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## The Russia-Japan Territorial Dispute and Visa-free Exchange with the Disputed Islands: Structure, Challenges, Media (research notes)

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### <要約>

本研究ノートは北方四島交流事業の下調べ分析である。札幌、根室とユジノクリリスク（国後島）におけるビザなし交流団体の代表者とのインタビューデータを基盤にして、交流事業の現状、構造、インフラなどを調査する。日本側の2016年-2019年のビザなし交流に対する報道に述べられた事故、重要なイベントなどの交流事業への影響を分析する。本研究の目的は1) 実施している日本側とロシア側の状況を比較する、2) 政治に関わらず、現在の地域レベルの状況でビザなし交流に対する問題を明らかにする、3) 在住ロシア人のアイデンティティ・ビザなし交流に多知る意見を調査し、日本側とロシア側のメディア報告を比較する。本研究ノートは国後島への訪問の間に取得されたデータを分析し、国後島に行く交流事業に影響する要因を明らかにする。日本におけるビザなし交流のニュースの定量と質的分析の下調べと交流団体の調査も含む。

These research notes present a preliminary analysis of the visa-free exchange program established between Russia and Japan. The visa-free program allows Japanese participants to visit the disputed Kuril Islands (Northern Territories), while Russian residents of the disputed islands can visit various locations in Japan. The program involves several kinds of activities, including school visits, homestays, scientific research, and recently joint projects to foster economic development of the islands.

Preliminary data for this research was obtained during visits to exchange organizations located in Sapporo and Nemuro in Hokkaido and Yuzhno-Kurilsk (Furumakappu) on Kunashiri/Kunashir.<sup>1</sup> Kunashir is the second biggest island (after Etorofu/Iturup) of the Greater Kuril Chain located northeast of Hokkaido. Together with Iturup and Shikotan, as well as a group of small islets known as Habomai, it has been the subject of a territorial disagreement between Russia and Japan for over 70 years. Kunashir is one of the two (besides Iturup) main destinations in the visa-free program, and as such it hosts the necessary infrastructure to carry out international exchange, as well as headquarters of one of the exchange organizations on the Russian side.<sup>2</sup>

In Russia, the disputed islands are referred to as “the southern Kurils”, emphasizing their supposed belonging to the Kuril chain, which includes the non-disputed islands located south of the Kamchatka peninsula. In Japan, the disputed islands are known as “the Northern Territories”, highlighting their supposed belonging to the Nemuro subprefecture in north-eastern Hokkaido. The Russian position in the dispute is that these islands were ceded to the USSR as the outcome of World War 2. The Japanese position is that the islands were seized by the USSR and are currently occupied by Russia illegally. Although border demarcation problems in the Sakhalin-Kuril area appeared multiple times since the beginning of official bilateral relations between Russia

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<sup>1</sup> For a full list of interviews, see Table 1. Due to the sensitive nature of the issues surrounding visa-free exchange and the territorial dispute, the names of the interviewees and their exact place of work are not mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> When discussing exchange activities, the author uses “the Russian side” to refer to activities performed under Russian administration, including activities carried out by exchange organizations located on the disputed islands.

and Japan with the signing of the Shimoda treaty in 1855, the dispute in its current form has existed since 1945. By joint agreement between Russian and Japanese governments, an exchange program was established in 1992 that allows Japanese citizens to visit the disputed islands, and Russian residents of the disputed islands to visit Japan. Visits in either direction do not require a visa; instead, citizens cross the border after receiving a special permit attached to their passport.<sup>3</sup>

The Southern Kurils/Northern Territories dispute has been analyzed and discussed extensively in academic literature. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's two-volume work *The Northern Territories Dispute and Russo-Japanese Relations* (1998), which covers Russo-Japanese relations during the period from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is representative of the historical approach to analyzing the dispute. Hasegawa defines the territorial dispute as the core factor shaping the development of Russo-Japanese and Soviet-Japanese relations, and argues that the development of the negotiations to resolve the dispute in the 1980s and 1990s was staggered by multiple factors, including domestic situations in Russia and Japan, lack of foresight and leadership in Moscow or Tokyo and international circumstances at the time. Kazuhiko Togo's 2011 work focuses on the period from 1985 to 2001 and analyzes five peaks (which he refers to as "lost windows of opportunity") in Russo-Japanese relations during Gorbachev and Yeltsin's terms, as well as Putin's first term, when, as Togo argues, the resolution of the dispute was realistic. Similarly to Hasegawa, Togo also names inertness of politics, lack of flexibility on both sides and domestic circumstances in Russia and Japan as the main reasons the dispute was not resolved during those five periods.

Analysis of the territorial dispute can also be approached from the international point of view. For instance, Kimie Hara's 2009 work discusses a potential resolution of the dispute based on a model adapted from the successful resolution of the Åland islands dispute between Finland and Sweden. The Kuril Islands/Northern Territories dispute is analyzed in the context of international relations in works by James D.J. Brown (2018). Other prominent works using this approach include Alexander Bukh's *Japan's National Identity and Foreign Policy: Russia as Japan's 'Other'* (2010), which discusses the dispute as one of the aspects of national identity in Japan, particularly its influence on Japanese national narratives of "inherent territory", which played a major role in constructing contemporary Japanese national identity. The relationship between identities and foreign policy on the Russian side is examined in Paul Richardson's 2018 work, which argues that the internal dispute on the islands' fate in Russia is related to the "heightened symbolism for the self-image of the nation, for the values that should be embodied by the state, and for the unequal power relations between center and periphery".<sup>4</sup>

A "local" approach to the dispute is gaining traction in recent years, with the focus shifting from analysis of the dispute as an international issue to analysis of specific issues on the disputed islands and the areas surrounding them, and comparisons of the voices of local residents in these areas with discourses taking place on the national level. A prominent work representative of this approach is Brad Williams' *Resolving the Russo-*

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<sup>3</sup> As of January 2020, there are two passports used in Russia: the internal passport is used as a general purpose identification document within the country, while the international passport is used for international travel. Internal passports are issued to all citizens that have reached 14 years of age, while international passports are applied for individually. Visa-free visits to Japan do not require an international passport.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Richardson, *The Edge of the Nation: The Southern Kurils and the Search for Russia's National Identity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 163.

*Japanese Dispute* (2007), which evaluates the roles of Hokkaido and Sakhalin<sup>5</sup> as main actors in improving bilateral relations and facilitating the resolution of the dispute through deepening inter-regional ties. Another prominent contribution by Paul Richardson (2015) focuses on the regional situation on Sakhalin and discusses local identities in the context of regional exceptionalism and local activism. Akihiro Iwashita's 2016 work dedicated to Japan's territorial disputes analyzes the local circumstances in Nemuro, including public opinion on the dispute among the local population that seems to be in favor of a compromise solution, which contrasts against the dogmatic "four islands at once" sentiment characteristic of national media and areas located farther away from the disputed islands. There have also been direct comparisons of newspaper reportage mentioning the territorial dispute on the local level.<sup>6</sup>

While the dispute itself has been analyzed extensively in academic literature, there is a notable gap when it comes to works that set the visa-free exchange program specifically as the subject of research. Nevertheless, some sources discussing the realities of the visa-free program can be found. On the Japanese side, a notable example is a 2013 field report published in the bulletin of Tokyo Gakugei University International Secondary School.<sup>7</sup> The report contains details on the pre-visit training in Nemuro, history of the dispute and explanation of the Japanese official position (including a section on "correct terminology" (*tadashii yōgo*) with a recommendation to use the word "occupy" instead of "control" when referring to Russia's de-facto administration on the islands), a brief overview of the demographics, education and infrastructure on Kunashir, a transcript of a discussion that took place between Japanese and Russian educators, as well as a list of impressions from both sides, including opinions and requests regarding the implementation of the exchange program. On the Russian side it is particularly difficult to find sources on the visa-free program other than occasional news reports from the Kurils. Media portrayal of the visa-free program is another direction of this research subject to further development.

This research aims to provide an insight into visa-free exchange that takes place on the local level between various prefectures of Japan and the disputed islands through Hokkaido. Using qualitative content analysis of interview data, it examines the practical implementation of visa-free visits on Kunashiri/Kunashir and other disputed islands, evaluates and compares the infrastructure involved in visa-free exchange on both sides, and discusses factors affecting the promotion and development of visa-free exchange between Russian and Japanese citizens on Kunashir.

At present, the findings of this research are organized into a series of research notes. The author intends to develop these notes into an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal. More data analysis, particularly related to media portrayals of the visa-free exchange program, will be added to the full version of the article.

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<sup>5</sup> The disputed islands are commonly seen as extensions of either Sakhalin or Hokkaido. The Japanese government considers the southern Kurils/Northern Territories to be part of the Nemuro subprefecture in Hokkaido, while Sakhalinskaya Oblast is a Russian administrative unit that consists of the island of Sakhalin and the entire Kuril chain, including the disputed southern Kurils.

<sup>6</sup> Georgy Buntilov, "The Kuril Islands/Northern Territories dispute: A comparison of local news reportage in Sakhalin and Hokkaido", *electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies (ejcjs)*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2017). <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcjs/vol17/iss3/buntilov.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Kokusai chūtō kyōiku kenkyū: Tōkyō gakugei daigaku fuzoku kokusai chūtō kyōiku gakkō kenkyū kiyō (6): 49-54.

Interview	Interviewee	Location	Period
A	Representative of a Japanese exchange organization	Nemuro	October 2017
B	Representative of a Japanese exchange organization	Sapporo	November 2019
C	Representative of a Russian exchange organization	Yuzhno-Kurilsk	October 2019
D	Japanese news reporter covering visa-free exchange	Nemuro	October 2017
E	Russian news reporter covering visa-free exchange	Yuzhno-Kurilsk	October 2019

Table 1. Interview data used for this research

### Kunashir infrastructure and exchange profile

Kunashir is located 70 kilometers away from Sakhalin and less than 20 kilometers from the Notsuke peninsula of Hokkaido. Hokkaido is visible from Kunashir’s western and southern shores.<sup>8</sup> Despite the short distance, traveling to and from Kunashir is complicated on both Russian and Japanese sides. Kunashir is reachable from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk by air using Aurora airlines’ flight that operates two-four times a week, and from Korsakov by sea. The sea route covers Iturup and Shikotan as well; a full voyage covering all of the islands takes about three days, while a trip between Kunashir and Shikotan takes four hours. From Hokkaido, Kunashir can be reached from the Nakashibetsu airport also serviced by Aurora;<sup>9</sup> however, the flight from Nakashibetsu is currently restricted to specific implementations of the visa-free exchange program (grave visits). Before 2017, all visa-free exchange was carried out only by sea.

For both sides of the dispute, Kunashir and the other disputed islands are the “periphery of a periphery”. Japanese administrative division places the islands into the Nemuro subprefecture of Hokkaido. Russian administrative division places Kunashir into a sub-region of Sakhalinskaya Oblast, the Yuzhno-Kurilskiy district. The administrative center of the district is Kunashir’s biggest settlement, Yuzhno-Kurilsk (known as Furumakappu in Japan). In Russian administrative terminology Yuzhno-Kurilsk is an “urban settlement” (*posyolok gorodskogo tipa*), which is a settlement with a population bigger than a village but not big enough for a town. As of early 2019, the entire population of the district, which includes the Shikotan island, is about 12000 people, with about 8000 residing in Yuzhno-Kurilsk.<sup>10</sup> The population of the district is likely larger due to the presence of military personnel, which is not included in population surveys.

Kunashir’s infrastructure only accentuates its “peripheral” profile. Many areas on the island are inaccessible without an off-road vehicle, and public transport is not widely available, particularly outside

<sup>8</sup> For comparison, the distance between the southern tip of Sakhalin and Wakkanai, Japan’s northernmost city, is 40 kilometers, which makes Sakhalin visible from Wakkanai on a clear day. Kunashir’s proximity, however, manifests in other ways as well – for instance, there are several locations on the island where Japanese mobile networks can be used to make phone calls, even in areas where Russian networks are unavailable.

<sup>9</sup> Kunashir received the first airplane with Japanese visitors in 2017. It was a charter flight from Nakashibetsu that brought about 70 Japanese citizens to the disputed islands in accordance to the agreement reached by Russian and Japanese governments regarding the visa-free exchange program. The visitors also flew to Iturup as part of the same exchange program. See *Aurora Airlines*, “Aviakompaniya ‘Avrora’ dostavila gruppu yaponskikh zHITELEY na Kuril’skiye ostrova”, September 26, 2017, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.flyaurora.ru/information/about/press-service/news/2017/10625/>.

<sup>10</sup> Rosstat, “Chislennost’ naseleniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii po munitsipal’nym obrazovaniyam,” accessed November 10, 2019, <https://gks.ru/compendium/document/13282>.

Yuzhno-Kurilsk. The local airport was originally built over 70 years ago, while the island was under Japanese jurisdiction, and received little extensions or upgrades until a complete overhaul in 2006. As of 2019, it is common for Kunashir flights to be cancelled due to bad weather as it is not an all-weather airport. Asphalt covering of the 16-kilometer road connecting the airport with Yuzhno-Kurilsk was finished only in late 2019. Kunashir is one of the targets for the Russian federal program for social and economic development of the Kurils for 2016-2025, and many recent infrastructural changes on the island are the results of that program. Until recently, power outages were common on the island. Fuel supply shortages are still common, with the most recent gasoline crisis happening in 2018 due to bureaucratic problems.<sup>11</sup>

Transportation to and from Kunashir is inevitably influenced by its status as a border zone in Russia and political nuances of the territorial dispute in Japan. For Russian citizens who don't reside in the border zone, visiting Kunashir requires a written permission from the regional internal affairs department in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. The seashore is patrolled by border guards, who routinely inspect the areas and check documents of tourists and locals alike. Unauthorized entry into the border zone carries administrative responsibility in Russia and is punished by a fine. The same offense conducted by a foreign citizen results in a similar punishment and deportation.

Apart from the visa-free program, Russia allows Japanese citizens to visit Kunashir as regular foreign citizens in accordance with Russian national laws, i.e. by applying for a Russian visa and entering the disputed islands through Sakhalin. While this is a viable and legal approach from the Russian official point of view, the Japanese government discourages Japanese citizens from obtaining Russian visas for the purpose of entering the disputed islands. By going to those islands with a Russian visa, the visitors would be legitimizing Russian jurisdiction over the islands, which the Japanese government deems inappropriate. Nevertheless, this approach is not explicitly illegal in Japan, and can sometimes be used by both Japanese individuals and small businesses.

For the Russian residents of the islands, however, the number of options to visit Japan is limited. Iwashita notes that in recent years there have been calls in Japan to suspend the visa-free program due to its lack of any significant influence on the progress of the dispute. Among the arguments against the program on the Japanese side he mentions the claim that, according to the program, the Japanese can only visit the disputed areas, while the Russians can go to any part of Japan.<sup>12</sup> It is true that depending on the receiving organization on the Japanese side the visa-free exchange program can include locations outside Hokkaido – for instance, the 2014 program included Tokyo as one of the destinations besides Sapporo and Nemuro.<sup>13</sup> However, for the Russian residents of the islands there are no legal ways to enter Japan other than through the visa-free program. Since Japan regards the southern Kurils as part of its national territory, it does not issue Japanese visas to residents of the islands. At the same time, the residents of the islands do not possess Japanese citizenship, so they cannot enter Japan without a visa. As a result, the only way to enter Japan legally for the residents of the disputed islands is through the visa-free exchange program. The visa-free program follows a tight schedule and

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<sup>11</sup> RBC, “Prokuratura nachala proverky posle soobshchenii o benzine po P100 na Kurilakh,” June 7, 2018, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/07/06/2018/5b1907759a794742743d47ab><https://www.rbc.ru/society/07/06/2018/5b1907759a794742743d47ab>.

<sup>12</sup> Akihiro Iwashita (2006), *Japan's border issues: Pitfalls and prospects*. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Yontō kōryū ukeire jigyo (seishōnen kōryū) no gaiyō,” June 24, 2014, accessed November 10, 2019, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/erp/rss/page18\\_000324.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/erp/rss/page18_000324.html).

restricts the freedom of travel to specific locations agreed upon by national governments in advance. In this regard, the residents of the disputed islands are in a less privileged position than other Russian citizens, who can simply obtain a tourist visa and go to any part of Japan on their own accord.

Kunashir's decidedly peripheral status within each of the claiming local administrations, its limited infrastructure, restricted border area, bureaucratic nuances, as well as the discriminative stance of the Japanese side towards its Russian residents in comparison to other Russian citizens, creates a sense of a “borderland within a borderland”. Based on distance alone, Sakhalinskaya Oblast, which is over 6500 kilometers away from Moscow, can be considered Russia’s most remote peripheral region; Kunashir, however, is a sub-region that has so little integration with its neighbor Sakhalin that it becomes a periphery within a periphery.

### **Implementation of visa-free exchange**

The visa-free exchange program allows Japanese citizens to visit the disputed islands, and Russian residents of the disputed islands to visit several pre-determined locations in Japan, which may differ between years. The entirety of the visa-free exchange program is financed by the Japanese side: exchange organizations transfer the necessary funds to the Russian side, which organizes the visits on the islands. The Japanese side also covers all expenses when Russian residents come to Japan. However, there have been claims that Russian participants are required to pay commission and other fees. The Japanese side has received complaints from Russian participants who were allegedly required to pay up to 50000 roubles (~87000 yen as of January 2020) to participate in a “free” trip.<sup>14</sup> The Russian side confirmed that the trip is “partially compensated”.<sup>15</sup> Financial nuances place restrictions on facilities related to the exchange. For instance, the House of Friendship,<sup>16</sup> which functions as a hotel for Japanese visitors during visa-free trips, does not accept reservations from non-Japanese guests while Japanese guests are staying. This requirement was enforced by the Japanese side, which financed the construction of the facility and still supports its operation.

From the Japanese side, the following criteria have been established for selecting participants in the visa-free exchange program:<sup>17</sup>

- Former residents of the disputed islands, their spouses and children
- Members of organizations that promote the resolution of the dispute in Japan’s favor
- Members of National Diet and local public organizations (including local governments)
- Journalists
- Participants involved in a specific exchange activity (cultural, academic exchange etc.)
- Representatives of organizations in charge of implementing visa-free exchange
- Interpreters and other supporting personnel

Russian residents of the disputed islands can apply to participate in a visa-free visit to Japan. Unlike the Japanese side there are no major restrictions, however quotas are formed based on the size of each group, and

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<sup>14</sup> Interview B.

<sup>15</sup> Interview C.

<sup>16</sup> Known in Japan as “Muneo House” – from the name of Suzuki Muneo, a Japanese politician who lobbied its construction in Yuzhno-Kurilsk.

<sup>17</sup> Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, Hoppōyontō kōryū (‘bizanashi kōryū’) Hoppō taisaku honbu - Naikakufu, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www8.cao.go.jp/hoppo/henkan/11.html>.

some specific categories of participants (athletes, those who have hosted Japanese guests in previous years, contributors to cultural exchange activities etc.) are prioritized. The main sources of motivation for Russian residents to visit Japan are the possibility to go shopping, interest in experiencing a foreign culture first-hand, and interest in Japanese language and culture. Some groups participate to learn Japanese in Sapporo.<sup>18</sup>

The first visa-free visit to the disputed islands by the Japanese took place in 1992. Since then, visa-free exchange on both sides has been taking place yearly, particularly during the spring-summer-fall seasons. When Japan acts as the receiving side, visa-free trips are divided into four categories: family, youth, Japanese language learners and general adult population.<sup>19</sup> The exact contents of the program vary depending on the category and the year, however an orientation session at the Exchange Center with the Northern Four Islands (NIHORO) is the first item on the list. NIHORO is located about 3.8km from Nemuro city center. According to the brochure issued by the center, the purpose of the facility is to “contribute to developing communication with the inhabitants of the northern four islands, as well as increase awareness and understanding of the Northern Territories problem in and outside Japan”.<sup>20</sup> The center is a large complex containing a variety of facilities, such as museum exhibitions, a movie theater, a library, a kitchen, and a playground. Although exchange with the disputed islands is carried out by multiple organizations<sup>21</sup> on the Japanese side, NIHORO is the starting point of all exchange when Japan acts as the receiving side. The visitors undergo basic training in Japanese culture, language and etiquette before departing to their next destination in the program. The locations to be visited by the Russians are decided in advance through negotiations between foreign ministries on both sides, and the guests are generally not allowed to stray from the plan of the program.

Any other exchange with the islands outside of the visa-free program is strongly discouraged in Japan. Any contact with the islands under Russian jurisdiction is subject to scrutiny and criticism in Japan. While it is possible for Japanese citizens to acquire a Russian visa and go to the disputed islands through Sakhalin, there are warnings advising against it. The assumption is that the Japanese visitors would be complying with Russian legislation by visiting those islands under a Russian visa, which is deemed unacceptable by the Japanese government. Under these circumstances Japanese businessmen are sometimes motivated to operate outside the official framework: they go to Sakhalin first and use their Russian visas to access the islands while keeping a low profile.<sup>22</sup>

### **Challenges faced by organizations involved in visa-free exchange**

During the survey of exchange organizations, it became clear that there are multiple issues affecting the development of the visa-free exchange program. Below is a brief overview of those issues.

#### *Issues with access and transportation*

As mentioned earlier, Kunashir’s infrastructure is still under development. Due to lack of roads it becomes difficult to access certain areas that have Japanese graves, which forces the receiving side to turn down

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<sup>18</sup> Interview C.

<sup>19</sup> Interview B.

<sup>20</sup> Hokkaido Center of Exchange with the Four Northern Islands (NIHORO), *Shinseki nichiro no eichi de yontō henkan* (Nemuro: NIHORO, 2016). Translated by the author.

<sup>21</sup> A list of exchange organizations is included in Appendix 1.

<sup>22</sup> Interview D.



potential plans of grave visits. In addition, the location of the disputed islands in a border zone with heavy military presence places further restrictions on accessibility and creates additional paperwork.

*Understaffing and lack of infrastructure, particularly on the islands*

The main obstacle to increasing the number of participants in visa-free exchange to Kunashir is the limited number of facilities available. There are no hotels large enough to host a delegation bigger than 100 people, and a visit by a large group to any of the disputed islands may result in a small scale “humanitarian collapse” due to lack of lodging and other resources. In addition, the administrative duties for the entire visa-free program on Kunashir are carried out by only two staff members. According to the organization, the optimal size for a single group visit is about 50 to 60 people.<sup>23</sup>

*Limited capacity of transportation vessels*

The “Etopirika” vessel that travels between Nemuro and the disputed islands can carry under 90 people, which leaves about 65 excluding the crew, and 40-45 general participants excluding administration, interpreters etc. Two vessels on the Russian side (“Nadezhda” and “Druzhba”, which were gifts from the Japanese side in 2002 and 2008 respectively) are used heavily for local transportation of people and cargo, and are too small for the purpose. “Igor Fargutdinov”, another vessel on the Russian side and the only link between the disputed islands and Sakhalin, is also overloaded with work to be used for the purpose.

*Inability to make use of the Nakashibetsu airport with only some exceptions*

At present, flights from the Nakashibetsu airport to the disputed islands are only available for groups of elderly Japanese who go to the islands for grave visits. If these restrictions were abolished and the air route was used for other visa-free visits, long hours spent on transportation by sea could be spent on other exchange activities.

*Inability of Russian residents of the islands to acquire Japanese visas*

Russian residents of the disputed islands are suffering from the results of political intricacies between Russian and Japanese governments. Compared to “ordinary” Russian citizens, they cannot apply for a Japanese visa, and their only legal way of entering Japan is through the visa-free program. This places heavy restrictions on the development of the islands’ ties with Japan, and limits their residents’ opportunities to study or work in Japan in comparison to other Russian citizens.

*Lack of transparency regarding expenditures on the Russian side*

One of the criticisms of the visa-free program in Japan is that it lets Russians go to Japan for free by abusing Japanese taxpayers’ money. However, participants from the Russian side have complained about having to pay in order to visit Japan. This creates additional difficulties in communication between sides, and hurts the image of the program in both Russia and Japan.

*Politics making it difficult for both sides to travel between Russia, Japan and the islands*

Political tension regarding the status of the islands creates additional difficulties for those who wish to travel to or from the disputed islands. For instance, a Russian citizen with a valid Japanese visa cannot go to Japan directly from Kunashir – they would have to go through Sakhalin instead. A Japanese citizen with a valid Russian visa can go to the disputed islands through Sakhalin (but not directly from Japan – unless they take part in the visa-free program), however their actions would be subject to scrutiny and criticism in Japan. Considering

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<sup>23</sup> Interview C.

the distance between the disputed islands and Hokkaido/Sakhalin, these restrictions create logistical difficulties for all parties involved, and hinder the development of joint activities on the islands, restricting business contacts to the visa-free exchange program.

### **Newspaper coverage of the visa-free exchange program in Japan**

Compared to other news on Russia and Russo-Japanese relations, visa-free exchange is not a frequent topic of reportage in Japanese newspapers. Most of the reportage follows the execution of the exchange program in spring, summer and fall, and any rare incident concerning the exchange program results in a large number of articles over a short period, with the rest of the year being relatively “quiet”. Given the difficulties in obtaining specific details on a particular event or incident, some reports contradict the commentaries offered by actual participants in visa-free exchange or other parties covering it.

Figure 1 shows the monthly number of articles in four Japanese newspapers mentioning the visa-free exchange program in 2016-2019. The first pattern observable here is that most coverage tends to concentrate between April and October, which is when exchange activities take place. The second pattern is the consistently higher amount of reportage in *Hokkaidō Shimbun*. As a large regional newspaper, *Hokkaidō Shimbun* has a Nemuro branch that specializes in coverage of the disputed islands, and the majority of news produced by the branch that mention Russia are about the disputed islands, including the visa-free program. This gives *Hokkaidō Shimbun* an advantage over other newspapers with regard to access to fresh information on visa-free exchange. Indeed, a member of an exchange organization expressed an opinion that *Hokkaidō Shimbun* has the most accurate and factually correct coverage of visa-free exchange out of all Japanese newspapers.<sup>24</sup>

As can be seen in Figure 1, there are certain “spikes” of larger amounts of coverage during isolated months. Many of these can be tied to specific events or incidents. 2016 and 2019 were particularly eventful years with regard to the exchange program and related incidents. In May 2016 a discussion sparked between Russian and Japanese newspapers regarding the cancellation of a visa-free trip from Japan to the disputed islands. The reason for cancellation was originally reported to be bad weather, however an article from a Russian newspaper cited the Japanese participants’ refusal to fill in the islands’ names in Russian as required by Russian law, which became the subject of discussion.<sup>25</sup> May and December 2016 marked mutual visits (Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Sochi in May and President Putin’s visit to Nagato in December) during which the state of the disputed islands was discussed and several projects for joint business development on the islands were proposed. The press and the local population in Nemuro were particularly active during Putin’s December visit, which reflected in both national and local coverage.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interviews B and D.

<sup>25</sup> *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, “Akutenkō de nyūiki dekizu\* bizanashi dai 1-jin,” 17 May 2016.  
*Hokkaidō Shimbun*, “< Shasetsu > 'hoppō' jiyū hōmon\* genten wo daiji ni shite koso,” 20 May 2016.  
*Sovetskiy Sakhalin*, “Ne tak pishetsya, po-drugomy slyshitsya”, 20 May 2016.

<sup>26</sup> For more on news coverage during mutual visits in 2016, see Georgy Buntilov, “The Kuril Islands/Northern Territories dispute: A comparison of local news reportage in Sakhalin and Hokkaido”, *electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies (ejcs)*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2017).  
<http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol17/iss3/buntilov.html>.

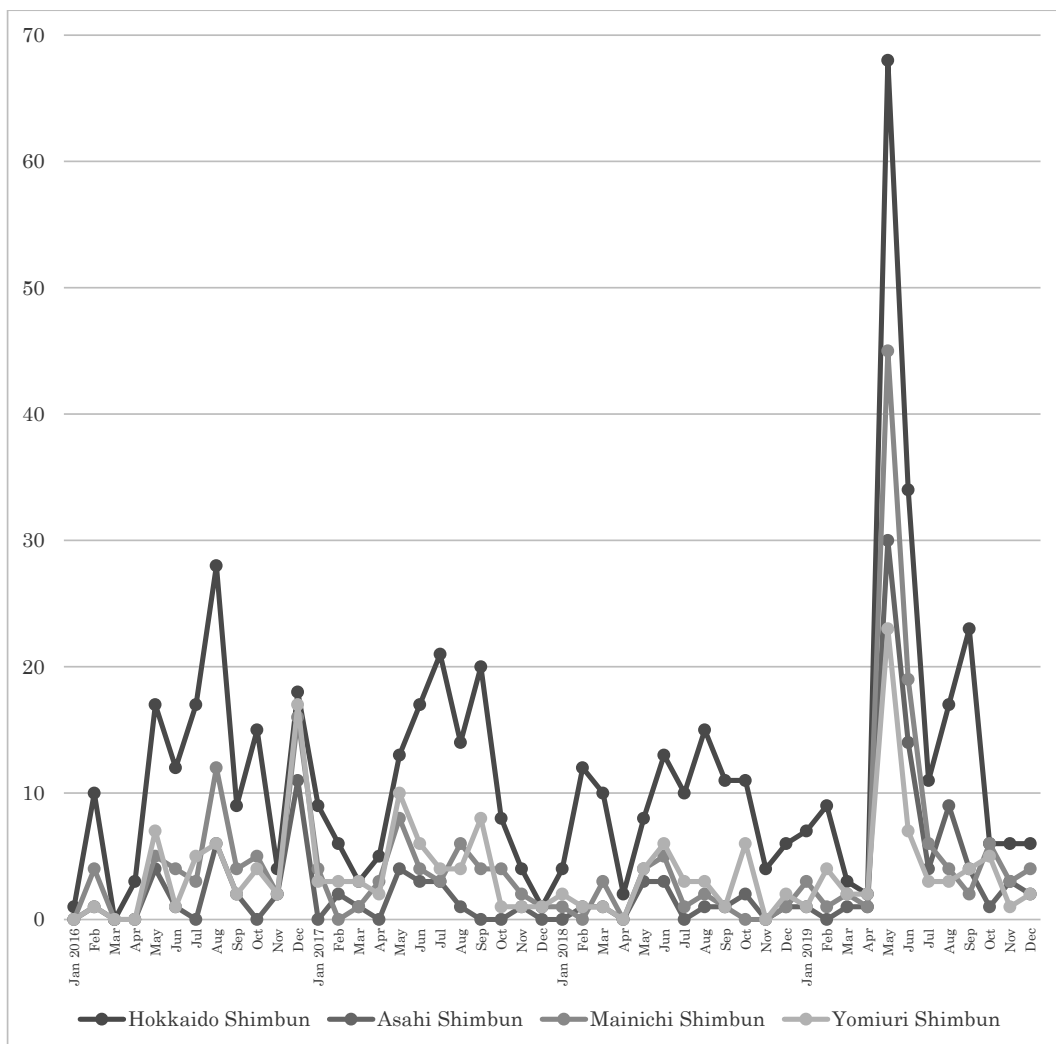


Figure 1. Japanese newspaper articles on visa-free exchange in 2016-2019

The largest amount of coverage of the visa-free exchange program in the four-year period is tied to an incident that occurred in May 2019. Maruyama Hodaka, a young Japanese politician who was member of Japan Innovation Party at the time, made a provocative statement during his visit to Kunashir as a participant in the visa-free exchange program. According to the reports, Maruyama became inebriated during a meeting with former and current residents of the islands, and made comments suggesting that war was the only realistic solution to the territorial issue.<sup>27</sup> Maruyama’s comment caused a massive influx of news mentioning the visa-free program in national and local newspapers in Japan, and forced him to resign from the party. Following the incident, exchange organizations engaged in the visa-free program received multiple complaints from Japanese citizens questioning selection criteria for participants in the program and requesting a stricter screening process.<sup>28</sup>

As can be seen from above, newspaper coverage of the visa-free exchange program in Japan is characterized by long periods of little to no reportage, and brief spikes related to specific events or incidents. In

<sup>27</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, “Ishin Maruyama giin jomei e Kitagata Ryō `sensō` hatsugen de”, 14 May 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Interview B.

such circumstances, qualitative analysis of specific articles is an effective means to understanding the portrayal of the visa-free exchange program in the news. The author intends to continue looking into newspaper coverage of visa-free exchange in Russia and Japan for further development of this research.

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## Appendix

Title in English	Title in Japanese or Russian	Headquarters
Hokkaido Committee to Promote Exchanges with the Northern Four Islands	北方四島交流北海道推進委員会	Sapporo
Northern Territories Issue Counter-Measures Association	北方領土問題対策協会	Tokyo
Northern Sea Animals Center	北の海の動物センター	Abashiri
Hokkaido Museum	北海道博物館	Sapporo
Hokkaido Government	北海道庁	Sapporo
Hokkaido University	北海道大学	Sapporo
Chishima-Habomai Association	千島齒舞連盟	Sapporo
Northern Four Islands Exchange Center of Hokkaido “NI・HO・RO”	北方四島交流センター（ニ・ホ・ロ）	Nemuro
Yuzhno-Kurilskiy Doker	Южно-Курильский докер	Yuzhno-Kurilsk (Kunashir)
Zaliv Kasatka	Залив Касатка	Reidovo (Iturup)

Appendix 1. List of organizations engaged in exchange with the disputed islands (incomplete).