

# Swiss farmer at the helm of Russia's largest dairy farm

by Marita Brune-Koch\*



Marita Brune-Koch.  
(Picture gk)

(January 2026) In the middle of the Moscow winter, a tour group from Switzerland sets off to visit "EkoNiva", Russia's largest dairy farm. It is snowing incessantly, and the coach struggles its way through the vast city. Despite the masses of snow, there is no chaos, though progress is very slow. The group is welcomed by Ramon Schenk, one of the farm's two managers. He greets the visitors in familiar Swiss German: he comes from Herrliberg on Lake Zurich. He has been living and working in Russia for 17 years. Today, he is taking the time to tell his guests about the farm.

The visitors are welcomed into spacious, bright and well-maintained rooms. Through a large glass pane, one can see cows crowding onto a slowly rotating carousel where they are milked. Few people are to be seen; the cows walk onto the carousel almost independently and, once milking is finished, walk back down again to their stalls. Later, *Ramon Schenk* will go into more detail, but first he treats his guests to an inviting buffet: they are free to help themselves to various fine cheeses, yoghurt and quark products. Coffee and various milk-based drinks are served.

After refreshments, the interested visitors from Switzerland are invited into a sort of seminar room equipped with professional presentation technology. Using a PowerPoint presentation, Schenk outlines the various aspects of the operation. Together with *Stefan Dürr*, a farmer from Germany, he has built up a huge operation. It comprises several sites across 13 regions, spread throughout Russia. A total of 123,000 cows are kept there. The entire operation covers 640,000 hectares. A total of 15,000 employees work across all sites. The

cows produce 1.4 million tonnes of milk per year, or 200,000 litres per day. According to Schenk, this makes the farm the largest dairy production operation in Russia. Globally, the farm ranks among the five largest dairy production operations. Naturally, they also have their own shops where their products are sold. However, they also supply their products to large supermarkets, hotel chains and major restaurants.



Delicacies at the reception. (Picture sv)

## Sanctions:

### From dependence to self-sufficiency

In a brief digression, Schenk explains that Russia imported all its dairy products until 2014. Then sanctions were imposed over Crimea. Russia began producing its own. Clearly, his farm played a significant role in helping Russia weather the



Ramon Schenk from Switzerland – now in Russia.  
(Picture screenshot<sup>1</sup>)

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sanctions well in this sector. With a grin Schenk adds: “We benefited from the sanctions.” “But we’d probably all benefit more if things were different. But that’s how it is”, he adds.

### Versatility and self-sufficiency

If the audience is already impressed by the sheer scale of the operation, the amazement grows when they learn how self-sufficient the farm is: it processes the milk itself into a wide variety of products, just as we are familiar with at home, and bottles them. The sugar in the quark and yoghurt products comes from the farm’s own sugar factory. The feed for the cows – alfalfa, cereals, soya, peas, lentils, linseed – is produced on the farm. The seeds are cultivated in seed production facilities. *EkoNiva* is the largest seed producer in Russia. The company has its own laboratories for formulating the feed and has also developed software for this purpose. In response to a question from a visitor, Schenk explains that genetically modified seeds are strictly prohibited throughout Russia.

They also plan, design and build the cowsheds themselves. They are identical across all the company’s sites. This facilitates rapid planning and construction. Later, the visitors tour the barns: they are bright, clean, open and spacious. Whilst the cows are heading to the milking carousel, the barns are cleaned: this means that three times a day, large agricultural machinery



Milking carousel. Milking takes place three times a day. (Picture mbk)

drives into the barns and clears out all the manure. By the time the cows return, everything is clean.

### Unbureaucratic planning permission

When asked how the planning permission process works for a barn like this, Schenk says: “If we decide to build in the morning, we can start digging in the afternoon.”

They keep everything as simple and practical as possible, “in-house”, as Schenk puts it: They plan and install the milking machines and milking carousels themselves. They have employed specialists who can immediately carry out any necessary repairs. He himself has travelled all over the world, looking at a wide variety of facilities to find out what is best for our situation.

**EkoNiva Group ist ein führendes Unternehmen im russischen Milchsektor**

- 122 950 hochleistungsfähige Milchkühe
- 640 000 ha Ackerland
- 1,4 Millionen Tonnen Rohmilch, die von der Gruppe im Jahr 2024 produziert wird
- 41 moderne Betriebe (darunter 3 im Bau)
- 3 Molkereien und 1 Käsefabrik

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Impressive results. (Picture screenshot<sup>1</sup>). *EkoNiva Group* is a leading company in the Russian dairy sector: 122,950 high-yield dairy cows / 640,000 hectares of arable land / 1.4 million tonnes of raw milk produced by the Group in 2024 / 41 modern farms (including 3 under construction) / 3 dairies and 1 cheese factory.

They have applied this knowledge in the planning and implementation of 40 facilities.

### **Health and optimal comfort for the cows**

One member of the audience raises the issue of factory farming. Schenk replies that not many farms in the EU offer such high standards and comfort for the cows. On a small farm, it would not be possible to provide what they do for the cows' well-being and health. All cows have a scanner that precisely measures their health status. This ensures that every cow can be vaccinated and treated appropriately. They have their own on-site vets who are readily available. Hoof trimmers employed by the farm ensure that the cows' hooves are always kept well-trimmed.

### **Good training for staff**

They have hired many well-trained people, offering them a good income. They train their staff at a farm-run school, taught by specially employed instructors according to their own standards. Every day, the staff would be picked up from nearby towns by the farm's own buses and brought back home. For all these reasons, and because they pay well, they have – despite the labour shortage – a good and sufficient workforce. Around 3,000 trainees would learn on the farm, with the best being hired and fully trained. Students would come from university to learn and work on the farm.

When asked about the proportion of land being used for agriculture in Russia in general, Schenk explains that most of the country's arable land is farmed. There is also a lot of uncultivated land, but the soil there is poor.

### **World-class production conditions**

During the farm's start-up phase, the state supported it with substantial subsidies. Without

this, such rapid growth would not have been possible. Today, investments are still supported in regions where there haven't been any cows so far, but where they are desirable, for example along the Volga. Long-term land leases would also be helpful. Russia offers the best production conditions in the world for agriculture. Now is a prime time to enter the Russian market, for example to produce seed varieties and secure genetic material. Russia is already self-sufficient in seed production. In the past, Russians felt that all domestic products were poor quality; today, the opposite is true: they are proud of their own produce.

### **Fine dining and personal conversation**

To round off the event, guests are treated to a five-course menu of the finest Russian fare. This provides an opportunity for personal conversation. Ramon Schenk explains that after his first six months in Russia, he spent six months in Australia to explore how agriculture is practised there. However, he did not like it there. He decided to move to Russia permanently. He doesn't want to go back. After all, he is now a father of five. When asked by a participant what the prospects are for foreigners moving to Russia, he explains that they are very good, especially for skilled tradespeople. There is a shortage of trained people. But you must learn the language: "Anyone who still can't order anything in the canteen after three days should pack their bags."

### **Economically independent through own efforts**

It is impressive what can be achieved when forces work together constructively. Especially in view of the profound economic upheavals to which we are increasingly exposed to in Western Europe.

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY3j52sBeF8>