

Background

No. 2478
October 21, 2010



Published by The Heritage Foundation

The U.S. Takes “New Europe” For Granted at its Own Peril

Helle C. Dale and Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

Abstract: *The nations of “New Europe” have been staunch allies of the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, and have sacrificed resources and soldiers’ lives in Iraq and Afghanistan. Again and again, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have shown their steadfastness and commitment to the United States. Yet America has not always returned the favor. Crucial ally Poland, as well as several other CEE countries, are still awaiting acceptance to the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. The “Third Site” missile defense installations, eagerly anticipated by Poland and the Czech Republic, were traded away by the Obama Administration to win Russian support on resisting Iran’s nuclear advances. CEE citizens have taken note, and public support for the U.S. and its policies has begun to waver. Russia stands poised—with an arsenal of propaganda, economic, and military might—to re-establish influence over the CEE region. The U.S. must not take support from New Europe for granted. The region has not yet been lost to Russian influence—but the U.S. must act now to preserve the crucial relationship with Central and Eastern Europe. Two of The Heritage Foundation’s most senior foreign policy analysts explain what the American government can, and should, do.*

An unfortunate side effect of the Obama Administration’s “reset” policy toward Russia was its impact on relations with some of the United States’ most loyal recent allies—the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These ties had been nourished under previous Administrations, and reached a high point

Talking Points

- The Obama Administration’s “reset” decision to focus on great power politics with Russia has upset the relationship between the U.S. and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) at every level.
- A strategic vacuum has developed in the CEE region. Not only is Washington’s rapprochement with Russia a major issue for CEE allies, so is the cancellation of the “Third Site” missile defense installations in Poland and the Czech Republic.
- Slow progress on expanding the Visa Waiver Program remains a major irritant for Poland. Shrinking U.S. public diplomacy budgets have also taken their toll.
- Continued support from CEE countries cannot be taken for granted. There is much the United States can—and should—do to reaffirm its commitment to the U.S.–CEE relationship.
- Public diplomacy must stand at the forefront of revitalizing and preserving the vital relationship between the United States and Central and Eastern Europe.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/bg2478>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

during the years of NATO enlargement (1999, 2004, and 2009). Despite firm government-to-government commitments to military cooperation, NATO enlargement, and support for building democratic institutions during the eight years of the George W. Bush Administration, popular discontent with the Iraq war started to grow among CEE citizens. Compared to many Western European nations, though, the countries of the former Iron Curtain remained staunch American allies.

The Obama Administration's decision to focus on great power politics with Russia severely upset the U.S.–CEE relationships at every level. For the CEE countries, the first year of the Obama Administration provided a tough lesson in the new realities of Washington. Despite the fact that President Obama enjoyed high personal approval ratings, among the diplomatic corps in Washington there was a widespread perception that the new White House team was not accessible to them.

The Obama Administration's decision to focus on great power politics with Russia severely upset the U.S.–CEE relationships at every level.

In part as a result of Washington's neglect, a strategic vacuum has developed in the CEE region. Not only is Washington's rapprochement with Russia a major issue for CEE allies, but so is the cancellation of the "Third Site" missile defense installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. The slow progress of expanding the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) was a serious irritant for all the European countries formerly behind the Iron Curtain. It remains so for the Poles who have yet to be accepted for visa-less travel to the U.S. Shrinking U.S. public diplomacy budgets have also taken their toll as the U.S. presence in the region seems to have dwindled. Several avoidable public diplomacy missteps of Barack Obama's first year in office have added more sour notes—such as the White House failure to appreciate the profound meaning of World War II anniversaries in Europe, and therefore failing to arrange

proper U.S. representation, or the President's snub of the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, allegedly because of too heavy a schedule.

As the distance between CEE and the United States has grown, the European Union and Russia have begun to move into the vacuum. As members of the EU, the countries of CEE—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Romania—have benefited from major financial inflows as well as from the ability of their citizens to travel and seek jobs and education in other EU states. This pull has greatly increased the visibility of the EU.

At the same time, Russia has tried to re-establish ties with parts of the former Soviet empire—such renewal having been one of the chief aims of the Putin era, with Poland being the principal target of this policy. In 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the Russian nation that the collapse of the Soviet empire "was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" and a tragedy for Russians.¹ Over the past decade, Russia has steadily put pressure on relations with neighbors in order to restore what it considers its rightful sphere of influence. In fact, Dmitry Medvedev, the current president, did not exclude CEE from his notorious mention of Russia's sphere of "privileged interests." Russia's government continues to show a willingness to employ a range of instruments to achieve the ends of its "neighborhood policy" (essentially proclaiming Moscow's veto power in areas controlled by the former Soviet Union). These include international propaganda, using critical infrastructure and energy as power levers, buying Russia-friendly political and business elites through lucrative business deals, and occasionally threatening in a not-so-veiled fashion to employ military power.

The U.S. government should not take the support from CEE countries for granted. As staunch allies as they have been after September 11, 2001, it will take determined effort by the United States to end the drift of CEE countries away from the U.S. Such effort should be a high priority as part of the bulwark protecting the transatlantic alliance from

1. "Putin: Soviet Collapse a 'Genuine Tragedy,'" MSNBC, April 25, 2005, at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7632057> (October 7, 2010).

fracturing. Within NATO, CEE countries remain of strategic importance for the United States.

As Ambassador Sven Jürgenson, foreign policy advisor to the president of Estonia, stated at The Heritage Foundation in October 2009, U.S.–CEE relationships reached a high level of intensity, forged during the struggle against Communism and the fall of the Soviet Union. It took a great amount of effort to build the relationships on both sides, and it will require effort to sustain them. “I try to remind everyone,” Jürgenson said, that “it was an anomalous time, also in the United States.” During the 1990s, the Baltics and other CEE countries made their final break from Russian domination, and at the same time the United States established itself as the world’s sole superpower. The Baltic states saw the “United States as the main counter-balanced influence to Russia. The United States as a unipolar superpower had made itself available to the Baltic states...and we reached for it.”²

Now as then, the relationship between the United States and CEE is based on common values and interests. During the 1990s, the confluence of those interests produced an unusually close alliance, which now requires mutual effort to maintain. Unfortunately, the Obama Administration demonstrated a disturbing lack of concern for these alliances during its first year in power, which culminated in the abrogation of the Third Site missile defense agreements concluded between the second Bush Administration, Poland, and the Czech Republic. The fact that it happened with minimal prior warning to the Polish and Czech governments, and was announced on September 17, 2009, the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland in World War II, was a major blow to CEE trust in U.S. commitments. Since then, the Obama Administration has attempted to reassure regional CEE leaders of continued American friendship by making public statements and by sending members of the Administration to meet with them in person. But much more remains to be done to shore up these important relations, and public diplomacy should play a leading role.

Perceptions by the public in CEE countries of neglect by the U.S. can be countered by among other things visits from high-ranking U.S. officials. President George W. Bush made a number of trips to the region, which made an impact. The visit by Vice President Joseph Biden to Bucharest in October 2009 was an attempt to reassure allies in the region after the missile defense reversal, and his visit was received favorably. President Obama has made a number of trips, intended as a signal of reassurance, but the President’s decision to sign the 2010 START treaty with Russia in April in Prague carried a mixed message: The price for signing the treaty was the cancellation of Poland-based and Czech Republic-based missile defense systems. At least the dinner hosted after the signing ceremony by the U.S. President with 11 CEE leaders gave them a chance to voice their concerns and was seen by many political leaders and the public as a positive step.

Investing in visible, tangible symbols of the American commitment to CEE security is critical, as is establishing accessible cultural and educational institutions outside the forbidding perimeters of the new U.S. embassy compounds in CEE countries. Exchange scholarships and a more open visa policy can facilitate the individual exposure of citizens to the United States. The U.S. government should:

- **Formulate** a strategic framework for cooperation with CEE countries that reaffirms their continued importance to the United States and for transatlantic relations;
- **Admit** Poland and Romania to the Visa Waiver Program, thereby clearing up a serious irritant in the relationship with important allies;
- **Raise** the visibility of the American presence in CEE countries by (1) increasing the frequency of state-to-state visits on both sides; (2) increasing the number of educational and cultural exchanges; and (3) increasing visible symbols of the American presence through speaker series featuring American political and cultural leaders; and

2. Sven Jürgenson, “Past and Present: Estonia and U.S. Partnership,” remarks at The Heritage Foundation, October 23, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Events/2009/10/Past-and-Present-Estonia-and-US-Partnership>.

- **Fund** symbols of the American presence, such as American centers at local universities and cultural institutions.

CEE Opinions Run Hot–Cold on U.S. Leadership

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the CEE countries invariably turned to the United States for guidance, protection, and investment opportunities.³ The security guarantees of NATO were even more sought after than the perceived path to prosperity through the EU, as CEE countries sought protection from a declining Russia that did not readily accept their inclusion in Western institutions. NATO enlargement to include Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 1999 and the second round of NATO enlargement in 2004 to include Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia represented high points in the relationship with the United States. Unfortunately, those high points lasted less than a decade.

Public opinion statistics in Central and Eastern Europe tell the story. In 2003, a majority of Poles found United States leadership in the world to be desirable, according to the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Trends poll, and most supported the handling of international issues by President George W. Bush.⁴ By contrast, in the 2008 survey, still under President Bush, the portion of Central and Eastern Europeans who found American leadership to be desirable had shrunk to just about one-third.

Even the "Obama-bounce" after the 2009 presidential election did not affect CEE as strongly as it did Western Europe. President Obama's approval ratings in CEE were 64 percent, compared to 86 percent in Western Europe. When it comes to the

desirability of U.S. global leadership as recorded in the Marshall Fund's 2009 survey, CEE registered just 44 percent approval as opposed to 56 percent for Western Europe.⁵ "Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, enthusiasm for Obama, for American leadership, and for the United States in general is far more subdued in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Turkey," write the authors, identifying this trend as one of the most notable findings of the survey.⁶

Also troubling was the finding by the Pew Research Center in the Global Attitudes Project poll released in November 2009. This poll found not only that attitudes toward the United States are on a downward trajectory in the region, but so are attitudes toward democracy, free markets, and the political and economic systems of the West. Clearly, expectations for the post-Communist way of life have fallen short.

Some of the CEE countries have struggled to transform their societies into true democracies and some have seen massive and persistent unemployment resulting from the closing of their state enterprises. The Pew report does reveal that the people of "former Iron Curtain countries generally look back approvingly at the collapse of communism," and that the majorities of people in most former Soviet Republics and Eastern European countries endorse the emergence of multiparty systems and a free market economy." However, since 1991, when the original survey was conducted, "the initial widespread enthusiasm about these changes has dimmed in most of the countries surveyed."⁷ Among the most afflicted in the survey were Hungarians, of whom 72 percent say they are worse off now than they were under Communism. Though the April 2010

3. Charles Gati, "Faded Romance: How Mitteleuropa Fell Out of Love with America," *The American Interest*, (November/December 2008), pp. 35–43, at http://www.cepa.org/publications/view.aspx?record_id=7 (October 7, 2010).
4. German Marshall Fund, "Transatlantic Trends 2003: Topline Data," July 2003, pp. 6–7, at http://www.gmfus.org/trends/doc/2003_english_top.pdf (October 7, 2010).
5. German Marshall Fund, "Transatlantic Trends: Topline Data 2009," 2009, pp. 9–10, at http://www.gmfus.org/trends/doc/2009_English_Top.pdf (October 7, 2010).
6. German Marshall Fund, "Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2009," at http://www.gmfus.org/trends/doc/2009_English_Key.pdf (October 7, 2010).
7. Pew Research Center, "End of Communism Cheered But Now With More Reservations," November 2, 2000, at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1396/european-opinion-two-decades-after-berlin-wall-fall-communism> (October 7, 2010).

election was won by Viktor Orban's conservative Fidesz Party, this dissatisfaction with democracy and capitalism has translated into the increased (19 percent) far-right vote for the Jobbik Party, which won parliamentary representation for the first time.

A Tale of Two Letters. A decline in public opinion of American leadership and democracy is worrisome in itself, but when combined with a souring of the governing elites, the effect on U.S. national interest becomes more palpable. The two famous public letters from leaders in the CEE region illustrate the deeply felt decline in the relationship with the United States.

On January 30, 2003, political leaders from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—along with the leaders of Spain, Portugal, the U.K., and Denmark—risked the wrath of the EU by stating publicly in an open letter why they stood with the United States on the Iraq war.⁸ Even though the letter provoked French President Jacques Chirac to lash out against the signatories, a number of other CEE nations soon signed on to a second letter in support of the United States, this time including Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Estonia, Lithuania, and the Balkan nations of Slovenia, Macedonia, Croatia, and Albania. In the view of nearly all the governments of CEE countries, the relationship with the United States was more important than the relationship with the EU, which they were soon hoping to join. Indeed, the issue of the Iraq war splintered EU aspirations for a common foreign policy, as the U.K., Italy, and Spain supported the U.S. while France and Germany fiercely opposed it. A fault line opened between Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's "New Europe" of the East and "Old Europe" of the West.

The letter hailed U.S. "bravery, generosity and far-sightedness" during the struggles with Nazism and Communism in the 20th century, and it called for "unwavering determination and firm international

cohesion on the part of all countries for whom freedom is precious."⁹ This statement captured not only the common interests, but also the deeply held common values that made the connection between the United States and CEE so powerful.

Just six years later, a dramatically different letter was put together by CEE leaders, a story of a "faded romance" as Charles Gati wrote in *The American Interest*. The open letter from a distinguished group of CEE leaders to the Obama Administration published in the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* on July 16, 2009, talked about disappointment, abandonment, and of allies being taken for granted. The letter expressed a fear of CEE interests being neglected by the United States in favor of a renewed relationship with Russia.

"Twenty years after the Cold War, however, we see that Central and Eastern European countries are no longer at the heart of American foreign policy," the signatories said as they warned against taking the relationship with the U.S. for granted. "All is not well in our region or in the transatlantic relationship. Central and Eastern Europe is at a political crossroads and today there is a growing sense of nervousness in the region."¹⁰ The specific factors cited in the letter were the troubling outcome of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the declining relevance of NATO, the slide in American popularity among the publics of their countries, the growing relevance of the EU, political turmoil resulting from the global economic crisis, and the "reset" of the relationship between the United States and Russia.

Visa Waiver and the Iraq War

Another critical factor was the "Visa Waiver issue" with CEE countries, which has cost the United States greatly in terms of public diplomacy (and which should therefore be at the top of the list of issues that need resolution). America's Visa Waiver program itself dates back to 1986, and as

8. "Europe and America Must Stand United," *Times* (London), January 30, 2003, at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/168/36565.html> (October 12, 2010).

9. STRATFOR Global Intelligence, "Europe: Splintering on Iraq War Shatters Common Policy," January 30, 2010, at http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/100400/europe_splintering_iraq_war_shatters_common_policy (October 7, 2010).

10. Valdas Adamkus *et al.*, "An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 16, 2009, at <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1778449.html> (October 7, 2010).

originally configured, applied to friendly, prosperous allied nations (a total of 27) whose citizens could be expected to return to their respective homes if granted a visa-free stay in the United States for tourism or business. A country could qualify for the program if the rate of citizens overstaying their visas did not exceed 5 percent, and the rate of rejection of visa applicants did not exceed 3 percent. Following the inception of the program, citizens from Western Europe found short-term travel for business or tourism to the United States greatly facilitated. (The limit of a visa-free stay is 90 days.)

The staunch support for the United States exhibited by the CEE governments after 9/11 made the Visa Waiver issue appear even more of an injustice.

As a public diplomacy tool, as well as an economic tool, the program works brilliantly. People-to-people contacts are perhaps the most powerful component of public diplomacy, and making visitors feel welcome creates a positive first impression. Surveys have shown that foreigners who have had the opportunity to visit the United States are more than 74 percent likely to have a favorable view of the country and 61 percent of travelers to the United States are more likely to support the United States and its policies than people who have never visited the U.S.¹¹

However, as the division of Europe ended after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and former East Bloc countries became members of both the European Union and NATO, the Visa Waiver program had the unintended consequence of perpetuating the historical division of Europe, leaving the CEE countries stuck with the old visa system. Their citizens had to pay a non-refundable \$100 visa-application fee, and show up for individual interviews

with consular personnel. The perception among CEE applicants was often that decisions whether or not to grant visas was made on an arbitrary basis by U.S. consular personnel. CEE citizens felt they were second class in the eyes of the U.S. government, understandably causing resentment. Countries that had looked to America for protection, leadership, and friendship in the 1990s began to experience a rise in anti-Americanism in the beginning of the new millennium.

The staunch support for the United States exhibited by the CEE governments after 9/11, including the open letter of January 30, 2003, made the Visa Waiver issue appear even more of an injustice. While the United States tightened visa requirements to deal with the new security threats from abroad, its new allies demanded recognition of the risks they were taking to stand in solidarity alongside Americans.¹² Polish soldiers are “daily risking their lives for America’s war on terror, and these are people who while they are in Iraq, they learn that they will have to be fingerprinted [when they visit the United States]. They feel that they will be treated as criminals,” said Radek Sikorski, then executive director of the New Atlantic Initiative, and later to hold posts as his country’s defense and foreign minister (as well as holding previous ministerial posts in the Polish government). “Isn’t there a better way to treat allies?” Sikorski asked. Poland was among the first four countries in the Iraq war coalition and led the international division in Iraq, contributing some 2,500 troops.¹³ Military and material contributions for U.S. efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo have been forthcoming from all new NATO allies.

A Resolution to the Visa Waiver Program. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the issue of visa waivers became a persistent and growing thorn in the relationship between the CEE countries and the United States. Finally, the political damage had to be contained: In February 2005, during a stop in Estonia

11. Discover America Partnership, “A Blueprint to Discover America,” January 21, 2007, at http://www.tourismeconomics.com/docs/Blueprint_to_Discover_America.pdf (October 7, 2010).

12. American Friends of the Czech Republic, “Lack of Visa Waiver Program Participation Affects U.S.–Czech Relations,” at <http://www.afocr.org/visa-lack-of-visa.html> (October 7, 2010).

13. Peter Brownfield, “Visa Program Angers Allies,” Fox News, March 10, 2004, at http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,113744,00.html (October 7, 2010).

on the way to the NATO summit meeting in Latvia, President Bush announced his plans to push Congress to reform the Visa Waiver Program. He committed himself to establishing “roadmaps” for countries not yet in the program, mainly CEE countries, but also South Korea, Malta, and Greece.¹⁴ It took two more years before Congress introduced legislation to expand the program under a certain set of conditions. Regrettably, these efforts coincided with the contentious debate over U.S. immigration reform; though unrelated, the issues became conflated in the minds of many Members of Congress. By reorienting the program’s focus to security collaboration and allowing prospective entrants a grace period of 10 years to reduce their rejection and overstay numbers, the legislation that passed in 2007 brought 10 new countries into the VWP.¹⁵

Most CEE citizens now enjoy visa-free travel to the U.S.—those of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia. But Poland, the country that advocated most strongly for CEE admittance to the program continues to struggle to fit the program parameters. Helping Poland (and other important friends and allies of the United States, such as Romania and South Korea) enter the program should be a top priority for the U.S. government. Indeed, during the presidential campaign, candidate Obama committed himself to moving forward with Visa Waiver, but has so far failed to take any positive steps in this direction. The strongest opposition in Congress to widening the program has come from Senator Diane Feinstein (D–CA), who introduced one of the most difficult issues into the Visa Waiver legislation, the demand for a biometric exit program at major U.S. airports. In essence, expansion of the program is held hostage to the Biometric Air Exit System, which is still under consideration by the Department of Homeland Security, having an estimated sticker cost of \$3 billion to \$9 billion over 10

years.¹⁶ Once again, U.S. public diplomacy toward important allied countries is being torpedoed by American domestic politics.

Georgia: The Value of Security Guarantees

The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 was a shock to the people and political leaders alike throughout the CEE. As Russian tanks rolled across borders in Georgia, violating the sovereignty of a country whose independence the United States had supported and which it had backed for future NATO membership, the U.S. response consisted of stunned surprise and little action. In fact, Prime Minister Putin and President Bush sat side by side chatting at the Beijing Olympics as the tanks rolled in.

Former President Putin had made it his top priority to restore Russian influence, especially in the territory of the former Romanov and Soviet empires. After years of planning and weeks of provocations inside South Ossetia, Russia began pouring troops into the two secessionist regions, and Georgia counterattacked. The lightning-strike invasion of Georgia served as a shot across the bow both to Ukraine and the countries of CEE. These new friends of the United States did not find the U.S. government’s response particularly reassuring despite the fact that the Bush Administration released Georgian troops serving in Iraq and facilitated their return home. The U.S. government also formally protested the invasion. U.S. Navy ships delivered humanitarian assistance to Georgia immediately after the ceasefire was in place, sending the Russians a message not to expand the war.

But there was no military response from the United States to repel the Russian troops. This is understandable in view of the fact that George W. Bush was in his last, pre-election weeks of his second term and was facing a massive Russian nuclear arsenal. Russia, for its part, was in no mood to back

14. James Jay Carafano and Laura P. Keith, “President’s Proposed Visa Waiver Program Reforms Strengthen Fight Against Terror,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1268, November 30, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2006/11/Presidents-Proposed-Visa-Waiver-Program-Reforms-Strengthen-Fight-Against-Terror>.
15. Sally McNamara, “Visa Policy and Transportation Security: Ensuring the Right Balance,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1813, February 13, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm1813.cfm>.
16. Ben Bain, “DHS Still Pondering Biometric Air Exit System,” *Federal Computer Week*, July 8, 2010, at <http://fcw.com/articles/2010/07/08/web-air-exit-update.aspx> (October 7, 2010).

down, quickly violating the French-negotiated ceasefire, known as the Medvedev–Sarkozy agreement, by refusing to revert to *status quo ante bellum* (August 7, pre-war ceasefire lines), recognizing Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence and planting five military bases in these secessionist territories. Only Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the South Pacific island nation of Nauru recognized the enclaves' independence, albeit the European Union called for "engagement without recognition" as far as Abkhazia is concerned.¹⁷

Throughout the CEE, the Russian invasion of Georgia seemed a throwback to Soviet invasions past—Berlin 1953, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968—and the U.S. response was as limited as any during the Cold War. With the EU taking the lead in ceasefire negotiations, the U.S. took a back seat. Consequently, a feeling of insecurity made the new NATO allies ask for additional political and military arrangements, such as a bilateral U.S.–Polish mutual defense treaty and accelerated the agreement to deploy the Patriot missile on Polish soil. The Baltic states asked for new contingency plans for their defense and orchestrated defensive military exercises with fellow NATO members.¹⁸

Missile Defense and the Third Site

After Russia's invasion of Georgia, deployment of U.S. military assets in the new NATO countries became another top priority for their governments as signs of U.S. commitment to their security. There, the "Third Site" of the U.S. missile defense system was a key element, and would have involved building an anti-missile shield consisting of a radar site in the Czech Republic as well as a missile-interceptor site in Poland. The governments of both countries took significant political risks in negotiating the agreement in the final years of the Bush Administration. Public opinion regarding the Third Site in the two countries was skeptical, yet from a governmental standpoint the security relationship with the United States trumped other considerations.

The Czech Republic concluded its agreement with the United States in 2007. The Polish government did the same in 2008, after the Russian invasion of Georgia. (The government of Lithuania lost no time offering its territory when the deal with Poland looked like it was falling through.) For allies to be demanding hardware on the ground, not only security guarantees on paper, suggests a dangerous loss of credibility in the relationship.

Even though NATO had backed the concept of the Third Site at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, the Obama Administration decided to abrogate the agreement. The decision to walk away from the Third Site agreements in September 2009, abrogating agreements reached so recently by the Bush Administration, and the disrespectful way in which it was done, was one of the new Administration's most inept public diplomacy moves, as well as biggest policy mistakes. When the announcement was made on September 17, 2009, it was without prior warning to the two governments who had exposed themselves politically to conclude the Third Site agreement.

Part of what made the policy reversal so troubling was the letter that President Obama sent to Russian Prime Minister Putin (his title had changed, though not his grip on power, as the Russian constitution prohibits more than two consecutive presidential terms). The "secret letter" leaked by the Russian government in February 2009 indicated that President Obama was willing, in order to strike a deal on the START successor treaty, to trade away missile defense with Poland and the Czech Republic. The deal would trade Third Site missile defense, which Russia fiercely opposed, for Russian cooperation on Iran. The red-faced Obama Administration argued that the letter merely suggested that the need for missile defense would be reduced if Iran abandoned its nuclear weapons program.¹⁹ Yet, the news of the letter seemed to confirm that strategic drift in the U.S.–CEE relationship was

17. Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy Toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *The Washington Quarterly* (October 2010), at http://www.twq.com/10october/docs/10oct_Cooley_Mitchell.pdf (October 7, 2010).

18. Center for European Policy Analysis, "Keeping New Allies: An Assessment of U.S. Policy in Central Europe," July 15, 2010, at http://www.cepa.org/ced/view.aspx?record_id=257 (October 7, 2010).

now being further aggravated by a U.S. preference for dealing with Russia.

Obama Steps and Missteps

After the Obama Administration took office in January 2009, it relegated the relationship with CEE to a back-burner assignment. Embassies were frustrated in their attempts to contact the State Department or the National Security Council. While President Obama retained high personal approval ratings in the CEE region, the White House appeared indifferent to their governments' concerns.

A notable example was the failure of the White House to acknowledge or respond to the invitation from the Polish government to the 70th anniversary commemoration of the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939.²⁰ Heads of government from most European countries were to be present. So notably was Russian Prime Minister Putin, who was on a mission to establish a warmer relationship with Poland, a rather delicate balancing act, but one considered favorably by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The White House, when it finally focused on the issue a week before the event, decided to send former Defense Secretary William Perry. Polish outrage caused a last-minute reconsideration which resulted in the attendance of National Security Adviser General Jim Jones at the ceremony. As the online *U.S.–Polish News* commented: “Major Polish newspapers ask what else Poland can do for America? How many more officers should die in Afghanistan? How many more F-16s should they buy? Do they, Obama and Clinton, understand that US is about to commit another blunder? Polish government is already under tremendous pressure from voters to withdraw from Afghanistan. This (slap in the face) may be the last straw.”²¹

Some improvements have followed. The open letter in July 2009 from the CEE regional leaders to

President Obama caught the attention of the Obama Administration, with the result that Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Pamela Quanrud was dispatched to make contact with every one of the signatories. Vice President Biden's message to the region delivered on October 9, 2009, in Bucharest was intended to reassure CEE countries that “In fact, it is precisely because of our global responsi-

After the Obama Administration took office in January 2009, it relegated the relationship with CEE to a back-burner assignment.

bilities and your growing capacity and willingness to meet them with us that we value our partnership with Central Europe and Europe now more than ever.” This sentiment was also echoed by Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy: “We've made it very clear that even as we seek to find new ways of working with Russia...that we don't accept certain of their policies, the assertion of their sphere of influence, particularly in the Baltic region. We are loyal to our allies and take our obligations seriously.”²²

President Obama's announcement in September 2009 of a European missile shield based on a different approach than that of the Bush Administration also had some positive impact. This plan, “phased, adaptive approach,” becomes operational next year and is based on the use of Aegis ships, armed with SM-3 missile defense interceptors, two of which have been deployed in the Mediterranean and some of which will also patrol the Black Sea. The second step, in 2015, will involve a land-based Aegis combat system, located in Romania, to be followed in 2018 by a system of land-based Aegis in Poland. Estimated completion for the entire project is 2020. While such a deployment timetable may be too little too late to counter the progressing Iranian nuclear

19. Peter Baker, “Obama Offered Deal to Russia in Secret Letter,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/03/washington/03prexy.html> (October 7, 2010).

20. Helle C. Dale, “Obama Not Smooth on Gdansk,” *The Washington Times*, September 1, 2009, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/1/obama-not-smooth-on-gdansk/> (October 7, 2010).

21. “Poles May Re-Think Relations with US,” *PL-News.us*, August 26, 2009, at <http://www.pl-news.us/2009/08/pires-may-re-think-relations-with-us.html> (October 12, 2010).

22. Center for European Policy Analysis, “Keeping New Allies.”

threat, the Obama Administration's decision has reassured CEE allies that the U.S. remains committed to their security.

The Fading American Presence

Nevertheless, it remains a fact that in the daily lives of most citizens of CEE countries, the U.S. presence is fading. Membership in the European Union offers access to a continent of higher education institutions, causing students to become formed as individuals by European values and intellectual traditions. In the U.S., high tuition costs and tighter visa regulations act as barriers. This means that future generations of CEE students, who will form the political leadership, will be less oriented toward the United States as allies, particularly compared to the long list of international leaders (currently, the Fulbright program boasts 28 foreign heads of government or state as alumni) who in the past have received education or fellowships in the United States.²³ As far as official exchange programs are concerned, the United States offers far too few. The U.S. government's primary exchange student

While American policy toward CEE countries has faltered and public trust in the United States has eroded in the region, Russia has pursued its policy toward CEE with great deliberation.

program under the State Department's Office of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the Fulbright Program, has a total of 76 slots for grants and teaching assistantships available to all 10 CEE countries.²⁴

"America Centers," which provided information about America's culture and political system, used to be another important public diplomacy tool, aimed at both students and the general public. For

security and budget reasons, these institutions were all but eliminated after the demise of the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1999 and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Today, the State Department is committed to restoring some of that public diplomacy infrastructure. The President's 2011 budget request includes \$15 million for 10 America Centers around the world. The America Centers have become more important as new American embassy compounds, such as the one in Bulgaria, emphasize personnel security needs. U.S. embassies have become less accessible from city centers and more intimidating for foreigners.²⁵ This makes the need for other outreach institutions more critical.

Russia's "Neighborhood Policy"

While American policy toward CEE countries has faltered and public trust in the United States has eroded in the region, Russia has pursued its policy toward CEE with great deliberation. From an American point of view, it may appear that Europe and CEE are not in need of much American attention. But that view underestimates the roles of both the European Union and Russia.

After the invasion of Georgia, it is now official Russian policy that the government has the right to use force in the interest of protecting Russian-speaking minorities or Russian citizens in neighboring countries, the so-called compatriots. Second, in Russia's foreign policy today, there is a strong emphasis on spheres of privileged Russian interests in the "near abroad." Russian public opinion is on board, too: 60 percent of the population supports re-establishing Russian control or influence over CEE countries.²⁶

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union almost 20 years ago, Russia has sought to regain international influence and prestige lost under Presidents Mikhail

23. U.S. Department of State, "Notable Alumni: A Tradition of Excellence," at <http://fulbright.state.gov/notable-alumni.html> (October 7, 2010).

24. U.S. Department of State, "Participating Countries: Europe and Eurasia," at <http://fulbright.state.gov/participating-countries/europe-and-eurasia.html> (October 12, 2010).

25. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "New Embassy Compounds: State Faces Challenges in Sizing Facilities and Providing for Operations and Maintenance Requirements," GAO-10-689, July 20, 2010, at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-10-689> (October 7, 2010).

26. Keith C. Smith, "Russia-Europe Energy Relations," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 26, 2010, at <http://csis.org/publication/russia-europe-energy-relations> (October 7, 2010).

Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Whatever their other faults and calculations, both leaders allowed the former Warsaw Pact countries to make their own choices of governance and alliances. Not so Vladimir Putin, who as president and as prime minister has vigorously opposed NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia as well as U.S. missile defense agreements with Poland and the Czech Republic. Under Putin, Russia has deployed a mix of tools and levers to reassert influence in CEE countries, including Russian-style “soft power.” This approach includes carefully calibrated public diplomacy, media campaigns, cyber attacks, energy dependence, corruption of local officials, and the threat of the use of Russian military power to “protect ethnic Russian minorities”; Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Moldova serving as examples of what can happen to those who defy Moscow.

From the Russian perspective, geopolitics and geo-economics is the determining factor, and the term “neighborhood policy” has literal meaning. While the United States and Europe operate with concepts like shared values as they cooperate with allies around the world, Russia looks at the hard facts of national interest and geographic location. The countries most exposed are those closest to its borders in Eurasia, followed by the Baltic states. Other CEE counties are feeling the pressure as well.

Russia today is investing heavily in the instruments of soft power to bring those countries back within its sphere of influence. Even while dropping oil prices caused the Russian government’s budget to shrink, investment in government media campaigns grew by 33 percent in 2009. In 2010, Russia is budgeted to spend \$1.4 billion on soft-power programs and propaganda.²⁷

Russian Propaganda

A Russian soft-power approach has a number of elements focused on culture, politics, and educa-

tion. For the Baltic countries, this soft-power pressure is perceived as even more of a threat than the prospect of an actual military invasion. “What Russia is doing is creating nostalgia for the ‘good old Soviet times,’” according to Estonian media expert Agu Uudelepp, strategic communications expert with the Tallinn-based Meta Advisory Group.²⁸ From the Baltic states to Ukraine, citizens of countries bordering Russia are inundated with Russian media. “It is impossible to live in the Baltics or Ukraine or some other countries next to Russia without seeing the TV with those good old movies.” Today 20 percent of Estonians get their news from Russian television. “Try to imagine that everyday sixty million American citizens will get their basic information about what is going on from Al Jazeera. Something like that is going on in Estonia,” says Uudelepp.

Russian propaganda is sophisticated in the way it manipulates universal stereotypes, including that of the “other.” Bordering states are often accused of treating Russian minorities like “gypsies.” The selective use of facts, a classic propaganda technique, allows the Russian government to rewrite history, claiming, for instance, that Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were merely deported from their home countries during the Soviet occupation *for their own safety*. Of course this argument fails to note that those deported were exiled to frozen Siberia and were not allowed to return to their own homes for more than 15 years. Russian historians often ignore execution and forced emigration of occupied countries’ elites.

Political symbols are used to unite “compatriots” and to strengthen ties with “Mother Russia.”²⁹ NATO and the United States are frequently invoked as the enemy. Indeed, anti-Americanism is a powerful tool in the propaganda arsenal of the Kremlin, deployed by a number of different ways, including government-supported youth organizations, think

27. Ariel Cohen and Helle C. Dale, “Russian Anti-Americanism: A Priority Target for U.S. Public Diplomacy,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2373, February 24, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/02/Russian-Anti-Americanism-A-Priority-Target-for-US-Public-Diplomacy>.

28. Agu Uudelepp, “Moscow’s Neighborhood Policy: An ‘Invitation’ Its Neighbors Can’t Refuse,” remarks at The Heritage Foundation, May 5, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Events/2010/05/Moscows-Neighborhood-Policy>.

29. *Ibid.*

tanks with international reach (such as the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, a Kremlin-funded propaganda platform with offices in New York and Paris), documentaries and movies, as well as the Internet. A cottage industry has developed in Russian talking heads, specializing in Washington-bashing.³⁰

The False Threat of NATO Enlargement

Another key element of Russian propaganda is the mischaracterization of NATO enlargement, which certainly has implications for the publics of the former Warsaw Pact countries, who are now members of NATO. According to Russia's new strategic concept, written under President Dimitri Medvedev, among the chief threats facing Russia today is "NATO's expansion near Russia's borders and attempts to grant the military alliance a global role."³¹ Indeed, one of the chief purveyors of anti-American propaganda is Russia's NATO ambassador, the ultra-nationalist Dimitri Rogozin. Instead of fostering U.S.–Russian ties, Rogozin uses his Brussels bully pulpit to attack the United States.

Recent opinion surveys in CEE countries have in fact shown that after the initial euphoria over NATO's enlargement, the popularity of NATO has taken a nosedive. According to the German Marshall Fund's 2009 Transatlantic Trends poll, NATO now has more support among the British (72 percent), Germans (63 percent), and the French (56 percent) than among Slovaks (52 percent) or Poles (50 percent). Russia's decisions to suspend the participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty in 2007, as well as the revival of military exercises along the borders of treaty countries, have

added to the sense of insecurity throughout the region.³² In addition, Russia is investing \$43 billion in new weapons systems, including bids to buy helicopter carriers and assault ships, such as the French *Mistral*, armored personnel carriers, and other systems.³³ Russian threats of nuclear retaliation for missile defense cooperation with the United States have targeted Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania.³⁴

Energy Dependence on Russia and the Schroederization of Political Elites

Energy dependence on Russia has also had a major impact on the CEE publics. Russia wields its energy resources as a powerful geopolitical weapon. Between 1991 and 2005, Russia carried out 55 politically motivated power-supply interruptions. These included interruptions to the Czech Republic in 2008, Ukraine in 2009, and Belarus in 2010.³⁵ Russia uses its energy wealth and near-energy monopoly against the neighboring countries of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine to ensure that friendly governments stay in place and are supportive of Russian policies. Control of strategic infrastructure is also part of Russia's power projection. Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, having facilitated the Russian state-controlled Gazprom \$1.3 billion in loan guarantees, subsequently became the chairman of the Nord Stream pipeline shareholder committee. This technique for buying political favors and political offices is deployed by Russia throughout the region³⁶—heightening the risk of increasing the strains within the EU and among CEE countries as well as the strains in the transatlantic relationship.³⁷

30. Cohen and Dale, "Russian Anti-Americanism."

31. Marcel de Haas, "Medvedev's Security Policy: A Provisional Assessment," *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 62 (June 2009).

32. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Russia: CFE 'Moratorium' Causes Consternation in Europe," April 27, 2007, at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1076139.html> (October 7, 2010).

33. Peter B. Doran, "Central European Atlanticism: Eroded by Russia?" *Central Europe Digest*, Issue Brief No. 110, April 1, 2010, at http://www.cepa.org/publications/view.aspx?record_id=134 (October 7, 2010).

34. Doug Saunders, "Putin Threatens to Target Europe," *The Globe and Mail*, June 4, 2007, at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/article763092.ece> (October 7, 2010).

35. Doran, "Central European Atlanticism."

36. Nino Tabatadze, "'Schroederization' of Europe May Frustrate NABUCCO Gas Pipeline Implementation," *Georgian Business Week*, March 1, 2010, at <http://www.gbweek.com/news.aspx?sid=5bf106ca-5f20-48e1-b98d-4b0561266746> (October 7, 2010).

37. Smith, "Russia–Europe Energy Relations."

Vital Tasks for the United States

The U.S. government should:

- **Formulate a strategic framework for cooperation with CEE countries** that reaffirms their continued importance to the United States and to transatlantic relations. The framework should be followed up with a more substantial policy brief that fleshes out areas of cooperation and mutual interest. These areas should include expanded energy cooperation, NATO cooperation, free trade agreements, and pro-democracy programs in CEE and in neighboring Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus.
- **Admit Poland and other CEE allies to the Visa Waiver Program**, thereby clearing up a critical sticking point in their relationship with the U.S. While the Polish government must commit itself to working on bringing down visa-rejection and visa-overstay rates, the Obama White House should support and redefine the program in terms of enhancing American security. Equally important is decoupling of VWP from the American debate over biometric airport exit controls and from the immigration debate as a whole.
- **Raise the visibility of the American presence throughout the CEE countries** to indicate that the United States has not abandoned the field by:
 - Increasing the frequency of official contacts on both sides. State visits are tremendously important symbols for smaller and mid-sized nations. This would also involve giving local media greater access to American officials and policymakers, and it would mean closing gaping holes in the ambassadorial nominations in CEE countries. One and a half years into the Obama Administration, Slovenia and the Czech Republic are still without a U.S. ambassador.
 - Facilitating educational and cultural exchanges that reach the intellectual and political leader-

ship of each country. The competition from Western Europe for CEE's best and brightest is intense through the Erasmus program that offers CEE citizens access to 2,200 European universities, mainly in England, Germany, and France.³⁸

- Increasing the visible American presence through the State Department's speaker series featuring American cultural and political leaders.
- Funding symbols of American presence, such as America Centers and America Corners at universities and institutions throughout the CEE. The United States should set the goal of giving at least 10 percent of CEE students and intellectual leaders direct exposure to American life and values, American institutions, and American speakers.

The point is that continued U.S. support by CEE countries cannot be taken for granted—but neither should CEE be discounted as lost to the EU or Russian influence. Given the CEE countries' location, history, and economic ties, the U.S. faces a nuanced challenge. There is much the United States can do to increase its visibility in the region and demonstrate its commitment. The Obama Administration, after a problematic start, has taken some important steps to shore up relations, particularly through visits by the President himself, the Vice President, and the Secretary of State. But much more needs to be done and public diplomacy must stand at the forefront of revitalizing and preserving the vital relationship between the United States and Central and Eastern Europe.

—*Helle C. Dale is Senior Fellow in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, and Ariel Cohen is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies in the Allison Center at The Heritage Foundation.*

38. Gati, "Faded Romance," p. 41.