



New visa rules threaten dozens of concerts and festivals

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A new report from Manifesto Club reveals that more than 20 major arts events have been cancelled or badly affected by new visa regulations which were introduced in the United Kingdom in November 2008.

The new regulations, with a points-based system, are intended to minimise illegal UK immigration but are also making it extremely difficult for dancers and musicians to obtain a UK visa.

"These rules will make it almost impossible to feature musicians from outside the EU," one person told the authors of the report 'UK Arts and Culture: Cancelled, by Order of the Home Office — The Impact of New Restrictions on Visiting Artists and Academics'.

According to the report, many arts organisations say that they can no longer invite non-EU artists. The report states: "These new regulations will do little to stop terrorists — who are unlikely to go through official channels — but are instead hampering UK arts organisations that are already struggling in a recession."

'Free thinkers and campaigners'

The report was compiled by the Manifesto Club, which "campaigns against the hyperregulation of everyday life". The organisation "supports free movement across borders, free expression and free association" and is "a rapidly expanding group of free thinkers and campaigners."

The group said that the report gives the first indication of how many organisations have been affected since the changes came into force. It found evidence that more than 20 major events had been cancelled or badly affected by the new system.

Meanwhile, the National Campaign for the Arts has led a delegation of arts industry representatives to meet immigration minister Phil Woolas, to reiterate concerns that the new system will lead to the 'gradual erosion' of the UK's cultural life.

The new visa system

In November 2008, the United Kingdom's Home Office introduced a new points-based system and visa restrictions, which has affected international artists and academics visiting the UK for talks, exhibitions, concerts or residencies.

With cancelled concerts, talks and visits across the UK, these measures have already had a disastrous effect on UK arts, writes Appleton and Govinda in the report.

6,000 protest signatures

Manifesto Club launched a campaign against the Home Office's restrictions in February 2009, with a letter to the Observer signed by artists including Antony Gormley and Jeremy Deller, and heads of arts institutions including the directors of the National Theatre and National Portrait Gallery.

The campaign sparked an extraordinary response from artists and academics, in the UK and across the world. Nearly 6,000 people signed a petition. Many others have sent email testimonies, completed an online survey, or joined Manifesto Club's Facebook group.

Excerpts from the report

Canadian singer Allison Crowe: 'barred from entry'

The Canadian singer Allison Crowe was detained at Gatwick, then deported and told not to re-enter the country — to the annoyance of fans:

Allison Crowe and her two band mates were fingerprinted and had their passports confiscated shortly after flying into Gatwick Airport. She said they were shut in a room where they were denied contact with the outside world for six hours and that she was told she would never perform in Europe again once her passports had been stamped by the UK Border Authority as 'barred from entry'.

"This legislation means that my favourite Canadian singer-songwriter Allison Crowe will never be allowed back into Britain," said Laura Jane Nott.

African musicians: 'not affordable'

African musicians are finding it particularly difficult to deal with the new procedures, since they may need to travel to another country to obtain a visa. David Flower from Sasa Music Promotions said:

"I run a music touring agency that brings musicians to perform in the UK from, amongst other countries, Mali. The visa application rules have recently changed again, with the likely effect that no Malian nationals will be able to afford to apply for UK visas in Africa, leaving Paris as their only chance to get them, provided they are also working on France on the same tour. This whole process in Dakar will not only take two weeks (allowing for travel) but will cost any group thousands of pounds. Return flights to Dakar, 10 days in hotels in Dakar plus welfare. My current application is for seven people. A rough estimate would be £5-6000 (plus costs of visas). The result is that, unless they can apply successfully in Paris, groups will no longer consider it affordable to come to perform in UK. UK audiences will be deprived of the chance to watch artists of the calibre of Tinariwen, Oumou Sangare, Toumani Diabate, Bassekou Kouyate, Super Rail Band, Rokia Traore and many others. These are some of the finest artists currently on the international scene."

West African jazz band Les Amazones de Guinée had to pay £3500 to travel from Guinea to Freetown, Sierra Leone, to obtain fingerprints for their visas. This was a waste of time and money, however, since the band was refused entry to the UK.

"We had to cancel the closing performance of an arts festival — SAMA South Asian Music & Arts — due to an artist being refused a visa and stranded in Pakistan. Other artists from South Africa were almost refused entry to UK, luckily our letter of support eventually allowed them entry," said the arts manager at a UK regional culture initiative

Russian and Georgian choirs: 'complicated and expensive'

There are also difficulties for Russian and Georgian choirs, who have been frequent visitors to the UK:

"The Russian church choir that has visited us annually for many years is now finding great difficulty in entering the country. The singers always go home to Russia after their tour and could not present any kind of threat, so why are they subjected to the indignity of being treated as potential criminals?," said Jeremy Hummerstone, Vicar of Torrington, Devon.

Katherina Garratt Adams, UK manager for MTIEBI Traditional Georgian choir, said: "Every time I have organised a tour for Georgians, the UK visa and work permit requirements have become more complicated and a lot more expensive, why has the UK adopted this policy of deterring artists from outside the EU?"

Jazz and club scene: 'no artists outside of the EU'

Restrictions are also having an impact on the jazz and club scene, especially for more alternative music:

"In the past I have been able to organise entry for various musicians to do three to ten date

tours of UK, obtaining a work permit via a small London club that I'm involved with (one venue used to be able to apply for a work permit covering several dates and venues); all are professional musicians with international careers & recognition, some in a long-standing band; and sometimes I would bring in an individual to work with UK musicians — providing the opportunity for a collaboration that couldn't otherwise occur. These visits weren't done for money; returns were low for the work involved, but they were rare opportunities to hear the musicians together, often on the wilder shores of free improvised jazz. I now have to find a promoter or some other to sponsor a tour — the band therefore will have to be a fairly assured success financially, and fit the sponsor's taste. The more experimental music will be heard less, and the bands that were made up of predominantly UK musicians with one incoming musician will not exist," said Lee Paterson from Gobetween.

"We have decided not to book artists outside of the EU because we do not have the capacity to deal with the extra administrative work, nor the funds to allow for the possibility of last-minute cancellations, due to refused visas."

Petition

Manifesto Club runs a 'Visiting Artists Petition' which states: "The UK Home Office has introduced new bureaucratic procedures for organisations that wish to invite non-EU artists and academics to the UK. As professionals committed to the principles of internationalism and cultural exchange, we are dismayed by these new regulations — which will curb our invitations to non-EU artists and academics to visit the UK for talks, artist residencies, conferences and temporary exhibitions. The system is costly to both the host organisation and to the visitor, and has already meant a number of cancelled exhibitions and concerts.

Read more and sign the petition on the campaign page:

manifestoclub.com/visitingartists