The New York Times Magazine https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/magazine/the-making-of-a-president.html

FEATURE

Welcome to Liberland, the World's Newest Country (Maybe)

Travels with Vit Jedlicka, the would-be founding father of a libertarian paradise.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Aug. 11, 2015

1. The Proclamation

Along the western bank of the Danube, more or less halfway between Zagreb and Belgrade, there rests in historic obscurity a three-square-mile teardrop of no man's land. It is an artifact of a border dispute of long standing, and neither Serbia nor Croatia expresses a desire to rule over this unprepossessing Gibraltar-size property. The land, marshy and prone to seasonal inundation, is choked with unregulated scrub, with here and there the lone tongue of a poplar or the gentle shag of a willow. The only road is a rutted single-lane dirt track, the only existing dwelling a flimsy hunting hovel, its provenance unknown.

The absence of governmental authority on this land is due to the manipulated course of the Danube itself. By the late 19th century, the Danube was accepted as the natural border between the regions — at that point still under Austro-Hungarian control — that would become Croatia and Serbia. There, however, the river's path was tortuous and difficult for larger boats to navigate, so engineering work was undertaken to smooth the snaking flow. The straightened Danube was a vast improvement for international riverine transport, but in the process, four large uncontiguous bulges of Croatia became stranded alone on the Serbian side, and one small pocket of Serbia, on what was now the far bank, became attached to the Croatian mass.

This latter pocket, which local residents call Gornja Siga, is the no man's land in question. When the two countries were neighboring republics of Yugoslavia, these orphaned riverbank plots were of little concern, but since the 1990s they have presented an intractable problem. The stranded pieces of Croatia now contiguous with Serbia are some 10 times larger, in aggregate, than the rather trifling portion of Serbia now joined to Croatia; Serbia has been all too glad to assume ownership of its expanded territory, but Croatia sees the situation as unacceptable. In light of this ongoing disagreement, for Croatia to accept Gornja Siga would constitute a de facto recognition of the Serbian view of the border and a relinquishing of Croatia's claim to the more considerable, though equally mosquito-infested and uninspiring, portions of Serbian bank.

And yet Gornja Siga has come, over the last few months, to assume an outsize role in the imagination of many — not only in Europe, but also in the Middle East and in the United States. Its mere existence as a land unburdened by deed or ruler has become cause for great jubilation. There are few things more uplifting than the promise that we might start over, that we might live in the early days of a better nation. All the most recent states — South Sudan, East Timor, Eritrea — were carved from existing sovereignties in the wake of bitter civil wars. Here, by contrast, is a truly empty parcel. What novel society might be accomplished in a place like this, with no national claim or tenant? Such were the thoughts that had for some time inflamed the spirit of Vit Jedlicka, a 31-year-old Czech politician who traveled to the land earlier this year and, in broad daylight, planted a new flag in its unstable soil.

It was not the first tract he had considered. Previously, Jedlicka had rejected as too small a plot on the Slovenian-Croatian border, and as too inconvenient, dangerous and arid a dominion between Sudan and Egypt, which was subsequently declared the Kingdom of North Sudan by an American named Jeremiah Heaton, who traveled there by caravan to declare his daughter a princess, though his nation remained unrecognized by any other world government. What instantly differentiated Jedlicka's aspirations from the minor follies of Heaton and other

micronational leaders — of Flandrensis, the Dominion of Melchizedek, North Dumpling Island — is that he had stumbled upon acreage of what may genuinely be unclaimed land.

And so, on April 13, 2015, he and his exploratory committee read, in English and Czech, the following proclamation:

We, the members of the Preparatory Committee of the State of the Free Republic of Liberland, issue this proclamation:

We, by virtue of the right to self-determination, right of discovery and the right of self-governance, proclaim the existence of the Free Republic of Liberland. The Free Republic is a free and independent country; and that as a free and independent state, the Free Republic of Liberland shall have the full power to defend itself, conclude peace, form alliances, establish commerce, and enjoy any other rights which sovereign states have. As a member of the family of nations, we pledge to abide by international laws that bind all states in existence.

2. The President

Jedlicka had long dreamed of such a proclamation. An avowed small-government libertarian and euroskeptic, he searched for two years for suitable territory on which to establish Liberland. The man he intermittently calls minister of information technology eventually discovered the plot via consultation of the ''terra nullius'' entry on Wikipedia. According to the homestead principle, as well as the rules stipulated by the Montevideo Convention of 1933, Jedlicka felt the land was technically his after the flag-planting rite, carried out by Jedlicka, his girlfriend and a college friend. Though he claims he did not seek political office himself, and he in fact recused himself from the initial round of voting, Jedlicka was immediately elected the nation's first president by a vote of two to zero.

In the days that followed his proclamation, President Jedlicka was unsurprised and unembarrassed by the dismissals of the international community; he knew recognition would come with time, once the land was properly settled and his

intentions were made clear. The day after he declared independence, the Serbian government released a communiqué that declared the birth of the new nation to be a ''frivolous act'' that it was prepared to ignore. Croatia's official position was that it considered Liberland to be ''a joke.'' When Jedlicka, soon after his election, tried to approach the Croatian foreign minister in Zagreb to talk over the matter, he says her bodyguards blocked his advances, and she fled on foot.

The President is a sturdy man of thickening athletic build, with blond hair and a reddish blond goatee that diminishes up his high-colored cheeks into blond peach fuzz and then asserts itself anew as bright blond bushy eyebrows over long platinum lashes. He is a soft-spoken, gentle ruler, well mannered and with a schoolboyish eagerness to please. For the first three weeks after the flag-planting ceremony, he and his founding committee could come and go from Liberland as they liked. He spent most of his time at the first Liberlandian Embassy, in Prague, a terraced apartment in the sun atop a hillside not far from Wenceslas Square that is also his home. (Jedlicka enjoys the free and casual use of such terms as ''embassy,'' ''ambassador'' and ''minister,'' though in his more legalistic moods, he is careful to qualify all of them with the adjective ''future.'') Then, on weekends, he drove the eight hours to Liberland at his leisure.

By May 8, though, which Jedlicka had planned as Liberation Day, his initial command of the situation had begun to erode. Domestically, the legitimacy of his administration was being challenged by a group that called itself the Liberland Settlement Association. The L.S.A., led by a Danish Bitcoin trader living in Switzerland, took at face value the President's initial declaration of Liberland as a radical libertarian experiment: They moved quickly to settle Liberland themselves, on the premise that it was as much theirs as anyone's. On the foreign-policy front, meanwhile, the Croatians lost their patience with the increasingly aggressive and populous homesteaders and were denying entry to Liberland. Croatian police apprehended all Liberlanders who attempted to enter. Jedlicka was arrested and thrown in jail twice.

As a resilient type and an incurable optimist, the President was prepared to forget the various diplomatic affronts, and he quickly came to view the situation with Croatia in a positive light. He had learned from his extensive experience with social media that all attention is good attention and that even no attention could still be considered, at the very least, some attention.

"If they help us, they help us," he calmly explained to his ambassadorial team in Paris, which, along with most of his international supporters, took a rather dimmer view of the Croatian question than he did. "If they ignore us, they help us. If they harm us, they help us."

What further ballooned the President's spirits amid the national conflict was the great pneuma of world solidarity. Within just a few weeks, he had received, via the Internet, more than 330,000 applications for citizenship. He had posted the citizenship application online in two parts, an initial registration and a subsequent questionnaire. The questionnaire asked if the applicant had a criminal history; if he or she was in debt; was respectful of the property of others; was interested in investing money in Liberland; was a member of an extremist group; if he or she wanted to reside in Liberland itself, and, if so, how. About 40,000 of the initial registrants filled out the entire questionnaire. Final citizenship, for the moment, remained in Jedlicka's hands, and by June he had awarded only about 130 of what he was referring to (pending constitutional confirmation) as honorary citizenships, mostly to those who showed the greatest commitment to the cause. Liberland was, after all, a tiny nation; he feared his experiment would implode under the weight of too many citizens right away.



Terra Nullius | Because of a dispute over several pockets of land on the eastern bank of the Danube, neither Serbia nor Croatia will claim the territory upon which Liberland is trying to establish itself.

The President imagined that the majority of freedom-loving interest would come from those seeking greater freedom in general, as opposed to political freedoms in particular, so he had not necessarily expected that the overwhelming interest in his nation would come from North Africa and the Middle East. The greatest number of registrants — 82,167 — came from Egypt. After the Egyptians, the most represented were the Turks, who almost certainly included Syrian refugees; after that came Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The Czech Republic was seventh, followed by the United States. Then it was Iraq and Jordan. Jedlicka was both proud of this fact and slightly troubled by it. Still, his first principle was that Liberland should stand for the free movement of persons — with the exception of neo-Nazis, communists and convicted felons — as well as goods and capital; the question of political asylum, like many other small details of refined governance, could be safely worked out down the line, once the land was delivered from Croatian tyranny.

Jedlicka proclaimed that in Liberland "government will be banned except for three things: security, legal stuff and diplomacy." His more specific platform was in constant flux, as he fielded suggestions and emendations from his supporters, but the pillars of his libertarianism were minimal government, complete privatization of schools and health care, voluntary taxation in the form of crowdfunded state expenditures and cryptocurrency. On some issues, he felt that more discussion was needed before he could divine the proper position. There was, for example, the matter of immigration. On the one hand, the President believed in the free

movement of people; on the other, he understood that many fellow libertarians and euroskeptics believed that unrestricted immigration, particularly by economic migrants and refugees, placed too great a burden on a community created to beget wealth. On this and similar questions, he left the door open to spirited debate.

Before any of these questions could be addressed, however, he had to advance Part 1 of his plan for establishing Liberland as a sovereign state: namely, to gain physical control over the territory. This had already proved more perplexing than anticipated. The Croatians regarded Liberland as Serbian territory; if you crossed overland, from the Croatian side, you were thus performing an illegal international crossing outside an official border checkpoint. If you crossed by water from the Serbian side, the Croatian police were technically arresting someone for crossing from Serbia to Serbia. The L.S.A. decided that mass arrests would inevitably bring international attention to the Croatian infringement on Liberlandian sovereignty, but the President knew firsthand the discomfort of the Croatian prison, and he did not want any more of his future citizens to suffer there. His tactic would be diplomatic, and he had to that end sought an alliance with a Czech member of the European Parliament. If the Croatian police arrested the holder of a diplomatic passport upon debarkation, they would provoke an incident with global repercussions; Liberland was a voluntary signatory to various international treaties and charters, and the Croatian provocation would not go unnoticed. The diplomat, Tomas Zdechovsky, a Czech member of the European Parliament, had agreed to the mission, which was to be held on a weekend in early June. The diplomat would attempt a landing at Liberland — which for a month no Liberlandian citizen or supporter had done without immediate arrest — and see if the Croatian police were willing to subject themselves to the scrutiny of the international community.

3. The Diplomatic Mission

The first diplomatic mission to Liberland convened at the Prague airport's old Terminal 1. The flight would be aboard AIR-Liberland, which was not a state asset but a private enterprise contracted to provide regular air service to the Croatian

castle city of Osijek, about 20 miles overland from Liberland. Jedlicka had secured, by virtue of this arrangement, a lifetime of free personal transit on the airline. For him, the gesture comported with the dignity of his office, but to his detractors, it recalled the kind of crony capitalism that Liberland had been invented to circumvent.

Though not vain, the President is a man of probity, always conscious of the freshness and propriety of his appearance, and he wore a pressed azure suit with a slight shine; the diplomat wore a blazer with a sewn-in pocket square in maroon and blue. Zdechovsky describes himself as a politician, crisis manager, media analyst, author and poet; he is an acquaintance of Jedlicka's from the bruising small-town politics of central Bohemia, where they campaigned against each other in the last European parliamentary elections.

The aircraft was given an approach to Osijek over Liberland itself, and the President took a series of selfies with the sandy beach of Liberty Island, a soft crescent in the waters just off Liberland proper, in the background. It was his personal favorite geographical feature of his country. When he thinks of its sucrose shores, which had been host to his early presidential cavorting and now lay just beyond his reach, he is often moved to comment that ''Liberland is not just a tax paradise, it is also a paradise of a sort.''

On the drive from Osijek to the Croatian border checkpoint, Jedlicka fielded more than two dozen calls, answering each one with the phrase, ''Yes, this is the president.'' Many of his contacts had never reached a head of state with so little intermediatory fuss. The President had more than a hundred messages via at least six apps to respond to and had to restart his phone more than once when its circuits needed cooling. He had left his own reserve battery on AIR-Liberland, so he borrowed a white power brick from a Canadian-Slovak named Vince Pillar, one of the President's growing cadre of assistants, who moved through life in a cloud of sweet banana-chocolate vape exhaust; the cable was too short, so Jedlicka had to hold both the brick and his phone to his ear to talk. We drove by the land entrance to Liberland, which for weeks was blocked by a compact white police car.

After about an hour, Jedlicka's entourage arrived at the Liberlandian base camp, a sagging military tarpaulin stretched into a tent over a little field half-cleared of brambles on the Serbian side, about two miles upstream from Liberland itself. There were engine problems with Liberland's official boat, so the mission was delayed until another boat could be made available. On the far side of the river, 850 yards away, the peaks of squat orange-roofed Croatian houses crouched behind a large defensive embankment were visible. The thick berm had been built to protect against the river's flood season, as well as the mosquitoes that bred without regulation in the bogs. As we waited, someone shooed one of the wild boars, a prodigious sow running impressively free of governance, back into the thick brush.

In the distance we could at last spy a small metal dinghy speeding north from Liberland toward the camp. The men and women from the boat hopped ashore, the tallest of the five waving a Liberland flag the size of a bedsheet. He was a tall man of considerable bulk, with long, thick hair swept back underneath a fraying straw cap and a Guy Fawkes beard. He wore a thin white short-sleeved dress shirt with an open collar and a Rolex tight around his wrist; at his collar's notch he wore a gunmetal medallion, with bas-relief imagery of a skull wearing a top hat alongside a gun. This was Niklas Nikolajsen, the director of the Liberland Settlement Association.

A Danish software engineer who now describes himself as a Bitcoin broker, Nikolajsen founded the L.S.A. just days after Jedlicka declared the establishment of Liberland. He was suspicious of the President's self-declared presidency and decided to stake his own claim. The L.S.A. was incorporated in Switzerland as a limited-liability company, but it had quickly matured into an autonomous faction of political hooligans that now rivaled the President's authority.

Nikolajsen lived in Zug, a small mountainous canton of Switzerland. He paid a tax rate of only about 4 percent, perhaps one of the lowest rates in all of Europe. But what if, Nikolajsen asked himself, ''you could even improve on that?'' This wasn't just a selfish thought, though he wouldn't mind paying no taxes; it was also about all of those people who for some reason couldn't live in Switzerland. ''If you're sitting somewhere nice, you think, Well, you could spread freedom,'' he said. The

idea had particular appeal in the context of the Balkans, where a byzantine regulatory apparatus allowed for a flourishing lawlessness. ''In many European languages, when things are really bad and bureaucratic, you call it 'Balkan conditions,' and there's a reason for it,'' Nikolajsen said.

Despite the fragile entente between the President and the L.S.A., there were undercurrents of soft-power maneuvering on both sides, and the threat of schism remained. Earlier that month, the L.S.A. posted an aggressive piece on its website titled ''Liberland's Constitution: Is It Libertarian Enough?'' It subtly undermined Jedlicka at every turn, suggesting that he might not be as freethinking as advertised. Where the President had wanted a clause prohibiting public assembly that infringed upon the rights of others, the L.S.A. worried this would be used as a way of ''squashing protests.'' More alarming, the President seemed to imply, in an article relating to the denial of gun permits to the mentally ill, that there might be any procedure at all to license firearms. The L.S.A. objected, along similar ideological lines, to Jedlicka's provision that the poor might have the right to gratis legal representation.

Nikolajsen understood that the real promise and the real threat of Liberland was as a libertarian free-for-all: the Croatians feared an armed redoubt of brothels and meth labs, and they were right to worry. ''I created a hundred thousand shares of the company,'' he bragged to me. ''I sold them all out to investors in the first 40 hours. Everybody wanted a piece. I never sold anything so fast. That's when I knew this was serious. You can always trust a market. You can't trust yourself, you can't trust your mother, but you can trust a market, because it shows you that what you have is something everybody wants.''

4. The Policija

At last the first diplomatic mission was ready to begin. Nikolajsen turned to Zdechovsky, the diplomat, as the company prepared to walk down to the boat, and admitted something that must have lingered uncomfortably in the minds of many

freedom-loving settlers: ''I have often been euroskeptic. But today I am totally for the European Union!''

With the official state vessel out of commission, the small metal dinghy had to fit eight people. It theoretically had a maximum capacity of six, but the President found he was unable to say no to the four teams of documentary filmmakers who didn't want to miss such crucial footage. The diplomat unwrapped four containers of kebab, chop and sausage, and laid them out attractively on very thin paper plates. The party picked at the food while waiting for a young Austrian in a blood-lettered shirt of a band called Ulcerate, a recent arrival Jedlicka hadn't yet met, to inflate a rubber raft for use in a landing.

Nikolajsen stood on the shore, eyeing the raft grimly. He knew that the Croatian police would seize it as part of their ongoing campaign of punitive asset forfeiture. He and the President have profoundly varying notions about what might constitute a libertarian state, but they share an appreciation for national pageantry and its props. He called out, ''We've been losing two flags and two rubber boats a day.''

The President looked to Nikolajsen. ''Can we have a flag?''

''If you promise to give it back.'' Nikolajsen fingered his gunmetal medallion and bit his lower lip. ''It's my last one.''

The President reassured him. ''I have more in my bag.''

The diplomat, an official of ambition delighted to be at the center of this special and unprecedented mission, swept his hand across the meat. Its grease had soaked through the paper plates and onto the weathered wooden bench. The aroma of the patties had the distinct ranginess of horse. ''Do you want something to eat?'' he asked.

The dinghy set off at speed downstream, with the President and the diplomat in the stern taking turns at the rudder. They could barely see anything in front of the boat for all of the filmmakers and photographers, and they had to swerve so as not to hit

the concrete pylon that supported the border bridge. The boat quickly slowed, however, and Jedlicka looked back to find that the raft trailing behind on its leash was filling with loden green river water.

The President sighed. He looked down at his textured brown oxfords, polished just this morning and now caked in gray mud. He and the Austrian hauled the raft up into the dinghy, where it rested between two filmmakers. He shrugged and regained his good cheer, throwing his arms up in anticipation of victory. ''These are the obstacles creating a new nation!''

The dinghy came around a bend in the river, the sun lower in the sky and the light a soft violet on the green width of the river, and the President stood up and laid his hand on the raft to take in the sight of his country. He had studied the poses of George Washington, whose likeness in oil graced the official Liberland Facebook page. Jedlicka beached the dinghy on a small sandbar just north of the Liberland-Croatia border. Black scathing cumuli of mosquitoes formed a needling vapor in the boat.

Jedlicka took the pump and reinflated the raft, which had gone soft in the dinghy. ''This,'' he said, ''is how presidential work is done in the field.'' His azure suit was soiled with sludge, and when he wiped the sweat from his brow, his hand emerged striped with black arthropod entrails and jags of the blood of his face.

There was a flurry of activity on the boat. With the raft back in the water and out of the way, all assembled could see before the dinghy, on its starboard side, a white boat with a blue tarp and antenna equipment. In clean blue lettering stenciled on the side, the boat identified itself as *Policija*. A man in a blue uniform and blue cap gazed at the dinghy through binoculars. A second policeman worked the radio on the bridge. The President stood up and waved. The boats drew up beside each other, and their bows plinked lightly.

The President spoke amiably. ''We're sending a diplomat now to measure our borders.''

The diplomat said, ''I am from European Parliament.''

The policeman was impassive. ''What are your intentions please?''

''Now?'' the President asked. The policeman nodded. ''We send diplomat to measure borders.''

''I will warn you,'' the policeman said, repeating some lines in English. ''Everyone who steps on the right side of the river will be arrested. This border is not defined. It is in dispute. Croatia defines one way, Serbia other way.''

The diplomat got involved. ''You must respect my mandate. There is European law here.''

''We are not here to discuss with you,'' the police official said. ''Everyone will be arrested.'' He hesitated, then pointed at the diplomat. ''Except you. Your diplomatic passport protects you. We will inform our minister, and he will inform your home state.'' The policeman seemed glad to be rid of these sentences.

The two boats continued to slowly circle each other amid the squalls of mosquitoes. The diplomat boarded the raft, with one of the documentary filmmakers, and they set off toward the Liberlandian bank, a gently sloping mud beach under a low canopy of dense foliage. The President started the engine and swung the dinghy, now much lighter, toward the center of the river. The two policemen tied their boat to a tree and went ashore.



Liberland sits on the Danube, to the right of the island. Antonin Kratochvil/VII, for The New York Times

The Austrian was encouraged. ''They're busy on the shore. We can go to Liberty Island and plant flag.''

''Yeah,'' Jedlicka said, ''but you'd get arrested.'' Happy with the success of the mission thus far, he was in no mood to countenance more bodily sacrifice. The young filmmaker who went ashore did not look prepared to spend the night in a dank, windowless cell of the border garrison, where 28 L.S.A. affiliates had already spent at least one night. The President swooped the dinghy in doughnuts around the middle of the river, peering over to see what was happening beneath the forest canopy. He smiled broadly, and two mosquitoes landed as black marks on his white teeth. On the shore, the policemen were arresting the filmmaker and escorting the diplomat to their boat.

As we set off upstream in the pinkening green, the President stood in the stern, sunburned, his face blotchy and cratered with scratched bites, his blond hair darkened by sweat and matted down. Roots extended from the eroded Serbian banks like long gnarled brooms, while the trees on the Croatian bank cast dark and extravagant emblems on the placid Danube.

5. The Matrix

The Ryanair flight to London gave the President his first time to think in several days. He felt, it was clear, that what was required at this clotted, uncertain juncture was a sense of destiny. The only way he could retake full control from the L.S.A. and rally his own troops against the threat of Croatian incursion was to offer his followers a strong and coherent vision for how the nation would be established.

What the President already knew was the following: The nation would be run by a legislative assembly of 20 individuals, but all laws could be vetoed by public referendum. He already had a designer's rendering of the future parliament building. It looked like a ranch house with an enormous porch, its roof arched in segments like a scaly fish in flight. ''The entire government,'' Jedlicka insisted, ''will fit into this building, and will not ever grow larger.'' As far as future construction went, there were varying points of view on how many people could fit on Liberland itself, but at least one artist on the Internet had imagined a hyperdense city of towering skyscrapers. Liberland was mostly marsh, however, and Jedlicka was not sure about the price of the necessary pylons. Beyond that issue, it was important to him that people not forget that his project was not solely about this small parcel of boar-crossed, mosquito-fogged swampland. This was a unique opportunity to create a worldwide movement for freedom — a way to distribute freedom instead of just concentrating it in this small state.

Exactly how to further this objective was on the President's mind en route to London. With his mobile phone on airplane mode and his Bluetooth headset stowed, the future of Liberland came upon him as a revelation. The country's fate rested in his ability to construct a vast online work-flow app. Its integrated user

interface would optimize the operations necessary to realize nationhood. It would render public the assigning and fulfillment of the remaining tasks; connect Liberlandians to one another, for cooperative purposes, via a messaging-and-commenting system; and streamline the gratification of logistical needs via a full-dress reservation portal for flights, buses, taxis and lodging.

Though the whole thing sounded complicated, the site design itself would be simple and intuitive. It would resemble an organizational table. Each column would represent a country, and the rows would be labeled with necessary positions: ambassador, financial minister, photographer, videographer, publicity person. Each cell would then be color coded: green would indicate a task assigned and completed, yellow a task merely assigned and red a task in need of the application of industry. Carrying out tasks would earn points, which could then be put toward the purchase of citizenship. This plan, the President believed, would create a currency that, despite the absence of a central bank or a foundational debt, would have value from the beginning: It would be tied to the labor of nation-building and would unleash extraordinary energy toward that end. The name of the currency was also revealed to him on the meditative Ryanair journey: the Liberlandian merit. His would be the planet's first fully merit-based country.

Despite an unusually hard landing, it was the President, in his crystalline, buzzing elation, who began to clap, with charisma; the rest of the cabin, dazed and a little rattled, soon fell in behind him with applause.

Jedlicka was greeted by a future citizen holding a Liberland sign complete with national insignia. He was a handsome, tanned, bald man of about 40, and he wore a short purple tie, hung loosely about his collar, over an untucked pinstriped shirt. The aspiring citizen, Jay Picard, said he felt completely overdressed, and removed his tie by drawing the intact loop over his head. He was as eager and nervous to meet the President as the President was to meet him. Liberland already had an official embassy and ambassador in France and Slovenia, but the President had yet to find someone in Britain he could trust with local leadership.

Picard showed Jedlicka to a racing-striped Mini Cooper, in which he had driven to the airport from his sometime home in Bath at, he claimed, more than 100 m.p.h. He turned toward the trunk, revealing a large tattoo of a bar code on the back of his head. ''The bar code,'' he explained, ''is basically to say, 'I'm not owned by the government.' I don't like to be a subject of the country.''

As he took Jedlicka's bag, he drew attention to the Liberland decal he had affixed to the rear bumper.

''Where did you buy that?'' Jedlicka asked. Though the President claimed to have pledges from investors — sometimes he said $2 billion, other times $20 billion — the nation's primary revenue stream was through merchandising, and he might have preferred to retain an incidental state monopoly for the time being, or at the very least tributary payments.

''Oh, I just printed it right off the Internet!''

As the Mini exited the airport, the car filled with the banana-chocolate vape exhaust of Pillar, the Canadian-Slovak assistant. Pillar had almost been stranded in Osijek, because the President's assistant in Prague, Kristyna Nedvedova, forgot to check him in for the flight in advance. (Nedvedova disputes this, claiming that the President continually fails to pass along the necessary information.)

The relationship among the President's many assistants resembled his broader problem in his attempt to consolidate his power base: He sought strength in numbers, told people what they wanted to hear and figured that envy and disagreement would resolve themselves down the line.

Pillar puffed on his vape pen, and Picard took this as an opportunity to offer the passengers his own vape pen, which contained a solution of pure cannabis oil mixed with a lovely blueberry flavor. Picard told us that he used it to take the edge off a recent flight from Oslo; he had problems with the British government, in fact he owed them quite a bit of money, and he was nation-shopping. He liked Norway, but his ideal refuge would be a place like Liberland.

Jedlicka was trying to change the shared Google Calendar time of the London meeting on his phone, but his roaming data service was unreliable. Picard took his hands off the steering wheel to pick up his own phone to broadcast as a local 3G hot spot. Jedlicka asked for the password.

''O.K., the key phrase is, first p, as in 'president,' then a zero, then, uh, r, n as in Nancy, s, and the ending is t, a, r. That's, uh, pornstar, but with a zero instead of the o.''

Jedlicka looked up from his phone and gazed at Picard. At times it seemed clear that the President felt minor but nagging doubts about the personnel decisions he had made. His tendency was to reward alacrity. When he advertised, on Facebook, for a Czech assistant who spoke English, the first person to reply was Nedvedova, a college student in Birmingham. Unfortunately, she still had two weeks of the semester left before she could return to Prague. The President said he needed someone immediately. She left school early, which made a vivid impression on the energetic young President. He had found, however, that it was not always easy to get in touch with her. And there were the frequent airport check-in problems.

Still, the President needed a local vizier, and Picard had driven very far through a good deal of traffic. ''I will make you,'' Jedlicka intoned, ''the leader of Liberland in Great Britain.''

6. The Martins

The pub, along the high street in Hampstead, was upscale, the clientele smartly outfitted for a Friday evening. Picard dropped off Jedlicka and went to park the car. Pillar puffed on his banana-chocolate vape pen out front and began asking people if they had heard of Liberland. ''No? Well, do you like paying taxes?''

The President moved past him and into the pub, which he toured in a quick circle, his phone and battery brick held together to his ear. He took a seat at a table outside. His supporters were probably just late because of the traffic. After a time, the President was approached, with some trepidation, by two men in their mid-30s, with unlined faces, one of them with a conservative style of refined fauxhawk, the

other bald. They were neatly kitted out for a night at a downtempo lounge. The one wearing the fauxhawk introduced himself as Martin. Martin asked the first question that the President is usually asked: How did he come to discover Liberland?

Jedlicka, still dazzled by the radiant vision of an integrated user-login platform-portal, was eager to engage his subjects on the concrete matter of the future, not on the country's Wikipedia origin. ''Oh, yes, we did research, we somehow came over this piece of land, and we said, 'O.K., Let's take it,' '' he said. ''The next day, the Serbian government released a statement saying, 'We don't mind it, but it's a frivolous act.' '' Jedlicka laughed. ''What does that mean, 'frivolous' — like, of free will?''

''Not really,'' Martin began, but the President had already leapt ahead.

''It will be like a large grid, with a row for each nation, and it will show the tasks and the titles,'' he said, explaining the color-coding system for proper task management. ''It will be like a world collection of shadow governments, with a full Liberland cabinet in each place doing everything that needs to be done. Ambassador, photographer, videographer, P.R. guy.''

Martin pressed for details beyond the integrated Internet grid. ''But how,'' he asked, ''are you going to do this? There's a claim from other governments — ''

Jedlicka cut him off. ''No, there aren't.'' He said that Croatia could not sensibly claim the land on behalf of Serbia. ''What Croatia did was recognize our borders by putting police there. That did more for us than the Serbians.'' If everything went according to his plan, he added, ''We will inhabit the land by the sixth of September.'' It would be the President's 32nd birthday.

Jedlicka had to check Facebook in case he was missing some supporters who hadn't yet recognized him at the pub. This was supposed to be a meeting with his English patrons, but he had not seemed to register that Martin and his friend each had a slight Slavic accent.

They were from Poland, though they'd been in Britain for more than 10 years. They were software engineers with good jobs. They quite liked life in London but had been made anxious by the waxing anti-immigrant sentiment. They thought they had moved past the era, when Poland joined the European Union in 2004, of fears about the ''Polish plumber'' come to take away middle-class jobs. But once again immigrants were being scapegoated, and their future in the country was uncertain. They were interested in Liberland in part for the technological aspect and in part because they wanted to make themselves aware of any possible haven, should such anti-immigrant parties as UKIP come into real power. Like the Egyptians and the Syrians, they might become exactly the sort of political refugees the hard-line libertarians preferred to keep out of their country. The L.S.A. had, for example, firm positions on the matter of immigration; on their website they ran an interview with one member who implicitly spoke for the whole movement when he said, ''I definitely wouldn't like it if people came to Liberland just because there isn't political freedom in their country.'' But the President stood for a big-tent libertarianism and did not want to see the future of Liberland compromised by such small-stakes infighting.

An hour passed before another ally arrived, an overweight, bespectacled man in his 50s wearing a large blue polo. He introduced himself as Martin. He, too, had a Slavic accent. He was interested in Liberlandian citizenship, because he thought it would be an excellent site for a protected data center.

Members of an expedition to Liberland gather upstream on Serbian territory. Antonin Kratochvil/VII, for The New York Times

The first Slavic Martin asked where the second Slavic Martin was from. ''Are you English?''

''British,'' the second Martin said.

''Really?''

''From Kazakhstan.''

Martin from Kazakhstan waited for Jedlicka to be finished on Facebook before he told him, with childlike delight, that he had been one of his earliest and most ardent supporters. ''Now you have 300,000 applications — ''

''Three hundred thirty thousand,'' the President corrected him.

''Now you have 330,000 applications, but when I registered on website it was only 200,000!''

The President was quick to capitalize on Martin from Kazakhstan's spirit. ''I know,'' he said. ''When I sent out an email about this meeting, I sent it to only 100 people, and I put you on it.'' The President looked around the pub. ''And here we are seven. Seven percent turnout for the last minute. Not bad.''

7. The State Visit to France

Liberland's ambassador to France, Pierre-Louis Boitel, lives in Charenton, a large suburb southeast of Paris, with which it shares a border. Some status anxiety attaches to a residence there, but the ambassador had translated Ayn Rand and appeared proud to resist the herdlike mentality. The only club the ambassador wanted to be a part of was Liberland, whose exclusivity was something he cherished; he worried that it would be diluted by impure libertarians. He spent the entire car ride from Charles de Gaulle Airport explaining to the President that the chief challenge facing Liberland was the question of citizenship and that they would have to run it on a subscription basis as a very exclusive club. The ambassador was friends with a retired police officer who was willing to run background checks. He seemed in part to want an exclusive club because of his anxiety about where he lived. For most people, he explained outside the Embassy, ''if you live in Charenton, you are nobody. You say you live in Paris, and someone says where, and you say, 'Charenton,' and they say, 'Oh, then you do not live in Paris!' But Paris is one hundred meters away, and we are on the Metro and here we pay 35 percent less than you pay to live in Paris.''

The President worried on occasion that he was too promiscuous with his titling, a common affliction among young micronational commanders in chief seeking to bolster the ranks of the political class, but he still referred casually to Boitel's apartment as the Embassy. The ambassador, a financial executive, was a lanky man of 39 in an oversize suit, with a long, pointy nose, a thick helmet of

overbrushed brown hair and eyebrows whose animation seemed fitful and beyond his control. He showed Jedlicka into the Embassy, saying, ''This is your Embassy, President, you are at home here.''

The parlor room was done in a subdued baroque style. The walls were painted salmon pink and sea green; gilded Louis XV replica armchairs were reflected in gilded mirrors. Heavy teal curtains were pulled back to admit the hesitant afternoon light, which pooled on the pale herringbone wooden floors. The walls were hung with coarse pastoral and dock scenes in thickly knifed oils, and antique knickknacks were everywhere: daggers inlaid with mother-of-pearl, fragile ceramics, a music stand with the sheet music for ''La Vie Parisienne.''

Jedlicka had only a few minutes to update his presentation before the whole party had to leave for his keynote speech at the annual convention of the small French libertarian party, but first he needed time alone with the first lady, who had flown in from Prague for the event. The first lady, whom the President refers to exclusively as the first lady, has been the President's girlfriend for a year and a half, and now she resides with him at the embassy in Prague. She is tall and well scrubbed and very blond; she keeps up an active lifestyle and maintains perfect posture even while seated. Though she did not get involved in her current relationship with the expectation of a full roster of official duties, she has taken on her new role with felicity and elegance. In order to labor on behalf of Liberland full time, she has temporarily given up her work as a massage therapist. The President treats the first lady with extraordinary consideration and solicitousness.

Once the President finished updating his presentation, the legation walked to the Metro. En route, he took out his phone. He would never be anything but unassuming about protocol, but he asked if there weren't a method of transport that might be more commensurate with his office. There was, after all, a French camera crew trailing him, and it was important that he make the proper impression on the television of a country where he had such a key embassy. ''It's just not too presidential to travel by subway,'' he said. ''I'm going to call an Uber.''

''No, no, you cannot,'' the ambassador said. ''It is not safe, it is impossible to take Uber here, you will not be safe. There is no time, and we must take the Metro. It will be quick. We do not even have to change the train.''

The President relented. But he would draw the official line at being filmed carrying his own bag. Pillar, however, would not be arriving in Paris for another seven hours; the President's assistant had once again failed to check him in, and he had been left at Heathrow.

The President turned to me with a look of anguish. He understood that this was a violation of propriety, but he also very strongly did not want to be filmed by French television carrying his own bag. I felt sorry for him and accepted a short tenure as his bag man.

Jedlicka was briefly mollified, but he was still very embarrassed to be seen on camera taking the Metro at all. Perhaps to compensate for the indignity, Boitel proceeded to cut a very long line of people to buy tickets, claiming that he was traveling on urgent official business.

The presentation, which began with a homage to the writings of the French proto-libertarian Frédéric Bastiat, was well attended, but the crowd was quick to disperse afterward. For the state dinner following the presentation, the ambassador had rented out an entire brasserie — all in crimson and gold — across from the Bourse, but more than 50 people who committed to coming weren't there. The President told him that in the future, it would be best to have people pay in advance. The ambassador was frustrated. I tried to make small talk.

Vit Jedlicka, at the first Liberlandian Embassy in Prague. Antonin Kratochvil/VII, for The New York Times

"I can't tell you what I do or where I work, because my boss would immediately fire me," the ambassador said. "I have a total, clean separation between my work and Liberland." He drew his hand down in a sharp chop. "I work in financial services for a very important and well-known firm, and if it were discovered that I was serving as the French ambassador from Liberland, everyone would immediately think I was washing money."

Across the table from the President was a middle-aged consultant with wire-rimmed glasses and a perpetual Gallic pout. He had been observing with some amusement the voltage across the gap between Boitel and Jedlicka, as they had sparred over the question of citizenship. The consultant said something sharp in French, and for the first time the ambassador lost his restrained bearing entirely. His pale face became hot with blood, and he sputtered rapid responses across the

table. The consultant remained cool and sipped his Bordeaux, saying very little as the ambassador railed. The word that kept coming up in his ripostes was ''*blanchiment*'' — ''whitening,'' or money laundering.

The ambassador decided to drop the matter and turned to his salmon, which required liberation from drowning in a pool of white butter.

Later, the wife of the consultant, a petite Russian woman with red hair and tiny teeth, explained the dispute her husband had had with the ambassador. ''Oh, the ambassador works at this bank'' — she said the name — ''and my husband told him that especially in the light of his job, everyone in France would view Liberland as a money-laundering scheme. That is how we view all of the other places the President likes to mention all the time: Liechtenstein, Monaco, Singapore. Those are all tax havens.''

On the one hand, the President took it as a matter of common sense that high tax rates had put innovation and growth in government shackles everywhere on earth; on the other, the President really did believe that his young nation would be rooted in a like-minded community and would have taken as a great betrayal of his mission the idea that Liberland would only represent a virtual home for some collection of far-flung tax evaders, people who had nothing to do with one another beyond personal greed.

The ambassador was less interested about where the money was coming from than he was in its conversion to cryptocurrency. He advised the President at length about Bitcoin and Blockchain.

''The L.S.A., they are just not serious,'' the ambassador said. ''They have their shares in an Excel file. An Excel file! That is not serious.''

It was not wholly clear to the President how his appointed ambassador knew this.

''Why, it is simple!'' Boitel said. ''I own shares!''

8. The President in America

A month later the President and I met again, in the greenroom at the Midtown Manhattan radio studios of The Blaze, Glenn Beck's network. In the intervening time, Jedlicka had been in intermittent touch, sending me an early MP3 of the national anthem — it was folksy and exhortative, like Joni Mitchell channeling the economist Milton Friedman — and telling me about his proliferating media coverage. I told him he looked good, but the reality was that he was clearly under some strain. The tips of his blond hair had lost their light magnesium frost. I asked after his new suit, and he told me he had gained more than six pounds.

New York was the last landing on Jedlicka's tour. He and the first lady traveled first to Las Vegas, where he spoke at Mark Skousen's annual FreedomFest convention and had the chance to shake the hand of Peter Thiel, a libertarian entrepreneur and venture capitalist. He wanted to play a dollar in one of the slot machines, but the first lady thought that gambling was beneath his station. The next stop was San Francisco; his Facebook post of the supporters' dinner there remarked that, among the various techno-libertarians he had been courting, a young relative of Kafka had been present. In Washington, he was disappointed not to meet Rand Paul, but he had the chance to meet with representatives at the Cato Institute. Throughout his trip, he had set his Twitter feed to broadcast inspirational quotes from the history of American democracy.

What vexed him most was the continuing recalcitrance of the Croatians. Not long before, on July 4, the President celebrated Liberlandian Independence Day. Croatia issued an official diplomatic statement once again, explaining that the territory identified as Liberland was not, in fact, terra nullius, and that they would continue to forcibly remove homesteaders. As if this weren't humiliation enough, members of the L.S.A. had photographed Croatian citizens enjoying a summer frolic on the sandy beaches of Liberty Island. But he was as undeterred as ever. In just a week in America, Jedlicka managed to establish 10 consular offices around the country,

and he was pleased to discover that the Croatians themselves had only four. (They actually have nine.) ''It's not a competition,'' Jedlicka said, ''but. ...'' He trailed off with a grin.

He persisted in his belief that the Croatian border police were helping him through the de facto recognition of his borders. But, it seemed to me, it was helping him even more by barring him and his future citizens from actually settling the land. If the land were settled, it would become obvious to all that Liberland had courted an impossible coalition of fantasists. For some, it was a hedge against resurgent nationalism; for others, a bastion of euroskepticism. It was a haven for exiles and refugees and, at the same time, the promised land of the xenophobe and the techno-pirate. Jedlicka, so profligate with his sympathies, could sell a version of Liberland to tax reformers and another to Bitcoin traders. He could sell it just as well to a Pole in London as he could to a member of UKIP.

The huge-tent dissonance had even been designed into the Liberlandian flag itself, with its yellow, symbolizing voluntary exchange; the black, symbolizing rebellion against the system; and the tree, symbolizing abundance. The bird symbolized freedom, which in practical terms meant support for equal-opportunity disaffection. It was an unassailable social-media strategy in a time of worldwide resentment toward governance, and as long as Jedlicka did not have to govern the terrain of an actual country, it would continue to redound to his credit across the world.

Jedlicka was never more than five minutes away from Facebook, and from his tiny theoretical country, he spoke a plastic message of faith and empowerment. The elites in Brussels and the national capitals, both elected and unelected, had never seemed so haughty, distant and undemocratic. But he was tired. After so many interviews, the President had grown weary of repeating the things that should have been so obvious to anyone who loved freedom. He held his face in his hands on the couch in the green room — and then sat up and looked across at me with great intensity.

"Did I tell you about the idea I had on the flight, for a color-coded online matrix that would help all citizens get Liberlandian merits?"

I nodded.

"We have so many people in Prague working on it! We have made so much great progress!"

Corrected on Aug. 23, 2015: An article on Aug. 16 about the effort to create a new country between Serbia and Croatia called Liberland misidentified the producer of an annual conference known as FreedomFest. The producer is Mark Skousen- not the political commentator Glenn Beck, who has been a speaker at the conference.

We acknowledge mistakes in our reporting with corrections. If you spot an error, please let us know at corrections@nytimes.com. Learn more.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a contributing writer for the magazine.

Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 46 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Founder