

EU-Russia cooperation must be deepened

Goran Persson, the Swedish prime minister, talks to EUROPE magazine

- Sweden, which takes on the European Union presidency from January 1, 2001, has already said one of its priorities in this capacity will be to develop cooperation between the EU and Russia. What precisely is Stockholm proposing to do?

- Deeper cooperation between the EU and Russia is of great importance for stability and security in Europe as a whole. But Russia stands to benefit from this cooperation in terms of economic growth, and a better life for most of its population.

Europe can share its expertise, which could be useful to Russia in its bid to strengthen democracy, the law-based state and to create a market economy based on social justice. Sweden, for its part, attaches much importance to the establishment of a civil society. At issue is, for example, effective and independent monitoring over how the state performs its functions. This cannot be done without a strong, independent media, which has a key function in any modern democracy.

The EU, like Russia, needs to cooperate more in the problems facing us today - these are frequently referred to as cross-border problems. Take, for example, the threat to the environment and organized crime, problems which do not recognize state borders. Sweden gives priority to cooperation namely in these areas.

Other highly important issues are the stimulation of trade and assisting Russia's bid for accession to the WTO; and intensifying political dialog and joint efforts to prevent conflicts and resolve crisis situations. Sweden, as EU president, will definitely be making every effort to enhance cooperation between the EU and Russia. But this depends on both sides. We hope and expect Russia to do its part of the work.

nn A conference on the "Northern Dimension" for foreign ministers has been planned for next spring. What results specific to Russia can be expected? How true are reports that the EU and Russia differ in their approaches to the Northern Dimension initiative?

- The conference takes place in Luxembourg on April 9, 2001. Invitations will be sent to representatives of EU member states and of Northern Dimension partners Russia, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Iceland. The objective is for the conference to become a sort of "check point" and to provide political support and leadership for future work.

Russia is a very important element of the Northern Dimension. It gives the EU a platform to develop cooperation on a regional scale with your country. The Northern Dimension will also facilitate cooperation between EU members and countries outside of the Union in Northern Europe, thus bringing the peoples of our part of the Old World closer together.

In the context of the Northern Dimension, Sweden will pay special attention to environmental issues, including nuclear safety, to the fight against crime and to the situation in Kaliningrad.

Russia itself suggested using Kaliningrad as a "pilot project" in relations between the EU and Russia. We also prioritize the stimulation of economic growth by, for example, lifting trade barriers; and investment in information technologies, transport, energy and the use of natural resources.

We are keen for the Northern Dimension to become a natural element of programs both among common EU structures and the various ministries of EU member-states.

A plan of action was accepted at the EU summit in Feira, Portugal, in June 2000, and the leading role in its implementation was assigned to the European Commission.

I do not see any major differences between the EU and Russia over the Northern Dimension. As far as I know, Russia welcomed the initiative very warmly and pins a lot of hope on it. I do as well and I hope that our joint efforts soon bring tangible results.

- Sweden backs the creation within the EU framework of a system to resolve conflict situations in the European region and Russia's involvement in it. What, in Stockholm's view, could Moscow's involvement consist of?

- The EU member-states have decided to grant the Union powers to resolve crisis situations and to prevent conflicts by both military and peaceful means. If all goes to plan, final decisions on this matter will be taken at the EU summit in Nice December 7-8 this year. After this, those powers must be invoked as quickly as possible. This will be one of Sweden's main tasks during its EU presidency.

There is a full consensus that the system for resolving conflict situations should be open to non-EU members, particularly Russia. Sweden attaches much importance to this issue.

Russia could participate in the conflict settlement system in a number of ways. For example, Russia could join a contingent resolving a conflict under the EU command. Then there is the country's aviation potential: it is well known that the EU countries are lacking in aviation resources, and that Russia possesses them, presenting a good opportunity for cooperation between the EU and Russia.

- Sweden and Germany have suggested organizing a conference of Baltic area defense ministers next year. Might Russia be invited, particularly in the light of the recent Kursk submarine tragedy?

- Our defense ministries have already made initial contact on this issue. Russia's participation in such an event would be entirely appropriate as it also has a Baltic coast. The groundwork for a meeting between top officials will start to be laid later this autumn.

- Several bilateral agreements were signed during your visit to Russia September 26-27. Which areas of cooperation do they concern?

- We signed two agreements on cleaning up the environment in the Baltic Sea.

One of them calls for Sweden to allocate 120 million kronar via Sida, the Swedish International Development Association, for the construction of water purification facilities in Kaliningrad. We have put a lot of effort into this project in recent years, working with ministries in Moscow and with local authorities in Kaliningrad. I hope that now, thanks to the financial support, the project will finally leave the drawing board and can be implemented. This would be a very solid contribution to improving the environment in the southern part of the Baltic Sea.

The second agreement also involves the allocation of funds via Sida for the construction of facilities to clean water and waste-water in Sestroretsk near St. Petersburg.

- One of the priorities of bilateral Swedish-Russian relations are direct links between Sweden and Northwest Russia. During your visit to Russia you visited St. Petersburg as well as Moscow. Tell us a little more about this aspect of Swedish relations with Russia.

- In St. Petersburg I met with Viktor Cherkosov, the Russian president's official representative for the Northwest District; with Vladimir Yakovlev, governor of St. Petersburg; and Valery Serdyukov, the governor of the Leningrad region.

Both of these regions are cooperating closely with Swedish partners at local and regional levels. St. Petersburg and Stockholm, on the one hand, and the Leningrad region and the Swedish province of Sodermanlands, on the other, have twinned. Other twin cities include Gatchina in the Leningrad region and Eskilstuna, among others. Both in St. Petersburg and in the Leningrad region our country works via Sida in areas like education, social welfare, and public administration and media reforms. Swedish firms are showing more and more interest in the region. St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region are two very important partners striving to make the Baltic Sea area economically the fastest growing area in Europe. And there are all the signs that this will happen! Russia is playing a key role in this effort, and I hope for even more contribution from Russia towards this end in the future.

Interview by Vladimir KULIKOV