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Washington's New European Allies: Durable or Conditional Partners?

By attaining NATO and European Union membership by 2004, eight new democracies from Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) have achieved the goals they set for themselves when communism disintegrated in the early 1990s. Now what? The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia are gradually redefining their strategic objectives within a transatlantic context that has been recently strained over a number of issues including the war in Iraq, the U.S.-led campaign against Islamist terrorism, and disagreements over the appropriate measures to eliminate the threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Each of these eight countries has had to perform a precarious balancing act between Washington and several major EU capitals, most notably in January 2003 just prior to the Iraq war, when U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld infamously divided Europe into "old" and "new" members. The CEE countries—the "new" Europe—had by that time all been invited to join NATO. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland have been NATO members since 1999, while the other five states along with Bulgaria and Romania were invited to enter in November 2002 and officially joined NATO on March 29, 2004. In March 2003, the European Parliament voted in favor of EU accession for the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. These nations officially became EU members on May 1, 2004. Bulgaria and Romania have also now completed their accession preparations and are expected to enter the EU in early 2007. All of these states had displayed solidarity with the United States despite concerns that this support could jeopardize their entry into the EU. The now notorious warning by French president Jacques Chirac that the candidate

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The Washington Quarterly • 28:2 pp. 95–107.

countries missed a good opportunity to "shut up" while threatening that their planned EU membership could be in jeopardy did not have the impact in the region that Paris had hoped. All the CEE capitals underscored their solidarity with Washington, even though none of them wanted to make such a stark choice between Europe and the United States again.

Should relations between the United States and France and Germany continue to be strained or damaged further in the event of a crisis over Iran, Israel and Palestine, or North Korea, the CEE capitals may be pressured to make undesirable choices between their loyalty to the EU and their commitment to the United States. The reasonably united position among these states on the war in Iraq also could begin to fracture, much as it has in western Europe, where several traditional allies of the United States have adopted positions contrary to U.S. strategy.

None of these countries want to make a stark choice between Europe and the U.S. again.

A primary goal now envisaged by the CEE states is to repair the political bridge across the Atlantic and to facilitate the reparation of the transatlantic alliance. Hence, they have pushed hard to revive and enlarge NATO and to expand its mandate, viewing the organization as the glue that holds the two sides of the North Atlantic together. The challenge facing the new allies is not a question of simply balancing U.S. interests with those of the EU, but one of making these interests complementary, implementable, durable, and effective. Are these eight states capable of fulfilling such a task, or will they become minor players, trampled by the larger powers, perhaps even exacerbating persistent conflicts within the alliance? As the EU integration process deepens, the foreign and security policies of the CEE states could become more closely aligned with Brussels and their loyalty to the United States could wither. Such developments could portend the emergence of more extensive and unified opposition in Europe to U.S. policy.

For Washington, what opportunities and challenges might the evolving orientation and goals of these eight countries present? Unpopular U.S. policies that emphasize a unilateralist approach to regional problems could shift political currents within each country away from a cooperative stance with the United States to a more Euro-focused position, with some popular political parties potentially seeking to benefit from public opinion in CEE countries opposing military involvement overseas. Should the Bush administration fail to pay sufficient attention to these developments in this region of Europe, Washington could undermine its base of support in Europe and even enhance forces within the EU opposed to a strong U.S.-European partnership.

Transatlantic Choices

From the CEE states' perspective, European unity is severely weakened without a strong transatlantic link, and conversely, transatlantic relations become fractured when the EU is divided. The new NATO allies favor a stronger and more unified Europe that complements NATO as well as the United States and does not compete with or undermine the alliance when addressing pressing security challenges. The September 11 attacks, for example, presented a valuable opportunity for the CEE states to demonstrate their commitment to the transatlantic relationship and to U.S. global engagement against new security threats. As a result, most of these countries responded quickly and positively in support of Washington's campaign against Islamist terrorism, including the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. As members of NATO and the EU, each CEE capital ultimately wants to participate in the decisionmaking process on critical strategic issues without being required to choose between Washington and Brussels, but their effort to maintain equilibrium between the United States and the EU has proven difficult in practice.

EU membership places certain obligations on members and aspirants, which may necessitate such a strategic choice. During negotiations with the EU in developing a common foreign and security policy (CFSP), each state made a commitment to abide by obligations stemming from the Treaty on the European Union, including Article 11, which stipulates active support for the EU's foreign and security policy in the "spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity." Members pledged to refrain from undertaking any actions contrary to EU interests or likely to impair its effectiveness as a cohesive force in international relations.

Although most of these commitments are primarily declarations and do not envisage concrete actions, difficulties arise when relations with the United States are affected. On several occasions, this reality has placed the new allies in delicate and even conflicting situations, such as with the controversies surrounding the International Criminal Court (ICC). The EU disagreed with Washington's efforts, launched in mid-2002, to conclude bilateral agreements with European capitals to ensure the exclusion of U.S. soldiers from the ICC's jurisdiction. In July 2003, the United States severed military assistance to 35 countries, among them six future EU members, that acceded to the common EU position on the ICC. Conversely, when Romania signed the "Article 98" agreement exempting U.S. citizens from prosecution under the ICC's authority—the first European country to do so—the EU expressed deep regret for their independent action, and Romania's EU candidacy seemed to be jeopardized. Romania was able to recover from what

appeared to be a stark choice between Washington and Brussels. Signing the Article 98 agreement helped Bucharest gain entry into NATO, but Romania's parliament has yet to ratify the agreement, and its EU membership remains on track for 2007.

An even more poignant example of the CEE states' difficult balancing act was the position of the new allies toward the Iraq crisis in early 2003. Although the EU did not reach a common stance, France and Germany sharply criticized both the January 2003 decision by three prospective EU members—Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—to join the United Kingdom, Spain, Denmark, Italy, and Portugal in signing an open letter supporting the U.S. strategy toward Iraq and the February 2003 decision by the so-called Vilnius 10 countries—Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—to sign a similar letter of support for U.S. military action. Subsequently, Chirac lambasted these states for their alleged immaturity and disloyalty. Chirac warned Bulgaria and Romania, the two countries slated to join the EU in 2007, that signing the Vilnius 10 letter may have cost them their future EU membership. The events surrounding the conflict in Iraq convinced most CEE governments that finding compromises within the EU and between the EU and the United States is of vital importance for their countries' long-term national security interests.

As EU members, these states will need to set security and foreign policies that will be more effectively harmonized with those of the EU, assuming that Brussels can develop a coherent and unified policy of its own. Of course, the military capabilities of all CEE capitals remain limited and overstretched amid budgetary cutbacks and the growing primacy of social and economic priorities. In this context, the durability and dependability of these capitals' alliance with Washington cannot be guaranteed. Indications or perceptions that the United States will take their support on controversial foreign policy issues for granted may also become a political factor emboldening CEE governments to adopt anti-American, pro-EU, or neutral positions in the years ahead.

European Integration

Broadly speaking, there are two contrary views on the potential impact of EU accession and the transatlantic divide on the international loyalties and security postures of the CEE states: inclusionist and disillusionist. The inclusionist viewpoint assumes that, as these new democracies enter the EU, fully adopt EU standards, become more economically compatible with western European members' economies, and blend into the pan-European mainstream, their distance from the United States will increase. Even without

EU accession, this evolution may only be natural as attitudes opposing or independent of the United States will grow among their younger generations and new political elites, all of whom will have little memory of the U.S. role in their country's liberation from communism and Soviet domination. Even if this distance does not increase naturally or because of EU membership, these states ultimately are relatively small demographically and weak economically; therefore, the inclusionist viewpoint goes, their potential pro-Washington influence within the EU will be limited.

The inclusionist view is not solely based on the power of integration. The new allies may also find the emerging EU CFSP in their individual national interests, especially if it involves reduced defense spending, little or no involvement in combat actions outside Europe, and only occasional engagement in joint peacekeeping missions. The CEE states may strive to develop the CFSP along those lines. Although most of these countries supported the appointment of an EU foreign affairs minister to enhance Europe's capacity to speak with one voice on important policy issues, the risk is that one voice may ultimately become a distilled compromise between 25 European capitals that could further undercut the EU's link with Washington.

> The CEE states view NATO as the glue that holds the North Atlantic together.

The countervailing position with regard to the new allies' future strategic choices is the disillusionist viewpoint, which contends that EU membership will result in renewed political disputes, economic problems, and social protests against European integration. It will become more commonplace to blame Brussels for restrictive regulations amid claims that small countries are drowning in the European mainstream. The conflict over voting rights for Poland in the European Parliament under the new EU Constitution is an example of the kind of dispute that could turn both public opinion and political leaders, particularly in Poland, against Brussels and the larger EU states. Poland and Spain were granted a smaller number of votes under the new constitution, contrary to the proportions initially specified by the Nice Treaty in 2000.

With 25 members, the EU's diversity could make decisionmaking even more difficult, especially to determine the legitimate conditions for the use of military force and for implementing the EU's security strategy. Differences in approach have already emerged within the EU over a number of issues related to foreign policy. For example, countries such as the United Kingdom and Poland do not consider an endorsement by the UN Security Council to be always necessary in order to legitimize military action during a mounting crisis.

Any anti-EU mood among some new entrants might not lead those states to turn toward Washington; Euro-skeptics are not necessarily staunch Atlanticists. Populist-nationalists tend to be suspicious of international arrangements and express fear of domination by either Brussels or Washington. This attitude is characteristic of the "small-state complex," even when it does not necessarily have a pronounced xenophobic component and does not signify strict isolationism. Countries such as Slovenia, Slovakia, or the Czech Republic that do not feel vulnerable to pressures from the former Soviet space may increasingly opt for a form of neutrality in foreign policy that will not promote either U.S. or EU interests.

As EU integration deepens, the CEE states could become more closely aligned with Brussels.

On the other hand, if the EU's emerging CFSP neglects the new democracies' input, the omission could contribute to a rupture within the union and could stimulate positions that favor the United States. For the Baltic countries, in particular, if Russia continues to act assertively under President Vladimir Putin's authoritarianism while the EU's security and foreign policy is perceived to be lacking muscle, it seems implausible that pro-Washington positions will weaken in Tallinn, Riga, or Vilnius. Indeed, these capitals may increasingly favor a more pronounced U.S. role in regional security, in return for which they may support Washington's controversial foreign policy decisions.

Poland is also seeking to inject a more active Eastern dimension into EU policy by supporting the political, economic, and social transformation of the European members of the Commonwealth of Independent States and extending the zone of security provided by NATO membership to Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. The EU's resistance to such an initiative could estrange Warsaw from Europe and enhance Poland's ties with Washington. Unlike some of the smaller new European democracies, Warsaw views its link with the United States not only as a guarantee of national security but also as a means to raise Poland's regional, European, and even global stature. Warsaw's prominent role in Iraq alongside the United States and the United Kingdom was a consequence of both calculations: national security and global projection.

Nevertheless, in the longer term, uncritical support for the United States may be politically damaging for Poland because it seems to place Warsaw in a role as a supplicant or even a satellite, harms transatlantic relations by fostering simplistic divisions between supporters and opponents, and polarizes political discourse and national decisionmaking. Several CEE states remain

skeptical of an ambitious Poland that could pull their foreign policies in an undesirable direction. For example, Poland did not receive support from its CEE neighbors when it demanded implementation of the Nice provisions that gave Warsaw substantial voting rights in the EU Parliament.

The domestic impact of EU entry will vary considerably throughout the central eastern European region. Where economic expectations are unmet among aggrieved sectors of the population, isolationist and anti-EU currents may rise, especially as disillusioned voters cast their support for nationalist parties. If the agricultural sector suffers as a result of EU requirements, competition, and limited subsidies, then populism and protectionism could increase. If entrepreneurs in CEE countries feel hamstrung by EU regulations, the emerging business class's support for enhanced EU integration is likely to decline. If Brussels takes a soft position toward Moscow or disregards the positions of these states geographically closest to Russia, diplomatic opposition could also increase. If immigration becomes a significant issue in the region, opposition to foreigners may be exacerbated. Finally, if a dual-track or two-speed Europe develops, whereby members have differing input in decisionmaking, it could stir political resentment and opposition in the area's capitals.

The U.S. Connection: Convenient Partner or Strategic Ally?

Despite these uncertainties about the future of European integration, ties between the new European democracies and the United States are being strained in their own right. Bilateral relations have come under pressure over a number of issues, ranging from the denial of visa-free travel to limitations on economic opportunities in the Middle East. An underlying concern for policymakers in the United States is that the memory of U.S. assistance in eradicating communism and building democratic systems is gradually receding in the region. These countries' future relations with the United States are more likely to be based on contemporary pragmatic choices and national interest, not history.

Most CEE states still consider a connection with the United States to be their key security relationship in the post-Soviet world. Indeed, NATO itself has traditionally been viewed as an alliance that guarantees U.S. involvement in ensuring the security of individual European states. Although the EU was once envisaged as primarily an economic alliance, it has since gained increased political coherence that may challenge the United States on a range of foreign policy issues in the future, but at least for now, strengthening transatlantic relations remains a key objective of the new European democracies.

For example, an important reason for active CEE involvement in Washington's military missions in the wake of the September 11 attacks has been to demonstrate political solidarity with the United States. In addition to earlier participation in NATO missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Kosovo, several states in the region have contributed to the U.S.-led coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The new allies also benefited from participating in international counterterrorism operations, with rewards including a faster track to NATO entry, U.S. security guarantees, closer military-to-military contacts with the United States, the encouragement of U.S. investment, and the likelihood of gaining U.S. military bases in the coming years.

The memory of U.S. assistance in eradicating communism may be gradually receding.

From the White House perspective, many of the CEE capitals delivered when their support was most needed in Afghanistan and Iraq. The total contingent in the Polish-led Multinational Division Center-South zone in Iraq has consisted of some 5,670 soldiers, including units from Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine. Troops from Estonia, Macedonia, Albania, Moldova, and the Czech Republic have also participated in zones controlled by the United States and the United Kingdom. Several new allies have developed niche capabilities that Washington considers valuable, including expertise in de-mining and in chemical, bacteriological, and radiological decontamination. In addition, in March 2003, Budapest allowed the Pentagon to use an air base in southern Hungary to train up to 3,000 Iraqi volunteers who would serve as guides and liaison personnel for coalition forces. Some CEE states have also hosted exercises for the U.S. military, and several have volunteered to train Iraqi officers to prepare their security forces for eventual independence. Their contribution was not simply a question of troops deployed—a number that ultimately remained limited—but of political commitment based on shared principles and common goals. As a result, the Bush administration was able to underscore that the United States was not alone in its preemptive missions, despite the reluctance of several major NATO members to participate.

Nevertheless, a number of factors, including mounting casualties among coalition members and terrorist threats directed against the territories of several CEE countries, will seriously test the durability of these ad hoc military coalitions. A troubling question that confronts all new allies is whether the connection to the U.S. security umbrella is genuinely based on long-term interests or has become contingent on tactical opportunities and conditioned on short-term objectives. Can the United States and the CEE

countries become long-term strategic allies, or are they just short-term partners? To answer these questions and to understand the policies of current CEE governments, Washington needs to take into account trends in public opinion and the postures of major opposition parties in their countries.

Public Opinion

Support for U.S. military missions among CEE states remains shallow. Even though most of these governments have backed Washington, all political factions monitor public opinion in their countries carefully. If public opinion were to be transformed into political action, it seems increasingly less likely that the new allies would support future U.S.-led missions unless they are approved by NATO or the EU. Indeed, in the region, support for military involvement in Iraq has been steadily declining. In December 2004, 27 percent of the Polish population backed their country's troop deployment, placing additional pressure on the already weak center-left government.[1] In Slovakia, 75 percent of the public oppose their country's involvement in the U.S.-led coalition, despite the pro-Washington position of both countries' incumbent administrations.[2] In November 2004, Hungary's parliament lacked the two-thirds majority vote necessary to extend its troops' mandate in Iraq by three months. A public opinion poll that same month showed that 54 percent of Hungarians supported their troops' return, while 37 percent approved an extension of their duty.[3] Even in Romania, one of the staunchest advocates of U.S. Middle East policy, public support has been steadily falling.

Favorable views of the United States more generally have also been diminishing among the new allies during the past year, a development that Washington should find especially troubling. This shift is related to what has been widely perceived as a faltering mission in Iraq and insufficient reciprocity from the United States for the new allies' involvement in the "coalition of the willing." In Poland, 86 percent of those surveyed in 2000 held a positive opinion about the United States; this figure dropped to 79 percent in 2002 and to just more than 50 percent in March 2003.[4] One opinion poll conducted in Poland on the eve of the U.S. presidential election in September 2004 indicated that, for 40 percent of respondents, Bush's foreign policy had worsened their view of the United States.[5] In addition, although young people in the CEE states have traditionally held a positive view of the United States, support among members of this generation could steadily decline as their exposure to the influence of the EU intensifies. The younger generation is now increasingly able to travel, study, and work throughout western Europe, and its cultural references and political sentiments are

more likely to be shaped by an emerging European consciousness than by a more distant and potentially more estranged America.

Political Trends for the Future

Despite these public sentiments, official reactions across the region to Bush's reelection have been congratulatory. The general feeling in the CEE capitals, however, is that they must continue to tread carefully between Washington and Brussels and that this task will become increasingly difficult, potentially precipitating further divisions both within the EU generally and within individual states. The new allies' strategy has been twofold: to promote greater cohesion between the EU and the United States as well as to rebuild the region's damaged ties with France and Germany. The likelihood that the EU will develop a coherent transatlantic policy that successfully incorporates both of these priorities depends largely on the willingness of Paris and Berlin to bring their foreign policies in accord with those of the new EU entrants.

Most CEE states still consider the U.S. to be their key security relationship.

Negative sentiments toward the United States among CEE countries may be exploited not only by ultranationalists, radical leftists, antiglobalists, and populists, but also by more mainstream political parties when decisions are reached involving transatlantic relations. Two important political developments within each CEE state must be carefully monitored by the current regional governments to determine whether their transatlantic bridging strategy is politically sustainable in their own countries: the staunchly pro-EU position of the mainstream center-left parties in the area and growing Euro-skepticism, antifederalism, as well as even nationalism among the center-right parties. Center-left parties, such as Hungary's Socialists and Poland's Democratic Left Alliance, may increasingly adopt the Euro-focused positions of their western European counterparts, while center-right neoliberal formations such as the Czech Republic's Civic Democratic Party and Hungary's Civic Party may adopt positions that are more Euro-skeptical, but which also lack a strong Atlanticism. Both tendencies could serve to weaken the pro-Washington stance of the new allies.

Such political trends are compounded by CEE leaders' concerns that Washington has not accorded their countries sufficient reciprocal benefits for their willingness to participate in military coalitions and for their refusal to succumb to terrorist pressure and domestic public opinion opposing mili-

tary action. Officials in these states complain about Washington's strict visa regime for their citizens and are disappointed over the level of U.S. business investment, the number of contracts awarded to CEE firms for the reconstruction of Iraq, and repayment of Baghdad's substantial financial debts to regional capitals. Although the Paris Club agreed in early November 2004 to erase the majority of Iraq's debt, the CEE states are not members of this consortium. Bulgaria and Romania in particular, both of whom are owed a substantial sum by Iraq, expect repayment and have asked Washington for assistance. A growing number of citizens and politicians complain that the Bush administration has simply used these states as instruments for political cover and that Washington will forget their sacrifices when it is politically convenient. Cynicism permeates the public debate, and the U.S. administration should be listening to it closely.

Implications for U.S. Policy

It is in the U.S. interest to ensure that it has dependable partners within the EU as well as sufficient areas of commonality with its new allies to avoid strategic divergence on essential security issues. Ensuring this would help forestall the possibility that the EU will develop into a potentially hostile bloc that may seek to oppose or neutralize U.S. policies on numerous foreign policy questions. To help avoid such strategic divergence, U.S. policymakers must accurately gauge political developments in each of the new European democracies to be able to assess the new allies' reliability.

In the optimum scenario, the CEE countries will actually succeed, both by buttressing the EU's security capabilities and by reinforcing the transatlantic connection. Another scenario favorable for Washington but damaging for the cohesion of the EU would have a fractured EU prove unable to develop a coherent foreign policy that could challenge U.S. interests, while the majority of key European capitals continue to maintain close ties with the United States. Policymakers in the United States should avoid oversimplifying the politics within and decisions of each of the eight countries while trying to gain a better understanding of evolving central eastern European policies toward the United States, NATO, and the EU. It is important for Washington to ascertain the depth and breadth of support for the United States among recent EU entrants or those countries scheduled to accede in 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania). Moreover, the impact of EU enlargement on transatlantic relations and the effect new members will have on the EU's embryonic foreign and security policies must be closely monitored.

Developing a more nuanced understanding of the new allies is essential for the United States to devise a durable strategy toward each country, the

wider region, and the EU as a whole. Policymaking is often based on short-term calculations of mutual goals rather than on a long-term analysis of strategic interests and the enduring capabilities of various partners. Washington's focus has been on the instrumentality of its recently formed alliances with CEE governments to pursue both NATO expansion and the U.S. campaign against terrorism and rogue states. Policymakers have yet to examine in detail, however, the impact of an enlarging EU, an emerging European security and foreign policy, and shifting political currents within each CEE country on transatlantic relations. In order to maintain strong U.S. influence in Europe and to ensure enduring support for U.S. policies in various unstable regions, the Bush administration needs to reinforce ties with the new European democracies, as well as with its more traditional partners. Coupled with appropriate economic and commercial benefits, political support on issues that are a priority for these countries—whether it is policy toward Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), or the western Balkans—may help guarantee more durable commitments to the transatlantic relationship on the part of Washington's new allies.

Favorable views of the U.S. have been diminishing among the new allies during 2004.

The White House can reinvigorate the U.S. approach by extending concrete political and economic commitments to its CEE allies. For instance, Washington can more effectively support Warsaw's Eastern strategy for including the CIS in Western institutions and help implement lasting solutions to the conflicts in Moldova and Kosovo. Establishing U.S. military bases in area states could be tied to the development of major infrastructure projects that can benefit wider sectors of the region's population. In addition, the counterterrorism pact between the United States and CEE countries could involve a host of U.S. assistance programs, such as training to prepare for civil emergencies, technical modernization for border control, and regional intelligence capabilities development. U.S. defense companies that have shown a renewed interest in the region's military sector as the modernization process intensifies should be encouraged to invest locally. Above all, a regular consultative process between Washington and the CEE capitals should be initiated in which all sides can express their priorities and coordinate potential operations.

It is incumbent on the CEE capitals to define appropriate programs and pursue effective strategies for developing bilateral links with the United States. At the same time, public expectations of material benefits should not

be raised too high, as they were before the war in Iraq or in the midst of negotiations over the emplacement of U.S. military bases, because any resulting public disappointment could be exploited by anti-Atlanticist forces. Conversely, Washington needs to ensure that it will have a majority of dependable partners within the enlarging EU to avoid damaging divergence on essential security questions. Ultimately, the shortsighted neglect of these countries by the U.S. administration may rebound against Washington when the time comes to confront the escalating global challenges posed by Iran, Israel and Palestine, or North Korea.

Notes

1. "Poles Less Opposed to Iraq Role: Poll," Agence France-Presse, December 17, 2004.
2. "Survey: 75% Slovaks Want Soldiers Out of Iraq," *Slovak Spectator*, April 26, 2004.
3. "Hungarian Troops to Leave Iraq," *New York Times*, November 16, 2004.
4. "Wither the American Global Role? How the World Sees the U.S.," *Wirthlin Report* 12, no. 2 (March 2003): 3; "What the World Thinks in 2002," *Pew Global Attitudes Project* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 2002), p. 53; John Springford, "'Old' and 'New' Europeans United: Public Attitudes Towards the Iraq War and U.S. Foreign Policy" (background brief, Centre for European Reform, London, December 2003), p. 6.
5. Public Opinion Research Center (Warsaw), "The Poles About the U.S. Presidential Election," September 2004, www.cbos.pl (accessed December 29, 2004).