

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

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Introduction:

Globalisation, understood as time-space compression (the world getting faster and smaller),¹ and characterised in practical terms by the movement or flows of ideas, values, information, capital, technology and people, has resulted in disorientation and crises in representation. Given its close association with representation,² such dissonance and doubt can also be said to extend to various forms of identity – chief among them national and ethnic. The purpose of this paper is to examine these cultural flows across the Russo-Japanese frontier. It concentrates on a unique program, known as visa-less exchanges, in which these flows have been combined to fulfil a political purpose, and assesses the impact it has had on the national identity of the Russian inhabitants of a group of islands (known to Russians as the South Kurils and to Japanese as the Northern Territories) at the centre of a longstanding territorial dispute.

When speaking of Russian national identity, which scholars agree is in a profound state of flux and uncertainty,³ this study is informed by the earlier work of geographers such as David Kaplan and Guntram Herb who argue that “national identity is negotiated within a hierarchy of geographical scales. These can extend above the state, such as an identity that encompasses a group of countries or a continental region, and below the state such as a collection of localities and regions within countries.”⁴ This paper concentrates on the sub-state or local identity of the current Russian inhabitants of the South Kuril Islands.

Background:

The agreement to conduct visa-less exchanges (*biza nashi kôryû* in Japanese or *bevizovye obmeni* in Russian) between the disputed islands’ former and current inhabitants was reached during Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit to Japan in April 1991. The agreement was a compromise and

¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, cited in Chris Burgess, “The Asian Studies ‘Crisis’: Putting Cultural Studies into Asian Studies and Asia into Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Flows Manifesto: The Theoretical Basis and Direction of the Project*, http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/lcl/research/cf_manifesto.html, accessed 8 September 2002.

² Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew eds., *Modernity and its Futures*, Cambridge: Polity Press/The Open University, 1992, p. 301.

³ See for instance, Rolf H. W. Theen, “Quo Vadis, Russia? The Problem of National Identity and State-Building,” in Gordon B. Smith ed., *State-Building in Russia: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Challenge of the Future*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999, p. 43; Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 38.

product of the Soviet leader's weakening authority over domestic and foreign policy. Gorbachev's visit came amid high expectations in Japan of a resolution to the longstanding territorial dispute. However, by the time of the April 1991 summit, Gorbachev's economic reform program was floundering and his political position had subsequently become extremely unstable. Gorbachev was fully aware that should he accede to Japan's territorial demands, his political rivals, amongst them Boris Yeltsin, would use any suggestion of the Soviet Union surrendering the islands as grounds for his removal from office.⁵ The agreement was therefore, according to one Japanese scholar, "in a way, a concession by the Gorbachev administration that, its grip on power slipping, could not take any decisive action toward handing over the islands."⁶ The agreement absolved Gorbachev of the responsibility of deciding the islands' fate and importantly removed the threat of having the territorial dispute used against him by his political opponents.

Under the program, which some see as a pilot-study "to sort out the question of whether both sides were able to build a relationship based on peaceful coexistence and good neighbourly cooperation prior to reversion of the islands,"⁷ the current Russian residents of the disputed islands (except the Habomai islets which are unpopulated apart from a small detachment of border guards) are permitted to visit parts of Japan (mainly Hokkaido) without having to apply for entry-visas. Similarly, the obligation for the program's Japanese participants: the islands' former inhabitants, many of whom live in Hokkaido, their dependents, government officials, members of the Northern Territories Return Movement and journalists, to carry a valid Russian visa has also been waived. Instead of a passport and visa, Japanese travellers are given identification papers issued by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a slip of paper by the Russian Embassy certifying the person as a regular traveller as agreed to by both countries. Russian participants go through a similar procedure when visiting Japan.⁸

Along with a similar program of 'free visits' (*jiyū hōmon*), which began in September 1999,⁹ the visa-less exchange program is the only mechanism through which Japanese citizens are formally permitted to visit the Northern Territories. From the program's inception in April 1992 until February 2000, 3380 Japanese visited the Northern Territories and 3117 Russian islanders have travelled to Japan. Over two-thirds of the Japanese participants in the program hail from nearby Hokkaido, which is largely due to the fact that most of the former islanders settled there, after being expelled from the islands shortly after the end of the

⁴ David H. Kaplan and Guntram H. Herb, "Introduction: A Question of Identity," in Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan eds., *Nested Identities: Nationalism, Territory and Scale*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999, p. 4.

⁵ Lisbeth L. Tarlow, "Russian Decision Making on Japan in the Gorbachev Era," in Gilbert Rozman ed., *Japan and Russia: The Tortuous Path to Normalization, 1949-1999*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, p. 134.

⁶ Hiroshi Kimura, "Japan-Russia Relations: Exchanges Build Vital Trust," *Japan Times*, 31 July 2000, p. 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Asahi Shimbun*, 23 April 1992, p. 1.

⁹ 'Free visits' were agreed to during Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō's visit to Russia in November 1998. It allows for visits to the islands by the former Japanese inhabitants without the need for reciprocal visits by the Russian islanders to Japan.

Second World War, in the hope that they would soon be able to return to their homes. Hokkaido has also hosted most of the Russian visits.¹⁰

Previously, the only way the former Japanese citizens could travel to the islands was as members of small groups for the purpose of tending ancestral graves on Shikotan (an important Buddhist custom), or as part of occasional ‘vegetable missions.’ These visits, however, were rather sporadic as they were dependent upon Soviet goodwill and influenced by the general state of Soviet-Japan relations.¹¹ The Soviet government was not totally opposed to visits by former Japanese residents to the islands. In fact, the Soviets were quite receptive to the idea – but on one condition: Japanese citizens carry a valid Soviet tourist visa. The Japanese government considers the islands to be Japanese territory and the Soviet occupation illegal, thereby obviating the necessity for Japanese citizens to apply for Soviet visas in order to visit the islands. It feared that if Japanese citizens applied for Soviet visas to visit the islands, this could be seen as tacit recognition of Soviet sovereignty over the islands. As a result, Japanese authorities prohibited them from visiting the islands. Thus, the natural desire to visit one’s ancestral homeland had become entangled in and frustrated by the delicate issue of territorial sovereignty.

Although the visa-less exchange program is based on an intergovernmental agreement, municipal and regional governments in Hokkaido and Sakhalin, in cooperation with a variety of foundations and private organisations, play an important role in coordinating and organising the visits and also contribute financial assistance. The Hokkaido Prefectural Government has provided institutional support for the visits through the establishment of an 18-member Hokkaido Northern Territories Exchange Promotion Committee (*Hoppô Yontô Kôryû Hokkaidô Suishin Inkai*) in February 1992, which meets four-times a year to discuss details concerning the visits. The Committee is comprised of the *Chishima Renmei* – an organisation representing the interests of the former Japanese islanders, the *Hoppô Dômei*-a key group in the Northern Territories Return Movement, the Nemuro county municipal government (Hanasaki port in Nemuro is the primary arrival and departure point for the visits) and the Hokkaido Prefectural Government.¹²

¹⁰ Hokkaidôchô Sômbu Chijishitsu Kokusaika Roshiasitsu, *Hokkaidô to Roshia Kyokutô: Kôryû Jisseki to Kyokutô no Gaiyô*, 2000, p. 35.

¹¹ Soviet-Japan relations were in turn heavily influenced by the vagaries of US-Soviet relations. Since its inception in 1964, grave visits were allowed in 1968 and from 1971-73. No visits took place between 1976 and 1985 – a particularly tense period in bilateral relations – but recommenced in 1986, a year after Gorbachev’s rise to power.

¹² “Hoppô Yontô Kôryû Hokkaidô Suishin Inkai-tte nani shiteiru tokoro?” <http://www1.biz.biglobe.ne.jp/~yonto/index.htm>, accessed 9 May 2000.

The Politics of the Visa-less Exchange Program:

The visa-less exchanges are often couched in terms of promoting mutual understanding and friendship between the Russian and Japanese participants in the program. However, given the government's single-minded desire to recover the four islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and Habomai, which it asserts is a precondition to concluding a peace treaty with Russia, Japanese irredentism often casts a long shadow over the visa-less exchange program. From a Japanese perspective, the visits are intended to supplement diplomacy by contributing to creating an environment, at the subnational level, (referred to as *kankyô seibi*) conducive to resolving the territorial dispute.¹³ A Japanese Foreign Ministry official is required to accompany the Japanese delegation on board the ship bound for the islands. He gives a formal lecture on the Japanese government's official policy on the Northern Territories and is obligated to protest the customs declaration before landing on the islands.¹⁴

Japanese participants in the program are required to attend meetings and workshops prior to visiting the islands, which, in addition to discussing travel details, are used to remind those who may have forgotten the arguments underpinning the government's claim to the Northern Territories. Symposia to discuss the territorial dispute are also held on the islands. The participants also receive materials outlining aspects of the visit to which they need to pay particular attention. Reflecting the government's concern that the visits not undermine the official Japanese position on the Northern Territories, these materials include a detailed list of statements, which may imply Russian sovereignty over the Northern Territories, Japanese should refrain from making when visiting the islands.¹⁵ In addition to participating in homestay programs and various cultural activities, Russian and Japanese visitors attend joint-symposia where they exchange opinions about the territorial dispute.¹⁶ These meetings serve as a means for those involved in the Northern Territories Return Movement to enlighten the islands' current Russian inhabitants about the

¹³ The local Russian press has also noted that the Japanese aim of the visits is to promote a return of the islands. See for instance, *Sovetskii Sakhalin*, 8 November 1996, p. 2.

¹⁴ Nobuo Arai and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, "The Russian Far East in Russo-Japanese Relations," in Tsuneo Akaha ed., *Politics and Economics in the Russian Far East: Changing Ties With Asia-Pacific*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 177. Arai and Hasegawa also point out that this protest session has become a contest among Foreign Ministry officials, although these protests no longer have teeth, degenerating into mere formality.

¹⁵ These are: 1. Do not make statements that are premised on the fact that the Northern Territories are Russian territory; 2. Do not encourage or propose economic exchange and individual cooperation; 3. Do not make any statements that contradict the government's four-island policy; 4. Do not make any statements indicating you have given up on an early resolution of the Northern Territories problem; 5. Do not make unsubstantiated or emotional statements; 6. The Northern Territories are Japanese territory. Therefore, in statements and accounts concerning the Northern Territories and the Russians living there, avoid expressions, which suggest that the Northern Territories are Russian territory. For instance, do not call the area between Cape Nosappu and the Northern Territories "the border" and when travelling to and from the islands, do not say, "entering a country" or "returning to my country". When arriving use the expression "entering the area (not country)" and when departing "leaving the area." Cited in Kotani Hidejiro, *Hoppô Ryôdo to Borantia: 'Ri' wa 'Ware' ni Ari*, Tokyo: Maruzen, 2000, pp. 152-154.

¹⁶ Hoppô Yontô Kôryû Hokkaidô Suishin Inkaï ed, *Yontô Kôryû no Ayumi: '92-'94*, 1995.

“correct” historical and legal arguments underpinning the Japanese claim to the four islands, which is hoped will alleviate their opposition to territorial concessions.¹⁷

Since 1992, Japan has donated 40 000 tons of humanitarian aid, including diesel oil, food and medicine worth 400 to 500 million yen (\$3 to \$4 million), to the disputed islands.¹⁸ In response to a devastating earthquake that struck the region in October 1994, the emphasis on aid shifted to small-scale infrastructure projects such as a new port on Kunashiri, a clinic on Shikotan, diesel generators and other facilities. The visa-less exchange program also functions as a means of “reconnaissance,” for government officials and private groups, providing them with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the islanders’ aid requirements. Japanese builders and engineers contracted to work on these projects are also able to visit the islands without carrying Russian visas. There is no denying that Japanese largesse mainly derives from a genuine humanitarian concern for the islanders’ welfare. However, Japanese aid to the islands also fulfils a political purpose: it is clearly calculated to win the hearts and minds of the islanders’ and secure their support for reversion of the Northern Territories.¹⁹ In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the Japanese government has tried to use economic aid as a weapon to ensure local Russian officials do Japan’s bidding. In a report by authorities from the South Kuril and Kuril Districts to a public hearing on the territorial dispute organised by the Sakhalin *Oblast’* Duma in September 2001, it was claimed that an official Japanese delegation visiting the islands attempted to persuade the South Kuril District administration to send a petition to the Russian government to expedite conclusion of a peace treaty. If they did not petition the Russian government, the Japanese delegation reportedly threatened to discontinue humanitarian aid to the islands.²⁰

The (Soviet) State Giveth and (the Russian State) Taketh Away

The ‘Sovietisation’ of the Kurils

If the Japanese government sees the visa-less exchanges as a means of mobilising public opinion in the Kurils in favour of reversion, how successful has the program been? The results of early polls taken shortly before the Soviet Union’s collapse suggested that this might be a difficult task. A survey conducted by the Sakhalin *Oblast’* Communist Party Committee in March 1990 revealed strong

¹⁷ Announcement of the visa-less exchange program forced an official shift in the Northern Territories Return Movement’s public opinion mobilisation efforts in May 1991. The new strategy was to include a heightened emphasis on exchanges with the islands’ Russian inhabitants. *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 24 May 1991, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Asahi Shimbun*, 29 October 1998, p. 4.

¹⁹ Lucille Croft, “A Voice of Reason Campaigns for the Return of Japan’s Northern Territories,” *Japan Times*, 3 February 2000, p. 18; Inoue Eisuke, “Akireta Hoppō Yontō Jindō Shien: Kestuzei Tsuida ga ‘Senryakudaore’,” *Mainichi Shimbun*, 18 June 2002, <http://www.mainichi.co.jp/eye/kishanome/200206/18.html>, accessed 15 November 2002.

²⁰ *Sovetskii Sakhalin*, 15 September 2001, cited in *Saharin to Nihon*, no. 245, 20 September 2001, p. 2.

opposition to the-then Soviet Union handing over the islands to Japan.²¹ It is not surprising that such strong opposition to reversion would be found among the Kuril Islanders. Throughout the post-war period, Soviet citizens were ingrained with the belief that the islands were an inalienable part of the Motherland (*Rodina*) and that the entire Kuril archipelago was discovered, settled and developed by Russians.²² There are political figures in Russia today – most notably Sakhalin Governor, Igor Farkhutdinov – who continue to make these assertions.²³

Although the Russians may have periodically established small-scale settlements on the Kuril Islands, their claim to discovering and developing the islands is questionable. First, the Dutch navigator Vries is widely acknowledged to have discovered the Kuril Islands in 1643, although it should be pointed out that by this time they were already populated by the indigenous Ainu. Second, the islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai group never legally belonged to Russia prior to 1945 and were in fact settled by the Japanese until shortly after the end of the Second World War, challenging the argument that the Russians developed the islands. This certainly would have been obvious to the soldiers of the invading Soviet Red Army. One veteran of the Kurils campaign recalled that, “Kurilsk in 1946 looked like it came straight out of an oriental painting.”²⁴

It was not long before the Soviets began some brushwork of their own. The islands’ new rulers embarked upon a thorough program of ‘Sovietisation’ in which all traces of Japan were systematically erased; the islands’ approximately 17 000 Japanese inhabitants were expelled during a three-year period from 1946-48; and houses, temples and shrines were either destroyed or collapsed due to neglect, leaving only a few gravestones, unexploded shells, small warehouses and the odd piece of broken crockery for amateur archaeologists to unearth. The Soviets established their settlements, where Japanese villages once stood. These were renamed along with the islands.²⁵ They also erected monuments celebrating the islands’ ‘liberation,’ as well as the obligatory statues of Lenin, helping to create what Anssi Paasi refers to

²¹ Cited in the *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 17 August 2001, p. 7.

²² Professor John Stephan, an expert on the history of Russo-Japanese relations, notes a tenth-grade history textbook in the Soviet Union was unequivocal in its assertion of Soviet sovereignty over the islands: “[The Red Army]...returned to the Soviet motherland primordially (*iskonno*) Russian lands – southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands- which had been seized in the past by Japan.” Stephan further adds “However, one-sided this assertion, such sweeping claims appear to [have] enjoy[ed] broad popular support within the USSR, a tribute to the effectiveness of mass indoctrination and confirmation of how deeply run the roots of Russian patriotism.” M. P. Kima ed., *Istoriia SSSR*, 6th edition, Moscow, 1997, p. 115, cited in John J. Stephan, “Soviet Approaches to Japan: Images Behind the Policies,” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 6, no. 2, Fall/Winter 1982, p. 138.

²³ *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 19 October 1996, p. 5; *Svobodnyi Sakhalin*, 18 December 1997, p. 3.

²⁴ Y. K. Efremov, *Kurilskoe ozherele*, Moscow, 1951, p. 51, cited in John J. Stephan, *The Kuril Islands*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 180.

²⁵ Etorofu became Iturup and Kunashiri was renamed Kunashir. Shikotan’s name remained the same. The islands making up the Habomai group were also renamed (Russian names appear in parenthesis): Shibotsu (Taraku), Yuri (Yurii), Akiyuri (Anuchina), Suishō-tō (Tanfileva). The Soviets also grouped Habomai and Shikotan together, naming them the Malaya Kurilskaya gryada. See John J. Stephan, *The Kuril Islands*, pp. 248-252.

generically as a visible “socialist ideological landscape”²⁶ on the Kurils. There was thus very little to remind the Kurils’ new inhabitants of the preceding period of Japanese settlement, which facilitated the process of Soviet indoctrination.²⁷

Soviet authorities offered monetary and other incentives (popularly called ‘Stalin privileges’) in order to attract migrants and encourage settlement in the isolated and climatically harsh northern and eastern regions of the USSR.²⁸ The geographically isolated Kuril Islands suitably qualified as one such region. John Stephan notes that geographic isolation, the islands’ turbulent history and the demands of economic planning have shaped the character of society in the Kurils, which is perhaps most evident in the division of the population into two groups: permanent inhabitants and transient seasonal workers.²⁹ The former, who have dubbed themselves *kurilchane*, first arrived on the islands while Japanese settlers and soldiers were awaiting repatriation.³⁰ The *kurilchane* initially consisted of demobilised soldiers (many from the 1945 Kuril campaign), as well as fishers and their dependents from the Soviet Union’s war-devastated western regions.³¹ The islands’ ethnic composition mirrors many other parts of the Far East. Ethnic Russians comprise about 80 per cent of the Kuril population, followed by Ukrainians (10 per cent), Belorussians, Tartars, Jews and peoples from the Caucasus region.³²

Seasonal workers – also known as *sezoniki* – are mainly youths who have been enticed to work in the islands’ canneries and fishing cooperatives by the prospects good pay, free travel and sometimes romance.³³ Given the seasonal nature of work in the fishing industry – the backbone of the local economy – the islands’ population fluctuates significantly during the year. Nevertheless, the Kuril Islands’ population gradually grew until the mid- to late 1980s, peaking at about 24 000 just prior to the Soviet Union’s demise.

The strength of this local identity is a source of contention. Soviet literary sources claim that later generations of *kurilchane* born on the islands after 1945, formed attachments to what they refer to as their

²⁶ Although Paasi makes this statement in reference to Värtsilä, a commune in eastern Finland that was divided in two by the new Finnish-Soviet boundary drawn as a consequence of the Second World War, it is applicable to the Kuril Islands, as well as most towns and cities in the former Soviet Union. Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border*, Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 1996, p. 295.

²⁷ Andreas Rüesch, “Where Japan and Russia Almost Touch: Poverty and Uncertainty on the South Kurils,” *NZZ Online*, 13 September 2001, http://www.nzz.ch/English/background/2001/09/13_russia-japan.html, accessed 12 November 2002.

²⁸ John J. Stephan, *The Kuril Islands*, p. 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Oleg Bondarenko, *Hoppô Yontô Henkan no Susume*, Kimura Hiroshi ed., Tokyo: NHK Shuppan, 1994, p. 157.

³³ John J. Stephan, *The Kuril Islands*, p. 182.

“ancestral homes.”³⁴ However, Oleg Bondarenko, a Russian journalist who settled on Shikotan, notes the transient nature of Kuril society. He claims many islanders either have homes on the mainland or dream of buying one. Even those born on the islands call the mainland home. Moreover, many also do not care what happens to the islands after they leave.³⁵ Although he does not explicitly mention it, it is possible that Bondarenko refers to the islands’ seasonal workers. Nevertheless, the Soviet state, through its various incentives encouraging settlement on the Kurils, provided permanent inhabitants with a new identity or, in the very least, created the necessary conditions to establish one of their own.

Despite the geographic isolation and harsh climate, thanks mainly to Moscow’s monetary and various material inducements, the islands’ inhabitants generally considered life on the Kurils attractive. Unfortunately, the Kuril Islanders’ standard of living rested on very shaky foundations. The Kurils, like the rest of the Soviet Far East, was drawn into a classic core-periphery relationship with European Russia. The islands were heavily reliant on Moscow for subsidised food, energy and transport, as well as budgetary support for local administration, credits for enterprises and state purchases of the output from its fishing processing plants. Life on the Kurils abruptly changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991.

Radical economic reforms launched by the Gaidar-led Russian government in early 1992 severely impacted on the Kurils’ economy. Price liberalisation triggered hyperinflation, sending the prices of basic food and goods beyond the means of most citizens. It also sent transport costs skyrocketing, essentially prohibiting many people from leaving the islands and preventing shipments of fuel, food and other necessities from the mainland. The new Chernomyrdin (he replaced the enormously unpopular Yegor Gaidar as prime minister in December 1992) government adopted a series of austerity measures, including limiting the expansion of credit and reducing budget expenditures, in an attempt to stem inflation. This not only led to a withdrawal of all material inducements, but also other forms of central investment, particularly in production and infrastructure.³⁶ Despite repeated promises, federal programs for the socio-economic development of the islands remained either unfulfilled or seriously underfunded. Moscow could no longer pay wages nor provide heat and power to the islands. Infrastructure had deteriorated to the point of collapse. Apart from a few fishers who profited from the burgeoning trade in poached fish and marine products, most of the Kuril Islanders had sunk into poverty. The damage caused

³⁴ See for example Aleksandr Mandrik’s poem ‘My Kurils,’ in *Literaturnyi Sakhalin: literaturno-khudozhestvennyi sbornik*, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 1959 or a collection of songs of praise contained in an issue of *Dalnii Vostok* (January 1973) devoted to Sakhalin and the Kurils, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 181-182

³⁵ Oleg Bondarenko, *Hoppô Yontô Henkan no Susume*. pp. 160-161.

³⁶ Pavel A. Minakir, “Economic Reform in Russia,” in Vladimir Tikhomirov ed., *Anatomy of the 1998 Russian Crisis*, Melbourne: Contemporary Europe Research Centre, The University of Melbourne, 1999, pp. 53-55.

by a devastating earthquake that struck the Kuril Islands in October 1994 and Moscow's response to the tragedy was to some, "telling evidence of the Russian government's neglect of the islands."³⁷

Recent Survey Results: A Change in Territorial Perceptions?

If the results of late Soviet-era surveys hinted at the difficulty in mobilising public opinion in the Kuril Islands in favour of reversion, subsequent polls revealed that, at least on one and possibly two of the disputed islands, this might not be such an onerous task – this thanks to the efforts (or lack thereof) of the Russian state.

A large number of polls and surveys gauging the South Kuril Islanders' perceptions of the territorial dispute have been conducted by both Russian and Japanese pollsters in recent years; in fact so many that it has become a cottage industry. The Kuril Islanders have diverse views regarding the fate of the disputed islands. A number of discrepancies and contradictions have appeared occasionally in the survey results. In some cases, this can be explained by changing climatic conditions. One study revealed that the islanders' opinions can vary according to the season; in summer when food is abundant, many people are said to be opposed to the 'radical plan' (the 1956 Joint Declaration), but in winter when food is scarce and conditions especially harsh, the islanders want to live under Japanese rule.³⁸ The controversial nature of the dispute can also result in biased polling.³⁹

In addition, there is also a tendency amongst academic and government officials in both Japan and Russia to make sweeping generalisations regarding the opinions of the Russian islanders. For instance, in an article in the English-language *Japan Times* Kimura Hiroshi, an authority on Russo-Japanese relations

³⁷ More than 60 per cent of residential buildings on Shikotan and the water, sewage, and heating systems were completely destroyed, whilst all diesel generators on Kunashiri and Shikotan ceased functioning. Since all the bakeries were destroyed, the South Kuril District had to be supplied by bread baked on ocean-going fishing vessels. Newspapers also reported that on Shikotan 40 per cent of the buildings belonging to Otrovnoi – the largest fish-processing enterprise in the Russian Far East upon which the economy completely depends – were destroyed by the earthquake. The human death toll may have been reduced had the three seismological centers in the South Kuril District not been forced to stop their operations the previous year due to a lack of funds. See Arai Nobuo and Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, "The Russian Far East in Russo-Japanese Relations," in Tsuneo Akaha ed., *Politics and Economics in the Russian Far East: Changing Ties with Asia-Pacific*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 181.

³⁸ Hiroshi Kimura, Graham T. Allison and Konstantin Sarkisov, *Nichi-Bei-Ro Shinjidai e no Shinario*, Tokyo: Diamond Publishing, 1993, p. 186.

³⁹ This is evident in the Sakhalin mass media. According to Aleksandr Tatarchuk, then-head of the local television studio on Shikotan, there are contradictions in the reporting of *Gubernskie vedomosti* and *Svobodnyi Sakhalin*. For instance, *Gubernskie vedomosti* reports that 66 per cent of the islanders were opposed to a transfer of the islands to Japan, whereas *Svobodnyi Sakhalin* reported that 30 per cent were opposed, 30 per cent in favour and 30 per cent had no opinion. Tatarchuk believed that *Svobodnyi Sakhalin* correspondent Oleg Bondarenko was fighting for a return of the islands to Japan. *Svobodnyi Sakhalin*, 15 August 1992, p. 3. Moreover, on 17 March 1991, in conjunction with the Soviet referendum on maintaining the Union, the Sakhalin regional government conducted a large-scale survey of oblast' residents. 12 000 South Kuril residents were reportedly surveyed (90 per cent turnout) who overwhelmingly opposed to handing over the islands to Japan. A Japanese Foreign Ministry official was sceptical about the results, claiming that the questions were worded so as to induce a negative response. *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 18 March 1991, p. 2.

and professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, claims that “the majority of Russians living there [on the disputed islands] are not opposed to the handover of the islands to Japan; they even harbor [sic] a secret desire for it.”⁴⁰ However, Rimma Rudakova, head of the Kurilsk administration’s (on Iturup, or Etorofu as it is known in Japan) social protection department and local organiser of the visa-less exchanges with Japan, completely contradicts Kimura, arguing, “The Japanese do the polls every year, and the figures are more or less the same each year, ... In Shikotan they get 40 percent for returning the islands to Japan and 60 against. On the rest of the islands, it is always 70 against.”⁴¹

The author has found that disaggregating the survey results of territorial perceptions of the residents of the three islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri and Shikotan reveals that there are broad, inter-island [and intra-] differences in the residents’ views. Generally speaking, the residents of Etorofu have consistently expressed opposition to Russia handing over the islands to Japan, whereas Shikotan residents are in favour of this. Kunashiri residents, on the other hand, have displayed mixed emotions, appearing to vacillate somewhere in-between the extremes defined by the other two islands.

According to a survey conducted by the *Hokkaidō Shimbun* in conjunction with the Hokkaido Information Research Institute of 300 residents of the three islands from December 1997 – January 1998, 36 per cent, 48 per cent and 53 per cent of the respondents from Shikotan, Kunashiri and Etorofu, respectively, replied that Russia “absolutely should not return the islands.”⁴² This survey closely reflected the results of an earlier survey conducted in July 1992 by the Shikotan Social Research Association which revealed that on Shikotan those favouring a return of the islands to Japan greatly outnumbered those against a return, whilst on Kunashiri and Etorofu those opposed to a territorial return slightly outnumbered those in favour.⁴³ Similarly, a smaller survey carried out by Japanese journalists accompanying a group of former residents visiting the islands under the visa-less exchange program showed that a little under 60 per cent on Shikotan, 10 per cent on Kunashiri and 1-2 per cent on Etorofu supported a return of the islands to Japan.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Hiroshi Kimura, “Japan-Russia Relations: Exchanges Build Vital Trust.”

⁴¹ “Japan Woos Residents of Disputed Islands,” *The Sakhalin Times*, no. 13, 22 November-6 December 2001, <http://www.sakhalintimes.com>, accessed 23 November 2001.

⁴² *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 16 April 1998, p. 1.

⁴³ *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 5 September 1992, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 4 June 1993, p. 3. Also, according to a *Vox Populi* survey of 300 residents of the South Kuril Islands (1800 and 300 people on the mainland and Sakhalin, respectively), 65 per cent on Etorofu, 44 per cent on Kunashiri and 28 per cent on Shikotan were opposed to a transfer of the islands to Japan. *ITAR-TASS*, 31 October 1998, FBIS-SOV-98-30, 30 October 1998. A survey conducted in Shikotan in April 1992 revealed that 83 per cent of respondents voiced support for a transfer of Habomai and Shikotan to Japan. This was in contrast to only 30 per cent the previous year. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 27 April 1993.

It is largely the federal government's inability to guarantee most of the Kuril Island inhabitants what would be considered in advanced industrial countries a minimum standard of living that explains the pro-return sentiments on Shikotan – and to a lesser degree on Kunashir. A Russian journalist, Mikhail Bugaev, who visited Kunashir and Shikotan in the spring of 1991 noted that a majority of the islands' inhabitants were opposed to reversion. During a follow-up visit the following winter he was amazed to find that the majority were now in favour of returning the islands to Japan. Most were not interested in Japan's historical and legal claims; they simply wanted to live like humans and, if the Japanese were willing to pay, were fully prepared to resettle on the mainland. In fact, that is what many have chosen to do.⁴⁵ The trickle of residents who found it impossible to live on the islands and chose to leave their homes before the earthquake turned into a flood thereafter. The population of the South Kurils District, which includes Habomai, Shikotan and Kunashir, is believed to have declined from 14 000 to somewhere between 8500–7000.⁴⁶ Thus, if the former Soviet Union provided the necessary conditions for migrants to establish a new local identity, the Russian Federation's neglect of the islands forced many *kurilchane* to either loosen or abandon their identification with the islands (and for some the Russian state).

The Rise of the 'Secessionists'

Meanwhile, the wave of discontent among the remaining islanders brought to power a group of local politicians who openly advocated secession from Russia. Mikhail Lukyanov, the leader of a group called *Zemlyak* (fellow countryman) that had been formed by a number of Shikotan residents (estimated to number 400) who favoured returning the islands to Japan, was elected to one of seven seats on offer in the South Kuril District elections held on Kunashiri in March 1994.⁴⁷ Lukyanov later became chairman of the South Kuril District Assembly. Although the clear subordination in power of legislative chiefs to district mayors allowed little scope for Lukyanov to influence matters pertaining to the territorial dispute, it did provide *Zemlyak* a forum with which to air its views. The group's fortunes received a blow with Lukyanov's dismissal in 1997 as the result of a conflict with the mayor of the South Kuril District, Vladimir Zema, over the allocation of fishing quotas.⁴⁸ The group has since been disbanded, with most of its members taking up the government's offer to resettle on the mainland.⁴⁹ Zema himself had proposed leasing the islands to Japan and even threatened secession.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Svobodnyi Sakhalin*, 3 June 1992, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Andreas Rüesch, "Where Japan and Russia Almost Touch"; *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 25 January 1995, cited in Hiroshi Kimura, *Distant Neighbors: Volume Two: Japanese-Russian Relations Under Gorbachev and Yeltsin*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2000, p. 268.

⁴⁷ *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, 31 March 1994, p. 5.

⁴⁸ This was revealed to the author during a discussion with Professor Arai Nobuo from Sapporo International University in March 2001.

⁴⁹ Watanabe Kōichi, "Hōkaisu Hoppō Yontō," *Sekai*, no. 630, 1997, p. 123. p. 125.

⁵⁰ Internal politicking should not be overlooked as a factor. It has been suggested that Zema resorted to desperate measures when his own position came under threat with signatures being gathered in the District to recall him. *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, vol. XLIX, no. 40, 1997, p. 21.

Moreover, the South Kuril District adopted a charter (*ustav*) in October 1996, which contains a number of clauses that appear to have provided a further boost to the secessionists' cause. Regarding a change in the South Kuril District's boundaries, article nine of the charter states that any such decision "must definitely consider the residents' will which is to be expressed directly."⁵¹ A referendum is the means by which this is formally expressed. A boundary change can be carried out if two of the following conditions are met: First, if more than two-thirds of South Kuril District Assembly members agree during a session and; Second, it is requested by more than two per cent of residents who possess the right to participate in a referendum.⁵² Of particular importance is the South Kuril authorities' attempt to increase the significance of a referendum by expanding the range of people who can participate in it. Current residence is not a precondition for voting in a referendum as long as one owns real estate, pays property tax, applies to participate in the district's administration, has CIS citizenship, owns a house, rents a property, lives in housing or is a family member of someone that does.⁵³ Even if one is not a CIS citizen, the opportunity to participate still exists as long as one applies to do so and the South Kuril District Assembly adopts a supporting resolution.⁵⁴ The implication is that if a Japanese citizen were to meet any of the preceding conditions, he or she could vote in a referendum to transfer the South Kuril Islands to Japan.

The Program's Impact on the South Kuril Islanders' National Identity:

Reconfiguring Macro- and Micro-level Identities

Japanese irredentists' attempts to reconfigure the Kuril Islanders' national identity manifests itself in three ways, impacting on both the macro- and micro-levels:

1. Inducing the islanders to abandon their local identity while retaining their state or national identity by offering to cover the financial costs of those who wish to resettle on the Russian mainland.
2. Inducing the islanders to renounce their state or national identity, but not necessarily their local identity by offering those wishing to stay on the islands post-reversion Japanese citizenship.
3. No change in national or local identities. This achieved by allowing those wishing to remain on the islands to retain their Russian citizenship. The visa-less exchanges have served as a vehicle for conveying these ideas to the Kuril Islanders.

⁵¹ Nakamura Itsurô, "Saharin to Minami Kuriru Chiku no Jichi Seido," *Surabu Kenkyû*, no. 45, 1998, p. 296.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Positive Impact

Although it is largely the Russian government's failure to provide the Kuril Islanders with a minimum standard of living that has forced many to abandon their homes and local identities, the visa-less exchange program has played its part. For some Russian and Japanese participants, the visa-less exchange program has contributed to the breaking down of outdated perceptions that were reinforced by negative government propaganda. They no longer see each other as the 'strange Other'⁵⁵ and now invite each into their homes as friends, not enemies.

As far as mobilising the pro-reversion vote, the program initially had a positive influence on the reconfiguring the *kurilchane* identity of Shikotan and Kunashiri residents. Some gratefully acknowledge, in particular, the positive Japanese response to the islanders' pleas for assistance. One Shikotan resident, Gennadi Sokolov, was so grateful, in fact, that he declared his governor to be Yokomichi Takahiro after the Hokkaido Governor responded to the islanders' SOS by sending 50 tons of potatoes.⁵⁶ Shikotan residents were forced to turn to Japan after Sakhalin officials failed to respond to their emergency call. A Shikotan official claimed that an improvement in the islanders' living standards resulting from Japanese economic aid and cooperation would lead to a resolution of the territorial dispute.⁵⁷

As discussed previously, the program's participants attend symposia to discuss the historical and legal vagaries of the territorial dispute. Exposure to the Japanese government's official position on the Northern Territories has undoubtedly swayed the views of some of the Kuril inhabitants. However, perhaps more importantly, the Russian participants in the visa-less exchange program have been able to see for themselves how the Japanese live – and many are more than impressed. If a visit to the Kurils for the former Japanese inhabitants represents a visit backwards in time, the journey to Japan serves as a trip into a possible future for Kuril residents. Socio-economic conditions in the South Kuril Islands and Japan, even despite the latter's current economic downturn (the longest since the war), are literally worlds apart. For someone from a desolate island with virtually no paved roads, primitive wooden housing and frequent power failures, the bright neon lights, glitzy department stores, well-stocked retail outlets and high-rise buildings that symbolise Japan's cosmopolitan cities serve as a reminder to the awe-struck islanders of what life could be like under Japanese rule. If the Russian government cannot guarantee even a basic standard of living, some residents believe it better to live under someone who can. An observation

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness*, p. 292.

⁵⁶ Sawa Hidetake, "Nihonka e Todomaranu Nagare: Hoppô Ryôdô Tômin-ishiki Sakkon," *Seiron*, October 1994, p. 133.

⁵⁷ *Hokkaidô Shimbun*, 22 May 1995, p. 3.

of the comments made by the embattled *kurilchane*, particularly Shikotan inhabitants, participating in the program reveals strong support for joint Russo-Japanese development of the islands.⁵⁸

De Facto 'Japanisation' of the Islands

A number of scholars have observed the uniqueness and peculiarity of identities in borderland regions. These regions are often peripheries located at great distances from the state centre. Feelings of isolation are common and central institutions are generally weaker, allowing other cultural influences to take root.⁵⁹ An analogy can be drawn here with Japan's increasing cultural and economic influence on the Kurils.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of Japanese goods on the Kuril Islands, while Russian goods are disappearing.⁶⁰ Russians participating in the visa-less exchanges take the opportunity afforded by the program to stock up on Japanese items, which are generally more reliable and easier to purchase than the Russian equivalents. Given the Russian federal and regional government's neglect of the islands, many *kurilchane* actively participate in economic exchange with Japan. Everyday Russian fishing vessels dock in Hokkaido's northern and eastern ports where the crews sell their catches for hard currency, which is used to purchase used cars, consumer goods and fresh produce.⁶¹ Russian fishers on the islands reportedly closely watch the weather reports on Japanese television before deciding to go out fishing and their children have become fans of Japanese cartoons.⁶² Economic and cultural relations have developed to such a point that one Russian journalist who visited the islands of Shikotan and Kunashir in 1998 remarked: "It is not necessary to officially transfer the South Kurils under Japanese jurisdiction. They are already part of the land of the Rising Sun."⁶³

Some observers in Japan see the gradual 'Japanisation' of the Kuril Islands as an important means of removing obstacles to reversion of the islands. Diplomatic commentator, Hidetake Sawa, offers numerous suggestions to this end such as emphasising Japanese language education on the islands, providing children on the islands with an opportunity to study in Japan and explaining the government's basic stance on the modalities of reversion.⁶⁴ Japanese who have a strong desire to see the Northern Territories

⁵⁸ Hoppô Yontô Kôryû Hokkaidô Suishin Iinkai ed, *Yontô Kôryû no Ayumi*, pp. 31-56; Hoppô Yontô Kôryû Hokkaidô Suishin Iinkai ed., *Hoppô Yontô Kôryû Taiwa Shûkaitô ni okeru Hatsugenshû: '92-'97*, pp. 2-65.

⁵⁹ See David H. Kaplan, "Territorial Identities and Geographic Scale," in Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan eds., *Nested Identities*, p. 37; Stein Rokkan and Derek Urwin, *Economy, Territory, Identity: Politics of West European Peripheries*, London: Sage Publications, 1983, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Hiroshi Kimura, *Distant Neighbors*, p. 269.

⁶¹ See Hokkaidô Shimbun Jôhō Kenkyūjō ed., *Dōnai Kōwan Toshi to Roshia no Keizai Kōryū*, Sapporo: HSJK, 2001.

⁶² Hiroshi Kimura, *Distant Neighbors*, p. 270.

⁶³ *Izvestiya*, 16 December 1998.

⁶⁴ Sawa Hidetake, "Nihonka e Todomarano Nagare," p. 139.

returned to Japan may be buoyed by the gradual convergence of symbolic cultural forms such as dress, language and technology across the Russo-Japanese frontier. However, when assessing the likelihood of this leading to a resolution of the territorial dispute, it is important to keep in mind Donnan and Wilson's observation that there are instances when "the meanings which local communities attach to those forms may diverge."⁶⁵ "This is because," Cohen argues, "whilst the *form* of symbols may be common to those who bear the same culture, the *meanings* of the symbols, their contexts may differ."⁶⁶ Thus, whereas some in Japan may see the Kurils' 'Japanisation' as a sign of the growing acceptance of Japanese culture and possibly life under Japanese rule, it is also plausible that the proliferation of Japanese goods on the islands is simply a means of satisfying the Russian islanders' material needs.

Negative Impact

As suggested above, the deepening personal and economic relations that have developed between the Kuril Islanders and Japanese citizens have ameliorated opposition to reversion among some of the islands' inhabitants, particularly on Shikotan. However, at the same time, there is evidence to suggest that the visa-less exchange program and the islands' gradual 'Japanisation' may also be having the unintended effect of reinforcing the *kurilchane*'s identification with the post-Soviet Russian state.

Globalising forces have engendered feelings of acute anxiety and a sense of crisis in many nations, communities and individuals. This can lead people to seek what Robins calls 'protective strategies' involving attempts to 'salvage centred, bounded identities for placeless times' which often lead to the revival of 'patriotism and jingoism.'⁶⁷ Constructing 'defensive' identities as 'trenches of resistance and survival' around territorial and other primary affiliations is a similar response to the sense of disorientation and marginalisation brought about by the increased movement or flows of people, ideas and technology that characterises globalisation.⁶⁸ In recent years, some Kuril Islanders have begun building their own 'trenches of resistance' in order to protect themselves from the Japanese cultural onslaught.

When the visa-less exchange program commenced in 1992, many Kuril Islanders were understandably apprehensive about the idea of living with the Japanese – over 40 years of indoctrination and anti-Japanese propaganda would be difficult to undo. Nevertheless, the Russian government's neglect of the

⁶⁵ Hastings Donnan and Thomas S. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*, Oxford: Berg, 2001, p. 75.

⁶⁶ A. P. Cohen, *Whalsay: Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island Community*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987, p. 13, cited in *ibid*.

⁶⁷ K. Robins, "Tradition and Translation: National Culture in its Global Context," in J. Corner and S. Harvey eds., *Enterprise and Heritage*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 41, cited in Paul Kennedy, "Introduction: Globalization and the Crisis of National Identities," in Paul Kennedy and Catherine J. Danks eds., *Globalization and National Identities: Crisis or Opportunity?* London: Palgrave, 2001, p. 14.

islands coupled with Japanese humanitarian aid and other assistance soon made inroads into the islanders' mindset, making many receptive to the notion of joint occupancy. In recent years, however, the visa-less exchange program and other cross-border cultural ties appears to have had the unintended effect of strengthening the Kuril Islanders national identity, in the process, reinforcing perceived civilisational differences, particularly among the Russian participants. On Etorofu and Kunashir an increasing number of people share the belief that religious, psychological and other cultural differences would make it impossible for the two peoples to live together in harmony.⁶⁹ Along with Moscow's recent display of concern for the islanders' welfare, this may partly explain the defeat of the secessionists in local elections held in the South Kuril District in March 2001.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, criticisms have emerged in recent years in both Russia and Japan regarding the manner in which the visa-less exchange program – now in its 11th year – has evolved. The Governor of Sakhalin, Igor Farkhutdinov, has voiced his dissatisfaction with the program's provisions, which essentially allow any Japanese citizen to visit the islands without a visa, while Russian participation is limited to the current inhabitants of Etorofu, Kunashiri and Shikotan. He has threatened to cancel the program should this perceived imbalance remain unrectified.⁷¹ Moreover, Farkhutdinov has also expressed concern at Hokkaido Governor Hori Tatsuya's participation in the program (in May 1997), believing it inflames public opinion in Sakhalin, which is vehemently opposed to Russian territorial concessions, therefore creating unnecessary strains in interregional relations.

From the Japanese perspective, as discussed previously, although the main purpose of the visa-less exchange program is to promote mutual understanding and mobilise support for reversion among the Russian islanders, there have been few visible signs that it has achieved the desired political and diplomatic results. Instead, some observers in Japan believe that the original aim of the program has been undermined and that the visits have become nothing more than sightseeing tours for the Russian islanders.⁷² The original destinations for the Russian visitors, mainly eastern Hokkaido and Tokyo, the former which is the frontline in the Northern Territories Return Movement and is dotted with billboards and other displays of government propaganda, have been expanded in recent years to incorporate 16 Japanese prefectures – including Okinawa, which is as far removed from the home of Japanese revanchism as can possibly be. This has led to calls from those in the Northern Territories Return

⁶⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 8-9.

⁶⁹ Andreas Rüesch, "Where Japan and Russia Almost Touch"; Nonna Chernyakova, "Life Improving for Russian Residents of the Disputed Northern Territories," *Japan Times*, 5 July 2001, p. 19.

⁷⁰ The manager of a Kunashiri construction company, Nikolai Ovchinnikov, soundly defeated Zema. After his victory, Ovchinnikov called for resolution of the territorial dispute to be postponed. Aleksei Kazantsev, "Yuzhnie Kurily vybrali novogo glavu administrasii," *StranaRu*, March 2001, <http://fareast.strana.ru/print/985001048.html>, accessed 22 March 2001.

⁷¹ *Sovetskii Sakhalin*, 2 April 1998, p. 1; *Gubernskie vedomosti*, 2 April 1998, p. 1.

⁷² *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 23 April 2001, p. 34.

Movement for the program to revert back to its starting point.⁷³ In fact, the visa-less exchange program may be having the opposite and unintended effect of delaying resolution of the territorial dispute, thereby making it more difficult for Japan to get the islands back.⁷⁴ Many of the Russian islanders have revealed an increasing lack of concern for the delicate issue of territorial sovereignty as long as suitable economic and cultural links are maintained.

⁷³ *Ibid.* Moreover, the financial burden imposed on the Russian islanders who participate in the program is substantial. Calculating the cost of the entire program is complicated, but a simple itinerary for a recent trip cost \$1680 per person for two busloads of Russians – for most, this is the equivalent of several months wages. As a result, rather than all of the islanders participating in the program, the “wealthier” ones are making repeat visits. “Japan Woos Residents of the Disputed Islands,” *The Sakhalin Times*, 22 November – 6 December 2001, no. 13, <http://www.sakhalintimes.com>, accessed 23 November 2001.

⁷⁴ Kimura Hiroshi, “Japan-Russia Relations: Exchanges Build Vital Trust,” *Japan Times*, 31 July 2000, p. 18.