

Putin Named Prime Minister of Belarus-Russia Alliance

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has been appointed as the Chairman of the Russia-Belarus Union State's Council of Ministers. Chairman of the Union State's Supreme Council, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed a resolution to that effect on May 24, 2008.

The meaning of the appointment is not clear. The announcement could be a sign that Alexander Lukashenka is seeking closer ties with Russia in the face of the U.S. sanctions, a bad local economy and greater domestic opposition. Moscow interpreted it as a major boost for the integrationist process. On the other hand Belarus have had some arguments with Russia in the past (last year Lukashenka denounced Russia as a "huge monster") and it immediately downplayed the significance of Putin's appointment.

Officials and analysts in Washington say it is unclear whether the move is a step toward closer political union or a mere formality. "We will have to wait and see what materializes," Karen Stewart, the U.S. ambassador to Belarus said.

Some observers even expected Vladimir Putin to become president of a unified state of Russia and Belarus after he stepped down as Russian president. Many say that Russian politics are particularly hard to read at the moment, because the lines of authority between Putin and Medvedev are unclear. Lukashenka's decision makes these lines even murkier.

The Union State of Russia and Belarus is a confederation established in 1996 to support close political, economic and military cooperation. However efforts to achieve a full merger have foundered and structures of the alliance have limited powers.

Sources: ITAR-TASS, The International Herald Tribune

Poland and Sweden to pitch 'Eastern Partnership' idea

On May 26 Poland and Sweden presented their EU partners with a plan to strengthen ties with post-soviet nations like Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which could one day join the bloc. The multinational forum would aim to negotiate visa-free travel deals, free trade zones for services and agricultural products and strategic partnership agreements with the five countries. It would also launch smaller, bilateral projects on student exchange, environmental protection and energy supply, but would avoid the controversial topic of EU membership perspectives.

The plan, debated at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels, was generally welcomed. "It's a welcome signal, for the countries ... but also good for Europe," said Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, whose country currently holds the EU's rotating presidency. EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said: "I think we can get good ideas out of it."

"We want to create something that would add value to existing mechanisms," Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said, such as to the so-called European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) governing cooperation with near non-EU nations. ENP "hasn't been working ... it hasn't been targeting the individual countries and their conditions," Sweden's Europe Minister Cecilia Malstroem underlined.

All the mentioned countries "have the right to join the bloc if they meet the criteria," Sikorski said, meaning, that Belarus could join only to the extent of its political situation, i.e. at a technical and expert-level only.

Following the foreign ministers' debate, Warsaw hopes to secure formal approval at the EU summit in June and to start detailed work on the "partnership" by the end of the year. On the other hand some representatives such as Luxembourg's minister of foreign affairs Jean Asselborn warned: "This could be dangerous for cohesion in Europe". "This can't just become a game in which some are more for the south [i.e. French-driven 'Union for the Mediterranean' proposal], while others are more for the east," he said.

Sources: EUobserver, EUBusiness, EurActiv