

Latvia Vows Better Ties in 'Historic' Visit

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Latvia and Russia promised to improve long-strained relations and business ties on Monday during the first official visit by a president of the Baltic nation to Moscow in more than 15 years.

"This is only the beginning," Latvian President Valdis Zatlers said at a news conference with President Dmitry Medvedev after talks in the Kremlin during what he called a "historic visit."

Deep differences remain over Moscow's decades of domination of the Baltic states and tension over Latvia's large Russian-speaking minority.

But both countries were hit hard by the global financial meltdown, and Zatlers say they wanted to boost trade.

He said he was accompanied by Latvia's biggest ever delegation of business leaders.

Medvedev said the differences could not be bridged in a single visit, but that engagement was crucial.

"It's better to talk than not to talk, it's better to meet than to avoid meeting, it's better to seek agreement on those issues upon which we can agree than to reject such agreements," he said.

After years of angry rhetoric and trade disputes, Russia has taken steps recently to improve ties with former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact states now in the European Union and NATO as it seeks more leverage with Europe.

Zatlers held that out as a carrot, saying that "good bilateral relations ... will have an effect on Russia's relations with NATO and the European Union."

He said ties had improved moderately in the past few years, which he said was reflected in a 27 percent increase in the volume of bilateral trade in the first 10 months of 2010.

"We have made a good start and we need to continue," he said.

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