

# SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM 2019

Latvia 28.9. – 13.10.2019.  
Franjo Toić, Croatia

Supported by:

forum  synergies



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## 1. Scholarship area map



## 2. Introduction

My name is Franjo Toić, I am 31 years old and I live in a small village Loznati on the island of Cres, Croatia. The village has 30 inhabitants and it is 6km away from the capital city of the island of Cres, and yes, it's in a rural area. The whole island has ~2.900 inhabitants even though it is the largest one in Croatia. I've done my elementary and high school on the island and then went to the University of Rijeka where I've studied tourism management on the Faculty of tourism and hospitality management, Opatija, and finally achieved there my master degree. I've worked since my teenager years in tourism and in all different types of jobs, on the island but also on the mainland. Now I'm working in the municipality of Mali Lošinj as a project manager/administrator for EU and national funds. But, since the earliest time I was very well aware of the work in rural areas and agriculture because we (my family) had a family farm, which I still keep the tradition nowadays. On our island, especially if you live in a small village, it is a tradition to have some kind of additional work with sheep, agriculture or beekeeping. At the moment, my family farm has 30 sheep of local type ("creska pramenka"), 30 beehives, few goats and chickens and a couple of fields for agriculture (tomatoes, onion, garlic, potatoes, etc.).



Many of my friends asked me how did I get this scholarship. To be honest, I've got the information for this program just by case while searching some information one morning at the job, where there was this notification from Croatian network for rural development for an ongoing call for participants. I've read the info, look about the possibilities and obligations and told myself: "If you want to go, you should apply for this because it is your last train to get some foreign experience!". So I started contacting Forum Synergies representative (Simone Matouch) and went in contact with an organization from Ireland. After 2 weeks of contacting and receiving details about the program, I've started looking for the transfer options and then realized I can go there anytime during whole year very easy. So I said once again, why not try something different and unknown to make the experience even better. And that's how I got in contact with Aris Adlers from LAG Juras Zeme (at the time of applying it was LAG Sernikon, the name changed during the year). He explained me what were his ideas and actions for program and it was really interesting for me. And that's how I decided to go Latvia!

I was very motivated for the application, even though I didn't had any expectation to pass the approval of my profile, so when I got a positive result in June 2019, I was really happy and shocked. During my studying at the university I wanted to do the Erasmus exchange program but never had a good chance to pass the qualifications due to very low quotas and plenty of student application. With this scholarship I also wanted to see the difference between EU countries and learn skills for my future plans of private entrepreneurship with my family farm.

In 2019. I also managed to receive 15.000€ for improving the activities on my family farm through the LAG Kvarnerski otoci in my area, so that was also one motivation more.

Now, while I am writing this report, I feel really happy and fulfilled for that possibility to meet new ideas, new and great people and get more international experience, even the program took only 2 weeks.

### 3. Activities during 2 week period in Latvia

Due to financial budget and poor flight connections from Croatia to Latvia, I've decided to get the cheapest and most reasonable flight from Zagreb (Croatia) to Warsaw (Poland) with overnight and then to Riga (Latvia) and the same was on return. So the trip in fact started on Saturday 28.9. but in Riga I arrived 29.9. afternoon and met my host, Aris Adlers from LAG Sernikon which changed the name to LAG Juras zeme in the period. He gave me some guidance how will the first week look like and where will we be traveling. I was really excited and I've had the opportunity to explore the capital of Latvia in the evening. Latvia amazed me with it's tradition and history, the natural side is really lovely and well kept even though I was quite shocked about the infrastructure status in the city center compared to the other cities in Croatia. I've learnt about general stuff from Latvia, like the total number and inhabitants, industry, income and similar.

The first day, Aris drove me to Tukums (official town advertising on the billboard is "Smukums un Tukums"- it means beauties from Tukums, a game of words to think yourself what kind of beauties Tukums has) where we met PLJ - Partnerība laukai un jurai (LAG Laukai & jurai) representatives – Ilze Turka and Ieva Vitola Deusa. There they introduced me with their activities and shown me very interesting projects. I was really interested in the project they have done to clean and reuse the sea grass & algae, and what were the main problems during the process. The machines they bought are really interesting cos they could be used for cleaning sea beach from the plastic garbage too (for example in Croatia), not only for sea grass & algae. We have even tried some food products of sea grass (pesto for pasta) which had a specific taste and it is definitely worth trying! After Tukums, we went to Majori and Engure, a small village near the sea that is special for their history of fishing eels. There we've seen a LAG project that had the activities to build a pier in the coastal area and a theme park. After that we went to Jurmala, a coastline city mostly known as a popular tourist destination that is crowded during summer time but after 1<sup>st</sup> of September the number of people decreases massively. Jurmala has a big coastline beach, and I was amazed by the status of them, very clean, without any trace of plastic garbage and well developed. Afternoon I used the train to reach Tukums where I had overnight.



2<sup>nd</sup> day was quite interesting since I had the opportunity to meet people from Estonia and Ireland since PLJ invited me to their meeting due to an ongoing INTERREG project. We had a possibility to share our experiences and to explore the previous projects from PLJ. It was really interesting since we had the opportunity to see a tourism project for tree camping, basically a metal construction on which you can sit and sleep and it is attached on the tree. We also had this meeting session on a special raft used for cruising on the water that was founded through a previous LAG project. I was really happy to meet the leaders of the projects going on in that area and even the leaders

from Estonia and Ireland. We shared experiences between our countries and we shared our contacts for future possibilities. After the meeting, I went to Saulkrasti and explored a bit the amazing coastal area and continued to Balvi.



for people with different addictions. We also had a meeting with well experienced ladies that are leading different LAG groups.

4<sup>th</sup> day we drove to Zasa for a big event. 17 communities were gathering in this final project meeting in which they presented the final brochures and info panels and different products from each community. It would be some kind of branding of the area. I really enjoyed because I've spoken with many interesting people and had really good ideas. The project itself was really well done, I've personally met with Solvita Kukle, a young person that was doing the design of the brochure, an English teacher that is retired, Madara Vevere municipality employee, and few other people. They all have one thing in common, they all got really tired of



the city and some had burnout from the stress and they moved on the country side to live with the nature and help the society. In the speech, especially the English teacher, spoke about nowadays people living in the big flats in the cities that are completely alienated from themselves, and everything she was telling made absolute sense. During this event we had the opportunity to try local meals and beverages and meet the scenery. It was a delightful pleasure to be in Zasa. At the evening we drove to Gulbene.

3<sup>rd</sup> day we drove ourselves to Salnava. It is a small rural village in a really authentic countryside. With cooperation of Latvian lauku forums the inhabitants asked for help about the ideas for the manner house. It is a 2 floor building but nowadays it is only used the basement floor for education purposes, kindergarten and elementary school. The meeting were attending ladies only from the village and they had different ideas for usage. The LLF team I was with were doing some analysis and brainstorming with the group and shown them the possibilities through LAG funding. I had an opportunity to speak with local people and even meet the kindergarten class. The area of Salnava definitely is way rural then the coastal area, and even there is a big difference in road development that should bring investments. In the afternoon we drove to Zasa and spent a night in an interesting guesthouse that offers help



5<sup>th</sup> day we were in Gulbene, a small remote town that doesn't have good traffic network. Even though it is in heart of mainland, it reminded me a lot of my island town. The people, the infrastructure

and many different things. I really enjoyed and I've had the opportunity to see a hostel based in an old railway house. It had some EU funds investments in some parts of it, but it is still originally the "old" railway house which has a "soul". Interesting accommodation that is worth a visit, and even with nice train exhibition in front. In the afternoon we had a meeting in local Kafijs Siltumnica, a place with similar story as the one in Zasa. It is more developed, it has a big (in my opinion) role in developing the cultural life of young people up to the age of 40. People were interested how it is possible to support the work in the future of this house with EU funds. The LLF team explained the materials and helped them. In the evening we went to Riga.



Franjo Toic dodaje 28 novih fotografija.  
6. listopada u 19:45

Sunday spent in Liepaja! Still can't believe how lucky I am with the weather, very sunny and 6C today! Had a special personal guide, Agris from Nica that took me all around and spoke about the history of this area... really really awesome! The karma returned back to me, since I've guided many times through my island complete strangers from abroad 😊 also had the opportunity to visit the WWII museum of the Liepaja region. Again seen the whole stupidity and nonsense of any war... thousands and thousands people killed or deported during the war and after it due to some kind of ideology and propaganda... even with more than 500 buildings devastated during WWII, Liepaja is nowadays a beautiful coastal city!



6<sup>th</sup> day we went to a beautiful coastal area in the municipality of Nica. The meeting was planned only with municipal employees and it succeeded well. They had the opportunity to share ideas with LLF and plans for future. Nicas mayor, Mr. Agris took us personally to the sightseeing of the local most popular places and shown us the sport hall that was built with Norway funding. It is amazing infrastructure with many sport activities. Afterward we went with Ieva Taurinskaite (head of project office) to see a coastal area near the beach where they had finished just few weeks ago the pathway and relax zone from the forest to the beach, all made in wood design. Excellent place for families. We than drove ourselves to Liepaja.

7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> day of this scholarship I was staying in Liepaja. Liepaja has big history and tradition, it is on the coast, it has beautiful nature, sea and even the lake. In this two days I had a

special occasion that Mr Agris (Mayor of Nica novads) took me for sightseeing of Liepaja and surroundings, and I've heard many interesting stories from the past of Liepajas history. In this two days I was visiting many locations and went to the WW2 museum. It was excellent place to see why every war is nonsense and to realize that only civilians die. Many people from Liepaja lost their lives during WW2 or after it in many concentration camps all around Europe. But still, nowadays, Liepaja is really developed, mostly touristic during summer season and with port infrastructure. I've even tried the Baltic sea on Liepajas beach and had some really good food.

9<sup>th</sup> day I went from Liepaja back to Riga. In Riga I had a really unique meeting. I was having a lecture in front of a class of students in Rigas technical university. It was a group of 30 students that are studying in Latvia for their master degree. The group was really multicultural and I really enjoyed my 1 hour lecture with comparison of Croatia & Latvia (Impact of cultural and geographical aspects on land use in Croatia and Latvia- comparative analysis) This lecture brought my back to my student days and I was really happy and inspired. Being a student in a foreign country gives you the opportunity to learn many great skills and habits and to see that the world is not only in your town. If everyone had the opportunity to share experiences and cultures while educating, there would be no war in the world I guess. The lecture was given thanks to LAG Juras Zeme and Aris Adlers.



10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> day was staying in Bebrene with a young family, Liga & Artis Pauluke, and I could say I had a great experience in this rural area. The family came back to Latvia after being in Canada for work for 5 years, and now they have a sheep farm. I've learnt many things about countryside lifestyle in Latvia, and I've even had the opportunity to put on the field the electric fence. It was a great experiment because it is much easier than on my island since the soil is really good. The family took me also one day in Zarasai, Lithuania to try their traditional meal, cepelinai. Even though the border from Lithuania is close, I didn't notice any bigger difference between 2 countries, there was only a small difference in standard (cheaper gasoline and some products in shops in Lithuania). The sheep farm consists of around 100 sheep that are kept outside when is not snow, and after they keep them in the barn during winter period. The electric fence keeps sheep away but it is not possible to resist wild animals like wild boars, deer and wolfs. At the moment they have 2 texel male sheep for reproduction purposes but



the intention is to enlarge the farm. They have the water from 80m deep source and a small pond near the house. It was a great experience because I wanted to have such a local farming experience since I'm also interested in sheep work. The part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> day I went with Mrs Inga Krekele for a visit to Daugavpils and Svente where I had the opportunity to speak about this scholarship in front of 18 years old kids. They were interested in it and I hope in the future they will realize the benefits from such exchanges. Daugavpils was really nice to see because of the difference between Riga and it, since the number of people is different and the history is also a bit different. Found out that the fortification near Daugavpils was actually made by French prisoners and I've heard also the history during the soviet times.

12<sup>th</sup> day after the trip back to Riga, I was exploring Carnikava area with my host Aris Adlers that has shown me the activities and project that were done in the past with his LAG and FLAG. We were in the area that was fully renewed with EU & national funding and noticed that there is a lot of fishing industry going on. The project also had this expanded reality with software applications to see the eels virtually flying over you while using your smartphones. We have seen the municipality and met some interesting people. In the evening, since it was my last evening in Latvia, I've met the whole LLF team on a nice dinner where we chatted and shared ideas, opinions and talked about everything. At the last day, I realized that the idea to come to Latvia was more than excellent and I'm really happy for every moment spent in such a beautiful country with even nicer people!



The last days, as the ones before arriving in Riga, I spent travelling to Warsaw and back home Zagreb -> island of Cres.

#### 4. Motivation:

I was motivated, as said in introduction, since I have a family farm and I felt like I'm being missing something in my life and went to search for a sharing experience of work and ideas. You is never to old to travel and get the experience, but it is better to do it when you are still younger. I didn't had the chance of having Erasmus experience so I wanted to have at least something where I could learn from a different point of view and different surrounding.

#### 5. Interviews:

To be honest, I don't have a specific idea what people should I mention here, since I've met really a big number of them and had a lot of talking on sustainable rural development activities. I will definitely note some of them, the ones that influenced me the most:

##### 1. LLF team

The people working in this organization were really (and I still think they are) enthusiastic in their daily jobs, and I've got the feeling they are really hard working group of young people that want to change the situation in rural areas on a better way. They all have some inner motivation since most of them are feeling connected a lot with the rural areas, most probably because in the past or nowadays they were (or are) living surrounded in nature or have someone that is in this situation. Basically, I see LLF as a small roller in the whole rural topic that will definitely have a big role to develop some good community projects in rural zones since the Latvian government doesn't take care a lot about rural areas. LLF during their community meetings were really trying to get the best results from communication with the local people. This activity reminds me a lot of a project we have done back on the island 4 years ago to analyze the landscape and provide future ideas. The best way is to get out ideas by leaving the local people in a small brainstorming group. Then, even if the local people are not sure about their ideas, in a couple of hours they will find out the right ones. I hope that LLF will stay like this, a group of really wise and proactive people that will help communities in their needs, even though they may have really hard and difficulty situations in their life!

##### 2. Liga and Artis

The family I was staying at in Bebrene were the ones that have shown me how it is living 24/7 in a rural area in Latvia. On my island, you think it is the worst thing being on an island sometimes, but then you move thousands of kilometers away and realize that you have "islands" on mainland too. Gravel roads all around rural areas, not possible to have water pipeline and so on, were a common thing in rural areas. When a family returns from Canada where they had really good salary and many opportunities, you know that they just want to live happily in rural area. I realized the difference between the sheep breed, the quality of grass and how you work out your daily activities in the

winter snow. Also, experience with wolf attacks and all the measures you have to do to protect your animals were a really good experience. On the island we don't have wolves but we have wild boars that attack our sheep, so I was interested how they cope with wild animals and damages. With Liga and Artis I had to explore really native parts of rural areas, and I'm really sorry that my experience was only 2 weeks. I wish I had more time to spend with them and to help them in their work. All the work they do, they try to influence the nature and surrounding as less as possible. They have their own greenhouse for the winter and they know what they want from the rural area.

### 3. English teacher

This lady that I don't remember the name unfortunately, she told me a great life story of her and I think that's the spirit and motivation in the life that everyone should have. She was a city girl married to a country boy, but they were living in Riga. She had a lot of stress at her work and started to have serial health issues. Her husband took the decision to move to countryside and she said that was their best decision ever. Living in a small flat, alienated from nature and just working and coping with projects is a lot of pressure if you can't handle. She finally went to country side where she's having an active role in rural sustainability program, she's helping her community to do some projects that will have mutual benefits and she has a small family farm. Borders exist only in human mind, and due to the media bombing in our daily life, we are always given just artificial wills and idea what should we do. She noted me that everyone has the possibility to choose what is good and what bad to you. I think she was right when she moved to countryside and I hope she will stay cheerful in future too!

### 4. Partnerība lauku un jurai

Ilze and Ieva gave me the opportunity to see what can you actually do with simple steps to get some done in real life. They've managed to get a lot of finance for making the pier, the theme park and to get one big machine from USA to clean the beaches and reuse the sea grass. It was really interesting duo that does a lot of work for their communities, even though sometimes like we always do, they have "problems with windmills" like Don Quijote, but still they keep fighting for a bigger purpose and for the local community. It is nice to meet people that probably in their daily life are so simple but still so experienced and skilled to make great decisions. They taught me about community management a lot!

### 6. Lessons learned, comparison and future actions

I've learnt a lot, most of that learning was gathered within LLF work with communities where I was able to compare difference between coastal and rural areas and see what daily activities are carried out. While being in Croatia on my island, we often think the "grass in the neighbor yard is more green than on our", but it isn't like that. I've seen many good examples of rural projects, but also some of them that had to be carried out even if the project was more political than real, which is a pity, because some people would really use that money on purpose for a better idea. I also realized while being in Latvia that people in general are more well educated and their awareness of public wellbeing is way above our. That could be seen everywhere around Latvia, almost no littering on the public roads, beaches completely clean, the grass and the yards are all well kept. It was strange for me at the beginning that all community events had 99.9% of female participants, but then I realized the women keep the "4 walls of the house" in Baltic states, and the male are mostly working and have no time to

discuss about the possibilities and developing in future. It can be a good but also a bad habit, but in the future I hope there will be more discussion with both male and female inhabitants. It can be that some of the workgroups were during the day and thus male part of the village population was working in rural and agriculture activities so it was not possible for them to visit this workgroups. I've learnt also that exchange programs are great to see other ideas. Sometimes you will notice that people that have not so good standard of life are more creative and inventive in their daily life, so it is a good start point for ourselves.

Definitely, it is not possible to compare my region of Croatia with Latvia because there is a lot of difference in the agriculture and landscape. In Latvian areas I haven't noticed any rocky parts while here on island and region we have a lot of rocks (karst landscape). Agriculture and sheep species are completely different and Latvia is more developed in the sector of cows and grain production. Implementation of EU funding is in my opinion way better in Latvia, but still from the newspapers and while having some talks with people there are a lot of problems in both project making and in control period of those EU projects, and even there are some bad experiences like in Croatia.

For the conclusion, I can only say that this has been a great experience and everyone should go away and see some other countries and their activities. Living in a rural area for someone that has never tried it may be like a cruel thing in the life, but I know that even though sometimes is really hard due to the hard work you have to do in the garden, field or forest, at the end when you turn around and look, you feel happy for the work you created with your own hands. It is pure happiness to plant a tree that you know you will never collect its fruits, but you are certain your kids or some future generation will collect the fruits of your hard work nowadays. That is the true spirit that you learn while living and working in the rural area, not being selfish and taking care of the people and nature that surrounds you.

