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VERFER UAC: Russian River And Lake Cleaner

A year and a half ago another player joined the ranks of the engineering ship manufacturers of Russia – it is LLC “VERFER – Universal Amphibious Complexes”. The company's main specialization are multifunctional and high-performance dredgers. We spoke to Igor Aleskerov, primary co-founder and investor of the company on the needs of the Russian market in this equipment, import substitution, areas of application, capabilities and advantages of their products.

– There are lots of ads for sale and rent of dredgers and for manufacturing orders over the Internet. Do you have any concerns about available market opportunities, about returns on your investments, which are probably rather significant?

– I have no concerns whatsoever. How many such offers are there on the Internet? Dozens, hundreds at most. How many companies manufacture dredgers? As far as I am aware, no more than twenty. And how many of these are capable of setting up serial production, just like us? And finally, how many dredgers can they make a year, in total? According to our estimates, it would be hundreds at best. But thousands are needed. The scope of work for this machinery is the entire country.

In fact, even the all-knowing Yandex Alice doesn't know the exact number of rivers in Russia. Various sources state that there are two to three million, and all of these require regular maintenance, and some need to be urgently rescued, including major

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navigable rivers. According to scientists, even the mighty Volga has already exhausted its self-healing capacity. It needs help. And it is the main waterway, the pride and one of the symbols of Russia. What can we say then about other rivers, especially medium and small ones? And about the lakes, which also need constant care. Our country also has many lakes—over two million.

The “Water of Russia” project is a dedicated program within the 'Ecological Well-being' national project, which is scheduled until 2030. The program aims to make our rivers and lakes deep and clean, and to improve the quality of life for people around them. We can already see examples of systematic and focused efforts in this direction.

– Could you provide any examples?

– There are a few examples right here, in Moscow. Moscow authorities and Sergei Semyonovich Sobyanin personally pay great attention to environmental issues. I didn’t notice it before, but now I regularly see special vessels, including dredgers, on the Moskva and Yauza rivers. The city has a whole fleet of these, and water quality in Moscow's rivers is showing positive dynamics. If this keeps up, I would hope that one day, the Yauza will be clean enough for swimming. Of course, that is still a long way off. But if we're talking about the long term, one question arises. Any technology has a very unpleasant property.

– What do you mean by that?

– Technology, even the most advanced, eventually becomes obsolete. It is not so much about physical wear and tear as it is about obsolescence. This is also fully applicable to dredgers. Our products integrate all currently available innovative technologies. These include both performance efficiency and control systems. Our software is regularly updated. We are ready to supply Moscow with the latest models of our equipment on a priority basis. Moscow is dear not only to its residents, but to all of Russia. Everything that concerns the image of Moscow, including the conditions of its water bodies, is a matter of national importance.

And one more thing. Our production facilities are located in Chelyabinsk region, but for obvious reasons, we conduct our business from Moscow. It is one of the world's leading political and business centers, and its role in this regard will only increase. And we try to look into the future.

– If I got this right, your dredgers are designed to solve environmental problems of rivers and lakes.

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– And many more problems besides these. Our dredgers can be used with equal efficiency in both natural and artificial water bodies, including industrial reservoirs, for example, at nuclear power plant cooling ponds, where water quality is also a safety issue.

Another vast area of application is the tailings ponds of mining and concentration plants, where solid tailings are stored underwater for reprocessing or final disposal. Mining industry professionals are well aware of likely issues: overflow of tailings ponds, collapse and erosion of dams. These could not only have a negative impact on production cycles, but lead to undesirable environmental consequences fraught with financial and reputational losses. Timely use of a dredger can prevent any such problems.

To wrap up our discussion on competition, let me assure you again that we are not afraid of it. On one hand, we are confident of the quality of our products and their market demand. And on the other hand we, as citizens of our country, could only welcome more manufacturers of dredgers, offering more modern equipment on the domestic market. The market is big enough for all of us, I’d like to reiterate.

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– The name of your company clearly states that it specializes in amphibious dredgers.

– Indeed, amphibious dredgers among others. However, we can produce both relatively compact self-propelled dredgers, as well as larger non-self-propelled ones. Both types feature several modifications. Models and their specifications are fully customized based on client preferences and the scope of work. Furthermore, our product range features auxiliary vessels to move dredged soil. But indeed, our current flagship product is the VERFER 900 multifunctional amphibious dredger.

– Does its amphibious capability design mean that it can move over land? If yes, then at what speed? And how far?

– I wouldn't drive it from Saint-Petersburg to Moscow. Though, I am confident that if we give our engineers this challenge, they will find a way to solve it. On a serious note, amphibious capability is designed for a slightly different purpose. For example, VERFER 900 can be launched and returned to shore without the use of lifting equipment. It is fully autonomous in this regard. It can operate both on water surface and on dry land. Speaking of long distance transfers, let's say, to another region, then it could be transported both by truck and by railway. This convenient capability is provided by the compact size of VERFER 900. It is 15,6 meters long and only 3,2 meters wide.

– How does such compact size combine with high performance and multifunctionality?

– As surprising as it may seem at first, this is a perfect combination. For example, the pump capacity is at least 900 cubic meters of pulp per hour. This is not inferior to the productivity of larger dredgers. The cutter suction dredger operational depth is about seven meters, and the backhoe depth is about six meters.

Going back to the Volga river, I should say that our VERFER 900 cannot operate in deep water in some sections of the main current, it will not be able to reach the bottom. It is designed to work in coastal areas, backwaters, channels and numerous tributaries. Any large river is an extensive ecosystem, a complex organism, and its health is determined by the condition of all its elements. And this dredger would be a perfect fit for medium and small rivers and lakes. Its compact size, high mobility and amphibious capability enable it to perform any tasks in hard-to-reach areas of water and in shallow waters.

– What are the specific tasks for such dredgers? In other words, which specific functions is VERFER 900 designed for?

– In a nutshell, it can perform all operations, required for vessels of this class. Let me name its key functions, along with

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dredging, laying fairways, approaches to ports, piers and berths, it can also remove sludge deposits and tailings, build up and reinforce levees. It can perform channel widening, shoreline shaping and stabilization, removal of aquatic/riparian vegetation and prevent bank waterlogging. This list is not exhaustive. This versatility is provided by availability of easily replaceable attachments, making the dredger a multipurpose vessel. Essentially, it can replace several types of equipment – from a floating excavator to a macerator vessel.

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– How did we ever get by without this kind of technology?

– First of all, for a time, the water bodies managed on their own. Now, people have to deal with the consequences of their impact on nature, and they cannot manage without modern technology.

As for specific universal amphibious dredgers, a Finnish company Aquamec Ltd used to have a monopoly in this segment of our market. Its Watermaster dredgers are still widely used in our country. But after the start of the special military operation in Ukraine, the Finns left Russia, and our VERFER 900 serves as a more than adequate replacement for their products. It is a prime example of import substitution due to its indigenous design and high-level Russian manufacturing localization. By the way, we are able to achieve 100% localization. But even today our company is completely independent from supply of components from unfriendly countries. No one can be sure what other sanctions the West could impose and how these would affect our industry.

– What if the Finns would want to come back?

– They would, sooner or later, and not only them. Russia is too huge and too tasty a piece of the market pie. We constantly hear that companies that have left our market have started registering trademarks in Russia, McDonalds being one of the latest examples. If I am not mistaken, Korean car makers have done it earlier.

But slamming the door on your way out is one thing, but coming back is another. In this case we need to recall what Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin said in this regard. He pointed out, that coming back won’t be easy for some Western companies. For those companies that had used anti-Russian rhetoric or supported the Armed Forces of Ukraine, it won’t be enough just to apologize. Overall, the President advocates a pragmatic approach, considering the interests of domestic manufacturers, and we fully support it. At the same time, we plan to develop international contacts and cooperation. However, much, if not all, depends on who we cooperate with and in which areas.

– Igor Timurovich, could you please share your plans in this regard?

– This may come as a surprise for you, but our long-term plans are connected with Africa. Indeed, they do not have as many rivers and lakes there as we have, but there is a lot of other work for dredgers. The African continent is the world's largest underground storehouse. While Africa accounts for roughly 17% of the global population, it possesses almost one-third of the world's natural resources. This means their mining and processing industry will be developing, operating the existing and

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building new mining and processing plants with their tailings ponds, as I have mentioned previously.

– It is obvious that any equipment requires maintenance. Most likely, a dredger, just like a car, is required to undergo regular check-ups. Do you provide this service?

We view the provision of such a service as a natural continuation of our production cycle. Making a contract with a customer, we enter into long-term relationships with him, since our products are designed for a long service life. In other words, these relations do not end with the delivery of a finished dredger to the customer. We provide a full range of warranty and post-warranty services. Replacement parts might be needed over time, consumables are required on an ongoing basis. We keep both spare parts and consumables in stock at all times and these can be promptly shipped to a customer. Should the need arise, our team is prepared to visit the location on-site to provide comprehensive assistance. We will also provide customer technical personnel training.

But these services are required right after we manufacture a new dredger, fit it out and run all required tests.

– And how much time does it take to build and test a dredger?

– The countdown starts at the time of contract execution. When a contract is signed, we immediately notify our production division. And they will be ready to hand over a finished dredger to a customer in one hundred days.

What is a dredger?

Dredgers are classified as technical fleet vessels. This category, long with dredgers, includes in particular, pipelayers, floating cranes, docks and drilling rigs, and also other vessels, designed for maintenance and servicing of ships, port facilities, waterways, and various natural and man-made water bodies.

Dredgers perform various environmental and industrial-economic tasks. Their primary functions are bottom dredging and water body cleaning. Dredgers can be utilized for mining sea and river sand, combating coastal waterlogging, constructing and reinforcing dams, as well as many other operations.

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