

All-round conversation with journalists in open format

The press conference lasted for around five hours, with the President answering over 60 questions on Belarus' social and economic development, its foreign policy and relations with Russia, the West and other countries and regions of the world. The media were also keen to learn about integration within the post-Soviet space and Belarus' participation. As is traditional, some personal questions were also asked.

Hosted by the National Library, the event gathered over 350 journalists from 285 media sources. Of these, about 200 journalists were from 184 regional media outlets. Foreign journalists from seven countries were in attendance.

Interest in such events is always high, with journalists appreciating Mr. Lukashenko's sincere and open manner. Their expectations were met once again, with the President encouraging discussion rather than formal questions and answers.

"Let's discuss problems together. Yes, I'd really like to influence you with my words and my conviction. However, don't think that I can't be influenced by your questions; believe me, I'm open minded and take our modern issues seriously," noted the Head of State.

The conversation covered almost every sphere. Conversation began with Mr. Lukashenko answering questions posed online by the public, despite some being rather uncomplimentary. He told those present that, in answer to those who expect him to repent for problems facing the economy and regarding foreign political isolation that he indeed does. "For those listening, I repent, I truly do repent. I'll say so a third time if it helps. I repent for those problems which currently exist in our country. Even if I didn't repent, I'm the national figurehead, the Head of State, in line with the Constitution. Whether I wish it or not, I bear responsibility for problems in our country," admitted the Belarusian leader.

Real life is complex and multi-faceted and, even, sometimes, boring: milk yields, GDP and modernisation, profitability and labour efficiency, rural development and work on external markets, kindergartens, schools, hospitals, universities, the raising of the coming generation and

care of the elderly. It's impossible to list everything but each aspect is part of daily life.

Gomel journalists were interested in the construction of a 100km railway line through Polesie, which would impact on its development, being rich in mineral resources. Those from Grodno were concerned for the fate of Grodno Azot, while those from Vitebsk were keen to learn about

and what has failed to materialise. Back then, I was convinced that we'd cope with new threats. Now, I can say that we certainly have. We've achieved small but steady economic growth while raising people's real incomes. We're often criticised for low rates of GDP growth but it's a very vague concept. When I ask the Government for explanations, they give me reports which show that certain

aged to expand exports and achieved a positive foreign trade balance (almost for the first time in our history). More currency came into the country than ever before, despite the unfavourable world market. Many, including journalists, criticised me, saying that the economy wouldn't be able to cope with such a task. However, it has.

Some forecast gloomy pictures of the future but

dressed to the President from various other directions.

Grinyuk, from the Satio Centre of System Business Technologies, wishes to know my assessment of public-private partnership in Belarus.

I view this positively. However, if the only thing you do is demanding something from the state, like give us liberalisation, no control, we will do what we

Belarus and earn enough money to live well, are able to do so. If businessmen do not understand that they should give something to people so that people live decently, we will help them understand that. If someone wants to dip into someone else's pocket, we'll deal strictly with those who don't. This is my policy towards public-private partnership.

My friend Stanislav Bogdankevich [formerly the Chairman of the National Bank of Belarus] advocates autonomy for the National Bank, making it independent even from the President. In fact, the National Bank is already independent, although the President can request a report from it at any time and can monitor any situation, demanding that different measures be taken in the interests of the state and our people.

During the world financial crisis, the EU (the most advanced organisation) and the USA saw financial organisations and banks collapse; they then immediately tightened controls. However, they tell us that everything should be independent. I believe that, when everything becomes independent and no one is held responsible, quarrels begin.

No state has absolute autonomy. No one, not even Stanislav Bogdankevich, can say that the President places excessive pressure on the National Bank. I've told the Chair of the National Bank and the PM that decent salaries are necessary but that, if we don't upgrade enterprises, we'll have nothing to promote in the Single Customs Space, let alone within the WTO. It's a matter of survival. I'm concerned about access to loans and how the Government and the National Bank will approach this. My only requirement is that the country grows and that the economy develops. That's my task, so some control is necessary, as this is a huge organisation, and no organisation can exist without control.

Economist Chaly asks whether the resignation of the Government is being prepared and whether I should set more feasible tasks before the Government. I believe he is aware of the how the decisions are made in our country, especially those which relate to the tasks for the Gov-



the future of the *Slavianski Bazaar*. Needless to say, everyone wanted to hear about integration, the optimisation of state apparatus, housing construction, servicing of foreign debt and land ownership, among other issues guiding Belarus' path into the future. Some issues may be dull but they are important. In particular, the President of Belarus detailed the following:

The results of 2012

Just over a year ago, in this hall, and in approximately the same format, I answered your questions, including those which had a sharp edge.

The most vital issue was the future of our country. I detailed the conditions under which socio-economic stability could be ensured for Belarus, while preserving the independence of our state. If you remember, I didn't promise an easy life; however, I didn't scare you with gloomy prospects either.

2012 is now past, so we can draw some conclusions and see what has come true

areas of agriculture and industry have increased over and above our targets: agriculture has grown by 6.5 percent (instead of 5 percent) while industry is up around 8 percent (instead of the planned 6.5 percent). Most vitally, real incomes are up 20 percent.

We have not achieved every goal and opportunities have, no doubt, been missed but, over the past year (which brought complex situations) we've settled financial problems hanging over from 2011. In honesty, in dealing with these problems, we met the major task for our economy; without financial stability, it would be impossible to speak about further development or modernisation of production, let alone raising real incomes.

Of course, people always want more. The only way for us, Belarusians, to achieve this is through hard work. There's no other way, as I've said before.

I'd like to give a simple but effective example. 2012 saw improvements over 2011, with measurable results. Vitally, we man-

I advise you to stay away from such 'oracles', as their agenda is not to inform the population but to cause panic in an underhand manner. We saw this recently when some tried to destabilise the exchange rate of the national currency in early 2013. Thank God, we managed to see what was happening and foil any plot.

I've always asked journalists to remain objective. You've seen and heard, so analyse, draw conclusions and criticise as is deserved. I'll listen to your opinions but please speak from the heart, with personal conviction.

Don't confuse freedom of speech with irresponsibility and be careful not to encourage ignorance or disrespect your audience.

I'm ready, as ever, to answer all your questions sincerely and honestly in as much detail as you require.

Issues addressed to the President online

On arriving here, I received the latest media review so, while you're thinking of your questions, I'd like to answer some ad-

want — this is not going to happen. Private businessmen's work brings benefits and enriches the wealth of the nation but anyone with sense knows that their own profit is their primary incentive. They will not dip into their pockets and give anything to anyone, neither the state, nor people. We need to realise that it is not businessmen alone who generate assets; there are thousands of people working there and they have the right for a decent salary and decent living.

Let's take the simple example of housing construction, which I was discussing with the PM yesterday; it's on the agenda for this year. In Soviet times, each enterprise — even a poor kolkhoz — provided accommodation for staff. Tell me, please, what have businessmen built today for those who work for them? With few exceptions, they simply pay wages. However, what can be bought with these salaries? Only the state is addressing this issue with real focus.

All businessmen who want to honestly work in