

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking?

Russia's Exploitation of Foreign Fighters
in Its War Against Ukraine



Executive Summary

After suffering massive battlefield losses during the first year of its 2022 aggression against Ukraine, the Russian leadership faced a strategic dilemma: how to maintain its military campaign without resorting to another highly unpopular “partial mobilisation”, which had already driven hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens to leave the country to avoid conscription. The response required reconciling the use of so-called “meat assaults” – waves of high-risk frontal attacks on Ukrainian positions – with the political cost of using ordinary Russian citizens as disposable infantry.

The Russian leadership opted for an institutionalised recruitment system that combines the enlistment of volunteers with predatory recruitment of socio-economically vulnerable foreign nationals into the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) on temporary contracts. According to the Ukrainian authorities, since February 2022 Russia has recruited at least 27,000 foreign nationals from more than 130 countries. Within weeks of signing their contracts, they are sent to the front lines and assigned to extremely dangerous combat missions, with a high probability of death or serious injury. Some have been coerced or deceived into serving as assault troops.

The size of Russia’s foreign fighting force is remarkable in itself. With the addition of approximately 14,000 North Korean fighters, who joined as part of an institutional arrangement with Russia, it may be equivalent to the entire armies of certain states¹. Although these forces have not been sufficient to decisively alter the battlefield balance, their recruitment contributes to Russia’s sustained violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, while reinforcing illegal transnational trafficking networks, undermining domestic and global security.

This report, prepared by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Truth Hounds (TH), and the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR), examines the underlying causes, patterns and modalities of recruitment and transfer of foreign fighters to Russia to participate in the war against Ukraine.

Drawing on testimonies from prisoners of war (POWs), interviews with military and human rights experts, as well as open-source research, the report assesses the

¹ For comparison, Czechia has a standing army of 28,000 soldiers. See “Czech army sets record recruitment goal for 2026”, Radio Prague International, 11 February 2025.

legal status of foreign fighters serving on Russia's side and their treatment by the states concerned. It identifies avenues for state and individual responsibility under international law. Specifically, the report maps regional recruitment patterns in Central Asia, South Asia, South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA), Africa, and Latin America (Chapter 3.1–3.5). It then provides an in-depth legal analysis of the conduct of Russia as the recruiting state (Chapter 5), alongside that of North Korea (Chapter 6), Cuba, Kazakhstan, Kenya, and Nepal as states of origin (Chapter 7.1–7.4), and concludes with recommendations addressed to states and international organisations.

At the state level, the report concludes that the recruitment practices documented here support a prima facie finding that Russia bears responsibility for the operation of a global human trafficking scheme targeting vulnerable individuals through coercion or deception. This responsibility arises both from direct state-orchestrated recruitment inside Russia, and from Russia's failure to prevent, investigate and prosecute transnational recruitment networks operating for its benefit.

Main Factual Findings

Open-source reports suggest that over 10,000 recruits from Central Asia, approximately 1,800 from South Asia, between 1,700 and 4,000 from Africa, and an estimated 1,000 to 8,000 from Latin America, have joined the RAF, with actual figures likely to be much higher. The number of foreign fighters increased by more than 30 per cent between September 2025 and February 2026, and Ukrainian intelligence has identified plans to recruit an additional 18,500 foreign nationals by the end of 2026.

The global reach of this recruitment campaign is not accidental. It reflects Russia's strategy to diversify and expand its pool of available fighters through a deliberate policy shift following the launch of its full-scale invasion in 2022. Whereas recruitment initially relied on ideologically motivated volunteers with prior military experience, it has since evolved into a globalised system targeting socio-economically and legally vulnerable populations.

This shift is reflected in Russia's domestic framework for the recruitment of foreign nationals, which had been fully institutionalised by mid-2023. Amendments to legislation on military service expanded eligibility for foreign nationals to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) by relaxing age limits, as well as residency and Russian language requirements. Additional legislation was approved,

facilitating citizenship in exchange for military service, alongside substantial financial incentives for foreign fighters, and schemes rewarding private and institutional recruiters for successful referrals of foreign nationals. At the same time, the Russian leadership oversaw a marked increase in the use of pressure and violence by military personnel, police and other public administration officials to compel foreign nationals to sign contracts with the MoD. This policy shift corresponds to a threefold increase in the number of foreign nationals recruited between 2023 and 2025, rising from over 3,800 to more than 14,000 individuals.

The cases documented in this report span a wide spectrum, from individuals who enlisted voluntarily in pursuit of material gain, to those who were deceived and subjected to coercion, potentially rendering them victims of serious human rights violations, including human trafficking, servitude and forced labour. Within Russia, recruiters have primarily targeted Central Asian and other migrants who face systemic discrimination and legal precariousness. At the same time, income disparities and political turmoil in SWANA, South Asia and Latin America have caused many young men to seize on ostensibly lucrative opportunities abroad. By 2024, the recruitment of African nationals seeking to escape extreme poverty had likewise become a significant pillar of Russia's recruitment strategy. Despite sustained efforts by Russian state media to portray many foreign fighters as ideologically motivated volunteers, the available evidence suggests that such cases are the exception.

Recruitment of foreign nationals inside Russia has been largely state-organised, albeit highly decentralised. From 2022 onwards, raids on migrant residences, workplaces, and mosques increased sharply, with the signing of a military contract presented as an alternative to deportation, criminal prosecution, or continued detention. In addition to administrative pressure, the report confirms other forms of coercion directed at Central Asian and other migrants, including confiscation of documents, fabrication of criminal charges, beatings and acts amounting to torture.

Recruitment and transfer operations targeting foreign nationals outside Russia have relied on a combination of transnational networks, involving both state and non-state actors. These networks operate through online platforms such as Telegram and Facebook, and private intermediaries. Many potential fighters have been lured through misleading representations, such as promises of civilian employment in Russia, non-combat military roles or facilitated access to Europe. In several cases, the involvement of Russian security services, the Federal Security Service (FSB), personnel from diplomatic missions and other state agencies,

such as so-called “Russian Houses”, indicate a level of state control or oversight of these processes. Furthermore, Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has implicitly approved the practice through the issuance of tourist visas.

Regardless of how recruits arrived in Russia, all were directed to military recruitment centres or bases. At the point of signature, contracts were presented in Russian to individuals who did not read or understand the language, often without any explanation and in circumstances that made refusal impossible. Recruits were repeatedly assured by intermediaries and recruiters, both public officials and private actors, that they would not be sent into combat. Of the 16 prisoners of war interviewed for this report, 13 stated that they had been told they would not be required to fight; most nevertheless found themselves deployed to forward positions within weeks of signing.

Following the signature of contracts, foreign nationals are typically deployed to the front lines after only several weeks of training. For the most part, these fighters have been assigned to high-risk “meat assaults”, contributing to Russia’s further territorial occupation of Ukraine. According to Ukrainian estimates, at least 3,388 foreign fighters have been killed in combat, often within the first few months of deployment, with some reports suggesting that as many as one in five recruits do not survive. Many foreign nationals have also reported being subjected to threats, beatings and other forms of harassment and abuse during deployment.

As international attention to these issues has increased, several states examined in this report, such as Kazakhstan and Kenya, have begun actively prosecuting returning fighters and recruiters. The number of open investigations, prosecutions and public reactions worldwide reflects the expansion of these practices.

Main Legal Findings

The report finds reasonable grounds to conclude that at least some of the documented and analysed individual cases amount to recruitment and transfer of individuals through deception or coercion for the purpose of deploying them as expendable personnel on the most dangerous missions in Ukraine. At the domestic level, Russia relies on state and quasi-state structures to fill its military ranks with vulnerable populations through predatory and coercive practices. This coordinated and legally enabled system exhibits all the constituent elements of trafficking in persons (act, means, and purpose), is attributable to the state and therefore

amounts to a breach of Russia's negative obligation under the Palermo Protocol to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime not to engage in or facilitate human trafficking. Russia is also in breach of its positive obligations to prevent and prosecute the recruitment and transfer of persons originating in third countries, including where such recruitment is facilitated by organised criminal groups or private intermediaries acting transnationally, with Russia's acquiescence or encouragement.

With respect to the states of origin, the report finds that none has fully prevented or remedied human trafficking within its borders. In some cases, these shortcomings are rooted in legal constraints. For example, Nepal's anti-trafficking legislation does not fully implement the Palermo Protocol and fails to adequately address the practice of deceptive recruitment into armed conflict. Cuba has adequate domestic legislation to address the conduct but has provided limited publicly available evidence of enforcement. Kazakhstan has primarily framed the issue through the lens of mercenarism, failing to address the responsibility of recruiters. Kenya has mounted the most sustained institutional response among the states examined, combining diplomatic engagement and criminal charges; nevertheless, recruitment appears to have continued for a prolonged period of time.

While the report finds that most foreign fighters meet the definition of "mercenarism" within the colloquial understanding, as fighters that join armed conflicts motivated primarily by financial gain, the current international legal framework governing mercenarism, reflected in international humanitarian law and transnational criminal law, defines the concept too narrowly to adequately capture the phenomenon documented in this report and does not reflect state practice.

Consequently, and in light of the extremely low number of ratifications of the international conventions on mercenarism, there exists no binding international norm, outside of the non-enforceable law on neutrality, that prevents states from facilitating or allowing the participation of their citizens in foreign armed conflicts when they – even formally – become members of the armed forces of receiving states.

As a non-party to the UN Mercenary Convention, Russia cannot be held legally accountable under that instrument for the use of mercenaries, even where individuals meet the Convention's definition. Among the states analysed in the report, only Cuba has ratified the UN Mercenary Convention, and has adopted a domestic definition of "mercenarism" that is much broader than that required by the Convention itself, potentially rendering many of the fighters recruited from Cuba

subject to prosecution. While Cuban authorities have announced the arrest of a small number of individuals, the report finds that these measures are insufficient given the thousands of alleged cases, suggesting a failure by the state to fulfil its obligations under the Convention.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations. Chief among them is the need for states of origin to take the lead in criminally investigating and dismantling recruitment networks, including by prosecuting recruiters, while prioritising the prevention of mercenarism and human trafficking. They should also engage diplomatically with Russia in order to seek access to and facilitate repatriation of their nationals, including POWs held in Ukrainian camps, and provide appropriate support to the families of victims.

Ukraine should ensure compliance with its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. This includes conducting individual assessments of each fighter's situation with respect to human trafficking and other violations, providing appropriate treatment, holding status determination hearings where there are strong grounds to believe that an individual meets the criteria for mercenarism and may therefore be denied prisoner of war status, maintaining meaningful communication with states of origin, and facilitating repatriation.

Finally, the report calls on international organisations to increase coordinated pressure on Russia to end predatory recruitment practices and ensure accountability, while working toward shared recognition of such recruitment as a form of trafficking and exploitation. This includes revisiting the definition of mercenarism, monitoring recruitment flows and online recruitment patterns, providing technical assistance to states to detect, prosecute, and prevent these practices, and offering expert support to Ukraine in relation to prisoner of war repatriation.

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FIDH is a global federation of nearly 200 organisations in more than 115 countries working together to protect, support and raise the voices of human rights defenders and victims through investigation, prosecution and advocacy.



Truth Hounds works to ensure justice for victims of international crimes committed in the context of armed conflicts and to prevent such violations in the future. Since 2014, the organization has been documenting and investigating international crimes and other serious human rights abuses in Ukraine and across Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.



The Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1993. KIBHR is a leading Kazakhstani human rights organisation with branch offices across the country. It promotes the protection of civil and political rights and contributes to democratic development, rule of law and civil society building.

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17, Passage de la Main d'Or | 75011 Paris | France
+33 1 43 55 25 18
contact@fidh.org

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truth-hounds.org
info@truth-hounds.org