

03.12.2025

Stefan Dürr: "The human factor predetermines everything"

EkoNiva-APK Group of Companies is the leading vertically integrated holding, ranking first in the ranking of the largest producers of raw milk in Russia and Europe and third in the world. Specialization - dairy farming, but the company is dynamically developing in other sectors, such as crop production, breeding and seed production, pedigree cattle breeding, organic products, milk processing. The holding also supplies and maintains agricultural and road construction equipment of world and domestic brands. BM Moscow Foresight magazine talked on the sidelines of the XVIII Verona Eurasian Economic Forum held in Istanbul with the founding father and president of the EkoNiva-APK company Stefan Dürr.

- Dear Stefan, please name three sources, three components of your success, or rather, the success of Eco-Niva.

- Success, first of all, depends on the attitude towards people. This is my most important principle. Secondly, you need to plan ahead of time and for the future, but not lose soil under your feet. Third, do not get lost when difficulties arise. Times happen different. There are obese years, there are skinny years, and they alternate. In the second case, you need to focus and go forward, overcoming difficulties.

- What does the human factor matter to you? Do you invest in expanding your knowledge, mastering new skills and abilities of your staff?

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- The main thing is the culture of work and the workers themselves. Everything is predetermined by the human factor. Last year, around 3000 trainees studied and explored the values of our company. So we have been established for 15 years. Usually about a third of the trainees then stay with us to work.

We pay attention to improving the qualifications of all personnel. I also adhere to this principle: every young specialist has the right to make a mistake, and every employee of the company has the right to disagree with his superiors if he believes that an incorrect decision has been made.

We are promoting educational agriclasses, including for schoolchildren, where we explain that agriculture is one of the most successful sectors of the economy in Russia. The previous image of those who are busy on the ground was unattractive. There was a perception that this is work without days off and vacations, salaries are small, and labor is mostly manual. In fact, the agricultural sector today is one of the high-techest, the working day is rationed, and wages are no worse than in other industries.

As in the space field, Russia, being an agrarian superpower, today plays in the highest world league.

- How diversified is EkoNiva's product line?

- Over 70% of our revenue comes from milk business. A small segment was allocated for meat animal husbandry products. We produce about one million tons of grain, which is also important for us. We grow lentils, peas, and soybeans. We process about a quarter of our milk ourselves. Raw milk is good, but commercially, fixation on it creates vulnerability. There is a lot of price volatility in this market. Therefore, we also offer ready-made dairy products, both traditional as well as cottage cheese, cheeses, and dessert groups of goods.

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- Is the geography of supplies within Russia and abroad changing?

- We understand that Russia together with Belorussia has already achieved complete self-sufficiency in milk, and therefore it is important to work for export now. We already supply drinking milk to China...

- So it seems milk wasn't part of their diet before?

-... now it is already coming in, they even have a program to promote milk as an element of school nutrition - after all, a growing organism requires calcium. Moreover, they add to tea. Imagine if every Chinese (for reference: the population of the PRC is approximately 1 billion 400 million) will drink a cup of tea with milk at least once a week... we simply will not be able to cover this demand. We also started supplying milk powder to Africa and the Middle East.

- Is environmental friendliness one of your priorities?

- Absolutely. Initially, I created Eco-Niva for organic farming. Unfortunately, real life makes its own adjustments. Nevertheless, I keep the ideas of organic farming in my soul and still believe that it has a great future.

- Today, when we have decided to eradicate hunger, when the agricultural sector has become one of the drivers of economic development, when export potential is growing from year to year, and our agricultural raw materials and finished food products are sold in dozens of foreign countries, Russia has a moral obligation to contribute to ensuring world food security. Do you agree with that?

- I agree. Recently visited Algeria. Cool country. The population is growing, incomes are increasing. But the task of feeding everyone hearty and healthy food remains among the priorities. Russia, on the other hand, has favorable conditions - climatic, soil, and so on, which allow the dynamic development of the agricultural sector. Yes, I agree that Russia has a moral responsibility to help ensure that people in other countries do not go hungry.

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- What three life principles are you ready to practice? What words could be inscribed on your knight's coat of arms?

- Honesty, modesty and down-to-earth approach.

- Down-to-earth approach?

- In the sense of following peasant practical common sense.

Vladimir Mikheev

Istanbul - Moscow.

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PERSONALITY IN FOCUS

Stefan Dürr, a Russian entrepreneur with German roots, was born in 1964 in the city of Eberbach in southwestern Germany (Baden-Württemberg). He graduated from Bayreuth University with a degree in soil agronomist and geoecologist. In 1994, Stefan Dürr founded the EkoNiva company. He started with growing and exporting organic buckwheat and millet to European countries.

In December 2013, Stefan Dürr became a citizen of the Russian Federation: the decree was signed by President Vladimir Putin. In 2024 he was awarded the Order of Friendship for services in the field of agriculture and many years of conscientious work.

FACTS ONLY

EkoNiva-APK Group is comprised of three independent holdings: agricultural, processing, and technical. More than 183,000 of its employees work in more than 40 regions of the Russian Federation. The company owns 632 400 hectares of land, over 250 000 cattle, including 120 000 cows of high-yield breeds. EkoNiva farms produce over 4000 tons of milk per day.

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EkoNiva-APK Group manages five milk processing enterprises receiving milk from its own farms: four dairy plants and one cheese factory. Here the company produces natural dairy products on a field-to-counter basis. It meets high quality standards thanks to careful control of all indicators of raw milk at each stage of production, as well as an uncompromising approach to the naturalness of all ingredients in the final products.

FACTS ONLY

EkoNiva-Seeds company is the largest producer of field crop seeds in Russia based on one agricultural holding. The company sells about 75,000 tons of certified seeds with high genetic potential annually. Its varietal portfolio is represented not only by the best foreign genetics, but also by the most popular varieties of domestic breeding. Since 2015, the company has been developing its own breeding programs. 16 varieties of winter wheat, soybeans and lentils of EkoNiva selection are included in the State Register of Selection Achievements approved for use.

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