

American visas

Stand in line

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A docile ally wins visa-free travel to America. Others fume

RISKING death alongside American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan makes you a valued ally—unless, that is, you actually want to visit the United States. Then you are a security risk and have to pay a hefty fee for a visa that you may not be granted. That is the bitter experience of loyal Atlanticists in eastern Europe, who have been waiting for America's visa regime to lift ever since the iron curtain fell.

Almost all “old” Europeans (ie, the richer part of the continent) benefit from America's visa-waiver programme; Greece is the only exception. That includes countries that have criticised American foreign policy and those with large Muslim minorities (a security risk in American eyes). Many ex-communist countries have demonstrated their pro-American loyalties on the battlefield. Poland and the Czech Republic, moreover, are the planned sites for two new American missile-defence installations, prompting wrath from Russia. Yet so far only Slovenia (exceptionally small, rich and well-run) has gained visa-free travel to America.

Now the Czech government seems to have done a deal that will make life easier for its America-bound citizens. In doing so it has infuriated the rest of Europe, especially Poland. Visiting Washington, DC, last week the prime minister, Mirek Topolanek, signed a memorandum of understanding that will allow Czechs to apply for a visa waiver online, skipping both the embassy queues and the \$131 fee. It has also agreed to plentiful data-sharing with American officialdom, and that American armed marshals may fly on Czech flights. Similar deals with other countries such as Estonia are expected.

This has infuriated the European Commission, which badly wants to be the sole negotiator with the Americans. Special deals for selected ex-communist countries will undermine that. Oddly, America repeatedly urges Europe to adopt a stronger and more united stance in the face of Russian attempts to do bilateral deals on energy. But on the question of visas, America appears happy to adopt a similar divide-and-rule tactic itself.

The Poles are privately livid. The new government in Warsaw has been trying hard to bargain for better terms with America on both missile

defences and visas. "The bouncing Czechs have stabbed us in the back," says an official, bitterly mixing his metaphors.