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Swedes to Help Create $1Bln Hotline

By Olga Razumovskaya

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Jonas Bergsten

Sweden's Ericsson will help Russia develop a $1 billion national emergency hotline similar to 112 in European countries, and Russia will waive some visas for Swedes, officials announced Wednesday as Prime Minister Vladimir Putin made a lightning visit to Stockholm before opening a figure skating championship in Moscow.

Putin, speaking to reporters after talks with Sweden's prime minister, also said people would be happy with the candidate whom he and President Dmitry Medvedev select to run in the 2012 presidential election.

Relations have been strained by Sweden's refusal to extradite Chechen separatists, whom Medvedev has called "bandits" involved in killings and kidnapping, but the subject was avoided during the visit.

At the meeting with Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, Putin announced the introduction of a visa-free regime for Swedes traveling to St. Petersburg by ferry and said he expected Stockholm "to appreciate this step and make a move accordingly."

"Our goal with interested European countries is to persuade all of our other partners in Europe that it is time to switch to a visa-free regime," he said, reiterating an issue that has been a Kremlin priority for the past two years, Interfax reported.

The prime minister also said it was time for Sweden to open up to Russian companies, which are growing in potential. The volume of Swedish direct investment in Russia stands at $2.5 billion today, he said.

"It would be right if this were a two-way street. Our cooperation would undoubtedly benefit from this, and the Swedish economy could use some capital influx," he said.

Ericsson, one of the world's top telecommunications equipment providers, signed a licensing agreement with Russian IT company Sfera to provide Sfera with CoordCom, a technology used for creating an emergency response system analogous to the European 112 and American 911.

Ericsson and Sfera will work together to adapt CoordCom to Russian conditions and compete in a bid to create "Russian System 112." With a budget of 37 billion rubles (just over $1 billion), the 112 hotline is being coordinated by Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu and is scheduled to open by 2013.

Although several Russian cities have emergency hotlines under pilot programs, most still rely on the Soviet-era system in which every emergency has its own number, including 01 for fire, 02 for police and 03 for ambulance.

Moscow also has a hotline modeled after the American 911 that has been in service for more than 15 years. The landline number, 937-9-911, contacts the Moscow Rescue Service, while the cell phone equivalent, 0911, charges a per-minute fee.

Ericsson also signed an agreement with the Skolkovo Foundation, which is in charge of creating an innovation hub near Moscow, to open a research and development center that will focus on information and communication technologies infrastructure.

Putin, who went to Sweden after a one-day visit in Denmark, encouraged the Swedes to cooperate in the Glonass project, Russia's version of the U.S. GPS navigation system that has been heavily promoted by the Russian government.

Swedish SWEPOS, a national network of satellite reference stations, recently became the first foreign company to use Glonass instead of GPS.

"We have a great field for cooperation," Putin said at the start of talks. "Sweden is now actively using Glonass services. Swedish entities have the technology, the capacities to work on the ground. ... [They] could become our good — in the full sense of the word — strategic partners."

The two countries signed a joint declaration stating that Russia needs to become a fully integrated member of the World Trade Organization and a partnership agreement aimed at

encouraging new investment through improvements in the rule of law and democracy.

The two countries also pledged to continue sharing IT experience.

Russia's four biggest telecommunications companies have not yet included Swedish telecommunications company Tele2 in the 4G frequency distribution consortium, although it has asked to participate.

Another Russian company, Angara Paper, signed a sales and marketing agreement with Swedish Sodra Skogsagarna Ekonomisk Forening and Sodra Cell as part of a project to build a forest and chemical complex in the Yenisei district of the Krasnoyarsk region.

Swedish journalists, however, seemed to care less about economic ties and more about whether Putin would run in the 2012 election.

"It is still too early to tell," Putin said. "The time will come, and we will make the appropriate decision. You will like it. You will be satisfied."

He returned to Moscow late Wednesday to open the World Figure Skating Championships, which the city won the right to host following the nuclear accident at Japan's Fukushima power station.

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Putin expressed worries again about the expansion of NATO on Wednesday, a day after he criticized the military alliance over its operation in Libya, Reuters reported.

"The expansion of NATO infrastructure toward our borders is causing us concern," Putin said at a news conference after meeting with Reinfeldt.

"NATO is not simply a political bloc, it is a military bloc. No one cancelled the agreements on how the bloc reacts to external threats. It is a defense structure," Putin said.

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