

COVID-19 EMERGING IMMIGRATION, CONSULAR AND VISA NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

BRIEF III – THE FRAGILE RELAUNCH OF GLOBAL MOBILITY

This Brief presents the most recent findings from the ongoing identification of immigration, consular and visa needs initiative launched as part of the IOM COVID-19 Response.

It offers an update to the IOM recommendations presented in Brief I by focusing on the gradual reopening of mobility channels.

Previous editions of the Brief can be found here: [Previous Briefs](#)

As containment measures are gradually eased in many countries, the management of mobility and the expected mid and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on migration and mobility have become one of the priority concerns for Member States. Governments around the world have started planning and implementing measures for the reopening of regular migration and mobility channels. For many countries the process of re-opening is likely to be a medium rather than short-term priority, cognisant that there is always the risk of a second wave of the pandemic and that mobility restrictions may be re-imposed.

While recognizing that there is no clear blueprint on how to safely enable human mobility in a world where COVID-19 is likely to be ever-present, as stated in the newly released IOM Policy Paper [Cross-Border Human Mobility Amid and After COVID-19](#), this Brief offers a **new set of technical recommendations** formulated for the consideration of Member States to develop targeted reopening strategies and fit-for-purpose immigration procedures towards the relaunch of safe and inclusive mobility channels. These latest recommendations offer an update to those formulated in [Brief I](#) and are geared towards recovery measures.

KEY FINDINGS

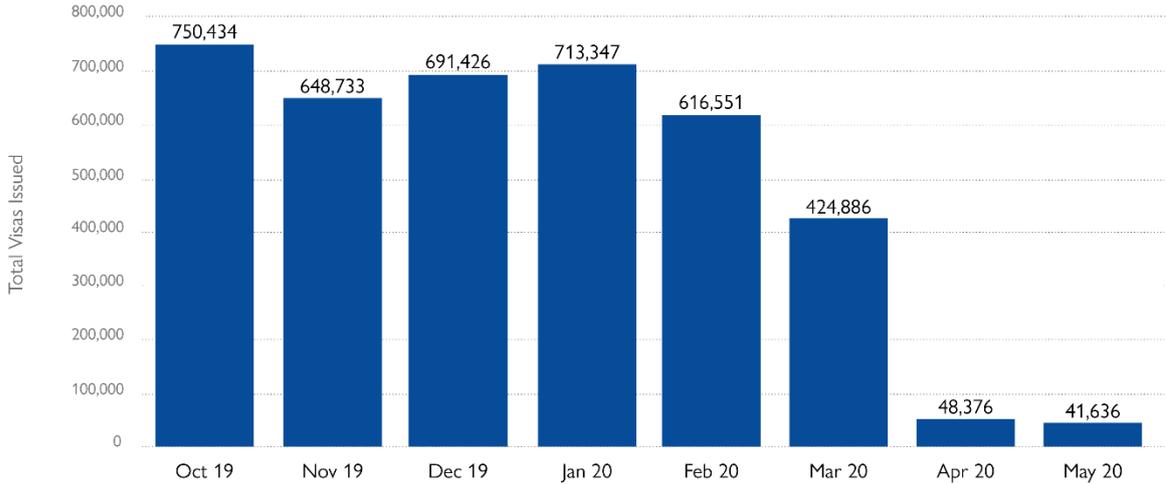
Identified Trends: The Implications of Reopening Regular Pathways

Although the long-term consequences of COVID-19 on global mobility systems remain uncertain, ongoing changes to immigration systems are expected to have a lasting effect on the fabric of migration and mobility moving forward. The latest findings of the Emerging Immigration, Consular and Visa Needs initiative presented in this Brief **focus on the various implications of the gradual resumption of migration pathways.**

The limitations on visa processing and the sharp decline in immigration worldwide underscore the difficulties in current reopening efforts and, more importantly, the long-term implications for global mobility's eventual return to pre-pandemic levels.

As an indicative point of reference highlighting COVID-19’s impact on immigration policies and procedures, the most recent statistics from the U.S. Department of State confirm that visa issuance plummeted to under 42,000 in May 2020, down from 713,000 in January 2020 – a more than 90% drop in monthly volumes. This trend is likely to continue as consulates remain closed. While comparable figures vary across the globe, this example serves to highlight the magnitude of the challenge.

Visas Issued by the United States – Fiscal Year 2020
Total Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Visas



Source: U.S. Department of State, Visa Statistics, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics.html>

The following trends detail ways in which Member States are approaching reopening measures while also highlighting some of the **risks associated with current reopening plans amidst the uncertain and rapidly changing environment of the ongoing pandemic.**

Implementing Mobility Corridors and their Limitations

Through their key role in the resumption of economic activity and the need to develop innovative and safe ways to facilitate passage, mobility corridors are at the centre of current immigration related developments for relaunching mobility. Since mid-May (as included in [Brief II](#)), a number of mobility corridors, also known as travel bubbles, have been implemented or are being developed amongst countries with low or decreasing pandemic curves. These corridors facilitate certain forms of passage and rely on bilateral or regional arrangements between governments to prioritize certain travellers. At this stage, the implementation of mobility corridors tends to focus on re-establishing passage between neighbouring countries, with a view to facilitate tourism, trade, and business activities. As a result, their role is central to ongoing recovery efforts and the staged reopening of border and immigration processes.

Government Approaches – Selected examples:

- The Baltic States have established the first European “travel bubble”, allowing citizens and residents of **Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia** to move freely amongst the three countries.¹
- On June 15, **China and Singapore** established a COVID-19 travel bubble to facilitate mobility for business purposes. Nationals of both countries will be allowed to move freely without needing to quarantine.²
- On June 5, the **Czech Republic** reopened its border with neighboring Austria, Germany and Slovakia and dropped travel restrictions with Hungary.³

*Mobility corridors are also under development in other locations: **Japan** is considering establishing a mobility corridor with **Thailand, Viet Nam, Australia, and New Zealand**⁴, while **Greece**⁵ is in discussion with the **United Kingdom** to implement a secure corridor with exemption from quarantine requirements.*

Generalized use of mobility corridors in the longer-term has the potential to normalize this limited and exclusionary form of global mobility, to the potential detriment of migrants and people on the move. Further fragmentation within global mobility systems, could have a direct impact on decades-long efforts to facilitate access to global mobility, for example through the development of free movement zones. As a reference, several temporary travel bubbles are for example currently operating within the Schengen Area, creating pockets of restricted mobility within the free travel zone. Additionally, despite the general understanding regarding the importance of maintaining the movement of essential and humanitarian personnel (including UN staff), their mobility continues to be heavily impaired by limited coordination efforts and logistical difficulties. The recent resumption of resettlement activities, announced by UNHCR and IOM, is also facing significant operational challenges due to the widespread travel restrictions that remain in place, highlighting the pressing need for continuous coordination with government partners.⁶

The implementation of travel bubbles is a key step for countries looking to relaunch mobility through a staged process. Amongst other advantages, it allows Member States to prepare and adapt immigration processes to health imperatives on a smaller scale before they are generalized to more migration pathways. Their establishment as temporary and transitional measures for the resumption of economic

¹ Coronavirus: Baltic states open a pandemic “travel bubble”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52673373>, BBC, 15.05.2020

² Singapore-China to open essential travel corridor in early June, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-singapore-china/singapore-china-to-open-essential-travel-corridor-in-early-june-idUSKBN2352A0>, Reuters, 29.05.2020

³ Czechs drop travel restrictions for Austria, Germany, Hungary from noon on Friday, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-czech-borders/czechs-drop-travel-restrictions-for-austria-germany-hungary-from-noon-on-friday-idUSKBN23COLA>, Reuters, 05.06.2020

⁴ Japan to ease entry for Thais, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/easy/1937604/japan-to-ease-entry-for-thais>, Bangkok Post, 19.06.2020

⁵ Why Portugal isn't on the UK air bridge list and travel quarantine rules still apply – but Greece was made exempt, <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/travel/portugal-air-bridge-uk-list-countries-quarantine-travel-rules-greece-exempt-explained-469886>, INews, 03.07.2020

⁶ Joint Statement: IOM Director General Antonio Vitorino and UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi Announce Resumption of Resettlement Travel for Refugees, https://www.iom.int/news/joint-statement-iom-director-general-antonio-vitorino-and-un-high-commissioner-refugees-0?utm_source=IOM%20External%20Mailing%20List&utm_campaign=521b029098-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_06_18_02_26&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_9968056566-521b029098, 18.06.2020

activity still needs to incorporate longer term considerations to avoid the eventual entrenchment of disjointed approaches that may increase socio-economic inequalities across regions and further marginalize migrants in vulnerable situations.

Challenges in Determining Who Can Travel

As the initial mobility restrictions enacted in mid-March have been lifted in a number of places and amidst persisting uncertainty regarding the likelihood of a second-wave of the pandemic prompting a return to isolation, many countries are looking into their options for slowly relaunching mobility. As part of the identified approaches for the reopening of borders and immigration procedures, Member States are taking active steps to determine who is able to access mobility, and under what conditions. These decisions are often linked to economic recovery considerations and the prioritization of certain pathways, such as those for business travel, which are at the heart of the socio-economic recovery process.

The reopening of immigration processes poses significant challenges to the facilitation of equal access to mobility by requiring considerable adaptations to adequately integrate health imperatives. Avoiding exclusion is the first basic tenet for the advancement of safe and inclusive human mobility after COVID-19, as outlined by the UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief: [COVID-19 and People on the Move](#). Low resource countries may lack the capacity to implement these new and often costly methods to safely relaunch mobility, which in turn risks excluding entire groups from accessing regular migration pathways. At this juncture, many migrants, including those in vulnerable situations, such as temporary workers, families and students, amongst others, continue to be affected by travel bans. Country-specific responses to the pandemic and their evolving containment measures are having direct consequences on access to mobility. For example, the easing of travel restrictions and the creation of mobility corridors in Europe include total bans on current "high-risk" origin countries such as the United Kingdom and Sweden⁷. Related to this, a recent trend in Member States' preparations for reopening has also been the implementation of reciprocal restrictions where the measures that are put in place by one country for certain nationals (for example quarantines), are mirrored by their counterparts for their own nationals and residents.

While planning for reopening is not yet an option for the many Member States still fighting the pandemic through lockdowns, in those with targeted reopening plans, access to immigration processes, such as visa processing capabilities, remains severely limited, particularly for more vulnerable migrant categories. Numerous situations of stranded migrants prevail in many locations, with many countries still working towards the return some of their nationals.

⁷ Britons and Swedes Remain Subject to Quarantine when Traveling to the Netherlands, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/britons-and-swedes-remain-subject-to-quarantine-when-traveling-to-the-netherlands/>, Schengen Visa Info, 25.06.2020

At this stage, the following pathways remain generally absent from ongoing or announced reopening plans.

International Student Mobility

International students faced considerable vulnerabilities following the worldwide containment and travel restriction measures that were put in place at the start of the pandemic. In several countries, permits were suspended and options for the re-entry of students abroad was eliminated, with limited access to immigration processes. As countries examine options for relaunching mobility, international students do not appear to be at the forefront of the gradual reopening of immigration processes. Throughout the world, those affected face uncertainty, limited information and reduced options for the continuation of their studies, with some countries reportedly eliminating certain pathways for admission and visa types entirely, or considering a suspension of student stay permits for those enrolled in schools holding classes entirely online. Selected countries are beginning to address these gaps, while taking steps to alleviate the profound economic losses faced by educational institutions. Measures are being discussed, including charter flights for students⁸, but in most cases, plans for restarting business travel and tourism seem to have been prioritized over the needs of international students seeking to study abroad or return to their country of origin. Although virtual learning and remote classes have been implemented by a number of educational institutions, in some cases up to 2021, capacity gaps in processing resources and health testing measures appear as one of the factors behind the exclusion of international students from initial reopening plans.

Government Approaches – Selected examples:

- **Canada** is making amendments to rule related to Post Graduation Work Permits applications, adding online course options to the study requirements.⁹
- **France** has announced it will reopen its borders to foreign students in July and has declared that study permit requests will be given priority.¹⁰

Family Reunification

In many countries, processing of most visa types, including family reunification visas, were suspended at the outset of the pandemic. This has resulted in many families being separated due to travel restrictions, sometimes unable to access timely consular and/or immigration support. Following the gradual reopening of some borders and the reintroduction of consular support and access to External Service Providers (ESPs) to submit visa applications, not all countries have prioritized family reunification caseloads. In some cases, immediate family members have been added to the select groups of prospective migrants allowed to cross borders, but family

⁸ British universities explore charter flights for international students, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/09/british-universities-explore-charter-flights-international-students>, Inside Higher Ed, 09.07.2020

⁹ France to allow int'l students in from July, <https://thepienews.com/news/france-exempt-students-restrictions/>, The Pie News, 15.06.2020

¹⁰ What you should know: Work and study permits for international students in Canada, <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/study-permit-work/>, SI News, 16.06.202

reunification is currently absent from various mobility corridors that are being implemented. The relaunch of global mobility requires adequate immigration related support for the timely incorporation of migrants seeking family reunification pathways, in support of the right to family unity.

Government Approaches – Selected examples:

- **New Zealand** reopened and prioritized visa application processing for family reunification, along with skilled worker visas.
- **Switzerland** has once again started to issue visas for family reunification purposes to family members of EU/EEA citizens, and to family members of residents in Switzerland.

The pandemic has had a direct impact on who is able to access mobility systems and under which conditions. Several of the immigration policies being rolled out or planned for reopening include entry bans by nationality and/or country of origin, with more stringent requirements being imposed based on the number of coronavirus cases in countries of origin. As a reference, while many internal border controls for citizens of the European Union have been lifted, only 15 countries have been considered for access into the bloc starting from July 2020¹¹. While this list is expected to be reviewed every two weeks, such an approach serves to reiterate the fragile nature of the current relaunch of global mobility.

Enhanced Health Checks in Immigration Processes

As part of the efforts to integrate health measures at borders and during immigration processes for the medium and long-term, as expressed in the IOM Policy Paper [Cross-Border Human Mobility Amid and After COVID-19](#), several countries have started to roll out changes to their visa requirements and procedures. These changes include enhanced health check requirements, with migrants being increasingly asked to submit additional health-related documentation and/or COVID-19 testing results, sometimes despite scientific evidence questioning the usefulness of such tests. The increased use of health certificates and health checks is being observed, while several of the quarantine measures that were implemented at the start of the global mobility restrictions have been maintained and/or enhanced in several countries, both before departure and upon arrival. For countries exploring or using mobile contact tracing applications meant to enhance containment measures, privacy and technical challenges continue to hinder their interoperability and generalized adoption, amongst other challenges. Nonetheless, the introduction of these technological solutions serves to illustrate the various ways in which countries are approaching the relaunch of global mobility. These new measures require substantial and costly adjustments driven by on the health-related and technical capacities required for their deployment.

¹¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/30/council-agrees-to-start-lifting-travel-restrictions-for-residents-of-some-third-countries/>, European Council, 30.06.2020

Government Approaches – Selected examples:

Pre-Travel and Post-Arrival Quarantines

- The **United Kingdom** lifted its mandatory two-week quarantine for travellers from certain countries, but it remains in place for others, with checks being conducted to verify travellers' compliance.
- Travellers to **Tonga** are required to spend 14 days in self-isolation in a country with fewer than 60 cases of coronavirus before entering the country.

Visa Requirements

- The **Republic of Korea** has begun requiring mandatory health certificates proving the absence of COVID-19 symptoms when applying for a visa.
- The **People's Republic of China** is now requiring submission of a new Health Declaration Form when applying for a visa.

Health Screenings

- **Greece** has announced a reopening of its borders from July 1, with all travellers required to undergo a COVID-19 test. The results of the tests will be delivered within 24 hours and will help determine who can enter the country.
- **Iceland** offers all incoming travellers COVID-19 tests. Those who test negative are exempted from quarantine.
- The **Democratic Republic of Congo** requires people leaving the country to take a COVID-19 test which must come back negative to be allowed to leave.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following set of recommendations are formulated for Member States that are gradually lifting travel restrictions and relaunching cross-border human mobility. As an update to those formulated in [Brief I](#), they offer guidance for the **adaptation and coordinated resumption of immigration procedures**.

Reinforce immigration systems in anticipation of the reopening of mobility channels and visa procedures, implementing the necessary public health tools and operational enhancements. Protracted decision-making harms migrants in vulnerable situations and undermines the integrity of regular mobility pathways.

- 1. Allocate additional resources for the adaptation and execution of measures** that include:
 - a. Physical distancing practices and other COVID-19 containment measures at all steps along the migration continuum, from the submission of visa and permit applications to cross-border mobility procedures at points of entry, and admission and stay considerations. These procedures often require attending a designated health assessment provider, biometrics enrolment and visa application submission at an external visa application center service provider, amongst other steps.
 - b. Sufficient resources and capacity for the management of immigration processes, including, infrastructure, funds to restart operations and refresher training for staff regarding changes to admission and stay policies as well as renewed training for and enhanced oversight of External Service Providers (ESPs) operating visa applications centres, to ensure the safe, dignified and efficient processing of visa applications and the prioritization and tailored assistance to migrants in vulnerable situations.
- 2. Implement the necessary tools to adequately integrate health measures within immigration and travel procedures¹²**, basing new health requirements on scientific, fact-based evidence, including for the following measures:
 - a. Comprehensive pre-departure public health measures, such as health education, diagnostics, therapeutics, referrals, preventive measures, and health-information sharing, as well as migration health assessments prior to travel;
 - b. Proper physical distancing measures in place in travel hubs and at points of entry (PoEs), coupled with handwashing stations and frequent sanitizing;
 - c. Health screening measures that are evidence-based, limiting the use of thermal screening and self-declaration forms;
 - d. Pre-departure and post-arrival quarantine measures that are properly coordinated, particularly to assist migrants in vulnerable situations;
 - e. Implementation of contact tracing measures to ensure effective monitoring of any infection spread while ensuring compliance with applicable data protection regulations;
 - f. Engagement with public health authorities to guarantee a whole-of-government approach to health-proofing measures.
- 3. Design contingency plans for the management of backlogs in immigration applications** resulting from a surge in requests, including through the establishment of technical solutions such as:

¹² As described in the IOM Policy Paper “Cross-Border Human Mobility Amid and After COVID-19”, https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/default/pp_cross-border_human_mobility_amid_and_after_covid-19_policy.pdf, 17.06.2020

- a. Remotely accessible tools, establishing online platforms wherever possible in local languages with multiple fee payment methods;
- b. Fit for purpose, case management systems to guarantee a fair and timely processing and tracking of applications;
- c. Secure appointment scheduling systems;
- d. Data privacy and compliance with internationally accepted protection standards;
- e. Safe and accountable technology.

Enhanced coordination in implementing revised pre-departure procedures and proportional entry requirements at the bilateral, regional, and global levels for the reopening of immigration processes.

4. **Ensure that comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures are in place at points of entry** to facilitate effective cross-border communication between immigration authorities about changes to visa and permit regulations and exemptions to quarantine procedures, amongst others.
5. **Avoid the implementation of reciprocal entry requirements and targeted travel restrictions** by ensuring measures are based on scientific evidence and recommended public health guidelines, including the International Health Regulations and other relevant global health frameworks. .

Integrate plans for reopening into long-term recovery schemes to include all migrant categories. Ensure that migrants in vulnerable situations have access to adapted immigration requirements when accessing regular pathways.

6. **Limit exclusions** to reopened immigration procedures by:
 - a. Extending mobility corridors, or travel bubbles, beyond emergency and humanitarian cases, to include family reunification, international students and temporary foreign workers.
 - b. Establishing mobility schemes that do not discriminate based on nationality or country of departure, enforcing reasonable conditions and health-related entry requirements based on scientific and evidence-based policies.
7. **Implement and maintain flexible visa application and permit procedures and requirements to avoid penalizing applicants** in irregular situations resulting from COVID-19. This includes the following non-exhaustive measures:
 - a. Continuation of penalty or fee waivers for late renewals and overstays of visas and permits;
 - b. Expedited application processes for individuals whose visas and permits have expired due to their inability to travel as a result of worldwide mobility restrictions;
 - c. Extending access to visa processing and regularization measures for migrants in vulnerable situations, beyond short-term stay authorizations;

Safeguard the integrity of immigration procedures by enhancing counter-fraud measures and actively countering misinformation. Tackle migrant exploitation through the delivery of accurate, timely and multi-channelled information in local languages.

8. **Allocate additional resources for the detection of fraud** within immigration procedures, with a focus on unscrupulous actors seeking to exploit prospective migrants and enhanced capabilities

to detect fraudulent documents. Maintain proper oversight of external service providers operating visa application centres, ensuring reasonable and transparent service fees, equitable access to visa application submission, and carefully monitoring the promotion of non-essential services, such as premium channels which expedite visa application processing for a higher service fee.

9. **Distribute comprehensive and up-to-date guidelines for migrants** regarding admission and stay regulations with clear descriptions in local languages, that include, amongst others, changes to visa schemes, permits, migratory regulations; modifications to documentary requirements and submission methods; details about updated health screening processes. Ensure external service providers operating visa application centres continue to provide accurate and timely information services via multiple channels, in local languages, even if visa application centers are not fully operational.
10. **Centralize relevant visa and permit information and ensure its dissemination using multiple channels**, including via online platforms, immigration/consular websites, diplomatic/consular representations and call centres in local languages.

KEY FINDINGS FROM PREVIOUS BRIEFS

Previously identified immigration, consular and visa needs:

- Increased flexibility related to visa requirements to enhance mobility
- Provision of timely and accurate information to migrants
- Expanded processing resources and capacity
- Expansion of consular support
- Management of visa and permit backlogs and related technical support

Previously identified immigration related trends:

- Mobility corridors
- Merging of immigration and public health imperatives
- Flexible visa schemes
 - Seasonal permits
 - Healthcare and essential worker permits

IOM formulated the following recommendations for Member States regarding immigration, consular and visa procedures in Brief I. These recommendations offered guidance for immediate immigration-related responses to the containment measures implemented by Member States in the early phase of the pandemic.

- **Facilitate immigration and visa procedures for healthcare workers** and essential personnel responding to the pandemic and people with priority travel needs.
- **Expand remote consular support** to ensure the continuation of seasonal or temporary work programmes while anticipating possible backlogs for immigration agencies resulting from a surge of employment-based requests, once mobility restrictions are lifted.
- **Adapt regulations** to uphold legal frameworks and incorporate the necessary adjustments for migrants to stay in compliance with immigration rules. These regulations require adjusted submission and processing procedures, addressing the difficulties for submitting visa and permit applications and renewals.
- **Rethink existing immigration processes and programmes** for these to fully integrate public health imperatives while incorporating technological innovations.

Watch the related video [HERE](#).

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