



Study on the impact and utilization of Canadian culture and arts in Canadian foreign policy and diplomacy, and other related matters

Supplementary brief regarding visitor visas

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Introduction

The Canadian Arts Coalition appeared before the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, on April 26th, 2018, and submitted two written briefs, on February 27th and May 29th.

Since then, new facts regarding temporary resident visas (i.e., visitor visas) were brought to light by the Globe and Mail. Those facts confirmed visa refusal issues identified by Senator Victor Oh, and they therefore deserve to be brought to the attention of member of members of the Senate Standing Committee.

Visitor visas and related administrative barriers to cultural exchanges

Soaring visa refusal rates

Citizens of other countries who want to travel to Canada must satisfy a number of administrative requirements before entering the country. Depending on their country of residence, they may be required to obtain a temporary resident visa (commonly referred to as “visitor visa”), provide biometrics, and obtain an electronic travel authorization.

Currently, Canada requests visas for 146 countries, including many important trade partners (China, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, the entire Mercosur area). 54 countries are [visa exempt](#).

Visas need to be obtained in Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada offices located in Canadian embassies, high commissions and consulates or in visa application centres (VAC). Visa application centres are operated by third-party suppliers. At present, there are 137 VACs in 95 countries. In February, the government of Canada announced that it will open new visa application centres. “By November 2019, there will be at least 149 VAC locations in 99 countries,” the [news release](#) claimed.

On July 8, the Globe and Mail published an article entitled “[Access denied: Canada’s refusal rate for visitor visas soars](#)”. This article shed light on an increase in both the number of visa applications and the refusal rate. Here are some of the statistics obtained by the Globe and Mail from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada:

- Applications for temporary resident visas increased from about 1.3 million in 2012 to about 2.3 million in 2017.
- The refusal rate for temporary resident visa applications increased from 18% in 2012 to 26% in 2017.
- In 2017 alone, Canada refused entry to nearly 600,000 people.
- During the first three months of 2018, the refusal rate increased to 30%.
- The highest refusal rates are clustered in Africa and the Middle East.
- The refusal rate for student visas has also increased, from 26% in 2012 to 33% in 2017.

The article also reports: “In most cases of denied visas, Canadian officials say they are not satisfied that the applicants would leave at the end of their visit. Officials can reject an application if they believe the applicant has not shown evidence of sufficient funds to pay for their stay, or has close family or financial connections to Canada and looser ties to their home country.” Considering how little justification is provided to denied applicants, one can’t help but wonder if all applications are properly assessed, and if there isn’t a direct connection between the increase in the number of applications and the increase in refusal rate.

This information is consistent with anecdotal evidence assembled by the Canadian Arts Coalition.

Since 2015, cases of problems with temporary entry of foreign artists were brought to the attention of the Canadian Arts Coalition. Notably, the Media Arts Network of Ontario and of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres have had a number of member organizations experiencing difficulties with the temporary entry of visiting artists. Some of these cases were for short term presentation engagements or multi-city tours over the course of a couple weeks, but most were for longer-term production residencies. The cases highlight two types of problems. The majority of the incidents are related to artists being refused a temporary resident visitor by visa application centre. A few other incidents involved artists being denied entry or being detained by customs officers at a Canadian port of entry (even though they had secured a visa). The cases of visa refusals involved artists coming from the Middle-East, Africa, and Latin America.

The increase in visa refusal rates represents a serious threat for Canadian performing arts presenters and festivals. Since almost any music group or theatre company touring Canada travels with four or more performers and crew member, the odds that at least one visa applicant will be turned down are becoming extremely high. This will consequently lead to many cancelled performances, which will cause financial and administrative hardship to our Canadian presenting organizations.

Expanded requirements for biometrics

The process for securing a temporary resident visa is about to become much more cumbersome and expensive.

In 2013, Canada started requiring biometrics (photograph and finger prints) to citizens from 29 countries. This requirement will soon be expanded to all visa applicants. Starting July 31, 2018, biometrics will be required from visa applicants from Europe, Middle East and Africa. Starting December 31, 2018, the requirement will expand to visa applicants from Asia, Asia Pacific and the Americas.

In order to give biometrics, visa applicants will have to go in person in a visa application centre in their country or in a nearby country. In effect, this means applicants will no longer have the option to have their visa application processed over the mail. For some visa applicants, this will imply significant travel time and travel costs.

The requirement for biometrics also comes in with a processing fee. The processing fee for an individual applicant is CAD\$85. Groups of 3 or more performing artists and their staff who apply for work permits at the same time will be subject to a maximum total fee of CAD\$255. This mitigation measure will however have a limited impact. Indeed, performing artist who enter Canada for a tour (and are not taking on work as part of a Canadian production) are work permit exempt, as per [Regulation 186\(g\)](#). They will therefore not be able to benefit from the maximum fee for performing artists.

For any music group or performing arts company, the costs will add up very quickly. For example, a music band from a visa country touring Canada with four musicians and a technical director would need to pay a visa processing fee of CAD\$100 and a biometrics processing fee of CAD\$85 for each musician and crew member. This represents a total bill of \$925, and no one has even boarded a plane yet. These fees will be passed on to Canadian festivals and performing arts presenters and they will considerably reduce the financial viability of foreign tours to Canada.

The collection and processing of biometrics is also likely to lengthen the total processing time for securing a visitor visa, since visa processing won't begin until biometrics are processed. The [website of Immigration](#),

[Refugees and Citizenship Canada](#) affirms: “The time allotted for the collection and screening of biometrics is not a part of application processing times. You are encouraged to give their biometrics as quickly as possible after receiving the Biometric Instruction Letter as the sooner an applicant provides their biometrics, the sooner Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada can start processing your application.”

If visa application centres are unable to keep up with the additional burden of collecting and screening biometrics, we are likely to witness an increase in visa processing times and/or further increases in visa refusal rates.

More information on biometrics is available on the [website of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada](#).

Conclusion

As a result of the increased refusal rate and the requirement for biometrics, the presentation of foreign artists from visa countries by Canadian arts organizations is becoming a risky and expensive business. In this situation, everyone loses: Canadian arts organizations, Canadian audiences and foreign artists. Our reputation as an open and welcoming country will also be seriously tarnished.

These recent administrative and financial obstacles related to visa applications to impact trade and diplomatic relationships with all visa countries, including important trade partners such as China and India.

About the Canadian Arts Coalition

The Canadian Arts Coalition is a collaborative non-partisan movement spearheaded by a group of national arts service and membership organizations, with a volunteer Steering Committee comprised of artists and arts administrators. We are united in the belief that a strong arts and culture sector contributes to economically vibrant, liveable, and innovative communities, and that strong federal cultural policy and investment frameworks leverage arts and culture’s contribution to the Canadian economy, Canadian communities, and Canada’s standing internationally.

The full list of [Coalition members](#) can be found on our website.