

Ukraine and Belarus finalise the border delimitation process

Tadeusz Iwański, Ukraina i Białoruś zamknęły proces delimitacji granicy

The presidents of Belarus and Ukraine, Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Viktor Yanukovich, met on 18 June in Kyiv and signed a protocol on the exchange of documents ratifying the Ukrainian-Belarusian agreement on the state border of 1997. The two countries also entered into a number of agreements regulating co-operation in the frontier zone, ecology, information exchange, and forestry. The presidents also discussed foreign policy: President Yanukovich encouraged Belarus to join the World Trade Organisation, while President Lukashenka recommended Ukraine to establish closer relations with the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Commentary

- Lukashenka's visit to Kyiv was the first official meeting of the two leaders since the swearing in of President Yanukovich. One of the reasons for the cooling of relations which followed was the fact that the Belarusian president was not invited to the international conference in Kyiv devoted to the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant catastrophe. Since then, the two presidents had only met officially at forums of international organisations. Minor and short-lasting conflicts over access to the Belarusian market for Ukrainian food products were observed between Belarus and Ukraine during that time.
- The border protocol is the most important of the documents signed. It finally brought an end to the issue of the state border delimitation between the two countries and opens up the way to the demarcation of the border. This issue is also essential for Kyiv in the context of establishing closer relations with the EU, including the implementation of the Action Plan on Visa Liberalisation with the EU.
- The sixteen year gap between the signing of the border agreement and the exchange of the ratification documents was due to Belarus's demands that Ukraine pay the debts Ukrainian contractors owed to Belarusian firms before 1992. Minsk made the exchange of the documents dependent on the resolution of this issue. It is impossible to conclude from the agreements signed whether this issue has been resolved. However, it cannot be ruled out that this problem has been settled. The ways in which Belarus may be compensated may include contracts to be signed under which Ukraine would undertake to buy certain Belarusian products, by Ukraine incurring the costs of activity in the common frontier zone or by Ukraine exporting electric energy to Belarus.

- Belarus's consent to exchange the border documents can also be seen as an attempt at bargaining with Ukraine. It appears that President Lukashenka's main motivation was to maintain the present level of exports of Belarusian petroleum products to Ukraine. Minsk is at present the key supplier of petroleum products to Ukraine, and these products generate a crucial share of the income from exports in the weakening Belarusian economy (US\$4.2 billion in 2012, according to Belstat). Initiatives aimed at protecting the domestic fuel market have gathered strength over the past few months in Ukraine. Several months ago, the Ukrainian government was planning to launch an anti-dumping procedure against Belarus in this context. In turn, on 6 June, Yanukovich suggested that it could be necessary to introduce import quotas for such products (Belarusian petroleum products have a 40% the share in the Ukrainian market).