

When Plitvice Lakes were proclaimed National Park in 1949, this was the first case that the concept of a protected area was applied in the former Yugoslavia. In the meantime, Plitvice became a world-famous attraction. But the development of tourism has transformed this “national treasure” into an important source of income in the impoverished region, which, of course, attracts the attention of powerful private actors.

Inner party personnel struggles in the Croatian Democratic Union around the head of the National Park Plitvice Lakes Park, which have recently been taking place on the Zagreb-Gospic route, have several problems related to the management of our most well-known protected natural area. The conflict was mirrored by HDZ President Andrej Plenković who appointed head of the LAG-1 Lika Tomislav Kovačević as the head of the Public Institution NP Plitvice Lake, while Lika-Senj Mayor and Hades veteran Darko Milinović had a candidate who had not passed.

Before determining whether the mayors and prime ministers have decided on coup, friendliness or some other interest links, let’s remind that the National Park itself has been under the intensified monitoring of UNESCO for many years. The reason for this is the increased pollution of the Plitvice Lakes and the excessive housing that has been particularly beneficial for the last five years since the construction license issuing from the level of the line ministry was transferred to regional county offices, which resulted in numerous newly built tourist facilities that covered a large part of the park located between Rakovica and Korenica, between Male Kapela and Plješevica.

However, Plitvice Lakes are the only area in our region listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979. That with the management of our oldest national park something was wrong was established a year ago by the UNESCO mission, which submitted a report which “expressed concern over the unsustainable expansion of touristic content, but also the excessive number of visitors to the park”. She also mentioned the possibility that Plitvice Lakes would be transferred to the list of endangered natural heritage due to these problems, but this has not happened yet. Plitvice had already been on that list from 1992 to 1997, that is, at a time when war was in the area and immediately after its completion.

#### Party ATM

In the 1990s, UNESCO has been in the park’s inspection several times, and besides the armed conflict, illegal beef hunting, fish catching dynamite, and destruction of forests and park contents have been problematic. In the latest report from January last year, war and hunting are no longer problems, but everything else is. It is stated that the current difficulties caused by the intensification of tourism, the rapid increase in the number of visitors (last year, the park was able to pass up to 15 thousand tourists per day, which is,

according to some estimates, double the amount it can bear), a significant increase in accommodation capacities, pollution of lake and river water, uncontrolled construction of road infrastructure and increased traffic of motor vehicles through the park itself.

Of the 12 points that the UNESCO mission proposed in the seventh, it is asked from the state to ensure the suspension of the issuance of any new building permits until the spatial plan and its implementation are reviewed and until it is verified whether and to what extent it is illegal construction. In the last, point 12, it is openly said that Plitvice Lakes will be moved to the list of endangered world heritage if the proposed measures are not adopted and started to be implemented. On February 1 this year, a new report will be submitted to the 42nd session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in June and July in Manama, the capital of Bahrain, and if this new report does not show progress in preserving the park, Plitvice could move on the list of endangered world heritage.

Another problem behind the conflict over the head office in Plitvice is clientelism, typical for the HDZ, which has been read in the media in the last week or two. In short, to the local HDZ and the current Mayor Milinović National Park served as a kind of ATM. As the political power of the HDZ in Lika slowly but surely erodes, so the inflow of funds from various public institutions to local Hadeses is getting weaker, so the Plitvice cashier is more important. How it actually works has shown the latest report on the operations of the Plitvice Lakes National Park for the past year, which, according to some media reports, shows that over 27 million kunas were spent on advertising expenditure, sponsorships and donations, which is several times more than past years.

#### Strategy of surviving

This is about the National Park helping local sports, cultural, veteran and hunting societies, and it should not be anything controversial (business giants always help the civil scene), but the problem is that the money from this item is usually distributed by the party key. When it is known that the annual income of our most important national park is about 200 million kunas and that it travels annually for about one million guests, it is clear why there is a fierce struggle over who will control it. Ante Kovač, the new head of the Plitvice Lakes Municipality, was elected on an independent list, said in the media without fussing: "I was not particularly familiar with the vision of Milinović's candidate Antonija Dujmović, but I believe that the final result would be privatization of the hotel first and then the entire park, by the knowledge of the concepts of Darko Milinović and his followers. In that concept, a homemaker would become a second-class citizen who would pay for a churchyard."

That with the conduct of the National Park something was wrong ten years ago was confirmed by members of the HSLs in the Lika-Senj County, who in 2008 warned that the

money spent in the park was spent unintentionally, even if it was speculated on the stock market. Namely, they warned the public that the state audit in its 2008 report determined that the National Park has invested funds in open-end investment funds since 2005 and that the value of the role in 2008 amounted to as much as 53.7 million kunas. In those years, the members of the park's management council were the most important personalities of the Hades, among them Darko Milinović, first of all. On the other hand, the apartmentization mentioned in UNESCO's report as one of the problems associated with pollution and disturbance of the natural balance in the National Park is actually a result of a wider phenomenon in which national and natural parks and nature in general in peripheral countries are perceived as possible, and is often the only source of income for the local population.

The completely depopulated and economically devastated Lika has seen in nature-based tourism, and within the framework of a kind-nature-based economy in Croatia, the opportunity to materialize from scratch, for which the liberalization of issuing building permits and opportunities offered by private initiative in tourism have served it and increase their own accommodation capacities. In fact, apartmentization in some way represented a survival strategy for the local population, to which the second option would most likely be emigration. Interestingly, the Church got even into the apartment house, through the well-known Mija Gabrić, the first-ever financier of Kaptol, who was discovered that 15 years ago, instead of a sacral object, as the inhabitants of the Rastovača village expected, they built apartments...

#### Preparing the field

Apartmentization on Plitvice can be partly interpreted as a consequence of the Law on Nature Protection from 2013. It has enabled the hotel, accommodation and catering facilities that were previously owned exclusively in the ownership of national parks to give a concession to private investors for many years. However, despite the intention of the then SDP government to privatize four Plitvice hotels, there is still nothing to do with it. There are many reasons for this. One of them is that potential investors have been set up very restrictive rules regarding the possibility of expanding the existing capacities of these hotels and they are questionable about the cost-effectiveness of investments. As a workable solution, the possibility has arisen that private initiative in the National Park can be practiced through the construction of apartments and smaller accommodation units. According to the data previously published by Petar Vidaković, the longtime director of the Plitvice Lakes National Park in the SFRY and author of several monographs on Plitvice and national parks, Plitvice Lakes is the only national park in the world, from more than 1,400,

which is materially and functionally self-sustaining for almost entire the time of its existence, which means it covers self-financing. In the 1970s, the two administrations, the first one in charge of nature protection, and the other that took care of catering, hotel and tourism, are merging into one that becomes responsible for its “security, scientific, development, tourism and financial tasks”. Although in that management model, which has been practiced for almost 50 years and for which time private capital did not have access to it, they “function equally well”, as Vidaković writes, “protection, tourism and ecotourism, employees and scientific research activity”, the SDP’s government decides on the changes and introduced the so-called Law on Nature Protection mentioned above. American model, which is characteristic of separating nature protection from commercial activities, which are given to concessionaires.

All in all, Plenković’s victory over Milinović seems to have given up on the privatization so far, on the principle of little local Hadezes, little Church, few veteran organizations, few local people, which means that the capacities in Plitvice Lakes could soon be sold wholesale, which is a game that goes beyond the HDZ. And the SDP, like many times until now, has been helping the legal field for this purpose. It is only important that Plitvice does not move to the list of endangered world heritage in the following months – and that is why, among other things, it was necessary to remove the miserable Milinović – so that after the Bahraini summit it could have been better fostered.