



## **My „labi“ days in Latvia**

Reflections on the ECFI study visit

(That you will probably not read ... or now you even might!)

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In September 2018 I had the pleasure of participating in the study visit to community foundations in Latvia, organized by ECFI. This trip consisted of many different “firsts” – Latvia was among a handful of European countries that I haven’t been to before and I’ve never taken part in an ECFI study visit so – as it is always the case – I was filled with excitement and wonder. On my way over, I tried to enlist the things I knew about Latvia, that weren’t many. I knew that they were quite patriotic and proud of their independence and heritage. I knew that they have a long coast with plenty of lovely and enjoyable nature. I knew Riga was all about the Art Nouveau architecture and colorful nightlife. I knew that their national drink, Riga Black Balsam, isn’t exactly your liver’s BFF.

The one thing I knew best and that prompted me to apply was Ansis, our host and director of the Valmiera Community Foundation, who (to his constant surprise) is perceived as one of the most prominent and active figures of the European and global community foundation scene. We’ve met in 2011 and, since then, I was able to observe his love and dedication to Valmiera community and Latvian culture and traditions as a whole. I thought that his first-hand experiences and knowledge of various contexts could provide me with some food for thought on our quest to build the community foundations movement in the Western Balkans region. The opportunity to contribute to building this movement in my own surroundings became apparent shortly before I applied for this study visit, making it all the more relevant. Trag Foundation has been very active in supporting existing and emerging community foundations in Serbia and collaborating with other community foundations region-wide. Still, the possibility of building an entire movement in 6 different countries certainly raised the challenge to the next level and we needed to look up to our allies closer to home as well as those in distant (yet not so different) regions like the Baltics. In that respect, I was bound to inquire about issues that other study visit participants most likely already chewed up and swallowed but that were nevertheless essential to the success of every community foundation out there.

Predictably, my interests revolved around all the key points of the Latvian community foundation experience – from the way different community foundations were established to the ways they promoted local leadership and built spaces for various people to convene and work together – in short, I wanted to learn about their most important milestones and their darkest hours. Given that I was coming from a community foundation supporting organization, I wondered if they had anyone to support this process and facilitate their joint work on the national level and, if not, what model was applied instead?

Our journey took us throughout the Vidzeme and Aluksne regions, towns of Valmiera, Ape and Aluksne that filled me up with inner peace and calm rarely experienced on the buzzing streets of Belgrade. All communities seemed so picturesque and well-kept, busting with numerous postcard-worthy sites. We've spent a part of our time in libraries and community centers that actually play the role of society pillars. I tried hard not to draw comparisons, but it was difficult not to reflect on the underwhelming state and the communal status of libraries and public spaces back where I come from.

My first Latvian a-ha moment happened while our hosts shared some background information on the country. I frequently sit through similar types of presentations and over 95% of those can easily be titled „*Exhaustive list of our problems*“ and last for about 5 hours straight. This, however, wasn't the case in Latvia. Our hosts were not complaining about much and certainly did not use each slide as a cue to highlight a number of polarizing issues in society. When I asked why I've learned that this represented a part of their mentality and culture – Latvians simply didn't like talking about problems and refused to engage in any kind of conflicting situations. Things were looking up for me already.

However, this is not to say that they didn't have any issues to begin with, on the contrary. In the time of our visit, Latvian community foundation movement was facing its biggest challenge yet, as their most significant institutional donor suddenly withdrew the funding that supported the movement since 2012. This was hardly uncharted territory as we've all experienced comfortable arrangements that ended up shaking our foundations to the core. Although much can be learned from prosperous times, I was grateful that we've had the opportunity to be there, at that delicate moment, and offer our hand in support. I also immensely appreciated our hosts' willingness to expose themselves to virtual strangers in the most honest, vulnerable and open way, enabling us to ask endless questions and offer thoughts and personal experiences as a way of moving forward.

Looking back, this visit enabled me to pack many thoughts into my suitcase and take them on the journey that we're just about to embark on here at home. I became very aware of the efforts needed to explain the importance and the role of community foundations to one's local community, even after years of hard work and numerous successes that illustrate your positive impact on the local life. I've learned about the importance of engaging the right people, both in the boards and the

executive, who balance strong personal motivation with the ability to open up their schedules, phone books, wallets and minds towards achieving the common goal. I've learned about the importance of strategy based on proactive rather than reactive approach to community needs and bravery to step out of your comfort zone and grab difficult issues by the horns, even when it's just you and that elephant in the room. I've learned that engaging donors doesn't come easy, even if you are a familiar and trustworthy face in the community and that it sometimes goes smoother in smaller and poorer communities than those that are more populated and well-off. I've learned that, in addition to opening spaces for donor engagement, you need to open spaces for community and civil society to grow into those agents of change. I've learned that small grants can go a long way and impact the community development way past their spending date. I've learned about the importance of measuring impact and storytelling as a way of creating grounds for expansion. I've learned that it's good to have a structure beyond you, to give you wings and have your back in your hour of need. It doesn't need to be a high-flying CFSO but it also helps if you're not exactly on the same boat so that it could look beyond the storms and navigate you into safety.



Most of all, those 5 days with colleagues from across Europe, made me feel like a part of a proper family, the one where everyone's a character and holiday dinner conversations go in unpredictable directions, but that is nevertheless there, armed with compassion, appreciation and respect for one another. Everyone was truly present and engaged, ready to listen, offer something to the table and take action where necessary. I wrote pages and pages of notes, thoughts, ideas and quotes that will surely help me through the bumpy road ahead.

While risking to lose my street cred by sounding overly emotional, I thank ECFI, most notably Mihaela and Julia, for the opportunity to be a part of this experience. I thank our wonderful Latvian hosts for their hard work to make these days thoroughly enjoyable, meaningful and inspiring. Last but not least, I thank my pan-European colleagues for all the insight, understanding and laughter that I am cherishing long after we've said our goodbyes. It was a truly exceptional first and I am crossing my fingers to the opportunity for Trag to be a part of many more memorable and thought-provoking joint endeavors ahead.