

Facilitation without delay

During his official visit to Ashgabat, Alexander Lukashenko stresses that Belarusian-Turkmen relations 'have virtually reached a level of strategic partnership'

By Igor Slavinsky

These words are the result of dozens of visits at various levels, producing thousands of Turkmen students at Belarusian universities, almost \$100m of turnover and joint projects worth over \$1bn. It's even possible to say that Belarus is shifting its Venezuelan experience to Central Asia, supplementing its traditional trading ties with the mining of mineral deposits, launch of production facilities and building of accommodation. The President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, characterises the talks as successful, noting that a new stage in bilateral co-operation is opening.

In the sphere of diplomacy, the first foreign state visit of a newly elected head of state is always important, since it hints at foreign political priorities. After the presidential elections, Mr. Lukashenko went to Turkmenistan, explaining his move on meeting Mr. Berdimuhamedov, "I wish to thank you for your firmness and brotherly solidarity. Before the presidential elections, you said — as if joking — that Turkmenistan

is a friendly country and the first official visit must be paid here as a result. We've been coming here, to your friendly state, and I'm thankful to you for the specifics of our relations. The matters which we discussed are now being promoted in all directions. We have a range of new proposals. I was impressed on hearing about your plans from our Foreign Minister. You do not merely plan diversification, but are starting development of the real sector of the economy. We are ready to join you in this work."

The construction of an ore-dressing facility at Garlyk potassium salt deposit could be a pilot project for our collaboration, stresses Mr. Lukashenko. Construction was launched during the President's previous visit, in summer 2009. Now, grand constructions are unfolding in the Kara-Kum, with the contract worth over \$1bn. The Turkmen President is keen to extend the agreement, asking Belarus to build a village and infrastructure nearby, accommodating workers employed at the facility. The idea seems logical, as the new company is being set up in a desert, not far from the Afghani border.

A new player on the global potash fertiliser market might appear, with Turkmenistan mining 1-1.5 million tonnes, with most exported. However, Mr. Lukashenko believes that Turkmenistan and Belarus won't compete directly for custom, saying, "We'll become reliable partners on the international market."

Turkmenistan's immense mineral wealth is currently underdeveloped: not only potassium, but gas and oil. These are attracting huge attention from around the world. Several years ago, the country boasted the only route for its gas to the global market: via Russia. These days, a gas pipeline to China is operational, with supplies to Iran exceed those of Turkmen fuel bought by Gazprom. We can suppose that the EU urgently needs Turkmen gas for the Nabucco pipeline (an alternative to Gazprom's pipe). The European Parliament seems ready to adopt any resolution to allow fuel to be pumped to the West.

Ashgabat has wisely used its resources to strengthen its independence, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Mr. Lukashenko congratulated Mr. Ber-



Alexander Lukashenko and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov meet in Ashgabat

dimuhamedov in advance, saying, "We are seeing the fruits of Turkmenistan's independence now. Your major achievement is that you've managed to ensure — not in words, but in action — the fundamentals for Turkmenistan's independence. You exist irrespective of the whims of our modern world... close and far. This is your greatest merit."

Unlike many other states, Turkmenistan has managed to avoid becoming a subject of international relations. The UN has acknowledged its neutral status — like Switzerland. It now artfully balances between the interests of the greatest states.

One local tradition in Turkmenistan is interesting, involving all foreign ambassadors accredited in Ashgabat joining meetings between the Turkmen President and foreign heads of state. It's a custom I've now twice observed, with ambassadors from the USA, EU states, Russia, China and other countries joining in talks. Last year, Mr. Berdimuhamedov met the heads of France, China, Germany and Turkey, while paying an official visit to Minsk.

Previously, Turkmenistan agreed the purchase of 1,500 Belarusian vehicles. During Mr. Lukashenko's

visit, goods from Minsk Automobile Works and Minsk Tractor Works were being unloaded. The Belarusian President said that Minsk is even ready to double its supplies of machinery this year. While signing documents, Mr. Berdimuhamedov talked much with MAZ's General Director, Alexander Borovsky, who noted his eagerness to set up service centres to maintain his plant's vehicles. Talks in the Turkmen capital were held in the same businesslike manner, focusing on concrete matters, with the Belarusian delegation — headed by the President — in attendance.

Flights to airports big and small

Belavia, Air France-KLM and Delta to join in code-share

Igor Cherginets, Belavia's Deputy Director General for Marketing and Foreign Economic Activity, tells us that the agreement between these air companies was prepared over a period of about two years. Belavia will now be able to sell tickets to the US largest airports, such as New York and Chicago, and to those located in small American towns. Jointly with Delta, ten small American companies have also joined the agreement, which helps expand the number of routes to Amsterdam, while offering convenient routes to African states.

Belavia National Airline currently controls around 65 percent of the Belarusian market for aviation passenger transportation.

UN can lead by example

Belarus proposes reform of UN information activity



Taking part in the 33rd session of the UN Committee on Information, Belarusian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Savinykh submitted a proposal to reform the information activity of the United Nations, to raise efficiency. In particular, he noted the need for detailed regional information activity strategies; these should take into account specific social and economic development priorities, while ensuring public support for

the practical work of local UN institutions.

Belarus believes that the operation of the UN Department of Public Information should be organised in such a way that each country's media gains access to UN global information sources, so they can disseminate information on its activities effectively. Mr. Savinykh stressed the need to ensure equal use of all UN official languages for television, radio and Internet broadcasts.

The United Nations' interaction with the media and academic institutions of Belarus was discussed by Mr. Savinykh and Kiyotaka Akasaka, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. The two exchanged views on the most promising forms of co-operation, aimed at involving the Belarusian media in UN information services.

The UN Committee on Information brings together 113 UN member states and holds its annual sessions in New York in late April-early May, discussing the efficiency of the UN's information activities. The Committee's members made suggestions regarding the UN website and UN radio development strategy, with particular attention paid to improving the efficiency of UN information centres located in member states.

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