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Britain and central Europe

New attractions

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Britain's popularity in central Europe is a political windfall



A DECADES-OLD wrong was put right last weekend. As part of Britain's celebrations to mark 60 years since the end of the second world war, 17 Polish standards flew in the victory parade that followed Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip down the Mall. The old soldiers deserved their recognition: Polish pilots were vital in defeating German air attacks and London provided shelter for the Polish government-in-exile. In spite of that, Poles were banned from a similar parade in 1946, for fear of offending the Soviet Union.

Nor was the march the only salute to wartime co-operation between the two countries. An officially sponsored commission of British and Polish historians has had unique access to the archives of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (better known as MI6). Its report on intelligence co-operation during the war was published the week before the parade.

"I was greatly moved," said Grzegorz Malkiewicz, editor of the London daily *Dziennik Polski*—particularly when Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, praised the Polish spies' "heroism", without which "the victory of peace and democracy on our continent would have been far less certain". That's balm to Poles' souls: they remember crossly how their trusted ally Britain betrayed them to Stalin at Yalta.

The book and the parade are part of a love-in between Britain and post-communist Europe with three aspects. The first is historical and symbolic. The unprecedented access to the spooks' archives, for example, helped allay lingering Polish suspicion of undiscovered British perfidy.

The second front is diplomatic. As Tony Blair's relations with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, have chilled, Britain has become more receptive to Polish and Baltic worries about Russian mischief-making in the former Soviet empire. "The language was so strong, so wonderful, we could have drafted it ourselves," recalls one Baltic official, who requested, and promptly received, a resounding letter of support from Mr Blair's office.

That contrasts sharply with France and Germany, both seen by the post-communist countries as unsympathetic. The French president, Jacques Chirac, once told them that "they had missed a good opportunity to keep silent".

So Britain's current presidency of the European Union has attracted some warm words from the east. "Approval of Blair's vision of a new Europe has been reverberating in the capitals of the new member states, from Tallinn to Budapest," said *Delo*, a Slovenian daily, recently. The Czech *Hospodarske noviny* called Mr Blair "the only top politician from the large EU countries not afraid to take a principled stance".

The third front is practical. Britain is the only large EU country to have opened its labour

market to workers from the new member states (and also, broadly speaking, to likely new members such as Romania). The results have been striking. Hundreds of thousands of central Europeans—at least double the official estimate of 176,000—have jobs in Britain, where their work ethic is highly welcome. Polish and Czech technicians at PCService, a thriving computer firm, “are happy to work—there's none of this ‘it's late, I'm tired’,” says the owner, Tom Breza.

By contrast, most European countries have seen workers from the new member states as a problem. “When Poland joined the EU, Germany introduced a transition period in its labour market. Lots of people who had been working there moved to Britain,” says Ania Heasley, who runs an Anglo-Polish employment agency.

A triumph for British soft power, then? Not so fast, warns George Schöpflin, a British academic who is now a Hungarian Euro-MP. He notes that the new member states strongly favour the EU constitution the British government regards as dead. And Britain has a dodgy reputation. “You can do short-term deals,” he says, “but at the end of the day Britain is not regarded as a reliable long-term patron—and all small countries need patrons.”

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