

“The New Sakoku Period ” : the Coronavirus Restrictions Policy Regarding Foreign Residents in Japan

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has caused colossal damage to the global economy and put humanity to the test, including in Japan. The Japanese cabinet is pursuing a rather liberal policy, focusing on the self-awareness of the population, and taking measures to prevent an economic crisis. To curb the growth rate of coronavirus infections, air traffic with other countries was shut down, and a state of emergency was declared more than once—either only in prefectures with an unfavorable epidemiological situation, or throughout the entire country.

Quarantine Features in Japan

In response to the emergency, most businesses were shut down, people were asked to reduce the number of meetings by 70–80% and, if possible, stay at home without going outside unless absolutely necessary. To reduce the burden on the health care system, residents of the country were asked not to go to the hospital for “trivial” reasons (people were asked to stay at home in cases of slight discomfort) . At the same time, unlike some countries, no material fines or criminal liability for violation of self-isolation were imposed; for the most part, the government focused on the self-discipline of citizens.¹

The main financial aspect of the policy is a set of budget programs aimed at combating the pandemic, supporting the population, businesses, and sectors of the economy, as well as implementing incentive measures. Each resident, including foreign citizens who had resided in the country for a long time, was allocated temporary assistance of 100,000 yen, families with children were given up to 300,000 yen, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were awarded up to 1 million yen to subsidize rent and up to another 2 million yen in financial aid, along with many other measures.²

The government is taking a number of measures to protect employment. Firstly, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare is reimbursing employees of companies whose financial situation has deteriorated due to COVID-19 who are forced to take leave or quit. Foreign interns, should they be dismissed due to the pandemic, can work in 14 other areas, for example, in agriculture, subject to a change in their status of residence.

Some experts believe that in order to provide jobs for graduates, companies should expand their scope of activities, starting with the introduction of internet-based services. The annual graduate recruitment campaign is also recommended to be conducted online.

Throughout the pandemic, Japan’s borders have remained closed to most non-foreigners. There

¹ Kuzovkov, 2020, pp.352–353.

² Belov, Tikhotskaya, 2020, pp.18–19.

were two short periods of exception: from October to December 2020, and from 8 to 30 November 2021. At the same time, those who entered had to observe strict quarantine restrictions. In order to enter the country, it was necessary to:

1. Receive two certificates confirming negative PCR test results (one test to be done 72 hours before arrival in Japan, the second in a special area of the airport after arrival)
2. Comply with a two-week quarantine, often at one's own expense, in a previously agreed room (hotel room, apartment, etc.)
3. Keep a health journal
4. Install location-tracking software
5. Avoid using public transport for two weeks after arrival

International Criticism of Japanese Policies

At the end of December 2020, the emergence of the Alpha variant of the virus forced the government to suspend the issuance of visas and restrict entry. The situation has remained unchanged over time. At the end of September 2021, the government decided to cancel the country's emergency regime, but the borders still remain closed to the vast majority of non-foreigners, except for a short period from 8 to 30 November 2021. Japan is the only G7 country that still maintains restrictions on immigration. Even the United States, in spite of its unfavorable (relative to Japan) position, has opened access for training and work. The isolation policy has been criticized for "double standards" compared to that applied to Olympic athletes. Due to the pandemic, a group of international students held an online press conference in May 2021, where they asked the Japanese government to ease restrictions. According to various estimates, about 27,000 students from different countries are still waiting for their opportunity to enter, and some of them have sold almost all their property in their homeland in order to securely go to Japan for study or work. Nevertheless, the restrictions put them in a very uncomfortable position: many have to live with friends or parents, hoping for a quick change for the better in the situation.

Online classes offered by some language schools force students to seriously change their daily routine due to differing time zones. This negatively affects both their performance and their psychological state. In addition, not everyone agrees to pay for tuition at a language school to study remotely.³

In March, the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) published its 2020 survey of international students in Japan. The total number of international students in Japan fell by 10.4%, a serious decline, especially against the backdrop of several years of growth. Given the ongoing travel ban, the number of international students can be expected to decline further in 2021.⁴

³ Voices from Limbo: Japan's Lockout Leaves Foreign Students Adrift/The Nippon Foundation Nippon.com//URL : <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00725/> (accessed 23.08.2021).

⁴ Japan should reopen its doors to international students//The Japan Times. URL : <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/07/21/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-reopen-doors-international-students/> (accessed 14.08.2021).

Conclusion

In the longer term, the downward trend in the number of international students may become a problem for the government, which has for many years sought to make Japanese universities more globally connected and competitive. It is likely that such a policy is primarily aimed at protecting Japanese citizens. It seems that the Japanese state at the moment feels much more relaxed, being isolated from the outside world, because the cabinet has the opportunity to make more balanced decisions and build on the peculiarities of the mentality of their country's residents. In addition, the lack of workers due to coronavirus restrictions is not felt so acutely, so the need to attract foreign labor has temporarily decreased.⁵ Parallels inadvertently arise with the so-called Sakoku period (the period of Japan's self-isolation from the outside world, 1650–1842). However, if such harsh measures persist, Japan could lose the confidence and interest of foreign students and workers, which will devalue the recent progress made in this area.

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⁵ Kuzovkov, 2020, p. 26