

Balkans come closer

Belarus and Serbia ready to develop relationships at all levels and in all fields, as confirmed by presidents Alexander Lukashenko and Tomislav Nikolić, on March 12th, at Minsk meeting

By Vasily Kharitonov

During the talks, Mr. Lukashenko stressed that Belarus and Serbia already enjoy good relations, which can be built upon. "Yes, unfortunately, there was a definite break in our relationship but, in spite of this, we've achieved real results in economy and trade. Today, we have political will. Therefore, we aren't just beginning; we are continuing building what was started," he asserted.

The President of Belarus noted that our two countries have a good foundation for relations, with the necessary legal framework in place. He is confident that our bilateral relations will go from strength to strength. "We, and you, and the whole world, have problems; nevertheless, together we can solve them. We must do so," said Mr. Lukashenko.

He stressed that Belarus and Serbia are building ties without any idea of working against anyone, but for the benefit of citizens in our two countries. "On the Belarusian side, we're ready to take our relationship as far as is acceptable to you," said Mr. Lukashenko, addressing his guest. "Today we welcome you, a congenial representative of a country which we treat with great love."

The Serbian President said that he had been to Belarus several times but that this was his first trip as head of state. "You mentioned that, for a while, we had a temporary break in our relationship. You know that nothing can stop relations between our two countries and peoples," said Mr. Nikolić. "We've realised this mistake and will do our best to correct it. Serbia has no enemies and we consider Belarus a most important friend." The Serbian President expressed his hope that the current visit would strengthen political and economic ties between our states, building on the friendship existing between our two nations.

The talks in narrow format lasted about two hours, with the presidents discussing in detail the full range of Belarusian-Serbian relations, including co-operation in trade-economic, sci-tech and humanitarian spheres, and within the international arena. Opening the extended meeting, Mr. Lukashenko stressed that they aimed to solve many problematic issues. The two leaders agreed to personally oversee the implementation of agreements, while defining a plan of action for the coming year.

By the summer, when the foreign ministers of our two countries meet, all projects should be inventoried, as well as contracts and agreements, giving a complete picture of the direction of further co-operation. In autumn, the intergovernmental Belarusian-Serbian commission for trade and economic co-operation is to meet, to look at interim results. In late 2013 or early 2014, our presidents will meet again, in Serbia, to report on progress. "We'll build three stages into our relationship, to give them solidity," said the Head of State.

Belarus is keen on launching major joint projects with Serbia regarding industrial co-operation, as



Tomislav Nikolić awards Alexander Lukashenko the Order of the Republic of Serbia

well as in the spheres of agriculture, construction, infrastructure development and the modernisation of transport and utility systems.

The head of the Belarusian state noted that, recently, our countries have made notable progress in trade and economic co-operation. At the same time, he considers that the current volume of bilateral turnover (of \$150m) is 'a drop in the ocean and can't satisfy us'. "It's very 'last century' to rely on trade alone; we should move on," said Mr. Lukashenko. He hopes to see our bilateral turnover reach \$0.5bn. "Of course, we'll promote investment in Belarus, and Serbia, supporting investors, businesses and various production programmes," said the head of state.

The presidents of our two countries believe that it will be profitable to create joint enterprises, while entering the production markets of third countries together. "Mr. Nikolić notes that Serbian products are remembered but that they have nothing to sell now. This is the easiest problem to solve. We are ready to join forces. We can produce, and you know how to sell well, so we should join forces and enter foreign markets together," said the head of the Belarusian state.

Mr. Lukashenko believes that friendly and mutually beneficial co-operation between our two countries will now move forward, thanks to the recent visit of the President of Serbia. According to the Belarusian leader, we enjoy a historical relationship of closeness in many spheres, including cultural and spiritual, and enjoy a high degree of mutual respect.

"Your current visit is not the beginning; it is a continuation of our relationship. We have the foundations, the legal framework for co-operation and joint enterprises producing equipment. We don't need to start from scratch after the break in our relationship; we should for-

get the misunderstanding and move on. There is basis for this," said Mr. Lukashenko. He drew attention to successfully developing interaction between our countries in the areas of health, education, culture and sport.

Mr. Nikolić noted his willingness to overcome the period of stagnation and mistakes in Belarusian-Serbian relations. According to the President of Serbia, since his election to the presidency, he has striven to find a chance to come to Belarus and correct some of the mistakes made. "The easiest thing is to lose a friend, but true friends never truly part. Belarus is a real ally of Serbia. This is also your personal policy," said Mr. Nikolić.

Mr. Nikolić supports the policy and course of development being implemented in Belarus. "I congratulate you on how your country is coping with the consequences of the global economic crisis, which has shaken even much stronger economies," he said. "We'll implement everything on which we agree. You and I will guarantee these agreements," said Mr. Nikolić. "We need good relations, based on trust, respect and a desire for our people to live better."

"I want to show, with this visit, that Serbia is ready to co-operate with all countries worldwide," stressed the Serbian President. "Serbia is trying to become an EU member. We're fulfilling all the requirements of the EU Council, which are normal for any state. However, no one can dictate to us who our friends are in the world. We consider Belarus to be one of our greatest friends."

He admitted that his country has a problem with Kosovo and the Metohija relationship. "It's part of our territory, over which we have no power. We gave it to the UN, and year after year, they have gradually passed it into the hands of the Albanians," said the Serbian President. "Maybe, up to now, it seemed that Serbia was ready to do anything in order to become

an EU member. However, everyone is wanting more. Today, I emphasise that there are things that Serbia is not ready to do, even for entry into the EU," stressed the head of the Serbian state.

Mr. Nikolić thanked Belarus for supporting Serbia in its struggle to preserve territorial integrity and sovereignty. "We understand all your difficulties and troubles. For many years, Serbia was under EU sanctions; the roots of our crisis came from them. However, we did not give up; they had to bomb us," noted the President of Serbia. "I hope that this kind of democracy won't be imposed anywhere else." Mr. Nikolić thanked Mr. Lukashenko for his support in a difficult situation and the courage shown by the head of state in arriving in Serbia during the bombing. "We'll never forget this," he said.

At the end of the talks, the presidents reaffirmed their determination to improve relations between

Belarus and Serbia significantly this year. Mr. Lukashenko and Mr. Nikolić signed a joint statement on their mutual desire to strengthen long-term co-operation between our two countries: on a bilateral basis and through multilateral co-operation. They confirmed their interest in further developing bilateral political dialogue at the highest levels, strengthening inter-parliamentary relations, improving existing mechanisms for Belarusian-Serbian interaction in the trade and economic sphere — and creating new ones, and expanding our legal framework for co-operation.

In the joint statement, Belarus emphasised its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia and the development of a comprehensive and coherent solution for Kosovo and Metohija.

The presidents also noted the commitment of Belarus and Serbia to resolving international conflicts and disputes through universally recognised channels of international law and the fundamental principles of the UN Charter. They agreed to consult on the subject of co-operation within the framework of the UN and international European regional organisations.

Belarus and Serbia also intend to intensify scientific and technological co-operation, expanding interaction in the fields of culture, sports, tourism and education. An intergovernmental agreement on co-operation in battling crime was also signed, as well as an agreement between Belarus and Serbia on legal assistance in civil and criminal cases. The Ministry of Information of Belarus and the Ministry of Culture and Information of Serbia additionally signed a memorandum on co-operation in the field of information.

Mr. Nikolić awarded Mr. Lukashenko the order of the Republic of Serbia, which is the highest state award of this country, for aiding development and strengthening peaceful co-operation and friendly relations.

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