

# 2023 Q1 REVIEW

An examination of the immigration and visa changes in 2023 Q1, and alignment to the CIBT Five Flagships

## THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Reviewing seventy plus news items, government announcements, public policy changes and thematically linking them to present an immigration and visa global state of play.

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## 2023 Q1: An Introduction

2022 Q1 saw a world still very much in the midst of a global pandemic. Numerous international borders remained closed, significant trade and travel corridors had only recently reopened, with concessions in both immigration and visa rules that were inexorably linked to the early stages of a world in pandemic.

The world in 2023 Q1 is very different. We have reviewed over seventy changes in policy, procedure and process in both immigration and travel against a backdrop of CIBT Newland Chase's five Flagship Themes:

1. **Reaction is Inaction:** A world in Polycrisis has become an **overarching** landscape.
2. **Abstract is Reality:** A world of AI, Digitization and Technology has become an **operating** landscape.
3. **Reset and Renew for Resilience and Relevance:** A world of skill, talent and a globalised workforce, together with immigration being used as an economic lever is a **relational** landscape.
4. **Embrace to Demystify:** A world of complex simplicity and simple complexity in both rules and procedure has become a **dynamic** landscape
5. **The [Un] Familiar Traveller:** A world of changing norms has become a **relative** landscape.

Interestingly, all of the changes explored (see below) fit into one or more of CIBT Newland Chase's Flagships; and when linked thematically, conclude that the uncertain world continues, the legacy of Covid is still being felt, public health considerations are part of the immigration and travel world; changing international relations still influence immigration and travel policy; economic considerations play a heavy part in determining how rules are implemented and relaxed; inroads in digitization and artificial intelligence are revolutionising the cross border cycle; and protectionism remains. But what can we learn from this? Below forms an 'around the world' update of what has been going on at a governmental and official level as we near the close of Q1.



# 2023: The Continued Existence of an Uncertain World

## The Covid Legacy

Unsurprisingly, 2023 Q1 saw successive governments introduce, reintroduce and remove policies that were in place as a result of the pandemic, as the world continued to reopen, and travel, mobility and migration accelerated at pace. In early January 2023, and centred almost entirely in **Asia**, the ongoing legacy of Covid in the travel and mobility space was lessened as countries removed concessions that had been in place on the labour market (for example **Vietnam**), or dropped legacy vaccination requirements for the purpose of entry. Undoubtedly, the most significant development has been the gradual reopening of **China** from January, which started by reopening entry to Business Travel (M visa); Work Permits (Z visa); Family Visit/Family Reunion visas; together with a limited number of student visas. Importantly, tourism was not included in this first tranche of post-pandemic reopening.

As some **China** Embassies/Consulates began to remove the requirement for PCR tests for travellers entering **China**; China opened to tourism on 15 March, 2023; and pre-pandemic visa-free policies returned, with the resumption the Hainan 59 country visa free entry policy, 15-day visa free travel for cruise groups at Shanghai ports, visa free entry to Guangdong province for foreigners' groups from Hong Kong and Macau SARs, and visa free entry to Guilin of Guangxi autonomous region for tourist groups from ASEAN countries. This marked the first time in three years that tourism returned to **China**.

Interestingly, during this period of the reopening of China, we also witnessed political reciprocity in the **Asia** region. As the borders opened, and in response to growing Covid rates throughout China, the government of **South Korea** stopped issuing tourist visas to Chinese citizens. In return, Chinese consular posts in **Japan** and **South Korea** suspended issuing Chinese visas of various kinds to Japanese and South Korean citizens. Whilst short lived (China begin issuing visas to Japanese citizens on 30 January 2023, and to South Koreans on 11 February 2023), it demonstrated a continuance of uncertainty as a result of pandemic.

## Public Health

With natural synergies to the Covid legacy above, 2023 Q1 has also seen the introduction of a greater number of health-related conditions being attached to visa issuance. Effective February 1 2023, applicants for visitor visas and visitor renewal visas to and in **Qatar** will be required to purchase a health insurance policy from an authorized vendor in order for the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to adjudicate their applications. Individuals eligible for visas-on-arrival will be expected to purchase a health insurance policy from the Ministry of Public Health website prior to arriving, unless they hold an international insurance policy which includes coverage in Qatar for the entire duration of their stay and which is issued by one of the approved insurance companies.

Correspondingly, **Taiwan** has also introduced a “proof of vaccination” requirement for polio if a traveller has lived in or visited any of the following countries for more than four weeks in the past year: **Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique** or **Pakistan**. It appears whilst Covid restrictions are being removed almost worldwide, a new discourse on health more broadly is developing.



# 2023: The Economic Face of Immigration and Travel

## Investor Visas: Conflicting Trends

Much has been discussed about immigrant investor programs, which allow individuals to more quickly obtain residence or citizenship of a country in return for making qualifying investments. Broadly, the programs offer either citizenship by investment, residence by investment, or a hybrid with immediate residence followed by accelerated citizenship. The trend of countries offering such visas has grown exponentially both as a result of the pandemic and pressing economic need.

2023 Q1 saw much activity in the world of investment, residence and citizenship; and not all of it on trend. In the first two months of the year, both **Ireland** and **Portugal** took aim in either curbing or removing their respective programs altogether. As the **Irish** economy has continued to grow, its Immigration Investor Programme came under scrutiny, with the government eventually concluding in February that it had fulfilled its purpose in bringing foreign investment into **Ireland**<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the influx of foreign real estate investment into **Portugal** led to greater scrutiny as to whether it was responsible for the worsening a housing, where steep rises in rental and house prices in **Portugal** have not been met with corresponding wage increases for the domestic workforce. Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa committed to “fight against price speculation in real estate” and has duly indicated the country will end the visa program.

In 2023 Q1, other countries have taken a different approach, in tweaking their existing rules to meet their own economic needs. **Singapore** announced a 300% increase in the investment threshold to apply for its Global Investor Program (GIP). During 2023 Q1, **Tanzania** started to implement changes brought in by its Investment Act, adding several new qualification requirements for strategic investment. Finally, **Greece** increased by 100% the monetary requirements for individuals applying for a “Golden Visa” in certain municipalities. In a move that shared similar socio-economic considerations as **Portugal**, the **Greek** government has put in measures to limit the number of properties in a given area which investors can buy, in order to keep prices from dramatically increasing and pricing out the local population. Clearly, investment



visas are still being utilised to meet economic needs of particular countries, and the qualifying requirements are impacted and informed by public policy.

At the other end of the spectrum, 2023 Q1 saw the **Hong Kong** SAR government announce it will soon relaunch its residency-by-investment scheme. The government suspended the scheme in 2015 to focus on attracting talent instead of investments, but is now relaunching the program to help economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## A Flex in Rules to Bolster Economy or Fill Skills Shortages

Skills shortages remain top of the international agenda. With recent studies indicating as much as an 85m human capital deficit by 2030<sup>2</sup>, and the immediacy of the mid-pandemic ‘great resignation’ taking its toll on current workforce demand planning, 2023 Q1 saw international governments respond to this by relaxing immigration rules to achieve economic results. At the top of the year,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce9570w0eyeo>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/this-week-in-leadership/talent-crunch-future-of-work>

the **UK** introduced new Immigration Skills Charge (“ISC”) exemptions for employers sponsoring senior managers or specialist employees under the Global Business Mobility – Senior or Specialist (former Intra-Company Transfer) route. **Australia** relaxed the rules surrounding skills assessments, and moved the deadline of the requirement to reduce rejection rates. **Bulgaria** relaxed several rules related to EU Blue Card eligibility requirements and processes, as a means to attract talent from neighbouring countries. **Slovakia** recently removed the requirement to undertake a labour market test for non-EU nationals applying to renew their Single Permit/Blue Card to continue their employment with the same sponsoring company and in the same position; allowing non-EU nationals to continue working in Slovakia whilst their renewal application is being processed. **The Netherlands** extended the rules permitting visa-exempt highly-skilled foreign nationals to work without a residence sticker or residence document, allowing eligible individuals to begin working upon arrival in the Netherlands on the basis of their permit approval letter for four months, without having to collect a residence endorsement sticker, as



was previously required. Throughout 2023 Q1, **Finland**, **Denmark** and **Switzerland** all introduced measures to streamline work authorisation processes specifically as a means to improve speed to ground for migrant workers in skills shortages (**Switzerland** going furthest in removing the necessity for academic qualification in certain shortage occupations). Collectively, these changes represent an indication of policy variance, not make it easier for international companies to transfer and continue employment for migrant workers, but to show a continued willingness to relax immigration rules for economic revitalisation.

But it isn't just about relaxation of rules. 2023 Q1 saw active steps by many governments to rethink the nature of immigration as a means to extend trade collaboration at a bilateral level. As part of a post-Brexit trade deal between **India** and the **UK**, the India Young Professional Scheme visa will allow Indian nationals between the ages of 18 and 30 to live and work in the UK for up to two years. **Canada** extended its open work permit program for eligible citizens of **Hong Kong SAR**, whilst relaxing some of the eligibility criteria; and on February 1 2023, **Canada** held an Express Entry draw for the first time in history, providing a new path for qualifying skilled workers in the transportation and logistics industry to receive residence in Canada. Governments are proactively re-setting and relaxing immigration laws as a means to demonstrate resilience ahead of difficult talent/skills projections globally.

## 2023: The Continued March Toward AI, Digitization and Tech:

The role of technology continues to expand across the entire cross-border cycle, from pre-entry to return, in the form of digital authorisation, applicant filing and processing, and – importantly – the use of AI for the purpose of immigration enforcement.

### Electronic Travel Entry and Authorisations

Whilst 2023 Q1 saw the news that ETIAS (**Europe's** proposed Electronic Entry System) has encountered further delays until at least 2024; the **UK** has moved forward with plans to introduce its own Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) system, starting with **Qatari** nationals in October 2023 and then extending to certain other nationalities in 2024, including citizens from **Bahrain**, **Oman**, **Kuwait**, **Jordan**, **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab**



**Emirates.** Similar to the ESTA program in the **USA**, the **UK ETA** is a new requirement for individuals who do not need a visa to come to the UK. If granted, an ETA provides permission to travel to the UK and will be electronically linked to the applicant's passport.

### Significant Inroads in Digitization

2023 Q1 saw another significant global move to digitization, across multiple countries.

In the travel world, for **Vietnam**, the immigration authorities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are now requiring companies to submit certain multiple entry business visa applications through an online immigration portal. Whilst **Malaysia** announced that applicants can now apply for Multiple Entry Visas (MEV) through the online MYVISA application (eVISA) facility. Applicants can apply for the MEV for certain purposes such as business, tourism and medical treatments. **Morocco** extended its 2022 e-visa platform to nationals of **Azerbaijan, Guatemala, India** and **Jordan**; who are now eligible to obtain an electronic visa (e-visa) to visit Morocco for business or tourism. The single-entry e-visa is valid for 180 days from the date of issuance and permits stays of up to 30 days. **Cambodia** has moved its 30-day business visitor visa onto an online platform.

Regarding authorisation to work, there were numerous moves to digitization in a number of ways, significantly the ways in which applications will be filed. **Hungary** has introduced online application processes for both EEA and non-EEA nationals, removing the need for individuals

to attend immigration offices (though strangely, the permit will then be mailed to the employer, rather than handed to the individual). **France** has moved certain naturalisation applications onto its online portal (although it is anticipated that all original documents that are submitted online will still be needed to be printed and available for the 'in person' interview, as part of the application). **Canada** also announced that from April 2023, Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIA) under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program will be digitized, removing paper and fax options; enabling employers to access real-time updates on the application status, and view correspondence and decision letters issued. **Canada** has also extended online tracking tools across numerous visa types, as a means to keep applicants informed, and to reduce contact with the authorities; with similar online tracking tools for short term employment permits in **Namibia** (with commitment from the **Namibian** government to extend online tracking across other employment categories).

Work passes, biometric identity documents and payment mechanisms are also moving into the digital world, across many countries. In a strive for efficiency, **Israel** has introduced new regulations allowing for the issuance of digital versions of all B-1 work visas (the irony here is that certain individuals will still be required to physically attend the Consulate once a work permit is approved). Upon arrival to **Israel**, the B-1 work visa, a longer validity visa and a multiple-entry visa will also now be issued electronically. **Malaysia** has announced it will grant electronic pass (ePass) for employment pass (EP)



## 2023: Continued Protectionism

Prior to the pandemic, protectionism was one of the most significant issues we debated as a community, with individual countries setting policy agendas that explored the tension between the objectives of highly globalised employers requiring access to migrant workers on the one hand, and protecting the employment prospects and conditions of domestic nationals on the other. The premise was that local workers (however you define them) should have some sort of preferential access to the national labour market. This could be seen across all high-income countries, almost worldwide; from the H1-B process in the **USA**, via the heavily prescribed Skilled Worker regime in the **UK**, to the pre-pandemic **Swedish** immigration model, where for ten successive years domestic labour laws were extended to all migrant workers, preventing undercutting and simultaneously limiting immigration.

2023 presents no exception to continued protection of the local labour workforces, and this global phenomenon looks set to continue into 2024. What is interesting is identifying the countries that are now looking to present further protections; as part of re-setting labour trends to be resilient in a post-pandemic world. For example, from 1 January 2023, the Labour Department in **Malaysia** made it mandatory for companies intending to hire foreign nationals to obtain approval from their department before the submission of the initial work permit, an administrative hurdle for employers and employees alike in seeking approval to work in a country.

But protectionism is not just concerned with approvals; as successive government approaches have demonstrated in changes to immigration and labour laws in 2023 Q1. The government of the **United Arab Emirates**<sup>3</sup> has implemented a mandatory unemployment insurance scheme for employees working in any private or government sector organization. The scheme is called the Involuntary Loss of Employment (ILOE) and employees can subscribe for it online, or through any other authorized insurance providers. Once applicants are eligible, they will receive 60 percent of their basic salary for three months if they lose their job due to reasons beyond their control. In a move similar to the **UAE**, the **Swedish** government has proposed a bill that would, among other changes, require private health care insurance for all foreign nationals, as well as

renewals. The endorsement sticker that is usually affixed onto the foreign national's passport showing the renewed pass will be replaced by the ePass. **Sierra Leone** launched an Identity Verification System that can be used by foreign nationals to open bank accounts, apply for credit cards and other public services, as a means to digitize the economy and further improve public service delivery.

### An Inroad in AI

In February 2023, **Portugal** confirmed that it has started using artificial intelligence tools to process citizenship applications. The tool will validate the authenticity of documents (instead of manual verification by the Institute of Registration and Notary Affairs) following an online application. The tool reduces the application processing time and reduces visits to government offices during the application process. The tool is part of the government's efforts to make government processes more efficient and digitized.

<sup>3</sup> <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/unemployment-insurance-scheme>

introduce a minimum salary requirement (on par with the median salary in Sweden) with exemptions for certain occupations, with an outright ban on certain work permits for certain occupations. In March 2023, the outgoing Head of the Swedish Migration Agency, Mikael Ribbenvik, conceded that the current Swedish immigration system is a confusing patchwork of rules<sup>4</sup>, and so it is even more interesting that in addressing those rules protectionism remains. Correspondingly, in a move similar to **Sweden**, applicants for the **Estonian D-Visa** must now evidence sufficient funds, whilst most renewals of temporary residence permits from July 2023 must demonstrate Estonian language proficiency.

These are all countries that have a proven track record in amending and updating immigration controls and laws to react to changing societal needs. But interestingly in 2023 Q1, we have also witnessed **Panama** introduce potential immigration reforms aimed at modernizing 20-year-old work permit policy, as a means to adapt to **Panama's** developing economy and market needs. Though some of the reforms do indeed enable international companies to benefit from special regimes in the country to attract foreign direct investment, the reforms also importantly include restrictions to protect local workers more broadly.

## Protectionism and Public Policy

But what is fuelling continued protectionism, especially in light of the already explored global trend of relaxations to rules, and a demystification of some procedures? An immediate response might be to determine that those countries that continue to introduce domestic protectionism are doing so to protect precarious economic conditions; but that itself does not correlate with the positions of those countries GDP world rankings<sup>5</sup>; which shows significant variation, for example, between **Sweden** (ranked 22 of the 190 countries examined by the World Bank) and **Estonia** (ranked 100). Another factor plays a role in the continued strength of protectionist policies – public opinion or the “politics of immigration/migration”. A look back at the last five years of post-Brexit **UK** will demonstrate that concerns on population increase, the potential strains on depleted public services, and media interest in the impact migration will have to the ongoing prosperity of the economy, continue to place immigration at the forefront of the national headlines. Brexit was almost the poster child for that debate, and latest YouGov<sup>6</sup> statistics would indicate that 81% of the



**UK** population (irrespective of age, gender, political persuasion, or location) still believe that the government is handling immigration badly. Yet, the same polling body show that the placement of immigration as the most important issue facing the **UK** has fallen significantly since a pre-Brexit High of 71% in 2015, to a relative 29% low in 2023 (the only time immigration has charted lower was in the early stages of the pandemic, when public health became the most significant issue and stayed there for quite a while).<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, the most important issue, according to **UK** nationals polled, facing the UK in 2023 is the economy.

## Conclusions

The world of immigration and visa policy continues to be a mass of contradictions; as the world readjusts to the ecosystem of 2023. Immigration rule relaxation still sits alongside continued protectionism; as countries explore which side of the debate is right for their own economic prosperity; tackling both the socio-economic and socio-political issues of the now and tomorrow. Accelerated technology advancement continues to disrupt, drive and develop; impacting the cross-border cycle in new ways from pre-entry through to return; and possibly leading to a more intuitive global immigration and visa footprint; where streamlined, consumer led and economically revitalised countries will continue to adapt the way they operate to meet new demands, ever-changing priorities and needs. The countries (from Albania to Vietnam) listed in this document by no means represent the entire mobile and globalised world, and circa 25% of the possible countries that could form part of this debate. It will be interesting to see how far the themes explored above extend into 2023 Q2 and beyond, and importantly which countries will appear in our next review.

4 <https://www.thelocal.se/20230317/swedish-migration-agency-boss-admits-confusing-patchwork-of-rules/>

5 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>

6 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/how-the-government-is-handling-the-issue-of-immigration-in-the-uk>

7 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/education/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country>