

Present coincides with great holiday

On the eve of October Revolution Day — November 6th — a new section of Minsk's first metro line is launched, with Belarus' President, Alexander Lukashenko, participating in the solemn opening ceremony for the stations of Grushevka, Mikhalovo and Petrovshchina

By Vladimir Khromov

A new 5km section, connecting the stations of Institut Kultury (The Institute of Culture) and Petrovshchina, is providing high-speed transport communication between the residential districts of Minsk's south-west and its centre. Several advanced technical solutions have been applied in the design and construction, as the Head of State noted. He reported on the reconstruction of Dzerzhinsky Avenue and the development of its neighbouring territory, asserting his commitment to further developing Minskmetrostroy. He is keen to see the export of construction services extended.

The Chairman of the Minsk City Executive Committee, Nikolai Ladutko, added that Moscow is eager to use the services of Belarusian metro builders. "We need to go there, without hesitation, as it's a perfect form of service export," stressed Mr. Lukashenko, adding, "The metro shouldn't just be maintained but expanded, including the export of services."

The development of inter-city railway passenger transportation is also in the limelight, with the existing route towards Zaslavl soon to be extended with lines to the satellite town of Smolevichi and Rudensk. This should aid their development. Moreover, one kilometre of city line is about ten times cheaper than metro construction. "It makes sense to develop this cheap public transport," said Mr. Lukashenko. "Of course, we'll preserve the present scale of metro construction as it's convenient; we're preserving our school of metro construction and certainly won't destroy it."

The President has praised the quality of work at the newly launched stations, which are not simply beautifully decorated but have been completed without excessive spending. "It's great that the job has been done economically. There's no need to build palaces, as functionality is key," stressed Mr. Lukashenko. "Everything should be done simply and affordably. Primarily, clean orderliness should be achieved without excess, using durable materials."



President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko at opening of new section of first Belarusian metro line



Petrovshchina metro station

After inspecting the new stations, the President answered journalists' questions

Asked about his preferred mode of transport from his pre-presidential days, he replied, "I love cars." Recollecting those years, he explained that he first rode a motorbike, having a car later. "I'm not a great expert in modern foreign cars but cars are my favourite mode of transport. Beginning with a motorbike and ending with a car, I learnt to drive quite well. Buses were not my favourite form of transport, although I used them a great deal, alongside trains," he admitted.

The new metro stations' opening to coincide with November 7th prompted the question of why Belarus celebrates October Revolution Day. "I support the good ideas with which revolutionaries approached simple people: that the land must belong to ordinary rural citizens and factories to workers. This aimed to save the country, bringing it into order. There were no bad slogans. The Revolution won under those slogans," the Head of State noted, stressing, "Many of those ideas form the basis of today's state policy. When we celebrate October Revolution Day, we are remembering those values and slogans."

Speculating as to why some post-Soviet states do not celebrate this holiday, Mr. Lukashenko answered, "They aren't do it in the past. There was much criticism that the Revolution brought grief, killing people. Actually, they were killed later. We're speaking of ideas. The negative aftermath — of murder — was the result of the ideology of the Revolution being put aside. It was wrong but it happened later; we do condemn those events. However, we can't reject everything which happened in 1917, selecting the ideas which inspired Vladimir Lenin and his team to bring about the Revolution."

Mr. Lukashenko advises us to take care in assessing the past. "Never hurry to assess the past, as that can lead to politicisation. The past is ours and we cannot reject it but to look at it objectively, we need to see shortcomings, without hiding them. We should also take the best from the past," said the President.

Asked whether it's too expensive for the state to build transport infrastructure, Mr. Lukashenko stressed the importance to the economy of developing such infrastructure. He views the new metro lines and logistics centres as

crucial to 'driving forward the economy' and 'raising interest among investors.' He added, "Of course, if we can afford to do this, things can't be so bad economically."

According to the Head of State, national development relies on the building of infrastructure. He mentioned the new hydroelectric power station on the Nieman River, near Grodno, which will almost pro-

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vide the entire city with electricity for domestic use. Similar power stations are also being built on other rivers. "We are building woodworking enterprises, furniture companies and infrastructure such as the road to Mogilev, driving forward the economy through investment. Infrastructure is absolutely essential," the President is convinced.

Speaking of Belarusian-American relations after the presidential elections in the USA, Mr. Lukashenko noted that he expects no change —

regardless of who holds the US presidency. "As far as changes in US policy towards Belarus, little will change, due to their great inertia. They are like a bulldozer traversing the world and it will be very difficult to turn it or turn it around!" asserts the Belarusian President. "I hold no hope that anything will change in our relations with the USA, although we're open to this when the Americans are ready,"

stressed Mr. Lukashenko. The Belarusian President was asked why he has never voted ahead of time at elections, to set a good example to his electorate — as did his American colleague, Barack Obama. "I've never thought of it," admitted the Head of State. "Probably, it wouldn't be appropriate to cast my vote ahead of time, given my position. Moreover, a great many journalists want to meet the President on this day; I can't escape this, as it's my duty to talk to them." The Belarusian leader added that he always

wants to be with the people on the main day of elections, as it's a holiday for his nation.

Mr. Lukashenko was asked how he feels about negative assessments of the elections in Belarus, given by Western countries and the OSCE. In particular, journalists commented on the comparison with the recent parliamentary elections in Ukraine which took place under a 'rampage' of democracy. Of course, OSCE observers are not welcomed at elections in the USA, so some might say that the organisation's role in this respect comes into question, especially as its standards appear to be unknown.

"What kind of interaction is it when, prior to the elections in Belarus, they had already prepared a report, which they presented afterwards. The same happened in Ukraine, where they had prior drafts. The OSCE presented these although Ukraine's elections were absolutely democratic. They did everything to please the OSCE and the West," emphasised the President of Belarus.

According to Mr. Lukashenko, CIS observers primarily base their judgements on criteria 'which are closest to all of us.' "The way we assess elec-

tions here, within the CIS, is contrary to the system used by the OSCE. The OSCE is trying to force its standards upon us when those standards are non-existent, being completely politically biased," asserted the Head of State. As proof of these double standards, Mr. Lukashenko notes the USA's positioning of itself as a stronghold of democracy. "International observers arrive and are told that, if they cross the threshold, they'll be arrested. What if we acted like that? We invite the Americans to act as observers in Belarus; we don't arrest them," said the President. "Even today, they want to be able to count votes. This is evidence of double and triple standards. We cannot allow it."

"I haven't noticed any concern here about elections in the USA," noted the Belarusian President. "They can hold elections in any way they choose. The entire world laughs at these elections. Firstly, they are indirect and, secondly, the person with fewer votes can become president. What kind of elections are they? They like their system, as it's their tradition, and people remain silent while their leaders are pleased. Well, may God be with you!"