

A policy of mutual advantage

INTERVIEW WITH HE SERGEI N MARTYNOV

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What are the key aims, objectives and guiding principles of the foreign policy of Belarus, given the growing importance of Eurasia to the global economy?

The overriding strategic objective pursued by the Republic of Belarus in the international arena is to defend its national sovereignty, rights, freedoms and the legal interests of Belarusian citizens, public and state interests. That is the natural ideological foundation underlying our foreign policy.

To deliver on such wide-ranging objectives makes it necessary to manage such strategic interests as ensuring the safety of our country in the widest sense of the word – including military and political, economic, energy, transit, environmental; the shaping of favourable external conditions to encourage steady economic development and growth in people's well-being; active involvement in the international agenda based on the supremacy of the law, equal opportunities, rights and obligations of each participant in the international process. Such are the goals set for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Alexander Lukashenko, President of the Republic of Belarus.

These give rise to our foreign, political and economic priorities that focus primarily on the neighbouring countries. Our closest ally and partner is the Russian Federation. Our interaction is stable and profound, evidenced by the strength and dynamism of our co-operation in trade and economic matters. Belarus continues to be one of the major trading partners of the Russian Federation and the results of the first half of 2008 places Belarus in sixth place in foreign trade with Russia. Over the past seven months of this year, the turnover between our countries grew by over 60 per cent compared to last year to reach an expected US\$40 billion by the end of the year.

We are aware of the importance of the development of relations with the EU – a global stakeholder in today's system of international relations, with its significant market and massive technological and investment base. For Belarus, the EU is our natural partner, especially in terms of exports. There are a number of areas where we have mutual advantages in fostering co-operation between Belarus and the EU – energy, transport, visa regime simplification, illicit migration, human trafficking, organised crime, and the environment. Belarus seeks to forge an efficient and practical dialogue with Brussels and other European partners on these important issues.

The post-Soviet space remains an area of special

strategic interest. We are heavily involved with the CIS, EurAsEC and CSTO. The multilateral format brings maximum results in enhancing this co-operation.

Another priority is to promote political and economic relations with the countries of the Southern hemisphere. We have embarked on a system of efforts to shape a wider arc of Belarusian foreign policy. Its pivotal points are China, Venezuela, Cuba, South Africa, Iran, the Gulf countries, Vietnam and India. We also work to have meaningful cooperation with such countries as Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Republic of Korea.

An assessment of our foreign policy priorities would not be complete without mention of our multilateral diplomacy that is such an important tool of our foreign policy. We intend to continue pragmatic cooperation with international organisations, the UN, OSCE, Non-Aligned Movement, principally to defend and promote our national and common interests.

Global security is a key issue for government and policy makers. What role can the UN and NATO play in maintaining stability? What part can the Commonwealth of Independent States and other regional organisations play in this context?

The founding nations of the United Nations which include Belarus, sought to create an efficient international structure to coordinate the efforts of the international community in maintaining and upholding international peace and security. However, the efficiency of the UN, in practice, has been far from being perfect. Clearly, quite a number of Security Council decisions are not fulfilled and some economic and military powers seek to use the UN platform to their own advantage.

As the world undergoes dramatic geopolitical transformations with new global challenges and threats emerging, it has become even more important to reform all areas of UN activity. We are confident that fostering the UN's role in maintaining stability and security will require the international community to fulfil two things. Firstly, the Security Council members, particularly the permanent members, should understand and remember that they are acting not only to pursue their own national interests but also on behalf of all UN member states. Secondly, the resolutions of the UN Security Council should be respected and fulfilled by all countries.

Belarus has always pursued a consistent and responsible policy to develop its co-operation with

NATO, within the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, with the aim of strengthening European and international security and reducing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and conventional arms.

It is beyond doubt that NATO will continue playing a significant role in ensuring international security. Belarus is ready to co-operate with the alliance here and in areas advantageous both for our country and for NATO. These might include minimising the consequences of emergencies, man-made and natural calamities, combating human, arms and drug trafficking and other cross-border crimes. We are certain that joint efforts to combat today's challenges and threats enhances co-operation between Belarus and NATO. It is a principle that NATO military activities should not place our security and that of our partners in jeopardy.

We advocate the development of a multipolar world, and this is where we have to look to the potential and ever-growing authority of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

The CSTO is part of a unified and indivisible system of security across the entire Euro-Atlantic space. Over a relatively short period, this organisation has already accumulated priceless experience in such areas as counter-terrorism, combating drug and human trafficking, and mitigating the effects of emergencies. We think that the CSTO should be transformed into a multifaceted military and political organisation and is well-placed to become a real force for good that can actively maintain international security. We believe that political dialogue and practical co-operation along the CSTO-NATO lines will undoubtedly meet the interests of the entire international community.

How are Belarus's relations with Europe developing? How important is Europe to Belarus as a diplomatic and trading partner?

Belarus is a European country and should not be split from Europe as we are an important part of it, geographically, historically and economically. I assume, when asking this question, you meant to say the European Union, implying Europe, and I will answer therefore from this context.

The Belarusian relations with the EU are developing strongly, in trade and economy, in particular. Over the past few years, the European Union has become a major importer of Belarusian commodities and is the largest consumer of our goods for the third year in a row. Between 2000 and 2007 the turnover between Belarus and the EU has soared eight-fold, Belarusian exports to the EU countries increased fifteen-fold. This trend continued in 2008.

The European Union is our neighbour with the longest shared border and, therefore, shared understanding of the need to develop co-operation in such areas as energy supplies, transport infrastructure, illicit migration, environment, customs regulation,

science and research, and so on.

Furthermore, efficient co-operation between us will give real impetus to Europe's role and profile in international affairs. I am confident that the creation of an economic co-operation zone for the whole of Europe will be helpful both for Belarus and for the EU. The long-term interests of our nation lie strongly with the formation of a safe, stable and consolidated Europe. It is also obvious that an independent, strong and thriving Belarus is an important factor for stability in Europe.

Recently, Belarus and the EU have cautiously drawn nearer. In April 2008, a European Commission office commenced operations in Minsk. We are actively co-operating with the EU in energy, transport, environment and customs. However, despite initial successes it is obvious that we are at the start of the path, politically. There should be political commitment and will, from both sides, not only Belarusian, to make further steps. I sincerely hope that despite the different approaches in Belarus and the EU across many political issues, a great future lies ahead for our co-operation.

What is the current status of The Union of Russia and Belarus?

The status of the Union of Belarus and Russian is clearly defined by the Treaty of Creation of the Union State of 8 December 1999. The two states have the task to create a common economic area securing free movement of goods, services, capital, labour, and providing equal conditions and guarantees for economic entities, equal rights for citizens in employment and payment of work, education, healthcare, and other social guarantees. During the years of integration, a legal basis covering all spheres of life and enabling both states to realise the potential of cooperation has been developed.

When talking about the status of the Union, it is important to underline that the Republic of Belarus stays committed to the idea of the creation of the Union State with all participating countries preserving their sovereignty and independence. We advocate the creation of the Union State on the principle of equality, and view this principle as a basis for developing our relations.

The union relations are built primarily on a business and rational approach to all aspects of cooperation. Because of this approach our union remains both the most developed and the most enduring integration structure in the post-Soviet area. Much has been done, and is being done, in the areas of defence and security, law-enforcement, and other areas of development in The Union.

What role will Belarus play in ensuring Europe's continuing prosperity and stability? How are relations with your neighbours developing?

We are a predictable and responsible partner, a net supplier of stability and security in the region, ►

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◀ a guarantor of uninterrupted transit of energy resources. Our contribution to nuclear and conventional disarmament in Europe is well-known and indisputable. Belarus is a responsible European partner in fighting international terrorism, trans-national crime, drug trafficking and the slave trade. These are not just empty words. They are backed by concrete deeds and examples of cooperation.

This country has no territorial disputes with its neighbours. This is our deliberate choice, despite the difficult and centuries-old history and in contrast to a multitude of contrary examples in the former USSR area. Given the conditions of our interconnected world, the EU cannot disregard the interaction with Belarus in such areas as the development of transport infrastructure, protection of the environment, customs regulation, scientific and technical cooperation, and many others.

And the final, but no less important point. Belarus is a country with a successfully developing economy and a steadily improving standard of living of its population, hence it is beneficial for the EU to have such a neighbour.

It is impossible to imagine a stable and prosperous Europe without friendly and mutually beneficial relations between European neighbouring states. Belarus is not an exception. None of Belarus' neighbours – Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine – is alien to us. We have enormous experience of co-existence and cooperation. All these states host large Belarusian diasporas, and ethnic Russians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Ukrainians are law abiding and respected citizens of Belarus.

Economics, politics, culture, science, sports, and, primarily, human contacts and relations between our citizens make a firm basis for the development of Belarus' bilateral cooperation with the neighbouring countries.

How important is regional integration to Eurasian development? What mechanisms are helping to reinforce the objectives of a Eurasian market, such as the Eurasian Economic Community?

Regional integration is one of the key issues in the development of the Eurasian area. Despite the differences, the state parties support the integration process and underline that with concrete actions. In particular, a customs union and a common economic area are being formed within the EurAsEC, a solid legal basis has, therefore, already been created.

The following mechanisms are vital for achieving the objectives of Eurasian regional organisations.

Firstly, it is important to create a valuable customs union within the EurAsEC, including the formation of a free trade regime, creation of a common customs tariff and a common system of measures of non-tariff regulation with regard to third countries, creation of a common customs area and the development of a common economic area. Belarus, the Russian Federation

and Kazakhstan are leaders in the formation of a customs union within the EurAsEC. We expect other EurAsEC member states will join the customs union, as soon as it has been formed.

Secondly, we should facilitate the development and implementation of priority interstate special-purpose programmes within the area of EurAsEC member states focused on microelectronics, innovation biotechnologies, and healthcare, based on the initiatives which were put forward during Belarus' chairmanship of the EurAsEC.

Thirdly, we believe it is necessary to engage the Eurasian bank of development in funding a number of integration programmes and projects.

How would you define Belarus' role in the world in the coming decade?

Belarus is located in the middle of Europe, and there will be no complete Europe without this country. Belarus is not isolated. In the era of globalisation, the process going on outside this country cannot fail to affect us. That is why the mid-term perspectives of Belarus will be defined, to a large extent, by externalities, global trends and regional development.

Today, we have firm foundations. We mobilised our economic, technological and labour resources in time. Year after year, we have consistently moved along the path to strengthen our independence, economic modernisation, and improve the wellbeing of our people. So I have grounds to believe that in the coming five to ten years Belarus will complete its development as a strong state with a vigorous innovative economy, modern production and a high level of social protection for its citizens, which will enjoy respect on the international stage.

Belarus has all it needs to establish a proper role in world politics and economics in the 21st century. Our unique geopolitical location in the middle of the continent, at the junction of the Eastern and the Western economies and cultures; our transit role in the supply of energy resources (today, over 30 per cent of gas and more than 40 per cent of crude oil exported from the Russian Federation to the European Union flows through Belarus) gives us an important role. Our status as the largest corridor between Asia and Europe is also important. I am confident that Belarus will not turn into a 'buffer' zone between the two poles of power, but will become a strong bridge between the West and the East. Today, we have the best Internet access levels in the CIS, and our infant mortality rate is at the level of the leading European states.

Belarus has no global geopolitical ambitions, and is unlikely to have any by the year 2018. We maintain a sober assessment of both our needs and strengths. But we have our national interests, primarily trade and economic ones, and our scope is expanding. And we will continue to uphold these interests. **F**

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