

Dialogue in open format

President of Belarus gives press conference to Russian media

The interview lasted a record five hours, with journalists keen to learn the President's opinion on a wide range of topics: from global events and integration processes to changes in Belarus and strictly personal issues. Alexander Lukashenko endeavoured to give complete, detailed and sincere answers.

Relations between Belarus and Russia

Over the last decade, we've witnessed many fateful events in the life of our two states. Our countries have covered a rather difficult path over a relatively short period of time. We've seen sharp disputes and conflicts, as well as brotherly support in difficult, complex circumstances but, vitally, have assured ourselves that, fundamentally, Belarus and Russia need each other in this vigorous, ever competing world.

We're pushed in this direction not only by the problems which appear ever more often in the international arena and in our mutual relations but also by our historical past and our present. No one needs our countries to be strong and independent except for ourselves. Competition is sharper than ever before, with the world's power players openly ignoring all the rules: written and unwritten. Belarusians and Russians are struggling for a worthy place in the Sun, as they undoubtedly deserve.

Life has already proven that we can achieve this together, as shown by the construction of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Undoubtedly, it can be assessed as an absolutely correct and forward-looking step, achieving a depth within the post-Soviet space never before seen in other co-operative projects.

The same is true of the Single Economic Space and our attempt to create the Eurasian Economic Union. At present, our Belarusian-Russian union enjoys greater depth, being a unique structure of integration.

Constitutional Act

We haven't yet publically announced our goals and may differ slightly in our understanding of these targets. For example, there was a time when we accepted rather radical proposals on the adoption of the Constitutional Act. At the time, the Russian Federation (its leadership and maybe even its elite) weren't ready for such a course. Legally, terms had been clearly determined regarding a referendum on a joint Constitution. We approved this process but were suddenly asked instead to introduce a single currency of the Russian Rouble. It wouldn't have been the worst course of action but we were asked to accept an emission centre exclusively located in the Russian Federation, with

all related policy determined by the Russian Central Bank. Even this wasn't completely unacceptable but we argued that more than currency was at stake.

To create a single union state, all areas must be considered — from the activity of single economic institutes to political authorities. Everything should be guided by the Constitution: monetary system, financial-economic policy, political authorities and so on.



If we had adopted this Constitution — as we agreed via referendums — the issue of a single currency would not have arisen. However, at the time, there was a breakdown in this movement. I mean the correct movement which has already found reflection in a treaty.

We are now taking stock and trying to solve definite questions in the life of our nations. Some 'polishing' is necessary but no radical moves. I won't go into detail, as it's a multi-faceted problem.

Priorities

We have no geopolitical tasks, as we clearly understand our place in the world. We aren't keen on globalisation although some central Russian media reproach me with interfering in world politics. I certainly don't. If we're asked to join a process, we do so. If we're asked to bring tangible benefits, we take part. If we see that we can't help, we don't, regardless of appearances. In this way, we're building our foreign economic and foreign political strategy.

As far as these strategies

are concerned, economics are at the heart of everything. All our embassies are oriented towards trade and investment, since exports account for around 80-85 percent of our revenue. We consume very little of what we produce, as in Soviet times. However, we've diversified, as is our ultimate goal. As President, I'm guiding the country towards a diversified economy, using local raw materials.

As far as politics is concerned, I don't spend too

much time pondering; you're aware of our structure. I can only say that we pursue a quite rigorous policy while relying on principles of honesty and justice. We don't bother to dress up issues to be something they are not.

Our domestic policy is transparent, with everything oriented towards the public good. For the nation! This is absolutely vital — not populism. We constantly discuss how best to do this; in particular, it is my policy, so it's my concern. The nation has elected me and we should do our best for the people without nudging and indulging the people, without creating excessive preferences for idling. We clearly understand that the rights of the nation and people should be observed; these are sincere rights.

I believe that we have a human right to life and to certain living standards and a degree of safety. This includes the right to work and to receive a reasonable salary which pays the utility bills and so on; we should help people in this. If you want to be rich this isn't a state concern. Yes,

we should ensure opportunities but if someone wants to become rich they'll need to work themselves to the limit.

Our domestic economic and political policy focuses on ensuring good living conditions for our people. We still have some way to go to achieve definite currency and financial stability; problems need to be solved.

Our foreign policy is multi-vector. We don't want to argue with the EU, preferring to live in friendship — as before. We have an absolutely reliable partner in the Russian Federation to the east; we are more than partners, we're much closer. We should live as

close people and close states. You know what this notion includes; it's our aim.

All our tasks are conducted countrywide, being interconnected and, simply, universal.

Integration

If we can, we should advance the SES and the Eurasian Economic Union to the same level as the Union State — literally removing borders, visas and other obstacles (as we did with Russia), moving forward by 2015.

Before then, we'll be focusing our attention on solving definite issues of the Union of Belarus and Russia. I'm convinced that no one can outstrip Belarus and Russia for their level of integration in economic, political and historical spheres.

Our path should be guided by fundamental principles of equality. Size is irrelevant; all nations should be equal — especially in building the Union. It won't last long unless it's based on mutual respect and equality. No such unions exist anywhere in the world and never have done.

The construction of the Union should rely exclusively on this principle.

This doesn't mean that everything is shared equally — can you imagine! Belarus would sob, as it doesn't need so much. I'm speaking of something quite different. Russia and Belarus should and will have absolutely equal economic conditions.

I underline again: I don't demand anything free of charge. At present, we extract natural gas and oil in Venezuela, although we don't do this in Russia. We had a frank conversation with your leadership, which desires to take part in privatising our coun-

try. We aren't against this. You want to buy our oil processing plants but, if I allowed this, I'd face a lot of domestic criticism. However, we can give you access to our oil refineries, so you can refine your own oil separately from ours. Sadly, you won't allow us to extract natural gas — as foreigners such as the Americans do. I've no idea why not, since we give you access to processing plants. You wouldn't be giving us oil but the opportunity to extract oil in Russia — following the same terms as those offered to foreigners. I'd love an answer but there is none... We don't currently enjoy equal conditions, which is difficult for us to live with.

Parliamentary dimension

Finally, we've managed to inspire Russia and Kazakhstan to share their opinions. We'll follow their decisions and, as soon as some problem arises, I'll immediately offer a suggestion.

Sincerely, we won't interfere with the process or speak out of turn; it's my deliberate position. We'll let the giants [Kazakhstan and Russia]

decide whether we'll have a parliament. Our Union State met obstacles during its development, which we had to overcome. Now, the Eurasian Economic Union needs to follow suit. Belarus and Russia have an Inter-parliamentary Assembly, a Supreme State Council and a Union State Council of Ministers. If we want to advance Eurasian integration, we need to create similar structures. It will be a difficult process but I'd like to note that Belarus won't create problems.

The WTO

Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, as well as other countries in the post-Soviet space, have been kicked — you know who by. You're also aware that the WTO is now a political rather than an economic organisation. Those kicking us would like to see us disunited but we are negotiating, alongside Kazakhstan and Russia. We're pursuing our policy carefully, analysing the situation in Russia.

When Russia joined the WTO, we didn't try to hinder it, meeting Russia halfway in all issues — including those requested by our Government. The Belarusian economy has suffered during the world financial crisis. We introduced protective customs duties for imported cars last year and have paid dearly for the Single Economic Space. The current Prime Minister and the President of Russia acknowledge this and give credit to Belarus.

Russia has joined the WTO, so we need to deal with that, making it work for us. We're determined to hold out, facing each challenge. Talking to the Russian leadership, we always remind them that Russia should not abandon Belarus, as it has promised. We receive positive answers but what will happen in the future? We'll wait and see.

The electoral system

I've been elected more than once and have also been a deputy, so I'm well aware of the party system and the majority system. You know, in the party system, only the top 2-3 people are well-known. Is this good? I think not.

There are 15 parties in Belarus but people only know the Communist Party and the nationalistic party, which has caused a lot of trouble in Belarus, and the BPF [Belarusian Popular Front]. People are aware of the extreme right and left parties. In between, there are fragments of both of these parties, as well as 13 other parties. Probably, people have heard their names but