

Inland Waterways: Romantic Notion or Means To Kick-Start World Economy?

by Karel Vereycken

PARIS, Sept. 24—Some 300 enthusiasts of 14 nations, among them, the USA, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, China, Serbia, Canada, Italy, and Sweden), gathered in Toulouse Sept. 16-19, for the 26th World Canals Conference (WCC2013). The event was organized by the city of Toulouse and the Communes of the Canal des Deux Mers under the aegis of Inland Waterways International (IWI).

Political officials, mariners, public and private individuals, specialists and amateurs, all came to share a single passion—to promote, develop, live, and preserve the world heritage of waterways, be they constructed by man and nature, or by nature alone.

For Toulouse, a major city whose image is strongly connected with rugby and the space industry, it was an occasion to remind the world about the existence of the Canal du Midi, built between 1666 and 1685 by Pierre-Paul Riquet under Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the French Finance Minister for Louis XIV. The “Two Ocean Canal,” which allowed for ships to travel from the Mediterranean port of Sète to Toulouse, and to enter the Atlantic Ocean, via the Garonne River at Bordeaux, was added in 1996 to the list of UNESCO’s World Heritage sites.

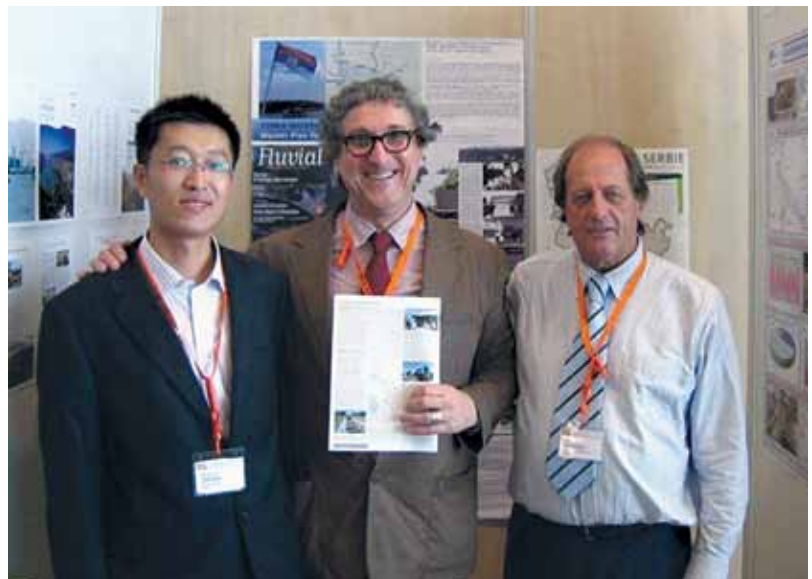
In public relations efforts, the French public authority in charge of canals, Voies navigables de France (VNF), also presented its program to replant, on a 20-year cycle, the plane trees bordering 239 km of the Canal du Midi. Under attack by fungus since 2006, some 42,000 plane trees will be replaced at a total cost of EU200 million.

Romanticism Is Not the Future

At the Toulouse conference, opposing visions were represented. First, the Romantic vision—which, unfortunately,

dominated most of the sessions—starts from the dangerous illusion of a post-industrial society, centered on a leisure- and service-based economy. For this vision, the future of inland waterways comes down to a hypothetical potential income from tourism. Many reports and studies indicate in great detail how formerly industrial city centers can become recreational locations where people can be entertained and make money.

Radically opposing this Romanticism, historians demonstrated the crucial role played by canals in organizing the harmonic development of territories and the birth of great nations. Several Chinese researchers, notably Xingming Zhong of the University of Qingdao, and Wang Yi of the Chinese Cultural Heritage Academy showed how the Grand Canal, a nearly 1,800-km-long canal connecting the five major rivers in China, whose construction started as early as 600 B.C., played



The author, Karel Vereycken (center), with Chinese scholar Wang Yi (left), and Serbian engineer Krsta Paskovic, at the 26th World Canals Conference in Toulouse, France.

Nouvelle Solidarité

The old Canal du Centre in Belgium (right) was built to transport coal for the steel industry. When it became obsolete, a new Canal du Centre (below), was constructed, with the world's largest lift-lock. The old canal is now a tourist attraction, while the new canal is used for trade and industry.



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a key role in securing China's military and food sovereignty. Nearly a thousand years before the European Renaissance, Chinese water experts built elementary, but operational, locks.

A Dutch historian also showed how in the early 12th Century, an amazing network of waterways was built in the peat lands; peat was the main source of energy for cities as Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Antwerp in the Netherlands.

Walk on Two Legs

In private, most attendants admit that to go forward, the profession needs two legs: tourism and industry. Therefore, it isn't sufficient to keep the existing canals in good shape, instead, new inland waterways must be constructed.

Vanessa Krins, of the Institut du Patrimoine Wallon of Belgium, gave the example of the Belgian Canal du Centre. Historically, this canal was built to transport coal for the Belgian steel industry. When it became obsolete, Belgium invested in a new Canal du Centre, which was inaugurated in 2002. With the new canal came the world's largest lift-lock at Thieu-Strépy, where an elevator is able to raise ships 73.15 meters. With this single elevator on the new canal, the two locks and the four older ship elevators of the old canal have been replaced. As a result, the old canal is now transformed for tourism, while the new canal is used for trade and industry.

Multiple Sizes

Michel Dourlent, president of the French National Chamber of Boatmen (CNBA), outlined a plan for a national network of canals required to

transport goods. For Dourlent, there is not just "one-size-fits-all." In the same way as there are highways, national routes, and local roads, France should build a powerful national network of canals of different sizes.

Up till now, the existing wide canals have all been dead ends. As a result, most of France's cargo shipping is cut off from the 20,000 km of wide canals spanning Northern Europe. To remedy this problem, it is of

utmost urgency to build the Seine-Schelde connection, and to connect the Soane River (which links with Lyon and Marseille) with the Moselle in Nancy, the Rhine in Mulhouse, and the Seine. Dourlent underlined that, for medium and long distances, smaller canals remain far more efficient and cheaper than rail or road. Dourlent also underlined that the absence of a decent canal system in their hinterland is suffocating the French ports. The largest port for French exports is Antwerp, Belgium, which is also one of the biggest European rail ports.

The UNESCO Trap

From that standpoint, it is clear that the port of Nantes on the Atlantic is suffering from the fact that the Loire River, the longest in France, is on the list of UNESCO's World Heritage sites, and as such, is condemned to . . . tourism. The reader should be reminded that stabilizing the main rivers of France has allowed that country to build nuclear power plants, which need a steady flow of water for cooling, a condition that can only be guaranteed on managed canals and waterways. Without such water management, there can be no nuclear power!

We therefore can only advise China to be very careful when calling for the placement of its Grand Canal on UNESCO's world heritage list. UNESCO, whose founder, Julian Huxley, was a raving eugenicist, just might be out to freeze all development in China! This doesn't mean that I am demanding that we wipe out the world's cultural heritage. A harmonic compromise between economic development and the conservation of the cultural and historical patrimony can always be worked out. UNESCO's "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" (Nov. 16, 1972, Paris, Article 11.4) states that, "The list of sites may include only such property forming part of the cultural and natural heritage as is threatened by serious and specific dangers, such as the threat of disappearance caused by accelerated deterioration, large-scale public or private projects [!] or rapid urban or tourist development projects; destruction caused by changes in the use or ownership of the land; major alterations due to unknown causes; abandonment for any reason whatsoever; the outbreak or the threat of an armed conflict; calamities and cataclysms; serious fires, earthquakes, landslides; volcanic eruptions; changes in water level, floods, and tidal waves."

Morava River (Serbia)



China and Serbia Debate Morava Canal

It is therefore not astonishing that the call for development came mostly from the so-called "developing nations." Standing before a map of his country, the Serbian engineer Krsta Paskovic, founder and main coordinator of the Danube Propeller association, argued strongly in favor of the construction of the Morava Canal, a project already imagined at the end of the 19th Century, to connect the Greek port of Thessalonica with the inland waterway transport axis formed by the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal. To make this connection a reality, several rivers have to be tamed, notably the Axios River in Greece, which becomes the Vardar in Macedonia, and the Morava River in Serbia. To interconnect these rivers, a canal is required.

Five years ago, at the WCC2009 in Novi Sad, Serbia, the project was extensively debated. Since then, the Serbian elites seem to have succeeded in convincing China of its stake in the project. Today, China considers building the Morava Canal a strategic priority, for the simple reason that it would shorten, by 1,200

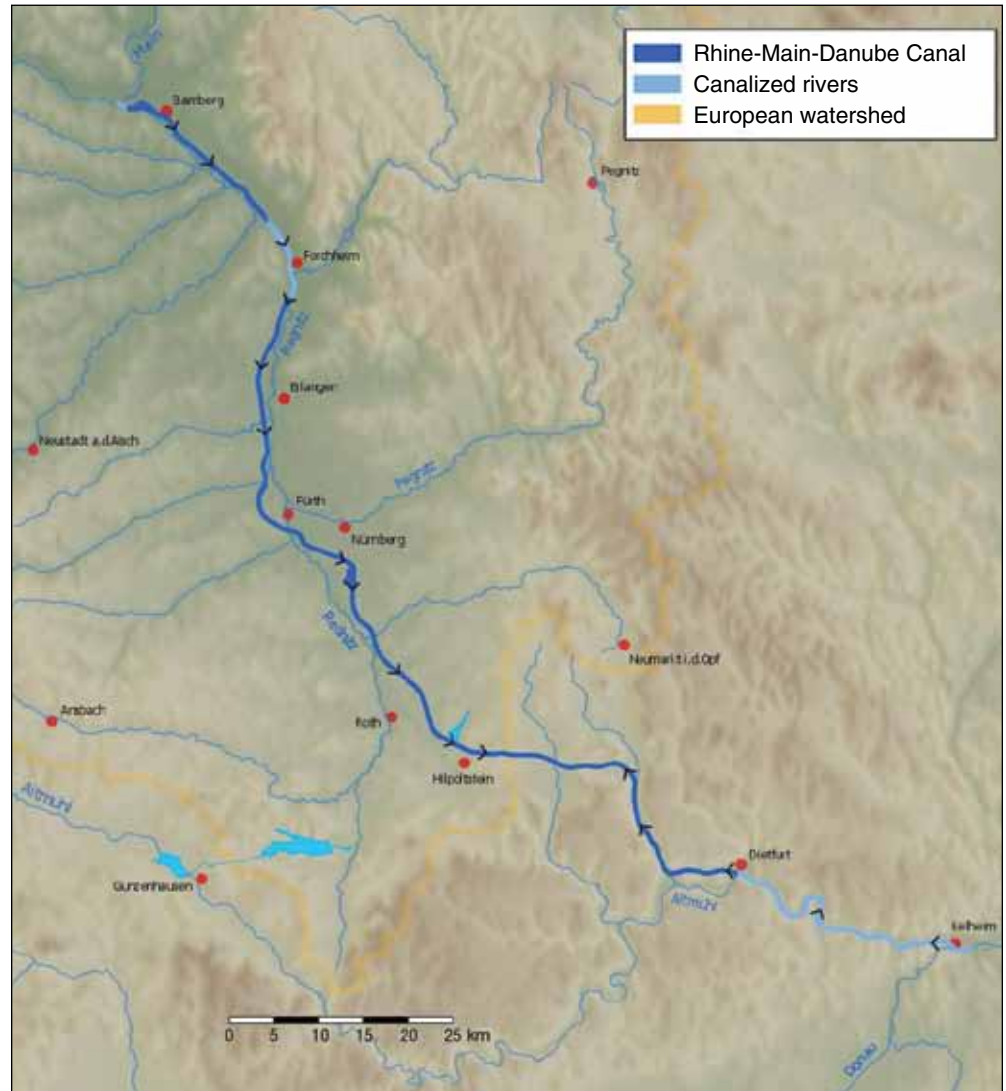
km, China’s main export route to the EU.

In May, a delegation of civil engineers of the China Gezhouda Group Corporation (CGGC), the state company that built the Three Gorges Dam, came to Serbia and conducted a feasibility study. Huang Lin, who heads the delegation, is quoted saying that the project is “feasible.” For Huang, the project is “big and historic,” and has been needed for a long time. Plans presented by the Serbians are 50 years old, and called for at least 63 locks. Chinese engineers are expected to come up with new solutions to the technical challenges of the project. The CGGC team will now present its technical recommendations to the Serbian government, and hopes to win the contract.

To discuss the financing of the project, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic just concluded a visit to China, where the canal project was discussed with Chinese investors. In 1973, the overall cost of the canal was estimated to be \$12 billion, about the same as the cost recently estimated for the Canal Seine Nord Europe (connecting the Seine with the Schelde), the largest infrastructure program under consideration in the EU, but currently sabotaged by the French banks.

For Greece and Macedonia, the benefits of the canal would be significant, in terms of jobs and economic stimulus. Transportation is one thing, but there is much more. According to the Serbian Minister of National Resources and Mining, Milan Bacevic, who presented the canal project to the Serbian parliament in July, “the

Rhine-Main-Danube River



The Morava Canal, if constructed, would connect the Greek port of Thessalonica with the inland waterway transport axis formed by the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal.

construction of the Morava Canal is a complex task which created the conditions for the construction of five hydroelectric power stations of about 400 MW each. Parallel to this, an irrigation system for about 80,000 hectares of the most fertile farmland of the Morava basin will be created. The reduction of costs in transport will be enormous, since inland water transport is four times less expensive than transport by road or rail.”

In an interview with the author, Paskovic underlined the decisive role played by the Schiller Institute of Helga Zepp-LaRouche. Following the Troika’s finan-

cial onslaught against Greece, the Schiller Institute published a special program to reconstruct the entire Mediterranean region.¹ Since the program called for the realization of the Morava Canal, Paskovic, who received a copy from a friend, sent it to over 500 Serbian decision-makers, making the Morava Canal the subject of a national debate.

Solidarity & Progress Intervenes

Outside the conference room, a team of organizers from Jacques Cheminade's party, Solidarity & Progress (<http://www.solidariteetprogres.org/>), distributed a leaflet, titled, "Inland Water Transport: Key for a New Renaissance," to those attending, published in French, English, and Chinese. The S&P activists carried signboards saying, "Let's dig canals and bury the banks," and insisted that, without a real Glass-Steagall reform, separating commercial banks from speculative investment banks, no long-term credit can be

made available for investment in such infrastructure as canals.


Briefed on the project, several U.S. and Canadian officials showed great interest in the NAWAPA program, proposed in the 1960s, as the largest hydraulic-transfer program ever conceived, but forgotten when priorities shifted after the Kennedy assassination.² People such as the Serbian engineer Paskovic wholeheartedly welcomed the programs put forward by S&P and the Schiller Institute.

Last year, the WCC took place in China, and next September, it will be held in Milan, a city that was a cradle of canal-building in Europe, a science not unrelated to the work of Leonardo da Vinci, who lived there from 1482-99. It will be another occasion to mobilize for genius.

The author is the director of the French weekly Nouvelle Solidarité.

1. "There Is Life After the Euro! Program for an Economic Miracle in Southern Europe, the Mediterranean Region, and Africa," EIR News Service, Inc., June 2012.

2. See *EIR*, Sept. 13, Sept. 20, and Sept. 27, 2013; and LaRouchePAC (<http://larouchepac.com/nawapaxxi>).



There Is Life After the Euro!
Program for an Economic Miracle in Southern Europe, the Mediterranean Region, and Africa
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http://www.larouchepub.com/special_report/2012/spec_rpt_program_medit.pdf