

Statistics

Alexander Lukashenko reminded that he made a decision at the end of the last five-year period to move to international standards of statistics.

"We do not manipulate statistics, and there cannot be any in connection with our obligations," said the President.

"Importantly, the National Statistics Committee is no longer under the Government. This was changed to exclude excessive pressure, because statistics are a very serious thing, and influence the decisions, which state bodies including me, and the Government, will make. It was changed to meet the international statistical norms," noted Mr. Lukashenko.

"We work in close contact with the International Monetary Fund. We do not ask them for any credits, but their opinion influences the state rating. You cannot co-operate with the IMF without putting your cards on the table. Professionals of the highest level work there," said Alexander Lukashenko.

"Therefore, the claims that something is embellished here, is nonsense. Firstly, we do not need this embellishment, and I was never engaged in it. And secondly, if you do it today, you will pay for it tomorrow," said the President.

The devaluation of the Rouble

The state of affairs in the foreign exchange market is perhaps one of the most discussed topics of recent times. Alexander Lukashenko noted that 'all people in the country, except the President, waited for the devaluation of the national currency'.

"I said that we will not artificially devalue our rouble in order to give a breath of fresh air to BelAZ, MAZ and so on, because the devaluation of a national currency results in an increase in prices. We have already experienced it. Therefore we will not do this, not at 25 percent, nor at 30 percent or 15 percent. If we have the possibility, we will support the stability of the national currency, but not excessively. All states do it."

Market laws are simple — if there is a great demand for Dollars, and people run to currency exchange offices, it is impossible to sustain the rate of the national currency, having caught at it, it is necessary to slacken it gradually. And we made it in Belarus. "Against the Dollar we devaluated by more than 10 percent a year gradually, as for a basket of currencies — Dollar, Euro and Russian Rouble — hardly more than by 9 percent. It means that under such an economy as we had, under a negative balance, we did not cling on to the national currency, instead we gradually devaluated it," noted the President.

Certainly, there were those who wanted to exploit it for their own political gain, in advance of parliamentary and presidential elections. Alexander Lukashenko told that he had applied to independent experts, requesting that they estimated the consequences of single-step devaluation of the national currency. "They have unanimously told me that there will not be any advantage. The state, the people and the enterprises will appear at a disadvantage. It confirmed my thoughts. I did everything so that there would be no devaluation of the national currency," noted the President, adding

that he intends to act in a similar way in future.

Alexander Lukashenko assured everyone that there will not be any devaluation of national currency, and if there is a need, so financial means from gold exchange reserve will be allocated to maintain the value of the Belarusian Rouble.

"We have enough gold exchange reserves; moreover soon we will receive nearly \$1.5bn from the Russian Federation to underpin the gold exchange reserve. In case of emergency, if we have excessive gold exchange reserves, we will support the economy. It is not a problem, people will get an additional salary," said Mr. Lukashenko.

Denomination

Alexander Lukashenko reminded that Belarus has already experienced denomination before, and that there is no sense to be afraid of this process. But we also should not hasten.

"We will think together with experts when this period comes. Here

car. This enables the state to annually spend considerable means on the maintenance of road infrastructure. "Therefore, there is no need to worry about this problem and shout that the state robbed you and so on. I guarantee that this money will not be spent on education, or even on public health services, but will be spent on roads, and I have warned the government about it," noted the President.

Concerning arguments that the means for road building are already built in to fuel costs, Alexander Lukashenko gave the argument that even some highways from capital into the regional centres are now being reconstructed at the expense of foreign credit, and that we have invested almost nothing on second category roads lately.

Judicial and legal reform

Alexander Lukashenko emphasised that decisions on carrying out the reform of the judicial system, with the creation of the Committee of Inquiry, were made after long

judicial system, "We have been moving towards this for a long time. I made a decision to unite the general and economic courts, and I am sure that we will not lose anything here."

Answering the question on the presence of so-called political prisoners in Belarus, the President once again noted that the Belarusian Criminal Code does not contain political articles. And concerning those who consider themselves as political prisoners, the Head of State noted that the condition for their release was the writing of a plea for mercy, as required by the Belarus legislation. Nevertheless, despite this possibility, some of them prefer to stay in prison 'till the following electoral cycle'.

Belarusian language

The President noted that all possibilities for those wanting to learn the Belarusian language are available in Belarus. At the same time, there were some remarks from the heads of some of the non-state mass media outlets about insufficient attention to

ings were not made public." noted the President. "I speak with them frankly. If they ask for a reception, I never refuse. I speak with everyone, from congressmen of the USA to European politicians." Such discussions help to inform the heads of the European states about the Belarusian position. "Yes, we do not sit at the common table, and we do not discuss problems (we will come to that in the future), but there is a certain dialogue, and it is already a good thing," emphasised the President.

"Recently we have started a period when we do not lash out at each other, and we are no longer on the offensive against each other. We have started to speak. Lithuania has understood that a third of its budget is from Belarus. Latvia has also understood the same," noted Mr. Lukashenko.

At the same time, the President noted that the independence of Belarus cannot be interpreted as withdrawal from co-operation with Russia. "We want to live on own piece of land, to have sovereignty. I do not want my people to be under pressure from someone else. It is my main task as the first President," said Alexander Lukashenko, adding that will never be on friendly terms with the West, in a way that sours relations with Russia and, in much the same way, the development of Belarusian-Russian relations will not be carried out to the detriment of co-operation with the West.

'We are very good friends with Putin'

"We are very good friends with Putin, in spite of the fact that, at times, there are 'sparks' between us. I can tell him everything straight out, and in the same way, he tells me everything straight out," noted Mr. Lukashenko.

Speaking about Belarusian-Russian co-operation, the President noted that, Belarus does not have such close relations with other countries, as it does with Russia. "We are friends, brothers, and generally speaking, we are one people. When we had hard times, who gave us a hand? The IMF? No! But they could. They have a lot of money, they are dripping with money. But for reasons of policy, they openly said that they cannot. While Russia gave us their shoulder," noted the Belarusian leader. "And they will always give us their shoulder, in any situation. For various reasons, and because of the fact that losing Belarus is a big political loss and problem for Russia as a whole."

The Head of State noted that Russia gives real support, including the realisation of the project of construction of an atomic power station. "It is real money, not just words. We should appreciate it, and should not treat Russia badly," Alexander Lukashenko considers. As for the attitude towards Belarus in the Russian environment, the Head of State noted that Russia is different; we should understand this and show endurance.

"But everything that happens, is objective and sincere, and there are no hidden moments in our relations with Russia," said the Belarusian leader.

Coming back to the theme of the allocation of two-billion credit for Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko emphasised that by doing this, Russia is also supporting its own enterprises which produce parts and raw materials for Belarusian machinery.



it is necessary to be very careful," the President stated. "We are ready to carry out changes at any time, but there should be certain conditions for this technical step. There should not be any change in the interest rate. There should not be any alarms in the market, so that the population is not worried. Moreover, the economy should not have crisis phenomena. Even if this year we feel that the economy becomes firm and stable, we would declare six months ahead of any denomination that it is to be carried out." Moreover, both old and new roubles would be used together for a year.

By the way, the new money is already approved, and outwardly it is similar to the Euro. "We were ready to implement this process long ago," noted the President. "But it is necessary to choose the correct time, so that people will not reproach us that we carried out re-denomination and that some people made a profit out of it. I will have a rigid requirement — if we round off the prices, we will round them down. People will not lose anything here."

Transport tax

According to the President, the duties on the granting of permission for a vehicle to be used in road traffic are small in Belarus in comparison with the cost of even an inexpensive

examination, analysis and were weighed. In particular, the experience of Kazakhstan and Russia was examined. "I was worried, and was afraid not to destroy the stability and safety which we are proud of. But when I understood that the country is strong and that we are ready to do it, I made a decision at that same moment," the President told about the creation of the Committee of Inquiry in Belarus.

Alexander Lukashenko recognised that, at the initial stage, there were conflicts between the Committee of Inquiry and other departments. However, this structure works stably now. One negative example was when someone in an official position attempted to hide a crime. The President cited the criminal case concerning the former First Deputy Prosecutor General. "There was an accident in which a girl died. She was seated on a motorcycle by one of the sons of a prominent businessman who had large patrons. So he killed a girl on a motorcycle. He was drunk, he had no driver's license and he was helped to escape punishment. All those involved in this crime, and those who tried to hide it, were sent to prison, now the case is being submitted to the court," said Mr. Lukashenko.

The President also expressed his opinion about the reform of the ju-

the development of the Belarusian language, and Alexander Lukashenko suggested the opening of special courses at state institutes and universities for those who want to learn it.

"I am not against the Belarus language. I, even more than you, want our people to speak the Belarusian language. The only thing that I do not accept is pressure. As soon as you start to press people, there is a back reaction," noted the President.

Alexander Lukashenko considers that the earlier imposition of the Belarusian language was an error by the opposition. "It is a politicised problem, and we will calmly regulate this matter in the country, and I guarantee a time when there will be no discussions that we oppress the Belarusian language, and develop English or Russian. Nobody should interfere with this matter. We will make it calmly," said the President.

As for the remark that few books are published in the Belarusian language in the country, Alexander Lukashenko reminded that he had suggested to Belarusian authors to write at least one worthy work, however they have not done this till now.

Relations with the West

Last year, we had a lot of meetings and activities between Belarus and the EU. "Many Europeans come to us and often ask that such meet-