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To Russia With Love, Or Not

U.S. President Barack Obama's recent decision to scrap plans for a missile shield in central Europe raises a nagging issue (once again): Should the mostly Slavic nations of central Europe choose closer relations with Mother Russia or the West? Or both?



AFP/Getty Images

Czech President Vaclav Klaus, right, with the deputy prime minister of Russia, Alexander Zhukov, at the Prague Castle on Sept. 14.

After Obama's announcement last week, Poles and Czechs will now be left without an American military presence and some in the two countries and abroad say the U.S. is letting the former Soviet satellites fall back into Russia's sphere of influence after two decades of rebuilding ties with the West. Others say no such thing is happening. So what is happening?

In a nutshell, identity crisis.

In the last two days alone, Czechs are sending very mixed signals about their relations with Moscow.

At a speaking engagement at the conservative Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., Czech President Vaclav Klaus condemned the European Union (of which the Czech Republic, Poland and eight other neighboring countries joined in 2004) and its integration, saying its

creeping federalism is "much worse" than he originally thought.

Klaus then went on to praise Russia as "a completely normal partner, like a host of other countries."

And the same day, CSA Czech Airlines, a state-run carrier, canceled flights to New York but increased the frequency of flights to Moscow. Although this reflects the economic reality. There's more airborne traffic between Russia and the Czech Republic than between the U.S. and Prague.

Yet, Tuesday the head of international activities at Czech state-run power company CEZ said that Russia is too-risky a partner for the company and so they've put all plans there on ice. (Note: Financial markets often praise CEZ managers for their strategic business decisions.) CEZ officials in the recent past have cited Russia's ability and readiness to shut off oil and gas deliveries to Europe as a very real threat to regional security, while others in local business have pointed out the Kremlin's harsh takeovers of foreign-owned energy assets (think B.P.) as reasons to be wary.

And what about the average Czech? They're split as well. Some will tell you St. Petersburg is beautiful if a little run down and Russians are good people, but in the same breath they'll warn that Russia doesn't know its own borders and that Obama's cancellation of the missile shield gives Moscow the green light for more Georgia-like military adventures in eastern and central Europe.

So which direction are central Europeans headed? East or west?

Let's follow the money. Over 85% of Czech exports (and the country's economy is heavily dependent on exporting its locally made cars and electronics) go to the EU, while only a paltry sum make their way to Russia.

And when Czechs spend their hard earned korunas on vacations or imported fashions, they overwhelmingly choose Europe's destinations and styles to anything from the east.

It might do Presidents Obama and Klaus some good to pay attention to where the people of central Europe are looking. It's not east.

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