

Presidents of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan discuss treaty on Eurasian Economic Union in Minsk

By Vasily Kharitonov

The Belarusian capital has hosted the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council session (at the level of heads of state) the CIS Heads of State Council session, in the new building of the Palace of Independence. These are being viewed as a turning point, with key resolutions passed in the move towards integration for the 'troika': Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. Without exaggeration, all post-Soviet territory is affected by this new geopolitical reality.

The presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia have agreed to accelerate work towards eliminating any problems facing the effective operation of the Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Community. The Eurasian Economic Union is to launch on 1st January 2015, with new participants welcome.

The Supreme Eurasian Economic Council session, which took place in Minsk on 24th October, saw a draft treaty prepared on the Eurasian Economic Union. Mr. Lukashenko notes that the success of the new integration association and its attractiveness to other countries will depend on the nature of the treaty and that this will directly affect the development of relations between states across the huge region. The President of Belarus considers it to be symbolic that the most important integration decisions are being made in Minsk. The Customs Code and uniform customs tariff, which were adopted in November 2009 in the Belarusian capital, began a period of practical function for the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia.

Mr. Lukashenko notes that Belarus welcomes new partners to the Customs Union and stresses the need for effective mechanisms of interaction for the 'troika' with these countries. He emphasises, "We should realise that Armenia and other countries need to follow the same path of integration as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, adopting obligations in full, without any reservations." The President of Belarus asserted the importance of Ukraine keeping an open mind towards participation in the Customs Union and the future Eurasian Economic Union, rather than looking only towards the EU.



Participants of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meet in expanded format

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, speaking of integration, notes that states participating in this process aim to solve issues together which cannot be solved alone. He also believes that the integration association must be equal for all member states. "Accession to the WTO by Kazakhstan is a very serious issue," he told those present, adding, "We were completely in the wake of Russia and promised support in our own accession to the WTO. The Bali conference will take place this year in December and Kazakhstan could enter the WTO but is prevented by its support of protection of Russia. This is certainly a question between Russia and Kazakhstan, but it also concerns Belarus."

The presidents of the Customs Union's 'troika' consider that preservation of the regulatory framework of the EurAsEC will drive forward the Customs Union. Mr. Nazarbayev notes that the EurAsEC, which finishes its work on January, 1st, 2015, has passed several dozen international treaties which affect member states of the 'troika' so he suggests prolonging their validity, adapting them to the Customs Union as necessary or adopting them anew.

According to the President

of Russia, Vladimir Putin, much has been done recently within the Customs Union to codify and strengthen the regulatory and legal framework. He explained, "All this should be the basis of the Eurasian Economic Union." He continued by saying that the Eurasian Economic Union is designed to fully aid freedom of movement for goods, services, capital and labour force.

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The member states also discussed the participation of new partners in Eurasian integration, with the President of Kazakhstan announcing, "I've heard widespread rumours that Syria, for example, wants to enter the Customs Union. The Prime Minister of Turkey, Mr. Erdogan, has also asked me wither Turkey might join." Mr. Putin added that such interest is being shown by other large economies, such as India, noting, "The Prime Minister of India recently visited our country, asking me to raise this question at today's meeting. He said that India would like

to consider signing a treaty to join the free trade zone with the Customs Union." He feels certain that, considering the volume and scale of the Indian market and prospects for development across Asia as a whole, the offer should be considered seriously.

After long negotiations between the 'troika', the presidents of Armenia, Tajikistan and Ukraine joined the meet-

ing, accompanied by the First Vice-Premier of Kyrgyzstan. They discussed questions defining dynamics and prospects for the further development of integration, in a constructive and informative manner, setting new guidelines for the development of Eurasian economic integration and confirming a strategy for increasing industrial co-operation, as well as trade and investment ties. Many questions were devoted to the treaty of setting up the Eurasian Economic Union.

President Lukashenko noted, after the session, that

acute matters were raised but that shared ground was found and all issues solved. "We've agreed to sign a treaty on the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union, which should commence on 1st January, 2015. For this purpose, by May of next year, we should have a draft treaty ready for signing, in order to have time for our parliamentarians to ratify it over the next six months," said President Nazarbayev.

The Customs Union's 'troika' welcomes new members, as noted by the President of Belarus, who stresses that the integration association is open for participation by those states which share its purpose and are ready to take on the required commitments. "Today's Single Economic Space is an enormous market, with a huge number of consumers; it has considerable possibilities for industrial co-operation, the realisation of investment projects and innovative development," Mr. Lukashenko underlined.

According to the President of Russia, Ukraine's membership of the Customs Union is incompatible with its joining the EU, since a free trade zone between the European Union and Ukraine cannot be conducted at the same time as its free trade

within the Customs Union. He emphasised, "We view the disclosure of our market as very dangerous: unacceptable for our economy at its current stage of development. We aspire to create a single Eurasian economic space — from Lisbon to Vladivostok; in order for this to be achieved on an equal basis and avoid economic losses and social problems, the process should be co-ordinated and gradual."

The next and final session of this year gathering the Customs Union's heads of state is to take place in Moscow in December, under a similar format.

A bilateral meeting between President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko and President of Russia Vladimir Putin took place in the evening in Minsk. The Head of Belarus thanked his Russian colleague for his visit and for support during the session. "We managed to discuss many issues," he noted. "I cannot call it a breakthrough but we have taken a major step as a result of today's work." He noted that progress has been made regarding various important issues in forming the Eurasian Economic Union and, importantly, preparations of the draft treaty on its creation.