

ABSTRACT

The Impact of Cultural Flows on National Identities: The Case of the Russo-Japanese Visa-less Exchange Program

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The collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound impact on global politics with many observers believing it would usher in a new period of peace and security. Many observers in Japan hoped the subsequent emergence of a decentralising and democratising Russian Federation would provide an opportunity to resolve a longstanding territorial dispute over a group of islands – known to the Russians as the Southern Kurils and to the Japanese as the Northern Territories – that had prevented both countries from signing a peace treaty and fully normalising bilateral relations.

In April 1991, the Soviet and Japanese governments agreed to a unique program of cross-cultural exchange. Called visa-less exchanges, the program, which began the following year, allows the current Russian inhabitants of the three disputed islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri and Shikotan to visit Japan without having to apply for entry-visas. Similarly, the obligation for the program's Japanese participants to carry a valid Russian visa has also been waived. From a Japanese perspective, visa-less exchanges were intended to supplement diplomacy by promoting mutual understanding among the program's participants and capturing the hearts and minds of the islands' Russian inhabitants, thereby securing their support for reversion of the Northern Territories. The program – now in its 11th year – has had mixed results: it has contributed to both a loosening of, and attempts to reaffirm, the islanders' macro- and micro-level territorial identities.