



Center for Strategic & International Studies
Washington, DC

CSIS CONGRESSIONAL FORUM

Impact of New Visa Waiver Legislation on Central and Eastern Europe

Discussions are currently underway to overhaul the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP) with the goal of enhancing security standards, building good will between the U.S. and its allies, and strengthening cooperation in the common struggle against international terrorists. On March 5, 2007 the CSIS New European Democracies Project (NEDP), together with Friends of Slovakia (FOS) and the American Friends of the Czech Republic (AFOCR), organized a forum on Capitol Hill on the impact of the Visa Waiver Program on U.S. allies in Central Europe.

Panelists included **Paul Rosenzweig**, Acting Assistant Secretary for International Affairs, U.S. Department of Homeland Security; **Mark Pekala**, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European & Eurasian Affairs, U.S. Department of State; and **Michael Wyganowski**, Executive Director, Center for European Policy Analysis. CSIS NEDP Director and Europe Program Senior Fellow **Janusz Bugajski** moderated the discussion.

Forum speakers stressed that the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP) was established in the 1980s and has proved to be a successful initiative, providing mutual benefits for the U.S. and its partners and facilitating business, cultural exchanges, and tourism. However, it does not reflect current security realities. Its main focus was to control the influx of economic immigrants, but in the post-9/11 environment the program is not equipped to secure U.S. borders from security threats.

Recognizing the need to modernize the VWP, the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Congress are closely cooperating to adapt and strengthen the program and to maintain its benefits. The primary objective of a modified VWP would be to advance U.S. national security and the security of travelers to the U.S. As President George W. Bush announced in November of 2006 in Tallinn, Estonia, the new VWP will aim to enhance security and to involve new member states. This means that the U.S. aims to create objective standards and roadmaps, which will assist the new countries to join the VWP. The basic premise will be to focus screening at the individual level rather than on a country basis, as transnational security threats are posed by specific individuals and cut across national lines.

The fundamental elements of a newly adapted VWP are uniformity and reciprocity. The U.S. will not attempt to distinguish between regions or countries, and in fact all VWP members will have to adhere to the same uniform standards. This means that current members will also need to make necessary changes to comply with new requirements.



Center for Strategic & International Studies Washington, DC

Washington has the constructive support of the EU, which has indicated the willingness of current visa waiver beneficiaries to accept changes in order to ensure the equal treatment of all EU member states. In terms of reciprocity, the U.S. will not require compliance with standards that Washington itself does not meet.

Specific measure for enhanced security in the VWP will include:

- Better reporting and control on lost or stolen passports;
- Improved information exchange about travelers who enter and exit the U.S.;
- Enhanced airport security in countries that have direct flights to U.S. cities and the introduction of air marshals.
- Improved quality of travel and personal documents.

The timeframe of accepting new countries into the program remains unclear, as it is contingent upon the speediness of the adoption of VWP reforms in the U.S. Congress, as well as the preparedness of individual countries. Washington will engage in bilateral negotiations with capitals interested in participating in the VWP and will work with local authorities to enforce the new security measures.

Economic immigration is becoming a diminished concern with respect to Central and Eastern Europe in view of EU enlargement and improved standards of living in the region. Nonetheless, the rates of visa refusal and visa overstays will be taken into consideration when accepting new countries into the VWP.

The possibility of a visa waiver program for Central and Eastern Europe today is a direct result of a half a century of constructive U.S. foreign policy in the region; one that supported democratic transition and development. Washington has found reliable allies among the CEE states and expanding the VWP to include the new EU members is a logical next step in consolidating the trans-Atlantic partnership.