

opportunities — what are they?

of funds which are targeted at our Eastern neighbours. Either next year or in 2012, a financial plan for the next seven years will be studied. Our common task is to convince the European Commission that as much money as possible is allocated to the neighbourhood policy. We'll take care to ensure maximum financing.

Editorial office: Mr. Shevtsov, how practical is the Eastern Partnership in its present form and what are the future possibilities?

Mr. Shevtsov: In my view, Belarus has many more advantages than disadvantages within this initiative. I'd mark it as 'good'. We should start looking at our relations with the European Union more realistically. About a year and a half ago, we were just starting on our path; now, we're already seeing positive results.

This initiative has emancipated negotiations to realise major joint projects with neighbouring countries. Our main goal was to leave behind diplomatic isolation in Europe, becoming part of large European programmes. Our further steps were to use our own forces and to join neighbouring countries interested in collaboration in realising some major projects.

Mr. Shevtsov: I can't help but think that the philosophy of the 'Eastern Partnership' is mismatched with the pace of regional co-operation between our six countries — I should stress that this is regarding the level of philosophy upon which the programme is based. Brussels has been debating the EU's terms of investment while Belarus has already received quite interesting proposals from large Chinese investors. While EU officials have been discussing the volume of money to allocate, when and how, Belarus has independently found its own solution to the energy problem in its relations with Russia. Venezuelan oil is being imported and volumes are growing. There's no doubt that oil from other countries will arrive soon. In other words, regional co-operation by the six countries of the 'Eastern Partnership' is developing more quickly than the philosophy of the EU initiative itself. It seems to me that, in planning further actions for the next stage of the programme's realisation, we must note that, if the EU continues in this slowly deliberative vein, the region is likely to lose interest in close co-operation with the EU for the time being.



ALEXANDER STADUB

Participants of round table discussion assess Eastern Partnership results

ceive oil on affordable terms.

However, certain problems have also emerged during this period — in particular, referring to gas supplies. To be more correct, these problems deal with the possibility of receiving Qatar liquefied gas. This affects not only Belarus but the whole of our region. Projects which are now in place and which are currently being discussed are, as a rule, of national character. For example, this is an idea of creating a Belarusian terminal in Klaipeda. A similar project could take place in Ukraine. Although this might not be the most rational method of solving the national problems; most of Belarus' neighbours also need Qatari gas. If the aspirations of regional countries were supported at EU level, cheaper

tance here. If you remember, last year, jointly with Lithuania and Ukraine, Belarus brought a package of regional projects to the 'Eastern Partnership' ministerial summit. In this respect, I agree with Mr. Shevtsov: this dimension now lacks the weight it deserves from our side.

Editorial office: Will joint Belarusian-Lithuanian-Ukrainian projects ever be implemented?

Mr. Ulakhovich: It seems to me that, firstly, it's now a good time for this programme's realisation: the completion of the first financial cycle. This allows us to develop the project core, while outlining common approaches and strengthening political dialogue. Meanwhile, next year, it will be the turn of

ally, the initiative was born in the middle of the crisis — not at the most favourable time. There were no grounds to rely on the allocation of great funds but, understanding these objective problems, we must continue talking at all levels about the obstacles we can eliminate. For example, there is a lack of interest from some countries, bureaucratic protractations and the distribution of accents by the European Union in its policy (which are not advantageous for us). While understanding that we are probably unable to overcome all objective obstacles independently at the moment, we must make all efforts to avoid them in the next financial cycle — starting from 2014. We should also minimise the negative influence of these factors.

At present, the 'Eastern Partnership' badly needs a uniting element: projects which offer real advantages and thus push participants to search for ways to unite efforts, despite their individual differences.

Mr. Dziedzic: I'd like to say some words about financial issues, so that we have a full picture of what is being done and what is possible. The European Investment Bank has allocated a special credit line for the 'Eastern Partnership': the Eastern Partnership Facility — worth 1.5bn euros. In addition, it offers an external mandate worth 3.7bn euros, following the example of the Southern avenue of co-operation. It's also worth mentioning that a quite flexible policy is being applied to the use of this money.

The Technical Assistance Trust Fund is also being set up, with 10m euros available. It will be quite flexible, aimed at helping small enterprises. This is important both for EU members and partner-countries.

Apart from the 'East-Invest' programme — spoken of previously — we have a new mechanism for the support of small and medium-sized businesses: the SME Facility (with a 30m euro budget). However, I'd like to note that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is showing interest in its work, so its budget could rise to 300-400m euros. This money aims to help create conditions to aid small business' functioning and the attraction of investments. Additionally, the 'Neighbourhood Investment Facility'

(NIF) is operational, as is an EU mechanism of macro-financial assistance to third countries.

Mr. Yarmolyuk: Speaking of plans for this money's use, sadly, within the framework of the 'Eastern Partnership', mastership of funds remains a dream for us. The European Investment Bank's mandate does not cover Belarus; it's a key drawback of the 'Eastern Partnership' for us, since it halves the applied value of this initiative. The same can be said of the SME Facility, although theoretically we may use the money to support regional projects — in line with the European Commission.

The receiving of macro-financial assistance seems possible but we've been negotiating with the European Commission for funds since last year. Initially, 200m euros were mentioned. However, according to EU standard procedure, this money must supplement loans granted by other financial institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF. The period of the IMF programme for Belarus has now expired and the EU has not had time to make its decision, although the issue was discussed for over a year. At present, the EU has no formal right to allocate financial aid to our country.

This weakens our belief that the EU is seriously interested in building significant relations with our country, despite pronouncements to the contrary — for reasons bureaucratic and political. Decisions which are important for us are being hindered by various levels of the European Union. We are seeing a relapse into former thinking patterns; until recently, these defined the essence of our relations with the EU but we had believed a change for the better was now occurring.

Editorial office: Some issues require no major funding; such as visas. If these are solved then our citizens will see clearly that partnership exists in action as well as words, with tangible results.

Mr. Dziedzic: Solving the visa issue does not mean abolishing them altogether; it's a complex situation involving security, the preparation of necessary documents, and so much more. An agreement on re-admission is needed and these issues must be co-ordinated during talks with partner-countries. I can assure you that Poland is doing everything possible to facilitate this process in its relations with Belarus (not long ago, an agreement was ratified on small cross-border movement between Poland and Belarus). However, I share your opinion that the visa issue is an important one for the 'Eastern Partnership', since it affects every citizen of the country.

By Nina Romanova



Mr. Yarmolyuk

The 'Eastern Partnership' initiative has fulfilled these functions fully.

Editorial office: Much criticism has been expressed regarding the programme. What are its weaknesses, in your opinion?

Mr. Shevtsov: Perhaps due to momentum, or certain clichés, talks regarding the 'Euro Nest' have been rather futile. The political component of the 'Eastern Partnership' has been progressing far too slowly for Belarus, compared with the country's needs for expanding co-operation; it is still yet to become viable. Speaking of Belarus' interests regarding the partnership in its political sense, it would be good if the 'Euro Nest' related issue had been postponed until the parliamentary elections, which are near at hand.

Editorial office: Meanwhile, our European partners should remember that Belarus has accepted an invitation to become an equal member of the programme. It is unfair and incorrect to impose conditions of co-operation on us. In our view, this is an important aspect.



Mr. Ulakhovich

Editorial office: Which major projects — profitable for Belarus and the whole Eastern Partnership programme — could be desirable in future?

Mr. Shevtsov: We should proceed from the fact that energy oil-related problems will be solved. The southern branch of the Druzhba oil pipeline is starting operations. Pumping of Venezuelan, Azerbaijani and, probably, Iranian oil is starting. How can the 'Eastern Partnership' contribute to the development of our states? Most likely, we should raise the issue of support from the EU regarding co-operation between countries in our region — primarily, for the development of new transport infrastructure oriented at sea terminals. We can raise the question — as we've done regarding Ukraine — so that Venezuelan oil can be supplied not only to our country but to Ukraine. Simultaneously, we can jointly raise the issue regarding Poland and Lithuania — i.e. supplying oil to the Gdansk and Plock refineries in Poland and Mažeikiai Refinery in Lithuania. Belarus is now able to help these states re-



Mr. Shevtsov

variants could be found to solve the gas problem.

The EU's financial cycle of the 'Eastern Partnership' programme is closing (18-24 months remain, during which basic financial funds should be mastered). With this in mind, more projects dealing with the intensification of political co-operation should be prepared for the next stage. This coincides with a period of closer rapprochement between Belarus and the European Union — and approximately coincides with our parliamentary elections. This is a very convenient moment for the intensification of co-operation.

Mr. Ulakhovich: We are viewing this programme — including, I think, at the top political level — as 'national state building'. Issues of economics and energy are key for Belarus. One of the traditional imperatives of state building is social-economic sustainability.

The conceptual part of the 'Eastern Partnership' is, for us, trade and energy. This is the segment where we expect the greatest progress. The second sphere deals with the regional approach. We've spoken much of its impor-



Mr. Chaly

Hungary and Poland to chair the 'Eastern Partnership': the former has already announced this idea to be a priority while Poland has never concealed its desire to see this happen. I see a certain administrative resource here which should help us develop the project core, strengthening our mutual understanding and deepening our dialogue, so that we see the first fruits by 2013.

Mr. Yarmolyuk: Returning to the words of Mr. Dziedzic regarding the half-full / half-empty glass, I can say that I fully agree. Belarus — despite all restrictions and obstacles to fully-fledged participation in the 'Eastern Partnership' — remains, probably, one of the greatest optimists regarding this programme. However, we are realists. We see the existing shortcomings and objective obstacles to its realisation and are doing everything possible to level the situation, so that the glass won't remain half-full.

We understand that there are obstacles to achieving the programme's realisation — borne of the global financial crisis and its consequences. Re-