

Some U.S. allies seek more visa waivers Bush, lawmakers hope to expand visa-free travel program

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WASHINGTON - Boguslaw Inderka, a Polish technician, boarded his flight from Warsaw to New Jersey with some resentment.

He was leaving just days after President Bush signed a law that expands a program allowing visa-free travel to the United States for citizens from some countries, but not for Poland and other close U.S. allies.

To plan a vacation, Inderka had to schedule an interview at a U.S. consulate well in advance of his trip, pay \$100 and wait to hear whether a visa had been granted. Had he been British or French it would have been a lot easier.

"We are a member of the EU, we are a civilized nation with over a thousand-year tradition," Inderka said before leaving. "Why do they treat us this way?"

The new law has disappointed many U.S. allies, but it is particularly grating for Poland, a country that has made big contributions to combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and has supported U.S. plans to install missile-defense interceptors on Polish soil.

Hearing the frustration, Bush already is pushing Congress to rewrite the law. His efforts probably will face stiff opposition from lawmakers worried about security and illegal immigration.

Last minute snag

European nations long have pressed the United States to expand the visa waiver program, which had included close allies not deemed security threats. Polish President Lech Kaczynski and other visiting leaders won pledges from Bush to help them sway Congress. Seven European countries banded together to hire a Washington lobbyist to build support among lawmakers.

They had appeared on the verge of success: a provision expanding the program was included in a wide-ranging security bill Congress considered last month. But a last-minute amendment required countries to demonstrate that fewer than 10 percent of their citizens' applications for U.S. visas were being denied. The threshold was intended to screen out countries most likely to send over illegal immigrants.

As a result, all but a few countries are likely to be excluded from the program. Recent State Department figures put the rejection rate of Poles applying for visas at more than 25 percent. Some countries, including Estonia, the Czech Republic and South Korea, would qualify for the visa-waiver program under recent numbers. Others, like Hungary, Slovakia and Latvia, are not far above the 10 percent threshold.

Bush approved the measure when he signed the overall security bill this month, but he also pledged to seek new visa-waiver legislation.

All of EU not equal

Although European Union countries were not the only ones bypassed under the new law, they have been among the most disappointed because it still requires visas for citizens of some EU states but not others.

EU Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini recently said the EU would continue to press the United States to include all EU member states in the program.

To meet the new standard, the Bush administration is now working with countries to find ways to lower their visa rejection rates, including public information campaigns to discourage applicants who are likely to be denied.

U.S. lawmakers also are looking into whether visa screening statistics are produced consistently in all embassies or whether varying screening methods make it harder for some countries to qualify.

For Poland and other countries like Romania, which are far above the 10 percent threshold, new legislation may be the only way into the program.

Reps. John Shimkus, R-Ill., and Rahm Emanuel, D-Ill., already have drafted a bill that would remove the 10 percent requirement.

Any renewed push to change the law, however, faces opposition in Congress. Many lawmakers believe the visa-waiver program makes the United States more vulnerable to terrorists and illegal immigrants. Some who fought the bill say that after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States should not allow any foreign citizens to enter without visas.

Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, author of the amendment that set the 10 percent threshold, has pointed out that al-Qaida members Zacarias Moussaoui and Richard Reid did not need visas to enter the United States. Moussaoui's passport was from France, Reid's from Britain. Feinstein has called the program, "The soft underbelly of our national security."

She and other opponents almost certainly would fight any new attempt to loosen the requirements.

Some advocates of expansion believe that opposition could ease after a few countries are admitted.

"If the expansion process goes smoothly, it could open the way for improved legislation," said James Carafano, a researcher at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington.