From Tourists to Asylum Seekers: Russian Citizens in Guam, 2012-2021

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In 2012 the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began admitting Russian visitors to Guam without requiring a visa. The policy seemed to be a happy convergence of US foreign policy goals and the desires of local political and tourist industry leaders. The arrival of free-spending Russian tourists filling the US Pacific Island territory's hotels and shops greased the local economy and represented a minor victory of the Obama administration's "Russia reset" policy. In 2014, however, events in Russia led to a sharp decline in Russian overseas travel and a rise in political repression. Fewer Russian tourists arrived, and Guam's visa waiver program became a lifeline to a small number of Russian asylum seekers. Meanwhile, anti-immigration politics in the US targeted the Russian visa waiver, and DHS ended the program in fall 2019. Between 2014 and 2021, the federal government processed few of the asylum seekers claims. Russian asylum seekers' status in Guam remains uncertain. They cannot leave the island because Guam is outside of the US customs zone, and they cannot return to Russia. This article examines the plight of Russian migrants in Guam, their experience with arbitrary federal immigration policies, the extent to which they and the residents of Guam are subject to the vagaries of US politics, and how local residents have welcomed the asylum seekers and how Russians have adapted.

Between 2012 and 2019 the United States Department of Homeland Security admitted Russian citizens to the Pacific Island territory of Guam without visas. Visa-free travel made Guam unique. While often called (including in this paper) a "visa waiver," the process by which Russians entered Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) is in fact DHS exercising its "discretionary parole" to allow Guam and CNMI to admit Russian citizens (Department of Homeland Security, 2013). No part of the United States allowed or currently allows Russians to enter without a visa, and for a brief period,

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Guam became a popular tourist destination of Russians from their country's Far East. This paper will focus on a small but significant subset of Russian visitors to Guam: Asylum seekers.

Guam may seem an unlikely destination for Russian asylum seekers. The largest and most populous of the Mariana Islands, Guam is about 3,500 miles south of Russia's Pacific coast. The indigenous Chamorro people first encountered Europeans, the Spanish, in 1521. The Spanish-Chamorro Wars of the 1670s brought the Marianas under Spanish control. Following the 1898 Spanish-American War, the United States annexed Guam, but not the other Marianas, which came under German control, and after WWI, Japanese control. This decision generated a political division between the culturally connected Mariana Islands (i.e., CNMI and Guam) that remains significant. After World War II, the United States administered what became the Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands in the north as part of the larger United Nations Pacific Trust Territory. The US continued, first under the Navy and then the Department of Interior, to govern Guam directly. Currently, Guam is represented in the US House of Representatives by a non-voting delegate. While the different parts of the Trust Territory devolved and decolonized from the 1970s to 1986, the Marianas were never integrated. The federal government classifies both Guam and the CNMI as unincorporated territories and places their oversight within the Department of Interior. Guam and the CNMI, however, have different local governments with differing degrees of autonomy (Rogers, 2011). Unlike the CNMI, The United Nations recognizes Guam as one of 17 non-self-governing territories that should be decolonized.

Since 1898 to 2021, American presidents have viewed Guam as critical to America's power projection in the Pacific. Barring over two years of Japanese occupation, the US Navy governed Guam for the first half of the twentieth century. The rights, legal status, and desires of Chamorros, the indigenous people of Guam, were of little concern to Naval governors or US Congresses. Following World War II and during the Cold War military build-up, local anger over military land seizures combined with decades of authoritarian rule to convince Chamorro

legislators in Guam to challenge naval rule. Coordinating with allies in Washington, the 1949 Guam Legislature Walkout succeeded in pushing Congress to pass the 1950 Organic Act that recognized the island' residents as citizens and transferred authority over the island to the Department of the Interior (Perez-Hattori, 1995). US citizenship on the island came with caveats. While Guam inaugurated its first elected governor in 1971, its lone delegate to Congress cannot vote, nor do residents' votes count in US presidential elections. Congress sets reimbursement for federal benefits at rates lower than the states (Rogers, 2011). Most significantly for the story of Russian asylum seekers, Guam remained outside the US customs zone. Entry into the island is and has historically been more policed than entry into the United States. The commonly used and often maligned phrase, "tip of the spear," ostensibly refers to Guam but is more accurately understood as the military bases that occupy nearly one-third of the island's territory (Park, 2017; Bevacqua & Cruz, 2020). US national security concerns and anti-immigrant politics, not the desires of the people of Guam or their representatives, account for the rise and fall of the Russian visa waiver program, as well as the ongoing stories of stranded Russian asylum seekers in Guam.

Method

This article places the origins and demise of Guam's Russian visa waiver program in the context of Guam's colonial relationship to the United Sates. Using secondary source literature, local and national media sources along with federal and Government of Guam documents, the paper begins with a selective history of migrants and tourists in Guam, focusing on United States' regulation of entry to Guam during the Cold War. It also shows how the desires of local business and political leaders at times coincided with, and at times diverged from, American national security interests. Using local and national media along with government documents, the paper next describes the origins of the Russian visa waiver program and the rise and fall of Guam's Russian tourist market. The core of the paper seeks to explain why Russian asylum-seekers chose Guam, and how and why many who did so now feel frustrated and

confined. This section relies primarily on a set of interviews with asylum seekers that began in summer 2020 and concluded in spring 2021. All participants were given anonymity so they could express themselves freely without feeling their words might endanger them, their families, or their asylum claims. The interviewees told diverse, revealing, and sometimes tragic stories. Such personal accounts would otherwise be hidden in narratives about tourist markets, immigration policies, and geopolitics. They are of value on their own, but collectively and in context, such stories expose the illiberal nature of American foreign and immigration policies and their effect on migrants and residents of Guam.

America's Cold War and Migration to Guam

The first Russian-speaking visitors to Guam arrived in the Spanish colonial era, but it was as an American Cold War outpost that Guam made a lasting impression on Russians. In the 1950s the United States Air Force Strategic Air Command (SAC) stationed B-52s with nuclear warheads on the island for potential use against Soviet Far East targets. By 1964, a second part of the nuclear triad arrived at Apra Harbor when the Navy deployed twelve submarines carrying Polaris warheads. In response, as Rogers (2011) describes in Destiny's Landfall, Soviet "fishing" trawlers appeared off Ritidian Point. Rogers continues, by saying that local reaction, went in a different direction. Chamorro fishermen ventured out to the Soviet vessels hoping to trade American cigarettes for Soviet vodka.

The spirit animating the fishermen's enthusiasm for exchange and the US government's desire to aggressively contain the USSR serve as useful metaphors for Guam's relationships with other nations and with visitors to the island. The Government of Guam has often welcomed visitors for their commercial potential while the federal government has viewed the same visitors as national security threats; and, in some cases, assets. Guam's tourism industry only began after President John Kennedy decided to end the security clearance required to enter the island, a policy that made visiting the island difficult (Rogers, 2011). For Kennedy, the security clearance bore an uncomfortable resemblance to

the Soviet Union's closed cities, which foreigners were prohibited from visiting. The need to obtain a security clearance to enter a US territory also contradicted the open, democratic, and liberal Cold War image the Kennedy administration sought to project globally (Rasmussen, 2016). Over the subsequent decades, tourists - primarily those from Japan - transformed parts of Guam and many aspects of everyday life for its residents. A decade into the twenty-first century, tourism was generating 60 percent of all Guam's business revenue (Guam Economic Development Authority, 2011). In pursuit of new markets, local politicians have since the 1980s petitioned the federal government for visa waivers for wealthy Pacific states, including South Korea and Taiwan. In 2009 Guam business and political leaders targeted China and, to a much lesser degree, Russia, for visa waivers.

The visa waiver the federal government granted to Russian visitors to Guam in 2012 is best understood as a continuation of a US Cold War tradition of using entry to advance American foreign policy goals. During the Cold War, the immigration visa (when made available to Soviets, East Europeans, and Cubans) could advance a narrative in which the United States protected individual rights, in particular the freedom of movement. Favored immigrants came from communist states and arrived through what scholar Aristide Zolberg has called the immigration system's "side door" (2006). Deploying what Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan dubbed "calculated kindness," the federal government welcomed through this side door politically useful asylees while barring undeserving aliens (1986). The US also held the side door open to foreigners who served American interests, particularly those who fought against communist regimes and movements.

In 1975, Guam served as a port of entry for the largest group of such side-door migrants: refugees from South Vietnam. As Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese armed forces, the United States government brought over 112,000 South Vietnamese, primarily government and military officials and their families, to Guam. "Operation New Life" temporarily housed the migrants in twelve camps on military bases and leased land, where individuals and families awaited relocation to the

mainland where their claims would be processed. Significantly, the federal government identified the Vietnamese not as refugees but as "evacuees." This legal sleight of hand turned a group with a collective need for protection into over 100,000 individual asylum seekers whose cases would have to be vetted separately. Instead of being refugees with a legally established path toward citizenship, the evacuees as asylum seekers, individually petitioned the federal government for refuge and were required to find sponsors in the mainland. At the moment of America's defeat, domestic media coverage emphasized how the operation fulfilled an obligation to endangered allies and illustrated fundamental humanity of American foreign policy. Media coverage of the refugees in Guam, on the other hand, highlighted the 1,500 Vietnamese who demanded repatriation. The repatriates told local media they had been confined by the United States. They went on hunger strikes and protested with images of Ho Chi Minh to win their return to Vietnam (Lipman, 2012).

Post-Cold War Migrants to Guam

Similarly, a 1996 post-Cold War effort, "Operation Pacific Haven," saw the US government fly nearly 7,000 Kurdish refugees who had helped maintain the US "no-fly" zone in Northern Iraq, to Guam (Murphy, 1996). Jana Lipman has noted that as an island colony in which migrant rights are not fully defined, Guam occupies a liminal zone in which asylum seekers have an ambiguous legal status that the US government, and sometimes asylum seekers, deploy to their respective advantage (2012). While the US has used Guam as a transit point to process "deserving" migrants toward legal immigration status, the island has also, though less frequently, been a destination for individual asylum seekers arriving on their own initiative.

The federal response to the arrival of Chinese asylum seekers in Guam in the 1990s prefigured how DHS later treated Russian asylum seekers. The first Chinese to seek asylum in Guam fled oppressive conditions in garment factories in the CNMI; but by 1999, local and federal officials expressed alarm that most migrants were arriving

directly from China (Smith, 1999). Chinese smugglers, "snakeheads," arranged for young men from rural Fujian province to travel by boat to Guam. Existing detention facilities in Guam proved inadequate, and there was no permanent judge in Guam to process the asylum claims. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) at first flew Chinese asylum seekers to Seattle (Smith, 1999). As more asylum seekers arrived and costs increased, INS halted such flights and instead left the responsibility for housing and caring for asylum seekers to the Government of Guam. Guam's lack of a federal immigration judge meant that detention could be lengthy, costly, and potentially dangerous. Outraged, Guam's Congressional Delegate Robert Underwood introduced legislation to: Prohibit claims of asylum in Guam; remove all undocumented migrants in 30 days; compensate Guam for all detention costs; and assign a judge to the island (Underwood, 1999). Local anger peaked when spearfishermen detained a suspected snakehead with the tools of the trade until federal officials arrived (Branigan, 1999).

Figure 1. Defensive asylum seekers in Guam are housed at the Hagatña Detention Facility while waiting for their initial hearing.

Underwood's legislation did not advance, and ultimately the federal government chose to deploy its considerable military assets to intercept

Chinese asylum seekers. The Coast Guard added the largest class cutter and a C-130 Cargo plane to interdict boats before migrants could make landfall. From sea, the military took migrants to a makeshift camp in Tinian, part of the CNMI. US immigration law did not apply at that time to the CNMI, and federal officials were free to ignore asylum pleas and deport all migrants to China (Smith, 1999). Guam's colonial status allowed the United States to evade its immigrations laws. The federal government preferred to let Guam deal with migrants, which legally are not a Government of Guam responsibility, on its own. When pressed, the federal government attempted to evade its legal responsibilities to asylum seekers. Guam's distance from the mainland and the merely advisory capacity of its delegate to Congress made it easy for federal authorities to ignore the desires of Guam residents. The final solution was a military one – intercept and deport.

The Rise and Fall of the Russian Visa Waiver

The arrival of Russians on Guam began with the federal takeover of the CNMI immigration system. Since the 1990s, Russians had been allowed entry to the CNMI. In 2008, however, the United States Congress "federalized" the Commonwealth's immigration system, replacing its law with the US Immigration and Naturalization Act, and the process was finalized under the Obama administration. Congress's takeover of the CNMI's immigration system endangered the free entry of Chinese and Russian tourists and investors, but the new law allowed for some local concessions (Quimby, 2013). The act noted the CNMI's "unique economic circumstances, history, and geographical location," and carved out a process through which the Governor of the CNMI could request DHS to add countries to the list of visa waivers. The same law reaffirmed the role of Guam's governor and non-voting delegate to the US House of Representatives to request visa exemptions (Consolidated Natural Resources Act, 2008). In 2009, Governor of Guam Felix Camacho and Guam Congressional Delegate Madeline Bordallo petitioned Congress for a Guam version of the CNMI Chinese and Russian waiver. They brought evidence showing that fewer Japanese visitors, who then comprised 80 percent of Guam's tourist arrivals, were choosing Guam. Visa waivers,

they claimed, could in their first year generate $212 million, adding an additional 16 percent to the island's estimated $1.2 billion tourism industry revenue (House of Representatives Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, 2009).

The year 2009 seemed an opportune time to make such a pitch. That January, the Guam Legislature welcomed the "first Pacific President," Barack Obama, with an optimistic resolution that requested the Philippines and China, but, significantly, not Russia, be included in the Guam Visa Waiver Program (Guam Legislature, 2009). Ignoring the appeals of Guam's political leaders, DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano decided against granting Russian and Chinese visitors' entry to Guam. DHS continued to allow Customs and Border Patrol in the CNMI to admit visa-less Russian and Chinese citizens and the Guam leaders continued to press for a similar program (Department of Interior, 2009).

Republican Eddie Calvo made visa waiver expansion an important element of his successful 2010 gubernatorial campaign. In office, his administration energetically lobbied the Department of Defense and the Department of State, emphasizing not only the transformational economic potential of the Chinese tourist market, but also how Chinese visitors to Guam could promote mutual understanding (Marianas Business Journal, 2011). In late 2011, the efforts bore partial but disappointing fruit: DHS added Russia but not China to the Guam visa waiver program. The decision went into effect in January to coincide with an Obama directive to boost tourism nationally (Executive Order 13597). Calvo continued to push for a Chinese waiver, marking the topic as the most important item for a 2013 Washington meeting with the Department of the Interior's Insular Affairs office (Perez, 2013). Guam officials had consistently identified a Chinese visa waiver as essential and a Russian one as a bonus, and it seems likely that if a Russian visa waiver had not previously existed for the CNMI, Guam leaders would not have requested one.

The Obama Administration's foreign policy of engaging Russia while confronting China proved decisive in Guam's Russia visa waiver. In

2008, Russians elected Dmitri Medvedev president. The possibility arose of repairing a bilateral relationship that had been fraying since the NATO bombings of Serbia in 1999 and the 2000 ascension of Vladimir Putin to the presidency. The so-called Russia "reset" achieved its greatest triumph in 2011 with the renewal of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (Baker & Bilefsky, 2011).

Since the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union, Russians' travel from Russia to the United States has been an expensive and time-consuming process. The Department of Homeland Security requires Russian citizens to obtain a tourist visa. This includes an interview at the US Embassy in Moscow or at one of three consulates spread across Russia's eleven time zones. Not infrequently, the process ends in a denial. Therefore, the Guam visa waiver marked a significant change in America's regulation of Russian visitors. While still unable to transit to the mainland without a visa, Russians could visit American territory. The simultaneous denial of a Chinese waiver occurred as the Obama administration announced a "pivot to Asia:" an effort to rally Pacific nations around American leadership to check growing Chinese influence (Liberthal, 2011). Governor Calvo had offered Guam as an American bridge to China, but in 2012 the US President preferred one to Russia.

For two years, the island was a popular destination for residents of the Russian Far East. Over the course of 2014, the Guam Visitors Bureau counted over 20,000 Russian arrivals, and it estimated the average Russian visitor spent $1,600 each day during an almost two-week – often the full 45 day – stay. By comparison, their Japanese counterparts averaged a weekend, and spent less than half as much per day. Despite Russian visitors' profligate ways, the Russian Far East's sparse population meant that the 2014 number was bumping up against a natural ceiling of annual Russian visitors that GVB estimated to be between 30,000-50,000. If the federal government had included a China visa waiver, GVB estimated annual arrivals of as few as 1.5 million to as many as six million, transformative numbers for Guam's economy (Marianas Business Journal, 2011). Nonetheless, signage near hotels and on roads and beaches soon added Russian translations. Russian families

joined the crowds at the luxury shops in Tumon, loaded up on groceries at discount retailer Cost-U-Less, and rented hotel rooms, homes, and condos across the island. Charter flights brought tourists from the Russian Far East cities Khabarovsk and Vladivostok and the future looked at least stable (Marianas Business Journal, 2014). In 2015, however, the upward trend of Russian visitors reversed. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the subsequent American and EU sanctions on Russia, and oil and the ruble's price declines, all contributed to fewer Russians traveling overseas (Kottasova, 2014). Bartley Jackson of the Guam Visitor's Bureau, however, remained upbeat on the long-term prospects. "They'll be back," he claimed on January 27, 2017 (Pang, 2017).

That same day new US President, Donald Trump, signed an executive order that initiated a review of asylum screening procedures and parole that directly targeted Guam's and the CNMI's visa waivers (Executive Order 13769). Two years prior to Trump's order, US Senators and immigration hawks Chuck Grassley, Mike Lee, and Jeff Sessions wrote to DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson, attacking the CNMI and Guam visa waivers as an illegal abuse of executive power (Grassley, Lee & Sessions, 2015). When Trump appointed Sessions Attorney General in spring 2017, the end of Guam's and the CNMI's visa waivers was in sight. It arrived two years later, and GVB member Bartley Jackson took to a local Guam radio program to stress that many Russian visitors had turned out to be asylum seekers, who he identified as a "problem." (Partido, 2019). The visa waiver had opened a space for the arrival of Russians. According to Guam political and business leaders, the viability of this space depended on the willingness of Russians to spend money and toreturn to Russia. The visa-less travel to Guam depended, however, not on Russian behavior but on the vagaries of American politics, both foreign and domestic. Furthermore, those who arrived with the tourists but had no intention of returning to Russia discovered how, just as effectively as authoritarian regimes opposed by the US, the United States could impede migrants' movement and ignore their legally protected claims of asylum.

Participants and Method - Russian Asylees in Guam

For Russians desperate to flee, Guam's visa waiver was a lifeline. "[I]f I had stayed in Russia, that could have ended with the falsification of a criminal charge against me… So, I escaped. I managed to do this" (anonymous interview, 2020).[2] Russian citizens also applied for asylum in the US mainland in increasing numbers. In 2017 DHS reported 2,600 Russian asylum claims, the highest number since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Office of Immigration Statistics, 2019). Following Vladimir Putin's 2012 return to the presidency, Russia has enacted legislation to criminalize political speech and organizing as well as homosexuality (Dixon, 2021; Kramer, 2013). Though the majority do not seek asylum, millions of Russians have left their homes over the past 30 years; and millions more (over 20 percent of Russians in Russia) want to emigrate (Krawatzek & Sasse, 2019). The United Nations ranks Russia behind only India and Mexico in terms of numbers of citizens living outside national borders (Moscow Times, 2019). The number of Russian asylum seekers in Guam is small but the precise number is not known. At most, two dozen have appeared at public rallies. Though unverified, local media estimates of Russian asylum seekers on Guam have ranged as high as 300 (Schwartz, 2018; Partido, 2019).

The ten individuals who participated in anonymous interviews for this project fled Russia in response to political and sexual repression, and also because of the lack of protection from criminals. They faced physical and financial threats. This small group came from different regions, practiced different religions, was multi-ethnic, and included professionals, scholars, businesspeople, and students. Most arrived as families; some arrived alone. Each was asked the same set of 21 questions about their lives in Guam. The interviewees all claimed affirmative asylum. This means that they filed the necessary paperwork with USCIS after they arrived and therefore avoided detention. Their "asylum clock" for obtaining work authorization began when USCIS acknowledged receipt of their application, and from this date each year

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all information from asylum seekers came from ten separate interviews by the author.

they renew their work documents for a $400 filing fee. All are waiting, some for over five years, for the USCIS to rule on their claims. Defensive asylum is claimed after deportation proceedings have begun and typically includes temporary detention. With one exception, the participants in this study arrived with the financial resources that allowed them to avoid homelessness. With two exceptions (one a student), all were employed.

Fleeing Persecution in Russia for Uncertainty in Guam

"We never thought we would go away from our native country that we love so much… we had to do it," one migrant said of their relocation to Guam. They feared the Russian State Security Service (FSB) was preparing to retaliate against them for political activities. "Nobody planned or tried to go away. It was not like we were fans of America or anything like this," the asylum seeker explained. Time and options were limited. American officials had denied their previous visa applications, perhaps because the government suspected an asylum claim. Guam, as part of the US but exempt from its visa regime, seemed the best choice. "We would have come to Europe, but we did not have a Schengen visa, and we could not wait to have it made. That's why we had to come to Guam." Others recounted similar stories of applying for and being denied visas. Following three failed attempts at American visas, an asylum seeker desperate to find an accessible destination that did not have an extradition treaty with Russia said, "We started looking for other opportunities."

And that opportunity turned out to be Guam. One asylum seeker said that a human rights organization in Russia had advised Guam specifically as safe and accessible. Most, however, were unfamiliar with the island, its peoples, and its confusing legal status in the United States. "Nobody knew anything about Guam among my friends before I came here," one asylum seeker said. "I [have since] met some Russians who come here, but they mostly come from the Far East, to rest and shop, but this is the Far East, and where I come from nobody knows anything about Guam." Migrants instead relied on social media for guidance. "We

found on YouTube the channel of this immigrant who already was here… And he said that it was so nice here, told about no entry visa, and how cool it is here. And so, in two weeks we packed our bags and came here."

Since 2017, Konstantin Smirnov has been *vlogging* on a YouTube channel about his family's quest for asylum. The most viewed post recounts how Smirnov got under the table jobs to stave off eviction while awaiting work authorization. Smirnov's posts are candid about the prospect of poverty, silent USCIS officials, and everyday frustrations and indignities. Other YouTube descriptions of Russian migrants in Guam, however, have painted a rosier and, not coincidentally, self-interested picture. The channel "Immigration to the United States," includes a highly viewed post on working in Guam that encourages viewers to use its off-island legal services, emphasizing that with its experienced legal counsel, asylum seekers typically wait less than a year for parole to the United States mainland (Politicheskoe ubezhiscshe v Ameriku cherez Guam, 2018).

Because Guam is a territory outside the customs zone and has no immigration judge, the federal government has found it possible to ignore Russians seeking asylum in Guam. Unlike Chinese asylum seekers in the 1990s, the federal government has not flown Russian asylum seekers to the mainland or, in most cases, allowed them to do so on their own by granting "advanced" parole. Advanced parole would permit asylum seekers to pursue their claims in the mainland. Most interviewees expressed bitterness at the lack of communication from USCIS on either the prospect of advanced parole or the processing of their claims. With some exceptions, the interviewees are financially able and desire to travel to the mainland. Some have even purchased airline tickets only to be informed by Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) officials at the airport that they cannot board their flights. A common complaint was that since they could receive word from USCIS at any time, they should not buy furniture or otherwise settle in, but be prepared to leave on a moment's notice. Some reported that they feel imprisoned. For many interviewees the realization that Guam might not be a temporary stop came as a shock.

"No one told us that we would not be able to leave from here. The immigration lawyer said, "my dears, believe me, even after you go through the interview you are going to spend ten, twenty years here and nobody is going to the mainland so easily."

Adapting (or not) to an Island Home

Guam residents had likewise conceived of Russians as temporary visitors, and there was surprise and concern as it became clear that some Russians' stay in Guam was indefinite. Asylum seekers in the US and its territories are mostly ineligible for federal benefit programs, such as food stamps and Medicaid. Federal reimbursement rates for these programs are set at lower rates in Guam and other US territories - relative to the states – meaning that the Government of Guam faces unique burdens that US state governments do not. When the Compact of Free Association went into effect in 1986, it gave citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia the right to migrate and settle in Guam. Thousands have done so to find employment, and many have found a different version of poverty awaiting them in Guam. In 1996 Congress passed the Welfare Reform Act and stripped FSM migrants of Medicaid benefits until a temporary reprieve was given in response to the coronavirus pandemic in late 2020 (Hofschneider, 2020). The Government of Guam has been left to fill the gap, which is estimated at $148 million annually; and it has done so with uneven results. Federal policies push migrants, including Russians, into homelessness and leave territorial governments to care for these individuals and to find and fund solutions (Limtiaco, 2021).

In fall of 2019, the Archdiocese of Guam reported that 10-15 Russians relied on their soup kitchens while others appeared at local shelters (O'Connor, 2019). Asylum seekers face uncertain work prospects and limited access to medical care and insurance. The pressure on local government and private charities is considerable. In an unsigned 2018 editorial, The *Guam Daily Post* urged local politicians to remember the strains that Chinese asylum seekers in the 1990s had put

on the local government, and called for DHS to discontinue the visa waiver. Russians, it said, were being influenced by YouTube videos that made claiming asylum in Guam seem desirable. A wave of migrants was threatening to deplete the island's limited resources. "Hosting 150 asylum seekers won't cause a big ripple stateside, but for our small island with a population of 160,000, which has barely increased in years, a growing number of asylum seekers could become out of hand" (Guam Daily Post, 2018).

Russian asylum seekers expressed ambivalence toward local peoples. Some admired what they described as a welcoming culture while others criticized local ways. "Well, probably because they are brought up this way," was how one asylum seeker explained the personal warmth experienced over three years in Guam. Another, however, claimed Chamorro employers were frustrating Russians' attempts to advance, "because they cannot do anything, and Russians can do everything. They are just envious." Ethnic Russian racism toward Central Asians and other national minorities in Russia can be layered onto Guam's social reality. One asylum seeker said Chuukese migrants from the FSM were responsible for making Guam unsafe. The individual used a term *Chuuki,* to identify Chuukese, a word that resembles a slur often used against Central Asians in Russia: *churka.* In offensive language, this same asylum seeker described Chuukese as the Guam equivalent of the Roma in Russia. "I know that they are all dirty, revolting, and gypsies [tsygancha]. It is horrible. Nothing is safe here. Nothing can be locked."

Asylum seekers who were not ethnic Russians expressed the most positive attitudes toward Guam. One wonders whether expressions of racism reflect that, outside military bases, those considered white are not seen in positions of authority in Guam and a related belief that the racial order in the mainland would be beneficial to ethnic Russians. With notable exceptions, there was a lack of sympathy for migrants from the FSM. Disappointing but not surprising, such attitudes are consistent with immigration to the mainland. Historically, many migrants have sought

distance from, rather than solidarity with, other migrant groups and Black Americans for self-protection and advancement (Roedigger, 2005).

Sometimes the same asylum seekers who expressed racist views also claimed that they preferred to socialize with non-Russians. A common complaint among asylees is that there is no Russian community in Guam because Russians, as a rule, do not seek out their compatriots. "We are Russians," one joked. "We are afraid." While such generalizations seem dubious, there are legitimate reasons why Russians fleeing persecution might be cautious in forming relationships with other Russians in Guam. Some expressed fear that government informants and even FSB agents may be among the asylum seekers. Nevertheless, a thriving social media community centered in the secure messaging app, Telegram, is popular, and like many online forums, divisive. Battles over how to petition the federal and local government to advance asylum claims merge with personal feuds and hyperbolic insults (Telegram, 2020-2021).

Interviewees identified the uncertain immigration process as part of a continuing trauma that began in Russia.

> So, I feel like an invalid; not physically, but socially. So, I am here, but I am not all here. Just twenty percent of me or ten percent of me are here, and the eighty percent or ninety percent of me are left behind… . I am eaten by this, I am oppressed by this. From time to time, I experience depressive states, but I tend to be optimistic, so I am able to shake these off fairly quickly. … I experienced a lot of difficulties in my life. I can survive many things, but the most difficult thing here in Guam is being torn away from my family and the wait… I don't understand when this interview is going to take place. I don't know if it is going to take place in a week or in three years. I don't know when I should be expecting this. And this is very difficult for me. I see no pleasure in being by the sea, among the palm trees because of that.

Some Russians made attempts to establish a permanent life in Guam but discovered that restrictions on their movements singled them

out. One asylum seeker recounted how a local friend initially helped him adjust to a new life. The friendship was an anchor. When the friend moved to the mainland, the loss felt devastating.

> I was really surprised by her behavior, her openness to me, her love, like she is a real friend. This is how they taught us in the USSR to be friends. But, unfortunately, the circumstances changed. Her husband had to return to the US…. and they left; she left with him. And now I am without a friend.

Another family broke apart when one spouse received advanced parole to the mainland and the other did not. The spouse departed with the couple's child, leaving the migrant in Guam alone.

Frustration and Protest

As years passed and USCIS remained silent, some asylum seekers organized for collective action. In the summer of 2020, a group of Russians published a petition demanding the right to travel to the mainland with the revealing URL, https://www.change.org/Guam-prison (July, 2020). Three months later, two dozen Russian citizens seeking asylum in Guam began gathering for irregular weekend rallies outside the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office, calling for the resumption of the video hearings necessary to begin processing asylum claims. The USCIS had in spring of 2019 suspended "credible fear" hearings in Guam. At these hearings, the USCIS determines whether the migrant claiming defensive asylum faces legitimate threats in their country of origin. Defensive asylum seekers who had arrived in Guam after the hearings' suspension found themselves unable to start the clock on work authorization. The rallies came as the island was recording some of the highest rates of new COVID-19 cases in the United States. Protesters' willingness to take risks to be heard, reckless or not, demonstrated their determination and frustration.

Organizer Egor Elkin had arrived in Guam before USCIS suspended the video hearings and, unlike many of the protesters, was employed. He

said he was lucky. “Some people live on the beach,” Elkin explained. “Some people had to live in shipping container units – no air conditioning. Some people get arrangements with local people for a room and help out around the house” (author interview, 2020). By spring of 2021, frustration for some had turned to despair. During the first week of March, a handful of asylum-seekers participated in a hunger strike outside the Governor’s Complex at Adelup. The weeklong action was to prod Governor Lourdes Leon Guerrero to advocate USCIS on behalf of asylum seekers. The emergence of a semi-permanent population of politically active Russian asylum seekers caught local attention, generating surprise and sympathy (O’Connor, 2021).

One asylum seeker who sympathized but did not participate in the hunger strike said that at their initial 2019 USCIS interview they had surrendered their passports. Since then, the USCIS had not communicated with them, nor had it returned the document. Even if it had been safe for this asylum seeker to return to Russia, the USCIS had made a return impossible.

The four hunger strikers were all men. At their small encampment they explained to local journalists that they had little hope of a good outcome. “There is a choice between a fast and slow death,” one participant claimed and added that the “fast death” or starvation, was preferable to the indignity of endless waiting (O’Connor, 2021). Meanwhile, on Telegram, asylum seekers carried out a hidden and frequently vitriolic debate over the merits of the hunger strike. Opponents said it was counterproductive to make strident demands that could alienate potential local allies. Others said that the object should not be the Governor of Guam, who had no power over immigration policy, but the federal government and the USCIS. The nearby federal courthouse, they claimed, would make a more effective rally location. Some of the commenters accused the hunger strikers of playing the parts of macho heroes while jeopardizing others’ asylum claims (Telegram, 2021).

Nonetheless, the hunger strike did attract limited local support. Near the end of the week, Lt. Governor Josh Tenorio met with the hunger strikers and a much larger group of sympathizers. During a listening session on the Adelup lawn, asylum seekers explained how they could not travel for urgent medical needs or enter mainland universities to which they had been accepted, and how they feared return to Russia. Egor Elkin, who did not participate in the hunger strike, wondered whether Guam's territorial status allowed United States to mistreat asylees. "Maybe this whole thing that they don't allow people out of Guam is just because they don't treat Guam people as equal to themselves. Why not make everybody on the same level?" Tenorio agreed and said he would try to find out any information on the status of claims or the prospect of granting advanced parole to the mainland. Beginning that same spring, a group of University of Guam Social Work students began connecting asylum seekers to local resources that might be available to them (O'Connor, 2021).

Conclusion

Most asylum seekers avoid any exposure, believing that visibility is dangerous. These individuals often report feeling forgotten by the federal government. Such feelings, however, are inaccurate. From the 2012 Russian visa waiver to the 2017 Executive Order to review asylum procedures, and then to the 2019 ending of the visa waiver program, the United States has shown a keen interest in Guam's Russian visitors. In 2012, Russian tourists to Guam were selected as part of a diplomatic effort to improve relations with a rival Pacific power. Since 2019, the federal government has changed course, off-loading desperate people in physical danger onto the local government and private charities. Guam has been made to help presidential administrations build bridges or throw up walls. The people most affected by Washington's capriciousness are waiting indefinitely for their lives to resume.

Political scientist Elizabeth Cohen has argued that liberal democracies transform time into political goods, "used when states and political subjects transact over power" (2018). Federal agencies refusal

to process the claims of Russian asylum seekers leaves these individuals in unprotected uncertainty and segregates them from the communities in which they live. Cohen explains, "racialized incarceration practices, delayed naturalization, and obstructionist abortion waiting periods are all instances in which select people's time is appropriated as a means of denying them rights that others enjoy" (2018). In 2011 Republican Presidential nominee Mitt Romney said that making life intolerable for migrants will lead individuals to "self-deport" (Madison, 2012). Self-deportation is an impossible choice for asylums seekers. Return means continued oppression, prison, or worse. While encouraged by the results of the 2020 election, Russians in Guam have expressed little hope regarding their status. In a cruel irony, some whose time was stolen waiting in Soviet lines now find themselves at the mercy of an indifferent regime in the Western Pacific.

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