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## **Dela Atanasija Nikolića – primer inženjerskog menadžmenta u praksi i liderstva za dobrobit društva**

Jelena Mitić<sup>1\*</sup>, Biljana Stojanović-Višić<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Engineering Management Belgrade, "Union - Nikola Tesla" University,  
jelena.mitic@fim.rs

<sup>2</sup> School of Engineering Management Belgrade, "Union - Nikola Tesla" University,  
bstojanovic33@yahoo.com

**Apstrakt:** Imajući u vidu njegovu odlučnost da pokrene promene i ostvari zajedničke ciljeve, primenu inženjerskih principa i znanja, liderskih i administrativnih veština radi efikasnog upravljanja projektima i resursima može se reći da je Atanasije Nikolić pionir inženjerskog rukovođenja u Srbiji, u praksi. Atanasije Nikolić pripada generaciji srpskih intelektualaca koji su postavili temelje društvenog i ekonomskog sistema u Srbiji, u 19. veku. Na osnovu svog inženjerskog obrazovanja, liderskih veština i brojnih interesovanja Atanasije Nikolić je pokrenuo neke od ključnih projekata za razvoj infrastrukture, ekonomije, poljoprivrede, obrazovnog sistema i kulturnih institucija. Rad ima za cilj da pokaže kako posjedovanje znanja, inženjerskog obrazovanja, volje i vizije može da pokrene promene u društvenom i ekonomskom razvoju. Prema njegovoj knjizi „Biografija verno svojom rukom napisana”, tekstovima koji se odnose na njegov život i aktivnosti, kao primer primenjenog inženjerskog menadžmenta i liderskih veština prikazuju se postignuća Atanasija Nikolića i osvetljava njegov doprinos društvenom i ekonomskom uređenju. Na ovaj način, prikazuju se aktivnosti sprovedene kako bi se Kneževina Srbija brže organizovala i približila evropskim državama, ali i ističe značaj inženjerskog menadžmenta u praksi i liderstva za dobrobit društva.

**Ključnereči:** Atanasije Nikolić, Kneževina Srbija, inženjerski menadžment, liderstvo

## **Achievements of Atanasije Nikolić – an Example of Engineering Management in Practice and Leadership for the Benefit of Society**

**Abstract:** Having in mind his determination to initiate change and achieve common goals, application of engineering principles and knowledge, leadership and administrative skills for effective project and resource management, Atanasije Nikolić can be considered a pioneer of engineering management in Serbia, in practice. He belongs to the generation of Serbian intellectuals that have laid the foundation of the social and economic system in the 19th century in Serbia, and with his engineering education, leadership skills and numerous interests, Atanasije Nikolić initiated some of the key projects for the development of infrastructure, economy, agriculture, educational system and cultural institutions. The paper aims to show how a person with engineering education, will and vision can initiate changes in social and economic development. According to his book "Biography faithfully written by his own hand", the texts related to his life and activities, this work shows the achievements of Atanasije Nikolić as an example of applied engineering management and leadership skills, and illuminates his contribution to the social and economic organization. In this way, the work shows the activities initiated so that the Principality of Serbia could be organized more quickly and get closer to European countries, but it also highlights the importance of engineering management in practice and leadership for the benefit of society.

**Keywords:** Atanasije Nikolić, Principality of Serbia, Engineering Management, Leadership

### **1. Introduction**

The idea of engineering management education appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, when technology and management knowledge was needed in order to manage large industrial and government projects. Engineering management is a discipline that studies and applies engineering principles in operational and strategic management and nowadays could be applied in numerous fields such as production, industrial design, construction, information and telecommunication technologies. Simply put, it brings together the technological problem-solving, organizational and planning abilities in order

to oversee the performance of complex enterprises. Engineering management education covers topics that enhance the value of new graduates by teaching immediately applicable management skills (Pence & Rowe, 2012: 48).

However, if we remember the words of Henry G. Stott<sup>1</sup>, that "Engineering is the art of organizing and directing people and controlling the forces and materials of nature for the benefit of the human race" (1907), then Atanasije Nikolić, who belongs to the generation of Serbian intellectuals that have laid the foundation of the social and economic system in the 19th century, is a pioneer of engineering management in Serbia, and moreover, with whom the significant study and application of science began, in the Principality of Serbia.

Many people nowadays haven't heard much about Atanasije Nikolić (1803-1882), and his work dedicated to the development of the economy, education and infrastructure systems, state organization and cultural identity. A well educated man, coming from Bački Brestovac (Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at that time), with a strong sense of national identity, moral responsibility and inexhaustible energy, Atanasije Nikolić was the initiator of national key institutions, a professor and the first Rector of the Lyceum. He is one of the Society of Serbian Letters<sup>2</sup> founders, its regular member and an honorary member of the Serbian Learned Society. He also advocated the establishment of the National Library.

All of his work is driven by the idea of education in order to create a modern and cohesive society, with belief that the improvement of society depends on the spread of knowledge.



Picture 1: Atanasije Nikolić. (Source: Life and work of Serbian scientists, book 7. Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts)

## 2. A leader dedicated to the welfare of society

Leadership is "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2008: 2), and can be seen as a process and a set of skills. As a process, it refers to the interaction with the group, initiating actions that bring the change. From the personality aspect, these are the qualities that allow him to convince the group. According to Katz's model, leadership skills include technical foundation, social orientation and conceptual ability. The first type of skills refers to the possession of knowledge, the second is focused on people and the ability to see their perspectives, and the third is on ideas, the ability to create visions and strategies (Northouse, 2008: 29).

Atanasije Nikolić was a man of technical skills, social orientation and conceptual ability, above his time, he initiated various projects that created new development directions. In many fields, Atanasije Nikolić was the first in Serbia, one of the first educated Serbian engineers, the initiator of engineering education, builder of modern roads. He has great merits for technological development, he made several melioration canals, according to his projects the first hard-surfaced roads in Serbia were built and the route of the main "Constantinople Road" was diverted through the Morava valley. Three decades before the appearance of the first railway in Serbia, he explored the terrain and made plans for the future railway.

Academic teaching and education in the fields of civil engineering and geodesy in Serbia began in 1846, when the Engineering School was established, as a part of the Belgrade Lyceum. Atanasije Nikolić was the founder of the Engineering School, and among the courses there were Practical Surveying,

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<sup>1</sup> American engineer, American Institute of Electrical Engineers (AIEE) president from 1907 to 1908.

<sup>2</sup> From which Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts was later formed.

Mechanics, Architecture, Drawing and German Language.<sup>3</sup>

He founded the first art schools - the Drawing School in Novi Sad and the Music School in Kragujevac, the first Agricultural School in Topčider, he also founded the first textile workshop for the production of blankets and cloth in Topčider, the first schools for assistant engineers, schools for apprentices which worked on Sundays and were the forerunners of national and workers' universities (Sarić, 2001: 3).

Systematically, he approached the creation of a Serbian technical dictionary, so that natural sciences could be taught in Serbian language. He started the first urban planning works in Serbia, drew up plots of land in Vračar, drained Topčider, planted a forest and a park, and founded a nursery garden. The formation of the park began in 1842 and it was the first Serbian park system based on European models of the palace complex - the Residence of Prince Miloš (Milošev konak) was designed to look natural, but still cultivated (Ćorović and Blagojević, 2012: 53). He worked on hydrotechnical projects, land reclamation projects, dams and embankments.

Also, he is reformer of Serbian agriculture. His merits are the first scientific and applied works on soils in Serbia. He is the founder of the first Agricultural School, in Topčider in 1853. He organized courses for peasants, wrote textbooks and started magazines in this field, in the Serbian language. He wrote the first books on agriculture (Agriculture, Farming, Viticulture, Fruit and Forestry, Cattle Breeding), and he even started publishing the first agricultural magazine (Uncle Srećko) with the articles and advices for farmers how to maintain their households, but this literature often did not even reach the audience it was intended for. The Agricultural School was abolished, but the agricultural and chemical experimental station was founded there in 1898. The first fertilization experiments in Serbia, meteorological measurements, production of seedlings, animal husbandry breeding, innovations in fruit growing, viticulture and afforestation began there (Životić, 2023: 63).

He was engaged in military and state affairs. While working in the civil service, he introduced worker's books, made the postal service independent, and wrote the rulebook for police officers. He is responsible for casting the first cannon in Serbia, founded the first workshop for the production of ammunition in Belgrade, and participated in several confidential diplomatic missions. He advocated for the establishment of the Topolivnica in Kragujevac. On the proposal of Ilija Garašanin, the State Council agreed and in 1848, the Topolivnica (cannon foundry) was opened in Belgrade. Atanasije Nikolić, as the first highly educated expert in Serbia, was engaged in the production of weapons.<sup>4</sup>

When he was appointed as the first Rector of the Lyceum, in addition to teaching and school administration, his task was actually to create the first higher education institution, from the procurement of accessories, the furnishing of the classrooms, to the making of the seal. He created the first graphic designs for the seals of the Society of Serbian Literature and the Lyceum (Đurić, 2020: 58).



Picture 2: Proposal for the seal designed by Atanasije Nikolić. (Source: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts)

As a trained artilleryman-engineer, he participated in the design of the defense belt along the rivers Danube (1849) and Sava (1854). He spoke German, Russian, and Hungarian, procured weapons and carried out diplomatic missions for the Principality of Serbia (Sarić, 2001: 3).

That he was a man of inexhaustible ideas and a wide range of interests could be seen in his commitment

<sup>3</sup> The studies lasted three years, and the Decree on establishment of the school stated: "In this school, the theory in the above sciences will be taught during winters, and during summers the students will be used together with engineers in measurements and construction of buildings and roads for the purpose of practical training, thereby supervising and implementing construction plans of various structures". (University of Belgrade, Faculty of Civil Engineering (2015) Available at: [https://www.grf.bg.ac.rs/p/docs/informatori/brochure\\_about\\_the\\_faculty\\_1442307536595.pdf](https://www.grf.bg.ac.rs/p/docs/informatori/brochure_about_the_faculty_1442307536595.pdf)).

<sup>4</sup> The first casts were not of good quality, and help was sought from abroad. First from Belgium, when also the first steam engine arrived in Serbia. Then, according to the decision of Prince Aleksandar Karadorđević from 1851, the foundry moved to Kragujevac. Through the efforts of Ilija Garašanin, Charles Loubrieu, the supervisor of a private foundry in Paris, came from France, and the first successfully cast cannons were from 1853. The first foundry building was built between 1851 and 1853 and was destroyed due to groundwater. The new building was built on the foundations of the old one, reminiscent of the original. In 1953 the building was placed under the protection of the state as a cultural asset of great importance. The foundry ceased operations in 1968, and since 1973 there has been a factory museum, called the Old Foundry.

to theater, literature and publication work. At his suggestion, St Sava became a school patron<sup>5</sup>. Along with Joakim Vujić and Jovan Sterija Popović, he laid the foundations of Serbian theatre. He organized the first performances in Novi Sad in the twenties of the 19th century. He founded the first theater in Belgrade, the “Đumruk” Theater in 1841, and the Theater “Kod Jelena” in 1847. He wrote several plays, with themes from Serbian history and motives from national literature. In some plays, he even acted. He published calendars and two books of Serbian folk tales (Đurić, 2020: 60). With his works, he revives the tradition and contributes to the maintenance and renewal of Serbian culture in the rebellious XIX century (Ivanović, 2020: 101).

Through creativity and persistence, decisions made, plans realized and actions implemented, the above achievements of Atanasije Nikolić show what kind of infrastructural, economic, organizational, security, educational and cultural changes could be initiated by management based on engineering education and principles, motivated by a vision and focused on a development strategy.

### 3. Life path according to his own words and deeds

Atanasije Nikolić was born in Bački Brestovac in 1803, in a merchant family. The period of his education was marked by poverty and perseverance, he started school in Sombor, studied high school in Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad and Győr. He attended the Artillery School in Vienna, and passed his engineering exams in Budapest. In addition to his excellent success, he knew that in Vienna "without protection" he would not advance, that the highest he could reach on the military ladder, despite all his efforts, was the rank of sergeant. For a time he worked as professor at a private drawing school in Novi Sad. The first drawing school in Novi Sad he founded in 1824. When he was confirmed as an "Engineer" by the University of Budapest (1829), he worked voluntarily on engineering jobs. Despite all the troubles, he worked dedicatedly, but didn't get a job as a regular engineer. Seeing that he could not progress significantly there either, he left and briefly served on the estate of Count Petar Čarnojević near Arad. When he finally got a well-paid job as an engineer in Munkač (Mukačevo, Ukraine) on the estate of Count Schönborn, he received an invitation from the Ministry of Education of the Principality of Serbia to become a professor at the newly opened Lyceum in Kragujevac. At the crossroads, he immediately chose the road to Serbia, but didn't dare to leave until he could organize the trip and relocation. He moved to Serbia with his family in 1839. He was appointed professor of Mathematics and Surveying at the Lyceum. He wrote the first high school textbooks for his subjects Algebra and Elementary Geometry, in Serbian.



Picture 3: Title pages of the textbooks Algebra and Elementary Geometry, by Atanasije Nikolić (Source: Life and work of Serbian scientists, book 7. Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts)

Soon, he was appointed Rector of the Lyceum. The progress of the institution he led was visible. With this, he won the favor of the authorities, especially Ilija Garašanin, which will soon separate him from his professorship. After the Lyceum moved from Kragujevac to Belgrade, Nikolić became the Head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (which included the state administration, the army, health and the economy).

His contribution to the state administration was great, but it also meant less time for teaching and scientific activities. Nevertheless, Nikolić remains consistent with his engineering and educational vocation. Together with Jovan Steria Popović, he participates in the founding of the Society of Serbian

<sup>5</sup> He organized the first school celebration of St. Sava in Serbia, which was coordinated with the beginning of the celebration of St. Sava in Matica srpska in 1839 (Đurić, 2020: 58).

Letters in 1841. The first Engineering school in Serbia, founded by him, operated from 1846 to 1849. He invested numerous ideas and activities in the development of agriculture in Serbia. During 1852, he traveled around European countries, studied their agriculture and agricultural schools. Upon his return, he founded the Agricultural School and carried out the first crossbreeding of foreign cattle breeds with domestic ones. He advocated the planting of mulberry trees, one of his ideas was to raise silkworms and produce silk. However, there are no more mulberries, some of his efforts did not last long, because they were not recognized as an interest of the community.

### **3.1. Service in the state administration**

Service in the state administration and dealing with politics is the fate of numerous Serbian scientists. As a confidant of Ilija Garašanin, he engaged in the welfare of the Serbian state and society. As a connoisseur of opportunities from both the banks of the Sava and the Danube, and with the national interest always on his mind, he played a major role in organizing the crossing of volunteers from Serbia to Vojvodina (1848), as well as in the procurement of weapons on the orders of Ilija Garašanin (1862), for the needs of the Principality of Serbia.

During his time, the Obrenović and Karađorđević dynasties alternated, he had many obstacles on his way, but political changes did not hinder him from working on the development of the country.

"Friends have always told me that I should not do so much for the common good, that no one would thank me for it; but I am passionately busy with the improvement of Serbia, so I could not do otherwise, and I always have a habit of answering them: I know that the world rewards hard work with ingratitude, I know that ingratitude awaits me, but I will do my duty, no matter what happens to me" (Nikolić, 2002: 138).

Some of his efforts were not long-lasting, due to the resistance in accepting the initiatives, they did not even reach the broad masses of the people. Although he was aware of this, he did not hesitate for a single moment in his attitudes and actions. Consequently, his achievements laid the foundations for the development of Serbian statehood, they remain to nowadays and are part of the cultural heritage.

### **3.2. Persistence, intellectual courage and soft skills of a leader**

"The paths of reconciliation, collective and individual investment in the shaping of a new cultural era, were impassable. Thanks to persistence and extraordinary intellectual courage, as well as restraint, to put obstacles, ridicule and patriarchal reluctance to accept changes into the background, Atanasije Nikolić managed to rise above his environment and his time" (Stefanović, 2004: 109). His journey to and through Serbia can be an example, what people who care about social interest have to put up with. However, numerous activities of Atanasije Nikolić also show that for a leader there is no other choice than persistence in the effort to implement changes and work on development.

Leadership also matters for economic outcomes. By promoting their economic values, leaders play an active part in shaping their environment (Arvate & Story, 2024: 17). Leaders who believe in their own strength, know how to recognize the potential in the environment and work on it, consequently achieve success in their endeavours.

Leadership involves decision making and requires competencies known as soft skills, such as visioning, communication, honesty, integrity, continuous learning, courage, tolerance, and creativity (Riley et al., 2008: 143) "Engineering is the professional art of applying science to the optimum conversion of natural resources to the benefit of man" (Smith, 1962). Atanasije Nikolić with all his diverse interests is an example of a leader with a vision, as well as integrity, continuous learning, courage, tolerance, and creativity, who initiated change in his environment. Not paying much attention to attacks and obstacles, Atanasije Nikolić did not waste energy and time on irrelevant things. Aware of the importance of the moment and the role entrusted to him, he worked on a broad plan with the aim of general progress. His dedication to scientific and educational work in Serbia in 19th century, cultural identity, economic and social progress, may be temporarily silenced, but is still there as a guide for harmonizing collective and personal development.

## **4. Conclusion**

Many people nowadays haven't heard much about Atanasije Nikolić, and his work dedicated to the development of state organization and cultural identity. Liberation heroes are often in the foreground. However, example of Atanasije Nikolić and his projects implemented with the aim of economic, infrastructural, educational system development show that leadership skills and engineering management can initiate progress and changes in society, for the common benefit and development in future. Therefore, his example is a kind of heroism that should be pointed out to the generations to come. This paper draws attention to the achievements of Atanasije Nikolić and importance of leadership and engineering management in practice.

Following examples like Atanasije Nikolić, who did not hesitate, in education, in personal development for the purpose of general well-being, can be useful for today's man, in overcoming the problems that arise every day. In a society where authorities and boundaries are collapsing, examples like Atanasije Nikolić are more than instructive and necessary. It shows how knowledge in technology and management could be useful, initiate changes and bring development in education, infrastructure, economy and agriculture, state administration and even lay the foundations of cultural and scientific institutions.

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