

Symbolical sense of important meeting

President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, makes his first official visit to Minsk

By Dmitry Krymov

By his arrival and the unusually sincere format of his meeting with President Alexander Lukashenko, the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, is showing that Moscow places Belarus high on its political agenda.

Negotiations between the two presidents (in narrow and extended formats) have been hosted by the Zaslavl State Residence. The two Heads of State didn't need much time for official communication, showing that all issues had been well planned in advance. They began the meeting with well co-ordinated, shared positions.

Mr. Lukashenko heartily welcomed his honoured guest, saying, "I'd like to thank you and the Russian leadership for everything we've done, especially in recent years. We've seen results in policy and economics."

The creation of the Union State — in which both sides have reached significant progress in all areas — is the political result of 20 years of diplomatic relations.

Mr. Lukashenko is convinced that we must further strengthen and promote the Union State, noting that the economic achievements of integration are significant. He explained, "We've established the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space, transferring our experience to a wider range of states. Other countries look attentively at us... I'm sure that the Russian Federation will continue developing and strengthening its Eurasian vector. We're ready for this."

Evidently, Mr. Putin completely agrees with this approach. He explained why he'd chosen Belarus for his first presidential visit, stressing, "This is natural. Belarus is our close and special partner."

The President of Russia also noted the success of our two states in developing trade-economic collaboration and expressed gratitude to Mr. Lukashenko for his active support of integration processes. The tête-à-tête conversation lasted no more than an hour. In the hall for extended negotiations, the Belarusian President summed up the results of the meeting, saying, "We've just discussed a range of problems and have found complete understanding. We have no closed topics. We're united in politics and economics, as well as in military-technical co-operation, more than ever before; we'll

be building our relations for the benefit of our nations without threatening, disturbing or creating problems for anyone."

Mr. Lukashenko assured, "Belarus is the closest and the most faithful of Russia's allies. It has always been so and will continue. We'll be consistently advocating the development of the closest friendly relations with our major strategic partner — the Russian Federation. This fully meets the will of our nations."

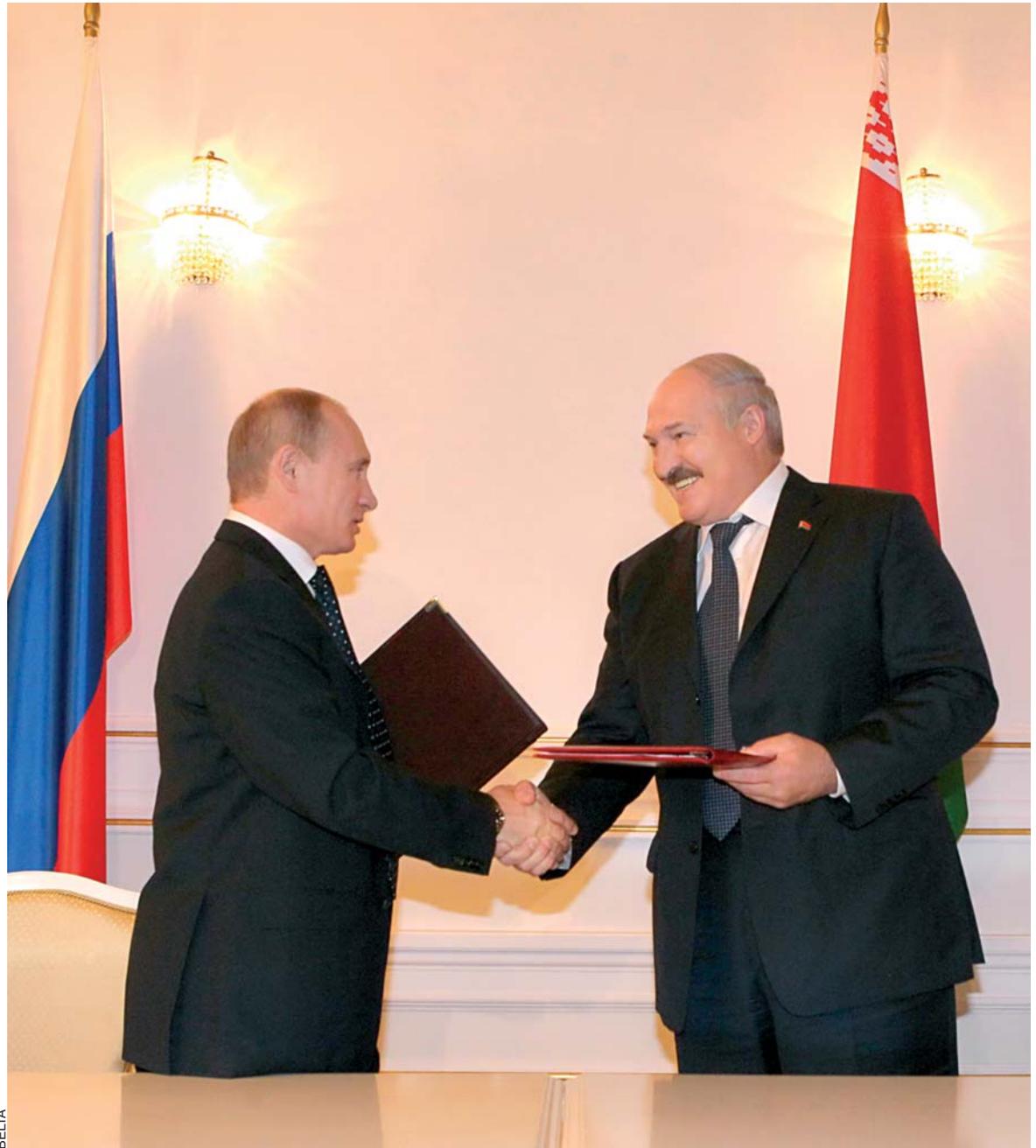
The Belarusian Head of State announced figures to show the success of interaction: annual trade turnover has reached almost \$40bn and continues to grow. Over the first three months of this year alone, it rose by almost a third. Mr. Lukashenko is keen to create joint manufactures and holdings, in addition to expanding trade.

"We should stop competing against each other at least within the frames of the Customs Union, jointly entering the markets of third countries," he stressed.

The Russian President supports this initiative, having noted, "We see how the Belarusian leadership takes difficult but absolutely correct decisions to stabilise its economy. We proceed from the fact that the results will be even more large-scale... This means that our joint efforts and activity within the Single Economic Space yield fruit."

The Russian leader highly praised the level of political dialogue between our states and said that the heads of both houses of Russian Parliament would soon visit Belarus. He added, "The dialogue between Belarus and Russia has acquired a very intensive and positive character. This is largely due to the determination of the Belarusian leadership for such work."

The major final document of the meeting was a joint statement by the presidents of Belarus and Russia, in which they noted the strategic character of relations between our two countries in all spheres of inter-state interaction, proving their interest in the further development of the Union State. As far as the future of integration processes within the post-Soviet space is concerned, Mr. Lukashenko and Mr. Putin are confident that 'the Eurasian Economic Union, involving Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia and formed on the basis of the cus-



Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko pleased with results of their negotiations

tom Union and the Single Economic Space of our three states, will be a powerful and influential geopolitical structure — attractive to other states who share the idea of Eurasian integration."

The statement also mentions the interest of the two sides in forming unified economic conditions within the Union State and the Single Economic Space. The presidents are committed to a high level of interaction regarding the construction of a nuclear power station in Belarus — with enhanced security. This proves their readiness to ensure efficient liaisons, promoting global nuclear security.

The two sides attach great importance to issues of military-technical co-operation and interaction in the sphere of ensuring wider security. Belarus and Russia 'intend to participate actively in collective efforts to enhance stability at all levels, including the prevention and peaceful resolution of international conflicts and counteraction of other threats'.

Our two states have proven their readiness to ensure close co-ordination in protecting and promoting common interests within the international arena. They have also noted the importance of further promoting OSCE reform, returning the organisation to its role as a forum for open political dialogue in Europe on equal terms.

The joint statement reads: 'Belarus and Russia will co-ordinate their efforts to counteract attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of Union State members and member countries of the Single Economic Space via the intro-

duction of restrictions or sanctions'.

Addressing journalists, Mr. Lukashenko stated, "Trustworthy dialogue has been established and maintained by both sides, enabling us to achieve weighty results over the entire agenda of our co-operation."

The President of Belarus highly appreciates Mr. Putin's visit, saying, "This visit is more important than many economic agreements between Belarus and Russia, or with other countries. It is a signal of our great future. As far as Belarus is concerned, we'll continue worthily. We've gathered here to improve the lives of our people."

Mr. Putin echoed those thoughts, adding, "I'm convinced

that Russian-Belarusian relations have a big future. We've signed an agreement which underlines the priority of our bilateral relations and our common hopes for active, fruitful work in all directions. As integration processes intensify, the unity of our states will only grow stronger, opening up opportunities to solve long-term and current tasks."

On the second day of his visit, before leaving Minsk, Mr. Putin laid a wreath at the Victory Monument, as is traditional. Heads of state who officially visit a country tend to pay tribute at national sites. However, the action had even greater significance, since the monument marks our Common Victory, which cemented the fates of our two nations forever...

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