

Balkan Countries Look To Join China's New Silk Road

March 14—The following is an interview done by Feride Istogu-Gillesberg with Iljaz Spahiu, the head of the Albanian-Chinese Cultural Institute in Tirana, for the German paper *Neue Solidarität*.

Spahiu has occupied himself with Chinese language, culture, society, and politics for 40 years. He earned a degree in Chinese language and literature at Beijing University during 1974-1978. Among other assignments, Spahiu worked for more than two decades as a translator and journalist for Radio Tirana. From 2002 to 2006 he served as a diplomat in the Albanian embassy in Beijing, and then worked for a private company there for several years. At the same time he was the Chinese correspondent for Radio Free Asia in Washington. He has also translated two novels by Chinese author Mo Yan.

Feride Istogu-Gillesberg: China and Albania have had a long standing relationship. How do you see relations between China and Albania today?

Iljaz Spahiu: As you yourself said, Albania and China have had a traditional historical relationship, which began in the 1960s and lasted until the end of the 1970s. This developed into a special relationship: China defined it as “friends and brothers,” and the Albanians described it as “strong as granite and pure as crystal.” You also have to recognize that, independent of this relationship’s ideological foundation, a real friendship emerged between the two peoples which is still very much alive today.

Back then (in the 1960s and 70s) Albanian films had a huge influence on the education of an entire generation in China. According to the statistics, the 1967 movie *Victory over Death* has had the greatest viewership in the entire world.¹ Unfortunately, at the end of the 1970s, when China began to open up to the world, Albania pursued a path of total isolation.

1. The film (“Ngadhnjim mbi vdekjen” in Albanian), about the World War II heroine Bule Naipi, had more than 100 million viewers in China.



Iljaz Spahiu (left) with China's Ambassador to Albania, Jiang Yu. al.china-embassy.org

After a fifteen-year hiatus, at the beginning of the 1990s relations between our two countries began to normalize. The basis for the relationship is different now; it is a relationship of mutual advantage, but the old traditional relationship provides strong support for further deepening it on both sides. At the moment there exists a good relationship and a stable policy on the basis of mutual advantage, free of ideology. Three joint declarations have been signed between the two nations, and there have been important, high-level visits.

The degree of economic cooperation certainly doesn't match the political; although over the past year we have had a noticeable uptick in trade, yet there is hardly any Chinese investment in Albania to speak of. I recommend using the traditional friendship, the special image of Albania, the fondness and nostalgia for Albania which the currently ruling generation in China has, and further developing and strengthening the relationship this way.

You have to keep in mind that China today is a per-

manent member of the UN Security Council, it is the second largest economy in the world, and an actor on the international political stage of growing significance.

Eurasian Land-Bridge

Istogu-Gillesberg: Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the founder of the Schiller Institutes, is the author of the report *The New Silk Road Becomes the World Land-Bridge*.² Mrs. Zepp-LaRouche has spoken at many international conferences about the great significance of the development of the Silk Road—not only for China and the BRICS nations, but for the entire world. Collaboration around economic development is the hope of mankind. The development of infrastructure, agriculture, and industrial production is the basis for raising living standards for all humanity, and the means for securing peace—as is now more or less coming to Syria. Does China have an agreement with Albania for the extension of the Silk Road, the strategy of “One Belt, One Road?”

Spahiu: First of all, I happily can say that the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, as well as the program for cooperation among the “16+1,”³ is creating an extraordinary opportunity—not only for the development of Albania, but for the entire Balkan peninsula.

China has plenty of capital, as well as extensive technical and human capabilities. It has the will and the desire to expand alliances for trade into Europe. On the other hand, our countries need investment in the construction of infrastructure and the development of our economies.

In the framework of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, Albania is pursuing significant projects which are now negotiated and are only awaiting concretization. The most significant of these projects are the highway from Arbrit,⁴ the “Blue Corridor,”⁵ energy proj-



Xinhua/Gao Jie

Iljaz Spahiu emphasized that China's “One Belt, One Road” initiative and its cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe is creating an extraordinary opportunity for Albania and the rest of the Balkan peninsula.

ects, and the construction of industrial parks, agriculture, and tourism—among other things.

The Albanian government is staying in constant contact with its Chinese partner around the realization of these projects. The Albanian Prime Minister has met the Chinese Prime Minister three times at high-level summit meetings, in the context of the 16+1. Currently, several chairmen of Chinese enterprises are stationed in Tirana, only awaiting the realization of these projects. In the meantime, other companies are showing interest in investing in Albania, because they see Albania as part of trade in the Balkans and beyond.

It must be stressed that, because of its traditional friendship with China, Albania has an advantage. Fortunately, this friendship is not only nurtured in the population, but also in our governments and leadership circles.

Certainly there are obstacles, especially of a technical sort—mainly in the area of financing, because Albania has huge foreign debts—but these can be overcome through a common determination.

Istogu-Gillesberg: How do you see the role of the Balkans in connection with the strategy of “One Belt, One Road?”

Spahiu: The “One Belt, One Road” initiative has given new content and a new dynamic to the program of cooperation of the “16+1” and the Balkan countries. These are countries through which the Silk Road travels. They will profit from this initiative; it opens up for us an excellent perspective for development. This ini-

2. <https://worldlandbridge.com/>

3. China's cooperation with 16 countries of Southeastern and Central Europe.

4. The connection by highway between Tirana, Albania, and Skopje (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

5. The Adriatic-Ionian highway, which connects Greece with Slovenia along the Adriatic coast.

tiative provides the Balkan countries with the possibility of trade links and cooperation with China as a trading partner.

In addition, the Balkan region serves as a bridge, or connecting point, between China and Europe. Thanks to these ongoing initiatives (“One Belt, One Road”), important projects are currently being carried out in the Balkan peninsula, especially in infrastructure and the energy sector, financed by China. These projects will have an important influence on the development of the whole Balkan region. Noteworthy in this connection is the project for extension of the rail connection between Piraeus-Skopje-Belgrade-Budapest, which shortens the route between China and Europe and expands trade, as well as the construction of highways in Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Montenegro, which will make cooperation between the Balkan countries easier and more profitable.

Role of Confucianism

Istogu-Gillesberg: Helga Zepp-LaRouche has often emphasized the importance of cultural cooperation among nations. You have at your command great knowledge about the history and philosophy of China: What can we learn from the Chinese philosopher Confucius?

Spahiu: That’s right. Cultural collaboration has an irreplaceable significance for strengthening and further developing relations among nations. Through cultural exchange and personal contact you can facilitate mutual knowledge of the culture, history, mentality, and values on both sides, which make it possible to bring people closer together. The Albanian-Chinese Cultural Institute has as its chief mission the nurturing and strengthening of the relationship between our two countries: Our chief concern is to transmit this relationship to the young generation in both countries.

The Institute is playing an important role as a bridge between the two cultures, establishing close ties between the generations, the media, and philosophical thought, and providing the basis for getting to know one another and the exchange of values.

As to Confucius’s philosophy, I think that it is a precious possession of not only the Chinese, but for people worldwide. Confucian culture has gone through many ups and downs; it was undervalued and ignored for thousands of years, but in the end, its values have gained a new degree of importance, especially over the recent years, when the western economies are shrinking and those of the Asian nations, especially China, are grow-

ing. The values which have been preached by Confucian culture—such as commitment, a sense of responsibility, the spirit of sacrifice, community, and advanced education, among other things—have undoubtedly created the circumstances for favorable economic and social development in Asia.

In this context, you can say that the onrushing development of Asia is competing with the modernity of the West. You can furthermore pose the question of whether the economic development of the Confucian societies of Asia opens up a new path to a modernization with Confucian characteristics, which differs from that in the West. The value system which dominates Chinese society ultimately has its roots in Confucius’ philosophy, which was not only dominant in the golden ages of Chinese history, but also shapes China’s societal values in large measure today.

In this respect the system of values with Chinese characteristics has been further elaborated, established, and recognized step by step. These values base themselves on the harmonization of the values of the individual with the progress of society as a whole, in contrast to the value system of the West, where individual freedom is emphasized.

In order to analyze the significance of Confucian culture and its ideas and concepts for today’s society, there was an international symposium on the theme “Confucianism—Peaceful Development on Earth,” held in September of last year in Beijing on the occasion of Confucius’ 2,565th birthday. One idea which was presented at this symposium was that traditional Chinese cultural thought, and its humanistic spirit, civilized ideas, and moral concepts, can play a positive role in the world’s getting to know and transforming itself, as well as in the administration and improvement of governance.

Istogu-Gillesberg: Do you have any closing words for our German readers?

Spahiu: I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity for this interview, to be able to communicate with German readers, for whom I have always had great respect.

Since this interview deals with the subject of China, I would recommend that you make yourselves familiar with Chinese culture and history. Only in this way can you achieve an objective view of China’s political situation, economic development, and communication in the world.