

The advantage of the Klaipeda seaport is that it is the northernmost ice-free port and also the closest one to Belarus. It is 680 km from Minsk to Klaipeda and 1,100 km from Minsk to Ventspils. The port has a traffic capacity of 40 mln. tons. The Klaipeda port transports over 4,5 mln. tons of Belarusian cargo, 1.950 mln. tons of Russian cargo, and 12.943 mln. tons of that of Lithuania. The major share of Belarusian cargo is oil products, which take 445 of the total volume; they are followed by fertilizers (26%), food stuffs and forage (21%), and metal products (5%). Last year the Ventspils port transported 8.17 mln. tons of Belarusian cargo, the major part of which was oil products and fertilizers. The total cargo turnover of the seaport in 2004 made 27.8 mln. tons.

Besides, the Belarusian side has announced its intent to carry out a pilot delivery of potassium fertilizers through Kaliningrad in the 4th quarter of 2005. The capacity of the Kaliningrad port for handling Belarusian exports is evaluated at 1 mln. tons per year. Official Minsk is not giving up on using the capacities of the Gdansk seaport. In late summer these hopes were discussed at the level of Ministries of Transportation of Poland and Belarus.

Some observers believe that it is quite possible for Belarus' activity on diversification of its exports through Baltic ports to make another topic for discussion of the «Belarusian issue» in Brussels. According to the resolution of the European Commission, a monitoring of the Belarusian authorities' adherence to the rights of trade unions is currently being performed. A negative result of this monitoring may involve introduction of economic sanctions.

Roman Yakovlevsky. 27.10.05.

COOPERATION CANAL: CONSTRUCTION WORK AT THE AUGUSTOW CANAL CONTINUED EVEN IN WINTER

By June 1st, 2006 the Augustow Canal should be ready for commissioning. Apart from being a waterway, it is also regarded as a tourist sight. The prepared investment projects envisage constructing a mill, restaurants, country homesteads, a smithy, crafts centers, night clubs and even facilities for downhill skiing in the vicinity

BACKGROUND

The Augustow Canal was built from 1825 to 1839 on the initiative of the Polish Kingdom, after the designs by Polish engineers, but with the imperial assent of Russian Tsar Alexander I. The main reason for the construction was fear that Prussia's tariff policy will impede transportation of Polish and Lithuanian commodities to the Baltic coast. Approximately until the 1950s, water ways to the Baltic Sea were used primarily for drifting logs down the stream and carriage of passengers. The Augustow Canal is peculiar in that it starts from Necko Lake and stretches from one lake to another up to the border between Belarus and Poland. Nowadays it is actively used for tourism. According to Leszek Teczlik, burgher-master of the town of Augustow, during the season the Canal attracts up to 100 thousand tourists.

In Belarus, from the border to the village of Sonichi the Canal flows in the natural bed of the Chernaya Gancha River, then it flows in the man-made bed for 6.5 km to the Neman River. This is the shortest way from Poland to the Baltic Sea. The canal locks in Poland are recognized as first grade works of ancient engineering. In Belarus by 2004 they were 70% destroyed. Approximately in the mid 1950s, the Canal was abandoned on the Belarusian side. Frosts literally broke the cast iron bracings on the lock gates made of oak, while metal parts of hydraulic works, bricks from the bottom, and granite veneers were stolen by local residents. In 1993 an attempt was made to restore the Belarusian part of the Canal but no funds were found. It all ended with preparing design documentation.

BUILDERS OF TODAY

The modern history of the Canal started last December, after the publication of President's decree on restoration of the waterway of Augustow Canal. Its peculiarity lay in combination of theory and practice on a very tight schedule. Information to compare: while in the early 19th century it took 15 years to construct the Canal under General Pradzynski's guidance, its present restoration is to take a little over two years. The first builders showed up here on March 2nd, 2004, and the completion of work is scheduled for June 1st, 2006. Specialists of the oblast unitary enterprise of GrodnoMelioVodKhoz, who are current «hosts» of the construction, say that in six months — by May 10th, 2006 — they expect to fill the Canal with water. It means that by this time the canal locks should be completely ready and the navigation channel of the Chernaya Gancha River should be formed. Therefore construction work is continued in the winter time.

RESTORATION VARIANTS

Two variants for restoration of the Canal were originally proposed. The first one was to deepen the bed of the Chernaya Gancha River in order to let small tourist boats pass. The second one (which got selected) envisaged maximum restoration of the Canal the way it used to be, that is making the Chernaya Gancha navigable once again. It means that its bed should be at least 1.5 m deep and 6 m wide. However, it is impossible to restore the Canal to its original form. Over 180 years the water level in the Neman fell by two meters, therefore, the three-chamber navigation lock of Nemново, the largest in the entire Belarusian-Polish stretch of the Canal, received a fourth chamber. Besides, the Neman changed its bed, so the Canal became 1.8 km longer. The builders had to dig a new bed along the dead arm of the river (the old river-bed).

When fixing the banks, the builders stuck to old techniques in some places, sheathing the slopes with wooden slats and wooden poles. In other places they used gravel chippings and special canvas (grass can grow through it). The walls of canal locks used to be lined with granite and sandstone from Poland; nowadays these materials are imported from Bashkortostan and Carpathian mountains, respectively. In order to receive frost-proof and moisture-resistant bricks for the bottom of the lock chambers, a whole plant in Vitebsk oblast had to invent and develop it and have it certified.

The Chernaya Gancha River has been «straightened» and broadened in some places but its old circuitous course has not been drained. The river flows into the Neman concurrently with the straight line of the Canal. The swampy areas around the Canal have been drained. This way there appeared islands and meadow parks in the midst of the Canal. Here and there water has been piped in to form lagoons, ponds, and basins. As a rule, piers have been built next to them. A ferry crossing is completely ready in the vicinity of the village of Lesnaya. The ferry was purchased from the Petrikov Shipbuilding Plant for 200 million roubles. It will be soon delivered to Grodno. Air-cushion vessels (they have been ordered in St. Petersburg) will cruise along the Canal.

BELARUSIAN-POLISH COOPERATION

The navigation lock of Kuzhinets is situated immediately on the border between Belarus and Poland. From the Belarusian side, a seasonal border crossing point of Novaya Rudovka is situated right next to the lock, so currently there is no access to the monument of hydraulic engineering. From the Polish side there is free access to the lock. Restoration of Kuzhinets and its surrounding maintenance area is performed by Polish builders. The work is expected to be completed by the beginning of navigation. The approximate cost of the work is EUR 0.5 million. The construction work is regulated by a Belarusian-Polish agreement. The issue of drafting an international Belarusian-Polish agreement on the use of the Augustow Canal has been discussed. When the Canal becomes a single water artery, there is a proposal to enter it on the UNESCO list. The draft is currently being coordinated between the two sides.

PROJECT COST

It is intended to spend 33 billion roubles on restoration of the Augustow Canal. The sources of financing include the State Inspectorate for Protection of Fauna and Flora under the President of Belarus (the main source), the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection, the Grodno Oblast Committee for Natural Resources and Environmental Protection, and the Emergency Fund of the President of Belarus.

Inna Maximchik. 19.12.05.

IGNALINA PASSION

The talks with the EU on extending operation of the Ignalina nuclear power plant may resume

Algirdas Brazauskas, Prime Minister of Lithuania, does not rule out the possible necessity to resume Lithuania's talks with the EU on the issue of extending the operating life of the Ignalina nuclear power plant (INPP) after 2009. «Anything can happen and we should be prepared for such variant. I also support the need for seeking arguments, and some arguments have already transpired. A lot has changed at the INPP itself since the beginning of our NPP