

International artists' visa refusals highlight UK government's "hostile environment" against migrants

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The Conservative government's "hostile environment" against migrants is impacting on artists visiting the UK.

Members of three acts at the WOMAD world music festival were denied entry to Britain last month, while a dozen authors have been barred from attending this month's Edinburgh International Book Festival.

Nick Barley, the director of this year's Edinburgh festival, said visa applications for several authors from the Middle East and Africa were still outstanding. The festival opens today with an international line-up including authors, poets, scientists and historians across 900 events.

"We've had so many problems with visas, we've realised it is systematic. This is so serious. We want to talk about it and resolve it, not just for [this festival], but for cultural organisations UK-wide," Barley told the *Guardian* Wednesday.

The visa bans have provoked widespread protest, with hundreds taking to social media to condemn the government's racist visa restrictions and with many drawing parallels with the 1930s.

PEN America CEO Suzanne Nossel released a statement Thursday, pointing to similar moves underway in the US: "At a time of geopolitical polarization and hardened borders, cultural and intellectual exchange provides an essential lifeline to keep societies and peoples connected and prevent schisms from deepening as a result of ignorance and fear."

International musicians have also been hit by visa bans. Tunisian singer and guitarist Sabry Mosba and Mozambican marrabenta singer Wazimbo were both denied entry to Britain for the WOMAD festival.

Members of Nigerian group Tal National were also denied entry, with the rest of the band forced to perform a stripped-down set. Indian musical duo Hashmat Sultana, who are sisters, only cleared border control 24 hours after their scheduled appearance.

Held annually since 1982, WOMAD invites festival goers to discover "a world without borders, a global fiesta of music, food, dance & art." But festival organiser Chris Smith says many international artists are now refusing to attend because of humiliating Home Office application procedures.

Other artists confirm this. Ebo Taylor, an 82-year-old Ghanaian musician who has played Britain many times, had a visa application denied last year. His band's passports were held for weeks, preventing them from travelling and causing them to miss shows, including at London's Jazz Café in Camden. Their visas were denied because of "insufficient funds on accounts," even though their agent's company was covering all their costs.

After the visa ban cost his company £17,000 in lost flights and fees, Taylor's agent Ben Makkes said, "I don't think we'll come back to the UK," calling Britain "definitely the toughest country to enter."

Serbian DJ Tijana T said she felt like a "criminal" after three visa applications were rejected last year. She provided financial records, proof of a company in Belgrade, evidence that her earnings would support her during the trip, documentation of future employment, contracts, and proof of years working in similar engagements, but her visa applications were denied, with authorities citing grounds of "reasonable doubt" that she would stay and work illegally.

Tijana T's story shows how the visa system is used to

milk applicants. She explained that artists must apply for a certificate of sponsorship (CoS) from an agency. This costs €250 for a fast-track procedure, which took 19 days the last time she applied, leaving her without a passport and unable to perform outside Serbia. “If you are from Eastern Europe it’s not so easy-peasy ... especially if we talk about Serbia where average monthly salary is €300-400.”

The visa is not the only expense. Applicants must also attend a visa application centre (VAC) in person, sometimes involving huge cross-border trips. The nearest VAC for Mali, for example, is Dakar in Senegal, some 1,000 miles away. All band members must attend. Even then, visas are not guaranteed.

The visa bans are genre-blind. Last year Russian baritone Igor Golovatenko was twice refused a visa to sing in *La Traviata* at Glyndebourne, where he had sung in 2015. The Philharmonia Orchestra also lost the German-based Armenian violinist, Sergey Khachatryan, “due to visa issues.”

Much criticism of the current situation has been framed against Brexit.

WOMAD co-founder Peter Gabriel asked, “Do we really want a white-breaded Brexited flatland? A country that is losing the will to welcome the world?”

Chris Wright of Chrysalis Records warned that hard borders would mean “we can kiss goodbye to the plentiful imports of musical goods we have got so used to.”

However, those looking to the European Union to protect their business interests have to turn a blind eye to the trade bloc’s own hard borders and barbarous anti-refugee policies.

It may have worsened since 2016, but what is happening is not new, nor was it created two years ago. As Gabriel notes, “The right to travel for work, for education and even for pleasure is increasingly being restricted and often along racial and religious lines.”

Professor Alison Phipps, UNESCO chair of refugee integration at Glasgow University, has called it “extraordinarily difficult ... to bring a musician into the country,” saying “undoubtedly, since 2015, it has got considerably harder.”

Last year she booked 22 Ghanaian musicians and dancers to appear in a government-funded academic project at Solas festival—20 were denied visas. When she appealed, all but two were allowed entry, but costly

flights had to be rebooked. Official or not, says Phipps, “there is a travel ban in place in the UK.”

“The message the UK is sending out to international artists is ‘you are not welcome in Britain’,” Phipps told the i website.

This has been true for years. The points-based visa system, introduced by Gordon Brown’s Labour government in 2008, was used to bar artists long before Brexit.

In June 2010, Russian ballerina Polina Semionova had to cancel eight performances in *Swan Lake* at the Royal Albert Hall. Two months later, despite having correct documentation, Brazilian theatre company Teatro da Curva were held for five hours, denied entry and deported.

In 2013, Gaza-based writers Ali Abukhattab and Samah al-Sheikh were refused visas for the Shubbak Festival and had to appear via Skype. Later that year, Kazakh painter Karipbek Kuyukov, who was born without arms, was prevented from attending an Edinburgh anti-nuclear conference because his “biometrics were of poor quality.” In other words, his fingerprints were unsatisfactory.

In 2015, Tbilisi’s New Collective theatre company were denied visas because they were young, single and without dependents. Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was also denied a visa on those grounds, and only entered the UK after then Home Secretary and now Prime Minister Theresa May intervened on his behalf.

A recent survey by the British Incorporated Society of Musicians reported 40 percent of members noticing a negative impact on their work since the referendum. More than a third of respondents said they had experienced visa difficulties travelling outside the EU, and 15 percent said they had lost work through visa issues.



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