

PRAVDA Views Economic Side of Russia Ties

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[By correspondents O. Stepanenko and A. Ulitenok:
"What Will We Build on the Ruins?"]

[Text] As a result of talks in Minsk between B. Yeltsin, president of Russia, and S. Shushkevich, chairman of the Belarus Supreme Soviet, a number of important documents have been signed. They are a communique on the results of the talks between the official delegations of the Republic of Belarus and the RSFSR, an agreement on the principles of trade and economic cooperation between the two republics, and a joint statement by their leaders.

The speeches by the participants in the Russia-Belarus bilateral meeting and materials issued to journalists placed emphasis on the economy. They point out the objective value of preserving the single economic area, which is bound together by thousands of vital blood vessels and nerves.

For example, the RSFSR supplies Belarus with oil, natural gas, coal, rolled ferrous metal, nonferrous metals, commercial lumber and sawn timber, chemical products, raw materials for the chemical industry, cement, machines and equipment, fish and fish products, vegetables, and consumer goods.

Belarus supplies the RSFSR with trucks, tractors, tractor trailers, elevators, metal-cutting machine tools, bearings, electric motors, computer equipment and spares, man-made and synthetic yarns and fibers, tires, flax fiber, potatoes, meat and dairy produce, and consumer goods.

The RSFSR accounts for 64 percent of the total volume of output imported into Belarus and Belarus exports approximately the same amount of its output to Russia. Essentially this is a single economic organism, and any disruption to it, no matter how slight, threatens not just calamity but catastrophe to many thousands of people.

The immediate future is even more alarming. Whereas last year Belarus refined around 40 million tonnes of oil, under the draft intergovernmental agreement for 1992 only 25 million tonnes (the state order) have been allocated, and a quota is included for purchasing 5 million tonnes by direct contracts. Supplies of paper pulp from Russia are planned to be almost halved. The question of deliveries of precious metals has not been resolved.

Russia is suffering, too. For example, a single electronic industry production association, "Monolit," supplies output to 1,500 Russian enterprises. The disruption of deliveries is undermining the production of television sets, radio receivers, tape recorders, and other radioelectronic equipment in the RSFSR. It is the same in other sectors.

The communique on the results of the talks between official delegations of the Republic of Belarus and the RSFSR—the main political document of the bilateral meeting—should be viewed as an attempt to avert the processes of disintegration.

The communique's key phrases show that even for Russia and Belarus the creation of a fully interconnected and integrated organism is no longer being raised as an issue. As Yeltsin stated, the idea of federation and the idea of a semi-confederation are now losing ground. And that is why the main task, in his words, is to find points of cooperation and collaboration—primarily, of course, in the most vitally important sphere of the economy, to which a special agreement is dedicated. The essence of the agreement is to pursue trade and economic mutual relations between the two republics within the framework of an economic community based on mutual benefit.

Meanwhile we can say that the attitude to those relations, like the attitude to bilateral action itself, is mixed here in the Republic of Belarus. The Belorussian people want the closest unity not only with Russia but also with the other former republics of the former USSR. In the March referendum the overwhelming majority of them voted for the preservation of the USSR.

While supporting the sound ideas of unification, many are convinced that it is necessary to determine more precisely the form and principles of that unification. They are subjecting Yeltsin's economic concept and program above all to uncompromising criticism.

Those who oppose the rapprochement of Belarus and Russia here have seized on the weakness of the Russian leadership's economic program. After B. Yeltsin's speech in the Belorussian parliament, where he tried to justify the price liberalization policy, the opposition here immediately organized a news conference.

In view of the omissions and mistakes by the Union and Russian leaders who included in the economic concept of perestrojka something more terrible than a nuclear bomb—the breakdown of interests between people, collectives, regions, and republics—opposition leader Z. Poznyak concludes: Belarus must take the path of an independent state with its own currency, army, and other attributes. In short, it must completely break away from Russia.

The meeting between the leaders of Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha is taking place behind closed doors.