

Thumbnail Image:

Image not found or type unknown



When Messaging Undermines the Messenger: How the Second Trump Administration is Squandering America's Greatest Public Diplomacy Asset in Europe

[1]

For a case study of just how dangerously the second Trump administration has eroded the U.S. brand overseas, consider Poland, a steadfast U.S. ally in central Europe and one of the most reliably pro-American countries on earth. Pew's June 2025 Global Attitudes survey recorded a forty-point collapse in Poles' confidence in President Trump to do the right thing regarding world affairs compared with the ratings former President Joe Biden enjoyed among Poles just a year earlier—one of the sharpest drops anywhere in the 24-nation Pew study.

A lack of confidence in an individual U.S. president, of course, does not necessarily mean that people in a particular country have lost faith in the United States more broadly. But here too, the Pew research suggests a troubling trend, finding that 55% of people in Poland currently have a positive view of the United States, down from 77% a year ago. That 22-percentage point drop was the third largest recorded, behind only Mexico (32 percentage points) and Sweden (28 percentage points), and larger than the drop in Canada (20 percentage points).

How did this happen so quickly in a country in which the United States has long benefitted from a deep reservoir of goodwill? And what does it mean for a bilateral relationship that Trump himself once described as central to the transatlantic relationship?

Given that Poland is a staunch supporter of Ukraine in its battle against Russian aggression—and has historically been a victim of Russian aggression itself—the perception that Trump, especially early in his second term, was taking Moscow's side in the war has contributed to the erosion of America's image in Poland. The Pew study found that only 28% of Poles have confidence in Trump when it comes to resolving the Ukraine, below the median figure of 33% among all countries that were part of the study. A range of other Trump administration policies have also tended to alienate Europeans more broadly, from tariff threats to attacks on international institutions.

But this is only part of the explanation. Poland, like the United States, is deeply polarized. And Trump is as polarizing a leader in Poland as he is it home. Polish supporters of the populist political right tend to favor Trump because they see him and the MAGA movement as sympathetic to their concerns on social issues such as abortion and transgender rights, while centrist and left-leaning Poles disproportionately dislike the American president. In other words, as one academic told me during my recent visit to Poland, Poles have increasingly projected their own political divisions onto their evaluation of U.S. administrations.

Moreover, not all Poles disagree with Trump's move toward a negotiated settlement to the

Ukraine war. Like elsewhere, war fatigue has set in. Poles are also increasingly weary of hosting the largest Ukrainian refugee population in Europe. Like Trump, some see Ukraine and its president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as insufficiently grateful for the Western support he has received. Right-wing politicians in Poland have seized on such sentiments.

But there is another factor that has infuriated Poles across the political spectrum, and that is U.S. public diplomacy messaging in the country. Since March, the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw has blanketed Facebook and Instagram with Polish graphics warning that “overstaying your U.S. visa could lead to a permanent ban.” Another oft-repeated State Department posting threatened (also in Polish): “if you’re considering illegal migration, don’t even think about it.” More recent messaging, also directed at Poles, says that all visa applicants must set their social media profiles to public.

"Good public diplomacy practice is based on dialogue and empathy. Moreover, messaging should be contextual. The current U.S. messaging in Poland directly violates all these principles."

A cursory survey of reactions to these postings reveals unequivocal and consistent fury among Poles. “Why would we come to the United States to study, if we are being treated like this by a close friend,” is a frequent refrain, as is “why would I want to travel to the United States?” Many note that they are unfollowing anything to do with the U.S. government. On Instagram in particular, many of these followers are young Poles. What was once a badge of honor—showing off a U.S. university or acceptance in a U.S.-sponsored exchange program on social media—has become a reputational liability.

In other words, the messages are truly undermining the messenger. Joseph Nye reminded us that soft power flows from attraction, not coercion. Good public diplomacy practice is based on dialogue and empathy. Moreover, messaging should be contextual. The current U.S. messaging in Poland directly violates all these principles.

The Poles I spoke with during a recent visit—almost all of them otherwise favorably predisposed to the United States—noted that the tone of these messages is incomprehensibly hostile. To me, a former public diplomacy practitioner, the messaging is simply tone deaf in a country that has been an unfailing democratic friend of the United States, and in which Washington has benefitted from a deep reservoir of public goodwill. It signals suspicion and distrust and are in turn fostering both among young Poles who once looked to the United States as a model.

Trump himself has praised Poland for meeting his demand that European members of NATO should spend more on defense—Warsaw’s military expenditure as a proportion of GDP is now more than twice as high as NATO’s 2 percent target of two percent, and not far from the five percent that Trump proposed. Some large part of that budget is being used to buy American-manufactured weapons systems. U.S.-Poland military-to-military cooperation is robust.

Poles have fought and died alongside U.S. troops in every major post-Cold-War campaign: the 1991 Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Poland even controversially hosted a CIA “black

site” during the height of George W. Bush’s global war on terror. As John Pomfret showed in his pathbreaking book, Polish intelligence services have closely cooperated with the United States throughout the post-Cold War period. Most recently, Poland has provided robust military, diplomatic, and humanitarian support for Ukraine. Successive Polish governments—left, right, and centrist—have treated Washington as a strategic patron and a moral compass.

In other words, Poland is a tremendous strategic asset for the United States, as well as an influential member of the European Union (EU) and NATO. Poland also happens to be an economic powerhouse, recently becoming the twentieth largest economy in the world. But Poland is also a democracy, and its elites cannot ignore public sentiment. The Polish reservoir of goodwill toward the United States is not bottomless. The danger is that the U.S. approach will alienate a future elite that will shape Warsaw’s foreign policy long after Trump leaves office.
