

Taube: Polish Visa Waiver Supports U.S. Jobs, Key Ally

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Imagine you're planning a long-awaited vacation to London and you discover that you need not only a U.S. passport but also a British visa. Wouldn't you be surprised and a little offended that our friends in England require you to run the bureaucratic gantlet, especially when British citizens can enter the U.S. without doing the same?

Surely, when two nations have enjoyed such a long and deep relationship, their citizens don't need to make a big fuss over visiting each other's shores.

That is precisely how many Poles feel today when they plan a visit to America, only to learn that they're required to have a visa. Americans, by contrast, can visit Poland solely on their U.S. passport — 21 years ago Warsaw's newly installed democratic government repealed the visa requirement for U.S. visitors, a reflection of the friendship the countries have shared since Revolutionary War days.

Leading voices in the tourism industry and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce agree: It's well past time for American lawmakers to match Warsaw's welcoming attitude and add Poland to our Visa Waiver Program. Not only would such a move make for good foreign policy, it would serve to strengthen our national security and economy.

First and foremost, including Poland in the Visa Waiver Program would make it much easier for Poles to visit the United States. Millions of Polish tourists travel the world each year, but fewer than 100,000 of them come to our shores. Yet in 2010 alone, countries with waivers were the largest source of inbound overseas travel to the U.S., generating 17 million visitors and \$61 billion spent in the tourism industry, in support of 433,000 U.S. jobs.

As the only European Union nation that continued to grow during the 2008 crisis, Poland boasts one of Europe's strongest economies. Current projections from the European Commission for 2012 show an increase in the annual growth rate from 2.5 percent to 2.7 percent. At a time when the U.S. economy continues to struggle, it only makes sense to encourage tourism from a friendly nation whose citizens enjoy significant disposable income.

Moreover, Poland has proved to be a stalwart ally of the United States. Ever since the Poles overthrew their communist regime, the Polish government has consistently been among the most pro-American nations in Europe, even at the risk of incurring the wrath of other EU or NATO members. Today, Polish soldiers fight alongside our troops in Afghanistan, as they fought together in Iraq, and the Polish government recently invested \$1.6 billion in the purchase of American F-16 fighters.

Poland is also on the front lines of our counterterrorism efforts, sharing information that strengthens the security of Americans at home and abroad — and when it enters the Visa Waiver Program, Poland will additionally be required to meet enhanced standards of counterterrorism, law enforcement, border control and document security.

The Visa Waiver Program is not an immigration bill. It is a jobs and tourism bill that will have a positive impact on our current economic and employment challenges. The security and commercial advantages we would gain from bringing Poland into the program have persuaded the White House that we need to act: President Barack Obama promised in 2010 that he would make it a priority to abolish visas for Poles. He reiterated his promise during his Warsaw visit last year and has lent his support to bipartisan legislation to extend the program to Poland.

Now, Congress must act. Legislation has now been introduced in both the Senate and the House. It's time for Congressional leadership to move ahead with this long-overdue measure. By expanding the Visa Waiver Program, Congress will be both recognizing a crucial U.S. ally and supporting job creation here at home.

Let's add to the program the country of Polish-American patriot Thaddeus Kosciuszko, charismatic Pope John Paul II and fearless champion of liberty Lech Wałęsa. Let's enable this generation of Polish tourists to see firsthand all our country has to offer, while also contributing to our future.

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