

Long and Winding Road...

Poland's admission into the United States Visa Waiver Program is long on oratory, but in the complex world of US lawmaking, it may mean little in reality,

writes Robert Kopacz

Polish Americans know better than anyone the significance of Poland's admission into the United States Visa Waiver Program, a bona fide proposal that is now winding its way through the United States Congress. Up until recently, anyone who had a relative in the US and wanted to visit them, had to go through the arduous process of securing a tourist visa. But while tourist visas have become easier to get, they are still not the same as a visa waiver.

The symbolism of such a waiver is lost on no-one. For Poles, it is the last frontier on the path to becoming a member of the larger community of free nations. Gone would be the humiliating days of waiting in line at the US Embassy's consular section on Warsaw's ul. Piękna. It would also mean an end to the embarrassment of anyone from ticket agents to immigration officials demanding your visa documents as a condition of boarding a plane.

For Polish Americans, it represents a certain vindication as a nine-million-strong ethnic group that has always felt its needs have been ignored or belittled by the federal government and its institutions.

The process took a major step forward in May when the United States Senate agreed to amend their immigration bill to include such a waiver for Poland. And in late May the Senate passed its Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill, which contained the visa waiver for Polish citizens.

Indeed, Barbara Mikulski, a veteran senator from Maryland and a Polish American, was a co-sponsor of legislation amending the Senate's immigration bill, together with Senator Rick Santorum from Pennsylvania—another state with a large Polish-American population. Mikulski's rhetoric on the Senate floor when the amendment was debated demonstrated that she is a forceful advocate for Poland within the United States Senate:

"The people of Poland don't understand, and frankly, neither do I, why France is among the 27 countries of the visa waiver program but Poland is not... The United States is blessed with few allies as stalwart as Poland, but we tell a grandmother in Gdańsk she needs a visa to visit her grand-

children in America."

Despite the oratory and the agreement of the Senate to adopt the amendment, Poland's admission into the Visa Waiver Program has a long way to go before it becomes law. Having the Senate agree to amend a Senate bill on immigration, and having that bill pass, is unfortunately not enough in the United States lawmaking process.

Why is that? Part of the reason has to do with the current political climate in Washington. All this is happening at a time when immigration has become the hottest topic in the American capital since Monica Lewinsky, making it impossible for the average politician not to have an opinion on the subject. When it comes to immigration, Washington has become the land of a thousand political cooks adding their pinch of secret seasoning to the legislative soup.

As a consequence, not only does the Senate have an immigration bill, the House of Representatives has also passed an immigration bill of its own, and one that differs significantly from the Senate's. Most significantly for Poles, that bill does not provide for Poland's admission into the Visa Waiver Program.

The next step will be to try to reconcile the two bills, and to come up with one that can be passed by both chambers of Congress. This is done by the House – Senate Conference Committee. Much can change between now and the end of that committee's work, including an agreement to delete the Santorum-Mikulski amendment added by the Senate as part of compromise legislation.

Confused? Wait, there's more. On top of that, many other Central and Eastern European nations are crying foul. The amendment was worded in such a way as not to mention Poland directly, but to establish the conditions needed to obtain probationary waiver status. It just so happens that Poland is the only country to meet those conditions at present. For example, a qualifying country must have between 300 and 1,000 troops in Iraq or Afghanistan. Poland is the only coalition

country with that many troops committed.

But the other CEE countries also have troops in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. They have also been stalwart allies. Why are they not admitted into the Visa Waiver Program, they ask, clearly irritated.

As if that wasn't enough, The European Union is also getting into the fray. They are seeking a visa waiver for all European Union members, and are hinting at requiring visas for Americans if such a blanket waiver is not forthcoming.

Tired yet? Wait, we are not finished. It is not even clear whether the current Polish government views admission into the Visa Waiver Program as a priority. Although Senator Mikulski stated on the Senate Floor that admission to the Visa Waiver Program was a "high priority" for Poland, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Anna Fotyga, in an interview with the Polish language American newspaper *Nowy Dziennik* during a recent visit to Washington, seemed to suggest that it was not such a high priority.

Given current Polish emigration trends, no one can blame the Polish government for equivocating. With some two million leaving to work abroad since EU admission, Poland is experiencing a rather large deficit of man power. The chance to come to the United States on a tourist visa and work illegally—currently common practice—could encourage another wave of Poles to attempt to leave the Polish workforce, further eroding Poland's widely promoted advantage of a relatively cheap source of labor within the EU.

What does all this mean for Poles wishing to travel to the United States for a simple visit? Probably another long wait in a line. Poles would like to have seen a bit more of a grand gesture in the name of friendship and reciprocity. They would like to have seen somebody cut through all the bureaucratic nonsense and say, "Hey, you guys deserve this. Let's just do it."

Instead, the chances are that Poland and its admission to the Visa Waiver Program will become another bargaining chip to be traded between battling politicians. Like most bargaining chips, it could easily be bargained away.

Now where have I heard that before? ■



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