

Building the community foundation movement in the Western Balkans: turning challenges into opportunities



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Marija Mitrović, Philanthropy and Partnerships Director, Trag Foundation, describes an ambitious programme to develop the community foundation movement in the Western Balkans. In this article she describes the context and journey, highlighting the challenges, and lessons learned on the way. Trag has developed a flexible approach which following research and consultation offers tailored capacity building and financial assistance to selected 'initiative groups' and guides them through a process of incubation, consolidation and finally to independent operation. What is most remarkable is their success despite constraints imposed by Covid-19.

Almost two years ago, with the support of the C.S. Mott Foundation, Trag Foundation embarked on a journey to support the development of the community foundation movement in the Western Balkans region. To some it may sound rather uncomplicated - Western Balkans is a relatively small territory in Southeast Europe with colorful landscapes and warm, strong-minded and hard-working people. However, this is also the region of 6 countries, 3 different languages, completely different levels of civic activism, community and local philanthropy development burdened by political, economic and social issues, brain-drain and its share of complicated mutual history. The region itself had only 6 existing community foundations operating in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, all very different in their nature and ways of working so, after the initial excitement of what lay ahead, the question on everyone's mind was - where do we begin? What contexts are the most suitable for planting seeds of community foundation enthusiasm? Who are the people we needed to talk to and engage, to get the ball rolling in the right direction?

After months of life on the road, meeting rooms, buckets of coffee and insightful discussions, Trag decided to launch the programme in Serbia first, to see if our approach has what it takes to yield results on the home ground. The Call for programme was launched

in late December 2019 and, during a 3-month campaign, we worked towards introducing the community foundation concept to wider audiences and getting people excited and inspired to get involved. Trag Foundation has been active for more than two decades and has, over the years, supported more than 1,500 initiatives in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro with over 14 m US dollars, so we felt quite confident that the programme would attract the attention of the civil society sector. However, we were aware that we needed to step out of our bubble, reach people from other walks of life and spread the word far and wide to encompass any possible target groups we could think of, especially entrepreneurs who were perceived as the go-getters who could open a number of doors and help transform ideas into action.

This was done with support of our sister foundations, existing community foundations, former grantees, business associations, friends in the media, persistent digital and mailing campaigns as well as info sessions held across the country (live events - remember those?). By the due date on March 15th, just a day before the COVID-19 pandemic led to a country-wide lockdown, we've received 28 applications from informal groups coming from 17 different communities in Serbia.

At first we were puzzled - should we wait for the pandemic to be over and visit each of the 9 shortlisted groups or keep the momentum going by transferring everything online? You need not guess dear reader, it soon became apparent that the pandemic is not just a short glitch in the matrix and after 2 weeks of interviews, dozens of questions, frozen connections and many 'can-you-hear-me', we decided to select 4 groups coming from Pančevo, Niš, Šabac and Stara Pazova to go ahead with the programme, based on their composition, knowledge of their community, experience and skills, availability of resources and endless enthusiasm to face all the inevitable challenges and come out on top.

The programme itself was designed to roll out in 3 stages - the *incubation phase*, in which the selected informal groups would receive accompaniment from Trag and external experts to build their team, acquire knowledge and skills necessary to become grantmakers, local resource mobilizers and community movers and shakers and meet the challenge of raising €15,000 from individuals and businesses in their communities that Trag would match, providing them with their first grantmaking budget aimed at supporting local initiatives in their surroundings. For this phase, Trag dedicated a €3,000 budget for each group, giving them some space to set themselves up and running, and conduct their initial fundraising efforts. Second phase is the so-called *consolidation phase*, in which the informal groups would evolve into established community foundations and work to support the local initiatives and raise additional funding for their grantmaking whilst being further strengthened in terms of their internal capacities and supported with a general purpose grant from Trag. The third phase is envisaged as the phase of *independent work*, with well-

established community foundations working on their own and Trag cheering in the background and providing additional sets of wings where necessary.

We began our joint journey with workshops on community foundation concepts, mapping and needs assessment exercises whilst devising their plans of work. The four groups vary in size, composition, community contexts, available resources and capacity building needs so the accompaniment plans were tailor made, to address each group individually but also collectively, to spark their sense of belonging to a wider movement. This process was much aided by our friends from Romania - Alina Porumb as the programme's key expert and community foundations from Timisoara, Ramnicu Valcea and Banatul Montan, who took time to share their experiences and answer a number of questions and dilemmas our groups faced as they moved forward.

As it always goes in life, plans are there to be changed so, as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed and shook all aspects of our personal and community lives, Trag and the initiative groups had to shift their approaches numerous times to effectively address these contextual upheavals. One thing was obvious - given that the civil society in Serbia was prompt in response to the effects of the pandemic, the need for community foundations proved to be greater than ever. Not only did communities need someone to take on the leadership role, connect all the stakeholders and address the burning issues without lengthy due diligence processes and complicated procedures, they also need someone who would establish the system to mitigate similar challenges and help communities become more resilient in the future.

With that in mind, Trag changed its accompaniment approach, putting more emphasis on strengthening initiative groups' internal capacities and building their leadership role in the community, whilst facilitating their decisions on when to best start their fundraising campaigns, in terms of momentum, their internal capacities, available resources and fundraising techniques that can be applied. With the support from Mott, we also changed our grantmaking scheme, providing a matching grant for every €3,000 that they raised with an additional €1,000 of general purpose funding, to cover the administrative and human resources costs arising from their newly acquired grantmaking role. This was also another mechanism set to mitigate negative circumstances of COVID-19 and provide more opportunities for the groups to fundraise, mobilize and position themselves as future community foundations in their respective communities. This really got the initiative groups going and they devised a number of interesting strategies to attract donors without much face to face engagement. Thus far, Niš has surpassed its first fundraising goal of €3,000 and Pančevo is less than €50 from the finishing line. Trag is now helping them shape their grantmaking calls and eagerly awaiting to see what kind of local initiatives get to be supported through this programme first.



As we progress further, Šabac and Stara Pazova will also intensify their fundraising efforts and we will continue with our tireless support, involving not only Trag staff but also resources coming from ECFI and community foundations in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania and Hungary. If your community foundation or community foundation support organization is interested to get involved - by all means, get in touch, let's tighten our ranks and make these challenging times a bit more magical! Until then, enjoy the [video](#) presenting the initiative groups and stay tuned for more news on successes in Serbia and the results of the Call for programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina that was just closed with 60 applications coming from all around the country! Also, feel free to contact us for more information on marijam@tragfondacija.org. We would be happy to network and share.