

A case of 'walk and you shall reach' for Belarus

Evolution not revolution is the way forward, says Aliaksandr Khainouski, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Belarus

■ *Belarus, east of Hungary (well, northeast): is the Viktor Orbán government "opening up to the east" for you? How are Belarus-Hungarian relations politically?*

Well, we feel more and more interest in Hungary towards Belarus nowadays and the government's actual "opening to the east" strategy creates

good favourable conditions but is only a part of this process. Historically and geographically Belarus and Hungary have a lot of common. They belong to the same Central European region and are comparable in population, area and economic potential. Both countries have open economies and depend a lot on import of energy resources. For both of us it is necessary to increase exports

in order to generate development. Don't forget that for several decades during the Soviet era we were functioning within the same system and a lot of economic and people-to-people links survived the changes of the political regimes. All this makes it possible to reach a very good level of mutual understanding and, based on this, build up bilateral relations. →



Ambassador Aliaksandr Khainouski: I advise people to go and visit my country, to see it with their own eyes and to make their own conclusions

Politically Budapest shows a very pragmatic approach, cooperating with Minsk in all areas that are not under EU restrictions. The Hungarian government supports economic cooperation, inter-ministerial dialogue, visa facilitation and humanitarian contacts. We maintain regular political consultations on different levels. This permits us not only to listen but to hear each other, overcome any narrow-minded approach, openly discuss issues of mutual concern, define spheres of common interest, find the ways of moving forward and achieve tangible results. And it is my strong conviction that we can achieve these results with Hungarian partners only by joining our efforts, by concentrating ourselves on what unites us and not on what divides us.

We also praise the great job done by Hungary in promoting cooperation in the Central European region, includ-

ing with the countries of Eastern partnership, during its presidency in the Visegrád Group and Central European Initiative.

So, my answer is yes, Belarus has its place within the “opening to the east policy” and strengthening the Central European dimension of the Hungarian foreign policy.

■ *It seems it was The Guardian newspaper in Britain that called your country the “Last Dictatorship in Europe”, in reference to President Alexander Lukashenka’s firm grip since 1994. Are people in Hungary always asking you about this? Are you tired of hearing it?*

Media love clichés and sometimes it is rather difficult to break them up however different the reality might be. I just advise people to go and visit my country, to see it with their own eyes and to make their own conclusions.

President Lukashenka has always said that he wanted to build a sturdy system because this could help preserve the unity of the country at a time when the Soviet Union had disintegrated. Believe me that even in the second decade of the 21st century under external pressure we still need to fight for our sovereignty, for our right to build a state where Belarusians will feel safe and at home, where the national sector of the economy would be competitive in the face of all-absorbing multinationals.

My country is not a perfect one. But who in this world are? I assure you, we are moving in the right direction, maybe not as fast as somebody would like us to. As they say, “walk and you shall reach”.

We are on the way to liberalisation of the economy and democratic transformation of the society and political life. But we prefer to do it by an



evolutionary and not a revolutionary way. Belarusians, who suffered a lot last century, lost a third of the population in a devastating world war, so we much value peace and stability.

■ *How are you promoting Belarus politically, economically and culturally? What are your embassy's efforts to strengthen Belarus' image in this country?*

We make use of the instruments that we have in our hands. I already mentioned regular political consultations. In the economic field we organise annually meetings of a bilateral Intergovernmental Commission. Being result-oriented we always combine sessions of this commission with business forums. I try to accept any invitation to make here a presentation of business opportunities in my country, be it by Budapest or regional chambers of commerce, local authorities or business associations, educational institutions or any big company- potential investor.

Presentation of the cultural peculiarities is yet another tool to promote the image of my country and together with my embassy's staff we are doing our best. Last year we brought to Hungary a renowned Belarusian traditional dance group and exhibition of national costumes. This year we presented to the Hungarian public the exhibition of Belarusian icons of the 17th and 18th centuries and paintings by young artists from my country.

Our main goal is to show that Belarus is a modern Central European state, open for cooperation, a good friend and reliable partner. It is a land of economic and tourist opportunities, a multicultural and tolerant nation proud of its deep historical roots and building its future.

■ *What are the business links between Hungary and Belarus? The main goods, exports and imports between the two?*

I would evaluate bilateral economic links as rather decent. Hungary ranks among the first 30 trade partners of Belarus in the world. Last year bilateral trade in goods and services reached USD 240 million. It shows steady growth but is still far from what we can achieve.

We are satisfied with the decrease of raw materials and increase of value-added goods in our exports to Hungary. In the first place I speak about agricultural machinery. According to different expert evaluations our tractors under trademarks "Belarus" or "MTZ" hold more than 50% of the whole Hungarian tractor market. As for Hungary, its main export article to Belarus is pharmaceutical products.

But simple trade in goods today is not enough; we prepare more advanced forms of economic cooperation, organising joint production for the third countries' markets and implementing major investment projects. What is important, business of both countries now receives support of financial institutions. Thus, the Belarusian development bank and Hungarian "Eximbank" have recently signed an agreement on opening a medium-term credit line.

Last year we opened a direct flight between Minsk and Budapest, operated by Belarusian air company Belavia. And believe me, this flight is in great demand not only from businessmen and tourists travelling between these two final destinations but also for transit passengers.

■ *What are the business opportunities in Belarus for Hungarian companies? Why should your country be attractive for investments?*

Opportunities are large. The Belarusian government strives to create open and favourable conditions for national and international economic operators. World Bank's Doing Business 2013 report ranks my country among the fastest reformers in this sphere. Add here already existing developed transportation and logistics infrastructure, highly qualified workforce, social and political stability and decent living standards, and you will put Belarus on the check-list to explore possibilities of setting up business there. As a result, Russia, Switzerland, USA, Austria, UK, Cyprus and Germany are the main investors in my country.

Last but not least, Belarus being the only purely European country belonging to the Common Economic Space with Kazakhstan and Russia, once European business comes to my country

it can operate freely on the common market of 170 million people and more than USD 2 trillion aggregate GDP.

■ *When did you arrive in Hungary and what previous postings have you had?*

I joined the Belarusian external service in 1993 after having graduated from university and my very first posting as a young diplomat was in Brussels. But for the past 14 years somehow my professional life is linked to Hungary. It is my third posting in this pleasant and unique country. First I came here in the year 2000 as consul with the main task to establish a Belarusian diplomatic mission in Budapest. Then I was posted here in 2006 for four years as political counsellor and finally returned in November 2012 as ambassador.

■ *How does Hungary rate on the scale of difficulty (or as an enjoyable posting) for Belarus' ambassadors?*

(smiling) Without any doubt Belarusian ambassadors must do a hard job in Hungary – I cannot but mention that both my predecessors were nominated deputy ministers of foreign affairs after they returned to Minsk upon completion of their missions. But jokes apart, Belarus-Hungarian relations have very big potential. Budapest is not a place to be bored. I love being here, striving to promote links between our two friendly countries. The Hungarian capital gives nice occasions for walking tours, a rich cultural life, wine sampling and visiting spas and thermal baths. What else can one wish in order to relax after a busy working day and prepare himself for the next one!

■ *There is a "club" of Hungarian-speaking ambassadors in Budapest? Are you a member?*

Yes, I have been invited to join this club recently. All of us have different levels of proficiency in this language, but our meetings present a unique opportunity to discuss interesting topics of diplomatic life and practise Hungarian, to meet Hungarian politicians and to communicate, or at least try to, with them in their mother tongue.