

Further degree of integration

By Igor Slavinsky

Politics is just one level of interstate relations although, as the highest; a lack of understanding between leaders influences co-operation between countries. This is especially true when leading TV channels fan the flames of conflict. Speaking objectively, Belarusians and Russians have not felt the negative consequences of political disagreements. Trade has been developing steadily; in the first eight months of 2010, our turnover reached about \$22bn — by the end of the year, it should reach the pre-crisis level.

The Kremlin has demonstrated responsibility, with Dmitry Medvedev personally initiating his meeting with Alexander Lukashenko. Sadly, the Russian side made a condition: to hold talks without media representatives. With this in mind, journalists could only judge results indirectly, from information spread by the Presidential Press Service, led by Pavel Legky. In his words, the talks were conducted in a 'constructive and friendly atmosphere'.

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Mr. Lukashenko said that, initially, Belarus was quite anxious about the formation of the Customs Union and the SES, since our two partner states are rich in hydrocarbon resources. Their interests thus coincide in this sphere, contradicting the interests of Belarus (which needs to purchase almost all its key resources). Before signing the 17 SES-forming documents, Minsk insisted on abolishing duties on oil and oil products from Russia, since no duties are envisaged by a Customs Union. The President thanked Mr. Medvedev for settling these issues during their bilateral meeting. Belarus' First Deputy Prime Minister, Vladimir Semashko, also attended the complicated talks and later announced that Russia would not impose duties on the oil supplied to Belarus. A similar issue regarding gas



At CSTO Collective Security Council session in Moscow

supplies is being settled, with quotas abolished for an unlimited term. A mechanism of revenue distribution from 'black gold' processing is being outlined.

"We're enabling our enterprises to freely compete within a Single Economic Space; it's a serious step forward," believes Mr. Lukashenko. "I can disappoint those who've dreamt of the destruction of our relationship: the case is rather the opposite. We've made a breakthrough in our

a complete coincidence of positions in a single meeting. The Kremlin's Protocol Service had prepared a table in front of Mr. Lukashenko, saying 'The President of Belorussia', although Mr. Medvedev had promised to use the official name of our country. Meanwhile, the documents dealing with the SES formation (which Mr. Lukashenko signed) mentioned 'The President of Belarus'. Despite differing spellings, Belarusians and Russians remain close to each other

believes our countries are moving towards each other rapidly, with giant steps. He characterises the job of negotiators as titanic. As the Belarusian delegation notes, the co-ordination of our positions has been conducted almost daily, with videoconferences organised between Minsk, Moscow and Astana where personal meetings were impossible. This has enabled Mr. Medvedev to announce that our three states have managed to agree on forming the SES by the

associations and the European Union, with the further step of establishing a common economic space'.

Mr. Medvedev's plane, flying from Brussels, landed at Vnukovo Airport simultaneously with that of the Belarusian President. As information agencies have reported, he agreed on Russia's joining the WTO. Previously, the joining of our three states as a single structure was debated. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry has proposed that our Customs Union partners consider the formation of a common economic space between the Customs Union and the EU. The major argument is that the Union cannot exist alone; lacking co-operation with other economic centres, it is likely to fail. Naturally, one of these partners is the EU. Belarus believes that our three states must elaborate a co-ordinated approach to establishing long-term relations with the European Union.

The next day, Moscow hosted the CSTO and CIS summits. Previously, we had seen breakthroughs regarding economic integration across the post-Soviet space. This time, important decisions on security provision were made. The Belarusian delegation brought a large list of initiatives to Moscow, aiming to strengthen the CSTO and lend it more weight. As at the CIS Summit, Minsk's voice was authoritative.

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relations." Belarus plans to ratify a package of documents on SES formation by January 1st. According to the President, the next stage envisages the establishment of the Eurasian Union, which is to focus on the solution of not just economic issues but a deeper level of integration.

Moscow newspapers pessimistically speculated upon the talks between Vladimir Putin and Sergei Sidorsky, which were held on the eve of the top level summit. Journalists believed that Minsk and Moscow would fail to agree... but they were wrong!

It's probably impossible to reach

in spirit; Belarus and Russia are the closest of allies. Whatever action Moscow takes in the western avenue of its foreign policy, the Wikileaks site has rather objectively demonstrated the essence of the West's attitude towards Russia. This does not mean that Russian diplomacy will sit idle; rather, it should value its old friends even more, while paying attention to integration processes within the post-Soviet space.

The Russian President has admitted that, initially, he thought that the creation of the Customs Union and the SES would take years. Now, he

end of 2010, with all necessary documents signed. On January 1st, 2012, the Single Economic Space could become a reality. As Kazakhstan's Head of State notes, Belarusian and Kazakh initiatives have been fully taken into consideration in forming a new, top level, integration structure.

The declaration signed by the three presidents reads that our countries are moving towards the establishment of a Eurasian Economic Union aiming for 'harmonious, mutually supplementary and mutually beneficial co-operation with other countries, international economic

Russia abolishes oil duties for Belarus, saving us around \$4bn

According to Elvira Nabiullina, the Russian Minister for Economic Development, duties on oil supplied from Russia to Belarus are to be abolished

"We're removing oil customs duties on mutual trade. We'll supply duty free oil to Belarus but will still collect duties on oil products at the external borders — for the Russian budget," she explained, as reported by RIA Novosti News Agency. The Russian Minister added that Bela-

rus should save \$3.912bn as a result.

Previously, Russia noted that export duties on mutual trade with Belarus could be cancelled only once the Single Economic Space was launched, in 2012. Ms. Nabiullina stresses that the decision on duties will come into operation after it is ratified by Minsk; however, this will be no earlier than January 1st, 2011. Moreover, she notes that the cost of Russian gas for Belarus in 2011 will remain at the previously planned level.

Ranked first in the CIS and worldwide

930 international observers accredited to monitor presidential elections in Belarus

The Central Commission for Elections and National Referenda of Belarus has accredited 930 international observers for the presidential elections. According to

the Commission's data, 406 OSCE/ODIHR representatives plan to observe the presidential elections in our country, in addition to 257 from the CIS and six from the CIS Standing Committee. Parliamentarians from other states have also been accredited to monitor the

event: 82 from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, 45 from the CIS Inter-parliamentary Assembly, ten from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Belarus-Russia Union State and eleven observers from foreign parliaments, alongside 24 members of foreign election committees. 48

representatives of diplomatic and consular institutes of foreign states are also to monitor presidential elections, in addition to 41 independent observers. Belarus is ranked first among CIS states and worldwide for its density of international observers: one per each electoral district.

Situation doesn't arouse any concern

According to Ambassador Geert Ahrens, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission in Belarus, the current presidential campaign is more liberal

OSCE/ODIHR representatives have the opportunity to monitor various stages of the

electoral campaign. They believe that signature collection has been organised calmly and in a business-like manner, while candidates' registration has been very efficient, with 10 out of 11 registered. The representatives of the mission are devoting great attention to work with the media. "On the

one hand, we believe that all candidates have been given the opportunity to speak on TV in a live broadcast. On the other hand, the current Head of State receives much more attention from the media, compared to other candidates. However, unlike those from the opposition, we believe that this is normal

and natural; the same situation exists in other European states," notes Mr. Ahrens.

"It should be mentioned that, on the whole, the electoral campaign in Belarus is progressing quietly and without serious incidents," asserts the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission.