apparatus, depending on whether a historian, lawyer, political scientist or political philosopher is describing it. Armstrong (2022) moves away from such fluidity, stating that islands cannot be just a framework for our speculations, fantasies and academic explorations but that they are real places inhabited by real people with real lives from which we can acquire the most productive awareness on the values of diversity within and between spaces. However, in anthropology we say that the island is experienced, just as the state is experienced, and that the state can be described as "a cult that is approached emotionally by embracing or dismissing the dominant myths and legends rooted in history" (Ivančić, 2023, in an

interview on HTV). This does not mean that the state is not a sovereign entity reigning over a certain territory through monopoly, violence or rational bureaucracy (Mitchell, 1991) or, quite conversely, that the state is a defender of public good and a provider of well-being (Thelen, 2022, p. 6).

In studies on Croatian islands, diverse perspectives point out the subjective and objective aspects of isolation. Therefore, there are multiple islands on the single island outlined in the monograph *Otoci otoka Hvara* ('Islands of the island of Hvar') (Perinić Lewis, 2017); or islands floating between two continents (Oroz and Urem, 2015). Nevertheless, we can say that islands are never unambiguous constructs in academic research but are "prone to intrusions, both natural and cultural ones" (Edmond & Smith, 2003, p. 5), the same way that the state, despite the intrusions of diverse ideologies and politics, is remembered and felt.

Thus, just as islands in academic studies are revealed as layered constructs shaped by subjective and objective forces, the state, too, becomes a site where emotions – such as anger, hope, and disappointment – give rise to complex social and political identities. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (2015) argues that emotions play a crucial role in shaping social and political relations, acting as tools for forming collective identities and social hierarchies. Ahmed suggests that emotions are not merely personal feelings but operate as cultural and political practices that influence how we understand others and shape communities. She demonstrates how emotions enable individuals and groups to articulate their relationships with state institutions, creating space for identities that are both adaptive and resistant to social norms and structures of power.

If the relationship between islands and the state is considered in Ahmed's context, it is essential to emphasise everyday practices from the perspective of islanders that align with their perception of the state's agency. This interaction also takes place in an isolated space. Accordingly, the analysis of the relations between the islands and the state requires grasping experiences and emotions through various relational modalities and in the context of the production of life. The latter is corroborated by the work of Navaro-Yashin (2002; 2009; 2012), who challenges the division between objective and materialised forms and subjective meanings. Navaro-Yashin, speaking of Cyprus, asserts that fantasy, emotion, imagination and materiality cannot be divided in the conceptualisation of reality, also giving the example of the conceptualisation of the divided island of Cyprus and Cyprus as a state. For her, the fantasies and anxieties surrounding the concepts of state and island are simultaneously an affective and a material whole.

In that sense, this research on the small island of Žirje is focused on mutually connected contexts of spatial and historical isolation (Figure 1). The isolation of the island has a specific structure whereby various forms of coexistence are outlined through the interaction of the local population, state institutions, the military and occasional visitors. The islanders who are nowadays facing isolation can bring unique worldviews to the surface, thereby creating new meanings of social equality and cohesion. Moreover, the process of Žirje's isolation sheds light on those key historical elements that have led to the construction of personal or group identity that do not necessarily correspond with the regional, local, national or supranational times and histories. The central question of this research is how the islanders of Žirje, which has been a military base restricted to visits of domestic tourists and forbidden to foreign guests for fifty years, experience the state and/or states in the contemporary context marked by free movement of capital and people, international laws, and global mutually intertwined crises.



Figure 1 - The geographic position of the island of Žirje (retrieved from Faričić & Juran, 2021).

In the Field

The authors conducted ethnographic research during May 2023 on the island of Žirje, which is the second largest island (after Murter) in the Šibenik archipelago (Duplančić Leder et al., 2004). Although it is situated about 22 kilometres southwest of Šibenik, Žirje is categorised as a settlement or as a part of the city of Šibenik (Figure 1). The island currently has a population of 150 registered inhabitants (Population Census, 2021). The population has consistently decreased since 1953, when there were 720 inhabitants; in 1981, there were 207; in 1991, 160; in 2001, 124; and in 2011, 78 inhabitants. Since the 1950s, the island's

population has declined primarily due to industrialisation and littoralisation on the mainland, along with the rise of tourism-driven migration and economic shifts that pulled residents away from isolated island life.

The Byzantine era fortresses of Gradina and Gustjerna on the southwestern part of the island, which served as control points of the intersection of Adriatic naval routes, testify to the island's important geotransportational and geostrategic position (Podrug et al., 2016; Faričić & Magaš, 2004). Nowadays the island is primarily a rural area in which agriculture (mostly related to the fertile Polje on the inner island) and its fishery (from the island's 29 bays) made the foundation of the island economy. In 1991 the island of Žirje became open to tourism, a social-economic transformation that changed the existing way of living in many locations. However, tourism on Žirje remained mostly undeveloped compared to other islands of the Eastern Adriatic (Bara, 2013; Faričić & Magaš, 2004).

The research was conducted as part of the bilateral project Isolated People and Communities in Slovenia and Croatia (ISOLATION IPS-2022-02-3741), a scientific collaboration between Slovenia and Croatia financed by the Croatian Science Foundation. The study was based on ethnography, including participant observation and interviews with permanent residents on the island. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, ensuring accuracy in capturing interlocutors' responses, as well as the questions and sub-questions. We kept detailed field notes during the fieldwork to document the various activities and observations. Regarding the method and sample size, we employed the snowball technique, which allowed us to speak with everyone open to issues of isolation, including three islanders working in public services, two self-employed individuals, and ten retirees, with a total sample of fifteen participants. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and two hours. The conversations were not based on pre-set questions; instead, they evolved around the themes that emerged spontaneously, respecting the interests and thoughts of the interlocutors. This approach helped ensure that the dialogue remained authentic and participant-driven. This provided a focused insight into the lives of those who reside on the island year-round without the influence of seasonal visitors on conversations. (NB: all quotations from interviews in the article have been translated by the authors into English).

Besides questions on the islanders' experiences of the state, the main research focus was on the historically rooted overlapping of subjective and objective determinants of island life that come to the fore in biographical stories. In the talks, we asked the interlocutors how they see the role of the state, with the intention of instigating comments on legal frameworks and concrete support, as well as on their own experiences and perceptions of institutions in daily life. The talks were marked by affective interpretations of the islanders' interactions in various situations with the states, especially since we talked in a domestic setting during the pre-season at the height of preparations for the tourist season. Boats were being repaired, water tanks filled and stocks of food and gas were being collected. We interviewed an almost equal number of women and men of middle to older age. Two women were between 30 and 50. Adhering to relational ethics, which is appropriate for research on small islands and in small island communities (Hayfield, 2022, p. 241), we have removed personal and demographic indicators to maximally protect the identities of our interlocutors and ensure their anonymity. We used pseudonyms and removed the age of the interlocutors.

In this article, we develop three topics that illustrate the complex, reflexive and dynamic relationship between small island residents and the state in the sense that they understand it: 1) The relationship of the state towards the island infrastructure and material legacy in the section 'Island Infrastructure and Historical-Military Legacy'; 2) Affective experiences of the

state in the second section, 'Reasoning about the State: Rules, Control and Criteria'; and 3) Identification processes and sustainability of the community in the section 'Tactics of Coping with the Island Life'. In the presentation of the analysis, we use fragments of interviews and polyphony to illustrate their responses to experiences of isolation with a clear awareness of the limitations of every approach and insight and with a desire to articulate their perspectives.

Island Infrastructure and Historical-Military Legacy

If you don't have water, you don't have anything....
(Marija, around 70)

In order to understand the role of the state on the island of Žirje, we focused our research on public infrastructure. The island's basic infrastructure, including the port or ship dock, was built initially by Austria-Hungary. The SFRJ continued infrastructure upgrades, but these efforts primarily focused on constructing military facilities rather than addressing the needs of the local population. After the Republic of Croatia was established, efforts were made to build a water system and provide electrification. More recently, since Croatia became a NATO member, a radar system for sea border surveillance has been installed on one of the island's highest points. In the past few years, the state has also initiated the construction of roads and pathways. However, it appears that across all these political systems – Austria-Hungary, Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia – the islanders of Žirje have never been a priority. They continue to lack infrastructure that would provide a quality of life comparable to that on the mainland. Aside from the new radar, the entire military infrastructure has been neglected and is devastated. As the islanders told us, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) did not asphalt the roads, and the Croatian Army (HV) did not attempt to rectify this after the country's independence in 1991. Electrification has also progressed slowly over the past few decades, so the problem of neglect and lack of maintenance have jeopardised the functioning of the already weak tourist and hospitality capacities and agriculture on the island. Restoration, building and maintenance are the primary infrastructural demands of islanders, and the military legacy is becoming an unwanted burden to various institutions and local and state authorities. As our interlocutors told us, none of the institutions, from the local to the state level, want to take responsibility for the military remnants, even today. They also do not want to rent or sell them even though the islanders desire a variety of tourist offerings, from nautical tourism to apartment building and a whole array of hospitality sector activities.

Situated in the Kornati National Park,⁴ islanders and younger people originating from the island are slowly turning to tourism by renting apartments and rooms. However, all revitalisation processes have difficulties defying the challenges of time and the rhythm of state institutions reaching decisions. It seems that the neglected communal infrastructure, as well as the military infrastructure (buildings and supporting facilities), are becoming a burden through which the state is perceived as a declarative, proactive administrative-legal construct.

The forgotten military infrastructure comprises objects such as rusted fences with barbed wire, derelict barracks for soldiers and above- and underground depots for weapons, bunkers and

⁴ The Kornati National Park, proclaimed in 1980, comprises a substantial part of the Kornati archipelago. It covers an area of 218 square kms distributed over a total of 89 islands and islets.

batteries. Despite this it is important to mention that during the Homeland War (1991-95), the role of the Croatian Army (HV) in Žirje was crucial. The islanders and the few soldiers of the Yugoslav People's Army that remained on the island joined forces in defence of Dalmatia and the Republic of Croatia. Their heroism and true unity in their desire to stop the attacks on the city of Šibenik are engraved in the memory of not just the citizens of Croatia but also those further away (Alić, 1994; Mikšić, 1994). The Croatian defence from the small island of Žirje became, in the 1990s, a symbol of the Homeland War. The unity of the islanders and the ex-Yugoslav army members bypasses the divided fantasies of exclusive political options. With unity, trust and courage, the killing of people and destruction of cities was stopped, and with regard to the unique circumstances of cooperation of all islanders, the story of the war includes collaboration of all people claiming different identities and sharing the same heart. They marked their own heroism by placing a board on one of the most significant spots of more recent Croatian history on the eastern battery of the small island of Žirje (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - The Zvizdulje battery on the island of Žirje (May 2023, photo: Lana Peternel).

Paradoxically to this significance, the military infrastructure has become useless and gradually converted into a part of the communal space for the disposal of bulk waste (Figures 3a and 3b). Next to the former barracks, there is nowadays a disposal place for old washing machines, cars, construction materials, household appliances, etc. Today, the island hosts a small number of professional soldiers – up to four, working seven-day shifts – who still fulfil as crucial a role for the islanders as they used to. Indeed, they also assisted us. Since we did not have our own transport, and often travelled to our interlocutors by foot, Croatian Army vehicles would often take us from the main port of Muna to the island's 'city centre' – Selo. These vehicles thereby serve as the local bus or taxi. Besides covering transport services, in the

communication with the locals we observed gratitude and trust towards the army “of the island, not the state”. Thus, our interlocutor Marija (around 70) remarked:

What about the army? Well, we know them all. Their shifts last seven days. They are great, they would help people, give transport to the doctor, help with getting off the boat. The army on the island has always helped, and still does when needed. The nurse calls the army when someone needs transfer to the hospital in Šibenik. Anything. The army helps us, and we are here for them.



Figures 3a and 3b – The area of the former Yugoslav People’s Army military base covered with communal waste (May 2023, photos: Lana Peternel).

Pointing to infrastructural problems, the interlocutors first complained that there has never been a water management system or drinking water on the island, as on the mainland or other larger Croatian islands. The water supply comes from the coast via water-carrying ships, then through fire hoses to water tanks or cisterns next to houses (Figure 4). As the islanders say, the fire hoses fill personal capacities, mostly the private and maintained wells (*gustirne*). According to islanders' statements, there are also hydrants that are not equally distributed on the island. The hydrant network is denser in some places while elsewhere it is completely lacking, such as in bays or small ports. In addition, there is the problem of the preservation of water quality in the tanks, which, mostly in the summer, have unpleasant odours and are potential sources of infection and a threat to the health of the locals and tourists. The locals approach the water problem carefully, and the strategies for filling the tanks' or cisterns' capacities are elaborate because the water is needed, apart from daily life in cooking and drinking, for watering the fields, olive groves, small gardens and vegetable gardens. Our interlocutor, who spent all her working years in Šibenik in hospitality, describes her "battle for water" on the island while talking on the terrace and offering homemade brandy as a welcome drink but also, in line with folk medicine, as a health elixir:

More or less, everyone has a well. That large ship arrives, fills the hydrants and water tanks, and then the water is distributed to the wells by hoses... but the hoses are old, nobody repairs them, nobody takes care of that. And, it sometimes remains outside, and in the rain all kinds of things happen. Everyone, more or less, cleans the wells. (Boška, around 70)

Another interlocutor says that the islanders are trying to maintain their own water tanks. Nevertheless, the local county – which is in charge of supply of – does not maintain the supporting infrastructure, i.e. the fire hoses by which water is delivered to the wells next to the houses. Our interlocutor describes the problem in detail:

There is about 500 metres of hoses needed for the water to come from the school to us, fire hoses, rubber ones.... The hoses are torn, of zero quality, and the water runs like the Niagara Falls. There, they stay for a whole year, and now when I'll need to collect water, it will run through these stinky hoses in which frogs, mice, and who knows which animals have sneaked in. Such water will flow into my well. It's a disaster. (Jadranka, around 75)

The islanders rent apartments or rooms to domestic and foreign guests during the summer season, and limited or disabled water supply means a threat to their operation:

If you don't have water, you don't have anything. I have three wells, two tanks, which is five altogether. It is five tanks that I have, and if it's a 10,000-litre tank, it means that we fill it three to four times a year during the season. (Marija, around 70)

For that reason, residents of small islands are not giving up the demand that one day their island must get a water supply system. Indeed, they are not at all losing hope that the state will omit or dismiss this project:

At the time... they were digging for electricity, they didn't prepare anything for the water but will have to dig and put infrastructure again.

On the other hand, electricity is not ideally set either. Today on the island, especially in the summer, power supply interruptions occur frequently. Power is interrupted in case of fire on the coast, and due to safety reasons, the power supply network is turned off on Žirje. They say that the state has renovated outdoor street lighting and that electricity on the island is “the best part of public infrastructure, especially in remote bays”. However, when some fault happens, e.g., when the strong winter wind *bura* starts to blow, a part of the island is left without outdoor street lighting and repairs can last for months:

when the first bura starts to blow, or the first jugo⁵, but that stronger one, the outdoor lighting disappears for almost a couple of months, we haven't had it since December. (Jadranka, around 75)

Thus, the present has not brought a significant difference from the island did not have electricity for decades and households and used to have portable generators, as our interlocutor remembers:

There was no electricity on the island, only four bays had it, everything else used portable generators. Electricity was lacking on most of the island... (Boška, around 70)

On Žirje, islanders do not have a gas supply. The gas bottles used in kitchens nowadays are illegally transported to the island. While there was a regular gas supply until four years ago and it could be bought legally, today the sale of gas is forbidden by law. The state prohibited ferries transporting people and cars from carrying gas bottles to the islanders. As an alternative, the state offered a special shipment of gas, but, as our interlocutors told us, the ship's draught was too deep, and it could not sail into the island harbour in Muna Bay. As there is no legal delivery on the island, the islanders developed a parallel strategy of 'smuggling' gas, which enables them to prepare food throughout the year in view that there's a risk that they'll be without electricity due to unfavourable conditions:

Catamarans do not transport gas or fuel, and Jadrolinija [the ferry operator] transports only fuel. Gas transport is forbidden because they had an explosion on the ferry, 500 bottles exploded. (Marčela, around 30)

... well, I bring 10 bottles of gas each year, I smuggle them. That's how it is. (Marija, around 70)

A year-around grocery outlet did not exist until 2023. The current retailer obtains bread and groceries daily from the mainland and works in two shifts. For years, there was just one small shop that worked only seasonally, in the summer. Today, the year-around small family shop is run by one young woman, Marčela, on the ground floor of her own house, with the help of her mother. In an interview, she described opening the shop, submitting her entrepreneurial project to the state agency and asking for a state financial subsidy for self-employment. Taking account of the fact that she wanted to open the only shop on the island, which is defined as an “area of particular state concern,”⁶ she was surprised at not having received approval,

⁵ A strong Spring wind typical of the northern Adriatic.

⁶ An “area of particular state concern” is a term used for regions of strategic importance to the Republic of Croatia, and such areas are subject to special measures of protection and development as determined by the state (Spatial Planning Act, OG 153/13, 65/17, 114/18, 39/19).

with the explanation that she needed to meet the criteria of sustainability. She describes her viewpoint on the withholding of the state subsidy in the following words:

I applied for subsidies [EU funds via the Croatian Employment Service], but it wasn't approved. They evaluated my idea as a good one and all... but Žirje was evaluated as non-competitive and unsustainable. So, with zero points it did not pass for the subsidies. There were forms to fill in, such as: idea, sustainability, specificity and for all those things regarding the island, zero points were awarded, which is shameful. There are a billion hairstyle and cosmetic studios opened in the city, they all received subsidies, and in my case, which is a rural setting, where it is very difficult to open something without the state – it's shameful.

Due to the partial signal coverage, the islanders have home internet if they want to rent apartments. During our ethnographic research, we had to rely on the home network. The nurse became aware of this problem due to a series of medical interventions in which the health care users needed have a connection provided by mobile operators, primarily due to their age and lifestyle in single-person households in inaccessible parts of the island. They informed us in detail where the networks are available, and where not:

Dračevica has no signal at all for any network... Stupica has neither A1 nor Telekom, Muna – weak signal, they need home internet. (Antonija, around 40)



Figure 4 - Fire hoses used for water supply (May 2023, photo: Lana Peternel).



Figure 5 - Cars without registration plates (May 2023, photo: Lana Peternel).

Reasoning about the State: Rules, Control and Criteria

I mean, the state enables you to be offensive, to be a thief, to go beyond the law. Write that down. Nothing comes here, but we sneak everything in. (Boška, around 70)

All the islanders indicated that they wanted state intervention in the sense of benevolent state project strategies and ideas. In other words, islanders wanted the state to acknowledge their needs and to take care of lives on small islands. They believe that the state should enable islanders to be open to tourism in line with their abilities. However, the islanders have not found ways of reaching out to the state, while the state is also not reaching out to them. In the cycle of unfulfilled promises and hopes, the small island of Žirje remains disconnected from official and unofficial communication channels. Most communication happens personally – acquaintances talking to acquaintances and neighbours interacting with neighbours. While everyone knows who the members of the Local Committee are, as well as their representatives in state bodies, communication rarely goes beyond personal connections and exchanged phone numbers. As a result, critical plans and projects struggle to move forward. Thus, an islander describes her communication with the state through an acquaintance:

The former president [of the Local Committee], I have his number in my mobile, ok and whenever there is a problem, I call him. We shall do it, we shall solve, but it can't be. For example, he said at the meeting what I had told him. And nothing happened. He says that the things we want can't be done. And I gave him almost everything in written form. I listed all the projects, and he said that nothing can be done. (Boška, around 70)

Our interlocutor perceives the described inefficiency as “neglectful treatment”, where the state does not even want to read their projects, let alone take care of them. In the islanders’ opinion, the state is present but in a completely wrong way. The state brings laws, punishes and prescribes but does not act. Navaro-Yashin (2002) asserts that affective faces of the state are inseparable from its material and bureaucratic forms. It is therefore apparent among islanders that the state triggers emotions such as disappointment, anger, rage, discontentment, desperation and resignation, but also signs of gratitude and understanding when the role of the army or medical care are mentioned, which are represented by people and not institutions or policies. All these emotional traits point to the modalities of their relationship towards the state in which various social processes are reflected and whose final outcome is isolation. The state aims for the best by announcing calls, providing subsidies for ferry lines and opening medical clinics on the island; however, these efforts rely heavily on the strong commitment of the islanders. The phrases that define this predominantly negative emotional landscape include: “that is so sad”, “this bothers me personally very much”, “of course I was mad and furious”, “how can I be content” and “I am not mad, but I feel forgotten”. Looking back on past times and on the role of the state during the past decades, one of our interlocutors argues:

The relationship of the state is neglectful towards Žirje. Here it is not the state, not the local office, not the city, this is an island, but only on paper. (Mario, around 60).

Objections to the state are multifold and illustrate that the state is manifested as a material-emotional construct. To begin with, one of our younger interlocutors from the island says that civil servants apply senseless rules that completely fail on islands, despite having right laws for islands. Marčela (around 30) says:

here are rules always. Of course, our state of Croatia has a hundred rules and if they're not met, the penalties are, my goodness...

Therefore, it appears that from one side the state takes care of the islands by creating strategies for them, while on the other side it blocks their implementation and does not see the vital initiatives of the islanders. Marčela says:

Eventually, Europe finances, huge amounts of money could be absorbed. There was this guy who was interested, and still is, in solar panels on the island and the growing of plums. The island really has potential, but the people are stopping it. They don't know, they think that they are right, and that we don't know. We think that we do know, and they don't. That's it.

The relationship of the state towards the island is visible in the execution of controls. An interlocutor Jere (around 45) remarks that the police arrive on the island “abruptly”: “The police come, they catch us a little by surprise, do some control, they halt sometimes, but here this news spreads in 5 minutes [laughter].” Thus, its role of surveillance mostly gets inverted and parodied through the ‘establishment’ of the Žirje Intelligence Agency (ŽOS) (Figure 6), which has its own space in an abandoned building in Muna Bay overlooking the harbour. When the police arrive on the island without notice, the so-called “Žirje CIA” spreads the news “so that all who have some problematic issue, such as driving an unregistered car, vanish”.



Figure 6 - Graffiti on the island of Žirje – the 'Žirje Intelligence Agency' (May 2023, photo: Lana Peternel).

Finally, the affective construct of the state is significant. One interlocutor, Marija (around 70), sees the critical problem in the state, and for her, the state is a real obstacle to the state itself. She remarks that the state itself needs to understand its own role. In that sense, it can be argued that the state has isolated itself from small islands as well. She reports:

The state is a large notion, the state cannot know what is happening on a small island, unless someone brings it the news, and it isn't aware that we exist, that is one vicious circle, in fact, not a vicious one, but a real one.

Tactics of Coping with Island Life

While it is small, the island is big enough to require a means of transport. Reaching olive groves, fields, the ferry, or small harbours on Žirje poses significant challenges for residents, particularly in their older years, due to the island's infrastructure. With no public transport and predominantly unpaved roads, mobility heavily depends on weather conditions and individual physical capacity. The most populated settlement is located inland, requiring a walk of several kilometres to reach these destinations, which can be difficult for some residents depending on their physical condition and circumstances. Whereas some thirty years ago, private initiatives could take place and, in this way, the deteriorated infrastructure was repaired, today the state has banned this in public areas. The islanders point out that every repair requires them to have a 'project' approved by the state.

In their own words, unpaved roads did not mean that the islanders acquired appropriate transport, such as elevated vehicles with thick tyres and four-wheel drive, which represent an imagined ideal solution for the difficult-to-access island wilderness. Indeed, very old vehicles, many without registration plates, are prevalent on the island – vehicles that would

not be allowed to drive anywhere on the coast (Figure 4). The island of Žirje is, therefore, the final destination for automobiles prior to being recycled, if that ever happens:

There are no conditions for having a better car because you need to go to the field, to the Dračevica Bay, to Stupica, it's a wide road, the cars are low, so when the car gets damaged – it's damaged, whatever, the tyre breaks – it breaks. Why do we have unregistered cars? Because we don't have the conditions for such cars; if we have a registered car, then we drive them only from the waterfront – to Mikavica, only on asphalt and nowhere else. (Pero, around 65)

The unity that they demonstrated is, on the one hand, an inherited practice of a small, tough island community and, on the other, it is a natural strategy by which they can compensate for the state's neglect of a remote, forgotten space that is facing long-lasting and diverse processes of isolation.

Eventually, their experience of isolation is overcome by the rooted traditional island unity and concern for one another:

We all know each other, and we know each other's shoe sizes. We know 80% of the basics about one another. (Boška, around 70)

The islanders' unity manifests in various ways in crises, especially when someone passes away. Our interlocutor Jere (around 45) describes a recent event: "there was a death, there was not enough [money] for the funeral, we all offered from our pockets so that there was enough."

Papers on life satisfaction on small islands confirm that life satisfaction is greatly affected by the extent of preserved social values. These include the closeness of personal relationships (level of acceptance in the local community, solidarity, cooperation) and the social order maintained through informal control (which provides a sense of security) (Podgorelec et al., 2015, p. 106).

An example of identity fusion as a strategy for combating the isolation process is the relationship islanders have with the nurse working on the island in the Health Centre, a branch office of the City of Šibenik (Figure 7). Although the nurse represents the public health system of the Republic of Croatia, financed from the state budget, islanders report that their relationship with the nurse has outgrown the state exclusiveness and that she blended in completely with the coexistence in which the roles of the islanders and the nurse are not divided: "we would do anything for one another," they say. As Fassin suggests in the book *At the Heart of the State* (2015), the personal relationship of the nurse with the people and her own contribution to the community is crucial, as opposed to mere agency within the state system. Her job is to contribute to the wellbeing, safety and health of the islanders. All the best aspects that the health system represents in an ideal form are what she represents to the islanders. The nurse views her job as a vocation, raising the bar of the quality of islanders' lives and those staying there. It is why her work and selflessness are seen as a positive example of unity that exists and can exist on an island. In her case, she is the person who sees, listens to and understands the islanders and serves the island with her professional and personal identity:

We have an ambulance and a wonderful nurse, who is available 24 hours 365 days a year. And she is not paid for that at all, she gets only her basic salary,

and maybe for working outside the office and for living separately, but she is paid only her normal salary for her basis. She is very capable, she knows a lot, and since she came, we have been very secure regarding the health system. Very secure. She is capable of initiating voluntary actions to raise funds for the ambulance. She cleans the ambulance, she does it all. (Marija, around 70)



Figure 7 - Health Centre on the island of Žirje in Selo, a branch office of the City of Šibenik (May 2023, photo: Lana Peternel).

The islanders emphasise their persistence as a form of island resilience. Upon realising that their requests were unanswered by the state, and that the health system would not improve, they raised funds by voluntary donations and bought the necessary medical equipment:

People raised the money alone in two days and bought a new stretcher. That's the kind of unity we have, we can quarrel, someone gets mad and doesn't speak to someone else, and so on, but when there is a problem, or feast, or death, or anything else, we all jump in and help each other maximally. (Marija, around 70)

Thus, within two days, we gathered and raised the money to buy the stretcher. Everyone gave as much as they could, someone 100, someone 200 Kunas... within two days. There was an action, the money was raised, and the stretcher is here. (Boška, around 70)

The nurse, whose presence on the island is important for fast medical care and the health needs of the residents, did not have a duty car. Upon seeing that the mainland authorities did not realise this need, the islanders started to raise funds for the car. When their action became public, the nurse was awarded a duty car.

We were raising money so that she could get a used car and drive on the island. And when they saw that we were raising the money, that we shall buy something, then they gave her some old car. (Antonija, around 40)

It was impossible to transfer an injured islander in need of transportation on the stretcher to the boat and to the mainland without the help of the army on the island. The islanders on Žirje react instantly, and they help one another immediately:

Normally, there's no car, no resources – who can you call for help? Call the army; they'll come with a van. And you have their number – we all do, because it's essential to have it. We always ensure we have everything we need. And if we don't, we'll provide it within minutes. (Antonija, around 40)

Along with the altruism and empathy of the nurse and the army, we can say that these two symbols of the state have taken over the identities of the Žirje islanders. The islanders, mostly older people, perceive them as their own – as their own army and their own nurse. They are the residents of Žirje who share everything with army and nurse at any moment. In addition, the same characteristics were used to describe the soldiers serving in the Yugoslav People's Army on Žirje five decades ago. According to the memories of our interlocutors of former times, there was no difference between those who represented the state because the circumstances in which all of them have lived and worked are mutual. This overlapping of times and states is visible in graffiti on the old municipal building, today a dangerous ruin in the centre of a settlement in the central part of the island. The graffiti originally read, "Long live the great public holiday 29.11.", referring to the Day of the Republic, the most significant public holiday in the SFRJ. An unknown islander later altered it to say, "Long live the great public holiday 5.8.", marking Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day in the Republic of Croatia, which celebrates state independence. However, the original date, 29.11., still faintly lingers beneath the newer 5.8. In this way, the two states and the two periods overlap in one pale, barely visible graffiti, just as they are almost invisible to the islanders and the states whose holidays they celebrate (Figure 8).

Abandoned, empty and derelict buildings (mostly those that used to have a public purpose, e.g., the agricultural cooperative building), on which the aforementioned examples of historical re-layering are visible, are evident on a couple of locations inside the settlement Selo. To the islanders, they are daily reminders of the "transitional, corrupt, privatizational present" (Hromadžić & Čavkić, 2016, p. 82).



Figure 8 - Ruins in the centre of the village Selo with the graffiti “Long live the great public holiday 5.8. (over 29.11.)” (May 2023, photo: Lana Peternel)

Conclusion and reflection

Using a perspective derived from the fields of Island Studies and anthropology, this article explains everyday living on the small Island of Žirje by recording and discussing its specific histories framed by isolation (e.g., Johnson & Kuwahara, 2024; Waite, 2002). While many islands in the Adriatic region experienced a military presence during the Yugoslav era, Žirje stands out due to its small size, remote geographic location and prolonged status as a military base. The isolation and historical economic crises in agriculture significantly impacted the island's development, particularly when compared to larger or more accessible small islands with broader economic development opportunities (Čuka & Oroz, 2024). Due to these circumstances, Žirje shares economic and demographic decline with other smaller islands. However, the overlapping of negative circumstances made Žirje especially vulnerable to infrastructural underdevelopment and, consequently, significant depopulation. Additionally, these circumstances shaped community identity and influenced islanders' interactions with the state and perception of current challenges.

In the book *Anthropology, islands, and the search for meaning in the Anthropocene*, Armstrong identifies that islomania is a malady of an inland mind. Fascination with islands is ingrained in the infinite possibilities that make life on the island unique. The identities of

islanders, island time and daily living shape the perspectives that explain how people are perceived with regard to the specific differences in their microculture (e.g., Perinić Lewis, 2017; Oroz & Urem, 2015). The island of Žirje, mostly due to its inaccessibility and lack of basic infrastructure, is perceived as an isolated place that has never stepped into the 21st century. According to these views, the island has disappeared from the list of institutional priorities of restoration and revitalisation and, upon having researched it, we ask whether it has ever been on the lists, except for defense purposes. Our interlocutor Pero (around 65) remarks “older people have lost that hope, for they have spent all their life waiting for something, and nothing happened.”

It is a paradox that since the time when Žirje was ‘closed’ due to the presence of the army, and now when the army became transformed and deconstructed, the island has become more abandoned than ever. During our talk with Boška (around 70), we asked her what it was like to live with the army in former Yugoslavia, and we received an answer accompanied by disapproval, for she perceived the question as a provocation. She responded that on Žirje there has always been a nice coexistence. She did not view the Yugoslav People’s Army as an “enemy”, nor that this period should be stigmatised as something bad that happened to Žirje:

Before, we had a restaurant here, a club, a disco where guests paid to enter, there were always some dances, events. I mean, the whole village could live off what we had, but....

Žirje was justified in its status as an island standing as a ‘state defender’ but, completely paradoxically, Croatia did not return this sentiment in the sense of support. It has forgotten the small offshore island, left it without water, electricity, roads, gas and mobile signal. The ferryboats are often over fifty years old, having completed their full tasks decades ago on more economically and touristically desirable routes. For instance, the ferry *Lošinjanka*, which now operates daily to the island of Žirje, once served one of the busiest routes, Split–Supetar on the Island of Brač, more than fifty years ago.

The results of the study reveal that the relationship between the island community of Žirje and the state is strongly marked by emotions such as disappointment, frustration, and an enduring hope for positive change. This emotional dynamic can be understood through Ahmed’s theory of emotions as cultural practice: on Žirje, emotions are not merely individual feelings but function as a collective response to the inequalities and failings of the state. Emotions thus become a framework for expressing the community’s ambivalence toward state intervention. While seeking greater support and resources, the residents of Žirje develop a sense of resilience and mutual solidarity, confirming Ahmed’s assertion that emotions serve as tools of social cohesion and political resistance.

Islanders from Žirje have made peace with their status and will say that they do not miss busy urban environments at all. They do not long for mass tourism and, as our interlocutor observes, “peace’ is the greatest treasure here.” Most of our interlocutors told us that Žirje is for Robinson Crusoe--esque tourism in nature and peace, so whoever wants entertainment, nightlife and crowded beaches can go to the mainland towns of Šibenik or Vodice. They emphasise that with infrastructural shortcomings (problems with water supply, electricity, internet, only one shop and one ATM, only apartment accommodation, no hotels, and four restaurants situated in the bays Tratina, Stupica and Koromašna) the island of Žirje can develop precisely for such specific forms of tourism (Alviž et al., 2017). The local people are satisfied with the profile of guests, who treat the island in a respectful way. The islanders have highlighted several needs or solutions for the development of sustainable tourism,

however: the installation of garbage bins and signage indicating restrictions and behavioural guidelines and a need for security personnel or park rangers. The enforcement of the law is cited by the islanders as a primary precondition for sustainability (Dunkić et al., 2017).

Based on the analysis of the relationship between the state and the islanders, we can conclude that Croatia's political and economic context is shaped by decades of a burdensome post-socialist transition, framing the daily lives of our interlocutors. At the heart of our theoretical approach is the pervasive state, which has left a significant imprint (Peternel & Doolan, 2023). Paradoxically, its role on the island of Žirje is one of non-presence. The state is physically absent but supports processes perpetuating long-lasting and exhausting isolation. For our interlocutors, the state has played a key role in positioning Žirje on the social, demographic, and economic periphery – both during the time of former Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia. To counterbalance this deficit, the islanders have made significant efforts to foster unity, solidarity, and mutual support, creating relationships that transcend identity boundaries. Their identity is strongly tied to the island—a small community where internal conflicts are set aside in the face of shared challenges. In navigating these challenges, the islanders often take the initiative to create their own living conditions by circumventing official rules and laws.

For islanders, such a situation only prolongs insecurity, and the majority depend on public institutions. They depend on the medical care and the local ambulance of the Šibenik Health Centre. Parallelisms are present in our interviews when referring to laws or, as they call it, surveillance, rules and communication. For the Žirje islanders, the state is a hypocrite, as well as discriminating, non-efficient and concerningly uninterested in the lives of the islanders. When it comes to older islanders, their relationship towards the state is affective. This is unsurprising because they state that they are tired of waiting, hoping and requesting. The state is unreliable for the islanders; there is no feeling that it primarily thinks of its citizens and people living in remote places, but rather the impression grows.

“An island is only on paper”, said an interlocutor, Mario (around 65), because he did not experience the state's benevolence besides in administrative documentation. The public sphere is often perceived as being preoccupied with trivial political topics and party or institutional disputes, rather than addressing the real lives and needs of citizens. Inspired by the approach of Thelen (2022) and Thelen et al. (2014), we thought about how the state is constructed and reconstructed relationally in ‘normal’ and ‘crisis’ times. Building on the work of Navaro-Yashin (2002; 2009; 2012), we approached this relationship as inseparable from affect. Triggers for frustration, anger and bitterness are numerous: the state does not successfully promote what it proclaims and praises the most – the natural uniqueness and beauty of islands. It happens then that the sabotaging of laws becomes an option and revitalisation transforms into an unfamiliar concept:

It is a grand concept, that revitalisation; what is meant by it? Actually, the Island should be an oasis, but with basic living conditions, appropriate infrastructure, electricity, water, gas supply, roads, and that's it. (Marija, around 70)

Such a relationship between affectiveness, materiality and individual reflexivity points, on the one hand, to bitterness and disappointment – substantial determinants of a state – but also to a desire to take the islanders seriously, as much as financial profit is taken seriously in the budget after the tourist season. In that sense, we can answer the question in this research of whether the state is truly responsible for the island's neglect. We answer that it

is, maybe not in every sense, but as long as the islands contribute to the visibility, prosperity and existence of the state – then it definitely is.

In conclusion, we highlight the dynamic tension between the island community's autonomy and the abstract hand of the state, contrasting neoliberal governance's often impersonal and distant nature with the community's close-knit, locally-driven ties. This dialectic not only reveals the island's ambivalent nature – existing as both an enclosed, isolated space and an open, adaptable one – but also shines a light on the extraordinary resourcefulness of its inhabitants, who navigate these dualities with remarkable ingenuity. In a context where formal support is often insufficient or delayed, islanders rely on longstanding practices of self-organisation, mutual assistance and practical problem-solving to overcome barriers to resources and services. By shifting our focus from a diachronic summary to an exploration of the community's resilience and proactive agency, we emphasise islanders' active role in shaping their futures rather than framing them as passive subjects at the mercy of external forces. This perspective allows us to recognise their adaptability in the face of challenges and underscores how their experiences foster unique, forward-looking aspirations for the future. Islanders' responses to isolation are not merely survival strategies but imaginative, community-driven adaptations that reinterpret and repurpose the conditions of isolation into opportunities for innovation and solidarity. This approach ultimately underscores the hope and potential inherent in the islanders' inventive responses to their circumstances, revealing a future-oriented resilience that challenges conventional narratives of isolated communities as static or passive. Instead, the islanders of Žirje embody a dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation, where the limitations imposed by geography and governance inspire rather than restrict. Their resourcefulness is a powerful model of community strength, illuminating the possibilities for positive transformation and growth even in the most isolated settings. We underscore the deep-seated ambivalence that shapes the island community's relationship with the state. On the one hand, there is a pressing need to make the state's presence more visible and tangible on the island, ensuring that residents have access to essential resources, services, and support systems that are often limited by isolation. Islanders express a clear desire for the state to step in as a provider and protector, bridging gaps in infrastructure, healthcare and economic opportunities. Yet, alongside this need is a persistent sense of frustration and resentment directed at the state and the ideals it represents in an affective sense. To many islanders, the state embodies a distant authority that has often overlooked their needs or imposed bureaucratic limitations without understanding local realities. This complex emotional landscape reveals a contradictory relationship: while the islanders seek intervention and investment, they are also sceptical and critical of a system that has historically failed to meet their expectations. This ambivalence – both reliance on and resentment of the state – captures the unique challenges faced by some isolated communities. It underscores how islanders navigate a nuanced balance between dependency and self-sufficiency, revealing a collective resilience in their efforts to address gaps left by formal governance. By acknowledging these dual sentiments, we gain a fuller understanding of the islanders' strategies for cooperation and resistance as they continue redefining their connection to the state in ways that reflect both pragmatic needs and affective tensions.

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