

Keeping gunpowder dry

Minsk hosts the Council of Defence Ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States

By Dmitry Vasiliev

Minsk is becoming ever more a centre for substantive discussions on integration. Following close on the heels of the Council of CIS Heads of Government and the Forum of Businessmen, Minsk has hosted the CIS Council of Defence Ministers.

The President met the heads of delegations before the Council began its work, noting, "We pay special importance to each event which helps strengthen the authority of our integration association and further develop co-operation among state-participants in all spheres." Issues of defence and national security are, naturally, of great importance. The President added, "Bearing in mind today's difficult geopolitical situation worldwide, this area of integration is of particular importance for state stability and the sustainable development of the Commonwealth."

Belarus supports the further all-round development of the Commonwealth, strengthening its defence capability and authority: a position shared by many heads of state considering integration. The President emphasised, "Whether we like it or not, life forces us to work closely within the framework of military organisations. Some may not seek a tight embrace, as in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, while others wish to be more independent. Nevertheless, world events push us towards closer military co-operation."

Of course, co-operation between Belarus and Russia is a good example. Mr. Lukashenko explained, "We have created practically a single army so, if something happens, we are absolutely united and we know what to do. We aren't afraid, having co-operated this way for decades, and we have not lost



Prospective issues of co-operation discussed in Minsk at meeting of Council of CIS Defence Ministers

any independence... We, Belarusians and Russians, don't have any secrets from each other. If we don't manage to achieve anything (Russia also has problems, we know) we simply ask Russia to note what is going on in Belarus. We ask Russia to supply the new weapons being used in the Russian army. We have the right to act in a unified manner, as equal partners with Russians in our common defence space."

The President expressed his hopes that CIS integration will start to move more rapidly — at least reaching the level of the CSTO. The Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu, who heads the CIS Council of Defence Ministers, added that much work lies ahead to attain the required level of security within the CIS. He called the meeting itself a landmark event in the development of close partnerships in the military sphere.

the military sphere is a component of integration, with priorities defined by the concerns of friendly countries regarding sudden complications in the global geopolitical situation. Hot spots are coming ever closer to CIS borders. Mr. Zhadobin noted the need to set up mechanisms to counter such threats.

Over 20 issues were debated, including the further development of a joint air defence system, the use of satellite communications for military purposes, interaction of engineering corps in the field of mine clearance and monitoring of ammunition. It was decided to hold joint military exercises for air defence forces under the slogan *Combat Commonwealth 2013*. In addition, out of date (yet still live) ammunition is to be placed in landfill sites in Russia and Kazakhstan and an international competition for the professional military is planned: *Warriors of the Commonwealth*.

Being well-prepared, the ministers completed their work efficiently, as Mr. Zhadobin noted, adding that decisions had been made collectively, with attention paid to air defence troops. He stressed, "We'd like to see the boundaries of the Commonwealth properly protected."

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Friendship with Holy See

By Lilia Osipova

Belarus eager to strengthen co-operation with Vatican

Thousands of kilometres separate Minsk from the Vatican but this is no obstacle to establishing constructive dialogue and kind relations. On recently meeting the Apostolic Nuncio to Belarus, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, President Lukashenko expressed his gratitude for the Vatican's support of our country, saying, "I cannot but thank you for your kind attitude towards Belarus. I'm thankful to the Vatican and to the Catholic Church for the support rendered within the international arena — primarily, in establishing dialogue with the European Union. It doesn't matter whether this generates a result or not, although I know that you are keen to see this realised."

Catholicism is the second largest confession (in the number of its followers) in Belarus so it's no surprise that we desire stronger relations with the Vatican. Over the past 20 years (since diplomatic ties between Belarus and the Holy See were established), the number of Catholic pa-

rishioners has quadrupled. The state has passed around 300 buildings to believers, also assisting in restoring ancient Roman Catholic churches.

While chatting with Mr. Gugerotti, the President stressed that the Catholic Church behaves very properly in Belarus, working closely with the community: an approach supported by the state. Mr. Lukashenko noted, "We've never experienced such great understanding and support as from those representing the Vatican — regarding personnel recruitment and the problems facing the Catholic Church in Belarus. I'd like to assure you that we'll do everything possible — and more — for the Catholic Church in Belarus. There are no problems which we may fail to solve."

Addressing his guest, the President asked, "I know that many Vatican heads follow your position

— supporting Belarus. Some have expressed a desire to visit our country. When you return to the Vatican, please tell them that we'll always be delighted to welcome them here. Please pass the kindest wishes from the Belarusian Catholics and Belarusians as a whole to Pope Francis. From what we read in the media and learn from you, we like his stance on particular issues; he's an interesting person." Mr. Lukashenko also requested that his best wishes be passed to Benedict XVI, noting that good interpersonal contacts already exist.

Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti stressed the great honour of working in Belarus, "This country deserves respect and a positive attitude and should receive such." He views the forthcoming visit of Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran — the most influential diplomat in the Vatican — as a clear indication of the Vatican's desire to promote relations with our country.



Claudio Gugerotti

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