2023 Q2 REVIEW

An examination of the immigration and visa changes in 2023 Q2, and alignment to the CIBT Five Flagships

2023 Q1: An Introduction

As 2023 Q1 saw a world moving away from restrictive mobility due to the global pandemic, with international borders opening, significant trade and travel corridors being utilized in ways they hadn't seen since 2019, and concessions in both immigration and visa rules that were inexorably linked to the early stages of a world in pandemic being removed, 2023 Q2 carries on with that trend. We have reviewed over 130 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 whilst the uncertain world continues, the lessened legacy of Covid has been replaced with other considerations, including a broader public health consideration, political unrest, negative natural world events, and the labour consequences

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

This is the third installment in a four-paper series that reviews over 130 news items, government announcements, and public policy changes and thematically links them to present an immigration and visa global state of play.

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inexorably linked to a world in threat of economic downturn. Indeed, economic considerations play a heavy part in determining how rules are implemented and relaxed, both to revitalize country economies and deal with skills shortages, and in an ongoing war for talent. Inroads in digitization and artificial intelligence are revolutionising the cross-border cycle at pace. We have also seen continuing protectionism, removal of immigration and travel policies that do not suit the evolving economic situation, and a number of burdensome regulations being introduced. But what can we learn from a review of April 2023 to June 2023, and how far is it a continuation of what we witnessed in 2023 Q1, and how much is new? 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 2023 Q2.

2023 Q2: 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) had encountered further delays until at least 2024 and that the UK will move forward with plans to introduce its own Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) system, starting with Qatari nationals in October 2023 (with further extensions for GCC citizens and Jordanian nationals in 2024); there have been a number of developments in 2023 Q2 surrounding further details of the proposed UK system. Upon launch of the ETA to Qatari citizens in 2023, applicants will only be required to pay one third (£10) for the ETA, compared to the £30 they currently pay per visit to the UK. This will also apply to citizens of Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, when they fall under the scheme. Similarly, Jordanian nationals will only pay one tenth of the current £100 fee for a visit visa.

In a move to revitalise the travel economy, from April 1, South Korea has temporarily exempted nationals from 22 countries (among them, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, Taiwan, UK and the USA), from Korean Electronic Travel Authorization (K-eTA) requirement for entry. Citizens from other visa-free countries not included on the list must continue to apply for K-ETA at least 72 hours prior to entry. Travellers from those exempted countries are still permitted to apply for a K-ETA, which will then continue to exempt them from the need to complete an arrival card at the port of entry.

Significant Inroads in Digitization

2023 Q2 saw another significant global move to digitization, across multiple countries.

In the travel world, Japan has opened eVisa capabilities for citizens of Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Mongolia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, the UAE, the UK and the USA for tourism purposes; although cash payments may still be required at the Japanese Embassy or Consulate General in some cases. Once an eVISA is obtained, applicants must present a "Visa Issuance Notice" to airlines prior to departure. In a move to attract tourism and foreign investment, Cameroon has launched an e-Visa system that enables business travellers and tourists the ability to apply for transit, long-stay and tourism visas online. Applicants can apply, make payments, check application and download the completed e-Visa within 72 hours of submission, a stark contrast to the 10 day wait time previously. Originally launched to facilitate visa processing for the FIFA World Cup in 2022, the Qatari *Hayya* platform has been expanded to allow for applicants to obtain entry visas for business and tourism, although foreign travellers eligible for a visa-on-arrival may continue to enter Qatar without having to apply for a visa in advance. South Africa added citizens of 20 additional countries (including Albania, Algeria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cuba, Ghana, Romania, and Slovakia, among others) to the existing 14 countries on the e-Visa nationals list. Eligible applicants can apply

online for an e-Visa for tourism or business visitor activities. Whilst physical cards can still be used, since May, China now accepts digital versions of the APEC Business Travel Card for the purposes of entry. Looking forward, it was confirmed that Equatorial Guinea's e-Visa digital platform will launch fully on July 1, 2023 for single-entry business and tourist visa applications.

Regarding authorisation to work, there were numerous moves to digitization in a number of ways, significantly the ways in which applications will be filed. In April, Hong Kong SAR moved initial visa and extension of stay applications, payments and issuance for certain talent admission schemes onto its online platform. Malaysia further extended its existing ePass provisions for renewal applications of Foreign Knowledge Workers, removing the need to have a physical endorsement in the applicant's passport; and announced a new "Xpats Gateway" initiative, which aims to centralize the various requests for the Support Letter, necessary for immigration applications, from different authorities and regulators onto one single platform; as means to speed up the documentary gathering period prior to submitting an EP application via the Expatriate Services Division portal. Foreign workers seeking to apply for a work permit in Panama must now first register via a new online system, which includes using integrated web software to take applicant photographs, submit personal information and then creates a PDF confirmation from the site to submit with the work permit application. Singapore launched a revised EP eServices platform, with upgraded accessibility and new features, allowing users to now undertake all Employment Pass and S Pass transactions, and focusing on user experience feedback to develop the system further. Oman launched a Ministry of Health supported, electronic self-service medical fitness examination tool for individuals who are who are required to undergo medical testing for immigration purposes, including those applicants for initial or renewed residency cards, and employers of foreign nationals.

Access Denied and Digitizing a Region

While the great inroads in digitization are most welcomed, 2023 Q2 also saw a number of online services buckling under pressure. At various points throughout the quarter, online tools being used in Brazil, Peru and France all were either suspended for brief periods, or not working optimally. This could lead to accessibility issues, delays in processing, and inability to track applications while the systems reconfigured. Specifically, high demand for appointments to submit biometrics in Costa Rica led to delays in successfully applying for initial visas or residence permits. Biometrics are required before a migrant worker can apply initial Residence Identity Card which could restrict an individual's ability to travel aboard, restrict access to some government services (such as obtaining a driving licence) and open a bank account.

Perhaps most significantly; the return to travel, depleted staffing at visa centres, and differing country policies use during pandemic recovery seem to continue to significantly impact the Schengen visa application process, even in 2023. In scenes similar to the previous two summers, high demand and a target by bots to book appointments as soon as they became available has led to delays already being experienced in April 2023, indicating that the Schengen appointment system was going to falter once more, with applicants waiting months for visas. This has led to some news outlets already labelling 2023 as another "summer of discontent" in the Schengen Zone. With the issues surrounding delays, growing security concerns, and a need to make the application more consumer focused, in June the European Council and the European Parliament provisionally agreed on rules to digitalise the Schengen visa application process. Digitization would replace the current visa stickers with online versions, but will go much further: digitization will allow for applicants to upload the relevant information and documents to support a Schengen visa application, in person consular appointments will only be required upon initial application, those applying with a new travel document, or those to need to renew out of date biometric information; the system will determine which country should review the application (which will be very helpful for trips to multiple destinations) and decisions would be communicated online. Whilst this is very encouraging, it is worth noting that, even when fully ratified, transitioning to a consistent digitized process might take many years, as EU countries will be permitted to gradually implement digital processes in line with new EU policy/Directives.

Conclusions

The world of immigration and visa policy continues to be a mass of contradictions; as the world readjusts to the ecosystem of 2023. At the end of 2023 Q2, and now halfway through the year, swathes of relaxations of the rules to revitalize economies and deal with skills shortages still sits alongside continued attempts to protect the local labour and enforce penalties for non-compliance of rules, many of which are changing rapidly. Countries are using both increasingly opening, and increasingly closing borders as a means to address the socio-economic and socio-political issues of the now and the tomorrow. Accelerated technology advancement, particularly in digitization, continues to disrupt, drive and develop; impacting the cross-border cycle in new ways and possibly leading to a more streamlined, consumer led discourse between applicant and authorities. Economically revitalised and challenged countries will continue to adapt the way they operate to meet new demands, ever-changing priorities and needs. It will be interesting to see how far the themes explored above extend into 2023 Q3 and beyond, and importantly which countries will appear in our next review.