

Today, the model of our integration is clear. Jointly with Russia and Kazakhstan (and I'm confident that other countries may also join soon) we've created the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space — with a single market of 170m people.

This market offers additional opportunities for sales of Belarusian produce, primarily, high-tech goods. Through this integration, we can gain equal access to raw material and energy resources without which no state can develop properly. This completely meets the interests of the state and nation, strengthening the position of the Belarusian state worldwide, while enhancing the welfare of our citizens.

Our structures are open for other states to join and, correspondingly, for further expansion of the joint market.

Meanwhile, we are far from reaching our limit. The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union is high on the agenda — to be formed in 2015.

Let's assess the scale of work conducted so far: from the edge of the Atlantic Ocean to the shore of the Pacific Ocean, space is being 'divided' by the two largest integrated unions. Belarus is among the founders of one of these, which is worth a great deal. These two big unions, which unite Europe and Eurasia and their neighbourhoods, are a significant force globally.

The European Union is one of the most vital vectors for Belarus worldwide. Belarus and the EU are important partners economically and politically. The EU is our #1 partner for exports and is our #2 partner for turnover, behind Russia.

A hundred million tonnes of cargo are transported by rail, road and air between West and East across Belarus, while 70 percent of Russian oil and a third of Russian gas are piped. This binds us strongly with Europe, in whose centre we are situated. Nor should we forget other vital interaction spheres: prevention of illegal migration, drug trafficking and smuggling (including illegal trade in nuclear and radioactive materials and weaponry), and the maintenance of safe borders.

Yes, we have different points of view regarding particular issues of social structure, but we must overcome these disagreements. As I've already said, dialogue and negotiations are needed rather than sanctions and bans. The policy of sanctions is wrong primarily because it's useless and brings no results.

Belarus doesn't feel hostility either to the European Union or the United States of America; we see primarily what unites us rather than separates. Moreover, we look to the future.

At present, many 'analysts' are asking which direction we are taking and to which nations we are allying ourselves. It's an outdated and primitive way of thinking, as wise politicians understand that the objective interests of the country are dictated by not only today but tomorrow.

Strategically, our two big unions shouldn't be hostile towards one another. They shouldn't 'divide' the continent but should unite it. Proceeding from this, Belarus is proposing an 'integration of integrations'. Its goal is the creation of a single economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok — as spoken of by the current President of the Russian Federation.

At the summit of heads of SES

states, held in Moscow last December, we decided (via Belarusian initiative) that it would be expedient to consider interaction between the Single Economic Space and the EU. It was our proposal, supported by our partners.

I believe that the Central European states have their own mission. Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia and the Czech Republic should unite the traditional West and East. It is our new historical mission and special role.

I know that my colleagues — the heads of the SES states of Russia and Kazakhstan — adhere to the same principal approach.

For the long-term stability of our state, these two East-West vectors aren't enough. We aim to occupy a strong strategic position by building Belarus' third stronghold — to the South.

This pertains to China, first and foremost. We have an important competitive advantage there, as we have been viewed as China's strategic partner for many years already.

for the sake of statistics but to achieve the highest goal — a better quality of life for people. Economy and politics are the means to achieving this. Sales of screws, bolts, milk and meat have meaning only when the profits bring an enhanced standard of living for people.

New economic approaches won't change the most vital fact: Belarus is a state for people. We've already achieved much in the social sphere. In terms of quality of education, Belarus is ranked 20th worldwide; it occupies 30th place in terms of healthcare and 20th for social capital. This shows that Belarus boasts human capital for dynamical growth of the level of welfare.

The major areas of development — including social policy, health, education and culture — tackle citizens' needs. They've been approved by the All-Belarusian People's Assembly and, regardless of the financial and economic situation in the country, we won't put aside these plans.

Speaking of education, I'll im-

balance.

Very soon, we need to solve the problem of lack of places at preschool nurseries and should ensure that there is availability 'within walking distance' — including at the expense of the creation of home- and family-type groups.

We've done much to develop and equip our health care system. Within five years, we'll completely finish this process, as has been already discussed many times.

Recently, measures have been adopted to expand the production of domestic medicines, primarily those enjoying mass demand, enabling us to make them more affordable to our citizens.

The quality of medical care and the cost of medicines and medical services should be under the daily control of the Health Minister, as these are the most sensitive issues for our citizens.

In recent times, complaints have appeared regarding the imminent launch of the new system of drug

We also need to accelerate the creation of the national electronic library.

Let's now speak of another important area in the development of the spirituality of our nation. At my direct instruction, we've launched the renovation of one of the major cultural symbols of Belarus — Slutsk sashes.

Many centuries ago, even in the most remote corners of Belarus, our luxurious Slutsk sashes were being made; our ancestors 'invested' all their talent, ability and soul into sewing them.

This project is unique, uniting spirituality, traditions, history, culture, technologies and economics. We shouldn't only restore the ancient craft but contemporise it to earn revenue while glorifying Belarus.

Almost every house in Belarus has at least one icon, so a Slutsk sash should also be in each house. We should make them worthily so that they are truly magnificent. Slutsk sashes are only the beginning. We should also restore and revive the castles and palaces of our nobility — such as Mir Castle. Our legacy includes many crafts and industrial goods, as well as Slutsk sashes, which should be restored. People should have the opportunity to touch such relics — even if they are hand-made items created in modern times. This is the idea of this endeavour.

The restoration of significant cultural and historical symbols, as well as promoting patriotism, love and respect for our Homeland, relies on our rich cultural and historical legacy. We should be deservedly proud of this, as it is an important part of the foundation and development of our national identity.

Slutsk sashes remind us of the simple truth at the heart of our land: a society is happy where spiritual values and material force, traditions and innovations harmoniously combine — joining the past and present. Our Belarus should be like this.

Dear citizens!

Belarus' foes would like to see our country underdeveloped, crusty and stuck in the past — wearing lapti shoes. Such countries are vulnerable, as they aren't competitive worldwide.

We won't give cause for joy to those who don't love Belarus, envying us.

Our country will never stagnate or stand still. We'll ever move forward, overcoming all obstacles and barriers, through to the future.

We'll move forward even faster. We'll explore all that is new and exciting in the world. We'll make our country a symbol of development, improvement and rapid progress.

There is no other way, so we must succeed, as we have before.

On the eve of May 9th, celebrating our Great Victory, let me congratulate all of you, dear friends, on the occasion of this Great Victory. We'll do all we can to ensure that new generations of Belarusians remember this Victory and over three million Belarusians who died — every third citizen — for the sake of this Victory. I wish you health, peace, happiness and welfare.

Let's be worthy of the heroic deeds of that generation of Victors!

Thank you for your attention.

(Applause.)



In the hall

We should translate our political advantages into economic ones. That is what we mean when we talk about the 'big advent' of China to Belarus.

As for the Southern Hemisphere, we've been successfully securing a foothold on the markets of Venezuela and neighbouring countries in Latin America. New efforts should be focused on India, South East Asia and, of course, Africa — where our economic presence is, as yet, insignificant.

In recent times, we've made some progress in expanding co-operation with Turkey, Qatar and other countries in the Gulf. This area should be developed by all possible means.

Collaboration with Israel could also have good prospects, especially in the high-tech field and agriculture. Many Belarusians have emigrated there, who could bring capital and the latest technologies to our country. They sincerely love our country, which we should take advantage of.

State agencies need to ramp up efforts to promote Belarusian products and goods on new markets. It's high time our diplomatic missions abroad worked shoulder to shoulder with representatives of our major export-oriented branches. They are legally authorised, so we need to promote the 'Made in Belarus' brand in every possible way.

As I keep saying, we aren't acting

immediately answer a question which concerns many: no new reforms or experiments will be organised in secondary schools. All our attention should be concentrated on enhancing the quality of education, while using contemporary IT. We aim to improve secondary schools, while equipping them with programmes which promote pupils' abilities.

We should also considerably improve and expand the system of training semi-skilled workers and specialists — to reflect market demand. We did the right thing in preserving our system of professional technical education and secondary special education. However, in recent years, we've seen a noticeable emphasis in favour of higher education. We now have too many graduates in the humanities, which concerns me greatly. Meanwhile, we're experiencing a serious deficit in other professions.

I've already said that if a graduate engineer wishes to work with machine tools he should be allowed to do so. However, we have too many lawyers, economists, historians and politicians. We can't employ them all but they'll soon be queuing up demanding employment from us.

The Economy Ministry, with the Education Ministry, shouldn't just study the problem but adopt a definite plan of action to solve this

dispensing (by doctor's prescription only). I'll ask the Health Minister and the Prime Minister to tackle these issues. As this is worldwide practice, we really need to explain this to people. Saying that, we don't wish to offend citizens and create unnecessary queues at polyclinics.

The current year is the Year of Book. As I've mentioned many times, books are like icons to me, being sources of knowledge, spirituality, traditions and moral inspiration. I tend to think of a Belarusian as a person with a book. Just imagine, if we threw away books, Belarusians would disappear.

I don't mean to publish additional tomes of waste paper. Our major task is to restore a love of literature — for the whole nation and, primarily, youngsters — making people ponder life and eternal values.

It doesn't matter which medium you use to read the works of Tolstoy, Turgenev or Kolas: a paper book or an iPad. The vital thing is that we enjoy the living word in any form, especially the younger generation. It's essential that they read.

In this respect, I entrust the Culture and Information Ministries to pay special attention to library itineraries. They should be involving the business community and using the media to promote 2012 as the Year of Books.