

Clearly defined position stated

President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko interviewed by French *Le Figaro*

In an interview with France's *Le Figaro* daily newspaper, the Belarusian President has spoken of relations with the European Union and Russia, while assessing the actions of the opposition in the current presidential campaign. Pierre Avril, a correspondent with the *Le Figaro*, asked Mr. Lukashenko over 30 questions, to which he received unambiguous and comprehensive answers. Speaking of co-operation prospects with the EU (the traditional question asked by European journalists), Mr. Lukashenko underlined, "We're doing everything we can to have normal, good relations with our western partner."

According to the President, all Belarus' recent initiatives have focused on this goal. "We're good pupils. We're ready to learn everything that corresponds to the interests of the Belarusian nation from you, and anything that doesn't create obstacles for our neighbours," the Belarusian leader

emphasised. He explained that, if EU policy solely relies on dictating conditions and pushing us towards certain actions for which we aren't ready — for objective reasons, this policy won't ever find understanding. "We have our country and our nation. The Belarusian state will exist: independent and sovereign. Therefore, we'll be ensuring our independence and sovereignty and acting, primarily, in the interests of our Belarusian people," Mr. Lukashenko stressed, showing his unchanged position.

As to why Belarus-EU relations are taking a long time to become established, the Belarusian President notes that the answer to this question should be searched for in Brussels, rather than Minsk. According to Mr. Lukashenko, the EU's current policy towards our country causes disappointment.

The French journalist was also keen to discover what spoils our relations with Russia and whether Be-



larus might merge with its eastern neighbour. "There's no sharp worsening of our relationship, since neither we nor Russia need it," asserted Mr. Lukashenko. Speaking of Moscow's ambitions, he added, "I believe you're well aware that the Russian leadership wanted to join Belarus to Russia. However, I don't think that it still pursues the same goals."

Analysing Moscow's current policy, the Belarusian President explained, "Russia is making the same mistakes as the EU. It's necessary to take the situation into account: there's the Belarusian state and the Belarusian nation. For any president, whoever occupies this post, protecting Belarusian interests is a holy duty."

The journalist next asked why Mr. Lukashenko hadn't met Russia's For-

eign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, on his recent trip to Minsk? "We didn't plan this meeting," he calmly explained. As to whether Russia supports the Belarusian opposition, Mr. Lukashenko noted, "This is true. We know for a fact that Nekliaev and Sunnikov [candidates for presidential elections on December 19th — author] are being financed by Russia."

The French journalist was keen to find out about the forthcoming elections in every possible aspect and began by asking the Belarusian President to comment on the statements of some of the other candidates regarding the illusion of an electoral campaign in Belarus. "If the presidential campaign is an illusion for them, then they have a right not to participate in this illusion. If they are real politicians, they must take responsibility and fight for this post," Mr. Lukashenko mused, adding, "In my opinion, they aren't ready to lead the campaign."

The President also commented on the speeches of some opposition candidates. "The amount of spite they radiate will only scare people and can only result in people not voting for them at all," he said. "Presidential candidates should offer good things to people. Pouring malice into the nation via television is not the way forward in Belarus."

Finally, Mr. Lukashenko was asked whether, if he wins the elections, he'll consider setting up contacts between the official authorities and the opposition. "If a citizen, a group of people or a party is willing to co-operate with the authorities, they are welcome to. However, improving people's lives must be the basis for this," he explained. Mr. Lukashenko believes that, at present, the opposition adheres to the principle of 'the worse it is for the people, the better it is for them'. He has no plans to collaborate with anyone harbouring such views.

Accessible virtual world

Over the past five years, the number of mobile communication subscribers has risen 2.5-fold, while computer provision per capita has almost quadrupled

By Andrey Denisenko

'Electronic' augmentation

Back in 2005, there were 13 home computers on average per 100 Belarusian families; by early 2010, the figure had risen to 40. Moreover, while computers had previously been viewed as printing devices and for playing games, they now have a wider application, being used to study, watch films and enjoy Internet access. With the advent of 3G technology, and the implementation of fourth generation communication, mobile subscribers have high-speed Internet access, allowing them to make video calls, watch TV broadcasts and more.

Until recently, Belarusian paid over \$100 (in equivalent) for mobile communication services monthly. This year, these tariffs have fallen at least 10-fold — owing to competition. Now, there are over 10m mobile communication subscribers, despite the population standing at 9.5m.

Technologies of convenience

New technologies are accessible to the wider public, allowing a host of problems to be solved at state level. For example, informatisation of schools continues and a system is being launched to sell tickets for suburban and inter-city trips via the Internet and bank info-kiosks. A system to allow patients to book polyclinic doctor appointments online is being currently improved. The *Electronic Belarus* programme is cutting paperwork at state establishments, while reducing time spent on filling in applications.

Informatisation is driving forward the economy explains the Minister of Communications and Informatisation, Nikolai Pantelei, "Our information society development strategy until 2015 has been approved in Belarus, aiming to allow us to join the top thirty states worldwide for the development of our information-communication technologies."

Our country should become more attractive to foreign investors with its implementation of new technologies. E-technologies will help enhance the



New technologies become more available to many people

competitiveness of domestic produce: domestically and abroad. Economic growth will lead to the improvement

of people's well-being and, accordingly, greater computerisation. Our lives will become even more 'electronic'.

Affordable housing

Belarus among best in CIS for housing construction

As of January 1st, 2010, the provision of housing in the country stood at 24.1 square metres of gross living space per capita. "Forecasts suggest that this will reach 25-27 square metres by 2015," noted the Head of the Department for Housing Construction at Belarus' Architecture and Construction Ministry, Alexander Gorval, speaking at an international scientific and practical conference: *Implementing the Concept of Affordable and Comfortable Housing Construction*.

In terms of the number of apartments per 10,000 people, Belarus is a CIS leader. As of January 1st, 2009, this figure stood at 73, against 54 in Russia, 37 in Kazakhstan and 20 in Ukraine. Belarus also compares favourably with advanced European economies, where the index is 50-70 apartments per 10,000 (Denmark, Norway, France and Finland). The rapid pace of housing construction is largely due to growth in lending, mostly via preferential loans.

In the coming five years, Belarus is to shift from administrative methods to the wider use of market incentives — such as mortgage lending and housing construction savings. Amendments are expected to the Housing Code, in the area of apartment rental.

Some facts to compare

Alexander Bokov

According to specialists, in the six months of 2010, Belarus ranked third in the CIS in terms of salary in US dollar equivalent: a state employee earned \$427 on average

Russia occupied first place (\$695), followed by Kazakhstan (\$558), which both boast big salaries connected to the mining industry. Azerbaijan lags slightly behind (\$409) while Armenia, Ukraine and

Moldova boast average incomes of just \$307, \$300 and \$243 respectively. The lowest salaries are paid to employees of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, who earn a mere \$157 and \$79 in US dollar equivalent.

Moreover, Belarus is one of the world's few countries to have no significant income gap between the wealthiest 10 percent and the poorest 10 percent of the population: a fact which has been unchanged for over a decade. On average, the wealthiest are 5.6-5.9 times richer

than the poorest: one of the lowest differentials in the world. In Russia, the income gap is 16.7-fold and, in the USA, stands at 16-fold. Even in Moldova it exceeds 12-fold. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have a 10-fold gap while Poland and France's gap totals 9-fold, followed by Germany with 7-fold. In Norway — the country recognised by the UN's recent Human Development Index report as offering the best quality of life — the income differential is 6-fold.

Application approved

UN Trust Fund allocates over \$1m to Belarusian project to combat domestic violence

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) are overseeing the new project of international technical assistance. "The project has been developed over two years as part of the UN's Gender Theme Group in Belarus and was approved by the corre-

sponding UN Trust Fund on its second application," notes Tatiana Gaplichnik, who heads the UN's Gender Theme Group in Belarus. "It is to be implemented in partnership with the Interior Ministry, the Ministry for Labour and Social Protection, and with other agencies, ministries and public organisations," she explains.

The three year project is to begin in 2011, with format and registration issues currently being discussed.