

U.S. Artist Warns Visa Denials Represent Growing Trend

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Richard Cameron-Wolfe posing for a photo in Omsk.

American composer Richard Cameron-Wolfe has come to Russia more than 11 times since 1989 with no hindrances, but in early October he was unexpectedly denied a visa in what he says represents a worrying trend.

Cameron-Wolfe is just one of many artists to be hit with a visa denial after Russia and the U.S. signed a visa facilitation agreement in September 2012, prompting some to say the visa regime is increasingly being held hostage to political spats.

"I would come to Russia or the Soviet Union, meet with composers and critics, bring them packs of modern American music and take a suitcase-load of Soviet scores and recordings back home," Cameron-Wolfe recalled over the phone from Kiev, where he came to deliver lectures and workshops to local students of music.

Cameron-Wolfe has devoted more than two decades to creating and promoting modern Russian classical music in the U.S., and he intended to enjoy the fruits of his labor on his most recent trip to Russia by listening to his own music performed at a festival of new classical music in Moscow.

But representatives of Russia's San Francisco consulate said the visa was denied, telling him they were "sad" about the decision and "did not understand why this was happening."

"After all this investment into Russian culture, it was a slap in the face not to receive a visa," he said with irritation in his voice.

The head of the Moscow Composers' Union, who invited Cameron-Wolfe to the Moscow Autumn Festival of new classical music, offered a more detailed explanation.

"The Federal Migration Service thought that he was coming here to work, to conduct, but he was only coming to listen to his own short opera," Oleg Galakhov said in a phone interview.

"If he had applied for a basic tourist visa with a hotel booked, there would be no problem at all," he said.

Cameron-Wolfe said he was coming at his own expense and that he "has never earned a dime in Russia."

The visa facilitation agreement signed last year between Russia and the U.S. was intended to make travel easier for citizens of the two countries, making multiple-entry three-year visas regular.

But in reality, the rules have apparently been influenced by the political ebbs and flows in relations between the two countries, which, despite the much publicized "reset," have gone through a tumultuous period.

Visas have repeatedly been used by both countries as leverage in political disagreements. The U.S. Congress passed the so-called Magnitsky Act in December 2012, imposing a visa ban on Russians allegedly implicated in human rights violations.

Russian lawmakers were quick to respond with a reciprocal ban, but they took it a step further, outlawing U.S. adoptions of Russian children.

Several Russian judges and tax investigators have been banned from entering the U.S. Russia retaliated by refusing entry to American judges and attorneys, including David Addington, Chief of Staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, and John Yoo, former Assistant U.S. Attorney General, among others appearing on the so-called "Guantanamo list."

Not even pop stars or artists have been left unscathed by tensions regarding visas.

In April 2013, Russia's Foreign Ministry accused American pop singer Madonna of using the wrong type of visa when coming for her concerts in Moscow and St. Petersburg in August 2012. She was later joined by another American singer, Lady Gaga, who was accused of the same offense.

Madonna came on a humanitarian-type visa, designated to allow visits for cultural purposes. This type of visa does not allow for commercial performances, however, the ministry said.

Russia's recently passed law banning "gay propaganda" among minors has also complicated matters, with many observers connecting the new law to visa denials of celebrities known to express support for gay rights.

Last September, U.S. pop star Selena Gomez was forced to cancel two concerts in Russia after being denied a visa. Her concert organizers attributed the visa denial to the "anti-gay propaganda" law, saying the government had tightened the visa regime for foreign musicians in response to Madonna's and Lady Gaga's decisions to openly support gays during their shows in Russia last year, RIA Novosti reported at the time.

Madonna vehemently denounced the legislation at her St. Petersburg concert in 2012, before it had been signed into law on the federal level, and Lady Gaga followed suit, daring authorities to arrest her for gay propaganda during one of her shows in 2012.

The organizers of Lady Gaga's 2012 concerts were fined for her onstage statement in support of gay rights. A court in St. Petersburg fined Planet Plus 20,000 rubles (\$614) on Nov. 14 for the pop star encouraging young gay people to "stand up for yourself, stand up for your friends" while on stage, Interfax reported.

Lady Gaga also condemned the law in August 2013, tweeting to her millions of followers that "the Russian government is criminal. Oppression will be met with revolution. Russian LGBTs you are not alone. We will fight for your freedom."

Yevgeny Finkelstein, head and founder of St. Petersburg Musical Company, which brought such artists as Madonna, the Rolling Stones and Sting to Russia, believes that the change in visa rules is nothing more than certain deputies staging a PR campaign for themselves.

"Certain public figures wanted to promote their image, that is all," he said on the phone. "I do not think there was an overarching state policy to oppress gays," he said.

Vitaly Milonov, a deputy of St. Petersburg's Legislative Assembly, sent a request to the Prosecutor General's Office to investigate the foreign artists' visa situation after their concerts. Following the request, promoter agencies were banned from using the humanitarian cultural exchange visas.

"Can you imagine, all artists, sportsmen and lecturers were banned from using the usual way of getting into Russia," Finkelstein said.

Afterwards, Finkelstein initiated an open letter to Putin that was signed by 24 promoter companies asking the president to formalize the procedure by introducing "artistic visas."

"The presidential administration was quick to respond, so we expect to have the new type of visa introduced by the beginning of next year," he said.

In the meantime, artists are coming on business visas, Finkelstein said, adding that he had already started to arrange the paperwork for Depeche Mode and Black Sabbath, who are scheduled to play in St. Petersburg next year.

The situation offers little consolation to Cameron-Wolfe, however.

"My interest in visiting Russia again is not a priority for any time in the near future," he said from Kiev, where he will be the official visiting artist at Kiev's University of Culture and Arts.

Visas have not been required for EU and U.S. citizens since 2005 for 90-day visits to Ukraine in any 180-day period.

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