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C O N F I D E N T I A L KYIV 001991

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/11/2019

TAGS: PREL PBTS ENRG BO UP

SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO VISIT TO UKRAINE

Classified By: Political Counselor Colin Cleary. Reasons: 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C...


C O N F I D E N T I A L KYIV 001991 SIPDIS E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/11/2019 TAGS: PREL PBTS ENRG BO UP

1. (C) Belarusian President Lukashenko's November 5-6 official visit to Kyiv attracted interest less for the modest deliverables and more for the opportunity it gave to speculate on its geopolitical significance. Commentators noted Ukraine's role in easing Belarus' isolation, observed that both states have found themselves involved in "gas wars" with Russia in recent years, and asserted that the two leaders were using the visit to send a signal to Moscow. End Summary. Border Demarcation -----

2. (C) Though publicly hailed as a breakthrough, Belarusian President Lukashenko's November 5-6 visit to Kyiv yielded, at least on paper, modest results. Ukraine's principal interest was to secure Belarusian ratification of the bilateral border treaty, which was completed in 1997 but has languished since then over Minsk's insistence that the GOU pay some \$128 million of commercial debts owed by Ukrainian firms to their Belarusian counterparts since the early 1990s. Oleksandr Levchenko, Deputy Director of the MFA's Fourth Territorial Department, confirmed that the two sides are still only discussing possible "compromise" solutions, and that Kyiv had only received a pledge from Lukashenko to submit the border treaty at some unspecified time to his parliament. Ukraine as Bridge to Europe -----

3. (C) Aside from discussing the border treaty, the sides pledged to cooperate in implementing mutually beneficial projects under the EU's Eastern Partnership, and Ukraine undertook to facilitate Belarus' contacts with Europe (e.g., by supporting Belarusian membership in the Council of Europe). Levchenko and others observed that Ukraine has always believed that isolating Belarus was counterproductive. Levchenko noted that the MFA had prepared points on human rights for President Yushchenko's use in his tete-a-tete with Lukashenko, but Levchenko did not know whether his president had actually raised the issue. Warm Atmospherics -----

4. (C) Contacts both in and out of government saw the significance of the visit more in symbolic terms. It represented something of a thaw in Lukashenko's attitude toward Ukraine since the 2004-05 Orange Revolution, an event that Lukashenko viewed as a direct threat. His last official bilateral trip to Kyiv had taken place in 1999. Levchenko said the Ukrainian side had worked long and carefully to lay the groundwork for last week's visit, including two meetings of the presidents earlier this year in the Ukrainian border city of Chernihiv (January) and the Belarusian border city of Gomel (May). The atmospherics were warm, with both Presidents at ease and using the familiar form of address at joint events. Presidential Secretariat contacts tell us that the two get along quite well on a personal level. Energy -----

5. (C) Contacts pointed to regional economic projects that would benefit from improved Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, such as the sale of Ukrainian electricity to Lithuania via Belarus, or Belarusian ability to tap into the Odesa-Brody pipeline. (Note: Press reports indicated that electricity sales to Lithuania via Belarus would actually be swaps, with subsidized prices for Belarus to "pay down" the Ukrainian commercial debt that is holding up ratification of the border treaty.)  Geopolitics and Russia -----

6. (C) Observers were quick to attribute geopolitical significance to the meeting. Presidential Secretariat Foreign Policy Advisor Bohdan Yamarenko told us that the overall strategic goal of the summit was to encourage Lukashenko to develop a more multi-vectoral foreign policy and wean him from Russia. One analyst also told us that the visit served to compensate for waning interest in Ukraine by the U.S. and Europe. He added that both countries have been victims of Russian "gas wars," and that Ukraine stands to gain from attracting Belarus into an informal grouping comprised of the GUAM states, the Balts, and Poland.

7. (C) Lukashenko stated flatly in the main joint press conference that closer relations between Ukraine and Belarus were not targeted at anyone (i.e., Russia). He added: "if someone doesn't like that we meet, that's his problem." One contact commented to us that Moscow cannot be pleased to have CIS leaders talking behind its back, especially when it involves a meeting between one of Russia's ostensibly closest allies and one of its betes noires. He added tartly that Yushchenko is not exactly bombarded by invitations to meet with foreign leaders anymore, so the Lukashenko visit allows him to demonstrate activity on the international front. Comment -----

8. (C) Although there are no territorial disputes between the two states, finalizing the border treaty with Belarus would be a symbol of Ukraine's consolidation as a subject of international law. It would also serve as a signal of Ukrainian normalcy for the Europeans, whose institutions many Ukrainians still aspire to join, and a reproach to Russia, which is widely seen here as slow-rolling the border-demarkation process with Ukraine. Lukashenko's trip probably represents less a reconciliation than a calculation that the Orange "disease" has run its course and no longer threatens him. Nevertheless, the willingness of Yushchenko and Lukashenko to seek common ground could work to the benefit of both countries in the event of pressure on either from Russia. PETTIT

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