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Current Problems of Cooperation between Russian and Belarusian Enterprises: Region's View



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Abstract. Under the unfavorable geopolitical situation, strengthening bilateral cooperation between Russia and the Republic of Belarus is of particular relevance. Currently, Russia is Belarus' key trade partner. Despite serious challenges, sanctions and restrictions, Russian and Belarusian enterprises continue developing cooperation in almost all sectors of the national economy and achieving results. According to the results of the first 11 months of 2022, the historically maximum volume of mutual turnover of goods and services – 45 billion U.S. dollars – has been achieved. Analytical data and expert assessments show that the current environment makes it possible to intensify bilateral cooperation between enterprises of the two countries and bring it to a new level. On the other hand, as experts note, the existing situation may become a source of problems that hinder the potential of such cooperation. This condition determines the topic relevance and the purpose of the work. The research aims to identify the barriers to cooperation between the enterprises of Russia and the Republic of Belarus and develop proposals for their elimination. In order to achieve this goal, we have developed a toolkit, which was used to conduct an expert survey (in-depth interview method) of managers of enterprises of Russia's region (the Vologda Oblast), cooperating with counterparties from the Republic of Belarus. We carried out the selection of the expert group by means of the documentary method. The heads of six enterprises of the region, whose activities correlate with the structure of the volume of foreign trade turnover between the Vologda Oblast and the Republic of Belarus, took part in the survey. Approbation of the developed toolkit allows identifying certain problems arising in the course of bilateral cooperation: the problem of value added tax refund in the framework of foreign trade operations, the presence of customs restrictions, including on special-purpose products, the negative effects of economic sanctions and others.

Key words: Russia, Belarus, entrepreneurial sector, enterprise, problems, prospects, development, innovations, scientific and technological potential, interview.

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, its former constituent republics began searching for various forms of partnership on mutually beneficial terms. This made it possible to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a free trade zone. In addition, work was launched on the creation of integration projects in the socio-economic sphere¹.

Relations between Russia and Belarus began occupying a special place among the interactions in the CIS format. The most important event in the framework of strengthening bilateral partnership was the signing of the Treaty on the Establishment

of the Union State (December 8, 1999)². The main objectives of the creation of the Union State were to ensure democratic development, strengthen friendship, and improve the quality of life. Moreover, there is a need to create a single economic space based on the integration of the material and intellectual potentials of the participating countries³.

The development of scientific and industrial relations is becoming one of the most significant components of the strategic partnership between

¹ The Union State: History of joint development. Available at: https://xn--c1anggbpdf.xn--p1ai/history/20years_of_union_state/page726227.html (accessed: March 27, 2023).

² Belarus and Russia: Building the future together. Available at: <http://www.loevkraj.by/> (accessed: March 27, 2023).

³ The Union State: History of joint development. Available at: https://xn--c1anggbpdf.xn--p1ai/history/20years_of_union_state/page726227.html (accessed: March 27, 2023).

Russia and the Republic of Belarus (RB). The basis for the formation of the common scientific and technological space of the Union State is the Union Programs (UP)⁴ (Vityaz, 2017).

The first UPs were developed more than twenty years ago. Regulated by a number of agreements between Russia and Belarus, they appeared even before the formation of the Union State as such⁵ (Vaganova, 2017; Dugova, 2017; Davydenko, Litvinyuk, 2022; Sotnikov, 2022). As relations developed within the framework of supranational formation, new programs were created (Shurubovich, 2019; Rauter et al., 2019). Since 2000, 57 programs of the Union State have been implemented to develop new technologies and create innovative products. In addition, in the fall of 2021, 28 UPs were published concerning the further deepening of integration processes⁶.

The issues and directions of economic integration of Russia and the Republic of Belarus are not limited to the Union Programs alone. Tatiana Runets, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Council of the Republic on Economy, Budget and Finance, noted: “Under the conditions of sanctions pressure, the key prerequisite for the integration of our countries is the expansion of industrial cooperation and the implementation of joint projects in the real sector of the economy. Trade cooperation is sometimes vulnerable, and joint business will make the integration process irreversible”⁷.

⁴ Meeting of the Bureau of the Inter-Academic Council of RAS and NAS of Belarus. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoYK79D64X0>

⁵ Joint Statement by the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus on the current development and further steps to deepen integration processes within the union state. Available at: <http://government.ru/news/43234/> (accessed: March 27, 2023).

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Tatiana Runets: Time requires prompt decisions to strengthen the economy of the Union State. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2022/05/04/tatiana-runec-vremia-trebuets-operativnyh-reshenij-dlia-ukrepleniia-ekonomiki-soiuznogo-gosudarstva.html> (accessed: January 30, 2023).

Along with the creation of the Union State, the most important instruments for strengthening integration processes that stimulate cooperation between Belarusian and Russian economic entities were the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union⁸. The development of integration processes in various formats has led to a significant increase in the volume of mutual trade, the indicators of which have more than tripled over the past 20 years. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat), the trade turnover of the two countries in 2021 increased by about 35% compared to the previous year. According to the results of 11 months of 2022, the historically maximum volume of mutual turnover of goods and services in the amount of 45 billion U.S. dollars has been reached⁹.

Against the background of changing geopolitical conditions, Russia and Belarus are joining efforts to resist the existing restrictions and are actively working to minimize their consequences. Bilateral projects are being implemented in the field of import substitution, ensuring the smooth operation of financial and commodity markets, and the formation of new production chains¹⁰.

Since enterprises and organizations are key actors in the framework of international economic cooperation, this study is aimed at identifying current problems and determining prospects arising in the course of cooperation between enterprises of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to solve a number of tasks.

⁸ Bordachev T.V., Vishnevskii K.O., Glazatova M.K. et al. (2019). Eurasian economic integration: Development prospects and strategic challenges for Russia: In: *Report to the 20th April International Scientific Conference on the Problems of Development of Economy and Society, Moscow, 9–12 April 2019*. Moscow: Izd. dom Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki.

⁹ Belarus has for the first time reached a trade surplus with Russia. Available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/business/880473> (accessed: January 30, 2023).

¹⁰ Import substitution in Belarus at the expense of the Russian loan will start in 2022. Available at: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16498395> (accessed: January 30, 2023).

1. To characterize the drivers, methods and instruments of foreign trade; to highlight the features of their implementation within the framework of bilateral cooperation between Russia and Belarus.

2. To analyze the dynamics of statistical indicators characterizing trade and economic cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus.

3. To develop tools to identify problems of interaction between Russian and Belarusian enterprises.

4. To test the developed tools (using the example of the Vologda Oblast enterprises interacting with contractors from Belarus).

5. To propose solutions to the identified problems, taking into account the positions of heads of enterprises.

The scientific novelty of the research consists in the development and testing of tools that allow identifying problems and prospects of bilateral cooperation between enterprises of Russia and the Republic of Belarus at the regional level. The practical significance lies in the fact that the results obtained (identified problems of bilateral cooperation and ways to solve them) can be useful not only to representatives of federal, regional and local authorities whose competence includes issues of international cooperation, but also to heads of enterprises that interact (or plan to start interacting) with partners within the framework of their activities from Belarus.

Literature review

The history of the development of Russian-Belarusian state relations is the subject of a number of scientific papers. For example, the study (Nemensky, 2016) touches on the aspect of economic relations between the two countries and domestic political discussions in Belarus on foreign policy in the eastern direction. Special attention is paid to the project of the Union State, the problems of the participation of the Republic of Belarus in integration projects with Russia.

The analysis of the formation of Russian-Belarusian cooperation demonstrates that both countries have always benefited from the partnership and mutual benefit, and “the integration process, which has already been extended to the economic sphere, can be considered natural” (Kurakina, Barshova, 2020).

F. Yusupov (Yusupov, 2013) believes that at the regional level, economic partnership is organized in the format of international integration blocks. In the CIS space, taking into account the development of international economic cooperation processes, sub-regional blocks have also begun forming. A good example of this is the Union State.

According to S.V. Moleva (Moleva, 2012), one of the most important areas of economic cooperation within the framework of the Union State can be considered the development of cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the trade and economic sphere. Within the framework of the study (Koloda et al., 2019), issues related to the foreign economic relations of the two states are analyzed in more detail. It was noted that Belarus is a strategic trading partner of the Russian Federation.

To date, the Union State has a complex of joint organizations and enterprises, economic and scientific and technical programs are being implemented (Kurakina, Barshova, 2020). Nevertheless, foreign trade is considered to be the most developed form of economic relations between Russia and Belarus.

According to some estimates, trade accounts for about 80% of the total volume of international economic relations (IER). International trade defines most types of international cooperation¹¹ (Bems et al., 2013; Boddewyn, 2016; Evenett, 2019; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2013; Mutz et al., 2017).

¹¹ International trade and its benefits. Available at: <https://www.bibliofond.ru/view.aspx?id=512277> (accessed: June 1, 2023).

We should note that a unified approach to the essence of international trade and economic activity has not been formed at the moment in both foreign and Russian economic literature. Most researchers define such activities at the country level, and their characteristics are united by the general trend of implementing IER across state borders. International trade and economic activity at the regional level represents the economic relations of economic entities of a particular region of the country with economic entities of other regions of the world (Xu, 2021).

Success in achieving the guidelines of interaction largely depends on the effectiveness of the use of the theoretical foundations and world practice of international trade and economic cooperation (factors that determine its development, conditions, forms and methods). Both Russian (Malakhova, 2021; Rodygina, Bessonova, 2018; Umgaev et al., 2019) and foreign scientists (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2013) devoted their works to the study of factors promoting international trade and economic cooperation.

S. Xu (Xu, 2021) identifies the following factors promoting the development of international trade and economic cooperation: scientific and technological progress, global problems (for example, food, environmental, etc.), as well as the heterogeneity of the development of regions of the world. As the author rightly notes, the improvement of production technologies stimulates the exchange of resources, and the presence of global problems is almost always concentrated within the international environment.

At the same time, in addition to the factors contributing to the development of international trade and economic cooperation, it is necessary to highlight the negative factors of inhibition of this process: economic and political conflicts between countries and regions of the world, underdevelopment of market infrastructure in individual countries, etc. (Malakhova, 2021; Xu, 2021).

Factors promoting international trade and economic cooperation determine the forms and methods of international trade (Evenett, 2019; Efimenko, 2020). Among the key forms of international trade, it is possible to specify trade in finished products, trade in commodities, trade in intellectual property, counter and exchange trading. The characteristics of each form of the IER will reveal their specifics and subspecies (*Tab. 1*).

Thus, there are various forms of international trade. They mainly depend on the subject and nature of foreign trade operations. Most often they are classified according to two criteria: the subject of trade and the way of organizing relationships between partners. When analyzing the forms of international trade, it is possible to describe in detail the volume and structure of trade of an individual country or group of countries, as well as the world as a whole. Since each of them has its advantages and disadvantages, it is possible to identify which of them is most beneficial for the importer or exporter in certain trade relationships.

To date, there are various methods of international trade. Their main goal remains unchanged – the exchange of goods on mutually beneficial terms. The most well-known methods of international trade are export-import operations (Mutz, 2017; Kovaleva, 2020).

The theoretical foundations and world practice of international trade and economic cooperation in the context of this study will be considered taking into account the needs and capabilities of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus.

Apart from political and economic factors, geographical, linguistic and cultural factors had a special impact on the development of trade and economic cooperation between Russia and Belarus. Russia and Belarus are border countries. Moreover, they are united by a commonality of traditions, culture, language, and mutually oriented economy (Kovaleva, 2020).

Table 1. Characteristics of international trade forms

International trade form	Characteristic/Description
Final products trading	It is carried out directly between exporters and importers, as well as through intermediaries: consignees, distributors, etc. It is important to emphasize that the final products are intended for ultimate consumption. Final products include a part of the nomenclature of machine-building production, electronics, electricity, etc. The higher the degree of processing of final products, the higher its competitive qualities.
Raw commodities trading	It is considered a traditional form of international trade and accounts for more than 20% of the commodity structure of world exports. At the same time, mineral raw materials account for more than 12%, and agricultural raw materials and food – almost 9%. We should note that there is a significant gap between producers and consumers, which determines the increasing role of world markets in the redistribution of resources.
Intellectual property trading	In this case, intellectual property objects in the form of patents, trademarks, know-how, etc. will act as goods, and the rights to use them will be the subject of international transactions. The results of intellectual activity are equated to the number of expensive assets in commercial transactions. The price of some famous brands can reach several billion dollars. For example, in 2017, the top ten best and most expensive brands included Apple – 184.154 billion U.S. dollars, Google – 141.703 billion U.S. dollars, Microsoft – 79.999 billion U.S. dollars, Samsung – 56.249 billion U.S. dollars, IBM – 46.829 billion U.S. dollars, and Microsoft – 12.829 billion U.S. dollars.
Countertrade	It implies transactions in which one party supplies products or services to the other, and the counterparty, in turn, sells its products or technologies to the partner. Thus, there is a mutual linking of the movement of goods in both directions.
Exchange trade	It presents organized trade in commodities, currency, securities, etc. through the intermediation of exchanges. Transactions on the exchange are executed without preliminary inspection, usually on lots of goods of a certain (basic) grade. In exchange trading, only about 10% of the traded goods are real goods, the remaining 90% are futures.
Source: own compilation using the method of content analysis by: Regulation of international trade in commodities. Available at: https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/546 (accessed: March 29, 2023); International trade in intellectual property. Available at: https://scienceforum.ru/2018/article/2018007416#:~:text= (accessed: March 29, 2023); Counter trade and its features. Available at: https://vvs-info.ru/helpful_information/poleznaya-informatsiya/vstrechnaya-torgovlya/ (accessed: March 29, 2023); What is stock trading? Description and definition of the concept. Available at: https://biznes-prost.ru/birzhevaya-torgovlya.html (accessed: March 29, 2023).	

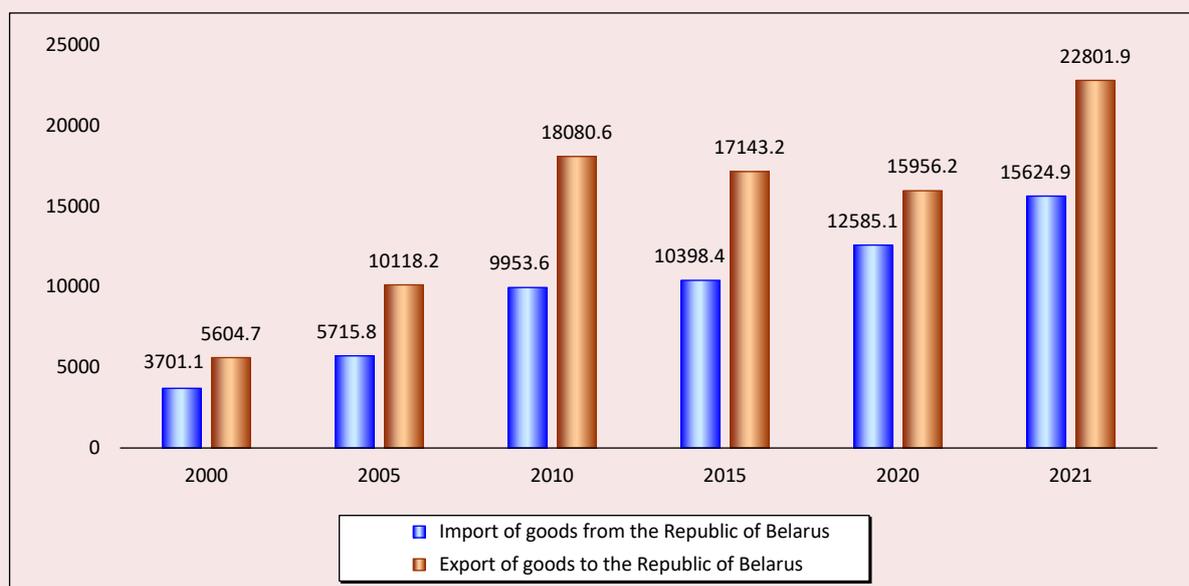
It is important to note that in the framework of the Union State all the forms of international trade discussed above are developed, but there are territorial specifics: when exporting from Russia to the Republic of Belarus the most common form is trade in raw materials, while when importing from Belarus to Russia it is trade in finished products and disassembled products. The “privileged” trade regime allows the Russian Federation to receive the necessary goods from the Republic of Belarus at reasonable prices: trucks, agricultural machinery (including tractors), household appliances, etc. The opportunity to buy Russian energy carriers (primarily natural gas) at preferential prices is of great importance for Belarus¹².

¹² Regional cooperation between Russia and Belarus within the EAEU framework. Available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/regionalnoe-sotrudnichestvo-rossii-i-belorussii-v-ramkakh-eaes/> (accessed: April 13, 2023).

It is also worth noting that within the framework of cooperation between Russia and Belarus, the main methods of international trade (export-import operations) are being implemented. Traditionally, the Russian Federation is the main trading partner of the Republic of Belarus, as well as the largest export market for Belarusian producers (Ibraeva, Dzhunusheva, 2020; Filkevich, 2018). Russia’s share in Belarus’ trade turnover is consistently about 50%. The Republic of Belarus remains an important trading partner of the Russian Federation, ranking 4th in terms of trade turnover between Russia and the countries of the world and 1st in the CIS. This makes it necessary to maintain a close relationship and cooperation between the two strategic partners¹³.

¹³ Russia – Belarus 2022. Economy: What will be tomorrow? Available at: <https://corp.wtmoscow.ru/services/international-partnership/analytics/rossiya-belorussiya-2022-ekonomika-chto-zavtra/> (accessed: March 29, 2023).

Figure 1. Dynamics of foreign trade turnover of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus for the period from 2000 to 2020, million U.S. dollars



Source: Foreign trade of the Republic of Belarus – 2021: Statistical collection. Available at: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/c4c/n6k9xzd6umpg61f8whfybttkcvl4t5t.pdf> (accessed: January 25, 2023); Foreign trade of the Republic of Belarus – 2018: Statistical compendium. Available at: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/b5e/b5eeb063dcad3c19ec3f27d642270471.pdf> (accessed: January 25, 2023); Customs statistics 2020, 2021. Available at: <http://stat.customs.gov.ru/analysis> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

Since the formation of the Union State, the foreign trade turnover of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus has been characterized by growth (Fig. 1). The export of Russian goods to Belarus over the period from 2010 to 2021 increased by more than four times. Throughout the entire observation period, there has also been a steady increase in imports of goods from the Republic of Belarus to Russia. The value of the trade balance for each year of observation presented has positive values: in 2021 it amounted to 7,177 million U.S. dollars, which is 73.5% more than in 2000.

Separately, we would like to focus on the indicators of foreign trade between Russia and Belarus in 2021 and 2022. It is especially important from the perspective of unfavorable economic conditions and high geopolitical risks caused by

the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the introduction of economic sanctions by a number of foreign countries.

According to official data of the Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation, in 2021 the import of Belarusian goods to the Russian market amounted to 15624.9 million U.S. dollars, which is almost 20% higher than in the previous year¹⁴. Moreover, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, in 2021, 31 new commodity items in the amount of 0.6 million U.S. dollars appeared in the structure of imports of goods, for which no deliveries to Russia were carried out in 2020¹⁵.

¹⁴ Customs statistics 2020, 2021. Available at: <http://stat.customs.gov.ru/analysis> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

¹⁵ On the results of Belarus' foreign trade with Russia in 2021. Available at: https://russia.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/trade/ (accessed: January 25, 2023).

Probably, the growth of foreign trade turnover in 2021 within the framework of the Union State is ensured by the fact that enterprises of Russia and Belarus have successfully cooperated in the implementation of projects to combat the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁶.

It is also important to note that against the background of the imposed sanctions, Russia and Belarus are joining efforts to minimize their effects. In January – February 2022, the countries managed to maintain positive dynamics in the field of trade and economic cooperation. Bilateral trade increased by 29.2% and reached 6500 million U.S. dollars. Russian exports amounted to 3900 million U.S. dollars, Belarusian imports – 2600 million U.S. dollars¹⁷.

Nevertheless, with all the indisputable achievements in the development of the Union State, there are serious shortcomings. As noted in the text of the analytical report “Russian-Belarusian cooperation: Time for strategic decisions”, prepared by experts of the A.A. Gromyko Association for Foreign Policy Studies in 2021, modernization of economic and political institutions is required to increase the stability and competitiveness of the Union State, strengthen Russian-Belarusian ties. The Union State is in dire need of a common industrial strategy and industrial policy¹⁸.

In addition, the most important problem of the Union State is the lack of a single legal space

(Zaitov, 2021). According to the researcher, it is necessary to pay special attention to the formation of a unified legal field and unification of legislation.

These and some other problems may cause barriers to the development of cooperation between enterprises of Russia and the Republic of Belarus.

Research methodology

The paper uses the methodology of system analysis using quantitative and qualitative methods of socio-economic research. Separately, we would like to note the use of the sociological method (interviewing). With its help, a survey was conducted of the heads of the Vologda Oblast enterprises cooperating with partners from the Republic of Belarus.

The information base includes scientific articles, monographs, regulatory documents, as well as information and analytical materials published on Internet resources. In order to substantiate the relevance and more complete disclosure of the research issues, information from the following organizations was used as information sources: the Russian Export Center, the Federal Customs Service, Rosstat, Belstat.

Characteristics of the research tools. In order to identify the features and problems within the framework of bilateral cooperation, an expert interview was conducted with representatives of organizations of the Vologda Oblast that cooperate with partners from the Republic of Belarus. A guide was developed for interviewing. Conventionally, all the questions included in the guide can be divided into three blocks (*Tab. 2*):

- certain aspects of cooperation between Russian enterprises and organizations from the Republic of Belarus: features, directions, advantages, plans, etc. (questions 1–5, 7, 8, 10);
- cooperation in the implementation of innovative projects (question 9);
- problems of cooperation (questions 6, 11).

¹⁶ Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and Russia on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Available at: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/b4996791161153f5.html (accessed: January 25, 2023).

¹⁷ Russia – Belarus 2022. Economy: What will be tomorrow? Available at: <https://corp.wtcmoscow.ru/services/international-partnership/analytcs/rossiya-belorussiya-2022-ekonomika-chto-zavtra/> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

¹⁸ Russian-Belarusian Cooperation: Time for strategic decisions: Analytical report. A.A. Gromyko Association for Foreign Policy Studies. Available at: <https://www.instituteofeurope.ru/images/news/092021/gromyko2021-2.pdf> (accessed: January 27, 2023).

Table 2. List of questions included in the guide

No.	Question wording
1	Since what year does your company cooperate with Belarusian partners?
2	In what areas do you cooperate with colleagues from the Republic of Belarus?
3	What was the reason you started working with them?
4	What are the main features of cooperation with Belarusian enterprises?
5	What advantages does this cooperation bring to you?
6	What are the challenges of cooperation? What are they related to?
7	How have the conditions of cooperation changed over the last 3 years (improved, worsened, not changed)?
8	What are your future plans for cooperation with Belarusian partners? What projects would you like to implement?
9	Are you ready to develop cooperation with the Republic of Belarus in the field of innovation? What will you need for this and what opportunities do you have for this?
10	Can you tell us how many years (1–3–5) ahead you see your company's development prospects? What are your main advantages that can help you realize your strategic objectives for the indicated period of time?
11	Would you name three major problems for your business personally, the solution to which would allow significantly improving efficiency and depends on: - local authorities; - regional authorities; - federal authorities.

Table 3. List of the Vologda Oblast enterprises for conducting interviews

Name of organization	Main type of activity (in accordance with the Russian National Classifier of Types of Economic Activity, OKVED)	City, address	Name of expert
AO Cherepovets Casting and Mechanical Plant	Manufacture of machinery and equipment for metallurgy (28.91)	Cherepovets, Stroyindustriya Street, 12	Vladimir N. Boglaev
AO Vologda Optical and Mechanical Plant	Manufacture of arms and ammunition (25.40)	Vologda, Maltsev Street, 54	Aleksei V. Grigor'ev
AO Cherepovetsles	Activities of holding companies (64.20)	Cherepovets, Lenin Street, 80	Valerii N. Pisarev
OOO Voltri	Production of folk arts and crafts (32.99.8)	Vologda, Kozlenskaya Street, 45A	Ol'ga V. Chashnikova
AO Russkii biskvit	Manufacture of breadcrumbs, cookies and other dry bakery products, manufacture of flour confectionery products, cakes, pies, pastries and cookies intended for long-term storage (10.72)	Cherepovets, K. Marx Street, 25	Andrei Yu. Gubarev
OOO Trading House Russkii chai	Manufacture of tea and coffee (10.83)	Cherepovets, Belinsky Street, 4, building 3	Igor' O. Bogdanov

Source: Cloud-based system for business process automation "SBIS". Available at: <https://sbis.ru/> (accessed: November 1, 2022).

We carried out the selection of the expert group using the documentary method in accordance with the structure of the export of goods produced in the Vologda Oblast to the Republic of Belarus, as well as the import of goods from Belarus to the Vologda Oblast.

Table 3 gives a more detailed description of the enterprises.

Results and discussion

A special place in foreign trade with the Republic of Belarus is occupied by the regions that are part of the Northwestern Federal District (NWFED). This is partly due to their economic and geographical location (the presence of a common border). In addition, the specifics and economic purpose of the goods supplied from the

Northwestern Federal District to the Republic of Belarus are important from the position of strengthening foreign economic relations.

The regions of the Northwestern Federal District are the most important suppliers to the Republic of Belarus of alloy steel and products made from it (Vologda Oblast), as well as passenger cars, which are assembled at the enterprises Avtotor (Kaliningrad Oblast), Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Rus (Saint Petersburg) and a number of others.

In addition, bearings and optical equipment (Vologda Oblast, Saint Petersburg), textiles (Vologda, Pskov, Novgorod oblasts), phosphorus and nitrogen fertilizers (Vologda Oblast), oil and petroleum products (Komi Republic), etc. are exported.

Dairy products, meat, fish, sugar, tractors and long-haul trucks, trucks, passenger cars, automobile tires, furniture, refrigerators, freezers, gas and electric stoves predominate among the import positions of the NWFD regions from Belarus.

Table 4. Dynamics of exports and imports of goods between the regions of the Northwestern Federal District and the Republic of Belarus for the period from 2000 to 2021

Import of goods from the Republic of Belarus to the regions of the Northwestern Federal District (million U.S. dollars)							
	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2021/ 2000 (times)
Russian Federation	3701.1	5715.8	9953.6	10398.4	12585.07	15624.92	4.22
NWFD	433.7	804.3	1289.2	1442.1	1474.96	1870.37	4.31
Arkhangelsk Oblast	4.5	12.2	26.1	26.7	10.83	8.08	1.80
Vologda Oblast	9.9	72.9	56	104.7	87.27	123.42	12.47
Saint Petersburg	258.6	470.5	828.2	854.5	825.65	1025.19	3.96
Kaliningrad Oblast	58.2	71.0	75.5	93.1	342.78	474.35	8.15
Leningrad Oblast	25.1	54.4	134.7	195.5	95.01	128.85	5.13
Murmansk Oblast	17.4	9.9	32.8	19.3	5.59	4.73	0.27
Novgorod Oblast	13	49.6	45.1	56.2	23.66	21.43	1.65
Pskov Oblast	16.9	35.2	60.6	66	64.44	38.98	2.31
Republic of Karelia	9	16.8	19.8	15.8	17.78	40.98	4.55
Komi Republic	21.1	11.8	10.4	10.3	1.96	4.36	0.21
Export of goods to the Republic of Belarus from the NWFD regions (million U.S. dollars)							
	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2021/ 2000 (times)
Russian Federation	5604.7	10118.2	18080.6	17143.2	15956.22	22801.93	4.07
NWFD	390.4	766.7	1571.5	1336.8	1909.95	2679.64	6.86
Arkhangelsk Oblast	8.6	6.5	64.9	20.9	17.46	24.60	2.86
Vologda Oblast	36.7	184.9	323.9	165.2	280.38	402.42	10.97
Saint Petersburg	192.4	266	440.8	546.6	1130.08	1555.35	8.08
Kaliningrad Oblast	44.1	56.7	40.5	117.5	146.18	259.03	5.87
Leningrad Oblast	24	100.7	188	235.5	193.82	270.28	11.26
Murmansk Oblast	24	30.8	97.4	35.4	0.60	0.73	0.03
Novgorod Oblast	19.7	39.2	65	41.2	33.45	40.77	2.07
Pskov Oblast	21.1	29.3	73.1	35.9	88.41	89.83	4.26
Republic of Karelia	5.6	10.9	13.5	4.6	5.01	19.24	3.44
Komi Republic	14.2	41.7	264.4	134	14.56	17.39	1.22

Source: Foreign trade of the Republic of Belarus – 2021: Statistical collection. Available at: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/c4c/n6k9zdx6umpg61f8whfybttkcvl4t5t.pdf> (accessed: April 25, 2023); Foreign trade of the Republic of Belarus – 2018: Statistical collection. Available at: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/b5e/b5eeb063dcad3c19ec3f27d642270471.pdf> (accessed: April 25, 2023); Customs statistics 2020, 2021. Available at: <http://stat.customs.gov.ru/analysis> (accessed: May 1, 2023); Trade between Russia and Belarus in 2021. Russia's foreign trade. Available at: <https://russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2022-02/torgovlya-mezhdu-rossiy-i-belarusyu-v-2021-g/> (accessed: May 1, 2023); Trade between Russia and Belarus in 2020. Available at: <https://russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2021-02/torgovlya-mezhdu-rossiy-i-belarusyu-v-2020-g/> (accessed: April 25, 2023).

The dynamics of indicators characterizing the foreign trade turnover of the regions of the Northwestern Federal District and the Republic of Belarus for the period from 2000 to 2021 shows a significant increase (imports of goods from the Republic of Belarus to the regions of the Northwestern Federal District increased 4.2 times, and exports of goods to the Republic of Belarus from the regions of the Northwestern Federal District – almost 4.1 times; *Tab. 4*). However, we should pay attention that for most of the years under consideration, the trade balance for the NWFD as a whole is negative. Obviously, this is due to the “raw material” specifics of exports from the Northwestern Federal District to Belarus (mainly the so-called “first processing” products are transported). At the same time, products with high added value are imported from Belarus to the Russian Federation.

Let us analyze in more detail the development of cooperation between economic entities with counterparties from the Republic of Belarus on the example of the Vologda Oblast. The joint work of the Vologda Oblast and the Republic of Belarus on foreign trade issues is carried out within the framework of the Agreement between the Government of the Vologda Oblast and the Government of the Republic of Belarus on trade, economic, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation of 2006¹⁹.

The Vologda Oblast and the Republic of Belarus are similar in the structure of industrial production. Both in the Vologda Oblast and in Belarus, ferrous metallurgy, chemical production (primarily mineral fertilizers), animal husbandry, forestry, etc. are developed. And this indicates that the problems resulting from the activities of industrial enterprises can be considered common for the Vologda Oblast and the Republic of Belarus.

¹⁹ The Vologda Oblast intends to strengthen trade and economic ties with the Republic of Belarus. Available at: <https://www.krassever.ru/news/vologodskaya-oblast-namerena-ukreplyat-torgovo-ekonomicheskiye-svyazi-s-respublikoy-belarus> (accessed: January 27, 2023).

Among the Vologda Oblast enterprises that actively supply their products to Belarus, it is possible to mention PAO Severstal, AO Apatit, AO ChLMZ, AO VBF, AO VOMZ and others. At the same time, the main suppliers from Belarus to the Vologda Oblast are the enterprises MAZ, MTZ.

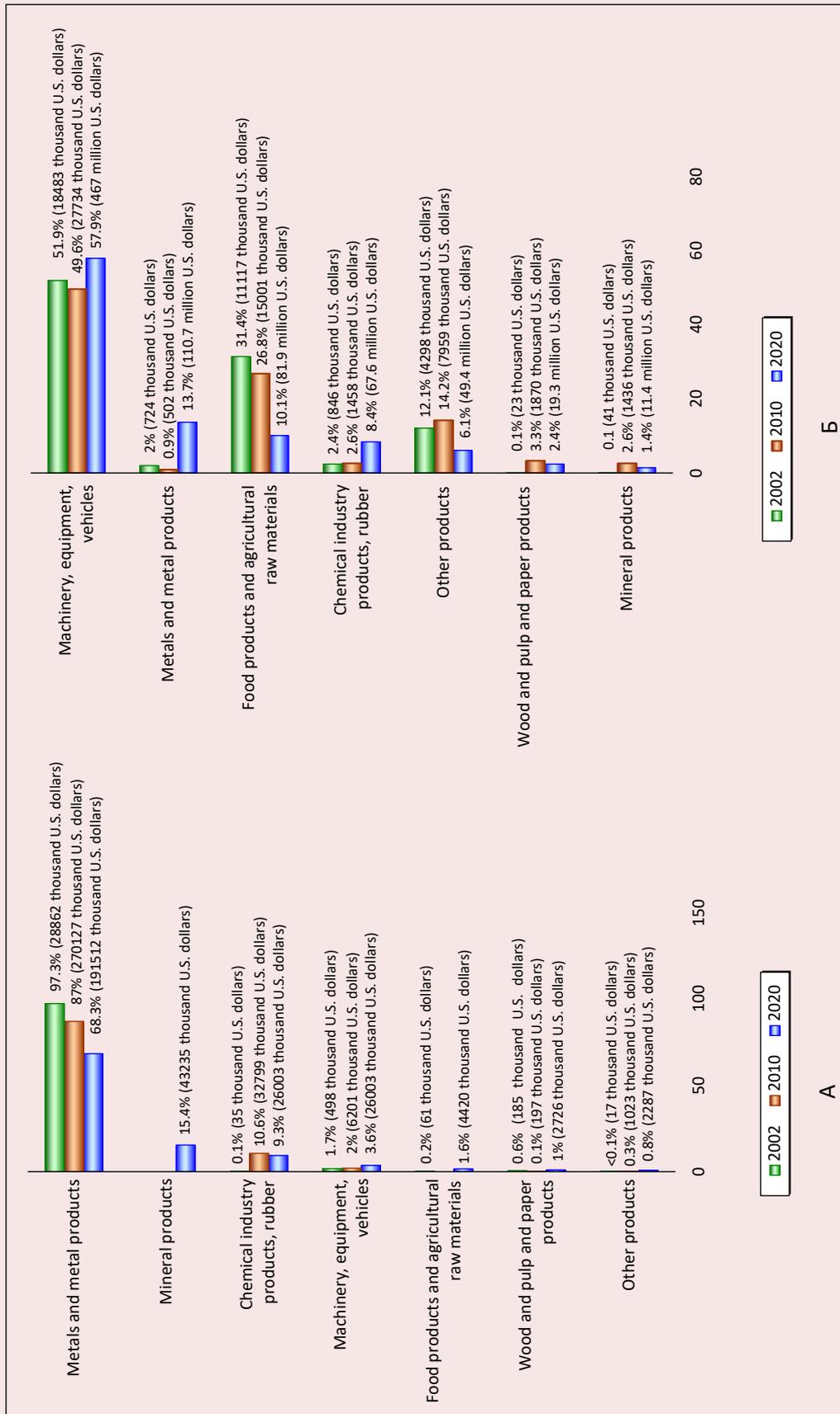
Figure 2 presents the dynamics exports structure from the Vologda Oblast to the Republic of Belarus and imports.

The volume of foreign trade turnover of the Vologda Oblast with the Republic of Belarus has increased by 40.5% since the beginning of 2021. In addition, the import of Belarusian products to the Vologda Oblast showed an increase of 53.4%. The Republic of Belarus ranks first according to the results of the Vologda Oblast’s foreign trade in 2020 and third according to the results of the third quarter of 2021. Moreover, the parties have done a lot of work to coordinate the Program for the development of cooperation between the Government of the Vologda Oblast and the Government of the Republic of Belarus for 2021–2025²⁰. Within the framework of the program, considerable attention is paid to creating favorable conditions for cooperation between enterprises of Russia and the Republic of Belarus.

At the same time, we should note that the enterprises of the region produce mainly products of the first stages for export to the Republic of Belarus. However, the most promising direction for export should be the products of the upper processing, which Belarus is not fully provided with. This, in turn, will require increasing the innovative potential of enterprises, increasing their level of innovation activity, as well as removing barriers that hinder bilateral cooperation in the field of innovation development.

²⁰ The volume of foreign trade turnover of the Vologda Oblast with the Republic of Belarus has increased by 40.5% since the beginning of 2021. Available at: https://vologda-oblast.ru/novosti/novosti_organov_vlasti/obemy_vneshnetorgovogo_oborota_vologodskoy_oblasti_s_respublikoy_belarus_uvelichilis_s_nachala_2021_goda_na_40_5/ (accessed: November 23, 2022).

Figure 2. A – Dynamics of the structure of exports of goods from the Vologda Oblast to the Republic of Belarus (2002–2020);
 B – Dynamics of the structure of imports of goods to the Vologda Oblast from the Republic of Belarus (2002–2020)



Source: Development of foreign economic activity in the Vologda Oblast. Vologdatastat. Available at: <https://vologdatastat.gks.ru/> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

To study the prospects, directions and problems of interaction between enterprises of the Vologda Oblast and organizations from the Republic of Belarus, we conducted an in-depth interview with the heads of the region's enterprises.

The period of cooperation of the organizations whose heads took part in the expert interview with partners from the Republic of Belarus is significant. Most of the enterprises have been carrying out bilateral cooperation for more than 10 years (AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles, OOO Voltri, AO Russkii biskvit, AO Cherepovets Casting and Mechanical Plant, AO VOMZ). At the same time, the general director of OOO Trading House Russkii chai, I.O. Bogdanov, noted that his company had started cooperating with Belarusian colleagues since 2020. The reason probably lies in the fact that this company has been operating on the market only since 2015.

The reasons for starting cooperation are different in each case. For example, as noted by the General Director of AO ChLMZ, V.N. Boglaev, the main reason for cooperation with Belarus was the need for specialists with the necessary knowledge and competencies. For some enterprises, the reason for cooperation was the need for materials and raw materials for the needs of their own enterprise (OOO Voltri, AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles). The request from Belarusian counterparties for the products of the region's enterprises can also be cited as a reason for cooperation (AO Russkii biskvit, OOO Trading House Russkii chai).

The range of areas of cooperation between organizations of the Vologda oblast and the Republic of Belarus is wide and is determined by the specifics of a particular enterprise. Among the areas in which bilateral cooperation is carried out, it is possible to indicate the joint production of products (AO Vologda Optical and Mechanical Plant, AO Cherepovets casting and mechanical plant), the exchange of technical solutions (AO Vologda

Optical and Mechanical Plant), as well as the export (import) of products and raw materials (AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles, OOO Voltri, AO Russkii biskvit, AO Cherepovets casting and mechanical plant, OOO Trading House Russkii chai).

The heads of the surveyed enterprises note: an important feature in the interaction is that the Belarusian partners pay special attention to the quality of products (OOO Voltri, AO Russkii biskvit). For example, according to the sales director of AO Russkii biskvit, A.Yu. Gubarev, only high-quality products from Russian suppliers can be sold to the Belarusian consumer.

However, there are other features: according to the general director of AO ChLMZ V.N. Boglaev, the business rules established in Russia are often incorrectly perceived by the Belarusian side due to the different socio-political structure of the state and a completely different attitude to ownership of the means of production.

In general, the interviewed managers note that Belarusian partners in the framework of bilateral cooperation have such qualities as honesty, punctuality, responsibility (AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles, AO VOMZ, OOO Trading House Russkii chai).

It is important to emphasize that for most enterprises, cooperation with Belarusian partners provides advantages both in technical and technological terms and in terms of staffing (AO ChLMZ, AO VOMZ, OOO Voltri). Director for science and innovation of AO VOMZ, A.V. Grigoriev, noted that bilateral cooperation makes it possible to borrow part of the Belarusian engineering school, which has retained the same "Soviet" look". Moreover, such cooperation provides an opportunity to expand the horizon of export supplies and thereby expand the markets for their own products (AO Russkii biskvit, AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles, OOO Trading House Russkii chai).

The change in the terms of cooperation of companies with counterparties from the Republic of Belarus over the previous three years has occurred in different ways. In relation to some enterprises, the terms of interaction have not undergone any changes (AO ChLMZ, AO VOMZ). OOO Voltri, AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles, and AO Russkii biskvit have worsened the terms of cooperation with Belarusian partners for various reasons, both related to the impact of international economic sanctions against the Union State and purely economic. According to the sales director of AO Russkii biskvit, A.Yu. Gubareva, the volume of exports to the Republic of Belarus decreased from 40% (in 2019) to 30% (in 2022) due to the pandemic and international economic sanctions. However, the relations of OOO Trading House Russkii chai with Belarusian partners have improved over the previous three years, due to the fact that the popularity of the company's products on the Belarusian market has increased: new counterparties and ordinary consumers learn about it.

As for future plans for cooperation with Belarusian partners, all the interviewed heads of enterprises are ready to increase the potential of bilateral cooperation. For example, O.V. Chashnikova (OOO Voltri) noted: "We plan to continue cooperation with the Orsha Plant and we want to do it directly, since we do not observe alternatives to their products". A.Yu. Gubarev and I.O. Bogdanov plan increasing the volume of trade turnover between their companies and Belarusian counterparties. The need for Amkodor products for the needs of AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles is a reason to expand the range of imported products. AO "VOMZ" plans expanding cooperation in the field of civil products and innovations. As for the projects that can be implemented jointly with the Belarusian side, the specifics of the company's activities play a special role here. V.N. Boglaev (AO ChLMZ) noted on this occasion: "There are quite a lot of promising projects: starting from the

production of forestry equipment and ending with an enterprise with a volume of cast iron casting up to 300–400 thousand tons and 100–150 thousand tons of steel casting, which should cover the need for body casting of the entire machine-building complex of Belarus and Russia".

Of particular importance is the issue of bilateral cooperation of enterprises in the field of innovation. "We are always ready to develop cooperation in the field of innovation! At the moment, we are already implementing innovations in the field of hydrocarbon processing. We have a competitive advantage: we are the only company in Russia and Belarus that has critical technologies of organ synthesis and pyrolysis. The market for such products in the Russian Federation alone is about 7 billion U.S. dollars. Although we are not the only player in this market, we are one of its most important elements" (V.N. Boglaev, AO ChLMZ). "Our company is innovative. It manufactures high-tech science-driven products. We want to develop innovations in the field of optical production for civilian needs (sights, binoculars, telescopes)" (A.V. Grigoriev, AO VOMZ). It is worth noting that every company whose managers took part in the survey is ready to develop cooperation with partners from Belarus in the field of innovation.

The current geopolitical situation is making its own adjustments regarding the vision of prospects for bilateral cooperation. Most entrepreneurs note that the planning horizon of companies has significantly decreased. However, the director for science and innovation of AO VOMZ, A.V. Grigoriev states that the current situation against the background of a special military operation did not have a negative impact on the company's activities and, accordingly, on the prospects for planning its bilateral cooperation with partners from the Republic of Belarus. According to the expert, this is facilitated by the joint production of products within the framework of the state defense order. In the current situation, joint coordination of efforts

is particularly important, since economic sanctions have an impact not only on Russia, but also on the entire Union State.

The competitive advantages of most companies that can help implement strategic objectives for a specified period include the professionalism of employees, first-class equipment and many years of experience. However, “young” enterprises also have comparative advantages. The director of OOO Trading House Russkii chai, I.O. Bogdanov noted: “We see the prospects for the development of the enterprise for five years ahead. Our main advantage is high vertical integration in the company (from the procurement of raw materials to the production of finished products). Moreover, automation of production has significantly reduced the cost of production (the wage fund has been reduced). Thus, for the previous four years we have not raised prices for our products”.

However, bilateral cooperation between Russian and Belarusian enterprises is not without some problems. “The main problem is that Russia and Belarus have different technical regulations. Moreover, I would also like to note that the preferences (subsidies) that apply to Russian enterprises on the territory of the Russian Federation do not apply to Belarusian enterprises (and vice versa). In addition, many Russian enterprises had (and still have) problems with receiving payments from Belarus for previously delivered products” (V.N. Boglaev, AO ChLMZ). “The main problem is related to customs duties and registration of permits. I would like to abolish excessive bureaucracy: to cancel permits for the movement of goods, people, etc.” (A.V. Grigoriev, AO VOMZ). Another important problem is the refund of value added tax in the implementation of foreign trade operations (AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles, OOO Trading House Russkii chai). It is also impossible to ignore the problem of international economic sanctions, which has had a significant impact on bilateral cooperation between enterprises

of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. For example, the sales director of AO Russkii biskvit, A.Yu. Gubarev notes: “The main problem is related to the impact of international economic sanctions that caused an increase in sugar prices in March 2022. The privilege extended to food enterprises of the Republic of Belarus, according to which they have the opportunity to compensate 50% of the cost of purchased sugar, does not apply to Russian enterprises that export their products to Belarus. Consequently, the products of Russian manufacturers in the Belarusian market have become more expensive and, as a result, less competitive (the price increase was about 30%)”.

Solving the identified problems can significantly increase the effectiveness of bilateral cooperation. However, it will require the help of representatives of regional and federal authorities. According to A.V. Grigoriev, in order to increase the potential of cooperation, including in the field of civil engineering, it will be necessary to remove customs restrictions on special-purpose products, as well as bring the legislation (including financial) of the two countries to a “common denominator” (a unified reporting system is needed). I.O. Bogdanov noted that the assistance of state authorities in solving the problem of VAT refund and affordable loans are important, since programs cannot be effective for everyone. V.N. Boglaev and O.V. Chashnikova added that they need personnel of appropriate qualifications.

Conclusion

Summing up the results of expert interviews with the heads of the surveyed enterprises, it is possible to highlight the features, problems and prospects of bilateral cooperation.

It is worth noting that the range of areas of cooperation between enterprises of the Vologda Oblast and the Republic of Belarus is extensive and is determined by the specifics of a particular company.

For most enterprises in the region, cooperation with Belarusian partners provides advantages both in technical and technological terms and in terms of staffing. Moreover, it helps to expand the horizon of export supplies and, thereby, the markets for its own products.

Of particular importance is the issue concerning the bilateral cooperation of enterprises in the field of innovation. It is worth saying that all the Vologda Oblast companies whose representatives took part in the survey are ready to develop cooperative ties with partners from Belarus in this area.

However, bilateral cooperation is not without problems: the fragmentation of the regulatory framework, including technical regulations, the “divergence” of preferences (subsidies), which, acting, for example, for Russian enterprises in the territory of the Russian Federation, do not apply to Belarusian enterprises (and vice versa). In addition, many Russian enterprises had (and still have) problems with receiving payments from Belarus for previously delivered products. Another important problem is the refund of value added tax in the implementation of foreign trade operations. It is also impossible to ignore the problem of international economic sanctions, which has had a significant impact on bilateral cooperation between enterprises of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus.

Thus, according to the functional orientation, the main barriers to the development of cooperation between enterprises of Russia and the Republic of Belarus, including in the innovation sphere, can be systematized into the following groups: organizational, economic, institutional and technical. Organizational and economic barriers include the problem of international economic sanctions, bureaucracy in the preparation of permits, insufficient investment. Institutional ones include the “divergence” of preferences (subsidies),

the fragmentation of the regulatory framework. Among the technical barriers, a special place is occupied by problems with obtaining payment from Belarus for previously delivered products, as well as with the refund of value added tax in the implementation of foreign trade operations.

The results of the interview revealed that the systematic nature is more characteristic of institutional barriers. In particular, experts V.N. Boglaev and A.Yu. Gubarev noted that the benefits and preferences that apply to Belarusian producers in Belarus are not related to Russian contractors who directly cooperate with them.

At the same time, the presence of organizational and economic barriers is determined by the foreign policy situation and a number of other factors, for example, global “challenges”, one of which was the coronavirus pandemic. Technical barriers are less systematic in nature: despite their frequent manifestation, they usually arise due to imperfections of technological equipment, means of communication and data transmission, problems with the Internet, electronic document management, etc. Thus, when making management decisions, it is important to take into account the specifics of each group of barriers to the development of cooperation with counterparties.

Another feature of the bilateral cooperation of enterprises is due to the nomenclature of the countries’ trade: the structure of foreign trade demonstrates that the Vologda Oblast is a “supplier” to Belarus of products of the first processing. At the same time, promising niches for production in Russia in the context of the development of trade with neighboring countries will be goods not even of medium, but of upper processing (with which Belarus is not fully provided). Thus, the development of foreign trade in an innovative direction is a priority within the Union State.

It is important to emphasize that regional enterprises have a certain potential to implement this task. For example, a number of enterprises are conducting research and development (AO Russkii biskvit, AO Timber Industry Holding Cherepovetsles, AO VOMZ, etc.). In addition, it is possible to develop joint production of innovative products, in particular using Russian production funds.

Taking into account the opinions of experts identified during the interview, we formulated proposals aimed at overcoming barriers to cooperation between enterprises of Russia and the Republic of Belarus, including in the innovation sphere:

1) the abolition of excessive bureaucracy when issuing permits for the movement of goods, people, etc., which is of particular importance in the new economic conditions caused by the introduction of sanctions;

2) creation of conditions in the regions for attracting investors, ensuring the work of the innovation infrastructure for packaging innovative projects to present them to investors;

3) elimination of contradictions within the framework of legislative acts regulating innovation activities within the Union State;

4) the solution to the problem associated with the refund of value added tax in the implementation of export-import operations; in particular, experts propose to abolish the procedure for registering contracts and make them free (free purchases without conversion from currency to currency).

The practical implementation of the developed directions should not only assist in improving the quality of the policy pursued within the framework of bilateral cooperation, but also have a positive impact on solving problems arising from the interaction of enterprises of Russia and the Republic of Belarus.

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