

## Time for sincere talks

By Igor Slavinsky

### Alexander Lukashenko interviewed by Polish media

In his three and a half hour interview, Alexander Lukashenko touched on every topic we might consider interesting to Poland today. The President was asked about political relations between Minsk and Warsaw, among other issues, and we cannot but admit that these relations have been far from simple. However, in recent times, positive changes have been obvious; several days ago, the President even met Poland's Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski. Mr. Lukashenko assured Mr. Sikorski of his readiness for further co-operation with the Polish leadership, saying, "I'm pinning great hopes that this man [President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski — editor] will conduct a policy based on principles, looking at matters openly."

According to Mr. Lukashenko, 'we've lived through a time of lost opportunities'. "Of course, we could have boasted closer relations, despite you being an EU member and limited by certain obstacles and normative acts. I understand this. Nevertheless, we have a broad space for activity," stressed the President, adding, "It doesn't matter that we lack political agreements, or that our state officers disagree on some issues. The border between Belarus and Poland isn't a wall; we're actively liaising."

Journalists from Polish TV and radio, the PAP Agency and *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper were also interested in the domestic political situation in Belarus on the eve of the presidential elections. They asked direct questions about the Union of Poles, Belsat TV channel and worsening relations with the Kremlin: topics covered by the Polish printed media. No doubt, the President's opinion on these matters will be interesting to those living in our neighbouring country.

## Familiar faces

By Tatiana Vesnina

### OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, headed by Ambassador Gert Arens, attends presidential elections in Belarus

Mr. Arens knows our country well, having headed the OSCE observation mission twice during Belarusian electoral campaigns. The first time was during the presidential elections of 2006; the second covered the 2008 parliamentary elections.

The diplomat doesn't conceal his warm feeling for Belarus, noting that he is always pleased to return, especially when he can be useful in some way. The Ambassador feels special responsibility while working in Belarus.

At present, 388 observers have been accredited by district election commissions, although exact figures on the number of foreign observers for the presidential elections in Belarus haven't yet been announced. From the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, there will be 400 short-term observers, in addition to 40 long-term members.

# Materialisation of multilateral relations

## President of Belarus meets foreign ministers of Germany and Poland

By Vitaly Volyanyuk

I have no idea what the foreign ministers of Poland and Germany felt on leaving the Presidential Residence in 38 Karl Marx Street, but the protocol section of their talks with Alexander Lukashenko left a bright impression. Several days prior to the visit of Radosław Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle to Minsk, Western printed media wrote that they planned to discuss the importance of free and fair presidential elections. However, in the beginning of the meeting, Mr. Lukashenko made it clear: there is no need for concern. "The elections will meet the most democratic standards. Their legitimacy is more important to us than to anyone else in the world," the Head of State asserted.

This is not the first visit to Minsk by top ranking EU politicians. However, I can hardly recall similar attention being paid by the media. Journalists crowded into the Blue Hall of the Presidential Residence. One photographer from the Polish PAP Agency told me that almost all of Warsaw's largest media companies had sent representatives to the Minsk meeting. Among them were TV channels Telewizja Polska, TVN24, and Polsat, and newspapers *Dziennik* and *Rzeczpospolita*. The German journalists were also great in number and I felt that these European colleagues were satisfied by what they'd seen. Instead of the usual prescribed speeches, talks were sincere and appeared constructive.



President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko meets foreign ministers of Germany and Poland

Mr. Lukashenko sincerely thanked Poland and Germany for working to ensure good relations between Belarus and the EU, during past difficult conditions and the present situation. "It may sound banal, but we're very much interested in Europe," the President stressed, adding that 'Europe also can't do without Belarus'. Mr. Lukashenko believes that the potential for co-operation is yet to be fully realised. Of course, political and economic sanctions do not contribute to the quick improvement of relations. The President considers that it would be wise to stop using these methods. He recalled the *Eastern Partnership* programme and stated with regret, "Sadly, we have more hopes than

realities now." Minsk hopes to soon see a quicker 'materialisation of relations' with the European Union.

"I know a certain opinion exists: let's wait until the elections," Mr. Lukashenko asserted, forestalling any further discussion in this direction. "In this respect, I'd like to note that these are not our first or last elections," he said. Mr. Sikorski added that Europe hopes that the forthcoming elections will be better than those held in previous years. "They will be much better!" the President added immediately, assuring those present that Belarus is ready to allow observers to monitor vote counting, so that no doubts are cast on the democracy of the process.

Mr. Westerwelle commented

that Belarus' invitation of a large number of foreign observers has been a 'correct step'. He noted that Poland and Germany wish to see Belarus as a good partner, rather than as a mere neighbour. The European ministers then enumerated the possible benefits of the partnership: financial assistance; economic integration; and easing of the visa regime. In turn, the President noted that Belarus has much to offer Germany and Poland.

The Polish Minister and the Head of the Presidential Administration, Vladimir Makei, spoke about strengthening co-operation and the topic continued as Mr. Sikorski and Mr. Westerwelle met with Belarus' Foreign Minister, Sergei Martynov.

## Some facts and figures to calculate and consider

By Vasily Belugin

### Unfulfilled potential of transit opportunities



#### Transit potential growing

A favourable geographical location is Belarus' enduring trump card, with transit opportunities covering roads, air space, gas and oil pipelines and communication channel. All generate significant revenue for the country's budget and the Government is keen to see this rise. Therefore, the Presidium of the Council of Ministers is keen to approve the 2011-2015 state transit potential development programme. Seven ministries, three committees and a

range of other state agencies have presented a single concept, co-ordinated by the Transport and Communications Ministry. Belarus' Transport and Communications Minister, Ivan Shcherbo, has presented the project, with First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko and Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Kobayakov being the first to offer their remarks and proposals. It is being discussed for the fifth time (unlikely to be the last). Mr. Semashko notes that the tariff for Russian gas transit will rise to \$2 next year (against today's \$1.88) while neighbouring Ukraine is paid \$2.5 for its intermediary services; this should be taken into account by Belarusian experts.

The Transport and Communications Minister has promised that the new programme will take into consideration these recommendations. Mr. Shcherbo also stresses that, by 2015, revenue from transit via our territory should reach \$2.4bn.

## Access to digital broadcasting

### By late 2011, digital television available to all Belarusians

BelTA News Agency has reported an announcement by the Communications and Informatisation Minister, Nikolai Pantelei, noting that, by late 2011, almost 100 percent of the Belarusian population will have access

to digital television. At the moment, digital broadcasting is in place at 35 radio-television transmitting stations, enabling access to 86 percent of Belarusians. Coverage is to be expanded, with new transmitting stations constructed and digital transmitters installed at relay broadcasting stations.

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