

# WebMemo



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## Visa Waiver as an Effective Public Diplomacy Tool

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When a program can increase U.S. security and counterterrorism efforts and benefit the American economy at a time of a struggling recovery, you have hit a double jackpot. And when the program—in this case the United States Visa Waiver Program (VWP)—is also an effective public diplomacy tool for improving the image of the U.S. abroad, it is a triple jackpot.

From 1986 to 2007, the ability to travel visa-free to the U.S. for 90 days was enjoyed by citizens from 27 countries, the preponderance of which came from the Western European part of the EU. In 2007, however, Congress enacted far-sighted legislation that implemented progressive changes to the VWP statute ensuring security and increasing the incentive to expand the program to include additional countries friendly toward the U.S. and like-minded with regard to security objectives. The majority of the eight new VWP countries were from Central and Eastern Europe, whose governments had also shown themselves to be good allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The countries that joined in 2007 were the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, South Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, and Slovakia.

**A Bump in Visa Waiver Travel.** The data showing the program's impact is clear. After a slump in travel to the U.S. following 9/11, the number of visitors traveling for pleasure or business from the new VWP countries began to increase consistently after the VWP regime took effect. According to the *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* released by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, temporary visitors to the U.S. increased from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia—six of the eight countries admitted into the VWP in

2008.<sup>1</sup> All of these countries are important new allies of the U.S. whose transatlantic ties with Washington need constant reinforcement.

The data reported the most dramatic change in travel from the Czech Republic. While in 2000, 44,395 temporary visitors from the Czech Republic traveled to the U.S., by 2007 that number had declined to 42,923. In 2008, however, the year after the expanded VWP took effect, an additional 7,353 visitors arrived in the U.S. from the Czech Republic for a total of 50,276. That represents a 17.13 percent increase in temporary visitors over 2007.

**VWP as a Public Diplomacy Issue.** The ability for foreigners to experience the U.S. firsthand has proven to be an extremely beneficial strategy for U.S. public diplomacy. Surveys have shown that foreigners who have had the opportunity to visit the U.S. are more than 74 percent likely to have a favorable view of the country, and 61 percent of travelers to the U.S. are more likely to support the U.S. and its policies.<sup>2</sup>

As a public diplomacy issue, however, there is more to the VWP program than just increasing America's global popularity. The staunch support exhibited by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe for the U.S. after 9/11 also meant that they sought recognition of the risks they were taking to stand in solidarity alongside Americans.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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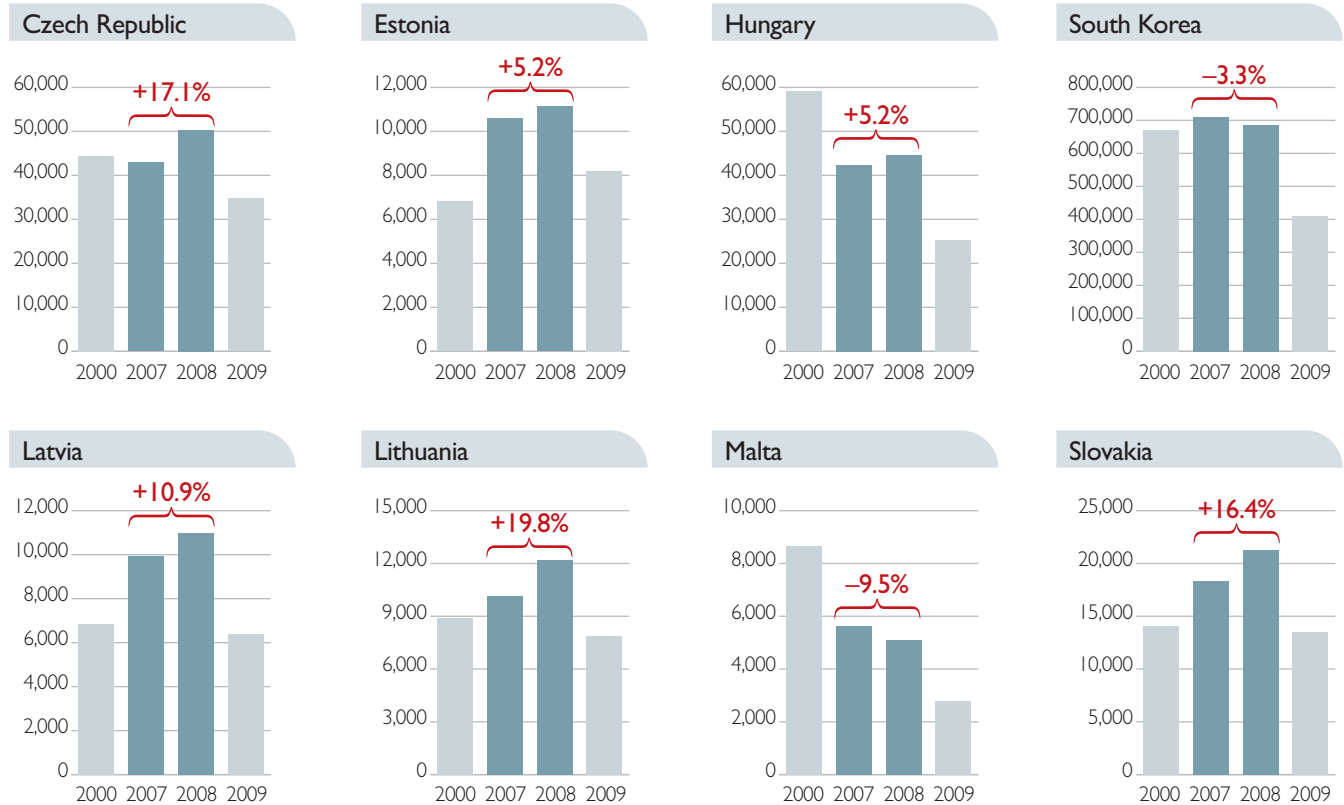
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## Visa Waiver Program Promotes Travel to the U.S.

In 2008, eight nations were added to the U.S. visa waiver program. Of those, six increased the number of temporary visitors sent to the U.S.

### Number of Temporary Visitors, by Country



Note: 2000 figure for South Korea includes visitors from North Korea.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, at <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtml> (August 18, 2010).

Chart 1 • WM 2985 heritage.org

Ironically, citizens of Germany and France—whose governments actively opposed the Iraq war at the United Nations—continued to enjoy VWP status. 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 crimi-

nals,” said Radek Sikorski, then-Executive Director of the American Enterprise Institute’s New Atlantic Initiative and later to hold posts as his country’s defense and foreign minister. “Isn’t there a better way to treat allies?”

For many of the governments in question, VWP became the most important bilateral issue with the U.S., adversely affecting public opinion of the U.S.

1. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, *2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Temporary Admissions (Nonimmigrants), Supplemental Table 1, April 2010, at <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2009/nimsuptable1d.xls> (August 11, 2010).
2. Discover America Partnership, “A Blueprint to Discover America,” January 31, 2007, p.7, at [http://www.tourismeconomics.com/docs/Blueprint\\_to\\_Discover\\_America.pdf](http://www.tourismeconomics.com/docs/Blueprint_to_Discover_America.pdf) (August 11, 2010).

**2007 Security Improvements.** In the legislation enacted in 2007, Congress added a number of new security requirements to the program that support U.S. counterterrorism initiatives while continuing to accommodate foreigners visiting the U.S. Some of the recent reforms include pre-approved travel, counterterrorism information sharing, and increased collective security measures for admitted countries.<sup>3</sup>

The new measures address security concerns post-9/11. One addition—the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA)—requires travelers to be approved through an online portal 24 hours before their travel to the U.S. Congress has also required VWP members to share information about U.S.-bound travelers who might pose a security threat. The reforms increase collective security by encouraging more states to meet common security standards.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the security measures discussed above, the 2007 mandate included a provision to waive the 3 percent visa refusal rate and allow countries whose rate was 10 percent or lower to become members. This provision came with an important caveat, however: All requirements of the 2007 law had to be met, thus increasing incentive to travel to the U.S. *and* creating a security partnership. Member countries must agree to implement equivalent standards and policies, such as limiting the entry of illegal visitors and hindering the travel of terrorists and criminals.<sup>5</sup> These measures work to boost immigration controls and increase the security of the U.S. and its allies while promoting the expansion of the program.

**Looking Forward.** The increase in temporary visitors to the U.S. experienced in 2008, unfortunately, has seen a drop-off since the world economy

entered its current slump.<sup>6</sup> Every one of the new VWP countries experienced a drop-off in 2009, a decline that, in some cases, was quite dramatic.

In order to combat this decline, Congress and the Administration should reconsider the poorly named Travel Promotion Act of 2009,<sup>7</sup> which was passed by Congress last summer. The State Department is currently working on the implementation regime for collecting the \$10 fee for foreign travelers to register on the ESTA Web site, which will certainly act as a deterrent for foreign visitors. Not only will America be asking foreigners to pay a tax for the privilege of visiting the U.S., but this nation will also be asking them to trust the U.S. government with their credit card information. If some people change their minds about coming to the U.S., it would not be hard to understand why.

The economic downturn and the resulting temporary setback in travel, however, in no way invalidates the impact of the VWP or provides an argument for not introducing additional members. Now, more than ever, Congress and the Obama Administration should take a proactive approach in expanding the VWP and including other “roadmap” countries such as Taiwan, Poland, and Romania. In addition, roadmaps should be considered for a number of eligible countries such as Panama and Chile. The VWP has proven to be extremely beneficial by increasing the amount of international visitors to the U.S., a key element of promoting a positive image of America abroad.

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3. Jena Baker McNeill, Nathan Alexander Sales, James Jay Carafano, and James Dean, “Visa Waiver Program: A Plan to Build on Success,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2282, June 12, 2009, p. 3, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/06/Visa-Waiver-Program-A-Plan-to-Build-on-Success>.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *2009 Yearbook*.

7. Jena Baker McNeill, “Promoting U.S. Tourism: Taxes Are the Wrong Approach,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2492, June 18, 2009, at [www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2492.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2492.cfm).