

Reciprocity proposal threatens Canada's visa-free access to Europe

BY TOBI COHEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS SEPTEMBER 17, 2013

OTTAWA — Mexico isn't the only country growing increasingly irate over Canada's decision to impose travel visas on its citizens.

Last week, the European Parliament voted in favour of a [reciprocity clause](#) that would slap visas on countries that saddle citizens of member nations with the same.

Canada requires visas for European Union citizens from Romania, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. The clause, which has yet to become law, means Canadians travelling to those countries could eventually face visa hurdles.

"We just want to have equal treatment, similar to the other member states," Silvana Bolocan of the Romanian Embassy in Ottawa said in an interview. "We believe that the vote in the European Parliament is a strong message of solidarity."

In [a report](#) earlier this week by The Canadian Press, Mexican Ambassador Francisco Suarez said his country was "really mad" at the Canadian government for failing to remove the visa requirement for Mexicans, imposed in 2009 following a spike in asylum claims from the country. If the issue isn't resolved by next year, he said, Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto could postpone his planned visit to Canada. He suggested it could also adversely impact economic co-operation in areas like energy and natural resources.

According to Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, about 38,000 Canadians visited Romania in 2011 — a country that has allowed unfettered access to Canadian tourists since 2002. About 15,000 Canadians are said to have visited Bulgaria over the same time period.

It's not clear how many Canadians travel to the Czech Republic on an annual basis but the country has been among the most vocal since

Canada imposed a visa on its citizens in 2009 due to skyrocketing asylum claims, many of them ethnic Roma. The country has even vowed not to ratify the yet-to-be-concluded Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with the European Union if Canada doesn't lift the visa requirement.

Officials at the Mexican embassy would not comment on Europe's reciprocity clause and whether Mexico would consider something similar.

Foreign Affairs spokesman Ian Trites maintained Canada makes its visa decisions based on "objective criteria, not reciprocity" and suggested the EU ought to do the same.

"Canada respects the EU's right to impose visas where objective criteria justify this action," he said, adding Canada is "committed to working towards visa-free travel for citizens of all EU member states and has made significant progress toward this goal." In recent years, he said, Canada lifted visas on Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Croatia.

That move, however, also led to a spike in asylum claims, particularly among Hungarian Roma. Citizenship and Immigration sought to rectify that by revamping the refugee system and making it more difficult for people from so-called "safe" countries to seek asylum. About six months after the safe country list was adopted last December, asylum claims were down by more than half. The list is thought to be a first step towards visa removal.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada officials, however, said the government is "closely monitoring" the impact of the list on asylum claims and will continue to examine all the criteria before deciding whether to make changes to its visa policies. Some 37 countries are currently listed, including Mexico and all EU countries except for Romania and Bulgaria. Listed countries are considered atypical producers of bona fide refugees because they respect human rights and offer state protection. Critics say the list is unfair and that many claimants from listed countries indeed face persecution.

According to [a report on the English language Romanian news site Romania-Insider.com](#), the reciprocity clause will only come into force 24 months

after it's published in the EU Official Journal. It's also governed by a lengthy process that would first require the affected member state to make a request for reciprocity. After that, Canada would have six months to lift its visa before its citizens are saddled with one of their own, according to the report.

Achim Hurrelmann, associate professor of political science at Carleton University in Ottawa, specializes in European politics. He said the proposal requires both European Parliament and Council approval. The council, which represents member state governments, has yet to approve it, but he said it appears negotiations have already taken place which suggests it's likely to do so imminently with few, if any, amendments.

"There is indeed substantial irritation among some of the EU member states that their citizens can still not have visa-free access to important partners like Canada or the United States," he said, suggesting the proposed reciprocity measure is really just a last resort aimed at expediting bilateral discussions on the matter.

"They are ... trying to build up a threat to pressure Canada and other countries to the negotiating table to come up with some kind of solution."