THE KARST SWITZERLAND

A Small Territory, a Great Laboratory for the Future

PREFACE

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There are places that seem small only because we measure them in square kilometres.

Monrupino-Repentabor is one of them.

On the map, it is a small territory on the Karst Plateau, behind Trieste, close to a border that for generations represented separation and that today can also be understood as a place of encounter. In reality, within such a limited geographical area, questions coexist that are far greater than its size: identity and openness, memory and innovation, protection of nature and economic development, local belonging and European cooperation, Italian and Slovenian culture, the autonomy of communities and the ability of institutions to build a future.

There is stone and forest. Caves and fields. Villages and paths. Vineyards, agriculture and biodiversity. There are traditions that have survived generations and economic activities that must now confront new markets. There is Trieste, close and unavoidable, with its history as a port, a frontier, a meeting point and a place of conflict. And there is Slovenia, which does not simply begin on the other side of an administrative line, because language, families, culture, landscape and memory have never followed the geometry of political maps with precision.

And then there are the questions.

What can a small territory become when it stops considering nature, culture, community, economy, democracy, capital and institutions separately, and begins to understand them as parts of the same system?

What happens if a forest is no longer seen only as a natural surface, an agricultural product only as a commodity, a monument only as memory, a business only through its balance sheet, a young person only as someone who may leave, or a border only as a limit?

What happens if, instead, we begin to look for the connections?

This book begins with these questions.

Not with the conviction that there is a simple answer.

And certainly not with the assumption that a small territory can, by itself, solve problems that affect entire European regions.

It begins, rather, with an intuition: small scale can be a limitation, but it can also be an advantage. In a small territory, connections are easier to see. It is possible to observe at close range where an administrative decision meets a business, where a cultural project encounters a financing problem, where an environmental decision produces economic consequences, and where the loss of a tradition also changes the attractiveness of a place.

A small territory can become a laboratory precisely because the relationships within it are visible.

From this perspective, the Karst is an especially suitable place in which to ask questions.

It is a territory that resists simple definitions. It is natural and shaped by human activity, agricultural and urban, Italian and Slovenian, local and cross-border. It is ancient, yet crossed by infrastructure and

international flows. It preserves deep traces of history while existing only a few kilometres from a city that for centuries has looked towards trade, markets and the wider world.

Here, the border is not an abstract concept.

For a long time, it divided political systems, economies, families, cultures and everyday routes. Today, that same border can acquire a different meaning. It can become a space in which cooperation is tested, models are compared, knowledge is shared and projects are built that do not end at the precise point where one administrative authority gives way to another.

This does not mean erasing differences.

It means learning how to make them work together.

The historic presence of the Slovenian language and culture is part of this complexity. It is not a linguistic decoration to be added at the end of a brochure. It belongs to the territory, to its memory and to its daily life. To imagine the future of the Karst without recognising its plurality would mean understanding only part of it.

The same is true of the relationship with Trieste. The Karst is not simply the landscape behind the city, and Trieste is not merely the nearest market or administrative centre. Their histories are intertwined. Stone, agriculture, trade, people, infrastructure, water, mobility and culture have created relationships over time that are far deeper than municipal boundaries might suggest.

Starting from Monrupino-Repentabor, therefore, does not mean narrowing the perspective.

It means choosing a precise point from which to begin observing a larger system.

The problem facing many small European territories, after all, is not necessarily a lack of resources.

Often, it is fragmentation.

Cultural heritage lies in one place.

Agriculture in another.

Biodiversity somewhere else.

Then come businesses, associations, public administration, universities, credit, European funding, tourism, young people, technology and environmental policies.

Each has its own language, procedures, expertise and objectives.

Each may be right within its own field, while the territory as a whole continues to lose opportunities because no one is able to see the complete picture.

A strong cultural idea may not know which financial instruments are needed to make it sustainable. A business may not know that university research could transform a constraint into an innovation. An environmental policy may be perceived only as a cost if no one attempts to measure its economic and social value as well. A European programme may make resources available that remain distant from local communities because, between the funding call and the actual project, no one is able to build the bridge.

The question, then, is not simply how to produce new ideas.

It is how to connect the ones that already exist.

Perhaps the real originality of a territory does not lie in constantly inventing something no one has ever thought of before. It may lie in the ability to recognise relationships that usually remain separate and transform them into a coherent project.

The Karst Switzerland begins with this conviction.

The name may be surprising.

It does not mean turning the Karst into a small Switzerland. Nor does it propose importing an institutional, economic or political system created elsewhere and applying it mechanically to a different reality. Territories are not industrial products, and models cannot be transferred while ignoring history, culture, law and community.

"Switzerland", in this project, is above all a methodological provocation.

It evokes responsibility, competence, pragmatism, attention to the sustainability of decisions, the capacity to think in the long term and a certain scepticism towards promises that are not accompanied by the instruments required to fulfil them.

It also evokes an apparently simple idea: a territory can be deeply attached to its own identity and, at the same time, open to the outside world.

It can be local without being provincial.

It can protect its language, its landscape and its traditions without turning them into barriers.

It can look towards markets and Europe without accepting globalisation as an obligation to become identical to everywhere else.

In this sense, the Switzerland evoked by the name is not a geographical place to be imitated.

It is a way of thinking.

And the Karst is not the passive recipient of that method.

It is the place in which it must be tested.

Because one word returns repeatedly throughout these pages: verify.

An idea can be attractive and still not be feasible.

A project can be socially desirable and still lack financial coverage.

A possibility provided by law is not the same as an authorisation.

Research does not constitute a partnership.

A conversation with an institution does not constitute official support.

An objective written down today is not a result achieved tomorrow.

These distinctions may appear excessively cautious. In reality, they form an essential part of the project.

Because ambition without verification produces promises.

Caution without ambition produces paralysis.

Between these two extremes lies a far more interesting space: one in which it is possible to imagine something that does not yet exist and then immediately ask what economic, legal, scientific, institutional and social conditions would be required to make it possible.

That is the space in which this laboratory intends to work.

Listen.
Study.
Compare.
Design.
Verify.
Build.

The order matters.

Building comes last.

First, the problem must be understood. Documents must be found. The people who live in the territory and those who possess specific expertise must be heard. Experiences developed elsewhere must be examined. Regulations must be studied. Costs must be calculated. Risks must be identified. It must be understood who has the authority to decide. We must ask where resources might come from and, above all, who would sustain over time what has been created.

Only then does it make sense to speak about implementation.

This also means accepting a possibility that public communication rarely welcomes: discovering that we were wrong.

A good analysis may show that an idea does not work.

A legal assessment may close a path that initially appeared promising.

Dialogue with the community may reveal that a project considered interesting by its creators does not respond to the priorities of those who actually live in the territory.

An economic assessment may show that the costs are disproportionate to the benefits.

In such cases, abandoning or changing an idea does not represent a failure of the method.

It is evidence that the method is working.

This book, therefore, does not ask the reader to believe in the ideas it contains.

It asks that they be tested.

Some may appear immediately achievable. Others may seem excessively ambitious. Some may find practical application relatively quickly. Others may require years, skills that are not yet available, partners still to be identified, capital that must be structured, or decisions that belong exclusively to the competent institutions.

Some will change.

Some will probably never be implemented.

Others may generate something different from what was originally imagined.

That is precisely why these pages are not intended to be a catalogue of promises.

They form a project book.

An attempt to bring order to questions, reveal relationships, collect sources, make opportunities and limitations understandable, and distinguish what already exists from what might one day be built.

A serious territorial project should not be afraid to show its doubts. It should treat them as information.

It should not hide risks in order to make an idea more attractive. It should expose them, because only by understanding risk can we decide whether it is worth taking.

It should not use a number simply because the number sounds impressive. It should ask where it comes from, what it measures and what it does not measure.

Above all, it should never confuse aspiration with reality.

But neither should it use present reality as proof that the future must necessarily resemble it.

The project exists within this tension between imagination and discipline.

At some point, of course, behind every project there is someone who asked the first question.

In this case, that person is Peter Regent.

Born in Trieste and connected to this territory, he has spent a significant part of his professional life observing economic, financial, entrepreneurial and governance systems from within, particularly between Switzerland and Europe.

But the purpose here is not to reconstruct a curriculum vitae.

The more interesting question is why experience gained in very different environments should lead back to such a small territory.

The question is, in essence, a simple one: how many of the skills used to structure organisations, investments, decision-making processes and complex projects could also be placed at the service of a local community?

And if the perspective is reversed: how much could a small territory teach someone accustomed to thinking through large organisations, large pools of capital and large systems?

The laboratory emerges from this encounter.

Not from the belief that one person can possess all the necessary expertise.

Quite the opposite.

If the questions involve history, environment, agriculture, law, finance, technology, culture, public administration, spatial planning and international cooperation, then no individual can be enough.

The method must necessarily open itself to others.

To citizens, researchers, businesses, universities, associations, professionals and institutions. To someone who knows a cave better than any technical report. To someone who studies biodiversity. To someone who knows how to read a balance sheet. To someone who preserves a family memory that no

archive has recorded. To someone who can explain why a proposal that looks perfect on paper would not work in real life.

The author can connect the questions.

The answers, if they come, will need to be far more collective.

Perhaps this is also why Sissi appears in the project.

A dog does not solve governance problems, build financial models or interpret European regulations. But she can remind us of something that projects and institutions easily forget: a territory is not only what appears in documents.

It is what is walked through.

Smelled, observed and lived.

It is the path someone follows every morning. The forest changing colour. The house in which a language is preserved. The field that someone continues to cultivate even when abandoning it would be easier.

Peter studies. Sissi sniffs. In the end, the territory decides whether the idea is worthwhile.

There is lightness in that sentence, but also an important rule.

The project should never become more important than the place for which it was imagined.

And it is precisely from this place that the perspective can gradually widen.

First Monrupino-Repentabor.

Then the Karst.

Then the wider territory between Italy and Slovenia, where continuity of landscape, culture and economy is often more visible on the ground than on administrative maps.

Finally, Europe.

Not because every local project must become European in order to acquire legitimacy.

But because many of the questions that emerge here do not belong to this territory alone.

How can small municipalities preserve services, opportunities and human capital?

How can young people find reasons to stay, return or build something of their own?

How can projects that are too small to interest major markets and too complex to depend exclusively on public budgets be financed?

How can heritage be protected without turning it into a static museum?

How can biodiversity be valued without reducing nature to a financial item?

How can innovation be built without erasing identity and tradition?

How can territories divided by national borders cooperate when environmental, economic and social problems do not respect those borders?

How can a local administration engage with universities, businesses, private capital, European programmes and communities without losing its own role?

How can a place remain open to the world without becoming interchangeable with every other place?

These are questions faced by thousands of small European territories.

From Alpine regions to islands, from rural areas to border regions, from villages losing population to communities that possess extraordinary heritage but struggle to transform it into sustainable opportunity.

The Karst Switzerland does not possess a ready-made model to export.

It would be contradictory to claim otherwise before it has even been tested in the place where it was conceived.

But it can ask a question.

If something worked here, could it also be useful elsewhere?

If a small territory succeeded in connecting heritage and innovation, nature and capital, identity and openness, research and enterprise, administration and participation more effectively, could that experience generate knowledge that others might use?

Not necessarily a formula.

Not necessarily a model.

Perhaps simply lessons.

Including lessons from failure.

Especially lessons from failure.

Europe is often imagined through its capitals, major institutions, infrastructure corridors, metropolitan areas, famous universities and large industrial groups.

But a vast part of Europe lives elsewhere.

It lives in small municipalities.

In rural areas.

In mountain regions.

On islands.

Along borders.

In places where a school, a business, a doctor, a road or a digital connection can radically alter the prospects of an entire community.

If European integration is to have a concrete meaning, it must also be tested here.

Not only in the ability to remove a physical border, but in the ability to transform that border into cooperation.

Not only in the availability of funding, but in the capacity of territories to transform funding into useful projects.

Not only in the protection of identities, but in the possibility for different identities to coexist without experiencing diversity as a threat.

The Karst has one valuable characteristic for exploring all of this: it makes contradictions visible.

It is both fragile and resilient.

Local and international.

Divided by history and connected by geography.

Rich in heritage and continually required to question its economic sustainability.

Close to important European networks and, at the same time, composed of very small communities.

Perhaps that is precisely why it is worth beginning here.

We do not know which of the ideas contained in this book will still exist in the same form ten years from now.

We hope they will not all remain unchanged.

If they did, it would mean that we had learned nothing.

A laboratory that always confirms its own hypotheses is not a laboratory.

It is a showcase.

This journey intends to be something else.

It aims to document the starting point while leaving open the possibility of correcting the direction.

It should allow us, one day, to return to these pages and say: this idea worked; this one did not. Here we underestimated a problem. Here someone who came later found a better solution. This project became reality. Another was abandoned. One question produced another that we had never anticipated.

That would be a good result.

Because the objective is not to prove that we were right at the beginning.

It is to build something better at the end.

And the outcome, if it comes, will not be measured by the number of ideas produced, the number of pages written or the ability to describe the territory in attractive language.

It will be measured in far more concrete terms.

Has someone found one more reason to stay?

Has a business gained an opportunity that did not exist before?

Has a piece of heritage become better understood and better protected?

Has cooperation between Italy and Slovenia produced something useful?

Has a young person been able to transform a skill into a project?

Has a public decision become more transparent?

Has a part of nature been protected not against the economy, but through a better way of thinking about it?

Has an idea born here helped another small European territory?

If, over time, even some of these questions could receive a positive answer, the laboratory would have served a purpose.

But before results comes the willingness to begin.

To look at what already exists with different eyes.

To reject the idea that being small necessarily means being marginal.

To understand that identity and openness are not opposites.

To recognise that preservation does not mean immobilisation.

To understand that capital is a tool, not an end.

To insist that great ambitions be accompanied by numbers, rules, responsibility and competence.

And, at the same time, not to allow difficulty to become an excuse for imagining nothing at all.

In the end, we always return to the point from which we started.

A small territory.

Stone.

Forests.

Caves.

Fields.

Villages.

Two languages telling the story of the same landscape in different words.

A nearby city.

A border that is no longer what it once was.

A community with its own memory.

And a future that has not yet been written.

Perhaps small territories do not need to become large in order to have a future.

Perhaps they need to become better at recognising the value of what they already possess, connecting it, protecting it and transforming it into possibility.

Perhaps their strength will not lie in competing with metropolitan areas on metropolitan terms, but in building something that cities cannot easily reproduce: proximity, identity, relationships, knowledge of place, quality of landscape and the ability to experiment on a human scale.

And perhaps some of the questions Europe will need tomorrow can arise precisely here, in places that, on paper, appear too small to matter.

We do not yet know what answers we will find.

But we know where to begin.

With the territory.

And with the willingness to look at it not as a periphery to be administered, but as a possibility to be understood.

Everything else still has to be tested.

And that is precisely why it is worth trying.