
Eastern Approaches - Hillary Clinton In Eastern Europe; Big Visit

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NO BLUNDERS please. America's relations with its east European and ex-Soviet allies are fundamentally good. But they are plagued by snubs and mis-steps, usually accompanied by the best of intentions.

President Barack Obama's visit to Prague in April featured a dinner aimed at reassuring and thanking ex-communist allies. But mystifyingly, two of the most loyal ones, Macedonia and Albania, weren't invited. Administration officials apparently forgot that Albania was a NATO member and that Macedonia (FYROM to the Greeks) was a big help in Afghanistan.

So a lot is riding on Hillary Clinton's trip, which starts in Kiev (Kyiv to Ukrainians) today, July 1st, and then moves on to Poland and the three republics of the Caucasus.

The Ukraine visit will be a delicate balancing act. She needs to underline American disquiet about the authoritarian tendencies developing under Viktor Yanukovich. But at the same time she wants to bolster Ukrainian statehood and discourage any further concessions to Russia on security and energy issues.

She spends a longer time in Cracow (Kraków to Poles) from July 2 to 4, for the relaunch of the Community of Democracies, which brings governments and ginger groups together to defend western values such as political freedom and the rule of law. The visit was planned long before the presidential election but will certainly add a welcome nudge of publicity for the front-runner (and acting president) Bronisław Komorowski. Mrs Clinton will visit Auschwitz. However much she praises Polish sacrifice and heroism during the war, that will doubtless lead to some nitwit reporting about her trip to the "Polish death camp".

Poland has forgiven America for announcing an unexpected change to the Bush administration's missile defence plans on September 17th, the anniversary of the Soviet invasion in 1939 and one of the blackest days in the political calendar. Haggling over a battery of Patriot missiles has produced at least a token presence of American hardware.

But the government of Donald Tusk is pragmatically, rather than romantically Atlanticist. Expect plenty of polite and friendly talk, but not too much substance.

Having negotiated that minefield, Mrs Clinton then hits the rocks (or at least heads for the stony ground) of the Caucasus. She will try to soothe feelings in Azerbaijan, still smarting from its exclusion from the nuclear security summit in April. Then she goes to Armenia, where an American-sponsored rapprochement with Turkey has stalled. She finishes up in Georgia, which is upset at America's lack of support on the breakaway statelets of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It also thinks that America is downgrading military support. Mrs Clinton knows that Georgia has influential and noisy backers in America, who are determined to portray the "reset" with Russia as a sellout of the ex-captive nations. But she also knows that the Georgian leadership is a potential liability.

Allies are wonderful things. But they can be rather exhausting. Mrs Clinton will be forgiven if she returns home thinking that America's enemies are rather less difficult to deal with. Top points from her visit will go to

the country that offers solutions to America's problems, rather than presenting needy, neurotic, whinges.

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