

Unger Foundation Croatia Trip Report August 11-28, 2020



For many NGO's and foundations, COVID 19 has disrupted valuable personal and professional relationships that have taken years to build and nurture. The Unger Foundation has been particularly active in Croatia over the last year, supporting my lecture series at the University of Zagreb last November (funded by an Erasmus Grant), **Saša Drezgić's** conference on the [Economics of Digital Transformation](#) (EDT), which was held online in June, Saša's application for a US Embassy Alumni Grant, and supporting continued collaboration between the [Unger Program](#) at the [Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs](#) at Cleveland State and the [Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Rijeka](#). Throughout the pandemic, the Foundation has continued to develop these core projects by working with our Croatian partners online. Yet, despite amazing technological innovations, online communications still can't substitute for personal face to face interactions, which produce a higher level of synergy and which are, at least in my experience, key to successful networking. As such, Prof **Andrej Krickovic's** ([Professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow](#) and Unger Family Foundation) trip to Croatia in August 2020 was a critical opportunity to maintain the Foundation's existing relationships, to keep forward momentum on the Foundation's ongoing projects and initiatives, and to open up new horizons for collaboration with new partners.

Andrej had a chance to meet with former Unger Alumni Dražen Hoffman, of the Croatian NGO GONG, Saša Drezgić, Professor at the University of Rijeka, Predrag Pale, Professor at the IT Department at the university of Zagreb, former Unger Grantee **Vjeran Pavlaković**, professor of Humanities at the University of Rijeka,. They caught Andrej up with their activities and on the state of political transparency, political governance, and civil society in Croatia, and the impact that the pandemic has had in these areas. They discuss ongoing and projects such as plans for next year's EDT conference, the CSU-University of Rijeka summer course Saša is organizing with CSU Prof. Nick Zingale, and various grant opportunities that the foundation is helping them pursue. They also explored ideas for future projects, including bringing Dražen and GONG together with UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies (where Foundation Alan Unger is a fellow), on ways in which Vjeran could revive his Summer University on Cres and expand its curriculum, and helping Predrag (who now works closely with the Croatian ministry of Education in their efforts to develop online learning) organize an annual summer seminar where participants would develop innovative educational and petrological techniques.

Andrej was able to maintain his ongoing collaboration with the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Political Science, meeting with Professors **Dejan Jović**, and **Kristijan Kotarski**. Dejan was a Foreign Policy Advisor to

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former Croatian President Ivo Josipović and he ran as a candidate for the European Parliament for the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (the main political party of the Serbian minority in Croatia) in 2019. Kristijan runs a special non-degree program at his faculty tailored to the needs of public and private sector professionals that are interested in learning more about issues related to public finance, transparency and good governance. Andrej held guest lectures for their courses at the university during his Erasmus lecture series last November and they agreed that Andrej would continue to give guest lectures (via Zoom) for Dejan and Kristijan's classes this academic year. Kristijan came to Moscow on an Erasmus grant in December 2019, which Andrej helped sponsor, and Dejan was scheduled to come to Moscow to participate in a conference organized by Andrej's university, which was eventually cancelled because of the pandemic. Andrej will look for opportunities to bring both of them to visit his university in Moscow as soon as regular academic travel can resume.

Andrej also met with **Nikola Jelić**, spokesman and advisor for newly-elected Croatian President Zoran



Milanović. As Milanović campaign manager, Nikola played an instrumental role in helping him pull out an upset victory over the charismatic incumbent, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. Thanks to Nikola's help, we were able to have president Milanović to give the opening remarks at this year's EDT conference. We discussed the possibility of having President Milanović attend next year's EDT

conference in person and Nikola also promised to help us arrange a meeting with the President the next time Alan Unger (as head of the foundation) is in Zagreb.

During his trip, Andrej expanded the foundation's contacts with new potential partners. He met with two professors from Libertas University, Croatia's leading private University, **Vladimir Filipović** and **Damir Mladić**. Libertas (<https://www.libertas.hr/en/>) has a strong International Relations department and an ongoing academic exchange program that brings US students to Croatia. Andrej will give two online guest lectures for their courses this year and he will also help Libertas organize an online conference on the theme "State (In)stability: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives for the Nation-State", that will be held in November of 2020. (<https://www.libertas.hr/en/news/call-for-papers-for-international-scientific-conference-state-instability/>).

Andrej also met **Cameron Millard**, deputy secretary of the Political Affairs Section of the US Embassy in Zagreb. Andrej gave Cameron the rundown of the Foundations history and recent activities in Croatia, including the Opatija conference and Saša's Alumni Grant application. Cameron has a background in Urban Studies and the conference, particularly the panels and presentations on "Smart Cities", piqued his interest.

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He was eager to stay in touch about next year's conference and, scheduling permitting, it would be possible that a representative from the Embassy (including the Ambassador) would attend.

Overall this was a productive trip that comes at a critical time, when travel and face to face interactions are severely restricted by the COVID pandemic. The foundation will keep the ball rolling on its ongoing projects, including Andrej's lectures at the University of Zagreb, the EDT Conference, and the Rijeka-Cleveland State Summer Course. The trip also helped to establish new relationships with Libertas University and at



the US Embassy, which open up new avenues for cooperation. Most importantly, the trip strengthened the personal and professional relationships that are at the very heart of the Foundation's activities and this will reap tremendous dividends once the pandemic is over and we can all return to some form of normalcy.



Dr. Andrej Krickovic is an Assistant Professor with the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia. Andrej has been at HSE University since 2013. He is consult to the Unger Foundation and an external advisor to the Unger Program at the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs.

The Unger Program at the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs was originally founded in 2002 as the Unger International Program for Local Government Leadership with the mission to catalyze an educational bridge between the Levin College and the University of Rijeka. The program was a collaborative effort of the Levin College to respond to the consulting, training, research and educational needs of local government leaders in emerging democracies. The program worked with university faculties and local government leaders in emerging democracies to develop and implement academic and continuing education programs in public management for future and incumbent officials and managers in local governments and non-government organizations. Today, the program serves to support and foster economic and community development through collaborative research and educational exchanges.