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Cubans Lured to Russia Through Old Alliances Left Stranded by Virus

By Isabelle DeSisto

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Volunteers Pedro Luis García and Anna Voronkova helping to organize the distribution of food to Cubans in need in Moscow. **Pedro Luis García's personal archive.**

Idalmis Moreno, a nurse with 15 years of clinical experience in her native Cuba, has spent two years trying to gain the migration status in Russia that would allow her to work.

Historical ties and visa-free travel between the countries have made Russia a popular destination for Cuban migrants. Some, like Moreno, arrive seeking employment through official channels, while others come as tourists and stay to work illegally in construction or buy goods to bring back to Cuba to resell.

But the coronavirus pandemic has left many of them stranded in the Russian capital, often crammed into tiny apartments without official work contracts or knowledge of the language.

“It’s like swimming against the current,” said Moreno, 56, who has been providing unofficial

medical advice to fellow Cubans during the outbreak.

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Russia and Cuba have a long history of economic and cultural ties. After relations with the United States soured in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the communist Latin American nation came to rely heavily on Soviet aid, and its students flocked to Russian universities.

Today, Russia is reasserting its presence in Cuba. During an official visit to Havana in October, former Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev pledged to invest in the country's energy sector and railway system.

Russian tourism to Cuba has also increased in recent years, with nearly 179,000 Russians visiting the island in 2019. Since 2018, Cuban tourists have been able to stay in Russia for up to 90 days without a visa.

This visa exemption makes Russia one of the most popular non-Spanish-speaking destinations for Cuban travelers. According to the Russian Federal Tourism Agency, 28,000 Cubans visited Russia in 2019.

Given Cuba's chronic shortages, a new class of entrepreneur has evolved since the government eliminated exit permits in 2013. These so-called *mulas* (mules) travel abroad to buy clothing and hard-to-get products like medicine and household appliances. Cuban citizens are allowed up to 120 kilograms of tax-free imports annually.

Russia may be a distant and expensive destination, but it's still possible to turn a profit. Spare car parts, for instance, fetch high prices in Cuba, where rusty Soviet Ladas still putter along pothole-covered streets.

Other Cubans stay in the country and find cash-in-hand employment. Cuban middlemen offer plane tickets, housing and a job for a fee of several thousand U.S. dollars. Russian-speaking Cuban "businessmen" charge exorbitant fees for normally free services like visa registration.

"[In the process of becoming] legal in Russia, you easily become the victim of scams," said Anna Voronkova, a Russian woman who has volunteered to translate for Cubans receiving medical attention during the pandemic.

Yorgeidys Lavastida's monthly salary in Cuba was around $25. When a Cuban told him he could earn $1,500 a month in Russia working in construction, he was sold. He planned to work for a short time to save money and buy goods for his family. But when he arrived in Russia and started working he went nearly two months without pay. "There was always some excuse," he said.

Oscar, who declined to give his real name, said a fellow Cuban swindled him, leaving him stranded without work. "I was told that it would be easy to get a job that paid well and that there wouldn't be any problems... All that was a lie," he said.

Now Oscar is living in an apartment with seven strangers waiting until international travel

resumes. “Russia was just a trampoline,” he said.

Many Cubans travel to Russia under the false impression that the country is a gateway to the European Union. Traffickers promise them documents that will allow them to continue to Spain or Italy. When they learn that Russia is not part of the Schengen zone, it can be too late to return to Cuba, as some sell their homes to pay for the trip.

When the coronavirus outbreak led the Russian government to suspend international flights and introduce quarantine in late March, Cubans in the country found themselves in dire straits.

With jobs and shopping trips on hold, their savings began to run out. Videos have appeared in Spanish-language media showing Cubans sleeping in stairwells in Moscow apartment blocks.

On June 3, a special Azur Air flight carried a group of Cubans and other Latin Americans back to their home countries and returned with Russian tourists who had been stranded abroad. But the $630 one-way ticket was too expensive for Cubans working in low-paying jobs in Russia.

The Cuban Consulate in Russia did not immediately respond to requests from The Moscow Times for information on the number of Cuban citizens stranded in Russia on tourist visas.

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Although neither the Russian nor the Cuban governments have offered financial support to stranded Cubans, volunteers have pooled resources to help the neediest.

When Pedro Luis García, who has been living in Moscow for seven years, learned of his compatriots’ plight, he contacted the Muslim charity *Dom Dobroty* (House of Kindness), which distributes food to hungry families. He also launched a Youtube channel where he posts videos teaching Cubans how to navigate Russia’s migration procedures.

García said he was motivated to help because of his own struggles as a migrant in Russia.

Through *Dom Dobroty*, García met Voronkova, who joined the aid campaign for similar reasons. In 2001, she found herself stranded in New York after the 9/11 attacks.

“I know what it’s like when you want to go home but you don’t have any money,” she said.

Together, García, Voronkova and other volunteers bought food and medicine and translated for a group of about 90 Cubans.

Voronkova was struck by strangers’ willingness to help. “The solidarity of the pandemic united people,” she said.

Donations poured in from Cubans living abroad. An organization that represents Russian veterans who served in Cuba during the 1962 missile crisis contributed 15,000 rubles.

Sergei Solovyov, a Russian historian specializing in Latin America offered his apartment to

Lavastida and four others. “I imagined what it must be like to be a family of migrant workers living in a country where you do not know the language,” he said.

Stuck in limbo

Now that Russia’s countrywide quarantine is over, some Cubans are hopeful. Construction sites are reopening and people can go outside without a pass.

But most are stuck in limbo. Until flights resume, returning to Cuba is not an option. Meanwhile, those who plan to remain in the country still face considerable challenges.

García thinks that unless something changes, Cubans will continue to be lured to Russia with false hopes.

Lavastida is frustrated that Cuban con men are giving Cubans a bad reputation in Russia. “We all love this country,” he said. “We would like to stay in Russia, but we want to work legally.”

The future is uncertain, but Lavastida is optimistic: “The last thing you lose is hope.”

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