

Medvedev in Italy for Deals, Culture

By [Irina Filatova](#)

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Medvedev shaking hands with Berlusconi on Wednesday on his Italy trip. **Andrew Medichini**

President Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday that Russia would seek to strengthen its partnership with Italy in the energy sector, as Italian businessmen see this year to be crucial for growing bilateral ties.

Russia plans to develop ties with Italy in trading gas and other energy resources, as well as cooperate in nuclear energy, Medvedev told reporters after a meeting with his Italian counterpart Giorgio Napolitano.

Medvedev said a number of agreements, which "reveal the main directions of Russian-Italian cooperation" would be signed, as he started his two-day visit to Italy on Wednesday.

The documents include Gazprom's agreement with Eni to jointly develop an oil field in Northern Africa, an agreement between Vneshekonombank and Italy's Cassa Depositi e Prestiti bank and a document on military transit over Russian territory.

Under the agreement with Eni, Gazprom will get a 33 percent stake, half of what the Italian energy giant is currently holding, in a project to develop the Elephant oil field in Libya.

Gazprom, which will be represented in the project by its oil unit Gazprom Neft, will pay a total of \$163 million for its stake, the energy giant said in its eurobond prospectus, Bloomberg reported.

Medvedev also plans to discuss development of the South Stream project jointly run by Gazprom and Eni, presidential aide Sergei Prikhodko said ahead of the visit.

The two countries will also agree on the transit through Russia of Italian weapons, ammunition and military personnel to Afghanistan.

Medvedev said the military transit was an important part of Russia's partnership with a number of other countries, "to which Italy is now joining."

The president is expected to push for developing a partnership in the aircraft industry, with Russia seeking to supply its SuperJet 100 aircraft to Italian carrier Alitalia, Prikhodko said.

"We hope that Al Italia hasn't lost its interest in this jet, and it will only increase after the certification procedure is completed," he said.

Alitalia refused to buy Russia's new SuperJet 100 late last year, signing an agreement to lease 20 jets by Brazil's Embraer instead.

Alitalia was unavailable for comment Wednesday.

Meanwhile, with 2011 declared the year of Russian culture in Italy and vice versa, representatives of Italian businesses in Moscow say the two countries historically have had strong business ties, with their similar mentalities facilitating successful partnership.

Russians like "Italian style" and gladly buy Italian products, including food, furniture and clothing, said Marisa Florio, who heads the representative office of the Italian-Russian Chamber of Commerce in Moscow.

She also said a similar lifestyle and manner of communication help in business as well.

Soulfulness, sociability and generosity are among the Russians' and Italians' common features of character, said Antonio Fallico, head of the Moscow representative office of Italy's bank Intesa Sanpaolo.

"It's not just mutual sympathy. Russians really love Italy deeply, just as Italians who fall in love with Russia forever, as I did," he said in e-mailed comments.

This year the two sides will continue developing their economic partnership, especially given that Italy can provide technological resources for implementing Russia's plans to diversify and modernize its economy, Fallico said.

Italy is one of Russia's biggest business partners, with bilateral trade reaching \$36.8 billion last year, the Kremlin said in an e-mailed statement ahead of Medvedev's visit.

The figure increased by about 11.5 percent over 2009, the statement said.

During his visit, Medvedev also plans to meet with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who is facing a court trial on charges of paying for sex with an underage nightclub performer.

Berlusconi, who is well known as Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's close friend, denied accusations on Wednesday, saying he was "not worried" about the upcoming trial.

Putin's friendly relations with Berlusconi undoubtedly play an important role in strengthening the two sides' cooperation, said Tatyana Stanovaya, a France-based political scientist with the Center for Political Technologies.

But "it's debatable" whether Russia needs Berlusconi for lobbying its interests in Europe, given his controversial image, she said by telephone.

"Personal ties are effective for pushing Russia's projects in Italy, but not in the European Union," Stanovaya said.

Fallico said the positive relations between Russia and Italy don't depend on the leaders' friendship — which itself is a result of the countries' strong ties.

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