

Berlusconi urges EU-Russia cooperation pact

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Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said on Monday talks between the European Union and Russia on a new comprehensive cooperation treaty should be intensified.

Russia and Europe resumed talks in December – a year after the previous pact expired – after delays caused by objections from some EU members and most recently Russia’s brief war with Georgia last August. Moscow says the new pact could be signed within two or three years.

“I am an advocate of European integration,” Berlusconi said in a RIA Novosti interview. “No matter what the prospects for political integration are... Russia is a major European power. We are part of one civilization, share the same values.”

“Talks on the new strategic partnership treaty between the Russian Federation and the European Union should be intensified,” Berlusconi said. “I will continue to pursue a conclusion.”

Berlusconi said Italian-Russian trade grew 11% to 26.5 billion euros (\$35 billion) year-on-year in 2008. He said Italian exports grew to 10.5 billion euros (\$13.8 billion) from last year’s 9.3 billion (\$12.2 billion) despite the growing influence of the global financial crisis in the second half of the year.

Italy exports cars, equipment, clothes and furniture to Russia. Oil and gas accounts for 70% of Russian exports to Italy.

Berlusconi is due to visit Russia on April 5-9 along with an 800-member business delegation.

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