

Diplomats united in isolation

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Montenegro

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This book contains a collection of stories we were sharing with one another while being isolated in Montenegro during the coronavirus crisis in Spring 2020.

The narratives are a glimpse into our work and private lives, as well as our observations, thoughts, memories, and dreams during that strange time.

Now we are ready to share these stories with you, dear reader.

Things started to seem "off"

Aivo Orav, EU Ambassador to Montenegro

Thoughts and friendships

Veselko Grubišić, Ambassador of Croatia

Hearts unlimited

Robert Weber, Ambassador of Germany

A new work life balance

Gregor Presker, Ambassador of Slovenia

Encounters of the third kind

Christine Toudic, Ambassador of France

Elevator to scaffold and back

Karel Urban, Ambassador of Czechia

Improvise, adapt, overcome

József Négyesi, Ambassador of Hungary

Quarantine doesn't mean isolation

Artur Dmochowski, Ambassador of Poland

Beauty of the mind in difficult times

Panayotis Partsos, Ambassador of Greece

The art of living is the art of surviving

Luca Zelioli, Ambassador of Italy

An atypical, but highly responsible mission

Boris Gandel, Ambassador of Slovakia

The "new normality"

Meglena Plugtschieva, Ambassador of Bulgaria

My Corona Diary

Anna Jankovic, Ambassador of Austria

Isolated, not alone...

Ferdinand Nagy, Ambassador of Romania



The pandemic of the new coronavirus, COVID-19, surprised and shocked the entire world, all nations, communities, families and individuals. Nothing alike has happened globally since the famous "Spanish fever" after World War I. A whole hundred years ago! My generation in Europe knows of epidemics mostly from fascinating novels of Albert Camus, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Borislav Pekić. And even there we talk of "classic epidemics": the plague, the cholera, the rabies. We were faced with the unknown. Scientists still cannot find an agreement over what COVID-19 is, whether it is a sort of flu or a vicious lung disease. There is still no reliable cure, nor vaccine. This is why it was unprecedented and challenging for individuals, for countries, for the international community. Including a small but respectable diplomatic community in Podgorica, composed of many wonderful people and dedicated professionals. In the "time of corona," fully aware of all the dangers this situation imposed, the community worked tirelessly and committedly by putting the principles of solidarity and humanity in the first place.

The book before you, dear reader, is a collection of stories from ambassadors about "life in the time of corona" in Podgorica and Montenegro, which aspire to tell a story of how the pandemics changed the regular course of work and family life of EU ambassadors, and what memories will come out of it. These written words are a testimony of how diplomats and diplomacy managed to continue functioning in a field they were neither used to nor trained for, and about the challenges they had to face, overcome, and which they had to draw a few lessons from. What remains as a "testament" of this story is that they have shown great responsibility and devotion to their countries and their work, as well as to Montenegro with which

they have shared the risks, the fears, the burden, the solitude, but also the joy and the pleasure of a life together and a common triumph.

Diplomacy is a skill of representing countries and international organisations while seeking paths of cooperation. Its content and methods have changed depending on the issues it has faced. That is what is happening now! These interesting testimonials of EU diplomats confirm the cooperation of the international community and Montenegro. These are depicted in real situations and events on paper, and will remain a golden thread of the collective memory of these times. The stories that you will read represent a contribution to the history of Montenegrin diplomacy of how it has demonstrated its potential amidst a world crisis and confirmed that Montenegro has many allies and friends even in the most difficult of times.

Perhaps corona brought out the best in all of us, from the diplomatic corps in Podgorica as well as the Montenegrin diplomacy. In a moment of a sudden and unknown crisis, when the investment was so high, an almost primordial urge of solidarity and community emerged, as if we have had a Kennedy-like flashback: "Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Finally, this is an opportunity to say thank you for all the help Montenegro received and to pay my respect once more to everyone; to my colleagues in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as their partners in the diplomatic community, for their common efforts in the evacuation and repatriation of our and their citizens during a time which will be remembered by common success in defending values upon which we are building a European Montenegro. Enjoy the pages before you.
Podgorica, 11.05.2020

Prof.dr. Srđan Darmanović,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro

| Things started to seem "off"

Arrival

During these days of isolation, I have had a lot of contact with the Romanian Ambassador, Ferdinand Nagy. He is the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, as he has been here the longest. Ferdinand and I discussed once that in diplomacy there are multilateral and bilateral representations. Now however, it looks that there are also unilateral representations. Of course, this was a joke, as our diplomatic work in Montenegro has become even more intense, although in completely new conditions. Building relations and strengthening them in diplomacy means meetings, conferences, lunches, dinners, coffees and cocktail receptions. At the beginning of the 21st century, when everything in Europe was going well and was relaxed, there were occasional voices heard that there was no need for diplomats anymore as everything could be done through video conferences. Diplomats became valued again in 2014 when Europe was facing certain security challenges. But in these current, unprecedented times, many extremely quick and far-reaching changes have had to be made in response to the virus. And it is not clear whether these changes are temporary or will become part of the norm.

On the morning of 16 March, Ferdinand Nagy sent a proposal to the other ambassadors to create a WhatsApp group to share information during the crisis. After a few weeks, this group also became an entertainment platform for its members stuck within the four walls of their homes. But this has been described in detail already by my good colleague, Ferdinand, in his story.

On 11 March, my wife Mare and I arrived in Podgorica from Estonia. We had been considering making the decision to go to Estonia for some time. As there had been only a few COVID-19 cases, we decided it was safe to go. When the first positive case was confirmed in Estonia, my Lithuanian colleague at the EU Delegation jokingly said that Estonia was first among the Baltic countries, as always. Among other things, Ms Kersti Kaljulaid, the President of Estonia, invited me to a dinner in Tallinn. This dinner was in honour of the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, who was visiting Estonia. During that time, people were confidently shaking hands with each other, although the people in charge of protocol did make sure there were bottles of disinfectant spray close by for everybody.

The airport in Warsaw was nearly empty. On the plane to Podgorica, Mare and I were among the only ones wearing a mask and rubber gloves. A big change awaited us on our arrival at Podgorica Airport where all the border control officers were wearing masks and gloves. Additionally, they asked us whether we had recently visited China or Italy. On the way to the city, our driver told us that people had

started stockpiling and that the shops were emptying quickly. The stores were trying to counter this by setting limits on produce, e.g. 20 kg of flour per person, although it seems that setting a limit encourages people to buy the maximum that they are allowed.

Information and overviews about the virus were being sent from headquarters to EU Delegations all over the world, but now we also started receiving instructions. At first, they came every couple of days, but this quickly escalated to several in a single day. As things started to look like a crisis situation, we had to decide what to do with our colleagues who were categorised as part of the at-risk group. The colleagues concerned opted to take a vacation and return to their home countries. It was a last minute decision as the borders were starting to close. My assistant, who was supposed to fly to Sofia through Belgrade, got stuck in Belgrade. From there she was put on a plane to Istanbul where she had to spend the night. There was even a possibility that Bulgaria would close its airspace to incoming flights. Luckily, she made it back home safely and so did the others. Meanwhile, a young colleague arrived in Montenegro the same day the measure was introduced by the government for people to self-isolate for 14 days on arrival. She went straight from the airport to her home for two weeks of self-isolation.

March 13 marked the end of the last normal working week. The management of the EU Delegation decided to start teleworking on 16 March. Our team of more than 50 people were advised to visit the office as little as possible. Leaving the office on the last working day, my colleagues and I were jokingly saying that the next time we met the world would be completely different and all of us would have gained an additional 20 kg.

Working in self-isolation

In a crisis situation, the Head of the EU Delegation has responsibilities for the whole team's welfare and at the same time has to make sure that work still gets done. Working from home meant that our IT-systems had to endure all sorts of conditions. The management had to deal with a number of staff decisions. Normally those would be made at an administrative level, but unique precedents saw them all end up on my desk. This new routine did create dozens of strange cases. For example, one colleague had to retire, but the moving companies were unavailable at this time and we had to make the relevant decisions.

A couple of times I called all my colleagues, both expats and local ones, to make sure they were healthy and to check whether they had everything necessary for living and working. One colleague complained that it was hard to keep their private life separate from their work life in a small apartment. Especially when their child

is craving attention by wanting to take part in official video conferences.

At the EU residence, I set my work up as a home office. Brussels started using teleworking on 16 March. This resulted in a proliferation of video conferences. I had a special system to inform my wife that I was in "work-mode". Every morning after breakfast, I put on my shirt and tie, picked up my briefcase, and went to ring the doorbell. As I entered, I announced that I was now at work. On the one hand it was just a joke, but on the other it helps psychologically to keep home and work separate.

At the beginning of the crisis, the embassies of the EU Member States were busy getting their citizens back to their home countries. The majority of last-minute travellers were now intensively looking for possibilities to leave. However, there was also a different attitude present. An owner of a seaside hotel complained that most rooms had become empty, although some guests had stayed. Apparently, they were noisily awaiting the end of the world in their rooms.

The EU Ambassador has a responsibility to coordinate the work of the EU Member States locally. During the crisis, the EU Delegation's central role in coordination was helpful also for the general repatriation exercise. The organised flights and citizens in distress belonged to Member States, but we helped the embassies here share information and contacts, and coordinate the passengers' departures. There was a special flight to Warsaw one weekend. Two days earlier, the government enforced the rule that a maximum of two people could ride in the same car. It was a practical decision but a problematic one for the tourists that were planning to leave. Most of them had come in pairs, if not groups, and this made it nearly impossible to drive the tourists to the airport from their seaside hotels. Thanks to effective teamwork and the prompt and constructive response of Montenegro's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we were able to get the tourists on their flights.

After the repatriation operations, many ambassadors breathed a sigh of relief over the fact that all their citizens who wished to leave had got home safely. I was joking that the embassies were working as tourist agencies and would be contacted again soon to bring the tourists back when the crisis is over.

Where is Europe's help?

Expectations of the EU have always been high, but during the crisis they were higher than ever. As the burden on Italian hospitals grew, criticism about assistance from the EU and member states increased in news outlets. And the EU institutions are always a "easy" target for all kind of criticism.

The EU isn't the type of organisation where at the click of one's fingers someone jumps into a truck to deliver things accompanied by waving flags. Rather the EU's decision making takes time. In turn, the EU's assistance is serious and too big to fit in just one plane or three trucks. During that time, it was embarrassing to watch how sometimes the assistance was being used for propaganda.

Obviously the Western Balkans was waiting for our help as well. And naturally there weren't enough masks, protective suits or ventilators during the first days of the crisis. The same equipment was lacking in all the EU Member States.

The first financial allocation was given to Serbia on 20 March. It was great for Serbia, but not the best message for her neighbours. This initiated quite a few storms in some media and social networks. However, soon after, the EU issued decisions for the rest of the Western Balkans. One after another, we announced the financial assistance given by the EU to these countries. On 25 March, I had the pleasure to announce €3 million of assistance to Montenegro for protective gear, alongside the assurance that there would be an additional €50 million in EU funds to alleviate the economic fallout.

The reactions of politicians in Montenegro towards the EU's assistance were immensely positive. There was a lot of positive feedback from the general public on social media too. I got a lot of phone calls.

The EU Commission does not earn money itself; all its funds come from the EU Member States. We therefore made a joint statement with the ambassadors of Member States, mentioning our solidarity with Western Balkan countries. We wrote that in addition to financial support, the EU was showing solidarity with the



Balkans by deciding to open negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania to join the EU. For the previous few months, the EU had been accused of stalling and not keeping its word to start negotiations. This decision proved once again that the EU does keep its word, even if it takes some time.

On 2 April, we signed the first €3 million contract for EU financial assistance with the UN Representation in Montenegro. The UN's task was to deliver the protective gear to Montenegro. My colleagues at the EU Delegation worked day and night to reach this agreement.

Usually these sorts of contracts are signed in conference halls in front of cameras. This time we signed in a video conference in which Deputy Prime Minister Simović took part. We were taking the distancing requirement very seriously; my last video appeal was recorded in my home studio, furnished by my wife Mare. The signing of the agreement happened in the home studio as well. I could print out the agreement only in black and white, so Mare cut out a colourful EU logo from a compliment card and pasted it on the agreement.

Crisis becoming a routine

The government was decisive in controlling the crisis and kept introducing gradually stricter measures. The beginning of the year was marked by confrontation with the Serbian Orthodox church and mass protests in response to the Law on Religious Freedom. However, the Church accepted the Montenegrin government's restrictions on public gatherings. This gave the government the possibility to focus fully on the fight against the virus.

The Municipality of Tuzi was put in complete lockdown in the second half of March. All inter-municipal travel was banned and a curfew introduced. All types of sport and recreational activities in public places was banned and access to the sea was restricted. As diplomats, we could have applied for exceptions, but it was not our intention to send the wrong message.

Before the ban on exercise, I was out early every morning for a 5–6 km Nordic walk. During the ban, I left my walking sticks and sports clothes at home when going for a walk. I've always liked mornings. It's splendid to observe people who are getting ready for the new day.

During this time there were fewer people outside – mainly garbage collectors and dog-walkers. I noticed that as time passed the garbage also changed – used masks and single rubber gloves, for example, on the streets. We greeted one of the garbage collectors every morning and even took a selfie together.



Their essential work has become even more important in these times; alongside medical workers, shopkeepers, police officers and many others, waste collectors have become frontline fighters who protect us all.

Every morning I passed three different queues – one at the bank, another at the pharmacies and the third at the bakery. Everyone was spaced 2 metres from each other. The queues at the bank reminded me that back in my home country people don't have any reason to go to the bank because everything has been online for decades. It felt like Estonia had been preparing for this crisis for the last 20 years. At times, the queues at the banks became very long. One time I got a phone call from my deputy, Plamena Halacheva, who asked whether a banking crisis is coming. Most likely, going to the bank became an opportunity to just get out of the house, especially when, aside from pharmacies and food shops, there were no other places to visit. Visiting the bank brought back memories of my frugal grandfather who, when he was quite old, went to the bank every few months just to ask the teller to show him his money.

On 3 April, UK Ambassador Alison Kemp's virtual end-of-the-week cocktail hour took place. This involved the Quint Ambassadors (USA, Germany, France, Italy and the EU). With a glass of wine in front of the screen, we exchanged views about life and the current circumstances.

At the end of the fourth week we celebrated my 55th birthday. Instead of a big party, we celebrated it together with Mare and the kids through a video call connecting us all in Podgorica, Tallinn, Birmingham and Edinburgh. We were joking that all our children had chosen suitable professions for the crisis – doctor, computer game programmer and psychologist.



Virtual cocktail party hosted by UK Ambassador Alison Kemp

Mare had made a protective mask from scratch and gave it to me as a gift. Somehow, she had also found some flowers. Because there were no balloons available at home, we used an old rubber glove and inflated that to symbolise this jubilee.



The birthday had fallen on Easter weekend and a week later it was Orthodox Easter. It was important not to mix up the timing when congratulating colleagues on Easter. Even in the past we've had to occasionally work during the holidays, but now it was particularly difficult to draw the line between work and vacation. During Orthodox Easter, we had to make sure that the protective gear bought with EU funds would actually make it to Montenegro, especially because all the rules for procuring protective and medical gear had been thrown into the dustbin of history. Hopefully it was just a temporary development.

The most frequently asked question in mid-April was "how much longer?". Many joint actions and close communication with diplomatic colleagues here had connected us more in isolation than previously. Because of this we had the idea of putting together a book with the EU Member States ambassadors with stories from their time in the crisis. Already at the start of the crisis, I informed my EU colleagues that they should mark in their calendars that we would have the first cocktail party in my house – the first Thursday at 19:00 after the "war". During the last days of April, while talking with Ferdinand Nagy, we were joking that after the crisis we should invite hairdressers to the first EU ambassadors' meeting instead of a politician. And perhaps for the next meeting invite a dentist as a guest. Now the question of whether this crisis even has a definitive end has risen. Most likely it will be a gradual and lengthy process.

A unique Croatian EU presidency

My wife and I would visit the supermarket once a week. This was a massive undertaking in gloves and masks, later disinfecting everything. The queues within the shops were disciplined. My longest wait was around 55 minutes in a queue. Interestingly, during the first weeks, it seemed that photographers had the best chance to capture the crisis when taking pictures of queues at shops.

After every shopping adventure, we discovered that the bulk of foods were being produced in Croatia. This always reminded me of my good friend, the Croatian Ambassador, Veselko Grubišić. At the end of March, Veselko sent me as a gift the tie of the Croatian EU presidency, which is lovely but will have to wait for more frequent use once the crisis has finished. Fortunately, the accompanying wine was a perfect addition to Easter lunch. Veselko was experiencing Croatia's first presidency of the European Union. This was unique because no one had gone through the EU presidency in isolation conditions before. Therefore, everything he has to say after me in this book should serve as a guide for others to learn both from our failings and our successes. And by the way, I heard that he wants to introduce all of us to you.

23.04.2020

Thoughts and friendships

It's the time of the pandemic. I live online, therefore I am not alone, but I am. We are all faced with trials. It is a time of deep and thorough reflection. I am the Ambassador of the Republic of Croatia in neighbouring Montenegro. The Zagreb-Podgorica flight route was to be re-established from 1 May, three times a week. Unfortunately, it has been postponed until further notice in the midst of this vicious pandemic. There are 13 resident ambassadors of European Union Member States here in Podgorica. Of course, there is also the Head of the European Union Delegation, Ambassador Aivo Orav; Estonian, blond, tall, liberal, smart, joyful, and hardworking. I am especially glad that he and his wife are very fond of Croatian specialities. We are very happy that there are plenty of them here in neighbouring Montenegro, and Croats are very proud of the produce from their fields. Despite the hardships in the past, Croatia has managed to establish multiple recognisable food brands. Our food industry has a long tradition, and many Croatian brands are more than a hundred years old, which has enabled systematic development and to reach an exceptionally high quality in both taste and appearance. When a rupture of the food supply took place at the beginning of the crisis caused by the pandemic, and when Montenegro was threatened with the possible unavailability of traditional sources of wheat flour, I was delighted to hear that big trucks full of wheat flour and sunflower oil were making their way from Croatia to Montenegro.

We, the resident ambassadors, are connected, via a WhatsApp group, with the non-resident ambassadors accredited to Montenegro from other countries. It was the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, Ferdinand Nagy, Ambassador of Romania to Montenegro since 2013, who initiated the creation of this network. He is a supreme tennis player, an excellent colleague, smart, analytical, and, most of all, a good organiser. We can truly say that we are communicating really well by sharing both our joys and worries. We are also exchanging information, promptly helping with the repatriation of European Union citizens, lobbying jointly, and sending some musical or funny content so that none of us feels alone or helpless.

Everyone is reliable, possesses true human virtues and is cordial in our communication. Karel Urban is the Ambassador of the Czech Republic, and as a true Czech he has a great Czech sense of humour like Karel Capek, his namesake, and he is also a patient listener. Our Italian colleague, Luca Zelioli, has all the Italian virtues of a charming and cheerful colleague, he is well read and I share with him a great many discussion topics. We both love Marco Polo. Artur Dmochowski, the Ambassador of Poland, is a caring father of two little children. He has the Polish spirit of a serious intellectual, like characters from novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz. I often attend mass in Croatian at the new Catholic Church in Podgorica with him.

The Musical Centre of Montenegro is situated on the site of the only old Catholic Church in Podgorica.

Very few of us know the Balkans as well as the Ambassador of Hungary, József Négyesi. He is great at everything! The Ambassador of Bulgaria, Meglena Ivanova Plugtschieva-Alexandrova, is well educated, ambitious, and has great experience of diplomacy and politics. Our Slovenian colleague, Gregor Presker, is an attentive colleague, well versed in happenings in South-East Europe, and one can have many pleasant talks with a man with so many good ideas. He and his wife make a harmonious diplomatic couple. The Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic, Panayotis Partsos, is well-educated and has very strong opinions which he does not try to hide and I enjoy very much talking to him on numerous topics, varying from the battle at Thermopylae to the eternal topic – the European Union – accompanied by a glass of wine. I have had only a short meeting with Boris Gandel, the Ambassador of Slovakia, who recently joined us in Podgorica and still has not presented his credentials due to the crisis. I hear nothing but good things about him. I could say many fine things about our colleagues who are excellent at presenting their countries that are not members of the European Union – the US Ambassador and other colleagues. I feel equally pleasant with them.

I have been thinking about my colleagues in this self-isolation. It is rare for all ambassadors to possess such distinguished qualities, which they truly do. I know them all really well, they are very dear, and we are very close. I think about them often. I am sure that my ambassadorial colleagues all model the four cardinal, Western virtues. They are prudent, otherwise they would not be diplomats. Many will wonder whether diplomats require courage, as they are not soldiers or arena fighters. Is it not courageous to go around the world and promote one's country, often separated from family, and sometimes even in mortal danger? We cannot characterise any of them as the opposite of moderate, sensible or tempered. It is one of the recognisable virtues of a person belonging to Western culture. I am sure some from East Asia might object as they regard themselves as even more tempered, but they are not my topic of discussion this time.

However, temperance in diplomats might not be desired when promoting their country, especially when its independence was re-established recently. I am a good example, I always talk passionately about my Croatia, and I am surely not tempered there. Even though everyone knows about France, my dear and charming friend Christine Toudic, the Ambassador of France, talks with pride about her country and presents herself as a proud Frenchwoman (*fière d'être Française*). She is an elegant woman, always ready to help. She is very knowledgeable and she shares her knowledge wholeheartedly. All of them believe in justice. When thinking of justice, the Ambassador of Austria immediately comes to mind, Anna

Jankovic, well-educated, sophisticated, a beautiful, tall woman, advocating a subtly even-handed attitude towards Montenegro, one could say she is just and fair. Students would love her if she were a professor.

God endowed Montenegro with beautiful landscapes. Its mountains poke through the clouds, and the canyons with clear rivers that feed both the Black and Adriatic seas are truly magical. Montenegro is distinct. It has the royal capital – Cetinje and an administrative capital – Podgorica. Most of the buildings in Podgorica are from recent times. The most monumental ones are those built after WWII by German prisoners of war and the newly built grand Orthodox Temple. The mosques are holding up but are a little remote, as is the whole of Stara Varoš, neglected for now; only the beautiful and slender Ottoman clock tower stands proud and tall. The streets are wide, with the exception of those in Stara Varoš and some other random ones. Podgorica is located in a large, flat valley bounded by mountains on three sides, while the fourth side plunges into Lake Skadar. It is only a few dozen metres above sea level. The mountains on the other side of the lake obscure Podgorica's view of the sea and prevent the sea breeze from cooling it at night when the summer heat strikes. The cold, blue River Morača now winds its way through the middle of the city, although not too long ago it flowed at the boundaries of Podgorica.

A little above Podgorica, the greenish River Zeta connects with the Morača. Near their confluence are the remains of ancient Duklja. I intentionally did not say that the Zeta flows into the Morača, in order to avoid hurting the feelings of those who live along the upper flow of the Zeta. They have been protesting for generations claiming that the Morača flows into the Zeta, because they say that more water flows along the Zeta than the Morača, especially in the summer when the Morača's levels go down. According to them, that is where the end of the Morača should be, and then the Zeta would run through Podgorica, all the way to Lake Skadar, passing through that flat, fertile area which is called Zeta, just like the river itself. I just recently found out that, not far from the confluence of these two rivers, downstream from the Morača, past the Vizier's Bridge, which used to be the only bridge in that area, there was once a settlement called Croatian Stubica. Beyond Podgorica, the North of Montenegro looks very beautiful. And the Montenegrin coast is a real beauty, especially the Boka Kotorska, a real gem. My most beloved – the autochthonous Croatian – community lives in Boka, small in number, culturally magnificent, tough, and indelible. I call them with endearment the Aborigines of Boka.

In Montenegro, the men are tall, fun, proud, and always ready for doing business. The women are of above-average height, unusually beautiful, and reliable. Everyone takes good care of themselves, is always clean and well-presented.

They are extremely hospitable, sometimes overly so. With the virus pandemic, all Montenegro's institutions have shown high levels of responsibility and reliability, as well as maximum cooperation. They have shown great consideration towards the citizens of the European Union and provided incredible help in facilitating their return to their respective countries.

We communicate by telephone and by e-mail at the Croatian Embassy. We are working even harder than before. Croatia is the only member of the EU that has a land border with Montenegro. We are aiding the repatriation of Croatian citizens and transit by other EU citizens (not only EU) via Croatia. We have almost become a station of the splendid Croatian Department for Consular Services, permanently in contact with our excellent counterparts from the Montenegrin Consular Services. Together we are delivering. Apart from all other regular diplomatic duties, I have been obliged to give many interviews to different Montenegrin media.

Every morning I used to shake hands with all those I worked with. Now we wave to each other at distance. We greet each other by bowing, much like the Japanese. We wear masks and gloves. We wash our hands 20 times a day. We miss handshaking, the occasional socialising, and human conversation. The Croatian diplomats are striving to at least partly follow the practices of the diplomacy of the pearl of Croatia – Dubrovnik. Was it not the "Grand Council of the Dubrovnik Republic who already on 27th of July 1377 decided to introduce a quarantine for the first time in history as a measure of protection from import and spread of infectious diseases, in particular the plague"?

One of the first lessons for every Croatian diplomat at the Diplomatic Academy is the one on the diplomacy of Dubrovnik. On the other hand, maybe it was the fear of infection that led to the drastic measure stating: "Whoever comes from infected areas should not set foot in Dubrovnik or the Dubrovnik area" that formed the basis for efficient preventive care. We admire the lazarettos near the old walls of Dubrovnik even today. There are similar ones in the Bay of Kotor. By dint of my official duties, and even more based on my personal preferences, I regularly talk to the leaders of the Croatian community. I am in touch with many Croatian citizens and directors of Croatian companies doing business in Montenegro. All those Croatian companies are contributing to the fight against coronavirus. I am proud of them. It seems that our social or physical distance represents at the same time our spiritual closeness.

Here is how political correctness is not only a concept but also a direction to follow. This modern plague, of our own 21st century, is described by the code COVID-19. And codes are anyway important, common and necessary in the binary world. If one thinks that the analogue world will be completely overcome, one

might wonder if our brains think in binary or analogue? If we are connected for so long almost exclusively through mobile phones and computers, will we be able to binarise our fragile neurons?



I had to wear a hat after my home-made haircut

It is Wednesday, 22 April 2020. Today is the 36th day since news broke of the first case of infection with this terrible coronavirus here in Montenegro. Also on this day, one of my favourite philosophers, Immanuel Kant, was born. I had almost forgotten.

Today I was much more preoccupied with other things. It is exactly one month since the terrible earthquake that shook my Zagreb. My family live in the city centre. They had to move out. They just returned to our apartment today. We talk

a few times a day. I wish I was with them, I could hug them at least. Our eldest son lives in Brussels, now he is working from home. I think of my elderly parents as well. They live on their own. Two years ago, they were annoyed when I found them a room in a beautiful nursing home, just a few minutes by taxi from their home in Gradac. At that time, my mum had just turned 86, and my dad 89. They told me that they would possibly consider the option of going to a nursing home once they were old. I am afraid for them, if the worst happens, regardless of the pandemic, I decided that I would go and carry everything out in a dignified manner. I could not and would not want to miss it.

Tomorrow is Jurjevo, St. George, or "green Juraj" as it is called in many Croatian regions. Here it will be celebrated in two weeks, on Djurdjevdan. Just around Jurjevo, the spring can no longer be hidden; nature is at its most abundant then. All life's juices want to simply burst. The hills around Podgorica are already green, though some hills towards Danilovgrad have been covered in yellow blossom by cornel trees for a while now. It looks like there will be plenty of cornel juice and jam. I saw several divine, delicately blooming magnolias, reminding me of Zagreb.

After years of longing to return to the West, Croatia became a member of the European Union in 2013. It seems that this Union has, in terms of values and relations between its members, come closest to what Immanuel Kant called "Perpetual Peace". The Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union would have taken place later, were it not for the decision of the United Kingdom to withdraw from the EU. I would have been happier to wait for the presidency for another seven years, with the UK remaining a member. Here in Podgorica there used to be 14 of us – unfortunately we can no longer count the British Ambassador Alison Kemp. Nevertheless, we still invite her to everything we can and that London allows, not just because she is smart, well-educated, fascinating and agreeable, but because we still hope... or we have still not got over her country's leaving. As one of the few Croats who has studied and lived in the British Commonwealth for a long time, I can confidently say that this was certainly a rash and unnecessary step. After a long period of agony and fruitless manoeuvring, finally, right at the beginning of our presidency, the "orderly withdrawal of the UK from the European Union" was adopted.

Our presidency started well. The January visit by the President of the European Council and all the members of the European Commission in Zagreb was the crowning of our long journey towards membership and the first years of membership. Everyone in attendance at the concert at the Croatian National Theatre was radiant. Who would have thought today that the foundation stone of that magnificent building was laid back in June 1894 and the first performance took place in October 1895. As it was known in advance that the building was to

be opened by Franz Joseph I, this could have been encouraging for the builders. Fortunately, Croatian television is also available in Montenegro, so I watched that concert, remembering my grandparents, who were born in what was the Habsburg Monarchy at the time. This reminded me that, despite the collapse of the monarchy, my grandfather's brother attended the first two years of medical studies in the 1920s in Vienna.

Croatia has adopted an ambitious presidency programme, both within the European Union and externally. Croatia acts as a "Small Mighty State". We decided to strongly advocate for all six non-member countries of our neighbourhood. We wanted the European Union–Western Balkans Summit to be the highlight of our Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Despite the pandemic and other hardships, we have helped build a consensus to open accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia. We hope that we will be able to make progress with our other neighbours as well, each being at their respective stages, and also with neighbouring Montenegro.



I was here during Easter (Uskrs). Tuzović, an old Podgorica family, although of Islamic roots, offered to make Easter lunch. I thanked them, but I had to be careful so as to avoid potentially passing COVID-19 on to them, because it is said that some may have it without even knowing. My doctor, Svjetlana Zeković, a Croat from Osijek, also extended an invitation and offered to at least bring some Easter pastries. Mijo Marković, from an Orthodox family, offered for me to spend Easter (Vaskrs) with them. This year, according to the Julian calendar, the Orthodox celebrated Easter just seven days after Easter according to the Gregorian calendar.

I am spending time reading great European literature, starting with the Divine Comedy, comparing the original with the Croatian and English translations. I am delighting in Dante's description of a pilgrim from Croatia. I am immersing myself again in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In particular I am dwelling on the legend of the Grand Inquisitor of Seville, during the Inquisition: his relationship towards Jesus Christ, considering his return to be redundant, imprisoning him, believing that he interprets the Christian doctrines better than Christ himself does. However, in the end, the Grand Inquisitor has mercy, he lets Jesus go into the dark night.

What about Montenegro, what kind of Christ is on offer here, in what form does he appear? Is there a Grand Inquisitor here? If there was, would he be more gracious than the one from Seville? Would the local saints cast Jesus into the shadows? The ingenious Dostoevsky poses numerous questions. I wonder if the printer from Kotor, Andrija Paltašić, from the end of the 15th century would have portrayed Christ in his prints with torture devices or as *Ecce Homo*, a compassionate man, a man of pain. Compassion is the very foundation of Christianity.



Coronavirus handshake with Minister of Interior upon receiving medical equipment from Croatia

We follow the news and listen to the main information and guidance of the National Coordination Body for Infectious Diseases. They are transparent. They are accurate.

They instil collective confidence in the nation. They have taken fairly strong measures, the results are excellent. The question of how to strike a balance between respecting pandemic measures, in particular keeping the distance

between people and reviving the economy, will soon be on the agenda. If this first crisis has been successfully overcome, there is no reason why the subsequent steps will not also be successful. The Montenegrin Ministry of Foreign Affairs has really proven itself. The consular staff, police, soldiers, customs and border services are often underestimated, but in times of crisis these jobs become crucial in serving citizens.



It has just been decided that the Zagreb Summit of EU and Western Balkans leaders will be held via video conference. However, we are doing everything in our power to adopt a quality document that would be good for both the EU and our neighbourhood. The baton of the Presidency will pass to the Federal Republic of Germany in July. We are happy about that. It is a good thing that, in this already very serious economic crisis, the baton of the EU Council Presidency is in the hands of powerful Germany. I am certain they will be able to build a consensus on the major challenges awaiting the European Union and the world in the coming period. All those cardinal virtues I mentioned previously adorn my colleague and friend Robert Heinrich Weber, the German Ambassador to Montenegro. If I were to describe him in one word, I could say quite simply, he is – great. Given that he served as a German diplomat in China in 2004 he represents a vast source of information on how China handled the epidemics then.

From Podgorica with love!

Hearts unlimited

Thank you, Veselko, for passing on the baton of our stories to me, as I will later this year also receive the role of the local EU Presidency from you. Here too I have to continue your good work.

When I first heard about the new lung virus spreading from China's Wuhan province, I was reminded of my first arrival in China in 2004 shortly after the first epidemic of the 21st century – SARS – had been officially declared over. I got posted as Deputy Consul General to our Consulate General in Guangzhou, the very same place where the SARS of 2002/2003 originated from. I confess that because of this experience I at first took things quite lightly.

For me personally and professionally the corona crisis began on the second Friday in March, to be precise: Friday the 13th! On that day I was visiting the mayor and the city parliament of Ulcinj and later took a stroll in the Salina salt works where NGO representatives informed me about the environmental situation. On my way back I saw that I had several missed calls from my deputy and I instantly knew that something must have happened. When I arrived at the German Embassy a number of my colleagues had already gathered and were discussing the latest developments. The Government of Montenegro had decided to declare a number of travel restrictions as a number of other states had either already done or were about to do in the following days.

Still I did not want to believe this could develop into something dramatically serious. So the next day, Saturday, Patricia and I took our car to drive to Cetinje to see a famous Montenegrin artist with whom we are friends. Together with my American colleague and her husband we spent a lovely morning in the Royal Capital and visited the artist's studio. Only the following Monday did we understand that the lovely lunch we all had together in a restaurant close to the royal palace would be our last social gathering for quite some time. In the embassy we understood that we had to try to get a larger number of German tourists from different parts of the country back home to Germany, if possible on the last outgoing commercial flights.

In order to keep the embassy open and operational even if one of us were diagnosed corona-positive, I decided to split my team of 19 into two groups which should work alternating between home and the office. Taking into account the specific situation, some worked permanently in their home offices, from where they gave great support. This system started to falter once the city of Tuzi, where four of our colleagues lived, was put under quarantine due to a heavy coronavirus outbreak in the community. But we managed to keep up the work in the embassy even with

the staff reduced to half, by just concentrating on the essentials and consequently putting off less important tasks for after the crisis.

In regular telephone conferences I addressed the embassy team as a whole, thus bringing all those working from home or in the embassy up to the same level of information. But these telephone meetings were also important for feeling the mood and keeping the team together despite working in two different groups. Since everybody wanted to support the embassy work, most of the time it was more difficult to tell people to stay and work from home than telling them to come to the office.

Luckily, on the very last flight from Germany to Montenegro, our consul came back from his holidays and I do not know how many times I have thanked him since then that he had not preferred to "miss" the flight and stay back in Germany with his family but to come, accept a four-week house quarantine, and from home support the evacuation of up to 500 people back to their homes. His experience in consular affairs under extremely difficult conditions and his readiness to work day and night including the weekends came in handy.

And soon we were facing our first and biggest challenge. After the commercial carriers had stopped flying to Montenegro we had to organise transport for our stranded tourists back to Germany.



Map of stranded German tourists' locations

State Secretary Vladimir Radulović contacted me and offered his support. We agreed to closely liaise with each other in the “airlift” programme conducted with the national crisis centre, which worked non-stop together with us.

Lists of names and communication data were needed, the border controls at the airports in Frankfurt and Berlin had to be contacted and close contact with the Montenegrin Crisis Centre had to be held around the clock. Emails with information had to be drafted and sent out to all Germans registered with the embassy’s emergency database.

The whole team worked tirelessly in shifts and did a tremendous job. In the end we had dispatched six flights to Germany, managing to take all the German tourists and a large number of other EU citizens, US Americans and Montenegrins living in Germany, back to their homes. Colleagues were working in shifts to take care of all the passengers at the airport and even managed some miracles.



Check-in for repatriation flight

Given the difficult working conditions under the corona crisis, I could see more clearly than ever before how committed my team was to working for German-Montenegrin relations, but also for the cooperation between the EU embassies in Montenegro. This became obvious when I asked for ideas on how we could help Montenegro with our limited embassy resources to fight the corona crisis. Everyone came up with creative ideas: from organising “care packages” for those who had lost their jobs and the elderly who lacked family support, to cooperating with the Public Hygiene Institute in purchasing new corona testing kits.



Supporting the Red Cross

Together with our colleagues in Berlin, we brainstormed about measures which could help Montenegro cope with the economic and social aftermath of the corona crisis. Our way of working together was now less structured, less hierarchical – some might even say less “German” – than before, but all the more creative and innovative.

In the midst of the crisis we were also able to experience how strong the support was between colleagues from different EU embassies and the EU Delegation. Helping each other in evacuating our citizens, coordinating with the EU Delegation and constantly exchanging important information became an excellent example, not forgetting the odd joke and encouragement we shared over the ambassadors’ communication network.

We EU ambassadors missed meeting each other in person, as we had done before in our regular EU Heads of Mission meetings at least once a month. The formal and informal exchanging of news and views, the discussions and analyses, were all of a sudden gone and we missed this keenly. So, very early in the crisis we set up an EU ambassadors’ chat group which included our deputies and also our Quint partners, the UK and US.

But to be honest, Zoom conferences and telephone calls to Montenegrin officials and our fellow ambassadors are not able to replace real diplomacy, just as you cannot understand a country by only studying its laws, economic statistics, newspapers and history books. If you really want to understand you have to use your brain and your heart. You have to leave your office, travel through the country and talk to people from all walks of life, eat their food and drink their wine, listen to their stories. Politicians, businessmen and women, artists, activists from NGOs, priests, nuns, workers, students, old and young, rich and poor.

Besides analysing the political, economic and social system in which the people of your host country live, you should always have your eyes open for its nature, its beauty and its challenges. If this is true in general, it is all the more true in Montenegro. Her high, unsurpassable, but often impassable mountains and deep valleys with only a few people living on limited fertile land, explain the extraordinary fine example that Montenegrins give when it comes to hospitality.

Whenever someone arrives and is not known in the village, he must have come from far away and have made a difficult journey. If he comes with friendly intentions he is most hospitably taken care of. So I have never left a Montenegrin village where I asked people the way without getting an invitation for a rakija. Whenever I tried to explain that I had to be cautious not to drive drunk, the invitation was extended to serving me food too.



Six weeks without going to the barber's

That is why I miss the times before corona. I cannot feel Montenegro by heart when I am confined to my residence, I cannot feel the real needs, hopes and sorrows in a video conference. And yes, I very much miss smelling the salt of the sea, the herbs of a mountain meadow and I miss the smell and the taste of a good cevapi sa kajmakom prepared over charcoal and rounded off with a loza.

I miss the stories about history and customs told by hospitable and proud Montenegrins over such a good meal. And, surprisingly for a German who is used to social distancing even in times of no corona crisis, I miss hugging my friends from Montenegro. With these concluding remarks I hand the baton over to Gregor...

A new work life balance

I cannot feel Montenegro with my heart when I am confined to my residence, said Robert. How similar we diplomats are. Before the corona period, my family and I lived Montenegro "with our lungs at full capacity", as the Slovenian saying goes. We did tours, getting to know the nature, tourist destinations, proud Montenegrins, learning about the country's history and tradition. We have been enjoying the cuisine. We would often make stops somewhere on the road and even in Podgorica to savour the traditional barbecued ćevapi with kajmak and loza as an aperitif. Whenever the weather was nice, even in winter, we would go to the seaside and take a walk by the sea enjoying the smell of salt. Robert, my German colleague, noted the same things that he will also miss. We diplomats have a similar taste and experience this period in similar ways. Even though us Slovenes are more "cold" than Montenegrins, but perhaps more available than Germans, we also miss social contact and the freedom to move. Who would have thought these two things would change in such a short time. But everything passes, so will this "coronacrisis".

When everything started happening around COVID-19, I could not believe it would spread so quickly. We all monitored the happenings when the virus first emerged in China. We were surprised and astounded by the measures being taken by the government in order to stop its spread. However, that was far away. It was taking place in China and only a rare few believed it could spread to Europe, or even across the whole world.

Even when the virus appeared among a larger number of people infected in Italy, I thought it was a local thing, until it led to the complete closure of some villages and small towns, followed by the entire quarantining of northern Italy. I followed the situation there more thoroughly since I lived in northern Italy for a long time, and my mother still lives there, as well as numerous friends. When quarantine happened in the regions of Lombardy and Veneto, I knew things were getting serious. That was when the first cases emerged



in Austria, and it was just a matter of time before it would happen in Slovenia. It did not take long. There were the first infected cases, immediately followed by certain measures taken up by the government in order to stop the spread. The infected people from Slovenia "brought" the virus from neighbouring Italy, where Slovenians like to travel, for personal and business reasons. This is why Slovenia introduced a ban on travelling to this neighbouring country, as well as strict health controls at the borders as one of the first measures.

However, the virus did not stop there, it kept spreading through the region. Croatia, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and finally Montenegro, which was known as the last fortress in Europe still not conquered by the invisible enemy. Montenegro had time to monitor the situation in its surroundings and to take all the necessary steps on time in order to stop the spread. I was somewhat surprised by the speed of the decision making, preventing all flights from Italy, firstly from Milan and Bologna, and later from Rome. This probably helped the virus to only appear in Montenegro relatively late on.

Then it all started happening in waves, hitting all sides. On both the working and private levels. First and most important, the issue at work was how to protect yourself and the family living with you, and how to aid the citizens of our country with their safe return to Slovenia. That was perhaps the most demanding task for us diplomatic representatives all around the world. We have never faced such a situation where we all had to react at once and get the best knowledge and capacity out of us to face it. Our ministries of foreign affairs formed crisis teams that coordinated the repatriation of citizens.

We had to contact all our citizens in Montenegro and respect their wishes and need to return. Some, who we did not know lived here, contacted us asking for as much possible information on the possibility of returning, the border situation, car transit options and potential return flights.

This is where the great humanity and solidarity of Montenegro stepped up, those of both its institutions and of the people who helped us. We found out that the Embassy of Montenegro in Ljubljana was organising a repatriation flight for its citizens with Montenegro Airlines from Ljubljana. We contacted them and the competent authorities, primarily the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro on the possibility of evacuating Slovenian citizens and their families on the same airplane when it flew out from Podgorica. The answer was short, clear and, as if this was an everyday thing: "Sure!" And when asked about the price of the air ticket, the answer from the authorities was brief: "repatriation flights are not being charged". Thus we managed in cooperation with Montenegrin authorities to return a few of our citizens who were in Montenegro when the measures got stricter. We also managed to get a few citizens of Slovenia from Kosovo on board,

who required a special permit to enter Montenegro, as well as a police escort from the border to the airport.

Our embassy and all the citizens who had the chance to return on that flight expressed great and deep gratitude at such an altruistic gesture from the Government of Montenegro, its authorities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the police, the Montenegrin Embassy in Slovenia and last, but not least, Montenegro Airlines.

Not all of our citizens decided to return on this flight. Some returned by car. Some had to stay here so that the companies they work for could still operate normally. However, some decided that it was necessary to return to their families where they were most needed. There were numerous different cases, desires and requests. We tried to accommodate everyone.

The work of our embassy was not only tied to the Slovenians who were still in Montenegro. We are still in touch with them to monitor their needs. It also took a lot of time to coordinate the evacuation of Slovenians transiting through Montenegro, also from Kosovo, where a special convoy of cars was organised, as well as from Albania. We have still not made a count of the cases because we had too much more important work to do. At some point we will certainly make a count. For the sake of statistics.

Besides aiding the citizens of Slovenia, our embassy also assisted the citizens of other EU countries who were transiting through Montenegro or who had set out from Montenegro in order to transit through Slovenia on their way back home and to their families. The help always arrived at the right time. All of it required sacrifice, understanding and patience from the employees at the embassy, as well as working overtime, even during the weekends.



I am therefore extremely grateful firstly to my deputy and Consul Stanka, Vice-Consul Blazo, as well as Petra, who has been monitoring the work of Slovenian companies in Montenegro in these extraordinary conditions and the measures undertaken by the competent authorities in the economic field.

There would not have been close cooperation in aiding EU citizens to return through Montenegro had there not been contact with the EU Delegation to Montenegro and the rest of the EU embassies, particularly the resident ones. We have been in daily touch with them. Some contact was established via official emails, some via social media and some more or less informal groups, especially via WhatsApp.

Communication via mobile apps has proven to be quite efficient. We would exchange very useful information, requests for help, and sometimes we would exchange some informal and funny things, some videos to help us relax in this difficult situation. That has made this coordination a lot easier and faster. Maybe even faster than would be in a "normal" situation which usually requires meetings and longer conversations. It seems to me that this kind of communication has brought us closer. We are all in the same situation, and we are all constantly adjusting, which is why there is a lot of understanding and support.

The initiative to create a common publication in which all of the EU ambassadors present their own views of the situation related to coronavirus has brought us even closer. We have been in constant touch, needing to hear from each other. We have also been in touch in order to exchange our experience in terms of work organisation, the evacuation of our citizens and future work plans. Everything has been very concrete, but also amicable.

Solidarity and belonging to the EU has been thus demonstrated and rooted more deeply – solidarity between ourselves and solidarity towards Montenegro and its citizens. In this situation, the EU has also shown that the Western Balkan region, and therefore Montenegro, is still in its focus, not just in terms of continuing the enlargement policy, but also providing aid, short-term as well as long-term, which will contribute to Montenegro's economic recovery.

Economic recovery is precisely what is most important now, besides the recovery of the health system. We all know that our families and our future depend on the economy. A lot has changed and there are many aspects in the economic world that have required adjustment. We must all make sure that an economic crisis will not follow the health crisis, and thereby a social crisis. This is what Montenegro has noted well.

We have learned a lot about the virus by now. There is still a lot that we do not know. However, we do know that social distancing and hygiene are essential for prevention. Knowing that can help us adjust further in order to make sure all work

continues so that everyone can have a job, an income to spend, so that the economy survives. This is why in a majority of countries, as well as in Montenegro, measures of restriction of movement and the operation of certain trades, restaurants, and other economic activities are slowly diminishing. The challenge is however still great.

The introduction of measures has also affected us and our families here in Montenegro. I have to admit that it is the restriction of movement that has affected me most, not so much in the evening as during the weekends. You feel a certain constraint, a limitation. I have felt like I used to feel when I was younger and punished (for breaking some house rules) by not being allowed to go out. Has it happened to you as well?

When it comes to my family, the closure of schools was a big challenge, so our "teenage" son had to stay home and do classes online. He could no longer spend time with an already small number of friends that he has made here. It was very clear that the restriction of movement and socialisation represented a problem for him. It is difficult for a young and social boy to handle social distancing. He could understand the need for it in order to prevent the spread of the virus, but this was difficult to maintain. It was hard for him not to be able to travel, go back to Slovenia and see his friends, see his girlfriend. You could tell this made him lose some spirit, and become indifferent to everything. This is why he has needed to find some activity, something to catch his interest, get his mind off this situation, and give him hope.

Given that I was going to work practically every day, my wife stayed at home, as she could not go anywhere with anyone, which was difficult for her as well – she was bored to say the least. She also needed to find an activity that could bring us closer and entertain us.

Therefore, we started playing cards with our son. An old social game that does not require a computer or online application, and can bring people close together. It seems that this is how we have got closer in our small family nucleus. We have started talking more, sharing opinions, thinking aloud, and making plans, which, for those who know, can be very hard with a teenager. Especially in the era of highly developed information technology.

In order to get our teenager out of the house we envisaged the need to go to the store quite often (not to the nearest one) with our bikes, as we craved ice cream. We connected doing something useful with pleasure, all in accordance with the imposed measures. We used means of transport while respecting distancing in performing necessary tasks. We did it all during the allowed hours by 19:00 on working days, by 13:00 on Saturdays and by 11:00 on Sundays.



As we have become closer in our family nucleus, we have physically become less close with our families and friends due to issues with travelling, border crossing, quarantine, self-isolation etc. However, we are less close only physically, as, thanks to technology, we have managed to connect virtually and keep in touch. We have also learned how to use some new online platforms that will come in handy once this is all over.

Who could have known that this virus and its spread would show just how small our world was and what a global life we were living? Fighting its spread has become a global way where every state is trying its best on its own, and in cooperation with others to beat it. We will succeed.

For this fight and the success achieved so far, I would like to thank everyone in Montenegro for their contribution. Starting from the government representatives and different institutions, doctors and medical staff, enterprises that were operational in the difficult times and their employees, to food traders, banks, post offices, bakeries, petrol stations, drivers transporting all the goods, markets and all those who have made our lives easier in this difficult situation.

However, even this crisis, like many so far, will pass one day. We will partially forget about it. It will remain somewhere in our distant memory. In the mist. We will only remember it when we will look back and remember all the positive moments that inspired us with the will to move on, realising that everything would be over one

day. Then, we will be able to socialise freely again, to shake hands, to hug and why not, even to kiss, as is tradition in many European cultures, just as it is here in Montenegro. Three times or once. Or is it twice? It does not matter. You decide. On someone's cheeks, of course, as is normal among friends and colleagues. We, the foreigners, who have spent this period in Montenegro, will remember it for the efforts of some Montenegrins to limit the spread of this disease, and again of others who have had difficulty coping with the changed conditions and many new measures that have influenced their lives. Finally, they did adjust. And we will remember all of us who worked in this beautiful country, and lived far away from our homes, our families and our friends whose lives have also completely changed. We also have adjusted to new conditions and – how funny – we have almost got used to them. I guess Christine feels the same.

Encounters of the third kind

As my Slovenian colleague said, human beings luckily have a capacity for resilience, both personal and collective. I was in Paris at the beginning of March, and I can confirm this as a fact once again.

The capital was back to normal after weeks of traffic protests, which exhausted Parisians and cast a shadow over the city. Therefore, everyone needed a bit of casualness. Spring was just showing its face, the gardens of the Palais Royal started blossoming in a thousand colours. A young group of rappers were dancing in the square garden of the Louvre in front of a dozen onlookers gathered in amazement. The cafés and restaurant terraces were packed, friends were hugging each other, lovers embraced. Carefree.

Paris was Paris again.

But that was before...

I came back to Podgorica from Paris on 10 March...

I was without any doubt one of the last people to land on Montenegrin soil, given that on Friday 13 March the hammer dropped. The government was announcing measures of the closure of all school and university institutions, bars, restaurants, and all other non-essential trade. And of course the closure of all land borders and international flights progressively reduced until their total closure. The plane due to take off on 12 March for Paris was cancelled at the last moment. Since mid-March Podgorica Airport has been shut, as well as the one in Tivat.



Here it is as if we are now on some sort of an island, without any way of leaving. Anyhow, our ministry forbade all ambassadors in the world to leave their posts before 15 April, which was later on extended to 11 May, the day of the start of deconfinement in France. That can still change... In any case, it is a funny observation, it is as if we were under house arrest with an electronic bracelet, without any way to escape anywhere...

It is there that the situation gets more complicated...

Notably, Montenegro has become one of the favourite destinations of the French (more than 100,000 French tourists visited last year), several dozen of them were suddenly left stuck without any prospect of returning to France. Anxiety and worry need to be managed, which can lead to people saying things they would not say under normal circumstances. At least, I hope that is the case... Our role is to help all our compatriots, in all domains, to reassure and advise them. Some wanted to go back at all costs, others did not know, while the rest preferred to stay until the situation gets better in France. The embassy consists of a small team, and everything should have been organised in such a way that no-one cracks.

Each and every one of our compatriots are a specific case. Some made us laugh, others – less so. Some thanked us, some did not.

Some cases will be embedded in our memory. There was a young man doing his internship in Montenegro, a son of someone quite rich who sent a private jet to bring him back to France. I performed several phone calls, emails and other correspondence under the veil of secrecy, in order to skip a few steps in allowing the jet to land at a closed airport. At the scheduled time of departure, I was on the terrace of the building where the residence is and in the dark of night lights were seen from afar, followed by the noise of a plane. The first one in several days... A somewhat surreal experience, if not crazy.

We also had a case – a bit comical, I would say – of a young man who called us to inform us that he was at a “silence retreat” and that he was wondering about the duration of his stay, as he did not want to have any problems with the authorities. I reassured him that there were no risks posed for him, that all granted dates of stay would be extended, after which he thanked me a hundred times announcing that he was returning to his silence retreat...

There was also a family with a camper van who wanted to return as soon as possible, but without leaving the camper behind. This was quite a complex equation without a cargo airplane and with the borders closed... Finally, thanks to help from our Croatian friends and more specifically the Ambassador of Croatia, the border between Montenegro and Croatia remained open for returnees from the European Union who wanted to go back home. And, thanks to our Slovenian and Italian friends, they were able to safely reach France.



A warm welcome for French citizens returning from Montenegro at Charles de Gaulle Airport

For those who arrived by plane, it was definitely more complicated, given that the airport was closed. It was then that the solidarity of the Montenegrin government stepped in. The national airline Montenegro Airlines chartered special planes to look for Montenegrin returnees stuck in a number of European capitals. So as to avoid flying empty planes, they proposed to take our returnees as well as others interested in a flight to Paris.

European solidarity has greatly helped this repatriation exercise. The moment a plane was sent to a European capital, the news was circulating on the WhatsApp group we created in order to run the crisis together. So every one of our returnees could have several choices to return.

The departure of a plane to Paris on Monday 22 April. A completely deserted airport, several phantom and masque silhouettes, barriers and security guards ensuring the respecting of distancing measures. A completely surreal atmosphere, and a successful boarding thanks to the professionalism of Montenegrins. It was a small Noah's Ark, as we had not only French, but also Germans, Luxembourgers, Portuguese, British, Bulgarians, as well as Americans and a South African.

True universal solidarity. We owe a big debt of thanks to the Ambassador of Montenegro to Paris, who was strongly involved in making this exercise a successful one. On the other hand, with a lot of intervention and no lack of imagination, we brought two Montenegrin returnees from Bolivia and India.

As the bars and restaurants were closed, and movement was restricted and forbidden after 19:00 (measures recently have slowly relaxed), the streets of the capital became completely deserted. It was a sight that was quite crazy, quite anxiety-inducing, even. Only the city lights and a few illuminated billboard signs lessened the darkness. There is hardly an ambulance in sight: I live just next to the general hospital of Podgorica. This city of course is not a metropolis, but its inhabitants like going out and sitting on the bars' terraces at the first sight of a sunny day. A ghost town, as if abandoned by its inhabitants. The day after...



A usually very busy street in Podgorica

On a personal level, this newfound solitude is a bit difficult to handle. I actually lost my husband a few months ago and, apart from the fact that I have had to relearn how to live without him, I have also had to learn to live without others. Double trouble. Moments of emotional distress, the desire to share this exceptional period with him. But he is not here. So, binge-watching TV series, books, operas, and I even dared to do a 3,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, Picasso's Guernica – 50 shades of grey and blue... Just as I was finishing it, I immersed myself in another challenge, "The Garden of Earthly Delights" by Hieronymus Bosch.



Luckily, we live in a 2.0 world, with multiple technologies that enable us to continue being connected to our families and friends even if they are far away. Every initiative is welcome and, when it comes to me, I often have a drink via FaceTime or WhatsApp video with my family in France, or with friends in Madrid, Quebec, Ottawa, Rabat, London, and of course Paris. It does not replace real life, but it is a satisfying substitute which erases the solitude and preserves the spirit of festivities. The 'apéro' is an institution, almost a sacred thing in France, and it should be preserved! Can you imagine what confinement would be like with a Nokia 3310, two hours of calls and 20 SMSs? It allows us to joke in order to preserve or find again our smile, even if it is not too tasteful.

In all of France at exactly 20:00, the French express their respect to doctors and medical workers and their exceptional devotion. Some from their balcony, or their window, their terrace, applauding and tapping pots or any other utensil that can make noise, which I decided to do at a distance for a doctor friend in the geriatric department of a big hospital in Ile-de-France. He helped me a lot when my husband was sick. He works 90 hours a week...

So every night at exactly 20:00 I send him a joke, a funny yet tasteful one, to wish him and his team good luck. He thanked me in return, taking a photo with all his colleagues fighting COVID-19 holding a sign saying "THANK YOU", which warmed my heart, as I felt that I was not completely useless so far away from my country. Montenegrins are taking the situation with a sense of serenity, and it is important to mention that they have known war 20 years ago. And, as they are well organised and the crisis was well handled by the government, the virus did not have such a big impact. They deserve this as they had great solidarity among themselves, as well as with us.

And the solidarity between members of the European Union was exemplary. As I already mentioned, we created a WhatsApp group, thanks to which we could share information, ask for explanations, and also support each other, send messages of sympathy as well as jokes! Knowing that you can count on your European colleagues at any moment in this particularly unimaginable situation makes the atmosphere a lot lighter. A world of complete uncertainty, a world where we do not know what tomorrow brings. The "after" world, as journalists are calling it. I would personally prefer to witness the world of before being improved thanks to this painful and tragic experience.

An illustration: Close Encounters of the Third Kind in the subterranean parking of the residence building. My colleague and my Croatian friend, equipped with masks, gloves and all protective gear in order to exchange packages. A true exchange of prisoners during the Cold War... We all placed our bags at a distance of three metres then we all took our turns looking in. There were French DVDs in mine, so that he can perfect his French in confinement; in his – presents from the Croatian presidency. Indeed, a true spy film!

And this new world has brought with it a new vocabulary, a whole load of new expressions we have been ignoring thus far. "Social distancing" existed before, but we had never theorised it. People reminisce about evenings with friends now that we can no longer socialise... "Barrier measures": now this is something that does not belong to French culture, where we shake hands, hug and tap each other on the back. Our culture is a tactile one and it is naturally difficult to adjust it to the new practices. And confinement/deconfinement. I could cite these new creations until the end of time.

This period is suspended, out of time, and the smallest thing that is out of ordinary becomes a major deal to be spoken of ad infinitum. If that could help us rediscover the things that really matter and if it lasts in the "after-world" it would have at least been useful.

It would at least teach us one more time that European solidarity is indispensable; it is vital. I cannot thank enough the neighbouring countries and friends who have provided shelter to our most sick French in their hospitals when ours could not take any more. In Germany, in Luxembourg, in Austria and Czechia, I say thank you, from the depth of my heart.

And, as Czechia has just been mentioned, I will cede the floor now to my Czech colleague.

Elevator to scaffold and back

Dear Christine, dear friends, do you know what an optimist says at every floor while falling down in an elevator? "So far so good, so far so good..."

We were on winter holiday in Cavalese, Italy this year. It was the first week of February, to be precise. The coronavirus pandemic strongly hit the north of the country a couple of weeks after we left. Then it spread to Spain, France, etc. European borders started closing and our planned summer trip to Paris slowly became unavailable, as did the purchase of an apartment on the most luxurious street in Prague, which is named Parizska. That was in my thoughts as I slowly fell asleep in my bed in Prague a month later. It was on the eve of our trip back to Montenegro.

Our plan for that morning was as clear as day. We just wanted to take our luggage, get ourselves in a car and go to Vaclav Havel Prague airport. Then board a plane and make two jumps – to Belgrade and to Podgorica. Theoretically, it was very easy, of course. I checked websites countlessly on our way to the airport.

Our flight was still scheduled. Our mood was excellent. We jumped out of the car, hugged my father in law and said goodbye. Any more would be a waste of time, as the parking fee is overpriced. We went into the hall and strange feelings overwhelmed us. I will never forget that moment when the full force of that silence hit my ears. I was staring at an empty corridor in amazement. Just a few policemen who wore protective masks and rubber gloves were present. No travellers, their baggage, kids or pets and all that usual chaos which we had already got used to.

Emptiness fully absorbed us like a black hole. We stared at each other incomprehensibly. Nevertheless, we bounced back quickly and our small group continued on its adventure. I dragged our overweight baggage. Our three-year-old son was running around and screaming. We were like strangers who had fallen from the sky at that moment. Eccentrics who had no clue about travelling restrictions adopted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Have you ever been over to the moon and back in terror in five seconds? If not, let me explain. I checked the list of departing flights many times. Our morning flight to Belgrade was still scheduled. There was no indication of a possible problem. The check-in desk was about to open. Two desk officers came and sat down on their chairs. A tiny group of fellow-passengers prepared their passports and slowly moved to the desk. So far so good, I thought. We were about to assume our

position in line when it happened. An LED screen lit up and the two words stunned me – FLIGHT CANCELLED. My brain did its best to reject the new fact. I tried to make those words disappear. Neither of us meet with success, though.

Like in a horror film in the silent era, people slowly moved towards the desk and then, giving a nod, turned back and vanished out of the building. I can still see their stony pale faces. An officer gave me a number and suggested contacting a call centre. He wished me good luck. I barely heard him as I was thinking about our next steps.



For this reason my head was about to pop. I tried quickly to organise all the thoughts that had popped into my mind. Meanwhile, my wife was standing to one side and searching for something on the internet. "Oh my goodness," I thought. A lot of questions attacked my brain. To go or not to go? If yes, with or without my family? When I was on the verge of panic my wife came to me and softly whispered. "There is a flight to Istanbul, which takes off in an hour. Then we could fly to Podgorica." I could not believe my ears! She was so rational and cool-headed. I realised that I was fully influenced by updated information describing the collapse of commercial air transportation. That was an illustration of the power of the media and social network in reality. "Okay, darling," I said. "There are two essential questions right now. Firstly, to go or not to go through Istanbul? Secondly, should I go alone or do we go together?" Not much time for a long disputation left. To my surprise we both blurted out the very same words in the very same second – "LET'S GO!" Then we informed our colleagues in Podgorica that we had a situation.

They already knew about it. They had promptly asked headquarters and got information that I was expected to go if there was any chance to. Our tickets were smoothly rebooked and we hurried to the second attempt to fly away. Fifty minutes left. So far so good, I thought again.

A Turkish Airlines officer looked at us and asked suspiciously why we wanted to fly to Montenegro. "Do not you know that there is a travel ban?" she continued. What is the purpose of your visit? Business or..." I did my best to keep calm. I showed her very patiently our diplomatic passports, again adding that we had to go back to Montenegro due to work. She barely glanced at our Montenegrin documents in which our permanent residence addresses were written. "Okay, okay, take it easy," she replied. "You are in our system. Do not worry." She explained to us that she had to check whether the airlines would let us embark. We got a shocking short answer after five never-ending minutes. "Negative," she said, in a manner that reminded me Raymond "Red" Reddington, a notorious most wanted criminal character from my favourite series *The Blacklist*. "You cannot travel. I am very sorry." She gesticulated towards her colleague. Then she took her stuff, said goodbye and left.

I started to boil. I precisely knew that she was completely wrong. I very rarely give up. "Your colleague has made a terrible mistake," I told a surprised girl. "I will not leave until I receive confirmation that you have refused to let us on board. We will request full compensation," I added. She called somewhere again and after a few minutes everything turned out all right. She was astonished by the reply she got. She stuttered her apologies, but we were not listening to her any more. We grabbed our passports and ran towards our gate as fast as possible. I do not remember whether I even said thank you. We finally got our seats in the plane. We were tired and confused about what was going on. Nevertheless, happiness shone from our faces. We had made it! So far so good, I thought whilst trying set up the TV channels on the screen in front of me. We took off, got delicious food and wine. We relaxed and started joking. My wife's parents were more than sceptical that our decision was right. Moreover, my wife's father is scared of flying. I will never forget three words he repeatedly mumbled over the phone over and over – corona, Istanbul, lunatics!



Our son fell asleep the moment we landed. He passed through all the checking procedures in a coma and woke up three hours later. My very first feeling at Istanbul Airport was just WOW! The super-modern premises amazed me. The airport in Istanbul was remarkably busier in comparison to Prague's. It seemed to me that the world there was still ticking without any iota of COVID-19. There were shops open. Nobody wore protective masks. Only the litres of disinfection, placed at every corner, reminded us of the danger of a virus. We laid Adam down on a bench and started exploring the cafés and pubs. I must admit I liked Turkish beer better than Turkish coffee. We spent five hours there. The more our departure time approached, the more my nervousness rose. My wife was shopping as we slowly moved towards the gate. I could not concentrate on the goods she was buying. I literally hypnotised by the list of departure flights all the time. All the updates caused me a mild heart attack when the word Podgorica disappeared from the board. Relief came back when I saw it again.

We reached our gate in time and we nervously awaited our further destiny. The atmosphere was far from idyllic. A horde of tense travellers stood without speaking. The gate opened and a man in a uniform started with his inquiry. "What is a purpose of your visit of Montenegro? Do you have a permanent residence permit? Can you prove it? Can you show me your documents, please? Now, I have to check all the information in Podgorica." It took very long time. We both heaved a sigh of relief when he finally wished us a nice flight. Having in mind Murphy's law, I did not unwind until we landed in Podgorica.

There was a maze of restrictions imposed by the Montenegrin government due to the coming pandemic. We had not had the chance to go through them as we were not in the country when they were adopted. Therefore we did not precisely know what self-isolation really meant. We understood when a police officer took our passports and accompanied us for a sanitary inspection. We filled in forms and got rulings, which read that we were banned from leaving our house for 14 days without any exceptions. Additionally, we were obliged to refer our condition to the authorities once a day. It was much worse than we expected, I must say. Then we took a car and went home.

The first two weeks of our "lockdown" passed relatively quickly. The days were sunny. My colleagues supplied us with food twice a week. We slowed down the rhythm of our lives and adapted instantly to the new situation. However, the institutions prolonged self-isolation. We were kept home for the next two weeks. "Oh Lord, stone me gently," I muttered when I found out. We could not do anything else but to restart activities which we had put to one side a long time ago. As a child I used to help my grandpa making sour cabbage. The procedure is easy. I cut it up, added salt, onion and cumin seeds. Then I pushed into a barrel and waited for

a couple of weeks. There was a key rule which I had to follow – keep the cabbage under its juices to prevent it from going mouldy. We also went back to our family recipes. Our home-baked bread was unexpectedly tasty. We started cooking Czech cuisine regularly. However, a lack of exercise soon resulted in my weight creeping upwards. That is why I started walking around our house every night. Nordic walking is not very popular in Montenegro. My neighbours must have seen me as a Martian with sticks. I was only missing the antennae.

My wife repaired ripped clothes and remade her old dress into skirts and trousers. Our son got new perfectly fitted shorts sewn from my old T-shirts. The media said that there was an urgent need for protective masks across the country. Therefore we decided to make them ourselves.

Actually it was my deputy who pitched that idea. My wife searched on the internet and the very first product left her provisional workroom a day after all necessary material was delivered. We understood that making the masks had become instantly trendy in the Czech Republic.



Hundreds of volunteers were sewing them and distributing them to hospitals and homes for elderly people for free. The masks were made from unexpected materials. They had various shapes and colours. The Czech nation showed its

sense of creativity and solidarity again. Surprisingly, the masks have become a part of fashion in my country. My wife made two hundred masks in total. We donated them to the Emergency Centre in Podgorica and to a home for elderly people in Bijelo Polje. One would say that it was just a symbolic gesture. Nonetheless, we considered that help to be more than valuable.



To be honest, I was able to fulfil my standard duties only fractionally during my self-isolation. I could not use the computer located in my office and all the planned meetings were called off. You could say that there were alternatives. Home office or on-line conference calls, for example. Not at all! Security rules prevented me from getting out my desk computer and bringing it into my house, as well as from installing free applications to the computer.

As I wanted to take part in a donor conference co-organised by the Montenegrin Ministry of Finance I had to use my personal laptop. The user-friendly application Zoom is not authorised by our ministerial experts, though. I shared my thoughts on Twitter. I supported campaigns launched by the Czech and Montenegrin governments respectively. The Czech campaign called "Wear a mask. My mask protects you, your mask protects me," as well as the Montenegrin one "Stay home," clearly explained to people the necessity of personal responsibility in the pandemic. I also consulted the daily routine with my deputy and signed a few documents, mainly notes.

We had to adapt to the quickly changing conditions of our work. New directions were coming from Prague, as well as from the other nearby capitals every day. It was a really demanding time. We helped our citizens or foreigners living in the Czech Republic to leave Montenegro when the borders were closed. We successfully repatriated them on private jets or repatriation flights provided by

some of the member states of the European Union. A few people went back to the Czech Republic by car through Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. Exchanging information in time was an essential part of our job. Not only did homemade masks become a phenomenon in my country.

Czech scientists were dedicated to helping our health system out. They developed a great number of new solutions as using 3D printers for making protective equipment. We contacted the Science and Technology Park of Montenegro and offered them cooperation with our partners from the Czech Republic. The Park needed special material for 3D printing as they were running out of their reserves. The material was on its way within 10 days after our first call. We also directed the Park to the websites of those Czech technology companies, which published their 3D printing know-how on the internet. Together with the Hungarian Embassy in Podgorica, we looked for a possible subject who would donate a 3D printer manufactured in Hungary to the Park.

Stacks of documents were written. Hundreds of urgent calls were answered. Whilst the world economy was totally frozen and the wheels were literally stopped, the diplomatic community ran its job tirelessly. We have all shown a great deal of responsibility and solidarity. We have worked hard and as well as we could. The crisis has shown us that we can rely on each other. We have proved that we are a successful team, the team of the European Union. Now, the situation is slowly calming down. The restrictions are being eased. The world is entering a new era. I deliberately do not want to say that we are going back to business as usual. It would be more than welcome if we were to rethink our meaning of life and specify our real needs. In the end I would like to express my deepest thanks to those who helped us in that hard period of time. Especially, I would like to thank our Hungarian colleagues, as they were extremely helpful in coordinating the delivery of the 3D printer for the Science and Technology Park of Montenegro.

Thank you!

Dear József, what will be your story about?

| **Improvise, adapt, overcome**

Karel! I would like to quote one of the eternal sentences from a movie you must have heard of for sure – Casablanca (directed by Mihály Kertész with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in the main roles), and this sentence also appears in Kusturica's classic "Black Cat, White Cat" (Crna mačka, beli mačor): "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship". Leaving behind the world of movies, I am delighted that even in such a troubled period, our cooperation has been crowned with success, and I believe such successes will continue in the future.

My generation and the ones to come are the children of what we might call the "consumer-welfare society". We have been given the opportunity to live in a world, in a Europe that, even with its challenges, has given us our perspective. Our way of life has made us believe that everything we own is eternal, and that nothing can disrupt our everyday lifestyle. We have made ourselves believe that this is just the way things will always be, and we couldn't imagine that all of this could and would change in a blink of an eye.

The coronavirus hit humanity unprepared, and has awakened fear and uncertainty within both individuals and governments. The new and unknown nature of the situation, as well as the precarious protocols, has made continents, nations and families shut down their contact in the hope of reducing the possibility of the pandemic spreading.

The first registered cases in Montenegro

On 17 March 2020, that which we had previously only seen on television or read in newspapers and reports suddenly became a reality. With the first two registered cases in the country, the virus immediately became part of our lives, something to which everyone had to adapt. The familiar image of this beloved city changed as the competent authorities approved new measures one after other in the fight against this invisible enemy. In the morning, snow-white masks hid the expressions of the people, the emptiness of the once busy streets during curfew gave rise to an eerie feeling.

Social distancing is difficult and it poses many dilemmas because, in the end, we are all social beings and even with the strictest measures applied it is hard for us to leave our habits and comfort zones.



But life must go on

Among my colleagues at the embassy, there are some who had already been witnesses of such harsh, extraordinary times, and some have been personally affected by them, while there are those to whom this situation meant a new, never-before experienced challenge. In this new, situation that requires a rapid response, everyone sought to give their best.

The experience of our discussions in these complex circumstances made it clear that everyone was aware of the graveness of the situation, and they have done their jobs calmly, adapting to the challenges, even in difficult circumstances. Gradually, we have started to change our habits related to social contact: almost without any notice, handshakes have been replaced by disinfection, joint coffee drinking was made impossible by mouth masks, and face-to-face meetings have been replaced by online video chats.

New situation, new challenge

As the virus appeared in Europe, European countries – including Montenegro – started to implement all the necessary measures, which, within a short time, led to us having to quickly reckon with the narrowing of the possibility of travelling and getting home. This meant that one of the first challenges we had to face at the embassy was the repatriation of our fellow citizens, which has not been an easy task.

The number of inquiries from Hungarian citizens wishing to return home increased parallel to the decreasing number of possible routes and methods of repatriation. Most asked us for help in organising their trip home as they cut short their stay. The first ones to ask for support were members of a Hungarian sports association. In their case, the main task, since they had their own vehicle, was to find the right corridor and make it accessible. In this respect, the continuous flow of information and cooperation established and maintained with the Hungarian Embassies in Zagreb and Sarajevo proved essential for future cases as well.

This is well illustrated by the fact that, since the cessation of air travel in Montenegro, the repatriation of nearly 50 compatriots and several accompanying EU citizens has been resolved through the Montenegro-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia-Hungary corridor with the involvement of our embassies in these three countries. Thus, by the time of the introduction of the curfew, all Hungarian citizens who wanted to leave Montenegro were able to return to Hungary.

Of course, we couldn't relax completely after that either; several embassies accredited to Montenegro are based in Budapest. Thus, the embassies of many countries from East Asia to South America which are located in Budapest contacted us regarding the repatriation of their own citizens in order to help establish and organise cooperation channels within the framework of diplomacy.

Although we are in the fortunate position of having been able to send our citizens home in time, cooperation with our EU colleagues has not stopped.

Everyday work in the shadow of the pandemic

Ensuring the continued work of the embassy was the other challenge. In doing so, it was important to comply with the measures of government bodies, to ensure the continuity of our work in line with the protocols intended to slow down or prevent the spread of the epidemic, to ensure safe working conditions and, finally, to carry



out the tasks identified by the MFA of Hungary.

Therefore, as a first step, I ordered the local staff to work from home. Then we developed a working schedule for our diplomats that ensured that the aforementioned tasks could be implemented. Of course, this had to incorporate flexible factors that would allow the number of those on duty to be increased or decreased as needed, as well as carrying out the necessary disinfections at the embassy.

The measures taken by the Montenegrin government also meant the temporary suspension of one of the most important elements of the diplomacy toolbox, namely, that there was no possibility for personal meetings, conferences, discussions, and the other events that are part of the everyday life of a diplomat. In these circumstances, solutions had to be found to ensure liaising with the Montenegrin authorities, the functioning of consultations between ambassadors in Podgorica, the implementation of tasks from our own ministries and the protection of embassy members against the virus, all in full compliance with the measures of the host country.

As the working-from-home methods had an impact on the form of personal contact between ambassadors, including EU ambassadors, it became necessary to create a new form of communication to adapt to this. The Head of the EU Delegation, Aivo Orav, and his staff played a major role in the design and operation of this new method.

There have been several significant consultations and deliberations through this platform, which would have otherwise been possible only in personal meetings, such as the EU Head of Mission meetings. Another such common platform is a certain mobile application, which no longer serves for only so-called official contact, but also more direct and everyday forms of social contact.

It is part of my life philosophy that, if you are not able to change the given living conditions, you can still learn to live in the best and most efficient way possible, as this is your only option. I have been trying to shape my everyday life accordingly. Without underestimating the dangers posed by this virus, and taking into account the existing protocols and government measures, I have been trying to continue my life the same way as before. Of course, this requires responsible behaviour from everyone, based on the principle of "defend yourself and protect others": do your best to avoid getting infected with the virus and also do your best not to infect others with it.

Anyone who has been a soldier in any army in any country has certainly been personally acquainted with the subject of the fight against chemical and biological weapons (weapons of mass destruction) and, thus, also gained knowledge about

the possibilities of defending against them. This experience provides the guidance that we must not approach the new COVID-19 pandemic and similar viruses with irresponsibility and fear, but with due care and respect, and we must be aware of the fact that we can and must learn to live with it. This is very important as there is currently no vaccine against this disease and it cannot be expected before next year.

I decided along these lines that I would be a part of the world even in these circumstances. I go to the market when it has just opened because I enjoy the scent of fresh vegetables signalling spring. I also visit NAŠ DISKONT, where I always get lost among the shelves because I can never find the products I am looking for.

Sometimes there are unexpected surprises

One Thursday, Mr. Pál Kovács, CEO of Crnogorska Komercijalna Banka, called me and inquired about my current schedule. I told him that I was doing exactly the same thing as he was. He then invited me to an "apartment inauguration party" as he had just moved into the same building that I am living in, so we celebrated this in a typical Hungarian way.

Two days later, on a Saturday, I invited him to a lunch, and then a few days later, he repaid my lunch invitation, and so forth. Well aware of the fact that none of us would get a Michelin star, we started our journey in the world of cooking and with the basics of Hungarian cuisine.



Since both of us are currently alone in Podgorica, we asked for our wives' help by phone in order to achieve the planned gastronomic experience, or something close to it. Either thanks to our so far hidden gastronomical abilities or the professional remote guidance (perhaps both), we put together a surprisingly good lunch, accompanied by fine local white wines. As this was not a diplomatic but a friendly lunch, we tried to avoid the usual protocol rules at that time, which, among many other things, was manifested in a lower number of dishes than usual, as none of us dared to make anything else, not even a simple cake for dessert.

Of course, everyone is experiencing this strange period differently. It is a special situation to live with small children, it is another challenge to spend this time in an apartment and another one in a residence with a garden. In this respect, our Polish colleague, Ambassador Artur Dmochowski could give us some insights, as he has lived through this special situation together with his family.

Quarantine doesn't mean isolation

As my Hungarian friend, Ambassador József Négyesi, observed, this time of quarantine has brought us many challenges. What I will remember best from this unusual spring 2020 period marked by the coronavirus pandemic, and what was probably most challenging, was the beginning of the lockdown. In particular, the first days after it were extremely hectic for all of us at the Polish Embassy in Podgorica. Many countries, Poland and Montenegro being among the first, started to limit international and domestic traffic, and soon after closed the borders.

Consequently, airlines began cancelling international connections and, as a result, in a few days we found ourselves facing many citizens of our country being suddenly and unexpectedly stranded in Montenegro, looking for any opportunity to return to their homeland and expecting all sorts of help and support from us at the embassy. They were mostly ordinary tourists, since Montenegro is a very popular tourist destination for Poles, people who had come here just for one or two weeks to visit the seaside or go backpacking in the mountains, often families with small children, certainly not able to stay here for a difficult-to-foresee time of pandemic.

We were able to help them quite quickly, although it took a great deal of effort from all of us at the embassy. The situation was changing so rapidly and the new information on different countries restricting the possibilities to travel reached us almost every hour, so it was extremely difficult to foresee what would happen next and to plan concrete solutions. Fortunately, in a matter of days, the Polish government and our national carrier LOT started a huge operation to evacuate stranded Poles from all around the world. Montenegro was not the first on the list, since there were other countries where the number of people waiting for air transport was much bigger – from Great Britain, through the USA, to Thailand. Nevertheless, we were able to effectively connect and communicate with the airline and both governments, the Polish and Montenegrin ones, in order to organise the whole, quite complicated operation, and after only a few days of waiting, we finally got two special LOT flights from Podgorica to Warsaw. Thanks to this concerted effort everyone who wanted to go back to Poland could be brought back.

What was also very satisfying, was that these flights created, on the other side, the possibility to help citizens of Montenegro, who were stranded in Poland, to return home. When our colleagues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro learned that there would be flights from Poland, they asked for our assistance. We

were able to smooth over some formalities in Warsaw for them and in this way all the Montenegrins who wanted to come back could be fortunately brought by the LOT planes to Podgorica.

In the face of the deadly danger facing our societies, the emergence of so many initiatives of assistance and support is really encouraging, so I am glad that we were not only able to help citizens of Montenegro return to their homeland, but also that our embassy successfully organised another significant initiative: a fundraiser among diplomats in Podgorica to help Montenegro fight against the epidemic. My wife, Monika, who is the President of the International Women's Club of Montenegro, with a lot of experience in fundraising, prepared a collection and we were very happy that, thanks to the funds offered by many colleagues from our diplomatic community, valuable and much-needed medical equipment, including special beds for the sick, could be donated to the Clinical Centre of Montenegro.

It is obvious that times of quarantine mean, first of all, a lot of hardships and problems. Soon after the outbreak of the epidemic in Montenegro we decided to change the mode of work of our office at the Polish Embassy and Consulate for obvious security reasons. We started to work from our homes, communicating through the internet and phones, and coming to the embassy only when it was necessary. All in line with the most important and universal epidemic protection recommendation – Stay Home or Ostani Doma.

Isolation and contact restrictions, of course, were a problem and made it more difficult than usual to work, but they were, in the state of danger we all unexpectedly faced, necessary for safety. Not only ours, but also the safety of all the other people we could have been in touch with. Nevertheless, this new working model soon proved to be quite effective, although it had its limitations and difficulties: lack of easy, direct, personal contact for a longer period for many reasons is quite uncomfortable.



Consequently, the daily routine of life and work had to be totally changed. Instead of going every day to the embassy at the same time in the morning, on most days I found myself sitting at my desk at home, with my laptop and mobile, checking and answering emails, calling and taking calls, with almost no difference compared to the office. It soon became simply a new routine. An important part of this daily routine is cooperation of the ambassadors of the European Union countries, very efficiently coordinated by the Head of the EU Delegation, Aivo Orav. Especially now, in this difficult time, it is so useful and of vital importance that we can exchange current information on the pandemic situation and help each other with different problems, not only in official matters, but also privately, since we are a group of close colleagues and friends.

On a more private note, I can add that you can hardly speak about isolation if you are working at home, particularly with a family with small children under one roof. Having two toddlers in the office may sometimes create interesting challenges while trying to connect with your ministry, for example. On the other hand, it is worth noting that we live in the middle of a village, because Donja Gorica, where the Polish Embassy's residence is located, although formally on the outskirts of Podgorica, is practically in the countryside. So, when you go out for a walk, you can speak to neighbours (and we paradoxically got to know them much better during this period of social distancing), and you can always see chickens, goats, horses or herds of sheep in your neighbourhood. Which is nice, particularly for little children, and made it easier to live through this strange time of quarantine.

We in Poland believe that only concerted cooperation and solidarity – one of the most important words for us – will help all of us to overcome this crisis. In this spirit, our country has been shipping medical equipment and protection measures

to countries that were much more affected by the epidemic, and our doctors have been working as volunteers in Italy and in the USA. This solidarity, on different levels, between the countries of our region of Central Europe, such as Poland and Montenegro, and between the EU and Montenegro, allows us to look to the future with optimism even today, in the middle of the pandemic.

So, let us hope that we will soon see the end of this crisis, the restarting of the economies in all our countries, and – which is of vital importance for Montenegro – the rebirth of international tourism. I wish I could watch LOT planes full of tourists landing in Podgorica every day again, and also bringing them to Athens and so many other historic Greek cities and lovely islands, where so many Poles and people from all around the world have enjoyed the splendid Mediterranean landscapes and beautiful beaches. Along with these wishes, and dreaming about the moment when I will be able to go to Greece with my family again, I pass the baton on to my distinguished colleague, Panayotis, ambassador of that marvellous country, the cradle of European culture, where our common history started.

Beauty of the mind in difficult times

As I continue the “relay race” after my Polish colleague, the first thing that comes to mind is a scene in New York back in Autumn 1989, with me sitting behind the sign “Greece” in the salle de conferences of the 2nd Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. As is the custom, the text of the national representative’s intervention is distributed a few minutes before he takes the floor, to be checked against its delivery, of course. In line to take the floor was the Polish representative. The clerk put a copy of the intervention in front of me, and as I picked it up, to my surprise the cover page had a significant change: the country was now the “Republic of Poland”! It had forsaken the term “Socialist People’s” before the word “Republic”.

The first one to do so, as the world was living through days of monumental change. No more bipolarity! A few years later, on 18 December 1993, Poland submitted its official application to join the European Union during the then Hellenic Presidency of the European Council. And a decade later, again during the course of another Hellenic Presidency, Poland signed in Athens, in April 2003, along with nine other European countries, the documents of its accession to the European Union.

The country that had made the word “solidarity” front-page news, thanks to Lech Wałęsa, was a full member of the Union, where the Western Balkans has also belonged for a long time now. But as 2020 set in, the world, and not just Europe, would have to rise up to the challenge of a pandemic, and ponder on the meaning of the word “solidarity”.

Together with the virus pandemic spreading, so questions also spread in my mind – typical, perhaps, of us all. When will it leave the country where it first appeared? Where will it go next?

Clearly, it was a question of when, not if, as shown in previous cases of pandemics in history. Memories came together with reflections from my graduate seminars on the world order back in the States a few decades ago: the pandemic known as the “Black Death”, how it spread from country to country, continent to continent, as a ship’s voyage would end and it would dock, and rats would disembark together with passengers, carrying the contamination with them. “No, nobody is safe,” I remember my professor saying. We are all so interconnected, that our fate is as delicate as a piece of thread. The illusion of everything being in order! Until proven otherwise, this time by a virus, discernible only under a microscope, probably only one with high magnification capacities.

And by the beginning of March, reality started acquiring a new face. Off to Greece for just a few days, as many as the fingers on a hand. As soon as I re-entered Montenegro, my mobile phone received one more message besides the typical one "Welcome to Montenegro, etc." It started with "Welcome", too. And then it read as follows: "If you are coming from areas affected by COVID-19, inform the border control officer. You will be instructed on your duties/obligations. The Government of Montenegro". The date read 14 March 2020. The Ides of March!



"2001: A Space Odyssey", was the title of the famous 1968 film. But this writing is not a ship's log, and I have no ambition to turn it into one. The captain of the ship I had re-entered had ordered: "Isolate yourself for two weeks!". And so I did.

And then, the new reality started moving fast, perhaps faster than a spaceship. The office at the embassy constituted the confines of my world, and my residence, three floors up, the limits of my walking oscillation. A shower in the morning, a cup of coffee, some fruit and a quick bite, and then descend to the operations room (office). Light the systems up, read the news on the internet, sit in front

my controls – the keyboard of my PC – and then switch to the official traffic, connected to the outside world via open and closed circuits. And the news poured in at a fast pace, in the form of statistics, in pictures of this coronated virus, of hospitals around the world, of people speaking into their phones and posting it on the internet, of masked faces, most of the surgical type, and some with more advanced ones, looking like Hollywood characters from scary movies. And then, soon enough, this new reality got ugly, as it struck Italy. It felt like I was 'neath the halo of a street lamp, witnessing a neon light (the virus) that split the night, and watching it all in silence, to use some of the lyrics from the "Sound of Silence" by Simon and Garfunkel. But no arms could be reached out – social distancing.

And countries bowed to the neo-virus that had set out on a world tour. The only sound was that of fear, so well depicted by Edvard Munch in his painting "The Scream" in 1893, a time referred to as "fin de siècle". What kind of an ending would this virus pandemic signify? No prayer could save anyone, as governments tried to locate "ground zero", hoping they could trace its path and stop the spread.

As I sat in front of my controls, I had to see two ministerial visits I had worked towards getting cancelled. I had to search for people, compatriots, who would want to be repatriated, faced with obstacles that not only reminded me of the past difficulties in the pre-Schengen era when crossing borders, but also made me ask myself what was ahead, as things started becoming more difficult than had ever been heard of or imagined before. But the Montenegrin authorities proved to be very efficient, very willing to respond positively to requests. Yes, every repatriation went smoothly.

This virus knows no borders, and for this very reason the challenge is common to us all, necessitating strong solidarity and cooperation. After a certain moment of freezing in front of the challenge and the awe it inspired, governments started reacting, listening to needs and developing the mechanisms required to face the unparalleled threat. Good news came from Brussels: the EU had stepped up and put together a global response package of €15.6 billion, of which €374.5 million was for the Western Balkans. Some €3 million of that, with €50 million coming later, is intended for Montenegro, to address both the immediate needs and the socio-economic impact of the pandemic for the "day after". Money for something very important. Money to show that the Union and its member states are here. In solidarity. Brothers-in-arms, out of these dire straits.

The ship's log now reads well over a month since the initial entry. I have grown over the isolation period I had to impose upon myself. I have been a few times to the supermarket in my neighbourhood, which was as well-stocked with products as before the corona outbreak. No empty shelves, plenty of pasta and ... toilet paper!



Shopping queue

Evolution has certainly been acquiring speed, but it needs time to profoundly change day-to-day business and the way we look at life. We are not robots, we need to interact. I have missed seeing my colleagues, my fellow ambassadors. The diplomatic community is a part of human society. We have been in touch over these past days, each one in his/her office, trying to keep the bridges between our countries and Montenegro strong and standing, as we stand ourselves. We are all happy to see that our host country has managed well under the circumstances, and we are here to navigate our ships the day after, as we prepare to leave the uncharted waters of COVID-19. We have all bled, some more, some less, but as we stand closer to the clearing, perhaps with anger and fear, feeling perhaps overwhelmed by the challenge, yet we stand firm, and like Simon and Garfunkel's "Boxer", fighters united in hope we remain!

As I am about to pass over to my Italian colleague, Luca, I give in to temptation and let my mind wander to the two opposite coasts of the Ionian and Adriatic Seas and the bright summer sun on a beautiful beach. Coasts that so successfully met in antiquity, to bring about the birth of the Graeco-Roman World, the very essence of today's Europe and Western civilisation. In reciting excerpts from the work "Odes" by Quintus Horatius Flaccus, the most celebrated Roman poet and philosopher, my Latin teacher in gymnasium would remind us of the poet's remark that Rome conquered the classical Greek world by force, only to be conquered by the arts and letters of Greece, which brought culture to rural Latio. Indeed, what would have become of Europe without such foundations, such a powerhouse of knowledge? Maybe Zeus would have even denied he ever met her! By the way, Luca, *mutatis mutandis*, I have been an avid supporter of Juventus ever since boyhood, certainly before Ronaldo joined forces with the football club. Anyway, he was only born in 1985! Perhaps it was because Juve's colours were the same – black and white stripes – as PAOK of Thessaloniki, my favourite Greek club.

| The art of living is the art of surviving

I always have interesting chats with my friend Panayotis, the Greek Ambassador. We especially like to discuss how modern European civilisation was born from Roman-Greek interaction. Ancient Rome conquered militarily and politically; Ancient Greece, however, responded by colonising culturally. We normally conclude that, since "the words of truth are simple" (as Aeschylus put it), it was an equal and crucial contribution (were it not for Panayotis's strange inclination towards Juventus F.C. instead of the glorious Milan F.C., I would say we are always in agreement).

I had just finished another discussion about history during a moment of relax when it began. With a first telephone call. Then an additional one. And again. Within minutes the embassy was flooded with calls from Italian citizens, just arriving at Podgorica Airport from Bologna, inquiring as to why they were being subjected to unexpected checks, questions and forms to fill in.

So it was: on 24 February 2020 the Italian Embassy experienced the first (mild) wave of anti-COVID-19 measures introduced by Montenegro. It came as a surprise, without warning. "It was an emergency call, we are sorry we could not inform you at once; from now on we will be in close contact with you," explained the representative of the competent administration the day after.

From then on, unfortunately, everything changed swiftly. Suddenly. By the day. And the whole world plunged in mid-March into something unknown since a very long time ago: a pandemic.

In a matter of two weeks, flight connections, first with Italy and then, gradually but inexorably, with the rest of the world, were lost. Together with the ferry lines. Well, the technical word used everywhere is "suspended": indeed, it leaves more room for hope. Something suspended will restart, of course. The tricky question, we discovered quite soon, was "when?".

The work of the embassy was already changing. But the effect of the suspension of commercial connections brought in a full new "evolution": many Italians were caught by surprise and left stranded in Montenegro. Students, businessmen, some tourists. Our priority became to get them out of the country, to repatriate them. It was at that point that we saw what solidarity meant. The Montenegrin government, in the process of repatriating its own citizens from Italy, offered a special flight from Podgorica to Rome to take the Italians back. Then we began to work with other EU Member States, in particular Croatia and Slovenia: many

Italians returned to the “Belpaese” by car, transiting across those friendly countries. Others decided to seek our help in reaching Italy via special ferries or special flights departing from Albania: to that effect, we worked and we are still working in strict coordination with the Montenegrin authorities and the Italian Embassy in Tirana.

Solidarity began to flow also from various Montenegrin institutions and, above all, from the citizens: many mayors sent messages of condolences. Both the Presidency of Montenegro and the Capital City of Podgorica illuminated their buildings with the colours of the Italian flag. Moreover, the embassy has been literally flooded with messages of sympathy and encouragement from ordinary citizens, many writing directly in Italian.

Various journalists also contacted me: I accepted some requests for an interview (below is a photo from my first one, through internet, with Dan) about the sad situation in Italy. I could also portray, on a more positive note, the first signs and then trends of an encouraging decrease in the spread of the contagion, while also pointing out how the great majority of the Italian people stood united and disciplined against the scourge. I also had the possibility to describe, of course, the crucial financial assistance that the EU and its Member States were ensuring for Montenegro in the fight against coronavirus and to support and restart the economy.



While these sudden developments were happening, I also had to completely rethink our “way of working”. Safeguarding the embassy’s personnel was indeed the other key priority. In order to preserve our employees’ health security, thus also preserving the capability of the embassy to assist so many Italians in difficulties,

I switched most of our staff gradually to a “smart working” modality. Within a few days of the first confirmed case of coronavirus in Montenegro, on 17 March, the embassy became almost “empty”, but remained very much operational, as I tried to explain in a message addressed to all the almost 500 Italian residents still in Montenegro. The embassy continued and continues to be open and efficient, working mainly through email and telephone.

We also discovered the dimension of video conference calls: we started to have a lot of “virtual meetings” with Rome and/or with other Italian Ambassadors in the Western Balkans, exchanging information and experiences. Notwithstanding the tragic balance of the pandemic in our country, the Italian diplomatic system continued to work everywhere to meet the challenge and assist our nationals.

From mid-March, the Montenegrin authorities gradually introduced stricter rules and measures, in many cases similar to those implemented in Italy weeks earlier, as my country was the first European state to be hit – and hit very hard, unfortunately – by widespread diffusion of the contagion.

With many services and shops closed or with reduced working hours as well as strict social distancing measures, with outdoor physical activities being impossible and leaving home at certain hours prohibited, everything became of course complicated and challenging. After having readjusted the work in the embassy, I now had to think about how to readjust my private life and habits.

With social life in shutdown, I discovered that I had more time available, especially in the evenings. I also noticed, almost at once, how I was missing three things:

1) Of course, the company of my family, locked down in Rome since the end of February. Luckily, nowadays modern technology gives you the possibility to stay in touch without much effort. Not perfect, but anyway a good temporary solution. Especially true as, thanks to this contact possibility, I could better manage the horrible feeling of being afraid – being completely powerless to do anything while isolated in Montenegro – for the health of family and friends in Italy.

2) The usual exchanges with my colleagues and friends, both diplomats and from Montenegro’s ministries/entities. One solution has been to create a chat group, especially among EU ambassadors: so, instead of meeting in person we can instantly and constantly stay in touch and exchange information, comments (we did spend Easter almost totally isolated from the rest of the world, so it was a consolation to share stories and best wishes with colleagues in the very same situation) and, why not?, jokes as well. I also have frequent telephone calls with many colleagues, just to see how they are doing. Solidarity and a habit of continuing to be in touch have been powerful means to keep a trace of normality. I had a possibility to make videocalls with some colleagues and, from our respective homes, and even have “virtual live toasts” to hope for a rapid defeat of COVID-19.

3) The many cultural initiatives I was used to organise. Before the pandemic, I had a personal motto: the sun in Montenegro must never set without an Italian cultural event ongoing somewhere in the country (well, “vive la grandeur”, as the French would say). Now, I can only hope to recover some of the numerous activities planned for 2020’s cultural programme. At least, and this thought was a sort of consolation, we were able to organise the main initiative already at the beginning of the year: on 21 January, thanks to the Italian Fondazione Pucciniana, “La Bohème” by Puccini was performed for the first time in Montenegro, at the National Theatre in Podgorica. It was a huge and warmly received success, with the theatre sold out for all three evenings of the show. The example will serve also for the future, as soon as the emergency is over.

I then had to reorganise my private priorities. Being a “good” Italian, I bought various types of pasta, as well as all the ingredients to prepare various sauces. I also remembered that when a student – well, not so many years ago after all! – in beautiful Bologna (famous for the most ancient European university, but also for its rich and excellent cuisine), I improvised as a sort of cook. I even “created” a new dish (tasty and nutritious, and above all very cheap), the (almost) famous “student’s peas” (basically, peas and tomato slices with some olive oil, onion, a bit of garlic, salt and oregano: cook them in a pan for some minutes – according to preference – have some bread nearby and ... voilà!). So, duly respecting all the precautionary measures indicated by the authorities for customers visiting shops or supermarkets, I also bought flour, olive oil, tomatoes, mozzarella and the other ingredients. And I started to use part of my free time as a proud amateur cook (you get an idea from the photo below). Pizza, pasta and even bread revealed their secrets to a certain extent (I really hope professional restaurants will reopen as soon as possible....).



As the ancient Romans were used to saying, however, “mens sana in corpore sano” (a healthy mind in a healthy body). In other words, if it is good to eat as well as possible and to enjoy the preparation of your meal, this is not enough. To maintain your mind active and healthy, you also need exercise.

Normally I do lengthy “fast walking” activities, especially during the weekends. But at the height of the corona age, most parks are closed and you cannot leave your home except during certain hours of the day. Well, if you cannot go “out”, you can always have some activity “in”.

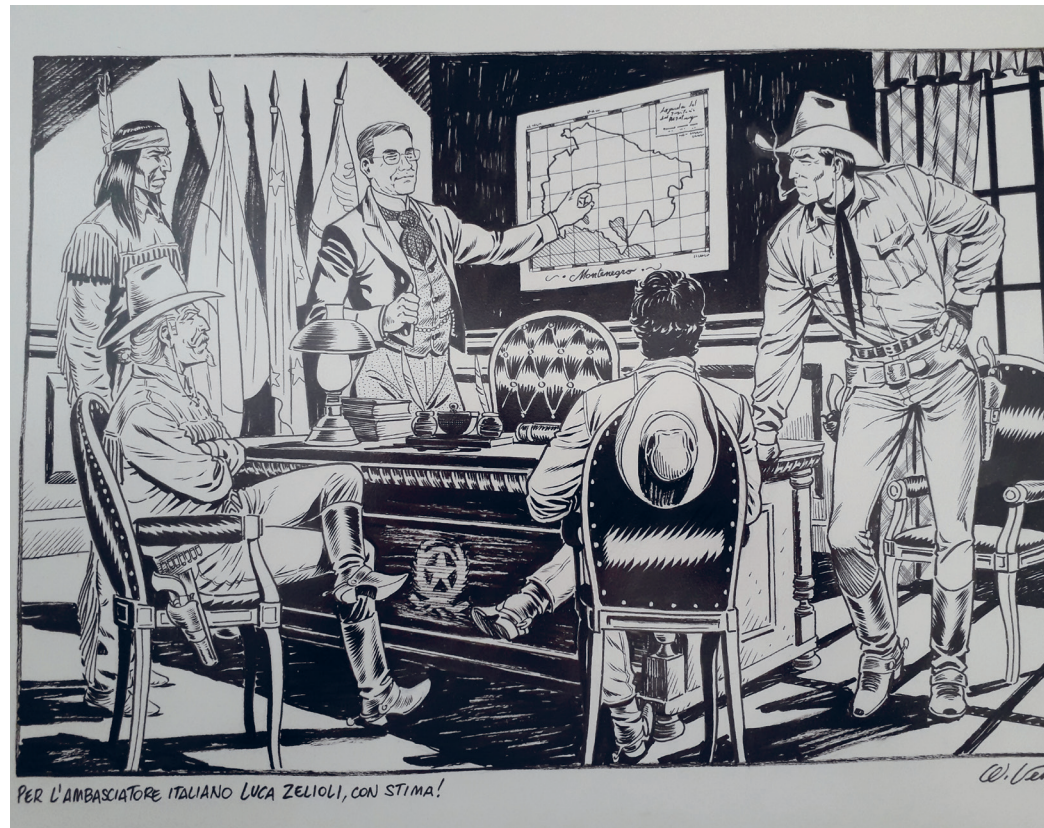
Luckily, I have a beautiful exercise bike (left over from a sporting accident two years ago, previously used to exercise my operated left leg), in the company of which I could spend hours going for a spin. Rediscovering, at the same time, listening to music to help pass the kilometres upon kilometres ... without even leaving home.

I also returned to one of my hobbies: comics. I made my official “outing” here in Montenegro back in 2018, when I was invited to open my first International Comics Festival in Herceg Novi, an event that the Italian Embassy supports every year.



It is therefore no mystery that I am a big fan of the Italian “Tex” comics series (also very popular here, I discovered) by Sergio Bonelli Editore, about a Texas ranger almost infallible in shooting at criminals, who also happens to be the chief of the Navajo people, a native American nation. Confinement at home gave me the opportunity to restart reading my entire collection (it has always followed me in whatever country I am working as a diplomat), from the first number. What a fun, discovering forgotten adventures!

And what a present I got through email from a dear friend, Walter Venturi, one of the most important illustrators of Tex in Italy: thanks to him I finally had the possibility of meeting my paper hero and his friends "face to face", as you can see from the drawing below (where, in my office, in an appropriate 19th century style, I am explaining ... Montenegro to them).



While I have reorganised as much as possible the modalities of work and my lifestyle, I am of course still very much missing "my life before the pandemic". For one, I certainly can't wait for the restarting of international flights to rebuild the usual connections with Europe, with Italy and with my family!

I am sure that together, in solidarity and responsibility, without forgetting the too-many victims of COVID-19, we will recover. Hopefully, better equipped to face possible future similar threats.

As I mentioned to Boris, my Slovak colleague: I have no doubt that we Europeans, if united from all corners of this wonderful continent, as we are doing with and within Montenegro, will soon get over this scourge and regain normality, stronger than ever.

| An atypical, but highly responsible mission

After finishing my previous mission in Denmark, I could not have imagined that my next mission would start atypically, attesting at the same time to the strength and unity of us Europeans in the spirit of "what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger", as our Italian friend Luca said.

Leaving Copenhagen I smiled and thought: "You began in the east, and then moved to the west, and you are now coming back from the north. It is time to go south." I did not have any second thoughts when I received the offer from my minister to go to the mission in Montenegro. To be an ambassador in a country with which we have fantastic amicable relations, a country whose birth was witnessed by two supreme Slovak diplomats – Miroslav Lajčák and Frantisek Lipka. It was more than an honour. And it was precisely Miroslav Lajčák, in the capacity of minister, who sent me to Podgorica and who was always saying that Montenegro was a country which would remain in his heart forever.

One can say the same about the Western Balkan region where he spent most of his diplomatic career, where he always felt good and to which he gladly comes back, a region he understands so well and whose future he cares about. I am therefore convinced that it is very good news that he was appointed the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues on 1 April this year. I believe it to be a positive sign in these difficult times for moving forward in right direction. It is not a coincidence, but a sign of trust, friendship and support that Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović was one of the first politicians that Miroslav Lajčák called after taking up his duties. It is at the same time a positive sign that the European Commission wants to dedicate more attention than before to the Western Balkans. I therefore feel even greater responsibility on my new mission.

I could not have imagined the issues I would encounter before coming to Montenegro, in spite of the fact that COVID-19 was already causing fear in China and was slowly moving towards Europe. During my final official travels from Bratislava before arriving to Podgorica, I often met people wearing protective masks. It had a special effect on me then.

Today, in countries where wearing masks is obligatory, the people who do not wear one seem peculiar. I admit it took some time for me to adjust, until I accepted mask wearing as a part of life, as I started taking my mask automatically before leaving the house, just as I do with my car keys.



Montenegro was the last country in Europe affected by the epidemic. Well done to the government and all competent authorities on their readiness for the epidemic, the measures undertaken, learning from the way the virus spread out of control not just around our continent but the entire world. It is surely thanks to such a response that the results of the pandemic in Montenegro are not as tragic as in other countries in Europe. Comparing my previous missions, this one started in a rather atypical manner. I could exaggerate and say that I am also a victim of coronavirus in an imaginary way. A diplomatic victim. Since my arrival in Podgorica in mid-February, I have not managed to present my credentials to

President Đukanović (it is now the end of April), which in a way limits my function in Montenegro. That is surely not the consequence of bad relations between two countries. On the contrary, the relations are excellent, as I have already said; it is just that COVID-19 is now affecting our lives, both private and professional. We have had to adjust our habits, standard regimes, working from home and giving up personal contact as much as possible. We all understand the situation we are in, where certain measures have to be respected.

I would say the new situation has united us. We are sticking together and we communicate well. It is with total conscientiousness and awareness that I can say that about the group of EU Member States' ambassadors, as well as those of other countries represented in Podgorica. We are all in the same boat, pulling at one end and are aware that the country we are accredited to needs our help, probably more than at any other time before. The Head of the EU Delegation to Podgorica, Aivo Orav, has done a great job, as have the other colleagues with whom we are in close contact, without personal, physical encounters. We formed two group communication channels – via email and WhatsApp – which we use to exchange necessary and useful information, opinions and advice, and when we are experiencing tough moments, we even exchange funny photos and videos. It reminds me of my father who used to say "humour must exist even on your deathbed". Luckily the situation in Montenegro is nothing like a "deathbed", though it reminds me more of a title of a French movie "The situation is bad... but not desperate".

The behaviour of Slovakian citizens can sometimes be desperate when they find themselves in trouble in a foreign country. Many found themselves in a crisis in this situation and wanted to go back to their country. I found out from my Slovakian colleagues accredited to other countries that there are such cases there, Slovaks who travelled to their territory on vacation, despite the fact that our Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs had already issued recommendations not to travel abroad given the gravity of the situation. Many even bragged about "finding a way to travel here and there" notwithstanding the recommendations, and are now saying, "state, please save us and helps us come back home". Luckily, we did not witness such cases of irresponsible citizens, though we did have a bizarre consular case. I will probably remember it forever, whenever the topic of coronavirus and Montenegro comes up...

A young 29-year-old Slovak woman was living with her friends in a magical coastal town on the Adriatic. She did not heed our pleas to take advantage of the situation and come home in time, back when her return was relatively easy to arrange. When these opportunities diminished, due to the ban on international traffic and the closure of borders in many countries in Europe, she expressed her desire to go back home. It happens in life that unexpected coincidence can be very helpful. One such coincidence happened. The next day I received a phone call from a friend who informed me that we had a VIP from Slovakia on vacation. This individual needed to return home, so he asked me to ensure permission to fly for a charter flight. My deputy Martin Balco took the task upon himself and I thought his phone would burn out from all the ringing. We were of course wondering if the VIP would agree to take the Slovak woman on board. Good news – a place on the flight was available. We let her know. She agreed to come to Podgorica the next day and return home. However, the situation took an unexpected turn on the date of departure. First of all, the woman was not accessible by phone, then she called us after waking up to tell us she was going cancel her flight as she did not want to be quarantined upon arrival in Slovakia. At this point, we of course asked around and we found out that a 14-day-long self-isolation was obligatory upon arrival home, but not state quarantine. After we informed her that this decision meant she would not have another opportunity to come back home, she told us she would go with a friend on a day trip and continue to enjoy Montenegro.

We were a bit shocked, but accepted her decision. Two weeks later a van arrived from Bratislava with diplomatic post for our new consul. After all the formalities were done, it happened that they were in a position to take one person with them back to Slovakia. The young woman agreed to leave with them and travel to Podgorica, but she clearly did not like the fact that she might have had to travel for 20 hours due to potential border issues. Suddenly, there was a young man with a backpack at the door of the embassy. He had not showered or shaved recently,

but was in good shape, saying, "Here I am!" We did not entirely understand what he was talking about and we were trying to remember whether we had scheduled a meeting with him, but it was clear we had not. In the end we found out he was a 27-year-old adventurer, who had been hiking the country for weeks and had just reached Podgorica from Bar after walking for three days, wanting to come back home. He had no money and no place to sleep. We called the Red Cross, as well as other institutions. However all capacities were already exhausted. The young woman took pity on him, and said she had a place to stay and eat. She offered her place to the young man. This is what being in the right place at the right time means...

After a few days we received some other good news – an airplane was going to take off from Belgrade to Bratislava to repatriate Slovakian citizens! After doing all the check-ups and obtaining all approvals, we could now take the Slovak woman to the Montenegro-Serbia border where our colleagues from the Belgrade embassy would take her to the airport in Belgrade. A perfect plan, which she politely and gratefully rejected, even though, as we then knew, she would not have been able to stay with her friend for much longer. Again, a situation we did not understand... After a week has passed, my deputy's phone rang on a Saturday, the young woman heartbreakingly informed him that, as of the next day, she had no place to stay, she was going to end up on the street with nowhere to go. The fact that the next day was a Sunday and restrictions on movement started at 11:00, this was cause for great concern.

The problem with our embassy, unlike other embassies, is that there is no option of staying the night there. So I wrote to my colleagues in neighbouring countries to check whether any transportation was planned. The Hungarians and Austrians hadn't any transportation in their pipelines. We were lucky in the end, our Czech colleague, Karel Urban, informed me that on Thursday a jet was taking off bound for Prague and a seat was available. My deputy called the woman to tell her the good news and advised her to ask her friends if she could stay with them until Thursday. Suddenly, the woman said the situation with her friends had changed so there was no need for an urgent return home...

After a strict warning that there were three countries cooperating on arranging her return home, and that if she missed this opportunity we would be forced to take her off the repatriation list, she accepted the offer. This time she would have to go into state quarantine and not self-isolation, and would have to arrange her transport from Prague to Slovakia herself, as this time there were no comfortable direct flights. We could say this woman was very lucky. The consul from Prague informed me on the day of the departure of the plane from Podgorica that there was one final bus going to Slovakia, organised by the government to aid repatriates, and adjusted the time of departure for the flight of this woman.

The consul from Prague, a good friend of mine, with whom I was on the mission in Moscow, reassured me that the bus would not leave without her. Less than an hour later, after I wrote these lines, my colleague returned from the airport and informed me that our consular case had been successful, the woman had boarded the flight and taken off. On their way to the airport, she had confided in him that she was nervous, as this was only her first or second time travelling by plane. It was just at that moment that I understood why she had not gone with the first plane, when everything was going smoothly for her. As she said to my colleague, she is planning to visit again in July. We do hope the circumstances will be different...

I guess the situation will calm down by the summer and life will go back to normal, at least within realistic lines. As my wife says, being one hour away from the seaside and not being able to go there and breathe the fresh sea air feels like a punishment. However, our entire family is patiently dealing with the situation



and my wife has replaced thoughts of the sea with planting new trees, such as fortunella, lemon, lime and kiwi, as well as other useful herbs, such as mint and dill. This morning my wife told me she was going to the agricultural supply store again. I had no idea my wife was so keen on gardening... Coronavirus is revealing many things.

Working from home was something we could not have even imagined in the past, which is now a reality in most cases. We are working in shifts at work, which means that not a day goes by when we do not meet each other, albeit briefly, all the while respecting the measures to stop the spread of coronavirus. Some things are simply better done in the office. For example, our consul was the duty officer



today, and I felt like I would do my best writing these lines in my office. My deputy has just arrived. Full house again. My dog, a dachshund, is here with me as well, he needed to leave home quarantine at least for a little while and I felt sorry for him. Our outfits are not totally appropriate, as meetings have been cancelled and the consulate's agenda is limited strictly to handling emergency cases. In case of need, we are fully dressed, as diplomats should be. As for my look, I am slowly beginning to understand how essential hairdressers and barbers are.

What matters is that we are aware of the reason why we are here. Besides representing the interests of our country and aiding our citizens, we also want to help our Montenegrin friends in this difficult situation. It is great to witness how the EU is helping Montenegro both financially and materially. NATO member states have also shipped aid on multiple occasions. Certain countries are shipping the material that is most needed now to Montenegro. Slovakia has helped in this situation as well. Our first shipment was directed to our Italian friends who were badly hit with coronavirus. We are preparing aid for other countries that need it. We certainly will not skip our friends in Montenegro. In March, we collected €4,300 together with some EU member states in Podgorica, which has helped the Clinical Centre

of Podgorica, the current centre of the battle against coronavirus in the country. Given the current situation, I want to believe that the aid will not stop there and that we will assist Montenegro in many other important areas. We are certainly solidary. And solidarity has always been the symbol of international prestige clubs such as the EU and the NATO.

An example of common solidarity is the case of the abovementioned Slovak woman, who travelled home via Prague. It is precisely the help of our Czech partners that illustrates how important friendly cooperation, coordination, sensibility and understanding are. And this was not a unique case. EU colleagues have always offered free places on the planes being sent from their respective countries which could take citizens as close to their homes as possible. We managed to repatriate six Montenegrin citizens from Slovakia and Austria. Even though it is a small number, the capacity of a small jet was fully used. I believe that these six seats were invaluable for these people and their families. My Bulgarian colleague, Meglena Plugtschieva, showed sweet and symbolic solidarity, after Aivo Orav announced the first financial aid from the European Union to Montenegro, by sending a bottle of good Bulgarian wine to all the embassies. Therefore, long live Meglena, long live the EU, long live Montenegro, which I believe after fulfilling all the criteria, will become a member of the club that it certainly belongs to.

| The “new normality”

Dear Boris,

Thank you for praising Bulgarian wine, famous worldwide, and about which a lot of stories have been written, but this pretty one in the time of coronavirus is unique and maybe unforgettable...

The beginning

Continuing with the Bulgarian Embassy’s story in the time marked by coronavirus, it might seem strange to you, but the Bulgarian Embassy, following the news from Wuhan, China, reported in Sofia in late-January that a special “postal regime” should be introduced – without direct physical contact – for consular visa requests from Asian citizens who needed to travel to Bulgaria.

And the first protective masks, gloves and disinfectants for the team were purchased immediately at that very moment. The shocking news from Italy in February made it clear that Europe would not be spared. It was a matter of time and, of course, of the reaction in Europe.

It was obvious we had to change our entire daily life: “No visas, no meetings, no handshaking, no hugs, no kisses, no coffees, no mall shopping, no beauty salons, no sport events, no parties – a new life...” This is what the team from the Bulgarian Embassy in Podgorica got in my instructions as ambassador regarding the coronavirus situation at our regular work meeting on 9 March 2020, just after a state of emergency was introduced in Bulgaria. It was clear – it was only a matter of time until coronavirus appeared in Montenegro.

I tried to direct the attention of the team to how serious the situation was globally, although in Montenegro at that time there were still no cases of the virus, but “we will be definitely hit and we have to be well prepared and protected, because this will affect our daily lives”.

Having experience of two political systems – before 1989 I lived in a country from the Eastern Bloc, and since 2007 in a EU Member State – as well as the harsh experience of the severe crisis in the 1990s in Bulgaria during the transition, I understood that a new and, this time, a global crisis was coming, but I did not realise how hard it would be and that we had to learn to live in a “new normality”.



On 9 March 2020, the day after International Women’s Day, which in Montenegro is celebrated as a real holiday and women receive flowers and gifts even the days afterwards – me too – the people on the streets were enjoying the first days of spring, and in Bulgaria the first cases of coronavirus were being registered, the first very strong measures of social isolation were being introduced and all public events were cancelled. This was only a week after we had celebrated some great occasions: on 28 February the official visit of the Montenegrin Prime Minister took place in Sofia, followed by a wonderful exhibition at the National Parliament of Montenegro called “Bulgaria and Montenegro on the map of Europe”. And on 3 March we celebrated our National Day with a glorious concert and about 180 guests in the Hilton Hotel.

Six days later we had to change everything, this is how fast the situation had changed. Unbelievable! From now on, standard diplomacy, our daily work, our communications, and our personal lives must become more virtual than real. For a month? Or two? Nobody knew. “Social inclusion” – our favourite EU policy, public diplomacy and cooperation, which we promote so much – now seems so outdated. And we must do the very opposite – “social exclusion”, closed offices, cancelled events.

EU ambassadors and virtual diplomacy....

Virtual diplomacy. Is it possible? Not only possible but, looking back, I must say highly effective. We, the EU ambassadors in Montenegro have always had very close relations with each other, but now we have realised that we can work even better in 24-hour-online mode in the WhatsApp group, established within a few minutes on 15 March. In time, I realised it was not only a group of ambassadors, it was a group of friends, it was a real "dream team".



And the EU decision-making process started immediately, virtual and in real time. The first online donor conference was successfully held in this way and afterwards the EU demonstrated its solidarity, providing Montenegro with great financial support in the fight against coronavirus. €3 million to alleviate the immediate needs of Montenegro's health system by supporting the supply of medical devices and personal equipment. And for mitigation of the negative effects of the coronavirus crises, another €50 million to bring back the socio-economic balance in Montenegro. This great sign

of solidarity was officially declared on behalf of the EU ambassadors' group by Aivo Orav, and was an occasion for celebration with Bulgarian wine granted to all the members of the WhatsApp group by the Bulgarian Embassy. The Bulgarian government also reacted immediately and offered support for the health system via official Bulgarian aid for Montenegro with specific projects which the embassy suggested be financed immediately: namely a project for the improvement of respiratory health in Montenegro at the Pulmonary Hospital near Nikšić.

It was not just a sign of solidarity from Bulgaria towards Montenegro, it was more of a friendly gesture from their Bulgarian neighbours.

As an embassy, we had prepared an extremely ambitious programme for 2020 – including exhibitions, concerts, book readings, ballet, round tables, political discussions and all kind of social events, which you can imagine. I, as an ambassador, could not believe that everything was to be cancelled. The hard preparation work from the last six months... what a pity! Bulgaria was due to take part for the first time in the International Tourism Fair in Budva. A big group from the tourist offices of several Bulgarian municipalities had registered and were due to arrive and participate at the national stand to promote Bulgaria from 19 to 21 March in Budva – cancelled.

A tour by an exceptionally talented Bulgarian folk ensemble to Montenegro and an exhibition for 24 May – the day of the Cyrillic alphabet – cancelled. Etc. etc....

For the end of April, for example, just within sight of 9 May – Europe Day – we had planned a wonderful exhibition presenting, with a brilliant sense of humour, the mentality and cultural characteristics of the people from the Balkans – "The Grandmasters of the Balkan Caricature". What could we do? In kind cooperation with our enthusiastic colleagues from the EU Info Centre the first online exhibition was "officially opened" on 22 April. And I appeared in my greeting video to the public wearing a mask and gloves! A wise man once said "where there is a will, there is a way" and we could not cancel art... "There are no barriers to art", as we know, and thanks to the innovative young people from the EU Info Centre and



my team – working as one in this case – we prepared the first online exhibition in Montenegro, unlimited in terms of time, place and space.

It seems this new virtual diplomacy gives us new opportunities which we have to explore from today onwards and maybe it will somehow optimise our lifestyle. So yes, it works, virtual diplomacy! It should be classified in future lectures for young diplomats as one of the successful and effective types of diplomacy, achieving fast and concrete result in emergency situations, without the "blah, blah, blah" and the unnecessary politeness and courtesy.

Implementation of measures in Montenegro from 13 March...

A look at our Montenegrin partners. On 13 March, the Montenegrin government introduced the first measures, although there were still no registered cases of the COVID-19 virus in Montenegro.

I could not imagine that these cheerful people, who constantly greet each other and embrace and kiss as part of their mentality, would be so disciplined and would

strictly observe and respect the measures, not only of distancing, but also of isolation and evening restrictions. And this impressed me so much. And of course, the heartfelt attention and concern that sounded from all my Montenegrin friends who thought about me, the team, and Bulgaria during this period. That remains an unforgettable, fond memory!

Stories

In any case, we will remember this period as a unique one with a lot of stories. In February, I received a message from a friend in Germany sending me information about Europe during the time of the Spanish influenza, and how ordinary peasants, by putting up ordinary peeled onions, managed to protect themselves from the pandemic of this deadly virus that claimed the lives of millions in Europe, far more than the victims of the First World War. And to everyone's surprise at the beginning of March, in all the embassy's rooms and mostly in the consular unit, to the amazement of the team, I ordered onions to be put up in a special place. I leave it to your imagination to think how the aroma of the team members mingled with the strong smell of onions, and what a combination it was! But I'm sure that had its meaning. The stories are very strange and different from one another.

My deputy's birthday fell on 18 March. There had been big preliminary plans for this celebration. Instead of this, she had to stand in one room in isolation, and every member of the team, separately, from the door two metres away, greeted her, and the gifts were left in advance on the table in the guest room, and she opened them wearing gloves and a mask. There were no hugs or kisses, but there was a strong feeling of friendship, there were sparkling, heartfelt looks and wishes spoken through the masks. And maybe they were more real and remain unforgettable. Easter, during which we could not see our relatives, who were two hours away



by plane, nor hug them nor say our greetings in person. This strange Easter, in which, according to Bulgarian tradition, people normally exchange eggs and cakes for health, was "celebrated" by the members of my team in the open air at the monument to King Nikola with two metres of social distancing, greeting each other with masks and gloves. Funny and incredibly sad, but memorable.

So, when all this is over and we disinfect not only our hands but also clean our brains and our souls, maybe we will appreciate the little things in life, to be and stay together and enjoy these things more than ever. I have learned to enjoy and to appreciate very much the Skype breakfasts, lunches and dinners with my husband!

My regular phone and Viber connections with friends and colleagues from Europe and worldwide were intensified and enriched a lot. But, speaking frankly, being far from family, from my husband, from my children and grandchildren, I am suffering and missing my life before corona. And my hope to celebrate Easter with my family in marvellous Austria was just a dream, a beautiful dream, which I do believe will become reality. Next year? Who knows?

Dear Anna,

With my personal story connected with Austria I would like to hand the baton over to you as the Ambassador of Austria to Montenegro to continue with your story!

| My Corona Diary

Listening to Meglena's story and her intention to celebrate Orthodox Easter in Austria reminds me of similar plans we had for Catholic Easter.

Tuesday, 3 March: Hurray! I have just purchased tickets from Podgorica to Vienna for my husband and me for 8 April. Although my job implies that I have to spend most of my professional career abroad, one thing is sure: we have always spent Christmas and Easter together as a family, not only with our two children but also their many uncles, aunts, and cousins. I also added two big suitcases to the tickets to be able to bring some bottles of Montenegrin wine, some delicious prosciutto and homemade chocolates for the big celebration. Great, we will see our kids for the first time since Christmas.

Friday, 6 March: Debate with students and young professionals on "Youth, Education and EU Integration" at the EU Info Centre with the Mayor of Podgorica, my German counterpart, and representatives of the EU Delegation and the Ministry of Sports and Youth. Once again I am impressed by the excellent education and language skills of young Montenegrins. All their questions seem well considered and relevant for the future of the young generation. It is a pleasure to enter into discussion with them.

Thursday, 12 March: Celebration on the occasion of the Day of National Teams of Montenegro in Hotel Hilton. In Austria the first COVID-19 cases have been registered and discussions on the implementation of restrictive measures are ongoing. Is it wise to participate in such a big event? I decide to ignore my doubts; a good decision, I was not aware that Montenegro had such a large number of top sportsmen and women in so many sport disciplines.



Friday, 13 March: One of the many delegations from Vienna arrives. The expert heading the delegation called me the day before to ask about the situation with coronavirus in Montenegro. "Do not worry," I tell her, "no cases in Montenegro, life is normal!" We spend a nice evening in the residence with delicious food and Montenegrin red wine. The "Women without Borders" delegation plans to stay for a week, they explain to me their interesting project called "Mother Schools 2020", a global Parenting for Peace programme which aims to prevent violent extremism. I recommend them several contacts and NGOs in Montenegro. They are all in Montenegro for the first time and are excited about the many interviews they have organised.

At the same time the situation gets more serious in Austria. Restrictive measures are to be introduced starting from 16 March. The first Austrian Airlines flights have been cancelled. Should I advise my delegation to return to Vienna immediately or can they finish their project as planned? I feel that I have to help them to assess the situation and take the right decision. But what is the right decision?

Saturday, 14 March: In the morning I was informed that the flight from Vienna to Podgorica was cancelled. It becomes quite clear to me that I have to advise my Austrian guests to return to Vienna as soon as possible.

Sunday, 15 March: At 6 a.m. the Austrian delegation members have already arrived at the airport in Golubovci and manage to buy tickets to Vienna via Belgrade. They arrive safely there in the afternoon.

What will all this mean for the many Austrian tourists in Montenegro? How will they be able to return? How will I be able to assist them? The embassy receives the first instruction to identify all Austrian nationals in Montenegro and to repatriate them. Will I meet the challenge? I realise that now is the time to act rapidly and with common sense, not to worry about formalities and to be pragmatic. The embassy receives more than 20 calls on the embassy's emergency number.

I have to answer questions such as: "Should I return to Austria where the virus has spread or rather stay in Montenegro?", "Are the borders with Croatia open?", "Can we return to Austria with a rental car?", "Can I transit through Montenegro from Albania, my wife is eight months pregnant and I have a small child with me? I am in the car and close to the Montenegrin border..."

All these uncertainties also concern our daughter who is studying in Edinburgh. I am worried about the attitude of the UK in addressing the pandemic, which is so different to the Austrian approach. Therefore I advise her to return to Austria as soon as possible. She already has a plane ticket for the 29th, but buys one for 19 March. But things are changing hourly and I learn from the Austrian news that a

landing ban might be introduced for flights coming from the UK. Quickly we buy a third plane ticket to be “on the safe side”. Only a few minutes later Austria decides to implement a landing ban for aircraft arriving from the UK by midnight on 17 March.

That means that all three plane tickets are unusable! “Be quick,” I beg my son who is the IT specialist in our family. “Buy a plane ticket for your sister as fast as possible.” He manages to purchase one of the last tickets from Gatwick to Vienna on 16 March, where our daughter lands at 9 p.m., three hours before the flight ban takes effect.

Tuesday, 17 March: The first corona case has been diagnosed in Montenegro, restrictive measures also start here. The ambassadors in Montenegro form a WhatsApp group, a good method to exchange information speedily and efficiently.

Thursday, 19 March 2020: My LUCKY DAY: My colleague’s morning telephone conference with our defence attaché in Belgrade who is also responsible for Montenegro:

Defence attaché: “This morning there will be a flight on a Hercules C-130 military aircraft of the Austrian Armed Forces taking EUFOR troops from Linz to Sarajevo.” Consul: “YES, that’s great. This flight must stop over in Podgorica on its way back as we have several Austrian citizens who need to be repatriated. We will hijack the Hercules.”

“This is too good to be true,” I am thinking.



Within three hours we have managed to get permission for the military aircraft to land. Simultaneously we have to inform 19 Austrian citizens who are all over Montenegro, explaining them the gravity of the situation and that this would be a unique chance to return to Austria if they can make it to Golubovci airport within the next three hours. The Austrian Defence Ministry requires all the passengers to undergo a medical check before boarding the aircraft. So this must be organised as well.

I arrive at the airport at 3 p.m. sharp to accompany the group of Austrians. The ambulance of the embassy’s doctor is already on the spot. Many of the passengers have arrived as well. Each passenger passes through the medical check-up. Soon after arriving on the runway we can see the Austrian Hercules approaching Podgorica. What a success! We really had succeeded in diverting a military aircraft so easily. For my colleagues and me this means that we were one of the first Austrian Embassies worldwide able to repatriate almost all their Austrian nationals. What a great feeling when this flight took off. And I was tempted to fly with them to Austria, recalling how exciting it is to fly on a Hercules. As a young diplomat I had this unforgettable experience when I flew from Addis Ababa to Djibouti.



Austria owes Montenegro particular thanks for the great professional support we had, not only from the authorities, but also for the personal engagement of all the individuals involved.

Friday, 20 March: Austrian ambassadors worldwide form a WhatsApp group to be able to communicate easily. I realise how serious the situation is in some of the

countries and how many tourists are requesting to be repatriated. There are 50,000 Austrians abroad! Borders closed, police roadblocks, quarantine regulations introduced from one hour to the other, new health regulations, curfews, and these are only few of the challenges the ambassadors are facing.

Sunday, 22 March: Call from the corona emergency desk office in Vienna at midnight. "We are sorry to have to inform you that one of the passengers flying to Linz on 19 March tested positive for COVID-19 in Austria. Please take the necessary precautionary measures." I start to reconstruct the situation at the airport; I was in contact with the group for more than three hours. I respected all the safety measures and did not shake hands or get too close to anyone. But in any case now I have to protect my team. So I decide to adhere to two weeks of self-isolation hoping that no symptoms will occur. My husband has to join me – as collateral damage. This further means rushing to the office immediately before my colleagues arrive on Monday and "securing" all the things I would need to install a home office: laptop, addresses, written notes, etc.

Monday, 23 March: First day in self-isolation. Where should I install my desk? The desk available in my daughter's room is tiny. The laptop's screen is too small, no appropriate office chair at home; two hours of work and I get terrible back pains.... From the first day I realise that I will miss my beautiful office. The light, the view, the functionality, the stunning view towards the Kuči Mountains on one side and Lovćen on the other.

Wednesday, 25 March: Unity and solidarity are being mentioned numerous times these days. I am convinced that unity and solidarity can and must be shown on different levels and in different ways. Every individual can show solidarity by observing the measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Also politics and society as a whole are being addressed. And in this regard I am proud that the Austrian Parliament has adopted the first laws to fight the pandemic unanimously and across party lines. The EU showed its solidarity towards Montenegro at an early stage of the crisis by announcing the provision of €3 million for immediate help to the health sector and €50 million as a long-term response for the health sector, the economy and businesses. In addition, the first EU aid deliveries arrive.

26–28 March: Although we have a beautiful house with a nice garden, self-isolation feels very awkward. I miss terribly my Gorica Park walks, observing nature in the spring, riding my bicycle to get to the office or just to buy a loaf of bread. But after a few days I come to terms with this new situation. I enjoy what is enjoyable and I realise how many things I can enjoy NOW, at this very moment. I think my first key learning point from the corona crisis is: "Enjoy the here and now", "Hic et nunc". Suddenly I am more aware of the birds singing in my garden, the different flowers

and trees blossoming... I miss my friends and my family but I find new ways to have them around. I realise how lucky I am regardless of the existing challenges. And I make a plan: I will not only keep in contact with my kids and closest friends, but I decide that every day I will contact a person for whom I know that this period is especially difficult. And I will call that person and take time to listen to him/her and show my empathy. Many such examples come to my mind: that acquaintance of mine whose daughter is waiting for a heart transplant in the UK. How will they cope with the situation? Or my fatherly friend in Toulon, France who now lives in a retirement home and cannot be visited by his wife and family for many weeks? Or the friend who has just launched a start-up? What about my school friend who is dependent on carers from Romania to assist her elderly parents? Calling all those persons one by one and taking time to listen to their problems and fears was a very rewarding experience for me. And showing my compassion made us both happy for a moment.

Sunday, 29 March: Ten days have passed since my encounter with the person who tested COVID-19 positive. According to epidemiologists this is the right time to do a COVID-19 test. Again the embassy's doctor is of invaluable help. He organises everything and in the afternoon an ambulance from the Podgorica Health Centre arrives at our residence. A young doctor and his assistant step out of the car and start to prepare for the testing. What an effort for the two doctors! They have to put on the protective gear including gloves, face masks and, above everything, full body protection. Not a single part of their bodies is uncovered... This scene reminds me of the famous movie "Outbreak" with Dustin Hoffman... Thereafter, without entering the house, they do a swab test from the nose and throat. Everything is done very quickly and efficiently. Hopefully we will soon be able to leave the house again.

Monday, 30 March: Good news: the COVID-19 tests for my husband Nikola and me are negative. So the self-isolation period can come to an end soon.

The embassy's work is reorganised. We are working in two teams to reduce the risk and to maintain the full operation of the embassy at the same time. We decide to work with one team from 8 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. and with the other team from 12.30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Some employees are working exclusively from home. But more and more I miss the contact with my colleagues and friends; after all, we diplomats are "social animals" and how to replace this personal exchanging of views, this encouragement, enjoying nice moments and having fun together? The WhatsApp group of the ambassadors in Montenegro helps in this situation. And again a new lesson learnt: we cannot see each other in person, but we are constantly – and maybe even more than before – in contact with each other and somehow united in our isolation.

We not only exchange very important professional information on this platform, but also encouraging messages, recommendations, experience, the Catholic and Orthodox Easter greetings, jokes and funny videos... All of this is at least partly a replacement for the personal contacts I miss so much.

Wednesday, 8 April: No entries in my diary for a while. But today is an important day as my husband and I should have left for Austria to meet up with our family. Once again I realise the gravity of the situation. When will I be able to see my children? How are they coping with this situation in Vienna? These thoughts make me sad. Skype, WhatsApp and Viber are no replacement for hugging your daughter or son! I try not to lose courage...

Sunday, 12 April: Easter Sunday. I hide Easter eggs in our garden, the kids look for them via WhatsApp.....and behave childishly, as if they were 10 and 12..., and in fact they are 20 and 22 years of age. They seem to be suffering less than their parents, which is somehow comforting.

I watch the "urbi et orbi" ceremony in Rome, the Pope's Easter blessing in – for the first time in centuries – in an almost empty Saint Peter's Cathedral. I realise once again that we are experiencing truly exceptional times. I feel that we will always remember the spring of 2020. These difficult times will certainly pass. And we will learn some lessons. Some of them are very obvious: the greatest wealth in life is health. Solidarity is more important than profit maximisation. A globalised world needs a global response to the pandemic.

Saturday, 25 April: No entry in my diary for a longer period. I miss nature so much and we decide to take a hike in the Kuči Mountains. How wonderful Montenegro's nature is!



Monday, 27 April: I have just heard on Austrian TV that a solution has been found for the very urgently needed nurses to travel from Romania to Austria on a special train. This will be a big relief for many families as well as for one of my old school friends. Many Romanian nurses taking care of elderly people in Austria will now be able to return home to their families and will be replaced by colleagues. Another problem solved. Things are getting better!

Ferdinand is the next story teller and I am sure he is well aware of his fellow citizens' contribution to Austrian society. But now I am curious about what he is going to tell us!

| Isolated, not alone...

"Alone we can do so little; Together we can do so much"

Helen Keller

Thank you so much, Anna!

I remember with great pleasure my return from a wonderful winter holiday Christmas including a lovely story of a family reunion, a tale of faith and devotion, the first meeting with my colleagues and friends, discussions and impressions from the holidays and how nice it is to be with your family, and how difficult it is to fight the extra weight. It doesn't get any better than this.

Probably each of us could say that the year has started with new challenges and that it is significantly different from every other one. Mine is different for sure. It started as I had planned, but after that it went to another direction, one that dictates a new situation that we had not hoped for. At least not now and not in these proportions.

At the beginning, everything seemed naive and distant to me, but I began to realise that I would have to confine myself to my four walls and perhaps the garden, and continue my life online for a while.

As well as family, business, and friends. Still, I am creating a life according to the new rules dictated by COVID-19 and am taking comfort (consoling myself) with the Latin phrase "vis maior..." trying to convince myself that the virtual power of family, friendship, work and life is almost as possible as physical power.

As the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, meaning that I have the longest professional and real-life experience in Montenegro, it seems to me that I could say a lot on the subject of Montenegrin-Romanian and pan-European and Euro-Atlantic relations and Montenegro's progress, since I am a privileged witness of the renaissance of this country and its people. However, this situation has caught us all and we are all "in the same boat".

The messages of unity, friendship, and fellowship that I have promoted during my mandate, and, of course, during these quarantine days, in all permissible ways and by all means. It just seems to me that I have, along with my colleagues and Montenegrin friends, a common invisible enemy – COVID-19.

It seems to me that we have fought using the strongest weapons possible, in

addition to medicine, hygiene, and discipline, with togetherness, love, empathy, cooperation and mutual assistance.

Now, if I can continue, it was good that we returned to ourselves, dedicated ourselves to our family, home, ourselves and some old/new habits, re-evaluated some forgotten traditions, repressed memories, found lost hobbies or objects, learned something new, watched movies, read books, listened to music, reminded ourselves of old friendships, heard almost forgotten voices, people; that we were happy and sad alone, without people, but we didn't need COVID-19 to remind us to all stick together, not in this cruel way...



No, absolutely NOT! We did not need to be reminded of all this, in a way, although every day from the TV screen I have been encouraged by the National Coordination Team of Montenegro, with its professional team, and the Montenegrin authorities, who have been acting responsibly and operationally throughout the period, giving the profession a good name.

For the first time in my life, I celebrated Easter alone, with my doggies, Hana and Mara, in my residence. I don't want to lament, but – ALONE! My wife is in Romania, my parents are also, and I have a sister in the Netherlands, and we are all alone because we are not together. We do not need holidays to bring us together but, because of our professions and destinations, we really look forward to the holidays not only because of the messages they carry and the tradition they represent, but also because we gather in the family home and have a shared appreciation that we are all together, healthy and happy.



I gathered my Montenegrin family into a WhatsApp group and our discussions, ideas and exchanges moved there, and our meetings were replaced by video calls and ingenious jokes that made the situation more bearable.

As the dean, I have to take care of my diplomatic family and see and hear them at least in the "WhatsApp" variant, to know that they are well and healthy, but also that we are ready to act immediately and now, if necessary.

After numerous political discussions since the beginning of the year and the adoption of the Law on Religion Freedom, the continuation of the boycott by the opposition, I followed the government's efforts to continue the dynamic EU progress under the new presidency – this time Croatia's. It was also one of the last events I attended with Prime Minister Dusko Markovic when Croatia officially assumed the Presidency of the EU Council.

However, in such a short time – from the beginning of the year until the epidemic – quite a number of events were planned and realised, and the year promised a serious dynamic and an abundance of content. The dinner I organised in February in honour of my fellow ambassadors was one of the last events I remember.

At the end of February, I agreed with Ambassador Orav to organise an EU HoMs meeting with Health Minister Kenan Hrapovic on the preparation and management of the coronavirus epidemic. The normal development and sequence of events did not in any way presage the black clouds on the horizon. They were neither in our plans nor on our agendas, bearing in mind the optimism and momentum with which we began the new year 2020.

Many other challenges and topics awaited us. An election year, numerous meetings and talks, the whole election process. But we continue to live and work from the office, from home, almost "tête à tête", but by every means.

I try to make each day fresher and with some tasks completed, with the same dynamic and established practice. I start my day with exercises, a healthier breakfast, and work from the embassy and from home, with regular contact with my fellow ambassadors – this is already part of my daily routine – and with regular contact with Minister Darmanovic and the Chief Negotiator, Mr. Alexander Drljevic, and to exchange with other officials information and strategies on assistance, support, joint action and combat, the possible transferring of citizens, etc.

In this situation, along with the professionals and the officials, the diplomatic missions proved to be effective with their professionalism, regular duties and availability, as well as their quick response, but also their operability, and they were the port of rescue for the citizens they represent and who addressed them, but also for other people and institutions.

I fill my day with some good books, music, but also regular sports activities that I try to practice, for a healthy mind and body... I ride a bike a bit in the garden and sit for a beer, also in the garden, so I practice jogging a bit in the same yard, do some gym in the salon, and walk to the living room but also to the kitchen, despite trying to visit this last destination as rarely as possible.

I have also tried my culinary skills and satisfied my taste and appetite but not those one of my puppies, which have made it clear to me that they do not like my quarantine cuisine. I'll have to change something.



I only regret that my tennis racket has been hanging lonely on the wall for a while, and this year, before the viral clouds, we had a lot of sun and clear skies, with a little snow, so my skis and winter equipment were packed up until next winter...

However, my passion for my old-timers is unquestionable, and I spend my time grooming and glossing over them, and no one can dispute the love that I have had for years.

Although there were not many Romanian nationals who needed assistance, transfer or service, we owe a great debt of gratitude to the Montenegrin authorities, our friends who dealt with the situation and problems so quickly and promptly, that everyone could get to their homes as quickly as possible, to their loved ones.

Solidarity was shown in the action especially among the colleagues from the embassies of EU countries that had a very large number of citizens on the territory of Montenegro, but also from the embassies of other countries that had to be included, as transit through their countries to the homes and families of our citizens also took place.

The embassies of EU countries and the entire diplomatic corps became even more compact, same as their will and desire to help each other, but Montenegro also received realistic outlines. We will forever remember these difficult times that brought us closer together, but also I cannot hide the sadness and bitterness because of the great number of victims and the great emotion and pain that we all have to share in order to ease the families who have lost their loved ones. And these are not the messages of a career diplomat, intellectual or distant observer, they are the messages of a simple and honest man, an emotional being aware of the importance of community, cooperation and mutual assistance, in both good times and bad.

At this moment, while I am writing this, the voices of the doctors can be heard from the television, who have been cheering us on but also warning us that it is already the third day without a new case, and my emotions are mixed inside me, with a thousand questions but also real hopes. Did it have to be this way and to this extent? How and what next?

I am happy because it seems that Montenegro has won and our joint fight against COVID-19 has been relatively successful. And I am sad because every life is precious and it has taken so many lives from our planet in such a short time and made so many families unhappy. Now I am proud to look again at the winning team: the doctors, the National Coordination Team and the Montenegrin authorities in the upcoming procedures of loosening the measures, which I hope will be successful at every stage.

Do not blame me and do not think that I am selfish for the moment if I confess that I am starting to think now about the beautiful Montenegrin coast, the Adriatic Sea, the green mountains of Zabljak and Durmitor, the spring smells of Lake Skadar and Podgorica's strong sun (heat), which I am eagerly awaiting in June and July, and that I already have some plans for August, which will not, I hope, be disrupted by some new inconvenience. But if something happens, we stand ready ALL TOGETHER.

During this time, which was also a time of observation, reflection and introspection, I think we have all seen, analysed and identified priorities and once again shown solidarity in both our private and professional lives and we have seen that no man and no state can be an isolated island in itself.

I admit that I have always preferred laurel wreaths over crowns and power. So I always believed that this "crown" (I mention that corona means crown in Latin, Italian and Spanish) would fall. And it has fallen, apparently. It's cheerful again. The clouds are waning, far from the horizon, I hope forever.

Or as the great Njegos said:

*"...send cheering light over Montenegro,
Remove from it the lightning and thunder,
The turbulent and hail-carrying clouds!"*

and in the original:

*„...provedri mi više Gore Crne,
uklon' od nje munje i gromove
i smučeni oblak gradonosni..."*

In the end, after all the aforementioned, every praise is deserved by the citizens, with their discipline and faith in professional people, in the people who have watched and cared for our lives, without sparing their own, away from their families and outside regular working times. To all of them and to all of you, a great medal for civic courage and my deep veneration.

I have used my long stay in Montenegro to reach as deeply as possible into its culture, tradition, essence and myth, through its greats, poets, writers... That cultural exchange in those times and now, the common moments of our histories and peoples, our migrations and permeation, always and personally delighted me, regardless of the fact that their identification and promotion was a mandatory part of my diplomatic mission.

Awareness of the similarities of our customs, spirit, mentality, and toponyms through the former presence of the Vlachs and their assimilation into Montenegrin life, their first settlements in the Cetinje karst, the names of the areas of Bistrica and Bihor both here and in my country, numerous connections, diplomatic and historical, meetings between King Nikola and King Carol, writers and travel writers but, above all, the one who tried to live all of this abovementioned and to be printed in books from the first printing machine in Cetinje and then in Targovishte in Romania – the great printer Macari, who connected us forever. With a vivid word and written word.

Well, this idea of having our lives in written form and in this way will make us permanently connected to the memory of our common quarantine days, separated but together, and at this moment I already have a picture in my mind of me, sometime in old age, smiling and with some thin nostalgia, sitting in a chair, flipping through the pages of this book of ours: our lives and our shared memories. There is much that could be written here, it would become a true “Chronicle of Montenegro” and would be a good signpost for new, emerging young diplomats, but also a good lesson in civic courage, responsibility, cooperation, devotion, and respect. And friendship. Without this last one, our job would be unemotional, technical, mechanical, routine, without soul...

It has been an amazing experience and a great pleasure working with such an inspiring and dedicated team, with people who are committed to doing the right thing. I have not only enjoyed my work but I also enjoyed spending time with such amazing people. It has been a journey that I’m going to cherish all my life and I will miss working with all of you.

I will remember forever that we were a true diplomatic family, representing our countries with dignity and respecting our host country, promoting true values, and we were privileged to carry out our missions in such a beautiful country as Montenegro, connected, working hard, always with new ideas, projects and enthusiasm, sincerely rejoicing, laughing, understanding. And lucky enough to meet each other.

It is said to be a lasting relationship when you can have long conversations with someone without a single word being spoken, when you understand each other even when you are silent. It seems to me that we have always spoken and acted when needed, and that our understanding has reached that level that we understand each other even when we remain silent.

It will be hard to say goodbye. I never liked the word “Goodbye” or “Adieu”. I don’t even like “Zbogom”. I much prefer “Welcome”, “Bienvenu” or “Dobro došli”,

because you can never leave people who mean a lot to you and have marked a part of your life. Wherever you travel, whatever destination you go to, wherever our roads lead, we travel together, you carry them in beautiful memories, in your head, in your heart and soul...

My deepest gratitude to all of you.

“Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity”

Robert Schuman

My dear friend Aivo, I’m looking forward to reading your story...



A friend in need is a friend indeed



Many thanks to Milica Ražnatović for translation.

