

## **We Could Have the Morava Canal Completed in Seven Years' Time**

*Tomislav Nikolic receives many travel invitations, but rarely accepts them, only when he absolutely must and when his presence would help to close new deals*

By Jelena Cerovina  
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Ever since the National Council for Cooperation with Russia and China opened in August 2017, its President Tomislav Nikolic has received more than 60 delegations from China; at least a couple of Serb entrepreneurs come every day, wanting us to help them find business partners in China. Russian entrepreneurs from different administrative regions have also been guests of the Council, but they are not as numerous as the Chinese, explains Ambassador Ivan Mrkic, Member of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, in his interview for the "Politika" daily. The National Council is a governmental body headed by Mr. Tomislav Nikolic, former President of Serbia. According to Mr. Mrkic, the Chinese are very satisfied to see a separate institution tasked with their country only, for they perceive that as Serbia's resoluteness to develop its existing cooperation with China.

### **This means that the Russians have shown less interest than the Chinese?**

Yes. They have their own well-trodden paths and when they come to an exclusive institution such as this one, for you will not find an address solely tasked with Russia and China elsewhere, they need time to realize that their life has been made easier now. We are making their life easier for economic reasons primarily. Remarks to the effect that we are losing sights of the EU and turning to China or Russia are common nonsense. We are just making use of an opportunity created beyond the realm of our influence. Those saying that Brussels is reproachful because we are turned to China for cooperation are oblivious of the fact that, say, Angela Merkel has made nine visits to China, and no one is accusing Germany of veering off its course, and when we strike agreements with the Chinese you will hear some (most often local) "well-wishers" scolding us that we are having a change of heart about Brussels.

### **How do you interpret such a heightened interest on the part of Chinese entrepreneurs?**

The Chinese side has shown such lively interest that we have at least two delegations coming every week. The National Council works like a magnet, attracting not only state-owned, but also private companies from China. We have also received representatives of the China International Chamber of Commerce for the Private Sector here, and let me remind you that Jack Ma, the founder of the Alibaba Group, is one of its members. They were here and they are calling on their members to invest in Serbia, and not only in infrastructure, but also in production. China's expansion is occurring world-wide, and it is only natural that Serbia should find a place for itself. Especially if China is interested, and it has shown that it is, not only in organizing credit lines in Serbia, but also

in cementing its position by building industrial zones. Most importantly, unlike some others, China has not made its cooperation with Serbia conditional on anything.

**If a Chinese delegation expresses interest in investing in Serbia, does the National Council have the authority to conclude deals?**

In that case we contact the relevant Ministry.

**President Nikolic said not long ago that he had not given up on the idea of having the Morava-Vardar Canal built, explaining that he had China's support for the project?**

That idea is age-old, dating back to the times of the Kingdom of Serbia. It was also present in the era of Tito's Yugoslavia, even featuring as a subject that came to the attention of some specialized UN agencies. Archives of the United Nations Secretariat still hold the studies done in the 1970s. Therefore, this idea is not new, and the last thing it should be used for is to amuse the public. We are talking here about the need to reinforce Serbia's strategic position. Serious studies have been carried out, some by the Chinese, too, showing that the idea would be both feasible and useful. Goods supply cost would be dramatically reduced, and the existing route would be shortened by 1,400 km. In parallel with the implementation of this project, Serbia would obtain much more arable land, flooding would be prevented, several hydro-power plants would be built... According to Chinese forecasts, everything could be completed in five to seven years. I can hardly imagine that someone should oppose such an idea. Especially if the funding came from abroad.

**Have you had any exchanges with Athens and Skopje?**

Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic Alexis Tsipras has expressed himself favourably about this project on several occasions. The Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia has also had repeated talks with Mr. Nikolic. The official Skopje has shown interest, too. But this idea must be a European one. We also advocated it in the framework of the Brdo-Brioni Process. Now it is up to the three Governments or three Presidents to say that they want the project to start running, and the Chinese would immediately launch the works on the ground. Unfortunately, the idea is often trivialized, and I believe that Serbia would thrive on such a mega-project, it would resemble Switzerland. I am confident that President Aleksandar Vucic will stand up for this project of profound importance to Serbia, its neighbours and Europe as a whole.

**What is your response to critics who say that the Council has been formed to cater for Mr. Nikolic's staff after they have left the Office of the President?**

Such criticism is utterly ludicrous. Ninety percent of the Council's employees were already working for the Government at the time of its establishment. Only 50% of the envisaged vacancies have been filled up, but we work normally nevertheless. We are filling the vacancies very carefully. Two Office Assistant Directors came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ms. Gordana Jaksic is Minister Counsellor at the MFA and she has been appointed Assistant Director at the Office by the Government's Decision. Ms. Jaksic is a seasoned diplomat and she is in charge of China here at the Council. Ms. Jelena Milicevic Prorokovic is an experienced officer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also tasked with cooperation with China. Mr. Milan Milosevic is the other Office

Assistant Director, also from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was previously posted to Serbian Embassy in Moscow.

**You were met with public backlash because the Council's 2018 budget amounts to RSD 50 million?**

The Council's budget is one of the smallest in the system of the Government. We only cover the necessities, and what remains unspent will be returned to the Government. A portion of the budget has been earmarked for the President's possible trips abroad. Tomislav Nikolic receives many travel invitations, but rarely accepts them, only when he absolutely must and when his presence would help to close new deals. Annual budgets allocated to more than half Serbian embassies must be the same, and nobody is talking about that. The ones interpreting it in that way are more likely prompted by other motives, or they are unaware of the facts.

**Do you think that the President of the Council has come under more criticism than the Council itself?**

I believe it has to do with the Serbian mindset. If somebody wants to come here, they are more than welcome to do so. They will be provided with exact information and with everything of interest to the public, for we have nothing to hide.

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<http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/395133/Moravski-kanal-zavrili-bismo-za-sedam-godina>