

# 'Belarus' geopolitical situation conditions the necessity for its involvement in integration processes'

At a joint session of the House of Representatives and the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of Belarus, President Alexander Lukashenko delivered his Annual State of the Nation Address to the Belarusian People and the National Assembly. We publish part of this address, dedicated to foreign political orientation and principles of international co-operation for contemporary Belarus

The world is ever more interdependent, contradictory and unstable, with competition between countries escalating for energy resources, food, sales markets and, even, water (the price of which now almost equals that of oil, with oil currently being ahead). Meanwhile, we are failing to use our wealth. At present, the world has a deficit of drinking water, while we have a surplus, yet cannot trade as we should...

The global financial and economic crisis is being replaced by new conflicts, embracing huge regions. The character and dynamics of the international situation and strengthening of globalisation determine the necessity of an urgent and immediate shift towards an innovative, creative and entrepreneurial foreign policy by such country as Belarus.

The strategic tasks of our country's international activity are large in scale and comprehensive, ensuring sovereignty and independence, state security in the broadest sense and the creation of favourable conditions for stable economic development. They aspire to the steady improvement of the quality of life of Belarusian residents and the promotion of national interests within the international arena. Our foreign policy is multi-vector in character; it has ever been so and ever will be.

Belarus has its own place in Europe, which determines our need for balanced interaction between two centres of power. A strategy of 'equal approach' towards East and West is still required, enabling us to efficiently use our favourable geographical location, as well as the transit and industrial potential of our state.

Russia is a key strategic partner for Belarus, as predetermined by objective multi-faceted ties between our two nations. All-round collaboration with Russia is a pillar of our sovereignty and economic development. Recently, as a result of the Russian Prime Minister's visit to our country, decisions were made regarding issues which have long required solution; this is one of the keys to developing our relations. We should preserve and reinforce our achievements and developments, achieved as part of the most advanced integration union within post-Soviet space: the Union State of Belarus and Russia, and as part of the Customs Union. The brightest examples of successful Belarusian-Russian co-operation are the ensuring of equal rights and the creation of a single system of social guarantees for citizens of both states.

At the same time, our bilateral potential is far from being exhausted and remains vital to solving the most com-

plex issues in our relationship, flexibly and constructively.

The European Union is our closest neighbour on the other side, although Belarus-EU relations have been cooler of late. Much has been spoken of in this respect, with sincere words on our side. I think that this 'time-out' won't last long, as we need each other. Those Europeans who value neighbourliness well understand the fruitlessness of attempts to isolate our country and our exclusion from solving problems which are vital to the whole continent. Belarus has stably ensured energy transit to Europe and filtered the flow of immigrants while blocking the smuggling of drugs, weapons and nuclear materials to adjacent territories. Our country boasts a unique culture, yet is very sensitive towards universal European values.

Those open to co-operation with us don't need 'an open fire' at their neighbour, which can turn out to be dangerous to themselves. Look at what has happened in several African countries as a result of disregarding this rule. I believe that most Europeans well understand everything. I'm confident that this guarantees favourable prospects for restoring normal relations with Belarus.

We must actively search for points of coincidence with European partners while intensifying the promotion of objective information on Belarus, inviting Europeans to visit us more often. As everyday practice shows, the West is keen to collaborate with us. This should be supported, offering beneficial forms of interaction. On the eve of the presidential elections, I was advised 'not to allow' some or to 'restrict the presence' of others. However, I took the opposite decision, enabling all those wishing to observe to do so, be they enemies or rivals. Meanwhile, people abroad sit reading their newspapers, without visiting our state, and believe that our country is some exclusion zone, with dictators on every square metre and cannibalism flourishing. However, when our last enemies arrived (as I know), they lifted their hands in dismay, discussing events privately over dinner at a restaurant: 'It's a completely different country. We've seen much worse. There are plenty of places in the EU where we're afraid to go. Belarus is normal. Do they stigmatise us for our election results? No. This topic is already history; they've recognised that our presidential elections meet all democratic norms, whatever they write. For what do they berate us? Because this 'dictator has scattered people, who were attacking the House of Government'. When Europeans asked these hoodlums what they would do



President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko delivers Annual State of the Nation Address

if the House of Government was attacked, they responded that they would act the same. In fact, we didn't shoot or beat anyone; we didn't use tear-gas or rubber bullets.

I'm confident that such beliefs will pass in time. Then, what will those who want to 'bend' Belarus have remaining in their arsenal? Nothing. We should understand this and know this. Today, we should be ready for the moment when Europeans (publicly or not) recognise that their pressure on Belarus has failed. When they say: 'We're ready to co-operate'. Such messages already exist and we should support this. Yes, we should criticise them if they aren't right, protecting ourselves by pointing out their errors. We shouldn't hide our

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heads in the sand. We shouldn't ever kneel or 'balk'. Why should we fight against them, escalating the situation? We don't need this. Let's speak, even tomorrow, anywhere: in Belarus, Poland, Germany or on neutral territory in Africa, in Libya.

We're aware that the United States of America is an acknowledged global leader, so we're interested in normal relations with the USA. These relations can be equally beneficial for us and the Americans. We have many points of coincidence. If the Americans are ready to collaborate with us, if they are interested in something in Belarus, we'll liaise with them. If Belarus isn't interesting to them, so be it; we don't depend greatly on the USA.

Regarding our national interests, further development of our bilateral ties with CIS states is of key importance. This isn't simply a motto. Strengthening interaction in various spheres with Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan and other partners will remain a top priority for us.

It's not enough to have just two vectors — conventionally speaking, east-

ern and western — to have an efficient foreign policy. We should expand the number of our 'reinforcement points' within the international arena, by extending the 'remote arc' of our allies and partners. Today, we are already receiving serious dividends from our collaboration with such states as China, Venezuela, India, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Vietnam, Syria, Iran and Brazil.

However, we shouldn't rest on our laurels. In this age of the most severe competition from all corners of the world, we can't allow ourselves to stand still, chasing others, trying to catch up. New partners are essential, as is the application of various forms of interaction across all continents.

The results of our co-operation with Venezuela and China have convincingly answered sceptics who doubted the economic efficiency of relations with these countries, located far away from Belarus. Our precious experience of working with them should be widely used in searching for new partners and opportunities worldwide. Recently, we've opened a range of new embassies and consulates. I'd like us to receive corresponding effects from this.

It is perhaps because of Belarus' specific economic character that it can sustain development only via export sales. Like any sensible buyer, it's important for us to have as many trade partners as possible. We can no longer allow ourselves to depend on no more than five customers, as previously. Taking this into account, further export 'intervention' into developing states remains of key importance. This priority is the result of our need to preserve and dynamically develop export volumes. However, don't think our focus on developing states allows us to 'forget' our need to more actively enter the markets of economically developed countries,

where customers impose stricter quality requirements for goods, including our own. Orientation towards these requirements will push our enterprises to modernise their manufactures while enhancing the competitiveness of their goods. If we're able to conquer these markets, we'll be selling our produce all over the globe.

Belarus' geopolitical situation conditions the necessity for its involvement in integration processes, shaping our major socio-economic task, leading our country to participate in the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia and, in the near future, in the Single Economic Space. Actually, we're creating conditions for the free movement of services, capital and labour. You're well aware that many barriers to mutual trade have already been eliminated within the Customs Union.

All these enhance the investment attractiveness of our country, since wide prospects are open to foreign investors wishing to implement their projects in Belarus, taking into account the new opportunities of entering the Russian and Kazakh markets. The most vital aspect today is enabling them to use these evident advantages while attracting major foreign capital into our country.

Our immediate key task is to turn Belarus into a large-scale international transport-logistics centre, using our favourable geographical location to the utmost. We've already begun steps in this direction. The expansion of transit volumes through our territory is the most vital route to bringing funds into the state treasury.

Belarus shouldn't just connect the west, east, south and north via numerous transport links; it should serve as a regional hub, offering secure and comprehensive servicing of transit cargo. Moreover, this hub should be the most attractive to our partners, compared to that of our rivals. The achievement of this goal will bring economic benefits to our state while strengthening our geopolitical position. Don't forget that we face sharp competition. If we procrastinate and waste time, this chance will be used by others and cargo traffic will bypass Belarusian borders.