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Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking?

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



List of Acronyms

ACJHR	African Court of Justice and Human Rights
ARSIWA	Draft Articles on State Responsibility for Internationally Wrongful Acts
API	Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions
CAR	Central African Republic
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DPR	So-called "Donetsk People's Republic"
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EUR	Euro
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
FSB	Federal Security Service (of the Russian Federation)
FSIN	Federal Penitentiary Service (of the Russian Federation)
GC III	Geneva Convention III relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War
GUMVD	Police and the General Administration for Migration Issues (of the Russian Federation)
HTTCA	Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act (of Nepal)
HUR	Defence Intelligence of Ukraine
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
ILC	International Law Commission
ILO	International Labour Organization
KIBHR	Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law
KPA	Korean People's Army
LKR	Sri Lankan Rupee
LPR	So-called "Luhansk People's Republic"
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoD	Ministry of Defence (of the Russian Federation)
NEA	National Employment Agency (of Kenya)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIS	National Intelligence Service (of Kenya)
NPR	Nepalese Rupee
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PMC	Private Military Company
POW	Prisoners of War
RAF	Russian Armed Forces
RUB	Russian Ruble
SWANA	South West Asia and North Africa
TH	Truth Hounds
UN	United Nations

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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 states.¹ 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 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.

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.

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 travel restrictions, 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.

Introduction

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, hundreds of reports have documented the presence of foreign nationals fighting alongside Russian forces on Ukrainian territory. From Cuba to India to Cameroon, individuals from across the world have appeared on the battlefield, participating in a conflict far from their countries of origin. As early as 2022, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence assessed that Russia was suffering significant personnel losses that would need to be replaced by the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) and "other sources".² For Russia's political leadership, the recruitment of foreign nationals has indeed emerged as a means to replenish the vast losses sustained by the RAF,³ while avoiding another highly unpopular mobilisation⁴ and continuing to pursue a battlefield strategy of overwhelming Ukrainian defences with expendable personnel.⁵

In the years that followed, the developing world increasingly appeared to serve as a major recruitment ground for these additional foreign fighters.⁶ While the involvement of foreign mercenaries or volunteers had already been observed since the beginning of the war in 2014, the inflow of foreign nationals into Russia's military forces reached an unprecedented scale after February 2022. According to the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, at least 27,000 foreign nationals (excluding North Korean troops) from more than 130 countries and unrecognised territories have joined the pro-Russian forces.⁷ They are recruited from both their countries of origin and from within Russian territory. It is extremely difficult to establish the exact number in each category, as all recruits eventually pass through Russian territory for the formalisation, training and dispatching phases of the recruitment process. This report analyses both categories.

While member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) represent one of the largest sources of foreign fighters,⁸ recruitment has taken on a global character, with considerable numbers coming from the most vulnerable contexts in South Asia, Africa and Latin America.⁹ Confirming data reported by Ukrainian intelligence,¹⁰ the consistent growth of this practice is reflected in social media monitoring data, which show a steep rise in the share of recruitment advertisements targeting foreign nationals – from approximately 7 percent of all such posts in 2024 to one third by mid-2025.¹¹ According to data presented at a public hearing of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights in March 2026, the number of foreign nationals recruited into Russian forces rose from approximately 3,800 in 2023 to over 8,200 in 2024 and nearly 14,000 in 2025, suggesting that international attention has yet to translate into any discernible constraint on recruitment.¹²

2 UK Ministry of Defence, [Latest Defence Intelligence update on the situation in Ukraine](#), X, 10 March 2022.

3 In the first year of fighting following 24 February 2022, Russian forces are estimated to have suffered approximately 200,000 casualties, including both killed and wounded. Anton Troianovski, Aric Toler, Julian E. Barnes, Christiaan Triebert and Malachy Browne, "New Leaked Documents Show Broad Infighting Among Russian Officials", *The New York Times*, 13 April 2023. As of January 2026, the number of battlefield fatalities is estimated at between 275,000 and 325,000. Seth G. Jones and Riley McCabe, "Russia's Grinding War in Ukraine: Massive Losses and Tiny Gains for a Declining Power", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 January 2026.

4 Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 647, "On the announcement of partial mobilisation in the Russian Federation" ("Order on Partial Mobilisation") [in Russian], 21 September 2022.

5 Russian tactics have been referred to as "meat assaults", "meatgrinder" or "infiltration" assaults. See, for example, "Infiltration instead of 'meat assaults': the Russian army's new tactics" [in Russian], *BBC News Russia*, 5 November 2025; Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), 19 May 2023 (Watling and Reynolds, *Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine*); Ivana Kottasová, Kostya Gak and Victoria Butenko, "From meat grinder to mopeds: How Russia rethought its war-fighting in Ukraine", *CNN*, 16 November 2025; interview with Human Rights Expert Sergei Kryvenko, 21 October 2025.

6 For the purposes of this report, a "foreign fighter" is an individual whose state of citizenship is different from that of a party to an armed conflict on whose side he or she is fighting, and he or she is a non-resident of that state.

7 Information provided by the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War at an event organized by TH in Kyiv, 23 March 2026.

8 Ibid.

9 Ammar Anwer, "Russia 'weaponizing poverty' to draw foreign nationals into Ukraine war – Kyiv", *TVP World*, 27 December 2025.

10 Hocht Zhyt, "Recruitment of fighters from Kyrgyzstan" ("Hocht Zhyt, Recruitment of fighters from Kyrgyzstan") [in Russian], *Telegram*, 5 August 2025; Hocht Zhyt, "Recruitment of fighters from Kazakhstan" ("Hocht Zhyt, Recruitment of fighters from Kazakhstan") [in Russian], *Telegram*, 25 July 2025.

11 "Russia Broadens Its Efforts to Recruit Foreigners for the War in Ukraine", *OpenMinds*, 25 November 2025.

12 Oral testimony of Andrii Yusov, Deputy Head of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights, Public Hearing on Third-Country Nationals Forced to Fight in Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine, 18 March 2026.

Dynamics of Russia's recruitment of foreign fighters year-by-year



Russia's recruitment of foreign fighters has significantly increased since 2023. © Lera Riezanova

But the scale of recruitment is only part of the picture. As testimonies of foreign fighters began to surface through interviews conducted with captured fighters in Ukrainian prisoner-of-war camps, communications with family members from the front lines, and accounts shared upon return to their countries of origin, recurring patterns became apparent. In many cases, individuals complained of having been deceived, initially offered civilian employment, educational opportunities, or non-combat roles, only to later find themselves enlisted into the Russian military. Understanding this phenomenon requires examination of both the structural factors that allow foreign fighters to be recruited and the ways they are integrated into the Russian military. Particular attention must be paid to the operation of local and transnational recruitment networks, the role played by intermediaries and states in facilitating enlistment, and the conditions surrounding recruitment, transportation, training, and deployment. Testimonies from foreign fighters themselves raise serious concerns about patterns of deception, coercion, and abuse, which may trigger the application of overlapping international legal frameworks on forced labour, trafficking in persons, and mercenary recruitment. These developments carry legal implications for a range of actors. They raise questions about the responsibility of the Russian Federation for recruiting and using foreign nationals in its armed forces, and about the obligations of countries of origin and transit to prevent exploitative recruitment and protect their citizens abroad. At the same time, they highlight the uncertain legal status of many of the individuals caught up in this process, from their classification under international humanitarian law, to the protections to which they may be entitled in armed conflict, and the avenues available for accountability in cases of abuse or violations. Understanding these dynamics is therefore essential to determining how this growing phenomenon should be addressed within existing international legal and policy frameworks, or whether those frameworks themselves require adaptation to meet the challenges at hand.

CHAPTER 1

Methodology and Research Objectives

1.1 Methodology

This research aims to examine the recruitment and deployment of foreign nationals into the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The study encompasses diverse regional contexts, particularly focusing on countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Despite significant variations in regional circumstances, citizens from certain states in these regions have, through various means and motivations, ultimately found themselves serving in the RAF.

The report draws on in-depth interviews with 16 prisoners of war (POWs) conducted by Truth Hounds (TH), as well as three expert interviews and one interview with a deserter from the RAF conducted by FIDH. These are complemented by systematic open-source monitoring conducted since summer 2025, and consultations with regional experts and Ukrainian authorities.

The legal analysis employs both analytical and comparative approaches. It first sets out a general framework under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, addressing combatant status, mercenary classification, human trafficking, servitude, forced labour, and related issues. The analysis then turns to the international and domestic legal frameworks of the states where recruitment was most active, namely Kazakhstan, Nepal, Cuba, and Kenya. Separate case studies address Russia as the recruiting state, and North Korea, whose armed forces have been officially deployed to participate in the conflict on Russia's side.

1.2 Research Objectives

The report pursues five interconnected objectives:

- To map the recruitment mechanisms, channels, and networks, from state-sanctioned legislative frameworks and financial incentive structures to the role of private intermediaries, migration institutions, and diplomatic infrastructure, tracing the process from initial contact to frontline deployment;
- To assess the responses of governments of states of origin, examining the gap between formal prohibitions on mercenary activity and the practical effectiveness of enforcement;
- To identify markers of coercion and voluntariness in individual enlistment decisions, recognising that these categories are not always mutually exclusive;
- To analyse documented cases in relation to the international law framework for mercenarism, human trafficking, forced labour and related human rights violations, and to assess potential individual and state responsibility arising from recruitment;
- To develop practical recommendations for a range of actors, including international bodies and governments of states where recruitment is taking place, on preventing predatory recruitment, protecting vulnerable populations, and strengthening legal accountability mechanisms.

1.3 Research Focus

While recruitment of foreign nationals is a practice employed by both parties to the conflict, this report focuses exclusively on recruitment into the RAF. This focus reflects three considerations:

- The United Nations (UN) General Assembly, in Resolution ES-11/1,¹³ identified the Russian Federation as having committed aggression in violation of the UN Charter, making the foreign augmentation of its armed forces a matter of particular concern for international peace and security;
- RAF recruitment operates at a scale and geographic breadth that warrants dedicated investigation; and
- In a significant number of documented cases, recruitment appears to have involved deceit or coercion, raising serious concerns under international human rights law.

1.4 Wartime Constraints and Ethical Commitments

While working in active armed conflict conditions requires exceptional flexibility from organisations operating in Ukraine, TH took all necessary measures to ensure that its ethical principles were respected in the process of interviewing POWs. This entails abiding by the *do no harm* principle, including by obtaining informed consent for the use of information, protecting personal data, and ensuring that the information collected would not be used in a manner that could harm interviewees. Additionally, to protect interviewees, interviewed POWs are identified in this report by nationality and an anonymised code only; their names and any other information that might endanger specific individuals or communities are withheld.

1.5 Geographical Coverage

The research covers countries from four main regions: Asia (including Central and South Asia), Africa, South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA), and Latin America. The selection of these regions reflects the highest concentration of documented recruitment cases, the presence of POWs from these regions held by Ukraine, the availability of sufficient open-source information, the authors' capacity to gather on-the-ground information, and local partner engagement.

For the purposes of the legal analysis, specific countries were selected based on the presence of POWs enabling primary-source interviews, documented recruitment activity, and official government reactions. On this basis, the report examines in detail the legal obligations of Kazakhstan, Nepal, Cuba, and Kenya. Russia is addressed as the state overseeing recruitment, while North Korea is examined as the sole case of official deployment of armed forces and the most significant single source of foreign fighters, requiring a distinct legal framework. The report does not consider cases of individuals forcibly conscripted from Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, or fighters recruited from Belarus.

1.6 Primary Data Collection Methods

In-depth interviews with 16 POWs are the primary source of information, conducted at detention facilities in accordance with TH's documentation methodology, with written informed consent. Additional interviews were conducted by FIDH with two Russian military analysts, a military deserter, an NGO expert in military personnel rights, and representatives of the "A Farewell to Arms" project on Russian recruitment practices.

¹³ UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1, *Aggression against Ukraine*, UN Doc A/RES/ES-11/1, 2 March 2022, adopted by 141 votes to 5, with 35 abstentions.

Open-source monitoring covers media reports, social media, and official statements, primarily in English and Russian, with French and Spanish sources for African and Latin American contexts.

Further sources include consultations with the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, interviews with military analysts, regional researchers, and human trafficking specialists, as well as with local partner organisations in fighters' countries of origin. Interview findings were cross-referenced with news reports, official statements, diplomatic documents, court decisions, and social media, and analysed to identify recurring patterns in recruitment schemes, promises made, routes, and service conditions.

When discussing figures on foreign fighters, the report uses the terms Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War in Ukraine, its project "Hochu Zhyt", and the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine – the latter's head simultaneously serving as head of the Coordination Headquarters – interchangeably.

1.7 Interview Principles

The research is based on semi-structured interview methodology. This approach allows for flexibility in exploring aspects respondents consider relevant and adapting to individual circumstances.

Interviews with foreign POWs create specific ethical challenges. First, they are in a particularly vulnerable position due to restricted freedom, which may affect voluntary participation; respondents may perceive participation as mandatory or feel psychological pressure. Second, foreign POWs may fear negative consequences, whether during captivity or upon return to their country of origin, as a result of being interviewed by researchers from the country against which they fought. Linguistic and cultural differences present additional challenges, with potential implications for the transmission and interpretation of information.

Several safeguards were implemented to minimise these risks. The research adhered to the *do no harm* principle throughout, including a trauma-informed approach to questioning: interviews began with general, less sensitive topics and gradually moved on to more specific questions, with attention to respondents' emotional state and the possibility of adjusting or pausing at any moment. Respondents were offered no material benefits or incentives for participation. Before each interview, respondents received a full explanation of the research purposes, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any moment. Respondents are not identified by name in this report. Informed consent was obtained in writing in 15 cases; in one case, at the respondent's own request, consent was given orally. Where necessary, qualified interpreters familiar with ethical standards for documentation were engaged. Open-ended questions were used throughout to allow respondents to formulate responses independently.

1.8 Research Limitations

The research is based primarily on interviews with POWs, which creates inherent sampling constraints: interviewees represent only those recruited foreign nationals who were captured by Ukraine and to whom researchers were granted access; their experiences may therefore not reflect the full range of recruitment patterns. Not all POWs approached agreed to participate, further constraining the geographic and demographic breadth of the sample.

Interviews were conducted under conditions of captivity, introducing several interpretive limitations. Interviews took place in the presence of representatives of the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, who are civilian public servants with no law enforcement authority or camp administration role, though their presence may nonetheless have affected respondents' candour. Nevertheless, in addition to the retrospective nature of testimony and the possibility of recall error, it cannot be excluded that some respondents may have approached the interview strategically, as an opportunity to present their circumstances more favourably or to influence their situation in captivity. While this report does not assume bad

faith on the part of any respondent, in most cases, the information provided by POWs could not be independently verified. These limitations are partially offset by cross-referencing with a wide range of independent open sources, including media investigations, official statements, court records, and diplomatic documents.

While the research documents a range of intermediary actors involved in recruitment, including state and private actors, Russian nationals and third-country citizens, the more granular operational mechanics of these networks, and the degree to which such activities may be organised or coordinated by Russian authorities, could not be established on the basis of available sources. A more systematic typology of intermediary roles, and the distinct legal consequences associated with different forms of involvement, remains a subject for further research requiring an expanded evidentiary base.

The findings of this report are grounded in documented cases and identified patterns rather than statistical representation of the phenomenon in its entirety. Where the evidence permits, the report assesses documented practices against the criteria under international law related to mercenary activity, human trafficking and related violations. Definitive legal qualification, however, remains the prerogative of competent judicial bodies.

1.9 Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER 2

Context

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Prevalence and trends in Russia's use of foreign fighters in Ukraine (from 2014 to post-2022)

Foreign fighters have been present alongside Russia-backed forces on Ukrainian land for over a decade, dating back to the outbreak of the war in 2014. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more than 2,000 non-Russian fighters from over 50 countries are estimated to have participated on both sides of the conflict (2014–2019), with more than 1,300 fighting on Russia's side.¹⁴ Their countries of origin were primarily European, with the largest pro-Russian contingents coming from Belarus (<500), Germany (<150), Serbia (<100) and Moldova (<70).¹⁵ While many of these foreign fighters lacked prior combat experience, a considerable proportion had served in other conflicts, formal armed forces, or entities such as the French Foreign Legion.¹⁶ A substantial number of foreign fighters were recruited by the Wagner Group¹⁷ – a "Private Military Company" (PMC) that, while remaining subordinate to Russian political leadership, played a pivotal role in systematising foreign fighter recruitment and deployment.¹⁸ The Wagner Group facilitated not only initial recruitment but also the transfer of experienced personnel between different conflict zones, creating a rotating cadre of combat-tested operatives.¹⁹

Foreign volunteers who joined Russia's side in Ukraine prior to 2022 were driven primarily by ideological and identity-based motivations, not financial incentives. Many were attracted by ultranationalist, far-right, and white supremacist beliefs, viewing the conflict as part of a broader struggle against liberal democracy and Western influence.²⁰ For example, Victor Alfonso Lenta, a former member of the French armed forces, encouraged potential fighters to join combat to destroy "Anglo-Saxon globalism, Atlanticism and the decadent west".²¹ Others were motivated by "pan-Slavic solidarity" and historical grievances.²² The conflict also offered a space for like-minded extremists and "battle-chasers" to gain combat experience and deepen their ideological commitment, with some intending to use the experience beyond Ukraine.²³

Moscow has reinvented its recruitment strategy after the full-scale invasion leveraging higher salaries and a simplified path to naturalisation.²⁴ Rather than relying primarily on ideologically

14 Arkadiusz Legieć, "The Risks of Foreign Fighters in the Ukraine-Russia Conflict", PISM, 25 October 2019.

15 The Soufan Center, "White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement" (*White Supremacy Extremism*), September 2019, p. 29.

16 The French Foreign Legion is a branch of the French Army that has historically recruited foreign volunteers, offering them French citizenship and military training that many later apply in other conflicts.

17 Sergey Sukhankin, "Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and "Volunteers": Non-Russians in Russia's Wars", Jamestown, 10 September 2019.

18 The Wagner Group was a semi-clandestine and malleable group of fighters, often described as a Private Military Company (PMC). In most operational contexts, it was a Kremlin-directed and financed paramilitary force, led by the notorious Yevgeniy Prigozhin, known as Putin's chef. It was involved in Russia's various foreign military ventures, including in Ukraine, Central African Republic, and Syria, among others. Following Prigozhin's death, the Wagner Group was dismantled and a new Africa Corps has engaged in activities in Africa in its stead. Candace Rondeaux, Ben Dalton, "The Wagner Group's Little Black Book: Decoding Command and Control of Russia's Irregular Forces", *New America*, 17 October 2024.

19 Nick Sturdee, "The Wagner Group Files", *New Lines Magazine*, 27 September 2021.

20 "White Supremacy Extremism", *supra* note 15.

21 Tony Barber, "Ukraine conflict attracts foreign fighters – on both sides", *Financial Times*, 22 April 2015.

22 Egle E. Murauskaite, "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Assessing potential risks", Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020, p. 12.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

24 Malika Bahovadinova and Elena Borisova, "Weaponising Naturalised Citizenship: Mitigating the Risks of War Mobilisation in Putin's Russia", *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 29 (1–2), 2025, pp. 116–134.

motivated volunteers, Russia has increasingly targeted socio-economically vulnerable migrants and job-seekers from developing countries.²⁵ This approach has not only broadened the pool of available recruits but has also allowed Moscow to mitigate the political risks associated with large-scale domestic mobilisation and potential public discontent.²⁶ While some foreign fighters continue to join for ideological reasons (the few documented cases include ethnic Russians from the near abroad, such as Kazakhstan,²⁷ Uzbekistan, and Latvia,²⁸ but also fighters from France, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and several African states²⁹), they now constitute only a small fraction of a recruitment landscape in which financial inducement and, in a substantial number of documented cases, coercion are the predominant drivers.

The shift from localised, ideologically driven volunteering to a deliberately organised, globally scaled recruitment campaign warrants close examination. Russia's reliance on foreign fighters post-2022 has become an important element sustaining a mode of warfare premised on attrition and the deliberate expenditure of human life. These high-casualty operations are used for continuous skirmishing to identify Ukrainian firing positions or to find weak points in Ukrainian defences to be prioritised for assault.³⁰ The shift to this strategy can be traced back to the battle for Bakhmut, which began in the summer of 2022 and lasted almost one year. That campaign marked the pivot from battalion groups of elite Russian troops to mass assaults requiring a continuous supply of personnel whom the Russian authorities treated as expendable.³¹ At the same time, the financial incentives that once drove a surge in voluntary enlistment are yielding diminishing returns, with fewer Russians willing to sign military contracts, despite bonuses remaining high.³² Demand for assault troops, however, has continued to grow,³³ even as "infiltration" tactics have gained prominence, since such operations are typically preceded and enabled by human-wave attacks.³⁴ The drop in domestic personnel has increased reliance on foreign combatants, as evidenced by intensified recruitment efforts such as more aggressive advertising, rising financial incentives, and increasingly coercive recruitment practices.³⁵ While foreign fighters do not determine the course of the war, their cumulative presence is a documented and quantifiable feature of Russia's current force composition.³⁶

2.1.2 Russian legislation regulating the recruitment and use of foreign fighters

On 11 March 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the use of foreign nationals to assist with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.³⁷ This followed Ukraine's announcement that it would form a "Foreign Legion".³⁸ Shortly thereafter, individual fighters from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, but also Syria and Libya, were seen participating in combat on behalf of Russia,

25 Karen Philippa Larsen and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, "Russia's shadow fighters" ("Larsen and Cold-Ravnkilde, 2025"), Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), 13 November 2025.

26 David Kirichenko, "Putin seeks more foreign fighters amid mounting Russian losses in Ukraine" ("Kirichenko, Putin seeks more foreign fighters"), Atlantic Council, 16 October 2025.

27 See, for example, BASE, "A Kazakh was fighting for Russia, Why?" [video], YouTube, 3 November 2025.

28 "SMO fighters without passports: Stories of foreigners who left their homelands to destroy the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU)" [in Ukrainian], URA News, 9 October 2025.

29 Thierry Vircoulon and Horacio Givone, "La politique russe de recrutement de combattants et d'ouvrières en Afrique subsaharienne" ("Vircoulon and Givone, 2025"), *Notes de l'IFRI*, IFRI, December 2025, pp. 15–16.

30 Watling and Reynolds, *Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine*, *supra* note 5.

31 Alexey Kovalev, "Putin Is Throwing Human Waves at Ukraine but Can't Do It Forever", *Foreign Policy*, 25 November 2024.

32 Janis Kluge, "Russian recruitment and casualties in Q3/2025", Substack, 11 November 2025.

33 Interview with Russian military experts from "A Farewell to Arms", Aleksei Alshanskyi and Alexandr Sterlyatnikov, conducted by FIDH, 14 October 2025.

34 "Infiltration instead of 'meat assaults': the Russian army's new tactics", *supra* note 5.

35 Interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

36 *Ibid.*

37 "Russia-Ukraine war: Putin greenlights letting volunteers fight Russia, says more than 16,000 people, mostly from the Middle East, have appealed to join the fighting", *AlJazeera*, 11 March 2022.

38 Bethan McKernan, "Ukraine appeals for foreign volunteers to join fight against Russia", *The Guardian*, 27 February 2022.

including in the ranks of the Wagner Group.³⁹ In February 2023, Vladimir Putin issued a confidential order tasking regional and municipal authorities with the replenishment of the RAF through the recruitment of individuals willing to perform military service under contract.⁴⁰

The Russian authorities began developing a legal regime and recruitment system for foreign nationals even prior to the Order, with these efforts intensifying following its adoption and the “partial mobilization” of September–November 2022. As detailed below, this federally overseen yet highly decentralised programme broadened the pool of individuals eligible for service and introduced financial and non-monetary incentives, including access to citizenship, in order to entice foreign nationals into signing contracts with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) of the Russian Federation.

Provisions allowing for the enlistment of foreign nationals into the RAF have been enshrined in Russian law since 1998.⁴¹ In their initial form, they permitted foreign nationals between the ages of 18 and 30 to sign five-year contracts for service in the army as privates and non-commissioned officers, provided they were legally present in Russia, passed a health examination and had knowledge of the Russian language.⁴² Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these requirements were significantly relaxed by raising the age limit to 65,⁴³ eliminating the language requirement and allowing for shorter term contracts, including during periods of mobilisation.⁴⁴ The revised legislative framework also enabled the use of incentives to encourage foreign nationals to sign contracts with the MoD.

A simplified procedure to gain Russian citizenship was introduced. An order signed by Putin just days after the announcement of the September 2022 “partial mobilisation” allowed foreign nationals and stateless persons to apply for citizenship if they had signed a contract of at least one year with the RAF and have completed at least six months of service in the so-called “Special Military Operation” (SMO).⁴⁵ Authorities were required to decide on such applications within three months. Knowledge of Russian or legal residency status was no longer required. Eligibility was also extended to spouses and children.⁴⁶ A subsequent order issued in May 2023 further broadened access to citizenship by allowing applications from individuals who had merely signed a contract of at least one year, without requiring participation in hostilities.⁴⁷ Decisions on such applications were to be issued within one month. At the time of writing, the Russian Parliament had also approved a draft law providing that foreign nationals who have served in the RAF or affiliated units “under contract” and participated in combat operations, are not subject to extradition for criminal offences or the enforcement of foreign sentences.⁴⁸

39 “Central Asian Natives Participate in War in Ukraine”, *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR)*, 6 April 2022; Mason Clark, George Barros, and Karolina Hird, “Russian offensive campaign assessment”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 20 April 2020, p. 5.

40 Sonya Savina, “Russian regions have paid war recruiters no less than 2 billion rubles” [in Russian], *iStories*, 27 October 2025, citing Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 309 of 14 February 2023, “On reinforcing the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation by promptly enrolling citizens for military service under contract”. Although the Order is not publicly available, it has been referenced extensively by numerous Russian regional and municipal authorities. See, for example, “On the recruitment of individuals for service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation under contract” [in Russian], 10 May 2023; see also Order “On the approval of the Procedure for providing a one-time cash payment to citizens of the Russian Federation registered in the Volchansk Municipal Okrug, who assisted in attracting citizens to conclude contracts for military service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation” [in Russian], 10 February 2025.

41 Federal Law No. 53-FZ “On Military Duty and Military Service”, 28 March 1998; and Military Service Regulations approved by the Presidential Decree of 16 September 1999. Miłosz Bartosiewicz, Piotr Zochowski, “Putin’s foreign legion. Foreigners fighting in the war with Ukraine” (“Bartosiewicz and Zochowski, 2024”) *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, 20 February 2024.

42 Federal Law No. 53-FZ “On Military Duty and Military Service”, 28 March 1998.

43 “Russia scraps age limit for new troops in Ukraine push”, *BBC*, 29 May 2022; “Russian Duma Approves Bill Raising Age Limit for Military Personnel to 65”, *RFR/RL*, 25 May 2022.

44 [Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 458](#) [in Russian], 7 July 2025.

45 [Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 690](#) [in Russian], “On the acceptance to citizenship of the Russian Federation in the facilitated order of foreign nationals and stateless persons, having concluded contracts on military service”, 30 September 2022.

46 *Ibid.*

47 [Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 350](#) [in Russian], 15 May 2023.

48 [Bill No. 1075363-8](#) “On the introduction of amendments to Art. 41 of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences” [in Russian], 23 March 2026.

Alongside inducements to foreign nationals, the authorities have also used the acquisition of citizenship as a means of pressure to sign a contract with the MoD, particularly on migrants. In August 2024, a new federal law entered into force which included failure to register for military service within two weeks of acquisition of Russian citizenship as a ground for revocation of citizenship.⁴⁹ This opened the door to the practice of threatening foreign nationals, who have recently received a Russian passport but have not served in the war, with deprivation of citizenship. More recently, the acquisition of citizenship or permanent residency for migrants has been made conditional on either signing a contract with the RAF or the military rescue units of the Ministry of Civil Defence, Emergency Situations and Natural Disaster Relief, or alternatively providing proof of discharge from service or ineligibility to participate in the war for health reasons.⁵⁰ This regulation has left some foreign nationals, especially those already residing in Russia, with no choice other than to sign up for war or leave the country.

2.1.3 Russian governments' financial support for recruitment

The large-scale recruitment of foreign fighters is financed through budget allocations from both federal and regional governments, as well as financial incentives channelled down to institutions responsible for the recruitment of soldiers to fight in Ukraine "under contract".⁵¹ The combination of financial incentives and institutional pressure to meet the Kremlin's recruitment quotas appears to have driven competition among regional authorities, with some offering individual fighters one-time signing bonuses of up to RUB 3 million (Russian rubles), approximately EUR 34,000 (Euro).⁵²

In addition to the sign-up bonuses paid to fighters by federal, regional and municipal authorities (sometimes cumulatively),⁵³ at least 11 of Russia's 41 regions have enacted bonus schemes rewarding recruiters, including explicitly for the recruitment of foreign nationals. A local decree adopted by the Governor of Ryazan Oblast provides for a payment of over RUB 90,000 (EUR 1,000) to staff of numerous law enforcement agencies – police, penitentiary services, employees of the Investigative Committee – for each individual, including foreign nationals and stateless persons, who signs a contract to serve in the RAF.⁵⁴ Remarkably, by 2025 regional authorities had begun differentiating payments depending on the national origin of recruits, assigning the highest financial value to foreign citizens from outside the former Soviet republics. In Ryazan, for example, recruitment of a foreign national from outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region might result in a payment of RUB 575,000 (EUR 4,000), while that of a national of Central Asian country RUB 80,000 (EUR 700).⁵⁵

2.1.4 Risks for foreign fighters

Alongside promises of high financial rewards, foreign fighters face significant risks, as detailed throughout Chapters 3.1.2–3.1.3, 3.2.2–3.2.3, 3.3.2–3.3.3, 3.4.2–3.4.3 of the report. According to official Ukrainian estimates, at least 3,388 foreign nationals (excluding the reported deaths of up to 6,000 North Korean soldiers)⁵⁶ have died in combat.⁵⁷ Reports from 2026 suggest that as many as one in

49 [Federal Law No. 281-FZ](#) "On amendments to Article 4 of the Federal Law On Military Duty and Military Service and Article 22 of the Federal Law On Citizenship of the Russian Federation" [in Russian], 8 August 2024.

50 [Executive Order No. 821](#), "On the Temporary Procedure for Granting Citizenship of the Russian Federation and Issuing Residence Permits in the Russian Federation" [in Russian], 5 November 2025; ["Putin Decree Forces Foreigners Seeking Russian Residency To Sign Army Contracts"](#), *RFL*, 12 December 2025.

51 Interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

52 Maksim Blant, ["Three million for a contract. What the regional payout race will lead to"](#) [in Russian], *RFL*, 8 October 2024.

53 *Ibid.*

54 "Russian regions have paid war recruiters no less than 2 billion rubles", *supra* note 40.

55 [Order No. 80-PG](#) "On Rewarding Employees of Federal Executive Bodies and the Prosecutor's Office Who Assisted in Facilitating the Signing of Military Service Contracts in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation by Citizens and Stateless Persons" [in Russian], 6 October 2025.

56 ["Kim Jong-un unveils housing for families of North Koreans killed in Ukraine war"](#), *The Guardian*, 16 February 2026.

57 ["More than 18,000 foreigners are fighting on Russia's side against Ukraine"](#), *The Odessa Journal*, 2 December 2025.

five foreign fighters die in combat, with nearly half of those deaths occurring within the first four months of battlefield deployment.⁵⁸ While Russia's overall casualty rate remains significantly higher than that of Ukraine,⁵⁹ several additional factors further increase the likelihood of injury and fatal outcomes among foreign fighters.

As per Russia's attacking strategy, many foreign recruits are assigned to positions within particularly dangerous assault units to conduct so-called "meat assaults", a term that reflects the expendable role and extreme casualty rates associated with such operations.⁶⁰ Despite these high-risk combat roles, foreign recruits frequently receive little to no meaningful military training,⁶¹ and are often sent to the front line after as little as five to six days to, in rare cases, one to two months of preparation.⁶² Moreover, among the 16 foreign fighters interviewed for this report, only five reported any prior military experience. With the exception of one interviewee who reported receiving instructions on the treatment of POWs and civilian property, neither the interviews conducted for this report nor the open source material reviewed identified any instances in which foreign fighters received training in international humanitarian law (IHL). Whilst a lack of training or experience may lead to higher mortality rates, a lack of training in IHL may increase the likelihood of committing war crimes and subsequent prosecution.

In a considerable number of cases, foreign nationals face a language barrier, restricting their capacity to communicate with commanders, understand orders, navigate their surroundings, or even fully comprehend the minimal training they may receive.⁶³ The language barrier also prevents fighters from receiving basic medical examinations prior to enlistment, as they are unable to communicate with medical personnel and interpretation is not provided, exposing them to further health risks.⁶⁴

Contracts signed by foreign nationals are identical to those signed by Russian soldiers, making no special accommodation for circumstances arising from recruits' foreign origin, such as modalities of payments to families of the deceased or repatriation of remains.⁶⁵ Interpretation at any stage of engagement is rare. Among the interviewees, it was provided to only two individuals, and one had his contract partially translated.⁶⁶ Although for migrants from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) this presents less of a problem, as most speak some Russian, their Russian language proficiency might not always be sufficient to understand legal terms. Foreign fighters are entitled to the same benefits as Russian soldiers, including same or similar salaries and veteran status. This apparent equality of treatment has significant disadvantages, however: under the Order on Partial Mobilisation, it is forbidden to terminate any contract prior to the official end of the mobilisation period (which had not been announced at the time of writing), unless the termination is due to age (65 years), imprisonment, or health reasons.⁶⁷ These restrictions are concealed from most recruits.

58 FRANCE24 English, "Russia using Africans as 'cannon fodder' in Ukraine: INPACT/All Eyes on Wagner" (video), *YouTube*, 16 February 2026.

59 "Russia's Grinding War in Ukraine", *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 27 January 2026; "Russia's tactics cause massive losses in push toward Pokrovsk – Ukrainian colonel", *The New Voice of Ukraine*, 7 February 2026.

60 "Central Asians in Putin's War: Fighting for Ukraine, Forced for Russia", *The Times of Central Asia*, 15 September 2025.

61 Interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

62 Ivana Kottasová and Victoria Butenko, "Facing a lack of Russian recruits, Moscow is accused of using deception and bribery to sign up foreigners to fight in Ukraine" ("Kottasová and Butenko, 2025"), *CNN*, 25 November 2025; interviews conducted by TH. Only one interviewee reported having received longer training (four months).

63 Irina Kravtsova, "Due to a shortage of manpower at the front, Russia has spread its recruitment networks to the poorest regions of the planet", *Novaya Gazeta*, 7 August 2024 ("Kravtsova, 2024"); interviews with NI-2 and Se-15 conducted by TH.

64 Interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

65 *Ibid.*

66 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

67 Order on Partial Mobilisation, *supra* note 4.

**Контракт
о прохождении военной службы**

1. Настоящий контракт о прохождении военной службы
в Вооруженных Силах Российской Федерации
(в Вооруженных Силах Российской Федерации, других войсках,
воинских формированиях, органах или воинских подразделениях
федеральной противопожарной службы)
заключен между резидент
(воинское звание, фамилия, имя и отчество)
гражданина (иностранного гражданина), число, месяц и год рождения)
и от имени Российской Федерации Министерство обороны
(наименование федерального органа исполнительной
власти или федерального государственного органа)
в лице Иттовск (Григорьева) (г. [redacted]) ВВО и Рязанцев А.Н.
(должность, воинское звание, фамилия и инициалы должностного лица)
на срок 1 (один) год с 30.08.2024г по 09.08.2025г.
(срок контракта)
2. [redacted]
(фамилия и инициалы гражданина (иностранного гражданина))
добровольно дает обязательства:
а) проходить военную службу по контракту в течение установленного
настоящим контрактом срока;
б) в период прохождения военной службы по контракту добросовестно
исполнять все общие, должностные и специальные обязанности военнослужащих,
установленные законодательными и иными нормативными правовыми актами
Российской Федерации;
в) возместить в случаях, предусмотренных Федеральным законом
"О воинской обязанности и военной службе", средства федерального бюджета,
затраченные на его военную или специальную подготовку, в размере
[redacted]
(размер подлежащих
возмещению средств (прописью, в рублях))
г) быть верным Военной присяге (обязательству), беззаветно служить
народу Российской Федерации, мужественно и умело защищать Российскую
Федерацию (абзац третий статьи 16 Устава внутренней службы Вооруженных Сил
Российской Федерации, утвержденного Указом Президента Российской
Федерации от 10 ноября 2007 г. № 1495 (далее – Устав внутренней службы));

First page of a typical contract with the Ministry of Defense signed by Russian and foreign nationals (obtained by FIDH).

Against this backdrop of inadequate training and lack of prior military experience, poor communication, and assignment to high-risk positions, relatively few foreign fighters return from the frontline, let alone receive the promised financial compensation or legal protections.⁶⁸ There are also confirmed reports of mistreatment, including physical and psychological abuse, during deployment.⁶⁹ These risks do not end with combat: many face the prospect of prosecution upon returning to their countries of origin, as an increasing number of states actively prosecute citizens who participate in foreign conflicts,⁷⁰ as well as individuals involved in recruitment.⁷¹

68 RFE/RL's Siberia.Realities and Current Time, "Inside Russia's Shadow Battalions: Coercion, Violence, And Ethnic Targeting" ("Inside Russia's Shadow Battalions"), RFE/RL, 3 August 2025.

69 "Ukraine war videos raise questions over Russia's recruitment of Africans" ("Ukraine war videos raise questions"), RFI, 16 January 2026; interviews with NI-14 and Mo-9 conducted by TH.

70 "Central Asian Migrants Coerced Into Russia's War in Ukraine" ("Central Asian Migrants Coerced Into Russia's War"), *The Times of Central Asia*, 23 June 2025.

71 Sonya Bandouil, "Iraq to launch a commission to prevent recruitment into Russian armed forces", *Kyiv Independent*, 10 January 2026.

2.2 Russia's Recruitment of Foreign Fighters

2.2.1 Recruitment of foreign nationals inside Russia

It was a campaign to target immigrants.

– Moroccan POW interviewed by TH⁷²

This section focuses on the recruitment of foreign nationals who began the recruitment process while they were already in Russia at any time since 24 February 2022.⁷³

At the time of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, close to six million foreign nationals were residing in Russia, a population whose precarious legal and economic circumstances made many of them susceptible to exploitative recruitment.⁷⁴ Over four million were migrants from Central Asia and other CIS states; the remainder included sizeable communities from China, Syria, and a range of states in Africa, South America and South Asia that maintained friendly or neutral relations with Russia.⁷⁵ As detailed below, among this population, recruitment structures have primarily targeted migrant workers, students and prisoners.

Human rights groups have reported that migrants in Russia are systematically subjected to “exploitation, corruption, police violence, and racism” and constant uncertainty due to their precarious residency status.⁷⁶ The recruitment drive targeting migrants began shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion.⁷⁷ Within just over a month of the full-scale invasion, 400–500 migrants had already signed up.⁷⁸ It intensified once the relevant legislation was put in place, particularly after May 2023.⁷⁹ According to official Russian sources, between January and October 2024 over 3,340 foreign nationals, primarily migrants, had received citizenship as a consequence of participation in Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.⁸⁰ In 2026, recruitment of migrants is no longer limited to men. Media reports confirm that hundreds of foreign women migrants have been recruited as kitchen, cleaning and medical staff, but also for combat roles.⁸¹

Fighter motivations

Russia's domestic recruitment campaign has primarily targeted socio-economically vulnerable men of military age, among the labour migrants, students or prisoner populations. An economic downturn in Russia in the early stages of the full-scale invasion,⁸² combined with these vulnerabilities and promises of high salaries and citizenship in exchange for military service, caused many migrants to seek out military recruiters or be subjected to recruitment pressures through threats and physical violence.

⁷² Interview with Mo-9 conducted by TH.

⁷³ The focus of this section, and of the report as a whole, is on fighters with non-Russian citizenship. Some of the interviewees and case studies are dual citizens, particularly citizens of Central Asian states, who are often treated as non-Russian citizens by the Russian authorities.

⁷⁴ “Central Asian Natives Participate in War in Ukraine”, *supra* note 39; see also, “MVD has revealed how many foreigners are in Russia” (“MVD has revealed how many foreigners are in Russia”) [in Russian], TASS, 3 April 2025.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “We really don't know who is coming” [in Russian], *Kommersant*, 19 September 2025.

⁷⁷ Bartosiewicz and Żochowski, 2024, *supra* note 41.

⁷⁸ “Central Asian Natives Participate in War in Ukraine”, *supra* note 39.

⁷⁹ UK Intelligence, “Ukraine Update of 3 September 2023” (“UK Intelligence Ukraine Update 2023”), X, 3 September 2023.

⁸⁰ “Ministry of Internal Affairs: since the start of 2024, more than 3,340 foreigners who fought on Russia's side against Ukraine have been granted Russian citizenship” [in Russian], *Current Time*, 4 November 2024.

⁸¹ Kanyngyl Elkeeva and Aygerym Berbidaeva, “In a year I'll be free: New reports from Russia of recruitment of migrant women from Central Asia to the war” [in Russian], *Radio Azattyk*, 10 February 2026.

⁸² ADC Memorial, *The Year of War: Reporting on the Situation of Minorities and Migrants*, 2023.

The underlying motivations of recruits fall into three broad categories: those driven by material and non-pecuniary benefits, including financial rewards, promises of citizenship, or release from prison; recruitment to avoid harm stemming from coercion involving physical or psychological pressure; and those motivated by money or other incentives but were misled about the nature or terms of their service. Open source reports and POW interviews confirm that financial motivation is by far the most common motivation reported by former fighters.⁸³ Of the eight fighters interviewed who were recruited inside Russia, half cited “money” or a “better job” as the reason they signed up to fight.⁸⁴

Online sources and conducted interviews confirm that a typical fighter salary ranges from RUB 180,000 (over EUR 2,000) to RUB 320,600 (EUR 3,500) per month, while one-time signing bonuses vary between RUB 200,000 (EUR 1,700) and RUB 1.9 million.⁸⁵ For example, one Ghanaian recruit interviewed for the report received a signing bonus of RUB 1.9 million (approximately EUR 30,500) and at least one full month payment of RUB 200,000 to serve as an evacuation specialist. He participated in only one mission before losing all but one member of his team in a drone ambush of their truck and surrendering to Ukrainian forces.⁸⁶

Cases in which foreign nationals in Russia have been coerced or deceived⁸⁷ into signing contracts with the MoD are well documented. There have been numerous reports of foreign nationals, particularly from Central Asia, having their passports confiscated and being subjected to threats and beatings to sign contracts with the Russian military.⁸⁸ Of the eight interviewees recruited from inside Russia, two reported threats of violence and arrest. Many had their passports, phones, bank cards and other belongings confiscated.

For example, a Moroccan medical student interviewed by TH was subjected to a random police check while he was walking on the street in Ryazan.⁸⁹ During his studies, he had rented an apartment instead of staying in the dormitory to which he had been assigned and which was registered as his place of residence in his passport. When he could not produce his passport, which he had left at the apartment, police escorted him home: “They went with me, searched the apartment, searched the documents. They found everything was right, but the address was not right. And from there I was taken.” He was then arrested, held without food or water for 48 hours and beaten in the pre-trial detention centre before being told to sign a contract with the MoD or face certain imprisonment.

Similarly, in early October 2025, police stopped 26-year-old Uzbek national Donierjon Ergashov on a street in Tver while he was returning home from work as a lumper (loading and unloading goods) at the popular grocery chain “Magnit”.⁹⁰ Upon discovering that Ergashov was in the country illegally, he was threatened with imprisonment and transported to a Military Commission. There he was repeatedly offered the choice of signing a contract with the MoD or of going to prison. He eventually agreed to enlist.⁹¹

Coercion is often coupled with false promises or other forms of deception. While most interviewees recruited from inside Russia were aware they had signed contracts with the RAF, most of them said they thought they would be engaged in non-combatant roles. A Kazakh POW complained that he

83 See, e.g., Kravtsova, 2024, *supra* note 63; “Forgotten Asians in captivity: why aren’t Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan preventing mercenarism?” [in Russian], *exclusive.kz*, 7 April 2026.

84 Interviews with Sa-1, Ga-3, Yn-7, NI-13, NI-14, Se-15 and Kn-16 conducted by TH.

85 “In Navoi, a woman was convicted of attempting to profit from recruiting citizens to fight in the war against Ukraine” (“In Navoi, a woman was convicted of attempting to profit from recruiting citizens”) [in Russian], *Kun.uz*, 11 September 2025; Nawal Al-Maghafi, Sheida Kiran, “We were tricked: How one woman lures foreign men to fight on Russia’s front line”, *BBC*, 12 January 2025; interviews with Ca-2, NI-13 and NI-14 conducted by TH.

86 Interview with Ga-3 conducted by TH.

87 See, for instance, “Trompés, traumatisés: le calvaire des Kényans enrôlés de force par l’armée russe” (“Trompés, traumatisés”), *Le360 Afrique*, 9 February 2026; interviews with Mo-9 and Ka-10 conducted by TH.

88 Lilia Yuldasheva and Ekaterina Pyslar, *Manipulation of civil society, raids, anti-constitutional laws* (“Yuldasheva and Pyslar, 2025”) [in Russian], 16 March 2025.

89 Interview with Mo-9 conducted by TH.

90 “Citizen of Uzbekistan was forced to sign a military contract under threat and held in a military commissariat in Tver” [in Russian], *The Insider*, 3 October 2025.

91 *Ibid.*

had not known that the contract did not end after one year,⁹² while a Kyrgyz POW, after facing legal problems in Russia, was contacted by a recruiter who encouraged him to sign a contract under promises of citizenship and even a plot of land, which he never received.⁹³

Recruitment processes

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ЗАПИСАТЬСЯ ПРЕМИИ

Online advertisement specifically targeting foreign nationals residing in Russia to join the Russian Armed Forces, published by the online recruitment portal “Federal Volunteer Recruitment Centre” (доброволец-центр.рф).

Recruitment processes targeting foreign nationals differ depending on whether the individual is inside or outside Russia. For recruits inside Russia, awareness of opportunities typically arises through multiple channels: personal connections; online platforms, including job websites, official state or state-sponsored agency websites,⁹⁴ such as regional authorities and municipalities, and advertisements on social networks through private channels on Telegram, VKontakte, Facebook or Odnoklassniki;⁹⁵ and physical spaces, such as billboards or facilities, i.e. recruitment centres, prisons, and police and military facilities. There have also been cases of private intermediaries, often pretending to represent law firms, who have contacted potential recruits from Central Asia by phone.⁹⁶ Once a recruit has learned of an opportunity, he or she is directed to a facility to sign a contract, undergo training and be assigned to a unit,⁹⁷ at centres like Avangard and Patriot in Moscow,⁹⁸ before deployment to the war zone. One of the recruits observed: “Each case is individual, each individual must be considered separately.”⁹⁹

92 Interview with Kn-12 conducted by TH.

93 Interview with Kn-11 conducted by TH.

94 See, e.g.: <https://avangard-region.ru/> and <http://www.gorod-dudinka.ru/poleznaya-informacziya/ofitsialnaya-informatsiya/12491-o-nabore-grazhdan-na-službu-v-vooruzhennye-sily-rossijskoj-federatsii-po-kontraktu>.

95 See, e.g.: “Military Service Under Contract” [@RF_Contract], Telegram.

96 “Central Asian Natives Participate in War in Ukraine”, *supra* note 39.

97 Interview with a Russian deserter conducted by FIDH, 2 October 2025.

98 See, for example, Avangard Center website, [About](#); interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

99 Interview with Kn-12 conducted by TH.

Physical recruitment spaces may serve as both sources of information for potential foreign recruits and sites of contract execution. These facilities can be divided into two categories: military and non-military.

Military and quasi-military facilities

Although rare in the case of foreign nationals, some recruitment takes place directly in Military Units, such as the 137th Guards Airborne Regiment in Ryazan. Foreign nationals might be brought there by an acquaintance and recommended to an officer on duty.¹⁰⁰ All military divisions and regiments, as well as their commanders, have recruitment quotas specifying the number of individuals required to sign up “under contract”.¹⁰¹ Commanders who fail to meet these quotas are deprived of bonuses or other benefits.¹⁰²

More frequently, foreign recruits are directed by an intermediary or forced to go to Military Commissariats or Military Recruitment Centres. In several instances, Central Asian migrants have received summonses to appear before Military Commissariats, despite lacking Russian citizenship.¹⁰³ Several interviewees reported going through the “Unified Selection Point for Contract Service of the Russian Army”, the Military Commissariat located at 5 Yablochkova Street in Moscow, colloquially referred to as “Yablochkovo”.¹⁰⁴

Non-military facilities and private individuals

Recruitment through non-military facilities and private recruiters is the most significant source of foreign fighters.¹⁰⁵ These include law enforcement facilities, such as those run by the Ministry of the Interior (Police and the General Administration for Migration Issues – GUMVD), prosecutorial authorities, Federal Security Service (FSB), Russian National Guard, Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Russian Federation (MCHS), Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN), Federal Bailiff Service, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation, facilities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and private recruiters, including commercial entities, operating with or without the backing of the state.¹⁰⁶ An August 2023 investigation revealed a scheme involving Russian oligarchs to recruit volunteers for the war through the corporations they controlled or their subsidiaries.¹⁰⁷

Many foreign nationals are detained following police raids of flats, dormitories and other migrant residences, mosques, or construction sites, stores, factories and other places of employment. Such raids have increased exponentially since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, especially following the Crocus City Hall terrorist attacks in Moscow, which were attributed to Tajikistani nationals.¹⁰⁸ Others are rounded up during random police checks on streets or in public transportation.¹⁰⁹ They are then transported to a facility run by the Ministry of the Interior, such as pre-trial detention or migration centres, and are offered or coerced into signing contracts.¹¹⁰

For example, during five days of raids in mid-August 2023 in Saint Petersburg, over 5,700 migrants were detained and over 500 of them were placed in centres for the temporary detention of migrants

100 Ibid.

101 Interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

102 Ibid.

103 ADC Memorial, “[AF RF has begun recruiting foreigners, including prisoners, for the war in Ukraine](#)” [in Russian], *Telegram*, 20 October 2022.

104 Interview with Ga-3 conducted by TH; interview with Russian deserter, *supra* note 97.

105 Interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

106 Ibid.

107 Maria Zholobova, Anastasia Korotkova, “[How the Russian Billionaires Provide Mercenaries to the Russian Army](#)”, *iStories*, 1 August 2023.

108 ADC Memorial, “[Year of anti-immigrant campaign after the ‘Crocus’ terrorist attack: statistics, raids and new laws](#)”, 27 March 2025.

109 Yuldasheva and Pyslar, 2025, *supra* note 88.

110 Ibid.

pending deportation.¹¹¹ Hundreds of migrants were detained in a mosque in January 2023 in Moscow, and in another mosque in May 2023 in Tver.¹¹² The raids are reportedly accompanied by threats, beatings, and even torture, including sexual and gender-based violence.¹¹³ Journalists have documented additional raids of apartments and workplaces of migrants in Moscow, accompanied by beatings and disappearances, only to appear again in military units in occupied Mariupol.¹¹⁴

Places of detention, including migration centres

Four of the recruits interviewed had signed contracts following detention or arrest.¹¹⁵ Migrants are often tricked, threatened or physically coerced into signing contracts with the MoD in pre-trial detention centres, police stations, prisons or migration centres. One notorious venue is the so-called Multifunctional Migration Centre “Sakharovo” in Moscow. The establishment of the centre, which has been referred to as the “hotbed for recruitment of migrants for the war”,¹¹⁶ was announced just prior to the September 2022 partial mobilisation campaign. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin declared his intention to open a facility “to assist the Russian Ministry of Defence in the recruitment of foreign citizens into military service”.¹¹⁷ Human rights defenders report that when undergoing a mandatory medical examination to apply for work permits (“patents”), migrants have been asked to sign a stack of documents containing a contract with the MoD.¹¹⁸ Most migrants, who often have an elementary level of education and a basic level of Russian, do not fully read the documents they sign and inadvertently commit themselves to military service.¹¹⁹

Prisons

Immediately following the beginning of the full-scale invasion, migrants detained in Russian prisons became susceptible to recruitment for military service in the ranks of the Wagner Group, which actively recruited soldiers from among prisoners.¹²⁰ Wagner Group representatives appear to have had open access to FSIN facilities to conduct recruitment,¹²¹ as well as some access to facilities abroad, including in the Central African Republic.¹²² In September 2022, over 40 foreign prisoners from a facility in the Mordovia region, including citizens of Moldova, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Serbia, and Egypt, were recruited and transferred to Ukraine.¹²³ This is also how several citizens of Tanzania, Côte d’Ivoire and Zambia were incorporated into the Wagner Group.¹²⁴ According to reports from relatives of convicts, promises of release and financial rewards, as well as threats and physical violence, were used to coerce individuals into joining.¹²⁵ By the end of 2022, human rights

111 “Deported, beaten, taken to the front lines: How Russian authorities treat migrants during the war – and what elections and mobilisation have to do with it” [in Russian], *Bumaga*, 4 September 2023.

112 *Ibid.*

113 “‘Framing’ with drugs – colony – military contract. How Russia perfected on migrants its recruitment techniques for the front” (“‘Framing’ with drugs”), *RFL*, 30 January 2026; see also Human Rights Watch, “Russia: Xenophobic Crackdown on Central Asian Migrants”, 17 March 2025.

114 Yuldasheva and Pyslar, 2025, *supra* note 88.

115 Interviews with Et-6, Mo-9 and Kn-16 conducted by TH.

116 “‘Sakharov’ Center has become a hotbed for recruitment of migrants for war” [in Russian], *RFL*, 14 June 2024.

117 “Moscow to Open Military Recruitment Center for Foreigners”, *Moscow Times*, 20 September 2022; Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, “Moscow is home to the ‘Sakharovo’ Migration Centre” [in Russian], *Telegram*, 20 September 2022.

118 “Easier to get a visa, than to die. Human rights Defender Chupik on why migrants should run from Russia right now” [in Russian], *Kloop*, 8 October 2023.

119 *Ibid.*

120 European Prison Litigation Network and Russia Behind Bars, “Recruitment of convicted prisoners by the Wagner Group and their use in the war in Ukraine” (“European Prison Litigation Network and Russia Behind Bars, 2023”), Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Russian Federation, 24 August 2023, pp. 10–12.

121 *Ibid.*

122 *Ibid.*, pp. 27–29.

123 *Ibid.*

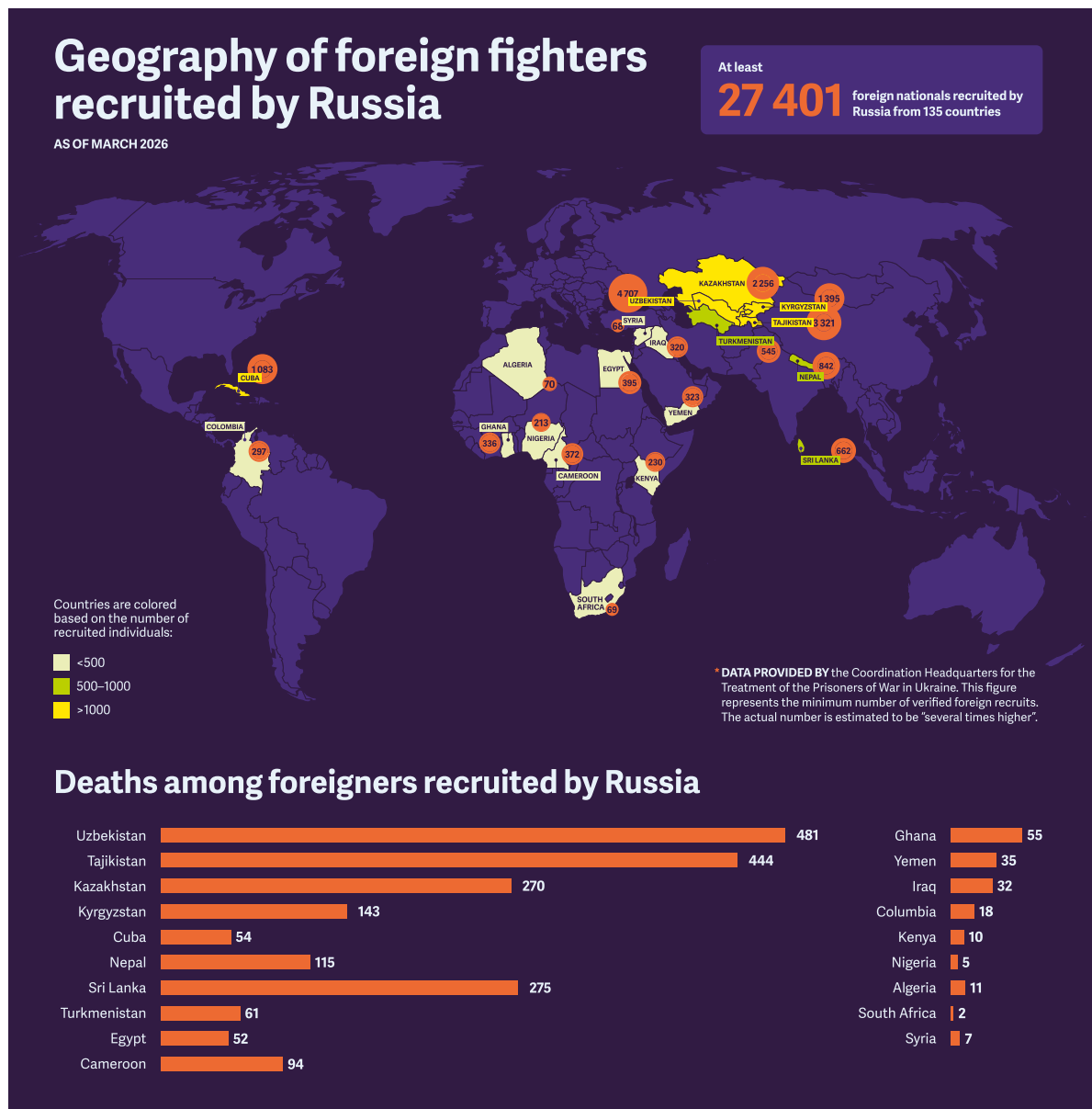
124 Bartosiewicz and Żochowski, 2024, *supra* note 41.

125 European Prison Litigation Network and Russia Behind Bars, 2023, *supra* note 120, p. 38.

organisations had confirmed that citizens of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, recruited in Russian prisons, had been killed in the conflict.¹²⁶

Following Wagner’s complete integration into the RAF, the MoD replicated this practice of recruitment from prisons.¹²⁷ According to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, established by the UN, many recruits faced significant coercion from prison officials. For example, one inmate who attempted to resist recruitment reported being told by a recruiting officer: “I will do everything so that you end up in the special military operation.”¹²⁸ Foreign citizens, including many employed in food delivery services, are increasingly “framed” for drug offences. Following conviction they are faced with a stark choice: to serve out their prison term or sign a contract with the MoD.¹²⁹

2.2.2 Recruitment abroad



Selected countries of origin of foreign fighters recruited by Russia. © Lera Riezanova

126 Ibid., pp. 27–29.

127 “Framing” with drugs”, *supra* note 113; see also *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine* (advanced unedited version, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine 2026”), 9 March 2026, A/HRC/61/61, para. 54.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid.

Foreign nationals recruited outside Russia represent a more diverse range of backgrounds, with one difference being that they might themselves be fleeing from armed conflict or other internal political instability. Research has confirmed the participation of students, farmers, drivers, construction workers, unemployed individuals, IT professionals, former military personnel, a jurist and even a professional athlete.¹³⁰

Just a few months into the full-scale invasion, Russia's campaign to recruit foreign nationals "under contract" began to actively target foreign nationals abroad.¹³¹ Much of this early effort focused on Central Asia and Africa, where Wagner Group had already established a strong presence, particularly in Central African states. Men from Senegal, Ghana and Cameroon joined units colloquially referred to as "Black Wagner". Media reports indicate that at least 42 such recruits were killed in the fighting in eastern Ukraine in 2022 alone.¹³²

Most of the combatants learned about the employment opportunity in Russia from friends, acquaintances or advertisements on social media,¹³³ but also through Wagner personnel, Russia's diplomatic presence (Embassies and Consulates)¹³⁴, cultural centres or "houses", as well as private, state-sponsored or state-linked commercial entities in the countries of origin.¹³⁵

An example of direct recruitment by Russian authorities is through so-called "Russian Houses", a network of cultural centres operating under the aegis of Russian state corporation *Rossotrudnichestvo*. *Rossotrudnichestvo* describes itself as a "leading Russian agency whose main mission is to strengthen Russia's humanitarian influence in the world".¹³⁶ The organisation is represented in 71 countries through 87 foreign missions, commonly referred to as "Russian Houses". In some locations, Russian Houses appear to serve as foreign fighter recruitment hubs. For example, in 2025, Kyrgyzstan's authorities arrested four individuals, including an employee of the Russian House, in Kyrgyzstan's second largest city of Osh,¹³⁷ on charges of running a mercenary recruitment scheme from the Russian House facility. They face 15 years of imprisonment under Article 416.1 of the Kyrgyz Penal Code, which criminalises the "[r]ecruitment, financing, material support, training of mercenaries for the purpose of using them in armed conflicts of other states or violent actions aimed at overthrowing state power or violating territorial integrity, as well as the use of mercenaries in military conflicts or actions".¹³⁸

While direct recruitment through Russia's state institutions abroad appears to be rare, research shows that state agencies have been involved at various stages of recruitment schemes. For example, Russia's municipal authorities have extended invitations to foreign nationals to travel to Russia in cases where tourist visas are necessary, and in all cases where the issuance of visas has been necessary, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been involved.¹³⁹ There have also been several reports of the FSB controlling or overseeing recruitment efforts by private tourism agencies.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore,

130 Interviews conducted by TH.

131 Richard Holmes, "From 'Black Wagner' to Cuba: How Putin recruits soldiers from across the globe", *The i Paper*, 21 August 2023.

132 Ibid.

133 According to UK Defence Intelligence "Online adverts have been observed in Armenia and Kazakhstan offering RUB 495,000 (EUR 4,400) in initial payments and salaries from RUB 190,000 (EUR 1,700). There have been recruitment efforts in Kazakhstan's northern Qostanai region, appealing to the ethnic Russian population." UK Ministry of Defence, *Intelligence Update*, X, 3 September 2023.

134 Several interviewees and project partners reported seeing flyers posted in or around Russian Consular services facilities abroad, for example in Uralsk, Kazakhstan; interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

135 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29.

136 *Rossotrudnichestvo* was established by Presidential Order in 2008 the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation. Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 1315, 6 September 2008.

137 "Kyrgyzstan arrests employee of Russian House cultural center for allegedly recruiting mercenaries to fight in Ukraine" ("Kyrgyzstan arrests employee of Russian House cultural center"), *Meduza*, 23 April 2025.

138 "Recruitment case: GKNB detained another suspect in Osh" [in Russian], *RFL*, 22 April 2025.

139 Aleksei Remizov, "A one-way visa: Russia's regional governments are recruiting Arab mercenaries to fight in Ukraine", *The Insider*, 16 July 2025; Aleksei Remizov, "Through Mordovia to Mordor: How Latin American and African mercenaries are recruited for Russia's war against Ukraine", *The Insider*, 16 February 2026.

140 Ibid.; see also INPACT, *The Business of Despair: The Russian army's recruiting of African fighters* ("INPACT, 2026"), February 2026, pp. 23–24.

reliable reports indicate that on several occasions, most recently in February 2026, the Russian authorities have issued “stop orders” restricting recruitment from certain “friendly” countries. This suggests knowledge and tacit acceptance, at least up to a certain point, of such practices.¹⁴¹

In almost all of the cases considered, the initial contact led to a local intermediary, either an individual or a commercial entity, with links to the Russian Embassy, which then facilitated the issuance of a visa, or, in cases where no visa was required, connected the recruit to another intermediary in Russia with ties to Military Commissariats or Recruitment Centres. Upon arrival in Russia, recruits were usually met by military personnel,¹⁴² or civilians with links to the military or security services, and then directed to a Military Commissariat or Recruitment Centre where they signed a contract in a similar way to those recruited within Russia. It has been reported that prior to the dissolution of the Wagner Group, foreign recruits signed separate contracts with this entity.¹⁴³

For example, one person interviewed by TH, a retired military service man from Sri Lanka, learned from a former colleague about the opportunity to work in Russia, away from the front lines. The colleague put him in touch with an intermediary who had connections with the Russian Embassy. The recruit sent a copy of his passport and other documents to the intermediary via WhatsApp and was then invited to collect his tourist visa from the Russian Embassy. There he met a man he described as a “man from Sri Lanka” who coordinated the visa process and logistics for a fee of EUR 400.¹⁴⁴ Although the Embassy employee knew he was going to Russia to participate in the war, like many of his compatriots he received a tourist visa. He was provided with plane tickets and travelled from Sri Lanka through Bahrain to Moscow with two other Sri Lankan nationals. Upon arrival in Moscow, he was greeted by a man who spoke only Russian and transported to a facility where he met 20 other Sri Lankan recruits.¹⁴⁵

Inducements follow a similar pattern inside Russia and abroad: offers of well-paid work with the military, away from the front lines, or in “construction”, “security”, “cleaning”, or “delivery” services, along with the prospect of citizenship. These offers are delivered via WhatsApp or Telegram groups like “*Sadiq Rossia*” (“Friend of Russia”) in local languages (see **Chapter 3.3.3**), and at times purport to represent the Russian state.¹⁴⁶ Private intermediaries acting as recruiters are often compensated both by the foreign recruits themselves (from their signing bonuses), and through the regional or municipal budgets for running referral schemes. This allows private recruiters to advance money for flights and lodging for recruits as additional inducements, while taking advantage of the desperation of foreign recruits, who arrive in Russia without support networks, knowledge of the Russian language or legal system, or access to remedies in cases of violation of their rights. Only one of the interviewees reported having had parts of his contract translated for him, and none reported being able to communicate freely with their superior officers or fellow soldiers. All of the interviewees were sent to the front lines between ten days and four months after signing their contracts.

Russian national Polyna Azarnykh is reported to have enlisted nearly 500 men, mainly from Syria, Egypt and Yemen, but also from Morocco, Iraq, Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria.¹⁴⁷ Azarnykh, a 40-year-old former teacher, reportedly used a Telegram channel to lure young men into joining Russia’s military on “one-year contracts” for “military service” with a monthly salary equivalent to about EUR 2,000, and a sign-up payment of approximately EUR 4,000. She met recruits at the airport within hours of their arrival in Moscow, and took them by train to a recruitment centre in Bryansk, western Russia. The contracts were in Russian, which none of the men understood. Azarnykh failed to make clear

141 Stop orders have been circulated among recruiters abroad. “Russia has limited recruitment of mercenaries from ‘friendly’ countries: the list could contain approximately 40 states”, *iStories*, 23 February 2026.

142 Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine 2026, *supra* note 127, para. 55.

143 Interview with Russian military experts, *supra* note 33.

144 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

145 *Ibid.*

146 See, for example, “Qui sont les Africains qui combattent pour la Russie? Les révélations d’All Eyes on Wagner”, *RFI*, 11 February 2026.

147 “We were tricked: How one woman lures foreign men to fight on Russia’s front line”, *supra* note 85.

that they could not leave after a year and threatened those who challenged her. Azarnykh took their passports, promising to arrange Russian citizenship. She also promised they could avoid combat roles if they paid her EUR 2,500. One combatant testified that he was sent into battle with just 10 days of training, so he refused to pay the EUR 2,500 and she eventually responded by burning his passport.¹⁴⁸

The following sub-sections provide the regional overview and country-specific analysis for several states of origin, from the different regions, of a relatively significant number of foreign fighters recruited into the Russian armed forces.

148 Ibid.

Step by step recruitment process



STEP 1 Targeting vulnerability

The system targets persons in vulnerable situations:

- migrants (especially in Russia)
- students abroad
- unemployed or low-income individuals
- persons in debt
- persons seeking residency or citizenship
- detainees and prisoners
- persons affected by economic crisis or instability



STEP 2 First contact

Recruitment often starts as an opportunity, not a military offer. Channels include:

- social media ads
- WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook
- recruitment agencies and intermediaries
- friends or acquaintances
- visa or embassy-related facilitation in some cases
- inside Russia: police checks, migration centres, detention facilities, prisons

STEP 3 Promises made

Recruits are often promised civilian employment, such as:

- construction work
- jobs in the security sector
- cleaning, logistics, delivery
- farm work
- or study or travel opportunities

Reality: military deployment



STEP 5 Travel and transfer

Recruits are moved through a structured system:

- visa facilitation
- flights arranged
- arrival in Russia
- transfer to recruitment centres or military facilities



STEP 4 Two pathways into the system

Pathway A:
joins voluntarily

- salary
- bonuses
- citizenship
- lack of alternatives

Pathway B:
deceived, pressured, or coerced

- are misled about the job
- do not understand what they sign
- are pressured due to migration status
- are detained or threatened



STEP 6 Contract without informed consent

Contracts are often:

- in Russian only
- not properly explained
- signed under pressure or time constraints

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interviewees said they were told they would not fight



STEP 7 Minimal military training

Training often lasts only a few days or weeks

Many recruits have no military experience and face language barriers, resulting in a limited understanding of orders, risks, and their rights.



STEP 8 Frontline deployment

Recruits are deployed directly to high-risk frontline assaults, sustaining significant casualty rates.



STEP 9 Conclusion

Predatory recruitment involving deception, coercion or the abuse of vulnerability can amount to human trafficking.

CHAPTER 3

The Recruitment of Foreign Fighters from Specific Regions

3.1 Central Asia

They bought a ticket for me... paid for the hotel... paid for the taxi... I didn't know it would be like this, I didn't know at all.

– Kyrgyz POW interviewed by TH¹⁴⁹

3.1.1 General overview of the extent of fighter flows

According to the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Central Asian nationals represent one of the largest contingents of foreign fighters recruited by Russia to fight in Ukraine. Although the exact number of Central Asian recruits remains uncertain, recent Ukrainian intelligence estimates that over 7,000 nationals from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have joined Russia's war effort against Ukraine. According to these estimates, over 2,700 fighters are from Uzbekistan, over 1,500 from Kazakhstan,¹⁵⁰ approximately 800 from Kyrgyzstan, and more than 2,000 from Tajikistan.¹⁵¹ The institutionalised recruitment of Central Asians began soon after the full-scale invasion¹⁵² and has continued to increase ever since.¹⁵³

While local recruitment within Central Asia is persistent, a large part occurs inside Russia (see **Chapter 2.2.1**, above). According to the Russian authorities, an estimated six million migrants currently reside in Russia,¹⁵⁴ the majority of whom are from Central Asia.¹⁵⁵ A large proportion live and work without legal status, excluded from basic labour and residency protections, making them ideal targets for exploitation.¹⁵⁶ While for some of the migrants promises of freedom, a substantial financial reward and even a Russian passport¹⁵⁷ are sufficient inducements to sign contracts with the MoD, those who are more reluctant face threats of deportation, violence and imprisonment.¹⁵⁸ This pattern reflects a broader,

149 Interview with Kn-11 conducted by TH.

150 Hochu Zhyt, [Numbers of fighters coming from Central Asia](#) ("Hochu Zhyt, Numbers of fighters from Central Asia") [in Russian], *Telegram*, 4 November 2025.

151 Ibid.

152 Aziz Yakubov, ["Putin's Foreign Legion: How Russia Uses Blackmail, Threats, and Deception to Mobilize Migrants from Central Asian Countries to the Front"](#) [in Russian], *Mediazona*, 28 October 2022.

153 Hochu Zhyt, Recruitment of fighters from Kyrgyzstan, *supra* note 10.

154 "MVD has revealed how many foreigners are in Russia", *supra* note 74.

155 [Russia Country Profile](#), "Migrants and Refugees" ("Russia Country Profile"), Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, n.d.

156 Muhammad Tahir, ["Russia's shadow army: Central Asian migrants are dying in Ukraine"](#), Atlantic Council, 20 June 2025.

157 Kottasová and Butenko, 2025, *supra* note 62.

158 Azattyq Asia and Current Time, ["Thousands Of Central Asians Enlisted To Fight Russia's War In Ukraine Through 'Coercion, Enticements'"](#), *RFE/RL*, 21 August 2025.

long-standing practice of discrimination, neglect, and routine mistreatment of Central Asian migrant workers in Russia.¹⁵⁹

Available figures on Central Asian fighters do not reflect the reality of the front lines, as many Central Asian fighters have dual citizenship, having become naturalised Russian citizens. For tens of thousands of Central Asians, Russian citizenship once symbolised stability and opportunity. Instead, it has placed them among the most vulnerable to forced mobilisation. In 2025, at least 20,000 of the approximately 80,000 detained Central Asian men who had obtained Russian citizenship had been sent to the front lines “to fulfil their military duty”.¹⁶⁰ Notably, all Central Asian states retain compulsory military service, meaning that many potential recruits possess basic military training.¹⁶¹ Additionally, unlike many other foreign recruits, Central Asians generally speak Russian, eliminating language barriers in command and control structures. From the perspective of the Russian military, these factors make their integration into active combat units more efficient.

Fatalities among Central Asian fighters are significant: at least 481 Uzbeks, 270 Kazakhs, 143 Kyrgyz, and 446 Tajiks are known to have been killed.¹⁶² Central Asian recruits are consistently assigned to the most dangerous sections of the front.¹⁶³ A representative of the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War observed: “We have once again seen that Russia sends them to the front line during the heaviest battles. These individuals were deployed to carry out attacks in directions such as Bakhmut, Bilohorivka, Avdiivka, Toretsk, and Pokrovsk.”¹⁶⁴ This aligns with studies on “ethnic stacking” within the Russian military, which find that ethnic minorities, including Central Asians, are generally disproportionately represented within the lower ranks of the army and are assigned the most “dirty and dangerous work of enlisted troops”.¹⁶⁵ As one Russian prison insider stated, “Ethnicity plays a role...the authorities view these groups as expendable”.¹⁶⁶



Number of foreign fighters from Central Asian countries recruited into Russia's Armed Forces, according to the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War in Ukraine. This figure represents the minimum number of verified foreign recruits from Central Asia; actual numbers are estimated to be "several times higher". © Lera Riezanova

159 ADC Memorial, *The Year of War*, *supra* note 82; Human Rights Watch, “Living in Fear and Humiliation: Rising Xenophobic Harassment and Violence towards Central Asian Migrants in Russia”, 17 March 2025.

160 Hochu Zhyt, “Targeting of migrants by Russian authorities”, *Telegram*, 21 May 2025.

161 Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, *The Rights of Conscripts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus: A Review of Legislation and Practice*, June 2021.

162 Hochu Zhyt, Numbers of fighters from Central Asia, *supra* note 150.

163 Jeff Sahadeo and Nicholas Morrison, “Russian Migration Policy at the Crossroads: Trends and Regional Repercussions”, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), January 2025, p. 7.

164 Aigerim Akylbekova, “More than 50 Central Asian citizens who fought for Russia in Ukraine have been captured. Who are they and how will they be replaced?” [in Russian], *Current Time*, 13 February 2025.

165 Jesse Driscoll, David Sichinava and Christofer Berglund, “Ethnic stacking in the Russian armed forces? Findings from a leaked dataset”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 41(3), March 2025, 199–218, p. 200.

166 “Inside Russia's Shadow Battalions”, *supra* note 68.

3.1.2 Fighter motivations (relative socio-economic conditions and political trends)

Central Asians constitute Russia's largest migrant community, shaping both its labour force and, increasingly, its wartime demography.¹⁶⁷ In 2024, nearly one in four migrants in Russia came from Uzbekistan (23.3%), followed by Tajikistan (10.4%) and Kyrgyzstan (9.5%).¹⁶⁸ These same countries are now among the most visibly represented on the Ukrainian front lines. The patterns of exploitation in war mirror the patterns of migration, with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan supplying not only Russia's essential workforce but also many of the foreign combatants on the Ukrainian frontline. Central Asian economies heavily depend on labour migration to Russia. In 2024, remittances accounted for approximately 48% of Tajikistan's GDP, the highest proportion in the world.¹⁶⁹

This dependence can be observed in the everyday situations faced by migrants upon arrival. For example, Foziljon Umarov, a Tajik bricklayer, described waiting in line in a migration office in Moscow to renew his permit. A woman behind the desk spoke to him in Tajik, the language he grew up speaking, and told him that if he signed up for the war, he would no longer need a residency or work permit. He was told he could earn about EUR 2,500 a month and that, after six months of service, he might even receive a Russian passport.¹⁷⁰ At just EUR 270,¹⁷¹ Tajikistan's average monthly salary is almost ten times lower than the income Umarov was promised for enlisting in the Russian army. Even in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where salaries average EUR 440¹⁷² and EUR 430¹⁷³ respectively, for many the military wage looks like a rare chance of financial stability. Some recruitment offers have been even higher, promising EUR 3,500 to EUR 6,100 per month and up to EUR 35,000 annually.¹⁷⁴

Unlike its neighbours, Kazakhstan has far fewer migrant workers in Russia, and those who are present are more often students or skilled professionals.¹⁷⁵ This is reflected by a comparatively higher average salary of almost EUR 700.¹⁷⁶ And yet, despite this economic advantage at home and the smaller migration flow, a large number of Kazakh citizens have still been enlisted on the Russian side in Ukraine. This is due not only to the higher wages promised by the Russian military, but also the opportunity to obtain a Russian passport. Even those who do not struggle economically may view Russian citizenship as a strategic asset, helping secure residency rights, expand job opportunities, and grant mobility across Russia.¹⁷⁷ This remains a strong incentive shared across the region.

Testimonies also suggest that, as with recruits from other regions, some of the Central Asian fighters in Ukraine were not aware they would have to participate in hostilities. One Tajik POW said "They fooled me", describing how he was assured he would be stationed as a guard far from the fighting, with the promise of a Russian passport after six months.¹⁷⁸ According to Kazakh military analyst Ermek Seitbattalov, job websites show "ads for work in [Russia, like in] Siberia, Irkutsk, or the Far East – high salaries, easy jobs. Behind some of those offers are [military] recruiters who send people to the war zone".¹⁷⁹

167 Lilly Horrigan, "Russia's Tightening Grip: A Potential Turning Point for Central Asian Migration" (Horrigan, 2025), Caspian Policy Center, 10 March 2025.

168 "The Ministry of Internal Affairs has revealed the number of migrants arriving in 2024" [in Russian], RBC, 19 June 2025.

169 Horrigan, 2025, *supra* note 167.

170 Farangis Najibullah and Zarangez Navruzshoh, "Russian Recruiters Target Central Asian Migrants At Mosques, Dorms To Join War In Ukraine", RFE/RL, 18 April 2023.

171 "Tajikistan Average Salary Rises but Trails Behind Central Asia" ("Tajikistan Average Salary Rises"), *The Times of Central Asia*, 26 August 2025.

172 "The average salary in Uzbekistan exceeded 6 million soms, and in Tashkent it was 10.3 million soms" [in Russian], *Gazeta.uz*, 28 October 2025.

173 "Authorities announced the average salary in Kyrgyzstan" [in Russian], *Kaktus Media*, 16 October 2025.

174 "In Navoi, a woman was convicted of attempting to profit from recruiting citizens", *supra* note 85.

175 "Russia Country Profile", *supra* note 155.

176 "Tajikistan Average Salary Rises", *supra* note 171.

177 Dmitri Belyayev, "War for citizenship: Why Uzbeks fight for Russia", *Eurasianet*, 14 November 2024.

178 Mansur Mirovalev, "Captured Tajik tells of life on Ukraine frontlines alongside Russian forces", *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2025.

179 RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, Azattyq Asia and RFE/RL's Uzbek Service, "Russia's War Dead In Ukraine Believed To Include Hundreds Of Central Asians", RFE/RL, 28 October 2025.

In terms of ideological motivations, a sense of affinity for Russia or support for its invasion of Ukraine appear to play a relatively small role in motivating Central Asians to enlist. One Kyrgyz POW explained that he had never followed the war closely and, in fact, had even contributed some money to support Ukraine while he was in Kyrgyzstan. But when he lost his job and his debts spiralled – loans, a mortgage, payments he could no longer meet – he felt he had no choice but to sign the military contract as a way out of his financial predicament.¹⁸⁰ In the same camp, another Kyrgyz POW admitted his complete detachment from the political context of the conflict: “I wasn’t interested in anything. It was for the children – they [Russians] promised a passport, so the children could study. I have to pay RUB 26,000 every month for kindergarten. But they said they would cover it... and then there’s school too.”¹⁸¹

While promises of citizenship and a high salary may have tempted numerous Central Asian recruits, for many others enlisting offered the prospect of freedom and a clean slate following arbitrary or justified detention. A Kazakh POW recounted, describing how he was detained for petty theft while on summer holiday in Russia: “Well, the police caught us. I got scared. I had never committed any offences before... So, I had to sign the contract so that I wouldn’t end up in prison.”¹⁸² His case illustrates a pattern documented across numerous accounts of detained migrants facing analogous circumstances. According to Russian human rights activist Olga Romanova, “Police are obliged to offer them [detainees] the opportunity to go to the special military unit, avoiding punishment.”¹⁸³

According to human rights defenders, most of them, however, are not given a genuine choice and are subjected to beatings, torture and threats of rape.¹⁸⁴ An Uzbek prisoner described what happened to fellow Central Asians who refused to enlist: “Wagner representatives shot three of them in front of everyone.” During Wagner Group’s visit of the facility, the recruiters allegedly took approximately 200 Central Asian prisoners and forced them to sign contracts.¹⁸⁵ Where financial inducements prove insufficient, available testimonies indicate that Russian authorities have resorted to coercion, including threats of imprisonment, physical violence, and, in documented cases, threats of death. Currently, no investigations are known to have been initiated by the Russian authorities into instances of torture aimed at coercing people into signing contracts.

3.1.3 Recruitment

Russian authorities rely on several strategies for recruiting Central Asian nationals, both inside and outside of Russia.

Recruitment inside Russia

Recruitment of Central Asian nationals in Russia relies heavily on their legal and economic vulnerability as migrant workers, as detailed in Chapter 2.2.1, above. Encounters with law enforcement frequently serve as opportunities for recruitment, with individuals pressured or deceived into signing military contracts through promises of release, financial compensation, residency rights, or Russian citizenship, and in some cases through threats and punishment.

A Kyrgyz POW recalled that he ended up on the front line after being caught with a fake Kyrgyz driver’s licence in Russia: “I had forged documents, honestly speaking – forged driver’s license. That’s why they called me in.” Although he was initially released, he was contacted later that same day by a woman who told him to go to Smolensk. There, he was taken to a military enlistment office, had his

180 Interview with Kn-16 conducted by TH.

181 Interview with Kn-11 conducted by TH.

182 AIRAN Aqpan, “Kazakh mercenaries: recruitment, crime, desertion. Death in war, prison at home” [in Russian], 27 May 2025.

183 Merhat Sharipzhanov, Siberia.Realities Russia, Current Time Asia, “Prisoners, migrants, and residents of remote regions: who is being forced to go to war in Russia and how” [in Russian], 4 August 2025.

184 Marina Baranovskaya, “How Russia drafts migrants to fight in Ukraine” (“Baranovskaya, 2023”), DW, 9 December 2023.

185 “An Uzbek court sentenced a 25-year-old man who fought in the war against Ukraine as part of the Wagner PMC to five years of restricted freedom” [in Russian], Current Time, 11 June 2025.

documents collected, and was allegedly promised Russian citizenship, land, and help securing legal residency for his children in Russia. He described the process: “They bought a ticket for me... paid for the hotel... paid for the taxi...I didn’t know it would be like this, I didn’t know at all.”¹⁸⁶

A young Uzbek migrant reported his experience of a similar ordeal, following allegations of drug trafficking:

“In court, I was sentenced to eight years. There was also pressure in the colony, they forced me to sign a contract. After I refused, they put me in a disciplinary cell. Later, a translator came again and persuaded me to sign the documents. In January 2025, they put me in handcuffs, put a bag over my head, and took me to a military unit.”¹⁸⁷

Central Asian nationals were among the primary targets of Wagner’s prison recruitment (see **Chapter 2.2.1**). The case of a 59-year-old Uzbek migrant worker is illustrative. After being arrested in Moscow and sentenced to nine years in a correctional facility in Mordovia, he was approached by Wagner representatives who offered him freedom in exchange for fighting in Ukraine. Charged with mercenary activity on his return to Uzbekistan, he testified in court that prison officials had told him he had been “shortlisted to join the war effort,” and Wagner commanders promised “a monthly salary of RUB 100,000 (EUR 1,100), Russian citizenship, and exemption from serving the remainder of [his] sentence.”¹⁸⁸

In addition to prisons and detention facilities, migration centres are also used as recruitment grounds. Migrants are given “a whole folder of documents, up to 40 sheets of paper” with no time to review them. With long lines of people waiting behind them, many unknowingly sign military contracts hidden among dozens of pages. Upon discovering the deception, leaving Russia often seems like their only remaining option.¹⁸⁹

Some fighters enlist voluntarily. For Uzbek migrant Shavkat Mashrabov, the process was straightforward:

“I arrived [in Krasnoyarsk], gathered all the documents, passed the medical examination, received a certificate of health, and went to the military registration and enlistment office. I presented my documents, diplomas, and certificates proving my qualifications, and signed the contract.”

After signing, Shavkat immediately received RUB 450,000 (EUR 5,000). He recounted: “I ended up in a reconnaissance assault brigade, as a machine gunner, Unit 09332, in an assault. They didn’t even look at who I was or what I could do – they used me to the fullest.”¹⁹⁰

Recruitment in Central Asia

While most recruitment targets vulnerable migrants inside Russia, networks continue to recruit locally within Central Asian states.

The recruitment process typically begins with seemingly ordinary job advertisements for construction or factory work, widely shared on social media platforms like Facebook or Telegram, and offering official employment, shift-based work, and paid accommodation and travel. The requirements are minimal, often just an ID and sometimes a photo or short video. After that, communication moves to WhatsApp, where anonymous recruiters respond quickly and create the impression of a legitimate hiring process, even using names of fictitious or bankrupt legal entities.

In Kazakhstan, candidates are then told to come to a bus station in Almaty, from where weekly buses leave for Russia with all expenses covered, indicating a steady, organised flow rather than isolated

186 Interview with Kn-11 conducted by TH.

187 “They put a bag over my head and took me to a military unit”: the story of a migrant recruited into the Russian army” [in Russian], *Kunz.uz*, 3 September 2025.

188 “Uzbek national recruited by Wagner convicted upon return”, *Kunz.uz*, 18 July 2025.

189 Baranovskaya, 2023, *supra* note 184.

190 “One way ticket: Migrants at war against Ukraine” [in Russian], *Oknopress*, 17 November 2025.

cases. Upon arrival in Russia, the recruits are presented with enlistment as the most effective way to settle in the country and obtain fast-tracked Russian citizenship, revealing the true goal behind the seemingly ordinary job offers.¹⁹¹ There have been claims that leaflets encouraging enlistment were distributed in Kazakhstan's larger cities. The investigation launched by the authorities did not establish evidence of physical leafleting, but the Ministry of Internal Affairs did recognize the online circulation of recruitment messaging.¹⁹²

Prior to its dissolution, recruitment by the Wagner Group in Central Asia was also openly promoted and easily accessible online. Social media channels, such as "kg.zaplata" on Instagram, provided detailed instructions for how to join, including medical tests at specific laboratories and extensive personal documentation.¹⁹³ Recruiters presented the process as "employment", describing deployment to Ukraine as a six-month "business trip" with salaries, bonuses, housing, and travel covered. Accepted candidates were instructed to delete social media accounts and travel with only a basic phone to a Wagner base near Krasnodar, southern Russia, using code phrases at checkpoints.¹⁹⁴

Some recruitment appears to be conducted with the express or implicit involvement of Russia and its institutions. The case discussed in Chapter 2.2.2, in which an employee of the local Russian House in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, was arrested for running a recruitment scheme on its premises, is illustrative of these methods.¹⁹⁵

3.1.4 State involvement or response

The warnings of criminal liability for participation in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, issued by **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan**¹⁹⁶ in the early months of 2022, have proved largely ineffective, as evidenced by the annual rise in fighter flows from the region.¹⁹⁷

At the same time, there are documented instances of consular intervention by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to assist citizens who were drawn into the war.¹⁹⁸ For example, a Kyrgyz national recounted: "I contacted the Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic. I am very happy, they came and took me away in an instant."¹⁹⁹

All four Central Asian states studied in this report, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, criminalise mercenarism and/or participation in armed conflicts abroad under their national legislation.²⁰⁰ Their respective criminal codes contain dedicated provisions prohibiting citizens from joining foreign military formations or taking part in hostilities outside state control. These offences are typically punishable by imprisonment, with stricter penalties applied when recruitment, financing, or training of fighters is involved.²⁰¹ Enforcement has varied across the region.²⁰² In **Kyrgyzstan**, the number of identified fighters far exceeds the number of prosecutions: only a handful

191 Elmedia Kazakhstan, "Investigation: The Lie About the 'Watch'. How Kazakhs End Up in a War Zone" [video], *YouTube*, 5 August 2025.

192 Alina Shashkina, "Kazakhs are being called upon to participate in the war: the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Security Committee are conducting an investigation" [in Russian], *Tengri News*, 29 April 2025.

193 Ali Toktakunov, "'Working for a Private Security Company'. How Russian private military companies are searching for mercenaries in Central Asia" [video, in Russian], *YouTube*, 19 July 2022.

194 Khadisha Akayeva and Aya Reno, "'The likelihood of these people returning is slim.' How does the Wagner PMC recruit in Kazakhstan, and why isn't it being combated?" [in Russian], *RFE/RL's Central Asia Service*, 10 April 2023.

195 "Kyrgyzstan arrests employee of Russian House cultural center", *supra* note 137.

196 Burak Bir, "Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan warn citizens against participating war in Ukraine", *Anadolu Agency*, 21 September 2022.

197 Hochu Zhyt, Recruitment of fighters from Kazakhstan, *supra* note 10; Hochu Zhyt, Recruitment of fighters from Kyrgyzstan, *supra* note 10.

198 Niginakhon Saida, "Uzbek Fighters in Russia's War Face Relatively Mild Punishments at Home", *The Diplomat*, 4 September 2025.

199 Jazgul Karimova, "'I was almost tricked into going to Ukraine.' Kyrgyz citizen lured into war rescued" [in Russian], *RFE/RL's Central Asia Service*, 18 August 2025.

200 "Central Asian Migrants Coerced Into Russia's War", *supra* note 70.

201 National criminal codes of relevant countries.

202 "In pursuit of money: How Central Asians fighting for Russia are punished at home" ("In Pursuit of Money") [in Russian], *Vot Tak*, 1 July 2025.

of legal cases have resulted in sentencing, and even then, several of those convicted have had their sentences reduced²⁰³ or have been pardoned.²⁰⁴

Kazakhstan was initially slow to crack down on recruitment, with less than a dozen known cases of prosecution²⁰⁵ before a sudden increase in 2024, when security services opened a substantially higher number of investigations, including 166 cases related to participation in foreign conflicts and 17 for mercenarism (see **Chapter 7.1** below). The trend increased further in 2025, with 709 cases initiated for participation and 28 for mercenarism. Court proceedings also increased during this period, with over 100 participation cases and 12 mercenarism cases reaching trial in 2025, bringing the total number of cases heard by courts throughout the war to 149 for participation in foreign conflicts and 30 for mercenarism.²⁰⁶

Uzbekistan has also been relatively proactive in investigating and prosecuting nationals who have fought on Russia's side against Ukraine, albeit with questionable leniency.²⁰⁷ While 1,110 Uzbek citizens have been investigated²⁰⁸ and hundreds of criminal cases have been initiated,²⁰⁹ no more than 30 sentences are publicly known to have been handed down in Uzbekistan. The highest recorded punishment is five years of restriction of freedom,²¹⁰ a sentence not always served in custodial conditions. Often, the punishment comes in other forms of restricted freedom, such as house arrest or curfew.²¹¹ In their decisions, judges have cited mitigating circumstances as the basis for reduced penalties.²¹²

In a notable example, in 2024, the Andijan City Court in Uzbekistan heard a case in which an Uzbek national, who had fought on Russia's side against Ukraine, confessed to killing more than ten soldiers.²¹³ According to the Criminal Code of Uzbekistan, this could amount to aggravated murder, punishable by 15 to 25 years or life imprisonment. Instead, the charge was mercenarism, for which, according to the law, the sentence ranges from 10 to 15 years in prison. However, the judge took into account mitigating circumstances (full admission of guilt, remorse, absence of prior convictions, family situation and the presence of three children), and sentenced him to restriction of liberty in the form of house arrest with permission to leave the house only to go to work or school.²¹⁴

There have also been cases of arrests of recruiters in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. For example, in 2024, Kazakhstani authorities arrested a Russian man wanted on an interstate arrest warrant for recruiting Tajik citizens and stateless persons.²¹⁵ In Uzbekistan, a woman was arrested for persuading citizens to fight on Russia's side against Ukraine, promising monthly earnings of between EUR 3,500 and EUR 6,000. She was detained while attempting to smuggle one of her recruits through the Navoi customs post in the Tashkent region.²¹⁶

203 ["The Osh Regional Court convicted a Kyrgyzstani for participating in the war in Ukraine"](#) [in Russian], 24KG, 26 June 2024.

204 ["A Kyrgyz who fought for the Wagner PMC, sentenced to five years in prison for mercenary activities, has been released and pardoned by the president"](#) [in Russian], *Mediazona*, 25 June 2024.

205 "In Pursuit of Money", *supra* note 202.

206 ["Five years for enlisting. Kazakhstan prosecutes hundreds of citizens for fighting in Ukraine"](#), *Mediazona*, 30 December 2025.

207 Chris Rickleton and Radio Ozodlik, ["Uzbeks and Kyrgyz who fought on Russia's side in Ukraine are receiving lenient sentences in their home countries. Under pressure from Moscow?"](#) [in Russian], *RFE/RL's Central Asia Service*, 3 February 2025.

208 ["Uzbekistan investigates citizens fighting for Russia in Ukraine"](#), Ukrainian World Congress, 8 May 2025.

209 ["Since 2022, 338 criminal cases of mercenarism have been opened in Uzbekistan. This number is growing annually"](#) [in Russian], *Gazeta.uz*, 18 November 2025.

210 Mercenarism is punishable by 5–10 years of restriction of freedom according to the [Criminal Code of Uzbekistan](#).

211 ["An Uzbek resident who served in the Wagner PMC was sentenced to four years of restricted freedom for mercenary activities"](#) [in Russian], *Current Time*, 12 September 2024.

212 ["An Uzbek man has been sentenced to four years of restricted freedom for participating in Russia's war against Ukraine"](#) [in Russian], *Gazeta.uz*, 3 June 2025.

213 ["Citizen of Uzbekistan fighting for Russia against Ukraine admits to killing over 10 Ukrainian soldiers"](#), *Gazeta.uz*, 7 January 2025.

214 *Ibid.*

215 ["A Russian citizen suspected of recruiting terrorists was detained in Kazakhstan"](#) [in Russian], *RBC*, 13 April 2024.

216 "In Navoi, a woman was convicted of attempting to profit from recruiting citizens", *supra* note 85.

In stark contrast, **Tajikistan** has not carried out a single known prosecution of citizens participating in the war or recruiters. In 2023, the Tajik authorities confirmed only 100 cases of Tajik citizens participating in the war.²¹⁷ In 2025, the President of Tajikistan held a telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin, during which he pledged support in “mitigating” the conflict in Ukraine, without clarifying what such “support” would entail.²¹⁸ According to migration expert Dilshod Abdurakhmon, there is “criminal indifference of the Tajik government to the fact that its citizens are becoming mercenaries in the Russian army”, which “may indicate a certain solidarity between the Tajik authorities and Russia and their support for Moscow’s policies”. In his view, to “preserve the existing regime, Dushanbe cooperates with Moscow and supports everything Russia does to Tajik citizens.”²¹⁹

Most measures have been reactive, with limited effort directed at addressing the underlying pull factors, such as the prevalence of Russian media in the region. As noted above, the Russian soft power entity the Russian House has been implicated in recruitment activities.²²⁰ This is not an isolated incident: in May 2024, a report by a Russian media *Sputnik Kazakhstan* came under investigation by Kazakh authorities following a complaint by a prominent Kazakh rights activist, pointing out that the outlet violated several Kazakh laws by portraying a Kazakh mercenary in a favourable light.²²¹ Yet despite such scrutiny, Russian state-linked media continue to operate freely and expand their reach across Central Asia, reinforcing narratives that encourage participation in Russia’s war effort.²²²

3.2 South Asia

He was beating me saying that you will be getting a passport in a few months... But I was joining my hands and saying: I don't want your passport, please. I am injured. Please, let me go.

– Nepali POW interviewed by Truth Hounds²²³

3.2.1 General overview of the extent of fighter flows

South Asian recruitment has formed part of Russia’s broader mobilisation strategy targeting economically vulnerable regions. Nepali recruitment began in May 2023, peaked in November 2023, and continued despite government bans. Similar patterns emerged across the region: recruitment operated through social media platforms, local agents, and minimally scrutinised Russian embassy visa processing. Prospective fighters were overwhelmingly motivated by economic opportunity rather than ideological commitment, while recruiters frequently misrepresented combat roles as non-combat positions or educational opportunities.

217 [“The ‘I Want to Live’ project: 931 Tajiks were recruited to fight in Ukraine”](#) [in Russian], *RFE/RL’s Central Asia Service*, 24 April 2025.

218 [“Telephone conversation with the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon”](#) [in Russian], *Kremlin.ru*, 10 August 2025.

219 [“Russia is recruiting Tajiks for the front: ‘The average person is uneducated and doesn’t understand that this isn’t their war’](#), [in Russian], *Current Time*, 25 April 2025.

220 [“Kyrgyzstan arrests employee of Russian House cultural center”](#), *supra* note 137.

221 [“Russian soft-power entities embroiled in controversy in Central Asia”](#), *Eurasianet*, 24 April 2025.

222 [Ernist Nurmatov, “A Tool Of Russian Propaganda? New Russia-Linked TV Station To Be Launched In Kyrgyzstan”](#), *RFE/RL*, 20 November 2025.

223 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

Despite considerable geographic distance, South Asia emerged as a major reservoir of foreign fighters for Russian forces in Ukraine. According to data provided by Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, as of early March 2026, at least 842 Nepalis and 662 Sri Lankans had been identified as having signed contracts with Russian forces, with 115 and 275 killed respectively.²²⁴ The Coordination Headquarters cautions that the actual scale of recruitment is likely several times greater – a reminder that the verified figures represent only those whose personal data Ukraine was able to obtain, not the full scope of Russia's recruitment campaign. Earlier media reports cited figures of up to 15,000 Nepalis, though these drew on anonymous sources and remain unverified.²²⁵ Accounts from POWs reveal how distance became functionally irrelevant: tourist visas processed within two weeks; flights via Dubai or Bahrain took a day; and at Moscow's Domodedovo airport, organised groups of 20–30 compatriots arrived in succession.²²⁶ One respondent noted meeting “around 14 Nepalis” on his Dubai-Moscow flight alone, suggesting organised group movements.²²⁷ This logistical ease, amplified by social media and personal connections, effectively collapsed geographic barriers. The scale and systematic nature of this recruitment prompted formal intervention at the international level: in July 2025, UN Special Rapporteurs submitted allegations to the Russian Federation regarding predatory recruitment of Sri Lankan nationals through false employment promises, documenting cases in which individuals were trafficked and forcibly conscripted into military service.²²⁸

India, while experiencing smaller-scale recruitment, illustrates different state response mechanisms: high-level political engagement secured Russian commitments to cease recruitment and release Indian nationals, an outcome not achieved elsewhere in the region. By December 2025, India's Ministry of External Affairs confirmed 202 Indian nationals had joined Russian forces since 2022, with 26 killed and seven missing; 119 were discharged following diplomatic intervention.²²⁹ Chinese nationals were also documented among foreign fighters: Ukrainian forces captured two Chinese combatants in Donetsk Oblast in April 2025, with Ukrainian intelligence identifying 155 Chinese nationals serving in Russian forces on Ukrainian territory.²³⁰

Bangladesh also experienced recruitment through trafficking networks operating under false employment promises; a detailed examination of the Bangladeshi case appears in the joint Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds report *“I Was Tricked into the War”*.²³¹ Based on 24 interviews conducted in Bangladesh and Ukraine, the report identifies at least 104 Bangladeshis recruited into the Russian army, with at least 34 killed.²³² In early March 2026, Ukrainian forces captured the first known Bangladeshi prisoner of war – a man from Gaibandha who claimed he had been deceived into signing a military contract.²³³ The Bangladeshi recruitment pattern reveals how Russia's recruitment apparatus co-opts existing labour migration infrastructure: brokers routed men through Saudi Arabia and the UAE on religious or tourist visas, repurposing legal migration channels as trafficking pipelines. Once in Russia, the transition from migrant worker to soldier was effected

224 Truth Hounds communication with the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 25 March 2026.

225 Sugam Pokharel, Matthew Chance, Mihir Melwani, and Nishant Khanal, “Russia has recruited as many as 15,000 Nepalis to fight its war. Many returned traumatized. Some never came back” (Pokharel et al., 2024), *CNN*, 11 February 2024; Samik Kharel, “Want to go home: Nepalis fighting for Russia in Ukraine describe horrors” (Kharel, 2024), *Al Jazeera*, 10 February 2024; Olivia Sapwood, “Sri Lanka launches a search for its citizens in Russia who are involved in the war”, *Military*, 18 May 2024.

226 Interviews with NI-13 and NI-14 conducted by TH.

227 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

228 UN Special Rapporteurs, *Communication to the Russian Federation on predatory recruitment of three Sri Lankan nationals*, 22 July 2025, Ref. AL RUS 11/2025.

229 Tania Myronyshena, “India confirms over 200 citizens recruited by Russia to fight in war against Ukraine”, *Kyiv Independent*, 18 December 2024.

230 Kateryna Denisova, Oleksiy Sorokin, “Over 160 Chinese nationals fight for Russia in Ukraine, obtained documents show”, *Kyiv Independent*, 9 April 2025.

231 Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds, *“I Was Tricked into the War: The Risk of Human Trafficking and Coerced Recruitment of Bangladeshi Men into Russia's War in Ukraine”* (“I Was Tricked into the War”), March 2026.

232 Figures based on data published by the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, as of February 2026, cited in “I Was Tricked into the War”, *supra* note 231.

233 Mohammad Jamil Khan, “Tricked into War: Bangladeshi POW in Ukraine Wants to Return Home”, *The Daily Star*, 8 March 2026.

through contracts signed in Russian without comprehension, followed by passport confiscation and coercion. The report concludes that these recruitment practices may constitute human trafficking under international law.²³⁴

The magnitude of recruitment was facilitated by parallel operating channels that reached different demographics simultaneously. At the Avangard Educational and Methodological Centre (Avangard) in Moscow,²³⁵ crowds of 150–200 people arrived daily to sign contracts. One Nepali interviewee noted that Nepalis formed the largest visible nationality, estimating 100–150 compatriots present alongside approximately 25 Cubans and 20–25 Africans.²³⁶ Another interviewee arrived with 60–70 people by bus, later grouped with 29 individuals (24 Nepalis, 5 Indians) for transfer to Rostov.²³⁷ A Sri Lankan interviewee's battalion included eight Sri Lankans within a larger mixed unit.²³⁸

3.2.2 Fighter motivations (relative socio-economic conditions and political trends)

Recruitment from Nepal and Sri Lanka occurred within contexts of structural economic vulnerability in both countries. Nepal, where 40% of the population lives below the poverty line and youth unemployment reaches 20%, has developed a profound dependency on labour migration: remittances constituted approximately 27% of GDP in 2023, with an estimated 3.5 million Nepalis working abroad.²³⁹ The country experienced intensified economic pressure during 2023–24.²⁴⁰ Traditional migration routes to the Gulf became increasingly difficult, while the contraction of Gurkha recruitment opportunities following India's Agnipath reforms²⁴¹ (limiting service to four-year contracts rather than long-term careers) further narrowed economic options.²⁴² Sri Lanka, meanwhile, faced its worst economic crisis since its independence in 1948. In 2022, the country experienced peak inflation of 54.6% and food inflation of 81%, defaulted on approximately EUR 47 billion in sovereign debt, and recorded an unprecedented outflow of over 311,000 workers seeking employment abroad.²⁴³ The crisis affected various groups: former military personnel receiving modest pensions found basic survival increasingly difficult, while others faced unemployment or business collapse.

The four cases documented in this report through interviews reveal individuals who encountered Russia's recruitment offer after exhausting conventional economic strategies. Their trajectories exemplify the compounding effect of structural poverty and individual economic shocks, including failed migration attempts, debt accumulation, and systematically narrowed opportunities. One Nepali interviewee described a cascade of setbacks: six years in Malaysia where earnings went entirely to loan interest payments, seven months in Dubai where "the work was not good", return to Nepal during the COVID-19 pandemic, a truck-driving accident, and divorce. Following his divorce, he faced social exclusion: "People don't support you when you don't have a wife, don't trust you with money." He sought driving work but lacked local connections. With a family of nine dependent on farming income, children requiring support, and accumulated debts, he explained: "I needed a job

234 Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds, "I Was Tricked into the War", *supra* note 231.

235 The Avangard Educational and Methodological Centre is a military-patriotic education facility located in Patriot Park, Odintsovo District, Moscow Oblast. Established in 2015 by the governments of Moscow and Moscow Oblast with Ministry of Defence support, the centre provides basic military training for Russian youth. It accommodates up to 600 trainees simultaneously and operates 10 specialised training classrooms covering disciplines including tactical, medical, and weapons training. Avangard was mentioned by respondents of multiple nationalities more frequently than any other facility.

236 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

237 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

238 Interview with Sa-5 conducted by TH.

239 International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM), "[IFAD, IOM Celebrate Vital Role of Remittances in Nepal's Development](#)", 11 June 2024; World Bank, "[Personal remittances, received \(% of GDP\) – Nepal, 1993-2024](#)".

240 World Bank, "[Nepal, 2025](#)"; Pokharel et al., 2024, *supra* note 225.

241 India's Agnipath scheme, introduced in 2022, restructured military recruitment by replacing permanent service with four-year contractual positions. This reform significantly reduced long-term employment opportunities for Nepali Gurkhas, who have historically served in Indian Army regiments under bilateral agreements dating back to 1947.

242 Naresh Gyawali, "[In the Trenches](#)", *The Caravan*, 30 June 2023.

243 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "[Sri Lanka: UN experts sound alarm on economic crisis](#)", 20 July 2022; Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, "[Sri Lanka's Economic Recovery in 2025](#)", 13 November 2025.

because I had kids, family, brother, father, mother... All my little money was spent in divorce, taken by my wife. And I still had my children, and I wanted to empower them.”²⁴⁴

Another Nepali interviewee who had worked as a road construction contractor recounted how the COVID-19 pandemic destroyed his business, while bank debts mounted. Living in a household of nine people – his father, mother, brothers, wife, and child – entirely reliant on limited agricultural income, he described his situation simply: “My family’s economic condition is terrible, so I thought this would be a good breakthrough... Frankly speaking, I was here for the money.”²⁴⁵

A middle-aged Sri Lankan interviewee who served 22 years in his country’s navy received a monthly pension of EUR 150. The 2022 economic crisis made this insufficient for survival. He explained his decision in pragmatic terms: “I worked in the navy, naturally I was interested in what’s happening in the world, I knew about the war with Ukraine. But my main goal was to find work.”²⁴⁶ A younger Sri Lankan interviewee had worked two years as a cook for Burger King in Moscow, initially with valid documents, then for an additional year without a valid visa. When his employer refused to extend documentation and deportation loomed, he faced a stark choice. The promise of Russian citizenship through military service appeared as the only path to remain legally.²⁴⁷

The research conducted for this report has revealed numerous similar cases of South Asian nationals already living in Russia at the time of the full-scale invasion who, faced with financial and immigration difficulties, opted to join Russia’s Armed Forces. Recruitment also extended to impoverished rural communities where agents targeted mountain villages with populations earning around 190 EUR monthly on seasonal Indian farms and dependent on subsistence agriculture and high-interest loans.²⁴⁸ Economic vulnerability could also intersect with legal precarity through other pathways: in an interview with *The Wire*, an Indian prisoner of war described traveling to Russia in December 2023 on a student visa, planning to study Russian before pursuing further education; when his financial transfers stopped working and he turned to Telegram to find employment, he was arrested on narcotics charges, receiving a seven-year sentence, and in June 2025 was offered military service as an alternative to imprisonment.²⁴⁹

In all cases, interviewees converged at a similar point: conventional livelihood strategies had failed, debts accumulated, and Russia’s offer of approximately EUR 2,000–3,000 per month emerged as the remaining economic option. Their trajectories demonstrate how endemic poverty becomes an acute crisis – through divorce, business failure, expired documentation – reducing the field of possible action to a single option. All four respondents possessed knowledge of the war before departure, though the depth of their awareness varied. One Nepali interviewee had followed the conflict through television and mobile news coverage.²⁵⁰ Another described his knowledge as “in general terms”.²⁵¹

Yet this awareness did not shape decisions, as economic necessity outweighed risk considerations. In each case, the war was known, but was assigned less weight than the certainty of continued economic failure under current conditions.

In the documented cases, decisions to join Russia’s military were mediated through personal relationships rather than formal recruitment channels or independent risk assessment. One Nepali interviewee relied on his “younger brother”, a student living in Moscow, who assured him: “I will

244 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

245 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

246 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

247 Interview with Sa-5 conducted by TH.

248 Kravtsova, 2024, *supra* note 63.

249 Luv Puri, “From Gujarat to Kyiv Camp: Indian Forced to Fight for Russia Appeals to PM Modi For Help”, *The Wire*, 2 December 2025.

250 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

251 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

support you, you can come here, you're in a very tough situation, whatever you need, I can support."²⁵² Later, in Moscow, he met two Indians who explained the recruitment process. He trusted their information because "two [or] three of their friends had already joined the army," giving them insider knowledge.

Another Nepali interviewee learned about opportunities from a fellow villager who had served in Russia's army but "was lucky": he had worked in rear positions, completed his contract, and returned safely to Nepal. His example suggested that a non-combat role was attainable: "I heard from him... it was my decision to join the Russian army based on that."²⁵³ The middle-aged Sri Lankan interviewee discovered the possibility through a former naval colleague with whom he had served for 22 years: "He's a very close friend. I trusted the information he conveyed, so I decided to come because I thought my friend wouldn't let me down."²⁵⁴

In each instance, personal connections legitimised the decision. Economic information about salaries and conditions gained credibility through personally trusted sources. These relationships – the fellow villager who returned safely, the student "brother" living near a military base, the long-time naval colleague already in Russia – created frameworks for understanding risk. What might have seemed implausible through formal channels became conceivable through personal assurance. Trust, rather than verification, mediated engagement with recruitment information.

3.2.3 Recruitment processes

Recruitment from South Asia operated through Russia's tourist visa system, with embassies issuing visas following minimal inquiry. Interview accounts indicate that local intermediaries played roles in recruitment processes. While the scale and systematisation of these flows raise questions about potential coordination, definitive evidence of institutional involvement remains unavailable. At Kathmandu's Russian embassy, crowds of 150–200 people gathered daily, with distinct queues: 25–30 students seeking study visas, and 100–150 men pursuing military service.²⁵⁵ One Nepali interviewee described the scene: "It was like a marriage going on there or something like that... Everybody was opting for a visit visa, and they wanted to go into the army."²⁵⁶

Inside the embassy, a Nepali intermediary named Katari – approximately 55 years old, having lived in Russia for years – managed the process, collecting NPR 8,600 (Nepalese rupees, EUR 56), per visa application. Embassy staff conducted minimal inquiry. When asked about the purpose of his travel, one interviewee simply stated he wanted work and had been abroad before; no further questions followed. His visa arrived within two weeks.²⁵⁷ Another Nepali interviewee recalled even less scrutiny: "There was not much inquiry. They also did not ask much. I also did not say much and I just got the visa," which arrived within one month.²⁵⁸

The process in Sri Lanka was similar. A local intermediary in Sri Lanka collected documents via WhatsApp, took passports to the Russian embassy, and returned them with visas within one week. The entire package (visa processing and flight arrangements) cost LKR 150,000 (Sri Lankan rupees, EUR 430). One interviewee noted: "Everything I did through my friend, because I don't have direct contact with who was connecting with the embassy."²⁵⁹

These tourist visas, officially valid for 30 days, functioned as recruitment permits. Embassy officials occasionally warned applicants. One Nepali recalled being told: "There's a big war going in Russia.

252 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

253 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

254 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

255 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

256 Ibid.

257 Ibid.

258 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

259 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

Did you see it on TV? Did you see it on your mobile?” When he confirmed awareness, the official warned: “Please don’t get involved in that war.” The visa was issued following this advisory warning.²⁶⁰

Between visa application and arrival in Moscow, a layered system of commercial intermediaries managed logistics and expectations. Agents operated openly near Russian embassies, charging EUR 7,000–7,800 for complete packages including visa facilitation, flight booking, and Moscow reception arrangements. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok and YouTube, amplified their reach: one Nepali received an agent’s contact “within minutes” of commenting on a recruitment video. Personal networks created parallel channels: individuals serving in Russia contacted friends and relatives, establishing chain recruitment patterns.²⁶¹ The system’s efficiency was remarkable: three out of four interviewees completed the process from visa application to Moscow arrival within 2–4 weeks.²⁶²

For those unable to afford agents’ fees, or who preferred direct arrangements, personal connections offered alternative pathways. One Nepali interviewee borrowed NPR 160,000 (EUR 1,000) from friends for his flight and paid an additional NPR 40,000 (EUR 260) to bypass Nepal’s travel restrictions through a “drunk” intermediary from Gurme who had lived for eight years in Russia and frequented the embassy. This intermediary arranged airport clearance: “Go to the airport, go to this number...’... He cleared the boarding.”²⁶³ Another Nepali interviewee arranged his travel independently after a student friend in Moscow provided the recruitment centre’s location.²⁶⁴

Arrangements in Sri Lanka followed comparable patterns. After visas were issued, intermediaries organised flight bookings. Groups travelled via Gulf hubs – Dubai, Abu Dhabi, or Bahrain – with layovers ranging from several hours to a full day. One Sri Lankan interviewee arrived with two compatriots to find 20 others already waiting in Moscow, having arrived the previous day. A Russian citizen with a prepared list met each group.²⁶⁵

In Moscow, Russian citizens contracted by intermediaries performed airport reception. One Nepali interviewee paid EUR 430 (arranged while he was still in Nepal) for a Russian man to meet him at Domodedovo airport, navigate immigration, and transport him to a hotel. These facilitators typically held groups at hotels for one to three days before delivering them to recruitment centres, where processing occurred rapidly and in large numbers. Avangard functioned as the initial processing hub: one group arrived by bus with 60–70 people and was later grouped with 29 individuals (24 Nepalis and 5 Indians) for transfer to Rostov.²⁶⁶

Processing occurred in stages across multiple locations. One Sri Lankan interviewee travelled by bus from Moscow to Lipetsk, where over three days he underwent blood tests, signed contracts, and opened a bank account before being moved to military training facilities.²⁶⁷ In cases documented by TH, Nepali recruits typically had brief stays at Avangard (6–11 days) for preliminary processing and medical screening, followed by contract signing at Yablochkovo recruitment centre, then transfer to Rostov for military training.²⁶⁸ Recruits signed contracts without fully understanding the terms, with varying information gaps. One Nepali clearly understood he was “here for the money” and that military service involved combat risk.²⁶⁹ In most cases, language barriers were substantial. Three out of four respondents did not speak Russian. When asked if he knew what he had signed,

260 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

261 Kharel, 2024, *supra* note 225.

262 Interviews with NI-13, NI-14 and Sa-1 conducted by TH.

263 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

264 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

265 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

266 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

267 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

268 Interviews with NI-13 and NI-14 conducted by TH.

269 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

one Nepali interviewee answered: “Obviously no.”²⁷⁰ A Sri Lankan interviewee received a one-page summary in Sinhala,²⁷¹ listing salary and contract duration, while the full Russian contract remained incomprehensible: “I understood nothing.” The existence of pre-prepared Sinhala materials – requiring translation, printing, and distribution to processing facilities – suggests recruitment infrastructure was configured to accommodate Sinhala-speaking recruits specifically.

Claims about combat deployment varied. According to open sources and corroborated by TH’s interviewees, foreign recruits were often told by intermediaries and other recruits that they would not be sent to front lines.²⁷² In practice, such guarantees proved inaccurate for both Nepalis and Sri Lankans, who found themselves in forward positions.²⁷³ Whether this reflected misunderstanding or deliberate misrepresentation cannot be determined. Individual fighters have even admitted to having shot at and killed Ukrainians during active combat, with interview subjects reporting deployment to assault operations within weeks of recruitment.²⁷⁴

Financial terms proved more reliable. One Sri Lankan interviewee received the promised RUB 195,000 after one month, followed by two additional salary payments before capture.²⁷⁵ Others saw promised funds appear in bank accounts but could not access them. For example, one Nepali interviewee’s card showed RUB 150,000, but he had no means to withdraw money while in Rostov.²⁷⁶ Language barriers and rushed procedures left other critical details unclear: where recruits would be deployed, whether they would serve on front lines, and how they could access promised payments.

3.2.4 State involvement or response

Nepal banned citizens from traveling to Russia or Ukraine for employment in January 2024, following domestic pressure from affected families. Diplomatic notes were sent to Moscow requesting cessation of recruitment and repatriation of nationals.²⁷⁷ Foreign Minister NP Saud met repeatedly with Russian Ambassador Alexei Novikov, and in September 2025, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli raised the issue directly with President Putin at the SCO Summit in Tianjin.²⁷⁸ Russia agreed to provide compensation to families of killed fighters (approximately EUR 60,000 per deceased), with payments beginning by mid-2024.²⁷⁹

Nepali police also took enforcement action. In a raid in early 2024, 18 people were arrested and dozens of passports were confiscated from hotels where recruiters operated. In one documented network, 12 intermediaries moved approximately 200 men to Russia, collecting EUR 7,800 from each.²⁸⁰ Despite arrests, recruitment continued through modified routes, via India or the United Arab Emirates rather than direct Nepal-Russia flights.²⁸¹ At Kathmandu’s Russian embassy, a Nepali intermediary who had lived in Russia for years helped process visa applications despite warnings. While Nepal demonstrated political will through arrests, diplomatic engagement, and travel restrictions, available evidence suggests these measures slowed but did not stop recruitment.²⁸²

270 Ibid.

271 Sinhala, the native language of Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese majority (approximately 75% of the population), is one of the country’s two official languages alongside Tamil.

272 Kirichenko, “Putin seeks more foreign fighters”, *supra* note 26.

273 Interviews with Sa-5 and Sa-1 conducted by TH.

274 Kravtsova, 2024, *supra* note 63.

275 Interview with Sa-1 conducted by TH.

276 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

277 “Nepal Suspends Work Permits for Russia and Ukraine Amid Soldiers’ Deaths – Reuters”, *The Moscow Times*, 5 January 2024.

278 “Nepal Raises Issue of Its Citizens in Russian Army with Putin, Fails to Reach Concrete Agreement”, *ANI News*, 4 September 2025.

279 “Russia to Compensate Nepali War Dead Via Moscow Embassy”, *Kathmandu Post*, 14 February 2024.

280 Pokharel et al., 2024, *supra* note 225.

281 Kamal Dev Bhattarai, “Nepal’s youth caught in the crossfire”, *IPS*, 30 April 2024.

282 Kottasová and Butenko, 2025, *supra* note 62.



During a demonstration near the Russian Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal in February 2024, family members of Nepali fighters demanded the Russian authorities to halt the recruitment of Nepali citizens into the Russian Armed Forces. © Subaas Shrestha / NurPhoto / NurPhoto via AFP

Sri Lanka opened an investigation in May 2024 after receiving 288 complaints from families, leading to seven arrests including a retired major general. In June 2024, Foreign Minister Ali Sabry secured an agreement with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that “no further recruitment from Sri Lanka will be done”.²⁸³ Sri Lankan officials subsequently reported that Russia had stopped recruitment and had agreed to compensation of RUB 13 million (EUR 125,000) per deceased fighter, though the effectiveness of these commitments remained unclear.

Sri Lanka also sought repatriation of nationals already serving, sending a delegation to Russia in June 2024 to negotiate their release.²⁸⁴ However, approximately 96% of 455 identified Sri Lankan fighters had applied for Russian citizenship, creating legal ambiguity about their status and Moscow’s obligations regarding their release.²⁸⁵ Russian authorities indicated they would consider Sri Lanka’s request alongside those from other countries with nationals in Russian service, citing approximately 10,000 foreign fighters total.²⁸⁶ By January 2025, Sri Lanka reported 59 deaths among its nationals serving in the Russian army.²⁸⁷

India achieved substantively different outcomes through direct high-level engagement. Following Prime Minister Modi’s July 2024 meeting with Putin and sustained diplomatic pressure, combined with trafficking network arrests (19 persons arrested in March 2024), Russia formally ceased recruitment and discharged Indian nationals from military service.²⁸⁸ In August 2024, India secured the release of 45 citizens. However, this diplomatic success proved short-lived: by October 2025, India confirmed that Russia had resumed recruiting Indian nationals, with the first documented capture occurring at the front lines.²⁸⁹ According to Indian press reports, approximately seven

283 “Foreign Minister Sabry meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov”, Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism, 11 June 2024.

284 “Sri Lanka Seeks Release of Ex-Soldiers in Russia and Ukraine”, *The Moscow Times*, 30 May 2024.

285 “Colombo Struggles to Repatriate Hundreds of Sri Lankans Fighting Russia’s War”, *Arab News*, 24 July 2024.

286 Kelum Bandara, “Sri Lankan Soldiers Seek Russian Citizenship”, *Daily Mirror (Sri Lanka)*, 2 July 2024.

287 Rathindra Kuruwita, “The Russia-Ukraine War Is Both Challenge and Opportunity for Sri Lanka”, *The Diplomat*, 13 February 2025.

288 YP Rajesh, “Modi to focus on trade imbalance, Indian soldiers in talks with Putin”, *Reuters*, 5 July 2024.

289 Yuri Zoria, “India rescues 45 citizens lured into Russian army, 50 more await discharge”, *Euromedian Press*, 14 September 2024.

Indian citizens underwent training in August 2025, with at least eight subsequently going missing in September, and two families received the bodies of their sons in October.²⁹⁰

The Indian case illustrates both the possibilities and limits of diplomatic intervention. India's geopolitical weight provided leverage that Nepal and Sri Lanka, whose strategic importance to Russia differs significantly, lacked. While both Nepal and Sri Lanka pursued sustained diplomatic efforts, formal requests, high-level meetings, compensation negotiations, neither secured comparable commitments to cessation or repatriation.

3.3 South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA)

The reason was the difficult life in Yemen.

– Yemeni POW interviewed by Truth Hounds²⁹¹

3.3.1 General overview of the extent of fighter flows

Several cases of foreign fighters joining Russia's military ranks from the SWANA region have been recorded, both from open sources and four TH interviews with POWs. Countries include Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, representing a fairly large number of countries affected for a single region.

Broader contextual ties between Russia and SWANA countries are significant: Moscow is one of the largest arms suppliers²⁹² to the region and continues to exploit economic and political opportunities to mitigate the impact of sanctions and losses stemming from its confrontation with the West,²⁹³ with strategies and outcomes varying across different countries.

Recruitment in the region appears to have peaked shortly after the start of the full-scale invasion, although timing and scale differed from country to country. In addition to their geographical, cultural, and religious similarities, a crucial shared factor across these states in terms of recruitment is instability, whether resulting from armed conflict, civil war, economic hardship, or political turmoil. Such conditions are conducive to emigration to Russia in pursuit of economic or academic opportunities, making migrants particularly vulnerable, as illustrated by several cases of captured fighters from the region.

A Yemeni interviewee explained that his main motivations to leave to work in Russia were linked to the dire economic situation and the fact that “[for] the last 15 years there has been constant war in Yemen”.²⁹⁴ He also mentioned the need to provide for his family, including eleven brothers, a wife and four children.

Exact data on the number of fighters per country are limited, but available reports suggest that at least 200 Yemenis were recruited between July and November 2025.²⁹⁵ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that approximately 2,000 Syrians were engaged in fighting against Ukraine,

290 Kusum Arora, “Tricked Into Joining Russian Army: Seven Indians Appeal to MEA to Save Their Lives”, *The Wire*, 10 September 2025; Sushil Manav, “Body of Haryana youth brought back, Russian commander told kin he died in Ukrainian strike”, *The Print*, 29 October 2025.

291 Interview with Yn-7 conducted by TH.

292 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “Trends in international arms transfers, 2024”, SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2025.

293 Nikolay Kozhanov, “Russia is weakened, but its influence in the Middle East should not be underestimated”, Chatham House, 11 December 2025.

294 Interview with Yn-7 conducted by TH.

295 Charles Clover, Andrew England and Christopher Miller, “Russia recruits Yemeni mercenaries to fight in Ukraine”, *Financial Times*, 23 November 2024.

from September 2022 to September 2024.²⁹⁶ In April 2022, only three months after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Russia claimed it had recruited 16,000 recruits from the Middle East.²⁹⁷ In December 2024, 22 Algerian fighters were identified in the Russian forces,²⁹⁸ with 25 reported killed since the outbreak of the war, as of November 2025.²⁹⁹

The recruitment of individuals from countries that have experienced war makes it possible to mobilise men who often possess prior military experience and are vulnerable due to the situation in their country, making them more inclined to accept. The presence of the Wagner Group in certain countries of the region contributed to the recruitment of local fighters. A striking example is Afghanistan, where military personnel, intelligence officers and special forces, some of whom had received US military training and later fled to Iran, were recruited by the Russian embassy in Iran, working with the Wagner Group and Iranian intelligence.³⁰⁰ In October 2022, it was estimated that there were 3,000 Afghans fighting among the Russian troops in Ukraine.³⁰¹ In March 2022, around 1,300 fighters from the Wagner Group were redeployed from Libya to Ukraine.³⁰² Direct or indirect collaboration with the Wagner Group is an important distinguishing characteristic, since fighters recruited through Wagner, rather than being directly incorporated in the Russian army, may have different legal status under international law.

3.3.2 Fighter motivations (relative socio-economic conditions and political trends)

When asked about his decision to travel to Russia for work, before being sent to fight against his will, a 28-year-old Yemeni interviewee replied, “The reason was the difficult life in Yemen.”³⁰³

Given the precariousness of their situations, particularly in financial terms, one of the main motivations of foreign recruits from the SWANA region is the salary offered in exchange for joining the army, with amounts varying from country to country. Amounts of up to EUR 5,200 were reportedly offered to Egyptians.³⁰⁴ Syrians were reportedly offered a salary of EUR 6,000 for frontline positions³⁰⁵ (although it is important to note that these reports concern the period of early 2022 and most probably describe conditions of joining the so-called PMCs, rather than the Russian Army). Iraqis reportedly received EUR 2,400, in addition to an initial payment of EUR 17,000 for signing the contract,³⁰⁶ and amounts of EUR 1,300 were mentioned in the recruitment of Afghans.³⁰⁷ These amounts represent a staggering sum compared to the salaries these individuals could have hoped to earn in their countries of origin or even in precarious jobs once they had emigrated to Russia.

As one Egyptian fighter recalled: “The salary promised by the trafficker is something you could never hope for in Egypt, even working for a whole year.”³⁰⁸

296 The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), “Recruited by Russia: The number of Syrian mercenaries killed in Ukraine jumps to ten” (“SOHR, Recruited by Russia, 2024”), 16 September 2024.

297 “\$7,000 for a Frontline Fight: How Russia is Recruiting Syrian Mercenaries for the War in Ukraine: A BBC Investigation” (“\$7,000 for a Frontline Fight”) [in Russian], *BBC News*, 1 April 2022.

298 Sofïa Syngaïvska, “Tragic Story of Algerian Mercenary: Killed Fighting for Russia in Zaporizhzhia Region Because of the Deceptive Recruitment Tactics” (“Syngaïvska, 2024”), *Defense Express*, 18 December 2024.

299 “Egyptian students in Russia pressured to join army or leave” (“Egyptian students in Russia pressured”), *France 24*, 21 November 2025.

300 Michael Scollon, “U.S.-Trained Afghan fighters Angry Over Their Plight Are Ready To Join Russia’s War Against Ukraine”, *RFE/RL*, 27 December 2022; “Russia is recruiting fighters for the war from Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq”, *Odessa Journal*, 5 October 2025.

301 Olivia Sapwood, “Russia is recruiting mercenaries from among the former servicemen of Afghanistan”, *Militarnyi*, 28 October 2022.

302 Mohammad Erteima, “1,300 Wagner mercenaries sent from Libya to help Russian forces in Ukraine”, *Anadolu Agency*, 26 March 2022.

303 Interview with Yn-7 conducted by TH.

304 “Egyptian students in Russia pressured”, *supra* note 299.

305 “\$7,000 for a Frontline Fight”, *supra* note 297.

306 “Social media tell stories of young Iraqis recruited to fight Russia’s war in Ukraine” (“Social media tell stories of young Iraqis”), *The Arab Weekly*, 5 November 2025.

307 “Russia recruiting US-trained Afghan commandos for Ukraine: Report”, *Al Jazeera*, 1 November 2022.

308 Jamal Boukhari, “From students to fighters : how Russia sends Egyptians to the Ukrainian front line” (“Boukhari, 2025”), *Equal Times*, 27 May 2025.

Foreign students from the SWANA region in Russia are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, as many come from socially, economically, or politically precarious contexts at home. TH interviewed a Moroccan student who was coerced into joining the army before being captured.³⁰⁹ He had travelled to Russia to study medicine, believing it would offer valuable academic and professional opportunities for his future.

This underlying vulnerability is often compounded by financial hardship and administrative insecurity in Russia, making enlistment appear as a viable solution. Moreover, following the outbreak of the war against Ukraine, rising living costs in Russia and the disruption or suspension of international money transfers made it increasingly difficult for many students to finance their education.³¹⁰ In 2023, Russia estimated that around 32,000 students from the Middle East were living in the country, nearly half of whom were Egyptian.³¹¹ Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the Russian army has sought to recruit Egyptian students and workers by offering high salaries and Russian citizenship, with reports also indicating that Egyptian prisoners in Russia have been blackmailed into fighting under threat of expulsion.³¹² The report shows that this practice applies to foreign students and migrant workers from other countries of the Global South.

Beyond financial incentives, recruits from the SWANA region were also motivated by the prospect of obtaining Russian citizenship and, in some cases, the potential opportunity to later emigrate from Russia to Europe.³¹³ While motivations vary by country, they are generally shaped by political repression, conflict, and insecurity, which can make military enlistment appear as a means of survival or stability for some migrants.

3.3.3 Recruitment processes

Recruitment processes are often deceptive or coercive, or deliberately encourage and target particularly vulnerable populations, both in the SWANA region and on Russian territory.

An illustrative example of deceptive recruitment is the case of the Yemeni POW interviewed by TH.³¹⁴ He was sent with a group of nine other Yemenis, first transiting through Ethiopia and then to Russia, after accepting an initial offer to work on a farm. All expenses, including tickets, documents fees and accommodation, were paid for by a so-called agriculture company. He only realised the deception on the day following his arrival in Russia, when he was transferred directly from the airport to a military base in Mordovia, without being warned or given the option to retract. He said that all the Yemenis' passports were confiscated and they signed contracts out of "desperation" and fear, as "if they didn't sign, they had no idea what would happen next".³¹⁵

Other deceptive recruitment practices have been documented. For example, under a recruitment scheme to enlist Syrians involving tourist companies,³¹⁶ economically vulnerable men are initially offered employment as security guards in Russia's oil-producing regions and are subsequently enticed by higher salaries to join the military. The case of Georges Nasser, an Egyptian national, provides another example. Along with around a dozen young men from his village, he was sent to Russia by an intermediary with the promise of employment in the construction sector for a monthly

309 Interview with Mo-9 conducted by TH.

310 Rehab Ismail, "How the Russian Federation recruits foreigners for war. The story of an Egyptian who lost his citizenship because of it" (Ismail, 2025) [in Ukrainian], *BBC News*, 10 May 2025.

311 "Egyptian students in Russia pressured", *supra* note 299.

312 *Ibid.*

313 "Iraqi man convicted for trafficking people to fight for Russia in Ukraine" ("Iraqi man convicted for trafficking"), *Al Jazeera*, 29 September 2025; SOHR, *Recruited by Russia, 2024*, *supra* note 296; "Social media tell stories of young Iraqis", *supra* note 306; "Russia Rejects Recruitment of Former Afghan fighters for Ukraine War", *Afghanistan International*, 2 November 2022.

314 Interview with Yn-7 conducted by TH.

315 Interview with Yn-7 conducted by TH.

316 Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, *Recruitment of fighters from Syria*, *Telegram*, 17 September 2024.

salary of EUR 2,600.³¹⁷ Upon arriving in Moscow in February 2025, after paying more than EUR 1,700 in travel expenses, they were instead offered the option of joining the army.

Several cases of direct recruitment of migrants in Russia showed coercive practices, taking place in police stations or places of detention, often involving threats of legal reprisals such as imprisonment, or offering no real choice at all.

The young Moroccan POW interviewed by TH, in his early twenties, shed light on the violent nature of recruitment practices to the Russian armed forces.³¹⁸ Having moved to Russia to study medicine, he lived, like many students, in a dormitory, where he was officially registered. Due to what he described as deplorable living conditions, he decided to rent a private apartment. During a police check, officers noticed that his registered address no longer matched his actual place of residence, leading to his arrest. He reported being subjected to physical violence by the police at the police station, where he was pressured to sign a military contract. After refusing, he was told: “If you don’t sign it here, you will sign it 100% in prison.”³¹⁹ Under duress, he ultimately signed the contract and was sent to the front. There, he recounted that a gun was once pointed at him for allegedly lacking enthusiasm. He also stated that he was beaten by Russian fighters after refusing to provide them with morphine, which they believed he was obliged to do as a medical student.

Another interview conducted by TH with a POW from the SWANA region, who requested that his country of origin remain anonymous, illustrates a similar trajectory.³²⁰ After migrating to Russia on a work visa, he moved from one precarious job to another. His financial situation was particularly difficult due to unstable employment, low income both in Russia and in his country of origin, and significant personal expenses, notably the cost of his sister’s wedding back in his home country. He told TH that he sent all his salary to his father back home and was left with nothing. Then, he encountered serious problems related to his migration status, as his work visa was not renewed. He was subsequently arrested by the police on his way to work and detained, first for two weeks, then for an additional three months, while also being fined. He said that he was then supposed to go back to his hometown, having already paid for a flight ticket, but two days before his departure, he was violently detained again, beaten and transferred to another facility. Later, in a detention centre for foreign nationals, he was informed about the possibility of joining the army by another SWANA inmate, who warned him not to go. However, facing mounting legal and economic pressure he ultimately saw enlistment in the Russian army as a means of escaping an increasingly untenable situation.

A case involving a young Egyptian student highlights both the vulnerability of migrants in precarious situations and the abuses perpetrated by Russian authorities. The student was arrested by the police, charged with drug possession, and sentenced to seven years in prison.³²¹ He was then lured into the army before being captured as a POW.

In some countries, such as Algeria, there have been reports of recruitment by Russian military contingents directly on local soil, luring citizens with promises of citizenship and high salaries.³²² Recruitment has also been facilitated through advertisements on social media platforms, a phenomenon reported notably in Syria³²³ and Iraq³²⁴. In Iraq, social media influencers have actively relayed enlistment offers from the Russian army, using slogans such as “Give me an Iraqi soldier

317 Boukhari, 2025, *supra* note 308.

318 Interview with Mo-9 conducted by TH.

319 Interview with Mo-9 conducted by TH.

320 Interview with Et-6 conducted by TH.

321 Ismail, 2025, *supra* note 310.

322 Syngaiwska, 2024, *supra* note 298.

323 “\$7,000 for a Frontline Fight”, *supra* note 297.

324 “Social media tell stories of young Iraqis”, *supra* note 306.

and a Russian weapon, and we will liberate the world from Western colonialism.”³²⁵ These messages, disseminated in particular on TikTok and Telegram, target a younger audience by instrumentalising the country’s traumatic past. Administrators of these channels also offer assistance to potential Arab recruits from Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and beyond. Recruiters even provide lists of essential military terminology to learn in Russian, including phrases such as “ammunition is depleted,” “mission accomplished,” “we have casualties,” and “suicide drone attack.”³²⁶ Some channels claim to assist Iraqi recruits with transferring money back home, sending visa invitations, and later covering travel costs. On his Telegram channel, Munaser, an Iraqi national who shares his experience serving in the Russian army on TikTok and Telegram, offers visa invitations to individuals seeking to enlist, reportedly costing up to EUR 800, most of which he says goes to travel agencies.³²⁷ While Munaser claims he does not personally charge recruits for his services, he warns that other “brokers” operating on social media exploit young Iraqis by taking a percentage of their army enlistment fees.

One Telegram channel in particular has been identified as playing a significant role in recruitment efforts: *Sadiq Rossia* (“Friend of Russia”).³²⁸ It targets Arabic-speaking audiences in an effort to recruit them into the Russian armed forces, relying on financial incentives. With over 3,700 subscribers, the channel claims to support the Russian army in the context of the “special military operation” and advertises benefits such as signing bonuses ranging from EUR 7,000 to EUR 26,000, paid leave after six months of service, fast-tracked Russian citizenship, and placement in elite brigades.³²⁹ The recruitment effort is reinforced by videos and photographs of individuals from Morocco, Egypt, and other Arab countries, presented as having enlisted to “fight Nazism”.

In addition to country-specific recruitment efforts and those conducted on Russian territory, transnational networks seem to have been established as a result of joint efforts by Russia and Iran.³³⁰ These networks rely on illegal migration and smuggling routes to transfer recruits, following four main corridors: (1) Middle East–Iran–Armenia–Georgia–Russia; (2) Middle East–Iran–Azerbaijan–Russia; (3) Middle East–Iran–Central Asia–Russia; and (4) Afghanistan–Central Asia–Russia. One illustrative case involves an Iraqi national, Amir Wisam Jawad, who was detained while attempting to illegally cross the territory of one of these transit countries after being recruited by the Russian Ministry of Defence. Similarly, several former Afghan security officials have revealed that Iran has been recruiting former Afghan fighters and commandos both in Iran and Afghanistan.³³¹

Thus, recruitment may take place through social media or via local networks, sometimes involving the direct presence of Russian armed forces on the ground. In many cases, individuals are told that their participation will consist of civilian work for the armed forces, such as reconstruction efforts, or are misled into believing they will be employed in entirely different activities, such as agricultural work.

3.3.4 State involvement or response

The case of **Syria** is distinctive due to the longstanding political alignment between former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russia. As a result, recruitment was conducted locally, either directly by the Russian army, the Wagner Group, or through representatives of the Syrian authorities.³³² It

325 Ibid.

326 Ibid.

327 Ibid.

328 [Sadiq Rossia](#), *Telegram*.

329 Sadiq Rossia, [Recruitment post](#), *Telegram*, 2 March 2025.

330 Yevhen Kizilov and Sevgil Musaieva, [“Russia is actively recruiting mercenaries from the Middle East to fight in the war in Ukraine – UP”](#) [in Ukrainian], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 19 March 2025.

331 Syed Fazl-e-Haider, [“Why Is Russia Recruiting Former Afghan Fighters for Its War Against Ukraine?”](#) (Fazl-e-Haider, 2023), *Jamestown*, 1 December 2023.

332 Hochu Zhyt, [“Recruitment of fighters from Syria”](#), *Telegram*, 7 May 2025.

has also been reported that the Houthis in Yemen have facilitated the recruitment of hundreds of Yemenis.³³³

Overall, relatively few responses have been observed from countries in the SWANA region. In interviews with POWs and in the cases examined, none reported having had subsequent contact with the embassies or authorities of their countries of origin. One argument invoked is that once an individual has signed a contract, it becomes difficult to secure their repatriation.³³⁴

Some countries, however, warrant particular attention. At the end of February 2025, **Egypt** decided to introduce security measures regulating travel by its citizens to Russia.³³⁵ In April 2025, the Egyptian government went further by revoking the nationality of one of its citizens for having enlisted in the armed forces of a foreign country without authorisation.³³⁶ This punitive and deterrent measure has been generalised and now applies to all Egyptian nationals. This raises the question of the destination of Egyptian POWs in the event of an exchange: where would they be sent? This issue is all the more troubling given that three of the four POWs interviewed in the region stated that they would prefer to return to Russia if released, rather than to their home countries.³³⁷

Iraq has also responded to this phenomenon. In September 2025, the Najaf Criminal Court sentenced an Iraqi man to life imprisonment for trafficking individuals to Russia to fight in the war against Ukraine.³³⁸ The court specified that the sentence was issued under a 2012 law criminalising the recruitment or transportation of individuals for the purpose of exploitation. In early September 2025, the Iraqi Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee acknowledged the presence of Iraqi nationals fighting alongside the Russian army, stating that parliament would take action to further investigate the matter and attempt to curb the phenomenon. In the same month, Iraq's embassy in Moscow issued a warning about "attempts to lure or coerce some Iraqis residing in Russia or abroad into joining the war under various pretexts".³³⁹

Iran, by contrast, has adopted a defensive posture, denying any involvement. Tehran has dismissed reports alleging that it is sending former Afghan fighters to fight on the Russian side.³⁴⁰ In response to these claims, Sayed Abass Badri, Media Director at the Iranian Embassy in Kabul, stated: "There may be rumours regarding the use of [Afghan] forces in the war in Ukraine, which the Islamic Republic denies."³⁴¹ Nevertheless, some Taliban authorities have also claimed that Iran is using former Afghan fighters as proxy forces in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine.³⁴²

333 "Russia recruits Yemeni mercenaries to fight in Ukraine", *Financial Times*, 23 November 2024.

334 Nabih Bulos "Russia recruits Arab fighters with promises, then sends them to Ukraine frontlines", *Los Angeles Times*, 5 October 2025.

335 Saleh Salem, "Egypt restricts travel for military aged men to Ukraine, Russia amid concerns they are being recruited for the war", *The New Arab*, 10 March 2025.

336 Ismail, 2025, *supra* note 310.

337 Interviews with Et-6, Yn-7 and Aa-8 conducted by TH.

338 "Iraqi man convicted for trafficking", *supra* note 313.

339 *Ibid.*

340 Fazl-e-Haider, 2023, *supra* note 331.

341 Rohullah Sangar, "Haqqani: Iran Sending Former Afghan fighters to War in Ukraine", *Tolo News*, 2 December 2022.

342 *Ibid.*

3.4 Africa

They gave me back my phone, so I texted him again, I said, Mr Harry, what am I doing in the military camp?

– Sierra Leonean POW interviewed by TH³⁴³

3.4.1 General overview of the extent of fighter flows

Since the death of a Zambian student in September 2022 first officially confirmed the presence of foreign recruits fighting for Russia,³⁴⁴ Russia's enlistment of African nationals has evolved into a significant pillar of its recruitment strategy. This scheme targets both African civilians, lured to Russia by high-paying employment offers, as well as active and former members of the military, recruited to fight on the front lines. Additionally, under the "Alabuga Start" Programme, hundreds³⁴⁵ of young women workers from Africa and beyond have been recruited to the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan,³⁴⁶ where most have been forced to assemble and paint Shahed-136 drones in working conditions described as exploitative and hazardous.³⁴⁷

In spring 2024, the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (HUR) reported an increase in Russian efforts to recruit African nationals into the Russian army.³⁴⁸ Although comprehensive statistics remain unavailable, in February 2026, the Ukrainian authorities reported that over 1,780 nationals from 36 African countries were fighting in the ranks of Russia in its war against Ukraine.³⁴⁹ Broader estimates suggest that the real number may reach as many as 4,000 fighters,³⁵⁰ with the Kenyan National Intelligence Service (NIS) asserting that over 1,000 Kenyans alone had been recruited into the Russian army as of February 2026,³⁵¹ while other Kenyan authorities had confirmed 200 individuals in November 2025.³⁵²

343 Interview with Se-15 conducted by TH.

344 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 6.

345 Benoit Faucon, Nicholas Bariyo and Matthew Luxmoore, "The Russian Drone Plant That Could Shape the War in Ukraine", *WSJ*, 28 May 2024.

346 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Who Is Making Russia's Drones? The Migrant Women Exploited For Russia's War Economy, May 2025, p. 5ff.

347 Emma Burrows and Lori Hinnant, "Africans recruited to work in Russia say they were duped into building drones for use in Ukraine", *APNews*, 10 October 2024.

348 Kateryna Denisova, "Russia speeds up recruitment of mercenaries from Africa, military intelligence says", *The Kyiv Independent*, 28 May 2024.

349 "More than 1700 Africans fighting for Russia, Ukraine says", *Reuters*, 25 February 2026.

350 "Thierry Vircoulon: 'Il y aurait 3000 ou 4000 Africains dans les rangs de l'armée russe'", *RFI*, 23 December 2025.

351 Humphrey Malalo, "Over 1,000 Kenyans recruited to fight for Russia in Ukraine, report says", *Reuters*, 19 February 2026.

352 "Kenya says over 200 of its nationals are fighting for Russia in Ukraine war", *Reuters*, 12 November 2025.

Fighters from African countries captured by the Ukrainian armed forces include nationals of Kenya,³⁵³ Cameroon,³⁵⁴ Somalia,³⁵⁵ Sierra Leone,³⁵⁶ Togo,³⁵⁷ Ghana,³⁵⁸ Senegal,³⁵⁹ Uganda³⁶⁰ and Burundi.³⁶¹ Additionally, credible reports confirm the participation of fighters from further African states, such as South Africa,³⁶² Zambia,³⁶³ Tanzania,³⁶⁴ Central African Republic (CAR),³⁶⁵ Nigeria,³⁶⁶ Gambia,³⁶⁷ Zimbabwe,³⁶⁸ Democratic Republic of Congo,³⁶⁹ Burkina Faso,³⁷⁰ and Côte d'Ivoire.³⁷¹ Although the exact number of fighters per country remains unknown, a crucial research conducted by the investigative group INPACT, published in February 2026, provides a non-exhaustive list of almost 1,420 African recruits who have been fighting on Russia's side since 2023.³⁷²

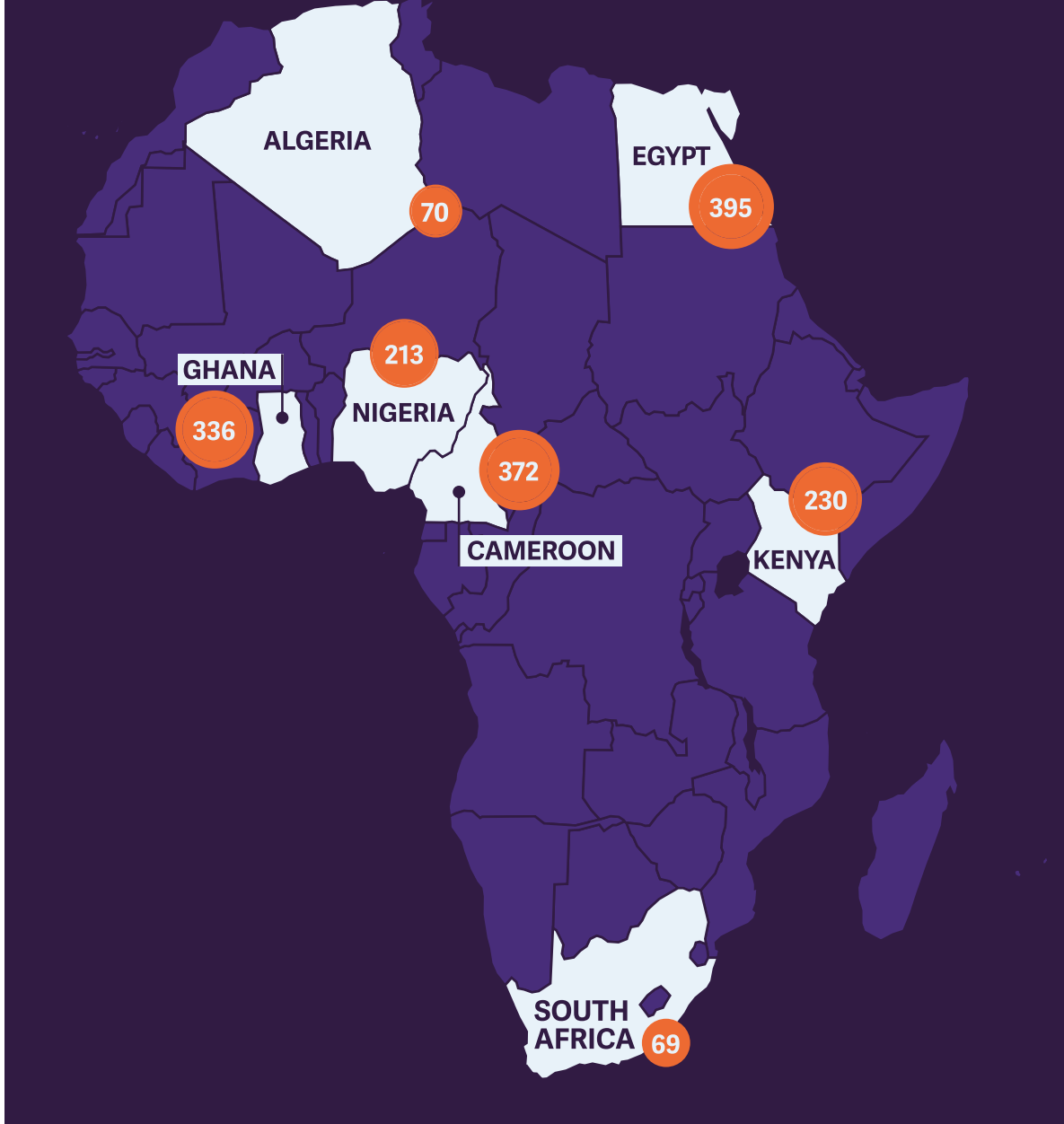
The human cost of this recruitment is significant: many recruits with no combat experience have been assigned high-risk tasks described by some of the survivors as "suicide missions",³⁷³ from which a significant number of fighters do not return or suffer serious injury and trauma.³⁷⁴ While no official data listing the casualties is available, figures published by INPACT suggest that the number of fighters from Africa killed in the conflict is in the hundreds, with over 300 casualties since 2023, most of them Cameroonian and Ghanaian nationals.³⁷⁵

Apart from civilian recruits, who represent the majority of African fighters involved,³⁷⁶ there have also been credible reports of African soldiers, specifically around 150 members of Cameroon's armed forces,³⁷⁷ being recruited into the Russian military.

This chapter draws on publicly available information, as well as three interviews conducted by TH with POWs from Ghana, Kenya and Sierra Leone.

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- 353 Akisa Wandera and Vitalii Chervonenko, "I'm Kenyan, don't shoot' - the athlete who says he was duped into the Russian army", *BBC*, 22 September 2025.
- 354 Kateryna Zakharchenko, "We Came to Make Shampoo and Fix Teeth': Africans Captured Fighting for Russia" ("Zakharchenko, 2025"), *Kyiv Post*, 30 June 2025.
- 355 Alexander Khrebet, "I'd be a king in Somalia with this money': Foreign POWs on being lured to fight for Russia in Ukraine" ("Khrebet, 2024"), *The Kyiv Independent*, 11 April 2024.
- 356 Daniel Kosoy, "Sold for a Passport: Russia's Recruitment Pipeline Sending Young Africans Into Its War", *UNITED24 Media*, 20 May 2025.
- 357 Maryna Kulakova, "How an African Student Was Drawn Into Russia's War and Left Behind" (Kulakova, 2025), *UNITED24 Media*, 17 April 2025.
- 358 "Ghana says at least 55 of its people killed after Russia 'lured' them to fight Ukraine", *The Guardian*, 27 February 2026.
- 359 Ousmane Badiane, "Qui est le mercenaire sénégalais combattant pour la Russie capturé par l'armée ukrainienne ?", *BBC Afrique*, 24 April 2025.
- 360 Vlad Litnarovych, "He Took Out a Bank Loan for a Job in Russia—And Was Sent to War in Ukraine" (Litnarovych, 2026), *UNITED24 Media*, 7 January 2026.
- 361 Olena Blizniakova, "He Came to Russia from Africa to Study Civil Engineering. They Put Him in a Military Truck" (Blizniakova, 2026) *UNITED24 Media*, 9 February 2026.
- 362 Tim Cocks, "South Africans who say they were scammed into joining Russia's war in Ukraine dig trenches, dodge bullets", *Reuters*, 22 December 2025.
- 363 Kennedy Gondwe, "Ukraine war: Zambia demands answers for death of student Lemekhani Nyirenda" ("Gondwe, 2022"), *BBC*, 15 November 2022.
- 364 Jean-Fernand Koena and Maja Zivanovic, "Family Of African Mercenary Killed Fighting For Russia Can't Recover His Remains" ("Koena and Zivanovic, 2025"), *RFE/RL*, 15 January 2025.
- 365 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 19.
- 366 Makuochi Okafor and Mansur Abubakar, "Nigeria warns against enlisting abroad after reports of deaths in Ukraine" ("Okafor and Abubakar, 2026"), *BBC*, 16 February 2026.
- 367 Mikhail Kalinin, "Lost in Translation: How African migrants are tricked and threatened into Russian military service" ("Kalinin, 2024"), *The Insider*, 7 November 2024.
- 368 Ben Farmer, Joe Barnes and James Rushton, "Russia hired African farmers to make shampoo, then sent them to war" ("Farmer et al., 2025"), *The Telegraph*, 9 June 2025.
- 369 Pjotr Sauer, "The Congolese student fighting with pro-Russia separatists in Ukraine", *The Guardian*, 8 June 2022.
- 370 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 19.
- 371 "The Africans fighting on Russia's front line in Ukraine" ("Africans fighting on Russia's front line"), *Reuters*, 22 May 2023.
- 372 INPACT, 2026, *supra* note 140, p. 2.
- 373 "We come here to die': African recruits sent to fight Russia's war in Ukraine" ("We come here to die"), *RFI*, 17 January 2025.
- 374 Farmer et al., 2025, *supra* note 368.
- 375 See INPACT, 2026, *supra* note 140, p. 22.
- 376 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 14.
- 377 Raoul Sumo Tayo, "Grave risks for Cameroon as soldiers desert to fight in Ukraine" ("Sumo Tayo, 2025"), *Institute for Security Studies (ISS)*, 2 April 2025.

Number of fighters recruited from African countries into the Russian Armed Forces



Number of foreign fighters recruited into the Russian Armed Forces from selected African states according to the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War in Ukraine. This figure represents the minimum number of verified foreign recruits from African countries; actual numbers are estimated to be "several times higher". © Lera Riezanova

3.4.2 Fighter motivations (relative socio-economic conditions and political trends)

Despite consistent efforts by Russian state media to portray African fighters as ideologically motivated volunteers³⁷⁸ joining the Russian military out of their alleged devotion to Russia as an "ally of the Global South", such cases appear to be exceptional.³⁷⁹

378 Kalinin, 2024, *supra* note 367.

379 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 16.

For most of those whose testimonies are available, the decision to seek employment in Russia was primarily based on economic considerations: limited wages and high unemployment at home, set against the prospect of salaries several times higher than anything locally available.³⁸⁰ One individual interviewed by TH stressed that he sought to fund his daughter's studies and offer her a better life.³⁸¹

While some join Russia's armed forces voluntarily and for economic reasons,³⁸² many recruits reported being lured to Russia by offers of high-paying civilian jobs,³⁸³ only to realise after signing a military contract or upon arrival at a military camp³⁸⁴ that they had unwittingly accepted roles on the front lines of a war they neither entirely understood³⁸⁵ nor intended to join.³⁸⁶ In many cases, recruits were compelled to sign a contract in Russian, a language they did not understand. One interviewee even recalled a Russia-based recruiter explicitly assuring him that "this fight is not in Russia" and he "will not even notice that the war is going on".³⁸⁷

Recruiters frequently offer salaries that are many times higher than those available in their countries of origin, as well as high sign-on bonuses, medical insurance and the prospect of receiving Russian citizenship.³⁸⁸ While many Western nations maintain visa requirements that are often insurmountable, particularly for those from African countries,³⁸⁹ and interviewees reported that their visa applications to European states had been consistently rejected,³⁹⁰ Russia's comparatively accessible visa procedures – tourist visas approved often within a week – make it an attractive alternative destination. Even for professional soldiers from the Cameroonian military, who seem to join Russia's military on their own volition, the motivation remains primarily pecuniary, as wages in the Russian military are reportedly several times higher than in Cameroon.³⁹¹ However, as described below, for those recruited *after* arriving in Russia, motivation often takes coercive forms, including threats of deportation or prison terms.

3.4.3 Recruitment processes

Russia's recruitment of African nationals into its military has evolved into an intricate and multi-layered scheme. Three primary recruitment pathways have been identified. First, recruitment occurs in the countries of origin, targeting young men from urban backgrounds with limited employment prospects,³⁹² exploiting the widespread desire for migration. Second, recruiters focus on African nationals arriving in Russia as migrants, tourists or students. Finally, recruitment efforts have also targeted active members of foreign militaries, especially from Cameroon.

In many African states, such as Kenya, Cameroon, and Ghana,³⁹³ recruitment follows the pattern documented elsewhere in this report. Recruiters promise high-paying civilian positions in the

380 DW, "Cameroonians dying for Russia in the war against Ukraine" [video], YouTube, 24 August 2025, at [00:48-01:13].

381 Interview with Se-15 conducted by TH.

382 See INPACT, 2026, *supra* note 140, p. 2.

383 "Russia Tricking Africans to Fight War in Ukraine" ("Russia Tricking Africans"), ADF, 7 January 2025.

384 Interview with Se-15 conducted by TH.

385 "We come here to die", *supra* note 373.

386 "Russia Tricking Africans", *supra* note 383.

387 Interview with Se-15 conducted by TH.

388 See HUR, "Africans for \$2,200 – Russia is ramping up the recruitment of mercenaries for the war against Ukraine" [in Ukrainian], 28 May 2024.

389 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 14.

390 See, for example, interview with Se-15 conducted by TH.

391 Sumo Tayo, 2025, *supra* note 377.

392 Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 13.

393 "14 Ghanaians lured to Russia with false promises end up in Ukraine war" ("14 Ghanaians lured"), *Modern Ghana*, 23 September 2024.

security sector,³⁹⁴ as drivers,³⁹⁵ factory workers³⁹⁶ or supermarket employees.³⁹⁷ Others are offered roles in the military, but are assured they will not be sent to the front lines, and will have non-combat roles, such as cooks or cleaning personnel.³⁹⁸ Promised salaries are often complemented by significant sign-on bonuses of several thousand euros promised to be paid upon arrival.³⁹⁹

In numerous documented cases, individuals paid significant fees ranging from several hundred⁴⁰⁰ to thousands⁴⁰¹ of euros for visas, plane tickets and accommodation in Russia, many borrowing money from relatives to afford travel.⁴⁰² In one case documented by TH, an individual paid almost EUR 6,000 for his transfer to Russia.⁴⁰³

Recruitment is often facilitated by local intermediaries, both individuals and recruitment agencies,⁴⁰⁴ who, in cooperation with their Russia-based counterparts, offer individuals jobs and swiftly provide them with short-term tourist visas and travel documents, often managing the process entirely online.⁴⁰⁵ While, in most cases, the names and identities of the recruiters remain unknown, with individuals frequently referring to them as “agents”, “acquaintances”, “friends” or “men” approaching them, at least two African states – Kenya and South Africa – have launched investigations against several persons suspected of recruiting individuals into the Russian military on human trafficking charges.⁴⁰⁶ In at least one case, a recruiter active in the African context has been linked to the FSB,⁴⁰⁷ consistent with broader evidence of involvement of Russian security services in overseeing private recruitment networks (see **Chapter 2.2.2**, above).

Additionally, individuals have been reportedly lured to Russia under false scholarship promises,⁴⁰⁸ study opportunities,⁴⁰⁹ or even cultural events. For example, in a case documented by TH, a Kenyan athlete was promised participation in a festival in Saint Petersburg by a local agent and travelled to Russia with a tourist visa together with three other Kenyan sportsmen. After the festival, the Russian host who had welcomed him upon his arrival in Russia offered him an opportunity to extend his stay: “He told us: no, would you like me to get you a job? So I told him: what kind of job? He told me: there’s a job I can find for you. You can get a work permit for one year.” Deceived into signing a contract in Russian which he did not understand, he only later realised that he had signed a military contract and was subsequently transferred to a military camp.⁴¹⁰

Furthermore, the online recruitment of foreign fighters through social media platforms has intensified,⁴¹¹ including through chats in which former recruits are reportedly forced to promote life

394 See, for example, Larry Madowo and Katharina Krebs, [“You escape, or you die: African men say Russia duped them into fighting in Ukraine”](#) (“Madowo and Krebs, 2026”), CNN, 4 February 2026.

395 See, for example, Simon Marks, [“Lured to Russia for Jobs, Hundreds of Kenyans Wind Up Fighting in Ukraine”](#) (Marks, 2025), *Bloomberg*, 23 December 2025.

396 See, for example, [“Nairobi sounds alarm over recruiters luring Kenyans into Russian war effort”](#) (“Nairobi sounds alarm”), *RFI*, 19 December 2025.

397 See, for example, [“Trompés, traumatisés”](#), *supra* note 87.

398 See, for example, [“We come here to die”](#), *supra* note 373.

399 See, for example, Madowo and Krebs, 2026, *supra* note 394.

400 See, for example, [“Nairobi sounds alarm”](#), *supra* note 396.

401 See, for example, Wycliffe Muia, [“Over 1,000 Kenyans enlisted to fight in Russia-Ukraine war, report says”](#) (“Muia, 2026”), *BBC*, 19 February 2026

402 Litnarovych, 2026, *supra* note 360.

403 Interview with Se-15 conducted by TH.

404 David Wafula, [“Lured by lucrative job offers and sent to fight for Russia - Kenyans want their sons back”](#) (“Wafula, 2025”), *BBC*, 6 December 2025.

405 [“Nairobi sounds alarm”](#), *supra* note 396.

406 Wedaeli Chibelushi, [“Kenyan charged with luring young men to fight for Russia in Ukraine”](#), *BBC*, 26 February 2026; Khanyisile Ngcobo, [“South African radio presenter among five charged over Russia recruitment plot”](#) (“Ngcobo, 2025”), *BBC*, 2 December 2025.

407 See INPACT, 2026, *supra* note 140, p. 23 ff.

408 [“Togo Warns Students of Russian Recruitment Tactics Amid Ukraine War”](#), *ADF*, 20 May 2025.

409 Blizniakova, 2026, *supra* note 361.

410 Interview with Ka-10 conducted by TH.

411 See, for example, INPACT, 2026, *supra* note 140, pp. 14ff. and 39ff.

in Russia to prospective recruits.⁴¹² In South Africa, two young men were reportedly recruited online by a user through the platform Discord while playing a military videogame.⁴¹³

For those already in Russia, recruitment has often assumed overtly coercive forms, with state authorities playing a more direct role. In several reported cases, the Russian authorities detained African nationals who tried to cross into the European Union with expired visas, offering them enlistment in the Russian military as an alternative to deportation.⁴¹⁴ A notable case involves Somali journalist Ilyas Ahmad Elmi, who was arrested near the Finnish-Russian border while seeking to join his family in Germany. He was subsequently offered a military contract by the Russian Ministry of Defence, which he signed under threat of deportation, but ultimately managed to refuse military service.⁴¹⁵ In at least two cases, nationals from Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Ghana⁴¹⁶ arriving in Russia were detained at the airport and forcibly taken to detention centres, where they were pressured into military service.⁴¹⁷

Likewise, in several cases, migrant workers and students in Russia, including individuals from Somalia,⁴¹⁸ Sierra Leone⁴¹⁹ – with whom TH were able to speak – and Senegal,⁴²⁰ were tricked into joining the military. For example, Malik Diop, a Senegalese national, was allegedly approached by recruiters in a Russian shopping mall and offered a job as a dishwasher in Luhansk for a monthly salary of almost EUR 5,000, but was later sent to the frontline.⁴²¹ African students and young workers have also been threatened with the non-renewal of their visas if they refused to enlist in the Russian army.⁴²² In one case, a Togolese student was arbitrarily arrested by the Russian police in the street, pressured to sign a military contract, and was forced to serve in a military hospital as a nurse.⁴²³ In a rather exceptional case documented by TH, a Ghanaian student voluntarily enlisted with the Russian military to finance his studies in Moscow.⁴²⁴

In at least three known cases, African nationals – Zambian student Lemekani Nathan Nyirenda,⁴²⁵ Tanzanian student Nemes Tarimo⁴²⁶ and Ivorian national Komenan Aboya⁴²⁷ – serving prison sentences for drug offences in Russia, were recruited into the Wagner Group and sent to the front lines directly from prison. Nyirenda and Tarimo were killed in Ukraine, while then head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, confirmed that Aboya had survived military service and had been pardoned.⁴²⁸

As documented in several cases by TH,⁴²⁹ recruits are compelled or explicitly forced⁴³⁰ to sign one-year contracts with the military written entirely in Russian, a language they do not understand,⁴³¹ and

412 "Trompés, traumatisés", *supra* note 87.

413 Adekunle Agbetiloye, "Russia used a gaming app to recruit South Africans for the Ukraine war", *Business Insider Africa*, 7 January 2026.

414 See, for example, Kalinin, 2024, *supra* note 367; Farmer et al., 2025, *supra* note 368.

415 Shaun Walker and Faisal Ali, "Beaten and conscripted into Putin's army: a Somali refugee attempts to reach Europe", *The Guardian*, 29 July 2024.

416 Farmer et al., 2025, *supra* note 368.

417 Zakharchenko, 2025, *supra* note 354.

418 "Russia Tricking Africans", *supra* note 383.

419 Interview with Se-15 conducted by TH.

420 "Russia Tricking Africans", *supra* note 383.

421 Farmer et al., 2025, *supra* note 368.

422 "Bloomberg: Russia is recruiting students and workers from Africa into the army" [in Russian], *RFE/RL*, 9 June 2024.

423 See Hochu Zhyt, "MERCENARIES' – how Russia deceives foreigners into joining its ranks" ("Hochu Zhyt, MERCENARIES"), [video, in Russian], *YouTube*, 4 January 2026.

424 Interview with Ga-3 conducted by TH.

425 Pumza Fihlani, "Ukraine war: Body of Zambian student Lemekhani Nyirenda returned by Russia", *BBC*, 12 December 2022.

426 Alfred Lasteck, Munira Hussein and Anne Soy, "Tanzanian killed in Ukraine: We told him not to go", *BBC*, 20 January 2023.

427 "Africans fighting on Russia's front line", *supra* note 371.

428 *Ibid.*

429 Interviews with Ka-10 and Se-15 conducted by TH.

430 "Trompés, traumatisés", *supra* note 87.

431 See, for example, Kulakova, 2025, *supra* note 357; Carlos Mureithi, "I didn't know how to shoot: how African men have been tricked into fighting for Russia" ("Mureithi, 2026"), *The Guardian*, 26 January 2026.

do not receive a copy of the document.⁴³² Within days of recruitment, individuals are transferred to training camps where they undergo rudimentary military training lasting up to three weeks.⁴³³ With rare exceptions, they are consistently assigned the most dangerous tasks: locating Ukrainian positions, seizing bunkers, or advancing into contested territory with little support.⁴³⁴ Several survivors also reported a stark hierarchy within their military units frequently characterised by neglect, intimidation and humiliation. Some reported being insulted with racist slurs, such as “monkey”⁴³⁵ or “piece of coal”.⁴³⁶ A video which emerged in January 2026 seems to show a Russian combatant threatening a black soldier with a mine strapped to his body,⁴³⁷ telling him that he would be used as an “opener”, likely meaning he would be required to attack a Ukrainian bunker by detonating the mine.⁴³⁸ In another video, a group of African recruits were mocked and referred to as “disposables”.⁴³⁹

3.4.4 State involvement or response

The response from African governments to the recruitment of their nationals into the Russian military has varied significantly. Many states initially remained silent about the involvement of their citizens in Russia’s war – despite Ukraine providing information about captured African fighters to their respective countries of origin.⁴⁴⁰ However, especially since autumn 2025, a growing number of states, most notably Kenya, South Africa and Ghana, have voiced concern and taken action against the recruitment of their citizens. Responses have included public acknowledgment, warnings about illicit recruitment schemes, the introduction of further security measures to prevent recruitment, as well as repatriation efforts, and, in at least three cases, the initiation of criminal proceedings against potential recruiters.

Kenya has emerged as one of the most vocal states in addressing the recruitment of its nationals into the Russian army. Notably, in March 2026, Kenyan Foreign Minister Musalia Mudavadi announced that Russia had agreed to stop enlisting Kenyan nationals into the Russian army,⁴⁴¹ and stated that Kenyans who had fought in Russia would be granted amnesty upon return.⁴⁴² This agreement followed mounting pressure from relatives of recruited Kenyans, as well as an intelligence report presented in the Kenyan Parliament in February 2026, which estimated that over 1,000 Kenyans may have been recruited into the Russian army.⁴⁴³

Earlier, in November 2025, Kenyan President William Ruto expressed “concern over young Kenyans who have been illegally recruited to fight in the war in Ukraine”, and asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to “facilitate the release of any Kenyans in Ukrainian custody”.⁴⁴⁴ Since December 2025, 47 Kenyan nationals⁴⁴⁵ who had “found themselves trapped in Russian military camps”,⁴⁴⁶ have been repatriated from Russia. They are to enter a reintegration program and, together with their families, are to receive psychological support. In response to ongoing recruitment

432 See, for example, “We come here to die”, *supra* note 373.

433 See, for example, Madowo and Krebs, 2026, *supra* note 394; “Nairobi sounds alarm”, *supra* note 396.

434 See, for example, “Russia Tricking Africans”, *supra* note 383; Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 19; Khrebet, 2024, *supra* note 355.

435 See Hochu Zhyt, *MERCENARIES*, *supra* note 423, at [18:00-18:05].

436 See, for example: https://x.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/2009629026197950702, at [00:10].

437 “Ukraine war videos raise questions”, *supra* note 69.

438 Mureithi, 2026, *supra* note 431.

439 “Ukraine war videos raise questions”, *supra* note 69.

440 Mercy Simiyu, “African POWs in Ukrainian camp: How we ended up fighting for Russia”, *The Daily Nation*, 5 July 2025.

441 Jean Otor, “Russia agrees to stop using Kenyan recruits in Ukraine conflict, Kenya says” (“Otor, 2026”), *BBC*, 16 March 2026.

442 Humphrey Mgonja, “Kenyans fighting illegally for Russia in Ukraine to be granted amnesty”, *BBC*, 22 March 2026.

443 “‘Bring our sons home’: Kenyan families demand action over Russian war recruitment”, *RFI*, 6 March 2026.

444 William Ruto, *I have had a fruitful phone conversation with President @ZelenskyyUa*, X, 6 November 2025.

445 Kaleb Moges, “Sixteen Kenyans missing in Russia after army recruitment”, *BBC*, 2 April 2026.

446 “Nairobi sounds alarm”, *supra* note 396.

risks, the Kenyan authorities issued a public alert advising young Kenyans to liaise with the Kenyan authorities to verify the authenticity of job offers from abroad before accepting such opportunities, and introduced measures to prevent the recruitment of its nationals into the Russian army, including tightened control over employment agencies, highlighting that “recruitment networks are still active in both Kenya and Russia”.⁴⁴⁷ As of late December 2025, the authorities had de-registered over 600 employment agencies described as “noncompliant”.⁴⁴⁸

In September 2025, the authorities announced that 22 Kenyans⁴⁴⁹ who were being prepared to join Russia’s military had been prevented from departing to Russia in a security raid near Nairobi. The raid resulted in the arrest of Kenyan nationals Edward Kamau Gituku and Festus Arasa Omwamba, both linked to the recruitment agency Global Face Human Resources Ltd., on suspicion of luring civilians into the Russian military. Both were charged with human trafficking.⁴⁵⁰ Gituku asserted through his lawyer that Global Face Human Resources Ltd. had a “contract validly signed by the government of Russia” and insisted that the company was tasked with recruiting exclusively members of the military who had left the Kenyan armed forces, were sufficiently informed about the purpose of the recruitment, and joined the Russian armed forces voluntarily.⁴⁵¹ As of March 2026, the investigation is ongoing. In addition, the Kenyan authorities arrested and deported Russian national Mikhail Lyapin, an employee of the Russian Embassy in Nairobi suspected of involvement in the recruitment of foreign fighters.⁴⁵²



Relatives of missing Kenyan fighters recruited into the Russian Armed Forces protest in Nairobi in early March 2026. © Gerald Anderson / ANADOLU / Anadolu via AFP

South Africa has similarly taken formal action against the recruitment of its nationals. In November 2025, authorities initiated criminal investigations for the recruitment of South African nationals into the Russian armed forces against at least eight of its citizens. Among those implicated was Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, daughter of former South African President Jakob Zuma and ex-member

447 Ibid.

448 Marks, 2025, *supra* note 395.

449 Nosmot Gbadamosi, “Young Africans Are Being Lured Into Russia’s War Machine”, *FP*, 21 January 2026.

450 “Trompés, traumatisés”, *supra* note 87.

451 Kai Eli, “Man Accused of Taking Kenyans to Russian Army Defends Business, Says He’s Been Contracted to Recruit”, *Tuko*, 27 September 2025.

452 “Kenyan Police Rescue Citizens Bound For Russian Battlefield”, *ADF*, 21 October 2025.

of the National Assembly, who was accused of luring 19 men – 17 South African and two Botswana nationals – to Russia under the guise of security training.⁴⁵³ Additionally, radio host Nonkululeko Mantula is accused of recruiting four men and making arrangements for them to join the Russian military. Mantula and the four men she allegedly recruited were charged with violating the Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act, which prohibits South African nationals from providing military assistance to foreign states without government approval, including by recruiting personnel.⁴⁵⁴ The authorities also announced they were working on the repatriation of the 17 South Africans trapped in Russia,⁴⁵⁵ with 15 South African nationals confirmed to have returned from Russia in February 2026.⁴⁵⁶ In addition, South Africa issued a statement warning its citizens against joining the Alabuga Start programme⁴⁵⁷ and launched an investigation for human trafficking after South African influencers travelled to Russia and promoted the Alabuga Start programme on their social media accounts.⁴⁵⁸

Cameroon, though initially abstaining from public statements, took internal measures to prevent the recruitment of members of its military into the Russian armed forces. Following reports of deserting soldiers joining the Russian ranks for higher salaries, Cameroonian Defence Minister Joseph Beti Assomo issued a confidential directive in March 2025 mandating stricter oversight. Military personnel are now prohibited from leaving the country without direct ministerial authorization, and those found to have deserted face dismissal and prosecution.⁴⁵⁹ At the same time, survivors reported that the Cameroonian Embassy in Moscow has largely ignored pleas for help from civilians recruited to fight in Ukraine, with some survivors accusing officials of “covering up human trafficking”⁴⁶⁰. Only in April 2026, the Cameroon authorities first officially acknowledged the participation and death of 16 of its nationals in Russia’s war, referring to them as “military contractors of Cameroonian nationality”.⁴⁶¹

Togo issued a warning against false scholarships, urging students to remain vigilant, as did **Tanzania and Zimbabwe**, after acknowledging the recruitment of its citizens into the Russian army.⁴⁶² **Botswana** reported that two young men had been lured to Russia to participate in a “short-term military school training programme”, but were sent to the front lines instead. The government announced that it was trying to facilitate their repatriation, explicitly noting that it wished “to caution Botswana youth” to remain vigilant and to verify employment offers abroad.⁴⁶³ Likewise, in February 2026, **Nigeria** officially acknowledged the presence of Nigerian fighters in Ukraine, and issued a warning against recruitment of its citizens to the front lines.⁴⁶⁴

The deaths of recruited nationals have prompted markedly different reactions. **Zambia** demanded that Russian authorities “urgently provide information on the circumstances”⁴⁶⁵ after the death in Ukraine of a student recruited into the Russian Armed Forces from prison. By contrast, the **Central African Republic** distanced itself from the fate of its citizens. Following the death of Central African Derrick Ngamana in Russia’s Kursk region, government spokesperson Maxime Balalu dismissed

453 Rachel Savage, “South Africa in talks with Russia over men ‘tricked’ into fighting in Ukraine”, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2025.

454 Ngcobo, 2025, *supra* note 406; Rana Taha, “South African radio host accused of recruiting for Russia”, *DW*, 1 December 2025.

455 Ruth Comerford and Farouk Chothia, “South Africans trapped in Donbas after joining Russia-Ukraine war, Ramaphosa says”, *BBC*, 6 November 2025.

456 Zimasa Matiwane, “15 South Africans Duped Into Fighting for Russia in Ukraine Return Home”, *NYT*, 26 February 2026.

457 “South Africa Warns Women About Viral Russian Job Scams”, *ADF*, 7 October 2025.

458 Mayeni Jones, “South African women warned about viral Russian job videos”, *BBC*, 25 August 2025.

459 “Les soldats camerounais sont incités à se battre pour la Russie en Ukraine”, *ADF*, 17 June 2025.

460 “We come here to die”, *supra* note 373.

461 “Russia confirms deaths of 16 Cameroonians fighting in Ukraine war, Yaounde says”, *Reuters*, 7 April 2026.

462 Sauli Giliard, “Desist working as mercenaries, state warns”, *Daily News*, 25 January 2023; Basillioh Rukanga and Shingai Nyoka, “Zimbabwe says 15 nationals killed after being lured to fight for Russia”, *BBC*, 26 March 2026.

463 Ministry of International Relations of Botswana, Press Release, “Alleged Reports of Two Botswana Youth Falling Victim to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict”, 15 December 2025.

464 Okafor and Abubakar, 2026, *supra* note 366.

465 Gondwe, 2022, *supra* note 363.

the deceased as an “adventurer” acting at his own risk, explicitly stating that the state bore no responsibility for those who independently sought combat roles abroad.⁴⁶⁶

As a result, some families of those missing or killed in Ukraine have criticised their governments over their “slow response”.⁴⁶⁷ Often unable to obtain official confirmation of their loved one’s death or to repatriate their remains,⁴⁶⁸ many relatives are struggling with uncertainty, emotional distress and grief, while also being burdened with providing for their families or the family of the deceased,⁴⁶⁹ with no financial compensation provided.⁴⁷⁰ In several cases, mothers⁴⁷¹ and wives⁴⁷² of missing or killed fighters are left to raise their children on their own, placing a disproportionate social and economic burden on women.

3.5 Latin America

All the Cubans who go to Russia don’t have to pay. One-way from Cuba to Russia costs 1,000 or 2,000 dollars. Which Cuban can pay that?

– Cuban POW interviewed by TH⁴⁷³

3.5.1 General overview of the extent of fighter flows

Among Latin American countries, those from which foreign fighters have been confirmed to have originated include Brazil, Cuba, Argentina, and Colombia. Cuba stands out in terms of intensity of recruitment to the Russian army, whereas in other countries in this region recruitment appears sporadic. Available evidence does not indicate the existence of a large-scale, regionally coordinated recruitment network.

One notable case documented by TH concerning a citizen of Brazil stands out for its remarkable circumstances. Although he was living in Australia at the time,⁴⁷⁴ his country of origin played little to no role. A qualified software engineer, he was recruited via LinkedIn by what he believed to be a reputable state-affiliated corporation (not named for security reasons), for an information technology position. Motivated primarily by professional prestige, alongside a competitive salary and the possibility of relocating his family, he accepted the offer. He only discovered after signing the contract, entirely in Russian, that it was a military contract. Subsequently transferred to a military base, he realised that he had been deceived. His attempts to leave, including through requests for assistance to the Brazilian Embassy in Moscow, were denied. He described ongoing fear and showed signs of psychological trauma. There is limited information available regarding other similar cases, suggesting that this instance is rather exceptional.

466 Koena and Zivanovic, 2025, *supra* note 364.

467 Wafula, 2025, *supra* note 404.

468 See, for example, Marks, 2025, *supra* note 395.

469 See, for example, Koena and Zivanovic, 2025, *supra* note 364.

470 See, for example, Vircoulon and Givone, 2025, *supra* note 29, p. 19.

471 See, for example, Wafula, 2025, *supra* note 404.

472 See, for example, “We come here to die”, *supra* note 373.

473 Ibid.

474 Interview with BI-4 conducted by TH.

Similarly, evidence does not appear to point to systematic recruitment in Argentina, but one particular case has emerged through open sources. This case concerns Dante Gianni Bettiga, a 23-year-old from Ushuaia, who travelled to Russia in February 2025 to study the Russian language but soon abandoned his studies and then had to search for accommodation.⁴⁷⁵ He was offered the opportunity to remain in the country, earn a salary and place to live from a private company subcontracted to recruit personnel for the Russian Army. He accepted the offer and signed a three-year contract. Despite his subsequent request for discharge, Russian authorities denied responsibility, asserting that the contract was concluded with a private entity that remains unreachable. His father, who suffers from liver cancer, formally appealed to the Russian Minister of Defence, invoking Article 51 of Federal Law 53-FZ, which allows for discharge when a close relative requires care. To date, the family has received no response from Russian authorities or diplomatic channels.

The presence of Colombian combatants among Russian ranks was also confirmed in October 2025 by the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, although the recruitment mechanisms remain unclear.⁴⁷⁶ An intercepted audio recording was released, in which individuals identified as Colombian foreign fighters appear to order the execution of civilians.

The recruitment of women, while significantly less prevalent than that of men, follows its own distinct patterns. At least one Cuban woman was recruited under a formal contract for a combat position.⁴⁷⁷ In Brazil, young women have been drawn into the Alabuga Start programme, arriving to find themselves in restricted facilities in Tatarstan assembling Shahed drones.⁴⁷⁸ The scale of this recruitment became publicly visible in early October 2025, when several prominent influencers were found to have promoted what appeared to be a legitimate internship opportunity, offering housing, Russian language instruction, and monthly stipends of up to EUR 600.⁴⁷⁹ Despite widespread public condemnation, Brazilian authorities have yet to initiate a formal investigation into the matter.

One of the most significant developments in the transnational recruitment pattern of foreign fighters has been the large-scale enlistment of Cuban nationals. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, approximately 20,000 Cuban nationals have been recruited by Russia since early 2023, forming one of the largest foreign contingents in the Russian military.⁴⁸⁰ Over 1,000 official contracts were reportedly signed between June 2023 and February 2024, with at least 250 individuals remaining forcibly retained after their contract terms expired.⁴⁸¹ In October 2025, *Reuters*, citing US diplomats, reported that approximately 5,000 Cubans are currently fighting alongside Moscow's forces.⁴⁸² Exact figures remain difficult to verify, as estimates vary considerably depending on the source and methodology, reflecting the broader opacity surrounding foreign fighter recruitment in the conflict.

Many recruits are believed to perish during their first combat operation, with an average survival time of 150 days following deployment.⁴⁸³ Recruitment of Cuban nationals appears to have peaked between July and September 2023.⁴⁸⁴

475 Guido Bovone, "El drama de un joven argentino que por un error está combatiendo en Ucrania con el ejército ruso", *La Nación*, 4 November 2025.

476 Oleksandr Shumilin, "Defence Intelligence of Ukraine releases intercept of Colombian mercenaries in Russian forces ordering killings of women and children", *Ukrainska Pravda*, 24 October 2025.

477 Mario Diaz-Balart, "National Security Briefing Exposing Cuban Regime Troops Fighting for Russia" [video], *YouTube*, ("Diaz-Balart, 2026"), 18 September 2025.

478 Ivan Khomenko, "How Brazil's TikTok Stars Helped Russia Recruit Young Women for Suicide Drone Factories", *United 24 Media*, 29 October 2025.

479 Ibid.

480 David Kirichenko, "Cubans Could Soon Become Russia's Largest Foreign Fighting Force" ("Kirichenko, Cubans Could Soon Become Russia's Largest Foreign Fighting Force"), *Forbes*, 7 October 2025.

481 Diaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477.

482 Anastasia Odintsova, "Up to 5,000 Cubans are fighting for Russia: U.S. diplomats will inform the United Nations that the Cuban government supports Vladimir Putin's war – Reuters" [in Russian], *The New Voice of Ukraine*, 5 October 2025.

483 Intelligence reports from the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War; Diaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477.

484 Iván León, "Teenagers in Putin's War: The Testimony that Broke the Silence on Cuban Mercenaries in Ukraine", *Cibercuba*, 16 May 2025.

The *Hochu Zhyt (I Want to Live)* project's verified fighter lists include a substantial number of Cuban nationals. Complementing this, in September 2023, Ukrainian cyber group Cyber Resistance released a dataset containing the names and contracts of approximately 199 Cuban recruits, including individuals as young as 18 years old.⁴⁸⁵ These findings, alongside other corroborating evidence, were presented during a National Security Briefing in the US Congress in late September 2025, which identified Cuba as one of the major sources of foreign mercenaries participating in Russia's war against Ukraine.⁴⁸⁶

3.5.2 Fighter motivations (relative socio-economic conditions and political trends)

Cuba ranks among the poorest countries in Latin America, with an estimated poverty rate of 72%.⁴⁸⁷ Within this context of systemic poverty and limited prospects, Russia's recruitment campaigns have capitalised on material vulnerability and the desire for emigration. The pattern here mirrors that documented across other recruitment contexts: for most Cuban recruits, the decision was primarily economic, driven by acute material need.⁴⁸⁸ Prospective recruits are promised employment in Russia as construction workers, warehouse staff, security guards, or drivers.⁴⁸⁹ With an average salary in Cuba of merely EUR 30 per month, or even EUR 15 according to varying estimates, offers of "easy work in brotherly Russia" with monthly pay of EUR 1,700–2,000 appear transformative.⁴⁹⁰

When asked about his main motivation, one Cuban POW interviewed by TH explained: "Well, firstly, to leave Cuba. This is what every Cuban wants, you know, to leave Cuba. This was the opportunity."⁴⁹¹ He added: "In Cuba, money and life in Cuba, it's shit. There are millions of Cubanos at the frontline, and I saw them, and it's not for nothing."⁴⁹² Another illustrative case is that of Francisco García, who worked in a hospital earning the equivalent of five US dollars per week, as reported by the *Daily Mail*.⁴⁹³ In mid-2023, he encountered online advertisements offering civilian construction jobs in Russia with a monthly salary of EUR 2,000. Motivated by the promise of financial stability, he left alongside other Cuban nationals.

Scholars of Cuban politics have underscored these dynamics. University of Virginia Professor Cristina López-Gottardi observed that "Cuba is in a severe economic and energy crisis. The economics alone make this a powerful draw."⁴⁹⁴ While financial incentives are a central motivator, deception and coercion significantly shape the recruitment experience. This interpretation aligns with the assessment of US Representative Mario Díaz-Balart, who describes a form of "state-sponsored human trafficking involving recruitment, coercion, and debt bondage."⁴⁹⁵

Beside the attractive salary offer, other incentives offered such as citizenship, housing, family relocation, play a role in the decision-making process, although they often prove illusory. The TH interview confirmed the speculative nature of family relocation, reducing it to a running

485 Hochu Zhyt, "[Recruitment of fighters from Cuba](#)" ("Hochu Zhyt, Recruitment of fighters from Cuba"), *Telegram*, 6 May 2025; León, *supra* note 484.

486 Diaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477.

487 Alejandro Martínez, "[Según estudios, Cuba con un 72% de índice de pobreza se coloca como el país más pobre de América Latina](#)", *Cuba en Miami*, 20 April 2023.

488 Diaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477.

489 "[Russians being lured into war under guise of jobs as drivers and construction workers in rear areas](#)", *The Odessa Journal*, 22 May 2025.

490 "[Today's Average Cuban Salary Now Equals US \\$16 per Month](#)", *Havana Times*, 20 April 2025; Hochu Zhyt, Recruitment of fighters from Cuba, *supra* note 485.

491 Interview with Ca-2 conducted by TH. This was one of two Cuban citizens that, according to publicly available information, are held in Ukraine as POWs.

492 *Ibid.*

493 Daria Berezhnaya, "[The Russians promised him a job on a construction site: a Cuban man recounts how he ended up fighting in the war against Ukraine](#)" ("Berezhnaya, 2025") [in Russian], *Focus*, 5 July 2025; Kamal Sultan, "[How thousands of Cubans have answered adverts for £1,900-a-month building jobs in Russia - only to be hurled into Putin's frontline meat-grinder](#)", *Daily Mail*, 4 July 2025.

494 Cristina López-Gottardi is an Assistant Professor at the University of Virginia's Miller Center; Kirichenko, "Cubans Could Soon Become Russia's Largest Foreign Fighting Force", *supra* note 480.

495 Diaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477.

rumour.⁴⁹⁶ According to the interviewee, citizenship is contingent on completing one year of military service, an outcome few achieve.⁴⁹⁷ Payments are equally opaque as the interviewee recounted: “Perhaps the money had been transferred, but I couldn’t verify it because there are no stores or places to make purchases on the front line.”⁴⁹⁸

3.5.3 Recruitment processes

Recruitment often begins with online advertisements or agents operating in Cuba who promote employment opportunities in Russia under the guise of civilian contracts. According to Ukrainian diplomats working in the region, many of these recruiters are Cuban citizens who had previously resided in Russia. These individuals reportedly act as intermediaries with Russia-based recruiters with ties to the Russian military, “inviting” friends or acquaintances to go to Russia in exchange for financial incentives.

The Cuban POW interviewed by TH recounted that his recruitment began with an advertisement on Facebook, written entirely in Spanish, offering non-military work opportunities in Russia.⁴⁹⁹ The whole recruitment process took place online via a digital form to be filled out with personal information. When asked about potential fees for travel or administrative services, he responded: “All the Cubans who go to Russia don’t have to pay. One-way from Cuba to Russia costs 1,000 or 2,000 dollars. Which Cuban can pay that?”⁵⁰⁰ After sending a photograph of his passport, he was promptly informed regarding his departure. Upon arrival in Russia, he was met by an individual holding a sign with his name. The ease of transportation is reportedly facilitated by the Cuba-Russia visa-free agreement.⁵⁰¹ Recruits are then transferred to military bases, where they are compelled to sign contracts written entirely in Russian, with no interpretation provided, a pattern consistent with that documented across other recruitment contexts.⁵⁰²

As in cases documented elsewhere in this report, the moment of realisation typically comes at the military base, not through any formal disclosure, but through the issuing of a uniform. This was confirmed by the Cuban POW interviewed, who stated: “It was not what I thought; it was something else, to enter an army.”⁵⁰³ Similar accounts have been provided by other confirmed recruits, such as Frank Darío Yarosey Manfuga, Alex Rolando Vega Díaz and Andorf Antonio Velázquez García.⁵⁰⁴ Vega Díaz and Velázquez García, aged just 19, released a video in August 2023, describing how they were recruited under false pretences: “It’s all been a scam.”⁵⁰⁵ Promised construction work and pay of approximately EUR 1,700, they instead had their passports confiscated and were issued military uniforms and rifles. Vega Díaz’s mother confirmed that her son had been recruited via Facebook by a Russian contact and a Cuban intermediary, who assured her that the work was unrelated to the conflict. Velázquez García’s father had warned of the exploitation of Cuban youth through deceptive recruitment schemes. The case of Francisco García further illustrates the coercion and violence involved in this process.⁵⁰⁶ Once in Moscow, he and other Cubans were met by military trucks and transported to an abandoned facility guarded by armed police. They were detained there for ten days and forced to sign contracts in Russian, under threats of physical harm. García later recounted that

496 Interview with Ca-2 conducted by TH.

497 Fourteen of the sixteen POWs interviewed by TH did not obtain citizenship.

498 Interview with Ca-2 conducted by TH; “[Putin offers citizenship to foreigners who fight for Russia](#)”, *Reuters*, 4 January 2024.

499 Interview with Ca-2 conducted by TH.

500 Ibid.

501 Diaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477.

502 Ibid.

503 Interview with Ca-2 conducted by TH.

504 Ernesto Alvarez, “[Cuban Captive in Ukraine: ‘I Don’t Want to Return to Cuba or Russia’](#)”, *Cuba Headlines*, 23 February 2025; León, *supra* note 484.

505 Ibid.

506 Berezhnaya, 2025, *supra* note 493.

he realised at that moment that “[his] life was over”. Of the 90 Cubans in his unit, more than half were reportedly killed in action.

Reports also highlight extortion by recruiters and officers. In one notable case, a recruiter identified as Russian citizen Elena Smirnova, and her accomplices, admitted to having embezzled the salaries of 300–400 Cuban recruits.⁵⁰⁷ Using her personal connections made through travel and marriage to a Cuban national, she built a network in Russia and Cuba to facilitate the engagement of poor Cubans to fight in Ukraine. She allegedly offered to continue her recruitment operations, claiming to have already enlisted between 6,000 and 7,000 additional individuals. Posting in Spanish on social media including VKontakte and Facebook groups, such as *Cubanos en Moscú*, Smirnova sought out individuals willing to sign contracts with the Russian Army for RUB 204,000 (approximately EUR 2,300) per month, combined with promises of Russian citizenship and purported employment in “construction”.⁵⁰⁸ Smirnova advanced transportation and initial accommodation expenses and recovered these, and more, from the signing bonuses of new recruits after contracts were signed with the local Military Commissariat. Taking advantage of the language barrier, men were convinced to disclose their bank card details enabling the unauthorised withdrawal of large sums from their accounts.⁵⁰⁹

Regarding Colombia, a 2026 investigation revealed how networks operate in Bogotá to recruit former military personnel.⁵¹⁰ According to the findings, some former military personnel have signed contracts directly with the Russian Federation, including loyalty and service clauses in accordance with the internal regulations of its Armed Forces. Complaints have emerged, mainly concerning deployment destinations that differed substantially from what had been promised. Two principal recruitment channels were identified: word-of-mouth within military circles, and social media/messaging platforms. Several families identified an alleged ex-military man as an initial point of contact, offering security jobs that later ended in transfers to Russia with incorporation into Russian military forces. A WhatsApp group was documented offering salaries of EUR 2,200–2,500 per month, with an initial payment of approximately EUR 17,000, figures that are similar to those in other national contexts.

At the same time, a significant number of Colombians are fighting on the Ukrainian side. Between 2,000 and 3,000 are estimated to have joined the Ukrainian army as contract soldiers, often motivated by offers of high salaries and limited opportunities at home, especially among veterans, as well as ideological motives.⁵¹¹ They mainly learn about such opportunities through social media. However, there have been several complaints from soldiers and relatives. For example, some struggle to obtain death certificates, which are a necessity for several administrative procedures in Colombia, since the bodies need to be recovered first, which is extremely difficult in Russian-occupied territories. Others claim they never received the compensation promised by the Ukrainian authorities.⁵¹²

507 Diaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477; Justyna Lisova, “Russian women accused of involvement in foreign recruitment for Ukraine war now fight in Storm Z unit”, *Hromadske*, 13 October 2025.

508 Elizaveta Surnacheva, Andrei Soshnikov, Svetlana Martova, *Systema* “Cartel ‘Soap Flowers’: How a tourism agent and hairdresser from Ryazan delivered foreigners to the war against Ukraine - and ended up in the trenches themselves”, *RFE/RL, Current Time*, 13 October 2025.

509 *Ibid.*

510 “La empresa de dos coroneles (r): así reclutan a exmilitares en Bogotá para ir a Rusia”, *El Expectador*, 22 February 2026.

511 Diego Stacey, “Families demand repatriation of bodies of Colombians who died in Ukraine: ‘This war is a slaughterhouse for foreigners’”, *El País*, 20 December 2025; Marco Pereira, Phoebe Keen, Rafael Abuchaybe, “I am ready to give my life for Ukraine.” “Why Colombians are so important on the front line”, [in Ukrainian], *BBC News*, 14 February 2026.

512 *Ibid.*

3.5.4 State involvement or response

Cuban authorities began addressing the recruitment of their nationals into the Russian military after international media exposure in mid-2023.⁵¹³ On 5 September 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Cuba issued a statement acknowledging “attempts at recruitment” of Cuban nationals,⁵¹⁴ while simultaneously rejecting what it described as “the false accusations that the United States government [was] spreading about Cuba’s alleged participation in the military conflict in Ukraine.”⁵¹⁵ It described these claims as politically motivated and unfounded. The Ministry declared that the Cuban state neither sends nor authorises its citizens to fight abroad and maintains a “zero-tolerance policy” towards mercenarism and human trafficking.⁵¹⁶ However, this position appears to be more ambiguous. On 14 September 2023, Cuba’s ambassador to Russia, Julio Antonio Garmendia Peña, stated that “we have nothing against Cubans who just want to sign a contract and legally take part in this operation with the Russian army”.⁵¹⁷ He added “But we oppose illegality and these operations that have nothing to do with the legal area.”

Following these statements, the Cuban Ministry of the Interior announced the arrest of 17 individuals allegedly linked to recruitment networks operating on Cuban soil.⁵¹⁸ The authorities also reported that between 2023 and 2025, Cuban courts had conducted nine criminal proceedings for mercenarism involving 40 defendants.⁵¹⁹ Of these, 26 individuals were convicted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 5 to 14 years. However, evidence indicates that Cuban authorities allowed hundreds of young men to leave the country legally for what were declared “tourism” trips, without any effective immigration control.⁵²⁰ Political scientist Alexander Motyl has argued that the scale and organisation of the recruitment effort “would be impossible without the approval of Cuban authorities,” and that Havana may be exploiting its ties with Moscow to reinforce its revolutionary identity and signal independence from Washington.⁵²¹ This assessment was echoed during the security briefing in Washington. Ukrainian officials noted that ordinary Cubans rarely possess foreign passports or the resources for regular transatlantic travel, suggesting involvement by state-linked intermediaries. The phenomenon has been described as “state-enabled human trafficking and proxy militarisation”.⁵²²

While Havana officially denounces the recruitment as illegal and distances itself from any connection to Moscow’s military operations, the available evidence suggests that, at the very least, the Cuban state failed to protect its citizens from being recruited into a foreign war under false pretences; at worst, it may have had an interest in the economic and political dynamics that this recruitment network generated.

In December 2025, Colombian authorities addressed the issue by approving a bill to ratify the 1989 International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries (UN Mercenary Convention), aiming to curb involvement in foreign conflicts.⁵²³

513 León, *supra* note 484; Harriet Hidalgo, “[Jóvenes cubanos fueron obligados a convertirse en mercenarios al servicio de Rusia: hablan familiares en NTN24](#)”, *Ntn24*, 7 September 2023.

514 *Ibid.*; “[Cuba denies participating in the war in Ukraine](#)” (“Cuba denies participating in the war”), *The Economic Times*, 12 October 2025.

515 “Cuba denies participating in the war”, *supra* note 514.

516 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Cuba, “[Cuba Categorically Rejects Claims of Participation in the Conflict in Ukraine](#)”, 11 October 2025.

517 Nora Gámez Torres, “[Cuban diplomat: government will not stop its citizens from fighting for Russia in Ukraine](#)”, *Miami Herald*, 14 September 2023.

518 “[Cuba arrests 17 over alleged recruitment of Cubans to fight for Russia in Ukraine](#)”, *The Guardian*, 8 September 2023.

519 “Cuba denies participating in the war”, *supra* note 514.

520 León, *supra* note 484.

521 Kirichenko, “Cubans Could Soon Become Russia’s Largest Foreign Fighting Force”, *supra* note 480.

522 Díaz-Balart, 2026, *supra* note 477.

523 Harriet Barber, “[US puts sanctions on network said to funnel Colombian mercenaries to Sudan](#)”, *The Guardian*, 9 December 2025.

CHAPTER 4

International Legal Framework

This chapter sets out the international legal framework applicable to the participation of foreign fighters in Russia's war against Ukraine. This framework is then considered in relation to several selected states, namely Russia (Chapter 5) and North Korea (Chapter 6), Kazakhstan (Chapter 7.1), Nepal (Chapter 7.2), Cuba (Chapter 7.3) and Kenya (Chapter 7.4), addressing state responsibility, and the individual criminal liability of foreign fighters and recruiters is assessed under the respective domestic legal frameworks.

4.1 The Legal Framework Applicable to “Foreign Fighters”

The participation of foreign nationals in Russia's war against Ukraine is not regulated by a single, unified legal regime. Instead, it engages multiple branches of international law that apply concurrently, resulting in a fragmented legal framework. Crucially, while international humanitarian law (IHL) governs the conduct of hostilities and the treatment of individuals by parties to the armed conflict (4.1.1), the obligations of states, including states of origin of foreign fighters to prevent predatory recruitment may arise under different provisions of transnational criminal law (4.1.2), namely obligations to prevent mercenary activities, and obligations to prevent human trafficking. Additionally, international and regional human rights frameworks prohibiting forced labour and servitude apply (4.1.3).

4.1.1 International humanitarian law (IHL)

International humanitarian law as the *lex specialis* governing situations of armed conflict applies to both Russia and Ukraine by virtue of the existence of an ongoing international armed conflict between the two states.⁵²⁴ While IHL does not prohibit the use of mercenaries by states, it regulates the status, rights, and treatment of individuals participating in hostilities.

According to Article 43 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (AP I), to which both Ukraine and Russia are parties, members of the armed forces, militias or volunteer corps forming part of such armed forces are combatants. Combatants are entitled to participate in hostilities and are granted immunity from criminal prosecution for lawful acts of war, subject only to liability for serious violations of IHL. When captured, combatants are entitled to prisoner of war (POW) status and must be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities.⁵²⁵

By contrast, foreign fighters do not benefit from combatant or POW status if they meet the definition of a “mercenary”, making them susceptible to prosecution for the mere participation in hostilities.⁵²⁶ Although the citizenship of combatants is irrelevant for determining POW status, as the main factor is their affiliation with the armed forces of the party to the conflict, a third nationality could raise suspicions that the captured individual is a mercenary.⁵²⁷ In cases of doubt as to whether a person is entitled to combatant or POW status, that person shall be granted POW status and be protected

524 There are no doubts regarding the classification of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia as an international armed conflict, both before and following the full-scale invasion. Common Article 2 to the Geneva Conventions (GC) recognises that an international armed conflict exists in particular when there is an armed conflict between two states or in the case of occupation. Both situations apply to Ukraine since 2014, given the direct involvement of the RAF in the occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts through control over military groups operating there, as well as to the subsequent 2022 armed attack that turned into a prolonged war of attrition against the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the continued occupation of parts of Ukrainian territory. The European Court of Human Rights has determined that the international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine began on 11 May 2014, as Russia exercised effective control over militants in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In 2022, following the full-scale invasion, the international armed conflict intensified.

525 Art. 118 GC III.

526 Art. 47 AP I.

527 ICRC Database, Treaties, States Parties and Commentaries, Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949, [Commentary of 2020](#) (“ICRC, Commentary to GC III, 2020”), Article 4 - Prisoners of war.

by Geneva Convention III relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (GC III) and AP I until a competent tribunal determines their status.⁵²⁸ However, as further examined below, the definition of “mercenary” under Article 47 AP I is highly restrictive, with most foreign fighters failing to meet its criteria. As a result, foreign fighters retain combatant status and are considered POWs, which changes the legal framework governing their repatriation.

4.1.2 Transnational criminal law

Obligations of states to prevent the predatory recruitment of foreign fighters primarily arise under two distinct legal regimes.

First, obligations to prevent the recruitment and use of mercenaries derive from the **1989 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries** (UN Mercenary Convention). In addition, such obligations can arise from regional treaties, such as the 1977 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention on the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa (OAU Convention on Mercenaries), however, none of the states selected for this analysis have ratified this instrument.

Second, where predatory recruitment amounts to human trafficking, state obligations arise under the **Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children** (Palermo Protocol), and, where applicable, the **Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings**.⁵²⁹

These instruments impose obligations on states of origin, but are also binding on Russia and Ukraine. As discussed further below, the Palermo Protocol may provide a more protective legal framework, particularly with respect to repatriation of trafficking victims, and may thus constitute *lex specialis* in relation to IHL where its conditions of applicability are met.

4.1.3 International human rights law (IHRL)

The legal framework is further complemented by applicable international and regional human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), regional human rights treaties, as well as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), prohibiting forced labour and servitude.

4.2 Responsibility of Third States for Sending Foreign Fighters or Failing to Prevent Their Recruitment and Departure to Russia

4.2.1 Prohibition on the recruitment and use of mercenaries

The UN Mercenary Convention, ratified by 38 states, establishes several binding obligations on states, including the duty to prohibit the recruitment, use, financing, or training of mercenaries; to establish a criminalisation framework under national law; and to undertake necessary measures to prosecute individuals involved in such activities.⁵³⁰ Additionally, states are specifically required to adopt appropriate measures to prevent the recruitment, use, financing, or training of mercenaries when such activities are intended to oppose the legitimate exercise of the inalienable right of peoples to self-determination.⁵³¹

528 Art. 45(1) AP I.

529 [Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings 2005](#).

530 UN Mercenary Convention, Articles 2, 5 and 9.

531 UN Mercenary Convention, Art. 5.

4.2.2 Most “foreign fighters” fail to satisfy the mercenary definition

Despite the widespread use of the term “mercenaries” in the media, which often applies it to foreign fighters in both the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces, the legal criteria set out in the UN Mercenary Convention are extremely narrow.⁵³² Article 1 of the Convention establishes the following five cumulative criteria, defining a mercenary as “any person who:

- i. is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict;
- ii. is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that party;
- iii. is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict;
- iv. is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict; and
- v. has not been sent by a state which is not a party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces.”⁵³³

These criteria are extremely difficult to fulfil, which makes their application in practice, including in the case of foreign nationals fighting on Russia’s side, nearly impossible. While this report offers a broader interpretation of certain criteria, which may not strictly correspond to their established interpretation in practice, it does not intend to set a new standard for the interpretation of Article 1 of the UN Mercenary Convention. Rather, it seeks to revive the debate on the applicability of the legal definition of mercenary to contemporary realities.

In particular, *criterion (b)* requires that mercenaries must be motivated to participate in the hostilities by a desire for private gain, and that the promised material compensation must be substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions within the armed forces of the party to the conflict. The Article requires a mental element: the person must be motivated specifically by the desire for personal gain.⁵³⁴

In the case of foreign fighters in the Russian army, “private gain” is not limited to monetary remuneration. As analysed in **Chapter 2.1.2**, since 2022, Russia has introduced a simplified procedure for obtaining citizenship for foreign contract soldiers and their families. For citizens of many states, a Russian passport is of significant value: legal access to the labour market, social services, and the possibility of regularising the legal status of their family. Notably, some foreign fighters cite citizenship rather than monetary payment as their primary motivation.⁵³⁵ As one foreign fighter in the Russian army stated: “I knew about the risks, but I decided to join anyway... Not just for money, but because first of all, I want a Russian passport.”⁵³⁶ Thus, even if the monetary reward on its own does not significantly exceed payments to Russian military personnel, all the combined benefits should be considered, i.e. salary, citizenship, and family benefits, which may substantially exceed the compensation of Russian soldiers of similar rank, since Russian citizens already have these rights by default and do not obtain them through the participation in hostilities.

The issue is then whether citizenship could be regarded as part of the “material compensation” that is significantly in excess of that paid to members of the belligerent’s armed forces. There is neither a uniform interpretation of what constitutes “material compensation” in IHL, nor a substantive analysis of this term in commentaries or academic literature, which typically refer simply

532 E. Kwakwa, “The Current Status of Mercenaries in the Law of Armed Conflict” (1990) 14 *Hastings Int’l & Comp. L. Rev.* 67, pp. 73-74, referring to G. Best, *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London (1980), p. 328, n. 83.

533 UN Mercenary Convention, Art. 1(1).

534 Antonio Cassese, “Mercenaries: Lawful Combatants or War Criminals?”, *ZaöRV* Vol. 40, 1980, pp. 1–30, p. 25.

535 Larsen and Cold-Ravnkilde, 2025, *supra* note 25.

536 *Ibid.*

to financial remuneration.⁵³⁷ Dictionaries define material compensation as a certain reward in tangible form, where tangible is “real and not imaginary; able to be shown, touched, or experienced”.⁵³⁸ Although citizenship is not tangible in the physical sense, it generates concrete and measurable economic consequences, especially for people coming from low-income countries. Given that citizenship motivation is perceived by those joining the Russian army as something tangible from the perspective that they are expecting a tangible improvement in their material situation, such remuneration could potentially be considered “material compensation”.

Additionally, *criterion (d)* excludes members of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict from the mercenary definition. However, the majority of foreign nationals in the Russian army formally sign contracts with Russia’s MoD, which seemingly precludes mercenary classification.

Yet, Article 43 AP I defines armed forces as “all organised armed forces”, where “organised” requires fighting with “a collective character, conducted under proper control and according to rules, as opposed to individuals operating in isolation with no corresponding preparation or training.”⁵³⁹ Additionally, these forces “shall be subject to an internal disciplinary system which, inter alia, shall enforce compliance with the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict.”⁵⁴⁰ This includes the obligations of the party to the conflict under the rules of IHL and, in particular, to provide instructions to its forces on its application.

The report questions whether a person who has formally signed a military contract but has not received proper training, or instructions on the rules of IHL, and who serves under commanders with whom he or she does not share a common language (rendering “proper control” impossible) can genuinely be considered a “member of the armed forces” within the meaning of Article 43 of AP I. Several factors undermine the assumption that contractual incorporation alone is sufficient to confer such status. First, the requirement under Article 43 that armed forces be “organised” implies substantive or at least integrative military training. Second, “proper control” requires effective command communication; when commanders and subordinates do not speak the same language, the chain of command is fundamentally disrupted. Third, Article 43 requires a disciplinary system that ensures compliance with IHL, but without training in IHL in an understandable language, this requirement cannot be met.

As a result of the restrictive criteria, foreign fighters recruited into Russia’s Armed Forces typically do not fulfil the mercenary definition set out in Article 1 of the UN Mercenary Convention. However, in practice, specific obligations, such as the obligation to take appropriate measures to prevent the recruitment of mercenaries under the Convention can also apply to the recruitment of foreign fighters, especially in cases where domestic law provides for a broader definition of mercenaries, and as soon as there is a mere suspicion that a person might fall under the UN Mercenary Convention.

4.2.3 Gap: no duty to prevent foreign enlistment short of mercenarism

Although a number of states criminalise or otherwise restrict foreign enlistment in their domestic legislation,⁵⁴¹ there is currently no general international obligation for states to prevent the voluntary recruitment of their nationals in foreign armed forces where such enlistment does not meet the legal definition of mercenarism, other than the so-called law on neutrality. Specifically, Article 4 of Hague Convention V on respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land requires states to prevent the formation of corps of combatants or the opening of recruitment agencies on their territories to assist the belligerents.⁵⁴²

537 Yves Sandoz, Christophe Swinarski and Bruno Zimmermann (eds), *Commentary on the Additional Protocols* (“*Commentary on the Additional Protocols*, 1987”), ICRC, Geneva, 1987, Art. 47 AP I, para. 1807.

538 “Material compensation”, *Reverso English Dictionary* (<https://dictionary.reverso.net/english-definition/material+compensation>).

539 *Commentary on the Additional Protocols*, 1987, *supra* note 537, Art. 43 AP I, para. 1672.

540 Art. 43(1) AP I.

541 See, for example, Kenya, South Africa, and Kazakhstan.

542 UN Human Rights Council, *Recruitment, including predatory recruitment, of mercenaries and mercenary-related actors*, Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination (“*Recruitment, including predatory recruitment, of mercenaries and mercenary-related actors*”), A/HRC/54/29, 12 July 2023, para. 13; see also ICRC, *Commentary to GC I*, para. 1803.

4.3 State Responsibility for the Failure to Prevent Human Trafficking, to Prosecute Perpetrators, and to Repatriate Trafficking Victims

Given the fact that the issues addressed by this report concern citizens of third states, a significant proportion of whom were recruited from abroad and transported across borders, often through deception and coercion, one of the possible legal qualifications is human trafficking. The right to be free from trafficking is often interpreted as part of the right to be free from slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour within the meaning of the ICCPR and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).⁵⁴³ The main international framework with regard to human trafficking is set in the Palermo Protocol, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, to which the Russian Federation and Ukraine are parties.⁵⁴⁴ The offence is composed of three elements:

- i. *Act*: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons;
- ii. *Means*: the threat of use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person; where any of these means have been used, the consent of a person is irrelevant.⁵⁴⁵
- iii. *Purpose*: exploitation, such as exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.⁵⁴⁶

The obligations of states under the Palermo Protocol are often summarised as the **3 Ps**: states are obliged to **prevent** human trafficking, **protect** victims, and **prosecute** traffickers.

4.3.1 Prevention

States Parties are required to establish comprehensive policies, programmes and other measures to prevent and combat trafficking in persons⁵⁴⁷ and to take measures, including through cooperation with civil society and bilateral or multilateral state cooperation, to alleviate the factors that make persons vulnerable to trafficking.⁵⁴⁸ Moreover, States Parties are required to adopt or strengthen legislative measures to discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation of persons that leads to trafficking.⁵⁴⁹ With respect to border control, States Parties are required to strengthen them to the extent necessary to prevent and detect trafficking in persons.⁵⁵⁰

543 On the ECHR, see, for example, *Rantsev v. Cyprus and Russia*, App. No. 25965/04 (ECtHR, 7 January 2010) para. 282; *J v. Austria*, App. No. 58216/12 (ECtHR, 17 January 2017) paras 103–106. On the ICCPR, see, for example Paul M. Taylor, "Article 8: Slavery, Servitude and Forced or Compulsory Labour", in *A Commentary on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: The UN Human Rights Committee's Monitoring of ICCPR Rights* ("Taylor, 2020"), 2020, Cambridge University Press, pp. 235–236; V. Stoyanova, "United Nations Against Slavery: Unravelling Concepts, Institutions and Obligations" (*MichJIL*, Vol. 38(3), 2017, p. 359; UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), Concluding Observations on Slovakia, CCPR/CO/78/SVK, 22 August 2003, para. 10; HRC, Concluding Observations on Hungary, CCPR/C/HUN/CO/5, 16 November 2010, para. 12; HRC, Concluding Observations on Mongolia, CCPR/C/MNG/CO/5, 2 May 2011, para. 21., cited in Matilda Gillis, "Modern Slavery in Armed Conflict: Foreign 'Forced Fighters' in Ukraine" ("Gillis, 2025"), *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* Vol. 74(3), 2025, pp. 707–721.

544 [Signatories and Parties to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children](#), supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, United Nations Treaty Collection.

545 Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(b).

546 Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(a).

547 Palermo Protocol, Art. 9.1.

548 Palermo Protocol, Art. 9.4.

549 Palermo Protocol, Art. 9.5.

550 Palermo Protocol, Art. 11.

4.3.2 Protection, including Facilitating the Repatriation of Trafficking Victims

States Parties are required not only to provide for the physical safety of victims of trafficking while they are within their territory, but also to facilitate their repatriation “without undue or unreasonable delay”.⁵⁵¹

As noted above, repatriation is one of the main challenges associated with foreign fighters fighting for Russia and captured by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Currently, such fighters are granted POW status by the Ukrainian authorities. In particular, according to Article 118 of GC III, “prisoners of war shall be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities”,⁵⁵² and must be returned to the side “on which they depend”, that is, to the state whose armed forces they represented, even if they do not have citizenship of that side of the conflict.⁵⁵³ Nevertheless, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Commentary notes that POWs may refuse to return to the state on which they depend. Such a request cannot be based on “mere convenience”; there must be “serious reasons for fearing” that the person may face real risks of “unjust measures affecting his life or liberty, especially on grounds of race, social class, religion or political views, and that consequently repatriation would be contrary to the general principles of international law for the protection of the human being”.⁵⁵⁴ Another reason for refusal may be a reasonable fear of punishment for the mere fact of having been captured and interned, or in cases of desertion or defection to the enemy.⁵⁵⁵ Such persons may seek refuge in a detaining country or any other country, and, in particular if the person is a citizen of a third country, they may return to their country of origin.⁵⁵⁶

This report suggests a reading of Article 118 informed by international human rights law (IHRL), the latter acting as *lex specialis* with respect to POWs who are also potential victims of human trafficking. Such an interpretation results in the obligation of the detaining state and the state of origin to take appropriate diplomatic and other measures to facilitate the repatriation of fighters who were victims of predatory recruitment without undue delay, acting in the best interests of the individual. Dr Matilda Gillis introduced the concept of “forced fighters” to refer to persons who have been “misled or tricked into participating in an armed conflict”, arguing that such persons should receive protection beyond the guarantees provided to combatants, in particular, the right to repatriation to their countries of origin, rather than to the state on which they depend under IHL.⁵⁵⁷ In practical terms, Article 118(2) of GC III provides only for the possibility of agreeing on a repatriation plan between the parties to the conflict and does not mention the conclusion of such agreements with third parties. However, such an agreement may be highly relevant in cases where thousands of citizens of a particular state have been recruited by a party to the conflict.

4.3.3 Prosecution

States are required to criminalise and prosecute perpetrators of human trafficking, including attempted “human trafficking” and accomplice liability, and specifically those who organise such practices.⁵⁵⁸

551 Palermo Protocol, Art. 8.1.

552 Geneva Convention III, Art. 118.

553 ICRC, Commentary to GC III, 2020, Art. 118, para. 4447.

554 Ibid, para. 4470.

555 Ibid.

556 Ibid.

557 Gillis, 2025, *supra*, note 543, p. 709.

558 Palermo Protocol, Art. 5.2(a)-(c).

4.4 Other Human Rights Violations

4.4.1 Servitude

Article 8(1)-(2) of the ICCPR, to which both Ukraine and Russia are parties, stipulates that slavery and the slave trade in all their forms shall be prohibited, and that no one shall be held in servitude.⁵⁵⁹ Additionally, Article 4(1) of the ECHR states that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude.⁵⁶⁰

Servitude is generally understood as a slavery-like practice and applies to “all conceivable forms of dominance and degradation of human being by human being”.⁵⁶¹ The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has established that servitude means “an obligation to provide one’s services that is imposed by the use of coercion” and the difference with forced labour “consists in the feeling of the victims that their condition is unchangeable and that the situation is not likely to improve”.⁵⁶² As further analysed in **Chapter 5.3.1**, servitude is recognised as a form of exploitation and therefore an element of human trafficking.

4.4.2 Forced labour

According to Article 8(3)(a) of the ICCPR, to which both Ukraine and Russia are parties, “no one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour”.⁵⁶³ The ECHR provides identical wording; however, since September 2022, Russia is no longer a member of the Council of Europe and consequently no longer bound by the ECHR.⁵⁶⁴ A similar prohibition is contained in the ILO Forced Labour Convention 1930 (No. 29), ratified by Russia, which defines forced labour as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.”⁵⁶⁵

Russia’s predatory recruitment practices targeting foreign nationals to fight in the war in Ukraine appear to meet the definition of “forced labour”⁵⁶⁶. Nevertheless, such practices might be argued to fall under the so-called “military exemption”. In particular, the ICCPR excludes “any service of a military character” from the scope of the prohibition of forced labour, while the ILO Convention formulates this issue more narrowly: “any work or service exacted in virtue of compulsory military service laws for work of a purely military character”.⁵⁶⁷ While some scholars interpret this exception broadly, extending it to any military service, including that carried out by “forced fighters”,⁵⁶⁸ it appears that these instruments are primarily aimed at excluding compulsory military service (conscriptio) of citizens of their own country.⁵⁶⁹ This is particularly relevant to the situation of “foreign fighters” employed by Russia; such persons do not fall under the category of military conscription pursuant to Russian laws. Moreover, given that many foreign fighters were recruited through coercion or deception and subsequently forced into carrying out offensive operations on the front line, their situation is fundamentally different from that of Russian citizens who are obliged to serve in their armed forces in case of conscription, even if they do so against their will.

559 Art. 8, ICCPR.

560 Art. 4, ECHR.

561 William Schabas, *UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Nowak’s CCPR Commentary*, 2019, NP Engel, p. 227, as cited in Gillis, 2025, *supra*, note 543, p. 715.

562 ECtHR, *Siliadin v. France*, Judgment, 26 July 2005, paras 123–124; ECtHR, *C.N. and V. v. France*, Judgment, 11 October 2012, App. No. 67724/09, para. 91, as cited in Gillis, 2025, *supra*, note 543, p. 715.

563 Art. 8(3)(a), ICCPR.

564 Art. 4(2), ECHR.

565 Art. 1(a), ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29).

566 UN Human Rights Council, “Recruitment, including predatory recruitment, of mercenaries and mercenary-related actors”, *supra*, note 602, para. 38.

567 Art. 8(3)(c)(ii), ICCPR; Art. 2(2)(a), ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29).

568 Gillis, 2025, *supra*, 543, p. 714.

569 Taylor, 2020, *supra* note 543; William A. Schabas, “Prohibition of Slavery and Forced Labour”, in *The European Convention on Human Rights: A Commentary*, Oxford Commentaries on International Law, 2015, Oxford University Press, pp. 214–216.

4.4.3 State Responsibility

A state can incur international responsibility for violations of IHL, international human rights law and breaches of other obligations under international law that are attributable to it.⁵⁷⁰ Under the rules of state responsibility, reflected in the Draft Articles on State Responsibility for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ASRIWA), conduct or omission is attributable to the state if it is committed by its de jure or de facto organs⁵⁷¹ or persons acting under its direction or control.⁵⁷²

Under Article 6 of ASRIWA, the conduct of an organ placed at the disposal of one state by another state shall be considered an act of the former state under international law "if the organ is acting in the exercise of elements of the governmental authority of the state at whose disposal it is placed," such as participating in an armed conflict. Commenting on Article 6, the International Law Commission (ILC) has explained that in "performing the functions entrusted to it by the beneficiary state, the organ must also act in conjunction with the machinery of that State and under its *exclusive direction and control*, rather than on instructions from the sending State."⁵⁷³ The ILC further provides that in limited circumstances an organ of one state "acts on the joint instructions of its own and another State... In these cases, the conduct in question is attributable to both States."⁵⁷⁴

570 International Law Commission (ILC), "Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, with commentaries", *Yearbook of the International Law Commission*, 2001 ("ILC, 2001"), Vol. II (Part Two), Art. 2.

571 Private entities or groups can be equated with state organs when the degree of state control over them amounts to their "complete dependence" on the state. Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (*Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro*) (Merits) Judgment International Court of Justice (ICJ) Reports 2007, paras 392-393; see also ECtHR, *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* (Nos. 8019/16, 43800/14, 28525/20 and 11055/22), Grand Chamber Judgment, 9 July 2025, para. 363.

572 Ibid, Arts 4 and 8.

573 Emphasis added. ILC, 2001, *supra* note 570, page 44, para. 3.

574 Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

Russia

5.1 Russia's State Responsibility For the Use of Foreign Fighters

Russia has not ratified the UN Mercenary Convention and is therefore not bound by its provisions regarding the prohibition on the recruitment or use of mercenaries. At the domestic level, Article 359 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation proscribes mercenarism, however, defining “mercenary” broadly as “a person who acts for the purpose of obtaining a material reward, and who is not a citizen of the state in whose armed conflict or hostilities he participates, who does not reside permanently on its territory, and also who is not a person fulfilling official duties”.⁵⁷⁵ At least formally, Russia integrates foreign fighters into its armed forces by having them sign contracts with the MoD, which removes them from possible criminal scrutiny at the national level. Indeed, our research has not revealed any domestic prosecutions of foreign combatants fighting on Russia's side, tending to show that the practice is state-organised or approved, even when conducted by the Wagner Group and other Russia-linked entities.

By contrast, Russia declared in 2022 that “none of the mercenaries the West is sending to Ukraine to fight for the nationalist regime in Kyiv can be considered as combatants in accordance with international humanitarian law or enjoy the status of prisoners of war”.⁵⁷⁶ The Russian authorities and the administrations of the so-called “Donetsk People's Republic” (DPR) and “Luhansk People's Republic” (LPR) under their control, have effectively implemented this position in practice. In particular, in June 2022, a court in the occupied DPR sentenced two British citizens and one Moroccan citizen to death for mercenary activities.⁵⁷⁷ Moreover, on 16 May 2024, a Russian court sentenced Australian volunteer Oscar Jenkins to 13 years' imprisonment on charges of mercenary activity.⁵⁷⁸ These prosecutions constitute violations of international humanitarian law: most foreign nationals who join Ukraine's side are integrated into the Ukrainian Armed Forces and hence do not meet the legal criteria for mercenarism under Article 47 of AP I.⁵⁷⁹ In particular, the International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine, established in 2022, was an official unit within the Territorial Defence Forces.⁵⁸⁰ Other foreign nationals served in regular brigades alongside Ukrainian citizens, such as in the Khartia Brigade or the 47th Separate Mechanised Brigade Magura.⁵⁸¹ They are therefore entitled to combatant and POW status and cannot be prosecuted for mere participation in hostilities.⁵⁸² With these prosecutions, Russia appears to be deliberately pursuing a strategy of violating norms of international humanitarian law in order to discourage foreign volunteers from joining the Ukrainian army.

575 Art. 359, Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

576 Jason Lemon, “Russia Vows Prosecution of Foreign Fighters After 16K Join Ukraine”, *Newsweek*, 4 March 2022.

577 Dan Bilefsky and Valerie Hopkins, “3 Foreign Fighters in Ukraine's Army Sentenced to Death in Russian-Held Territory”, *The New York Times*, 9 June 2022.

578 Donald Rothwell, “Sadly, Russia's Mercenary Verdict Means Oscar Jenkins Won't Be Coming Home Anytime Soon”, *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 28 May 2025.

579 Volodymyr Zelenskyy, “Appeal to Foreign Citizens to Help Ukraine in Fighting against Russia's Aggression”, Official Website of the President of Ukraine, 27 February 2022.

580 After the International Legion was disbanded at the end of 2024, its fighters were transferred to other units of the Ground Forces. Asami Terajima, “Everyone's in Shock - Ground Forces Reorganization Leaves International Legion Soldiers in Limbo”, *Kyiv Independent*, 7 January 2026.

581 David Pipe, “Khartia Brigade is forming an international battalion”, *Militaryland*, 23 May 2025; 47th Separate Mechanized Brigade “Magura”, Official Website, “About”.

582 Ilya Nuzov, “Mercenary or Combatant? Ukraine's International Legion of Territorial Defense under International Humanitarian Law”, *EJIL:Talk!*, 8 March 2022.

5.2 Russia's State Responsibility for International Crimes Committed by Foreign Fighters

The paucity of training in IHL and combat received by foreign fighters might increase the likelihood of them committing war crimes and other international crimes.⁵⁸³ Regardless of the legal qualification of the individual foreign fighters employed by Russia, as mercenaries or combatants, Russia incurs responsibility for any serious violations of IHL or IHRL committed by such individuals in connection with the war in Ukraine, as if they were carried out by Russian soldiers as *de jure* or *de facto* state agents, pursuant to Article 4 of ARSIWA, or acting under Russia's effective control within the meaning of Article 8 of ARSIWA.

This applies to foreign fighters that have signed contracts with the Russian MoD, as well as to those that have signed contracts with Wagner, Redut or other so-called "Private Military Companies" (PMCs).⁵⁸⁴ Because the name suggests that these are private commercial entities, individual combatants in Wagner have been referred to, and at times treated as, "mercenaries". Ukrainian courts have issued several convictions under Article 447 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine (mercenary activity) against members of Wagner, in particular against citizens of Belarus and Kazakhstan.⁵⁸⁵ However, this report does not consider that foreign nationals who fought in the war in Ukraine as part of these so-called PMCs should be classified as mercenaries.⁵⁸⁶ Given the level of subordination, dependence and integration with the RAF in Ukraine, the authors consider that Wagner and Redut constitute irregular armed forces under a command responsible to Russia, within the meaning of Article 43 of AP I.⁵⁸⁷ With respect to individual fighters, there is no reliable evidence that they received higher remuneration than soldiers of the regular Russian army, at least for their participation in the conflict in Ukraine. In any case, in 2023, the Russian government forced all combatants of so-called PMCs to sign contracts with the Russian MoD.⁵⁸⁸

One exception from this analysis might arise with respect to war crimes carried out by North Korean troops (see **Chapter 6**). Because these troops have been placed at the disposal of Russia by North Korea, within the meaning of Article 6 of ARSIWA, while continuing to operate under the "effective control" of North Korean leadership, both states could incur responsibility for international crimes committed by individual North Korean combatants, based on the particular circumstances surrounding the offence, including the established chain of command.⁵⁸⁹

5.3 Russia's State Responsibility For Human Trafficking and Forced Labour

Russia has ratified the Palermo Protocol, as well as both the ILO Forced Labour Convention 1930 (No. 29) and its 2014 Protocol, and has thus undertaken positive obligations to prevent trafficking, investigate and prosecute perpetrators, protect victims of trafficking, and cooperate internationally to combat the practice.⁵⁹⁰ As a signatory to the Protocol, Russia also has a negative obligation not to engage in human trafficking.⁵⁹¹

583 See, for example, Europol, "654 war crimes suspects tied to Russian paramilitary", October 2025.

584 Nikoloz Chkhaidze, "The Renewed Power Structure of Russian Private Military Companies", *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*, 5 February 2024.

585 *Ibid.*, see the cases of Andrey Gerilovich, a Wagner mercenary and Belarussian citizen who was convicted in Ukraine for mercenarism under Art. 447 of the Criminal Code, and Shyngys Seipiyev, a Kazakh citizen, who was found to have "voluntarily agreed to and subsequently signed a contract to serve with the Wagner PMC in Tyumen in October 2022".

586 Dmytro Koval and Andrii Latsyba, "Status of the so-called Wagner PMC under International Humanitarian Law", *Truth Hounds*, 20 September 2023.

587 *Ibid.*

588 Roman Petrenko, "Russian Defence Minister Forces All Mercenary Groups to Sign Contract with Russian MoD; Wagner Group's Chief Refuses", *Ukrainska Pravda*, 11 June 2023.

589 Marko Milanovic, "North Korea's Troop Deployment in the Russian War of Aggression against Ukraine: The DPRK as a Principal or as an Accomplice?" (Milanovic, 2024), *EJIL:Talk!*, 4 November 2024.

590 Articles 2, 5, 6 and 9, Palermo Protocol. The Protocol was signed by Russia on 12 December 2000 and ratified on 26 April 2004. Federal Law No. 26 -FZ, 26 April 2004.

591 A treaty requiring states to suppress and criminalise trafficking cannot reasonably be interpreted as permitting state organs to participate in trafficking activities. See, for example, ICJ, *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro*, ICJ Reports 2007, p. 43, paras 166–167 (holding that the obligation to prevent genocide "necessarily implies the prohibition of the commission of genocide by a State").

The research shows that Russia is *prima facie* responsible for violations of the Palermo Protocol in respect of both its negative and positive obligations, namely by committing and failing to prevent or punish human trafficking. With respect to the recruitment of foreign nationals who were already on Russian territory after February 2022, the report finds that Russia has intentionally engaged in predatory recruitment practices targeting primarily socio-economically vulnerable foreign migrants and students, employing any means available to sign them up to perform extremely dangerous combat missions in the war in Ukraine.⁵⁹² With respect to recruitment that begins outside Russian territory, Russia is responsible for having failed to prevent or suppress a global human trafficking scheme, by enabling, encouraging or disregarding predatory recruitment practices that ultimately benefit its war effort against Ukraine.

5.3.1 Russia's predatory recruitment of foreign fighters meets the "act", "means", "purpose" test of human trafficking

Russia is the state of both "recruitment" and "receipt" of thousands of socio-economically vulnerable individuals recruited to fight in the war in Ukraine. As the state that has orchestrated such recruitment, including by enabling thousands of fighters to sign contracts with the MoD, paying their salaries and providing them with weapons, uniforms and training, Russia meets the "act" requirement, both for individuals transported from abroad and those recruited within Russian territory; the term "recruitment" does not distinguish between domestic and transnational recruitment processes. The practice of recruiting citizens of third states in Russia or in their own countries to fight in Ukraine fulfils the transnational element required under Article 4 of the Palermo Protocol. While recruitment in Russia takes place primarily through state institutions, in recruiting fighters abroad Russia relies on obscure transnational networks of private intermediaries to facilitate the recruitment and transportation of such persons, frequently routing them through third countries.

As for the "means" element, numerous cases show that both Russian state representatives and private Russian or foreign organised groups exploit the vulnerable situation of persons seeking any opportunity to escape extreme poverty. These actors lure, deceive or coerce such persons into signing contracts with the RAF. The prohibited means – abuse of vulnerability, deception, and coercion – are employed at different stages of recruitment, sometimes cumulatively affecting the same individual.

In the case of foreign nationals present in Russia at the time of recruitment, particularly migrants from Central Asia, documented "means" include threat or use of physical force, including arbitrary arrests, beatings, and threats of violence, deportation or prosecution, in order to compel individuals to sign contracts with the MoD (see Chapters 2.2.1 and 3.1.3). Foreign nationals held in places of detention have been particularly susceptible to such forms of pressure, as confirmed by the interviewees from Morocco and Kyrgyzstan. As described in Chapters 2.2.1 and 3.1.3, these coercive tactics are often coupled with fraudulent or deceptive practices. Many foreign fighters, including the majority of those interviewed, initially sought out employment voluntarily but signed contracts because they were promised non-combat roles away from the front lines, such as in construction, security or cleaning services. Many foreign nationals have signed contracts without having been allowed to read them in a language they understand or without knowing what they are signing, as in cases where contracts were hidden in stacks of other documents unwittingly signed by recruits when faced with pressure from security forces.

Save for the express involvement of Russia's state institutions and the non-coercive initial approach, the means of recruitment are similar in relation to individuals who are outside of Russian territory. Taking advantage of the extreme poverty or conflict-affected backgrounds of young men, in places like Kyrgyzstan and Yemen, commercial entities, or individuals working within criminal networks with links to Russian state institutions, promise high-paying, usually civilian, employment, offer to

592 Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine 2026, *supra* note 127, para. 54.

pay for travel to Russia and facilitate tourist visas. This pattern has been documented in the cases of interviewed recruits from Cuba, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, among others. Even where contracts with the MoD are mentioned at this stage, these promises are reinforced with deception about the non-combat nature of the work.

After arriving in Russia, prospective fighters are often pressured into signing contracts by finding themselves in situations of dependency and subordination to handlers and agents they have never met. Numerous cases studied in this report show that individuals are taken directly from the airport to a military base or recruitment centre and asked to sign a contract, in Russian, with no translation provided, on the spot (see, for example, **Chapters 2.2.2, 3.1.3, 3.2.3, 3.3.3, 3.4.3**). Some have reported being threatened with violence, or having their phones and passports confiscated.⁵⁹³ The decision to sign must be assessed against the backdrop of irregular migration status in Russia, lack of access to meaningful justice mechanisms, absence of personal or professional connections, and insufficient financial means to travel back to their countries of origin. In such circumstances, the choice to proceed or refuse and risk prison, violence, or being left to their own devices with no means for survival in Russia, amounts to coercion bearing the hallmarks of human trafficking.⁵⁹⁴

With regard to the element of “purpose”, the report shows that Russia recruits such persons in order to send them into extremely dangerous active combat operations, where probabilities of death or injury are extremely high. All 16 interviewees reported participating in assaults of enemy positions, often referred to as “meat assaults”, a role they never expected to perform. The involuntary and exploitative nature of such service is further reflected in the fact that none of the foreign fighters who sought to leave the RAF after having signed the MoD contract was allowed to leave their unit or terminate the contract. Nor were they informed that termination of the contract would be impossible after the initial one-year term. Moreover, the RAF has been consistently characterised by a strict hierarchy known as *dedovshchina* (literally, “grandfather’s rule”), under which senior soldiers exercise power over new recruits through humiliation, military bullying and, in some cases, sexual violence. Human Rights Watch defines such relationships as servitude.⁵⁹⁵

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the Russian army is known to brutalise and exploit its own soldiers by sending wounded soldiers into combat operations, subjecting them to inhuman treatment and torture,⁵⁹⁶ and refusing leave.⁵⁹⁷ Foreign nationals find themselves facing similar treatment. A recurrent feature is that such fighters are deprived of the opportunity to refuse to participate in combat operations or return to their countries of origin, including being told to participate in enemy assaults “or die” and being threatened with death if they flee their positions.⁵⁹⁸ An illustrative case concerns a Nepali interviewee who was repeatedly beaten in front of his unit.⁵⁹⁹ Another documented case involves a Cuban recruit who was taken to the front line: when he refused to take up arms, he was subjected to physical violence and deprived of food.⁶⁰⁰ In yet another instance, video footage shows a scared Kenyan soldier with a mine strapped to his body, apparently forced by a Russian soldier to breach positions of the Ukrainian army (see **Chapter 3.4.3**, above). Such mistreatment likely amounts to torture or inhuman treatment, which constitutes a grave breach of international humanitarian law and potentially a war crime, entailing both state and individual criminal responsibility of the superior officers committing such abuse.

593 “Trompés, traumatisés”, *supra* note 87.

594 See, for example, ILO, *Tricked and Trapped: Human Trafficking in the Middle East*, 2013, pp. 15-16 (qualifying the practice of deceptive recruitment in relation to the nature of the job, the working and living conditions, as well as the inability to escape, and lack of justice mechanisms as employers, as amounting to human trafficking).

595 Human Rights Watch, *The Wrongs of Passage: Inhuman and Degrading Treatment of New Recruits in the Russian Armed Forces*, 19 October 2004.

596 Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine 2026, *supra* note 127, paras 56–57.

597 Paul Sonne, Anton Troianovski, Milana Mazaeva, Nataliya Vasilyeva and Alina Lobzina, “How Russia’s War Machine Brutalizes and Exploits Its Own Soldiers”, *The New York Times*, 31 December 2025.

598 “Trompés, traumatisés”, *supra* note 87.

599 Interview with NI-13 conducted by TH.

600 RFE/RL, “A group of mercenaries has been exposed. Another country is siding with Russia” [video, in Ukrainian], YouTube, 13 February 2025, at 10:40.

Moreover, foreign fighters' passports and phones are often taken away, depriving them of the opportunity to contact their families, leave the service or return to their countries of origin.⁶⁰¹ Most of the recruits interviewed for this report did not receive promised payments, in some cases leaving them in situations of debt bondage and without the financial means to escape even if an opportunity were to arise. These conditions generate a sense of abuse, helplessness and hopelessness, characteristic of situations of servitude, human trafficking and forced labour.⁶⁰² From the perspective of such fighters, the only realistic options are surrender to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, or almost certain injury or death.

5.3.2 Russia has violated its positive obligations under the Palermo Protocol

In addition to violating its negative duty not to commit “human trafficking”, Russia is violating its positive obligations to prevent and prosecute “human trafficking”, as well as to protect victims, including where recruitment is facilitated by organised criminal groups or private intermediaries acting transnationally but under Russia’s instruction or control. As noted by the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the rights of peoples to self-determination (UN Working Group on Mercenaries), states are subject to a due diligence obligation requiring them to exercise a measure of care in preventing and responding to the acts of private individuals or entities that interfere with the rights of individuals.⁶⁰³ In this regard, states should take reasonable steps to prevent human rights violations in contexts in which mercenary and mercenary-related actors operate and take the necessary measures to investigate those violations, identify those responsible, impose appropriate punishment and provide effective remedies to the victims.⁶⁰⁴

Contrary to these obligations, Russia has put in place policies and a legislative framework that have encouraged and facilitated human trafficking. As described in **Chapter 2.1.2**, above, new laws widening the age of eligible military recruits to between 18 and 65 years and relaxing the language and legal status requirements expanded the pool of foreign nationals eligible to join the RAF “under contract”. At the same time, Russian authorities have put in place a system of pressures and incentives to draw in more recruits. On the one hand, citizenship and long-term regularisation in Russia has become almost entirely dependent on military service. On the other, Russian citizenship for merely signing contracts with the MoD for service in the so-called SMO, for fighters and their families, and lucrative financial incentives for both combatants and recruiters were offered to stimulate demand. Referral bonuses offered by regional authorities for each foreign national recruited by a private or institutional recruiter have triggered a race between regions and municipalities. The increasing payouts for recruits beyond the near abroad further indicates intent to geographically expand the pool of recruits as wide as possible.

Public declarations by Moscow’s Mayor Sergey Sobyanin announcing the opening of a “one-stop shop” for migrants to sign contracts with the MoD, and its subsequent establishment, are further indications of Russia’s intent to target a group that is especially vulnerable to human rights violations in Russia (see **Chapter 2.2.1**). At the same time, Russia has not established an agency to monitor human trafficking activities nor to make periodic assessments measuring its compliance with the Palermo Protocol.⁶⁰⁵ Nor has Russia implemented a national action plan on combating human trafficking.⁶⁰⁶

601 Fortify Rights, Truth Hounds, “I was tricked into War”: *The Risk of Human Trafficking and Coerced Recruitment of Bangladeshi Men into Russia’s War in Ukraine*, 2026, p. 36.

602 “Recruitment, including predatory recruitment, of mercenaries and mercenary-related actors”, *supra* note 566, para. 30; See, for example, *Rantsev v. Cyprus and Russia*, App. No. 25965/04 (ECtHR, 7 January 2010), para. 282; *J v. Austria* App. No. 58216/12 (ECtHR, 17 January 2017) paras 103–106.

603 “Recruitment, including predatory recruitment, of mercenaries and mercenary-related actors”, *supra* note 566, para. 38.

604 *Ibid.*

605 US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report: Russia*, 2022.

606 *Ibid.*

While our research has uncovered no definitive proof of recruitment abroad being organised and directed by Russia, other than the alleged involvement of Russian Houses and Embassies in Kyrgyzstan and Kenya (see **Chapter 2.2.2**, and **Chapter 3.4.4**), public statements and even visits⁶⁰⁷ by foreign officials, including from Kenya, Botswana, Cuba, India, Nepal and South Africa, alerting Russia to this practice, coupled with Russia's issuance of so-called "stop orders" restricting recruitment from certain "friendly countries", indicate that Russia's political and military leadership has been at the very least aware of the scale and scope of the practice and nevertheless failed to take steps to prevent it.⁶⁰⁸ South Africa's negotiations with Russia to return fighters allegedly tricked into joining the war have even resulted in the purported return of some 17 recruits.⁶⁰⁹ Moreover, the issuance of thousands of tourist visas to men of age suitable for military service, invitation letters from Russia's municipal authorities and the alleged involvement of FSB, (see **Chapter 2.2.2**) all point to Russia being aware of the existence and extent of the transnational recruitment scheme, but failing to prevent it.

Russia's role in the organisation and at least tacit support of the transnational recruitment scheme is also evidenced by its failure to suppress the practice through punishment of recruiters. While Russia ratified the Palermo Protocol and amended its Criminal Code by introducing Article 127.1. (Trafficking in Human Beings) and Article 127.2 (Use of Slave Labour), our research has not revealed a single investigation or prosecution of state agents or private individuals for these offences. Legislation adopted in March 2026 prohibiting the extradition of foreign nationals who have served in the so-called "Special Military Operation" (see **Chapter 2.1.2**), presumably to stand trial for the crime of mercenarism or similar offences in the state of nationality, sends a further signal to foreign nationals that they will benefit from Russia's protection should they sign up with the RAF.

607 Otalor, 2026, *supra* note 441.

608 Ibid. Russia appears to have agreed to stop recruiting Kenyan nationals in response to a request made by Kenya's Foreign Minister, Musalia Mudavadi, to Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

609 Khanyisile Ngcobo, "[Ramaphosa thanks Putin for release of South Africans lured into Russia-Ukraine war](#)", *BBC*, 24 February 2026.

CHAPTER 6

North Korea

6.1 Regional Context

North Korea represents a legally, quantitatively and qualitatively distinct category of foreign fighter deployment compared to the cases documented in this report. Instead of decentralised, primarily economically motivated outflows driven by individual decisions, the Korean People's Army (KPA) deployments to Russia have been state-directed, strategically negotiated, and embedded within formal military-to-military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, formalised by the 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁶¹⁰

Russia's complicity in this system extends beyond passive tolerance. By enabling a fraudulent visa ecosystem, facilitating the continued presence of North Korean workers years after the UN-mandated repatriation deadline, and cooperating with Pyongyang in the forced repatriation of defectors,⁶¹¹ Russia has actively expanded North Korea's transnational repression apparatus. This cooperation has created a legal grey area in which North Korean workers, civilian and military alike, exist outside the protection of Russian labour laws while remaining tightly controlled by North Korean state security agents embedded within worksites and military units. As sanctions enforcement collapses, both states have been able to expand cooperation into forms of military labour previously unthinkable under the pre-2022 geopolitical order.⁶¹²

The deployment of North Korean troops to Russia is strongly linked to North Korea's long-standing and highly institutionalised system of labour export to Russia.⁶¹³ Since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Moscow and Pyongyang have significantly deepened their cooperation⁶¹⁴ in ways that challenge regional security structures and erode the international sanctions regime.⁶¹⁵ This convergence has provided an increasingly permissive environment for North Korea to deploy soldiers to an active conflict zone, but also to entrench a large clandestine labour presence within Russia. This environment has enabled North Korea to expand both the scale and the scope of its deployment of personnel, from construction and logging brigades to military specialists, engineers assigned to Russian defence production lines, and now combat troops deployed into Ukraine.⁶¹⁶ Although framed publicly as a strategic military partnership, the recent troop deployment reflects the same economic logic that has long underpinned North Korea's overseas labour system.⁶¹⁷

According to South Korean intelligence, North Korea has deployed a total of approximately 14,000 combat soldiers: 10,900 in late 2024 and 3,000 in January-March 2025.⁶¹⁸ In June 2025, Russia's former Minister of Defence, Sergey Shoigu, who has since been demoted to Security Council Secretary, stated that Pyongyang also agreed to send 5,000 military construction workers from two brigades and 1,000 sappers to clear mines in the Kursk region of Russia, temporarily occupied by

610 [Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#) [in Russian], 19 June 2024.

611 Lina Yoon, "North Koreans Face Repatriation from Russia", Human Rights Watch, 22 February 2022.

612 Molly Carlough and James Kennedy, "How North Korea has Bolstered Russia's War in Ukraine", Council on Foreign Relations, 25 November 2025.

613 Chan Hong Park, *North Korean Overseas Laborers in Russia*, Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2016.

614 Rachel Minyoung Lee, "North Korea's Acknowledgement of War Participation", *38 North*, 29 April 2025.

615 Youn Dam-rin, "The Impact of Strengthened Russia–North Korea Relations on International Politics", *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 34(1), pp. 29-68, 2025.

616 Jeong Tae Joo, "North Korea deploys specialized military construction unit to rebuild war-torn Russia", *Daily NK*, 30 October 2025.

617 Yeosang Yoon and Seungju Lee, *Human Rights and North Korea's Overseas Laborers: Dilemmas and Policy Challenges*, Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2015.

618 Lee Yu-Jung, "North Korea, Russia hail 'invincible' alliance on anniversary of strategic partnership treaty", *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 20 June 2025.

Ukraine.⁶¹⁹ In September 2025, South Korean intelligence estimated that around 2,000 North Korean soldiers had been killed in combat.⁶²⁰

Like their civilian counterparts, North Korean soldiers operate within a coercive command structure and are subject to the same system of wage confiscation, ideological surveillance, and restricted movement. Reports that military personnel deployed to Russia are earning the equivalent of EUR 1,700 per month,⁶²¹ almost all of which is remitted directly to the North Korean state, demonstrate the merging of North Korea's military and labour export strategies into a single apparatus designed to generate revenue while advancing Pyongyang's geopolitical objectives.⁶²² In addition to the economic advantages, Kim Jong-un underscored the importance of overseas combat experience for the KPA, linking the experience gained in the conflict to broader military preparedness, including readiness for potential armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula.⁶²³

6.2 Scale and Modalities of Deployment

The nature and scale of deployment of North Korean fighters stand out in comparison to other foreign combatants. In October 2024, South Korean and US intelligence reports about North Korea's troop deployment to Russia quickly became public.⁶²⁴ The Russian and North Korean governments had tried to keep the troop deployment secret and Pyongyang reportedly threatened treason charges against those who "spread the rumour".⁶²⁵ Alleged reports of North Korean soldiers wearing Russian uniforms and pretending to be Buryats to blend within the Russian troops soon began to surface.⁶²⁶ However, even in North Korea where information is tightly controlled, the news of thousands of soldiers being dispatched to a foreign country became widely known.⁶²⁷ In late April 2025, Moscow and Pyongyang officially acknowledged the troop deployment.⁶²⁸

North Korean soldiers were deployed in large numbers in the Russian offensive in the Kursk region in the Russian territory, then partially occupied by Ukraine. They suffered thousands of casualties because of their lack of experience or expertise in drone warfare in the relatively flat landscape, which differs greatly from the rugged mountainous terrain in the Korean peninsula where they were trained to fight. North Korean soldiers have reportedly killed themselves rather than face capture.⁶²⁹ As of March 2026, only two have been taken prisoner by Ukrainian forces.⁶³⁰

By August 2025, Pyongyang had moved from indirect reference to the overseas deployment to a formal public acknowledgment of combat deaths. State media reported that Kim Jong Un presided over a ceremony honouring commanders and fallen soldiers to whom he referred as "heroes who brought glory to the nation," describing their activities as part of the "KPA overseas operations unit" and referencing the "liberation of Kursk territory," without explicitly naming Russia or Ukraine.⁶³¹ At the ceremony honouring the dead, Kim Jong Un stated that additional North Korean soldiers

619 "North Korea to send 1,000 combat engineers, 5,000 workers to rebuild Kursk Region – Shoigu", TASS, 17 June 2025.

620 Yi Wonju, "About 2,000 N.K. troops deployed to Russia estimated to have been killed: NIS", *Yonhap News Agency*, 2 September 2025.

621 Taejun Kang, "Russia pays North Korean soldiers about \$2,000 a month: South's spy agency", *RFA*, 23 October 2024.

622 Mark F. Cancian and Chris H. Park, "North Korean Troops Deploy to Russia: What's the Military Effect?", Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 25 October 2024.

623 Colin Zwirko, Kristen Talman, and Seung-Yeon Chung, "North Korea honors over 100 dead troops from Ukraine war at Pyongyang ceremony" (Zwirko et al., 2025), *NK News*, 22 August 2025.

624 Chang Dong-woo, "N. Korea decides to send around 10,000 soldiers to support Russia in Ukraine war: Seoul", *Yonhap News Agency*, October 18, 2024; NATO, *Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte following the North Atlantic Council briefing on the DPRK's troop deployment to Russia*, 28 October 2024.

625 Jeong Tae Joo, "N. Korea threatens treason charges to silence rumors of captured soldiers", *DailyNK*, 18 February 2025.

626 Ellie Cook, "North Korean Soldiers Being 'Disguised' As Russian Troops on Front Lines", *Newsweek*, 6 November 2024.

627 Lee Chae Eun and Jeong Seo Yeong, "News of North Korean military's Russia deployment spreads from border to interior", *DailyNK*, 5 November 2024.

628 Jack Kim, "North Korea confirms troop deployment to Russia as Putin hails 'heroes'", 28 April 2025.

629 Ju-min Park and John Geddie, "North Korea's suicide soldiers pose new challenge for Ukraine in war with Russia", *Reuters*, 14 January 2025.

630 Lina Yoon, "A Year On, Two North Korean POWs in Ukraine Fear Forced Return", *Human Rights Watch*, 26 February 2026.

631 Zwirko et al., 2025, *supra* note 623.

remained abroad, reiterating previous claims that approximately 6,000 North Korean military personnel had been sent to support activities described as “restoration” or “fortification” efforts in the Kursk region.⁶³²

6.3 Command Structure

North Korea’s military involvement appears to have evolved from initial deployment and training alongside Russian troops to gradual operational integration. In late 2024, intelligence reports from South Korea and Ukraine indicated that up to 12,000 North Korean troops, including roughly 500 officers and several generals, had been sent to Russia and were training alongside Russian troops at various Russian military bases under Russian command, including Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov.⁶³³ Early reporting suggested that the contingent belonged to an elite KPA unit and that senior North Korean commanders and translators accompanied the troops to maintain internal command and discipline.⁶³⁴ For example, one of the accompanying high-ranking commanders, Kim Yong Boo, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the KPA is believed to have been in command of a major special forces formation deployed in Russia.⁶³⁵ Analysts noted potential challenges in integrating the North Korean forces under Russian command due to inherent differences in military structures, particularly the North Korean system in which political officers can override military commanders, meaning that direct military orders would need the approval of North Korean political officers, hindering operations.⁶³⁶

Nonetheless, reports throughout the course of North Korea’s participation in the war indicate that, rather than operating as a separate special unit, North Korean troops were placed under Russian operational command, training alongside Russian forces and carrying out the same assigned tasks.⁶³⁷ In early 2026, Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (HUR) reported that North Korean troops who still remained in Russia were operating under Russian operational command, conducting artillery fire, reconnaissance, and Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) strikes against Ukrainian border areas,⁶³⁸ indicating a shift to more specialised roles.

The presence of North Korean generals and commanders raises questions about the degree of influence exercised by North Korean political command over the activity of the troops before 2026. Nevertheless, it is clear that training, planning and deployment took place in accordance with the decisions of the Russian Army’s command, which distributed roles to North Korean soldiers accordingly.

6.4 Recruitment Processes

Recruitment for the deployment of North Korean soldiers to Russia is not voluntary. Selection and assignment are conducted through a state-sanctioned, top-down process in which individual soldiers have no ability to consent to or refuse deployment.⁶³⁹ Decisions are made through opaque internal mechanisms controlled by the Ministry of Defence and the Central Military Commission,⁶⁴⁰ reflecting the compulsory nature of participation.

632 Ibid.

633 [“Ukraine intelligence agency says North Korean units already in Kursk region”, Reuters, 24 October 2024.](#)

634 Victoria Butenko, Maria Kostenko and Lauren Kent, [“What the f**k to do with them? Russian soldiers heard condemning North Korean recruits in intercepted audio”, CNN, 25 October 2024.](#)

635 Ivan Khomenko, [“North Korean Generals Behind Russia’s War Effort Spotted at Moscow Victory Day Parade”, United24Media, 12 May 2025.](#)

636 Veronica Neifakh, [“South Korea Alleges More North Korean Troops Sent to Ukraine, as Moscow and Pyongyang Keep Mum”, The Media Line, 4 March 2025.](#)

637 Mark Trevelyan, [“Russia says North Korean troops play key role in de-mining its Kursk region”, Reuters, 15 November 2025.](#)

638 Yuliia Taradiuk, [“North Korean troops in Russia attack Ukrainian border communities, HUR says”, Kyiv Independent, 4 February 2026.](#)

639 Lee Sang-yong, [“Years of indoctrination preceded NK troops’ Russia deployment”, DailyNK, 20 November 2024.](#)

640 Anthony Cordesman, [“The Conventional Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia”, CSIS, 2 August 2016.](#)

While deployment provides the KPA with exposure to contemporary warfare including combined-arms operations, drone usage, electronic warfare, and modern logistical systems,⁶⁴¹ these institutional objectives do not confer autonomy or informed choice on individual soldiers. Testimonies from captured North Korean soldiers indicate that deployments were misrepresented as overseas “training”, with no disclosure of the likelihood of frontline combat.⁶⁴² Reports further indicate that returning personnel are subjected to intensive ideological screening to counter perceived ideological exposure and reassert regime loyalty,⁶⁴³ underscoring that the recruitment and deployment process functions as an extension of domestic political control rather than voluntary military service. The testimonies of two North Korean soldiers captured by Ukrainian forces in January 2025 provide some of the earliest firsthand accounts of the conditions confronting these deployed units.⁶⁴⁴ According to their statements, troops experienced acute shortages of food and water, entered the battlefield with little preparation for the intensity of combat, and suffered profound disorientation due to linguistic isolation. They also described witnessing substantial casualties among KPA personnel in the early stages of their deployment.⁶⁴⁵ Their accounts reinforce open-source assessments that North Korean units were inserted rapidly into high-risk operations without adequate acclimatisation, equipment, or training for the realities of modern, high-intensity warfare.

Logistically, the movement of North Korean troops into Russia appears to follow established routes long used for the transfer of workers and materials via rail,⁶⁴⁶ military flights into Russia’s Far East, and, in some instances, naval movements along the shared coastline.⁶⁴⁷ Once inside Russia, soldiers reportedly undergo rapid processing⁶⁴⁸ before being attached to Russian units operating in areas such as Kursk.⁶⁴⁹

6.5 Legal Analysis

In light of the official deployment of North Koreans to Russia as regular active-duty service members of the KPA, and regardless of the initial unsuccessful attempts to conceal it from the public, individual North Korean fighters cannot be regarded as “mercenaries” within the meaning of Article 47 of the AP I or the UN Mercenary Convention, neither of which has been ratified by North Korea.

KPA deployment has triggered the applicability of IHL to North Korea as Russia’s co-belligerent in the international armed conflict against Ukraine.⁶⁵⁰ Individual North Korean soldiers should therefore be regarded as combatants meeting the criteria spelled out in Article 4 of GC III or Article 43 of AP I, entitling them to POW status upon capture. As such, they should be repatriated by Ukraine after the cessation of active hostilities to Russia as the party “on which they depend” within the meaning of Article 118(2), unless they have a genuine fear of returning to Russia and being eventually handed over to North Korea, where they face possible human rights abuses for surrendering to Ukraine. An interpretation Article 118 informed by IHRL would suggest the possibility of Ukraine entering into a repatriation agreement with South Korea or another safe third country.

More challenging legal questions arise with respect to the assessment of state responsibility for: individual violations of IHL and the commission of war crimes and other international crimes by

641 Samuel Ramani, “North Korea’s Military Intervention in Kursk: A High Casualty Learning Curve”, *38 North*, 19 February 2025.

642 Chae Yun-hwan, “N.K. soldier captured by Ukraine says he thought was going to training, not war: Kyiv”, *Yohap News*, 12 January 2025.

643 Jeong Seo-yeong, “N. Korea’s national police agency orders intensified surveillance over returnees from abroad”, *DailyNK*, 25 September 2023.

644 Anton Sokolin, “Ukraine releases first testimony from captured North Korean soldiers”, *NK News*, 11 January 2025.

645 “Ukraine reports North Korean losses on Russia’s Kursk front”, *Reuters*, 17 December 2024.

646 Anton Sokolin, “North Korea to resume train service with Russia next week after 5-year hiatus”, *NK News*, 11 December 2024.

647 Ifang Bremer and Joon Ha Park, “How Russia is transporting North Korean troops to the front lines of Ukraine war”, *NK News*, 29 October 2024.

648 “Ukraine intelligence agency says North Korean units already in Kursk region”, *Reuters*, 25 October 2024.

649 Jack Kim and Joyce Lee, “North Korea troops have joined Ukraine war battles as part of Russian units, Seoul says”, *Reuters*, 21 November 2024.

650 Steve Szymanski and Joshua C.T. Keruski, “Ukraine Symposium – North Korea’s Entry into International Armed Conflict”, *Articles of War*, Lieber Institute West Point, 10 December 2024.

North Korean soldiers; and North Korea's responsibility under the law of *jus ad bellum*, international law governing the legality of resort to force, including the law of neutrality and the lawfulness of the use of force.

Whether North Korea incurs responsibility for war crimes and other international crimes committed by North Korean soldiers depends on the attribution of their conduct to North Korea under ARSIWA. Such attribution depends on the timing of the alleged unlawful act: if it occurred during the earlier stages of KPA's deployment, when North Korean officials appear to have maintained a certain degree of internal command and disciplinary oversight over KPA, while under the overall operational command of the RAF, dual attribution of conduct to both Russia and North Korea would likely arise.⁶⁵¹ However, the fuller operational integration of remaining KPA troops by early 2026 points to the exclusive and complete placement of such personnel at Russia's disposal. Thus, any internationally wrongful act committed by a KPA combatant during this later period would likely trigger Russia's state responsibility alone.

Under the definition of aggression, an "armed attack" against the sovereignty of another state occurs when armed forces of a state attack the land, air or other forces of another state.⁶⁵² By dispatching a division-size professional military force to Russia, whose conduct was at least in the beginning of its service attributable to North Korea, the latter has committed an "armed attack" against Ukraine in violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, regardless of the fact that the attack occurred on the territory of Russia in Kursk. Even if such conduct could not be attributable to North Korea, it has still committed an internationally wrongful act by aiding and abetting aggression within the meaning of Article 16 of ARSIWA and in violation of the law on neutrality.⁶⁵³

There are strong indications that North Korean soldiers have been subjected to state-sponsored servitude, human trafficking and other forms of human rights abuses, with Russia's complicity.⁶⁵⁴ However, this report does not undertake an analysis of these issues, since North Korea's recruitment of these soldiers is part of the regular conscription process into regular armed forces, unlike the practices described in the other chapters.

651 Milanovic, 2024, *supra* note 589.

652 Definition of Aggression, UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX), 1974, Art. 3(d) and (g).

653 Milanovic, 2024, *supra* note 589.

654 See, for example, Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, *Transnational Repression and Exploitation of North Korean Workers in Russia: Revisiting Conditions Amid Sanctions and Geopolitical Tensions*, December 2025.

Legal Assessment of Individual and State Responsibility for the Participation of Foreign Fighters from Specific States

The following chapter analyses individual and state responsibility for the participation of foreign fighters from selected states, namely (7.1) **Kazakhstan**, (7.2) **Nepal**, (7.3) **Cuba** and (7.4) **Kenya**.

7.1 Kazakhstan

As described in **Chapter 3.1.1.**, over 1,500 Kazakhstani nationals have reportedly been recruited to fight in Ukraine on Russia's side. With more than 700 criminal investigations targeting those suspected of enlisting in Russia's Armed Forces in 2025 alone, Kazakhstan has adopted one of the most proactive enforcement approaches among Central Asian states. This chapter analyses the international responsibility of Kazakhstan as a state for failing to prevent and counter such recruitment, as well as individual criminal responsibility of fighters and recruiters from Kazakhstan.

7.1.1 Applicable international law

International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries

Kazakhstan is not a State Party to the UN Mercenary Convention. However, as described below, the Kazakhstani Criminal Code provides for criminal liability for mercenarism and even goes further by criminalising unlawful participation in foreign armed conflicts.

Regional agreements

Kazakhstan is a member of the CIS, a regional intergovernmental organisation established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which encourages cooperation in the areas of security, legal cooperation and cross-border criminal prosecution in particular. However, there are no international treaties within the CIS that are specifically aimed at prohibiting and prosecuting mercenarism as an autonomous international crime. The only relevant instruments are the 2005 Model Law "On Combating Mercenary Activity" and Article 109 ("Mercenarism") of the Model Criminal Code. These instruments, however, are not legally binding and, by their very nature, are more akin to soft law instruments intended to harmonise the national legislation of participating countries.

Palermo Protocol

Kazakhstan acceded to the Palermo Protocol in 2008⁶⁵⁵ and is therefore bound by the obligations contained therein.

7.1.2 Domestic legislation

The Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan contains Chapter 4, "Crimes against the peace and security of mankind," which criminalises such acts as mercenarism (Article 170) and participation in foreign armed conflicts (Article 172). Since 2014, the penalties provided for in these articles have changed several times, expanding the range of additional penalties and increasing prison terms, while contemporaneously eliminating the harshest punishment: the death penalty.

655 [Signatories and Parties to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, United Nations Treaty Collection.](#)

Mercenarism, Article 170

Article 170 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan criminalises both the facilitation of mercenarism – including the recruitment, training, financing, and use of mercenaries – as well as the direct participation of mercenaries in armed conflict, with increasingly severe penalties where such conduct results in grave consequences, such as the death of another person.

Under Article 170(1), the recruitment of mercenaries is punishable by 7 to 12, or, if committed by a person “using their official position”, by 12 to 17 years of imprisonment. By contrast, individuals who directly participate in an armed conflict as mercenaries face seven to ten years’ imprisonment under Article 170(3). Where such participation results in the death, grievous bodily harm or other grave consequences for one or more persons, Article 170(4) foresees 15 to 20 years’ imprisonment or life imprisonment, with the possibility of deprivation of citizenship and confiscation of property. The definition used in Kazakhstan’s Criminal Code largely aligns with the definition set out in the UN Mercenaries Convention, although it notably omits the requirement that the material compensation must be “substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that party”.⁶⁵⁶

Participation in foreign armed conflicts, Article 172

While criminal liability for mercenarism has existed in Kazakhstan for over thirty years, criminal liability for the “intentional unlawful participation” of Kazakhstani citizens in foreign armed conflicts “falling short of mercenarism” was introduced into the Criminal Code only in April 2014. This provision effectively complements the existing prohibition of mercenarism by extending liability to individuals who engage in foreign hostilities without meeting the strict legal criteria of “mercenary”, and introduces a penalty of five to nine years of imprisonment. According to Kazakh officials, the adoption of this provision was prompted by the participation of Kazakh citizens in armed conflicts “based on ideological religious beliefs”, and not for material gain.⁶⁵⁷ That same year, the Prosecutor General’s Office of Kazakhstan reported the participation of Kazakh citizens in military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine.⁶⁵⁸

Human Trafficking, Article 128

Article 128 of the Kazakhstani Criminal Code prohibits *inter alia* the recruitment, transportation and transfer of individuals for the purpose of exploitation, including “forced labour” or coercing a person “into committing unlawful activities”. If individuals are recruited “by false pretences or abuse of trust”, Article 128(2) foresees an increased liability of seven to nine years of imprisonment and confiscation of property.

7.1.3 Analysis of individual responsibility

Individual responsibility of foreign fighters

As described above, Kazakhstani nationals fighting on Russia’s side face criminal prosecution for “participation in foreign armed conflicts” (Article 172) and “mercenarism” (Article 170).

Since criminal liability under Article 170 is excluded where individuals become members of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, in practice, the number of cases initiated by the Kazakhstani authorities under Article 170 is highly limited and concerns Kazakhstani nationals who joined the Wagner Group⁶⁵⁹ before its incorporation into the RAF. Rather, the Kazakhstani authorities have increasingly initiated criminal investigations for “participation in foreign armed conflicts”, with over 700 cases opened under Article 172 in 2025 alone. As of March 2026, only a limited number of cases

⁶⁵⁶ Art. 3 Nr. 15 of the Kazakhstani Criminal Code.

⁶⁵⁷ [Speech by Senator of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan Ermek Zhumabayev to the media](#) [in Russian], 20 March 2014.

⁶⁵⁸ Statement of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “[On a number of citizens from Kazakhstan participating in combat operations on the territory of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria](#)” [in Russian], 30 October 2014.

⁶⁵⁹ See, for example, Elena Weber, “” [in Russian], *RFE/RL*, 28 November 2023.

seem to have reached trial: between 2023 and March 2026, Kazakhstani courts issued 21 known decisions⁶⁶⁰ against Kazakhstani citizens for participating in the armed conflict on the side of the armed forces of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Of the total number of cases analysed for this report, 20 were adjudicated under Article 172 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan for “participation in foreign armed conflicts”, while only one case was considered under Article 170 (“mercenarism”). Out of the twenty decisions reviewed, four resulted in the termination of criminal proceedings due to the death of the defendants. Furthermore, one case concerning an attempted offence under Article 172 concluded with the individual being released from criminal liability and subjected to compulsory psychiatric treatment instead. Out of the 15 convictions rendered under Article 172, one individual was sentenced to six⁶⁶¹ and five individuals to five years of imprisonment, while nine individuals received sentences of four and a half years of imprisonment, i.e. below the lowest term of imprisonment allowed by the law. In all cases where a sentence lower than the statutory minimum of five years was imposed, the courts justified such a mitigation of punishment by the defendants’ admission of guilt. As of March 2026, courts across eleven regions of Kazakhstan have issued convictions under Article 172.

Individual criminal responsibility of recruiters

While those recruiting mercenaries face significant prison terms, no equivalent provision exists for recruiting Kazakhstani nationals for unlawful participation in foreign armed conflicts, creating a significant liability gap. However, if recruiters deceive individuals, they may face individual responsibility under Article 128(2) of the Criminal Code for human trafficking.

7.1.4 State responsibility

The participation of Kazakhstani citizens in hostilities alongside the Russian armed forces against Ukraine raises complex questions of international law concerning state responsibility and obligations.

First, in the absence of evidence that Kazakhstan is sending, directing, financing or equipping its nationals fighting within Russian military structures, or otherwise exercising effective control over them, their conduct cannot be attributed to Kazakhstan. Therefore, the mere participation of Kazakhstani citizens in Russia’s war against Ukraine does not constitute an act of aggression committed by Kazakhstan under international law.

Second, since Kazakhstan has not ratified the UN Mercenaries Convention, it has no international obligations to prevent the recruitment of mercenaries. Despite that, on a policy level, Kazakhstan has taken various measures to prevent the participation of Kazakhstani nationals in the RAF. This includes warnings issued by the authorities, emphasising that participation in a foreign armed conflict constitutes a crime, reported efforts to block advertising materials promoting recruitment into the Russian army,⁶⁶² as well as an increased number of criminal investigations and prosecution under Articles 170 and 172.

However, Kazakhstan remains bound by its obligations under the Palermo Protocol to prevent, investigate, and prosecute trafficking-related conduct. While the authorities have taken several measures in response to the recruitment of Kazakhstani nationals, the large-scale recruitment of Kazakhstani nationals raises questions as to whether these measures have been sufficiently effective in practice.

660 The court decisions analysed were obtained via the open platform “[Court Office](#)” of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

661 “[In Kazakhstan, a 25-year-old man was sentenced for participating in the war against Ukraine on the side of the Russian Federation](#)”, RFE/RL, 26 February 2026.

662 “[Dozens of advertisements recruiting for the war have been blocked in Kazakhstan since the beginning of the year](#)”, Orda, 28 November 2025.

7.2 Nepal

Nepal ranks among the top countries in terms of the scale of Russian recruitment of foreign fighters. As detailed in **Chapter 3.2**, Nepali nationals form one of the largest groups of foreign fighters in the Russian army. This chapter analyses two interrelated issues of responsibility: (1) individual criminal responsibility of recruiters who recruited Nepali citizens, as well as the individuals themselves who are participating in the armed conflict on the side of the Russian Federation, in light of applicable international and national law; (2) international legal responsibility of Nepal as a state for failing to take appropriate measures to fulfil its obligations under international law to prevent, suppress and remedy such recruitment.

7.2.1 Applicable international law

Nepal is not a party to the UN Mercenary Convention and therefore has no treaty-based obligations regarding the prevention of mercenarism and prosecution of mercenaries under this instrument.⁶⁶³ Nevertheless, Nepal is a party to a number of international human rights instruments that establish obligations to prevent trafficking in persons, protect victims, and investigate and prosecute violations, in particular, the Palermo Convention and the Protocol on Trafficking in Persons.⁶⁶⁴ In addition, Nepal has ratified the ILO Convention on Forced Labour (No. 29, 1930) and the Convention on the Abolition of Forced Labour (No. 105, 1957), which prohibit forced labour and oblige states to take measures to eliminate it and punish those who use it. As discussed below, despite having ratified these instruments, Nepal has failed to fully implement them in domestic law, likely leaving those trafficked to fight on Russia's side without adequate redress.

7.2.2 Domestic legislation

Nepal does not have specific criminal legislation prohibiting **mercenary activities** or the enlistment of citizens in foreign armed forces. In August 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement reiterating its position that fighting for a foreign army is only explicitly permitted in the presence of a bilateral treaty with the country in question (i.e. India and the United Kingdom).⁶⁶⁵ Any other service in foreign armed forces, such as the French Foreign Legion, is discouraged at the level of foreign policy, not criminal law. The only relevant provision in the National Criminal Code of 2017 is Section 54, which establishes liability for “using the territory of Nepal [to] wage or threaten to wage war, by raising arms, or attempt to wage such war or insurrect or attempt to insurrect against a state having diplomatic relations with Nepal”.⁶⁶⁶ While Ukraine and Nepal have maintained diplomatic relations since 1993, this provision is unlikely to apply in practice, since its *actus reus* is territorially limited, as it requires the prohibited conduct to occur on Nepali territory.⁶⁶⁷

Nepal has also introduced national legislation to combat **human trafficking**. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal stipulates that “[n]o one shall be subjected to trafficking nor shall one be held in slavery or servitude”.⁶⁶⁸ The main legislation in this area is the Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act of 2007 (HTTCA), which defines two main offences: human trafficking and human transportation.⁶⁶⁹ Section 4(1) defines human trafficking as the sale or purchase of a person for any purpose, use in

663 [Signatories and Parties to the International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries](#), United Nations Treaty Collection.

664 [Signatories and Parties to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children](#), supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, United Nations Treaty Collection, ratified in 2020.

665 Arun Bam, “Concerns Raised after Illicit Participation of Nepalis in Foreign Armies”, *myRepublica*, 10 August 2023.

666 [Criminal Code of Nepal](#), 2017, Section 54.

667 Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of India, “[Cooperation between Ukraine and Nepal](#)”, 24 March 2026.

668 [Constitution of Nepal 2015](#), Section 29.

669 [Human Trafficking and Transportation \(Control\) Act 2007 \(Nepal\)](#), Section 3.

prostitution, removal of human organs and coercion into providing sexual services.⁶⁷⁰ Section 4(2) defines transportation of persons as taking a person out of the country for the purpose of sale, as well as moving, holding or transferring a person from their home or care by any means – including deception, forgery of documents, coercion, threats or abuse of authority – both within Nepal and abroad, for the purpose of prostitution and exploitation.⁶⁷¹ Exploitation (Section 2(e)) is defined as “an act of keeping a human being as a slave and bonded, and this word also includes to remove human organ except otherwise provided by prevailing law”.

In the specific context of recruitment for the war in Ukraine, the Foreign Employment Act of 2007 appears particularly relevant. Section 43 provides for punishment for any person who sends another person abroad (without obtaining the appropriate licence), by making false assurances, or lures the person for employment abroad.⁶⁷² This is the main provision on deceptive recruitment and appears to be favoured by Nepali authorities in prosecuting recruiters, as recruiters typically promise civil employment in Russia to prospective recruits while concealing the true military nature of the work.⁶⁷³ In particular, work is considered unauthorised if it is carried out in countries for which the government has not granted permission to work. For example, in 2024, the Nepalese government temporarily suspended the issuance of such permits for Russia and Ukraine.⁶⁷⁴

Other qualifications relevant to establishing criminal liability may include fraud and servitude.⁶⁷⁵ As discussed in **Chapter 5.3.1**, many “forced fighters” recruited into the RAF find themselves in conditions that may amount to servitude.

7.2.3 Individual criminal responsibility

Given that Nepal has no legal prohibitions on the participation of Nepali citizens in foreign armed conflicts or mercenary activities, those who have joined the RAF cannot be held criminally liable for the mere fact of such participation, including, it seems, for hostile acts leading to the death of Ukrainian combatants. Nevertheless, recruiters and those who facilitate the recruitment and transport of Nepali citizens to Russia may well be held criminally liable under current legislation.

In December 2023, the Nepali authorities announced that they had arrested 10 members of a criminal organisation that was transporting young Nepali people to Russia.⁶⁷⁶ In January 2024, two more people were arrested.⁶⁷⁷ According to the police, which has not made specific charges publicly available, the actions of such recruiters constitute smuggling of people and fraud.⁶⁷⁸ Since Nepali legislation does not contain a separate legal provision directly prohibiting the smuggling of people,⁶⁷⁹ the terms most likely refer to human trafficking and transportation, as well as deceptive recruitment under the Foreign Employment Act.

This chapter does not seek to provide a comprehensive legal assessment of each case, given the limited information available. However, drawing on the information obtained from interviews, it offers a *prima facie* assessment of the legal situation of the individuals concerned.

670 Kapil Aryal, “Orphanage Trafficking in Nepal: Legal Gaps, Protection Failures, and Reform Imperatives”, *The Informal: South Asian Journal of Human Rights and Social Justice*, Vol. 2(1), 2025, 83–92, pp. 85-86.

671 Ibid.

672 [Foreign Employment Act 2007](#) (Nepal), Section 43.

673 According to comments by an expert on Nepalese law.

674 Andrew Roth, “[Nepal Bans Citizens from Working in Russia or Ukraine after Deaths in Military](#)”, *The Guardian*, 5 January 2024.

675 [Criminal Code of Nepal](#), Sections 163 and 279.

676 Gopal Sharma, “[Nepal Police Detain 10 over Allegations They Sent Youths to Russian Army](#)”, *Reuters*, 6 December 2023.

677 “[Two Arrested for Sending Nepali Nationals to Russian Army in the Name of Finding Them Lucrative Hotel Jobs](#)” (“Two Arrested for Sending Nepali Nationals to Russian Army”), *Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility*, 8 January 2024.

678 Gopal Sharma, “[Nepal Police Detain 10 over Allegations They Sent Youths to Russian Army](#)”, *Reuters*, 6 December 2023; “Two Arrested for Sending Nepali Nationals to Russian Army”, *supra* note 677.

679 In August 2024, the Nepali Supreme Court instructed the Ministry of Home Affairs to develop a law to define and criminalise human smuggling; see Binod Ghimire, “[Supreme Court Seeks Specific Law to Address Human Smuggling](#)”, *The Kathmandu Post*, 17 August 2024. At the time of publication of this report, no steps had been taken to do this.

The first Nepali man interviewed by TH approached the Russian Embassy in Nepal on his own initiative to apply for a visa to work as a driver in Russia.⁶⁸⁰ His brother, who had studied in Russia, assured him that it was easy to find civilian work there. At the Russian embassy, he was warned about the war with Ukraine and advised not to get involved, to which he replied that he was only looking for civilian work. Due to the ban on direct flights to Russia, he approached a travel agency in the Sundara neighbourhood of Kathmandu, which arranged his journey via Dubai for NPR 160,000 (EUR 925), and an additional NPR 40,000 (EUR 231) for bribes at the airport.⁶⁸¹ Upon arrival in Russia, he was met by a Russian citizen (who charged EUR 430 for his services) and delivered to a hotel. After that, he spent some time at his brother's accommodation. Two Indian men he met at a shopping centre recommended that he join the army. He went to the army recruitment centre of his own accord and signed a contract, even though it was in Russian, a language he does not understand, without any translation. Upon signing the contract with the Russian MoD, he received between two to three weeks training at Avangard outside Moscow and subsequently in Rostov. After falling ill, he spent around 20 days in the infirmary, but was sent to the front before he had fully recovered. He repeatedly refused and asked to be sent home, for which he was beaten and abused by his commanders. Eventually, he was forcibly sent on a combat mission and placed at the front of the group, where he was wounded. Despite this, he said that he does not wish to return to Nepal, but wants to return to Russia to receive compensation for his injuries.

The second Nepali interviewee made a conscious decision to travel to Russia to join the army for financial reasons. He obtained information from a fellow villager who had served in the Russian army away from the front line and had returned to Nepal. He obtained a tourist visa at the Russian embassy without any further questions and travelled at his own expense. He was met at the airport by an acquaintance who took him to a hotel. The following day he presented himself at a recruitment centre. He understood that he was signing a military contract and intended to do so, although he did not understand its terms, as it was only in Russian and not translated into Nepali. Unlike the first interviewee, he received fairly extensive military training, though without any training in IHL. He noted that he had not been subjected to mistreatment. He also stated that he wished to return to Russia, initially through a POW exchange, and subsequently to Nepal.

On the basis of these facts, it is unlikely that either individual would be recognised as a victim of human trafficking under the "act-means-purpose" test of the Palermo Protocol, particularly in the case of the second interviewee. Both individuals actively sought out recruitment and knew where they were going. Although the terms of the contract were unclear to them, both individuals were fully aware that they would be serving in the army and did not find the lack of translation particularly problematic. Nevertheless, in the case of the first interviewee, his lack of awareness of the impossibility of terminating the contract, negating meaningful consent, and the abusive treatment he experienced during deployment, which may amount to servitude, inhuman treatment or torture, should have triggered Nepal's obligations to prevent further recruitment, prosecute offenders and protect victims.

Finally, while it is difficult to characterise the Kathmandu-based travel agency as a recruiter, as it did not take any measures to directly recruit individuals into the army, it did facilitate the eventual transfer to Russia and was likely aware that its services were facilitating the movement of Nepali citizens into the Russian army to fight in Ukraine. Subject to further investigation, such actors may be considered facilitators of human trafficking.

680 Interview with NI-14 conducted by TH.

681 It seems that this agency was not itself recruiting Nepalese, rather it provided an opportunity to travel despite the ban, particularly for students and workers in Russia.

7.2.4 State Responsibility

Nepal's state responsibility falls to be assessed primarily under the Palermo Protocol, which Nepal ratified in 2020. Nepal is not a party to the UN Mercenary Convention, so no claim for state responsibility could arise on that basis.

Under the Palermo Protocol, Nepal is bound to undertake preventive measures, including by bringing its domestic legislation in line with the Protocol's standards and ensuring border controls, as well as prosecuting perpetrators and protecting victims. It has fallen short on at least some aspects of these obligations.⁶⁸²

Firstly, Nepali legislation on human trafficking does not comply with the international standards set out in the Palermo Protocol. The HTTCA focuses primarily on prostitution and organ removal, rather than exploitation in its broader sense. While the crime of transporting persons seems more applicable to cases of recruitment into the Russian army, the Act's definition of "exploitation" is narrow and interpreted restrictively, referring only to slavery and bonded labour, among the most severe and legally complex forms of exploitation. Nepal adopts a hybrid monist-dualist approach: under Section 9 of the Nepal Treaty Act 1990, ratified treaties prevail over inconsistent domestic law. In practice, however, courts tend to rely on implementing legislation.⁶⁸³ Thus, while direct application of the Palermo Protocol remains theoretically possible, it is more likely that courts will apply the narrower definition of human trafficking contained in the HTTCA, rather than the broader treaty definition.

The practical consequences are significant: HTTCA charges are unlikely to succeed in most recruitment cases because the conduct at issue, namely deceiving individuals into travelling abroad for ostensibly civilian work that turns out to be military service, does not fit within the Act's enumerated purposes of exploitation. Prosecutors relying on trafficking or transportation charges, therefore, face a structural gap between the conduct and the statutory definition.

With respect to Nepal's obligations to prosecute perpetrators and to dismantle recruitment networks, the measures taken to date include employment permit suspensions, diplomatic démarches, and the 2023 and 2024 arrests demonstrating awareness of human trafficking issues. The Nepali government has temporarily banned its citizens from travelling to Russia or Ukraine for employment purposes and has called on Russia to immediately cease the recruitment of Nepali citizens, return those already serving in the army, repatriate the bodies of the deceased, return the wounded and provide compensation for the families.⁶⁸⁴ Nepal's Minister of Foreign Affairs held a bilateral meeting with her Ukrainian counterpart, emphasising that those recruited had fallen victim to human trafficking networks, and requesting the release of the Nepalis taken captive.⁶⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the lack of publicly available information regarding the prosecution of alleged perpetrators, the absence of new arrests of recruiters, and the failure to align national legislation with international standards suggest that Nepal is likely not fully fulfilling its positive obligations under the Palermo Protocol.

7.3 Cuba

As established in **Chapter 3.5**, Cuba is one of the countries with the largest numbers of foreign recruits in the Russian army. At the same time, Cuba has a fairly extensive legal framework, provided for by national legislation and ratified international agreements, to prevent and prosecute such activities. This chapter seeks to analyse: (1) national legislation on regulating the participation of Cuban citizens in foreign conflicts, voluntarily and through coercion, in light of applicable international law; (2) individual responsibility of Cuban recruiters and fighters participating in foreign armed conflicts; and (3) Cuban state responsibility and enforcement gaps.

682 Chandan Kumar Mandal, "Nepal Needs to Amend Human Trafficking Laws to Fully Enforce Palermo Protocol, Experts Say", *The Kathmandu Post*, 21 February 2021.

683 The Law Institute, "Nepal's Alignment with International Law and Its Impact", IHL Issues in South Asia, 11 November 2025.

684 Binaj Gurubacharya, "Nepal Asks Russia to Send Back Nepalis Recruited to Fight in Ukraine and the Bodies of Those Killed", *Breaking News*, 25 January 2024.

685 Susan Shrestha, "Russia Recruited Nepali Men into Its Army; Seven Captured by Ukraine; Nepal Urges Their Release", *NepYork*, 19 March 2025.

7.3.1 Applicable international law

Cuba is a party to a number of international agreements that are relevant for the purposes of this report. Firstly, Cuba has ratified the UN Mercenary Convention, which obliges it to take all possible measures to prevent the recruitment, use, financing or training of mercenaries.⁶⁸⁶ Cuba is also obliged to prosecute all persons who fall under the definition of “mercenaries” or those who recruit, use, finance or train mercenaries.

Cuba has also ratified the UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime, in particular the Palermo Protocol.⁶⁸⁷ This entails obligations to prevent, investigate and prosecute crimes related to human trafficking, as defined in the Protocol.

7.3.2 Domestic legislation

The main source of potential criminal liability for persons involved in armed conflicts outside Cuba is the 2022 Criminal Code.⁶⁸⁸ Its Chapter III, “Crimes Against Peace and International Law”, contains provisions pertinent to the recruitment and participation of Cuban nationals in foreign armed conflicts. Two articles form the core of the framework: Article 129 criminalises the recruitment of persons within Cuban territory for military service in a foreign state, while Article 135 addresses mercenarism, imposing liability on anyone who joins a foreign military formation or private military company for personal financial gain. The Criminal Code also contains several other provisions that may be relevant to the responsibility of fighters and recruiters:

- Article 128 - Recruitment or committing other hostile acts against a foreign state;
- Article 130 - Committing acts aimed at undermining the independence of a foreign state, the integrity of its territory or the stability of its government from Cuban territory;
- Article 133 - Dissemination of false news with the aim of disturbing international peace or endangering the prestige or credit of the Cuban state or its good relations with another state;
- Article 423 - Fraud.

In addition, Article 363 of the Cuban Criminal Code criminalises human trafficking in terms that closely follow the framework of the Palermo Protocol, incorporating the three main elements of the definition: act, means, and purpose.

The Cuban authorities have remarked that the same factual conduct may give rise to a range of different and multiple legal classifications, depending on the facts established in each case.⁶⁸⁹ Indeed, in 2023, Cuban authorities detained 17 people involved in a scheme to recruit individuals for war in Russia and noted possible charges such as mercenarism, human trafficking and hostile acts in a foreign state.⁶⁹⁰

686 [Signatories and Parties to the International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries](#), United Nations Treaty Collection, accessed in 2007.

687 [Signatories and Parties to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children](#), supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, United Nations Treaty Collection.

688 [Código Penal \(Ley 151/2022\)](#), Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba No. 93, 1 September 2022.

689 Razones de Cuba, “Cubans Are Recruited through Social Media for Military Purposes for War Operations in Ukraine” [video, in Spanish] (“Cubans Are Recruited through Social Media for Military Purposes”), YouTube, 8 September 2023, at 5:50.

690 “Cuban Regime Detains 17 People Related to the Recruitment of Cuban Mercenaries in the Service of Russia” [in Spanish], *CiberCuba*, 8 September 2023.

7.3.3 Individual Criminal Responsibility

Foreign fighters

With regard to the legal classification of the fighters who signed contracts with the RAF, the preliminary classification may include “mercenaryism” (Article 135) and “hostile acts against a foreign state” (Article 128).

The definition of “mercenary activity” under Article 135 of the Cuban Criminal Code is much broader than that set out in the UN Mercenary Convention or Article 47 of AP I. It provides for the liability of “anyone who, for the purpose of obtaining payment of a salary or other type of remuneration or personal benefit, joins military formations or private military companies, composed wholly or partly of individuals who are not citizens of the state in whose territory they intend to operate”. For a crime to be committed, two elements must be satisfied: subjective and objective.⁶⁹¹ The objective element consists of joining a military formation to participate in a conflict, and the subjective element requires that such participation be motivated by personal gain. As Cuban lawyers have emphasised, the actual commission of the act is not necessary: intent, preparation, and organisation may suffice.⁶⁹²

Although each case must be assessed on its own facts, the report shows that the motivation of Cuban fighters lies primarily in obtaining personal material gain (see **Chapter 3.5.2–3.5.3**). Moreover, there is no doubt that the RAF and structures like Wagner or Redut can be considered military formations comprised of non-Ukrainian citizens, fulfilling the criteria of Article 135. Notably, Cuban fighters need not seek to or actually participate in hostilities to be considered mercenaries within the meaning of Article 135.

In addition, Article 128 provides for liability for anyone “who carries out enlistments or other hostile acts against a foreign state, which give rise to the danger of war, retaliatory measures against Cuba, or expose Cubans to harassment or reprisals against their persons or property, or to the alteration of Cuba’s friendly relations with another state”. Participation in the conflict against Ukraine likely amounts to “hostile acts against a foreign state,” in particular due to the deterioration of bilateral relations between Ukraine and Cuba.⁶⁹³ While this provision seemingly addresses ideologically-driven activities that ultimately harm Cuba’s national security, and Article 135 is a more specialised norm that seeks to curb the outflow of financially motivated fighters, the former could also be invoked against recruiters who “enlist” fighters domestically.

Both of these offences might be charged in cases where a person voluntarily joined the RAF. As in most jurisdictions, being recruited to join an armed conflict or participation in hostile acts against a foreign state as a result of duress or deception, or other circumstances meeting the *prima facie* definition of human trafficking, would negate the mental element required for criminal liability.

Recruiters

With regard to recruiters, Cuban national legislation provides a wider range of applicable offences. The most relevant qualification is Article 129 of the Criminal Code, which prescribes imprisonment of between four and ten years for “anyone who recruits persons within the national territory for military service in a foreign state”. The phrase “within the national territory” can be interpreted in two ways. One reading would require the physical presence of the recruiter on Cuban territory while targeting individuals within Cuba. However, this interpretation would create a significant loophole for cases of remote recruitment via the internet. Therefore, it is more likely that this provision applies to the act of recruitment that is directed at persons who are in Cuban territory, regardless of whether the recruiter is within or outside Cuban territory.

691 “Cubans Are Recruited through Social Media for Military Purposes”, *supra* note 689, at 2:00.

692 *Ibid.*, at 4:30.

693 “Ukraine Closes Cuba Embassy and Downgrades Ties over Havana’s Complicity in Russian Aggression”, *ZMINA Human Rights Centre*, 29 October 2025.

Furthermore, recruiters may also be prosecuted under Article 135(2) of the Criminal Code on mercenarism, which provides that “the same penalty shall apply to anyone who aids or abets, or carries out, any other act intended, directly or indirectly, to achieve the objective set out in the preceding paragraph”. Recruiters such as Russian national Elena Smirnova (see **Chapter 3.5.3**) who facilitated the activities of mercenaries by providing assistance with transport and visas, right up to the signature of a contract with the MoD, may be criminally liable under this provision as well as under Article 129.

For using deceit or coercion to lure “forced fighters”, recruiters could additionally face charges of human trafficking. Article 363 of the Criminal Code provides for liability in cases where a person “promotes, organises, incites or executes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, using threats, coercion, violence, deception or bribery, taking advantage of the victim’s vulnerability or gender, or through payment to those who have authority over them to obtain their consent, with the aim of subjecting them to labour or sexual exploitation, forced or compulsory labour, forced marriage, illegal adoption, begging, practices similar to slavery, servitude, organ removal or the performance of other criminal activities contrary to human dignity”.

Application to available cases

Despite the large number Cubans fighting on Russia’s side, suggesting that many of them have signed up to fight voluntarily, the three-element test for human trafficking appears to be satisfied in at least some cases. In particular, Russia-based and local recruiters play a key role in organising, promoting and directly carrying out recruitment on a wide scale. They also provide transport, which is critical given that ordinary Cubans cannot afford tickets to Russia, as the average salary in Cuba is between 15–30 EUR per month (see **Chapter 3.5.2**).⁶⁹⁴ Many individuals are recruited through deception regarding employment in civilian positions, with recruiters exploiting their financial vulnerability. Regarding the “purpose” element, as analysed in **Chapter 5.3.1**, most foreign fighters are deployed to the front lines to be used as expendable human material in so-called “meat assaults” in conditions tantamount to servitude.

The Cuban man interviewed for this report recounted his recruitment through Facebook, where he came across an advertisement offering civilian employment in Russia, describing tasks such as picking up and transporting goods.⁶⁹⁵ After following the page and submitting his phone number, he was contacted via WhatsApp by a Spanish-speaking individual whose nationality he could not determine. He was then directed to a digital platform where he submitted personal information, including identity documents, photographs, passport scans and even information on skin colour. Within hours, travel arrangements were made on his behalf at no cost to him, and he departed Cuba without a visa or any additional documentation. Upon arrival in Moscow, he was met by someone holding a sign with his name and driven to Rostov, where he was issued a military uniform, underwent a blood test, and was presented with a contract written entirely in Russian. No translation was provided, and he signed without understanding its contents, receiving only partial oral explanations from those present. He was then transported to occupied Ukrainian territory and deployed to the front line.

This report finds reasonable basis to conclude that a *prima facie* human trafficking violation occurred in this case. The individual was transported and recruited from Cuba to Russia through deception, responding to an advertisement for civilian logistics work, and at no stage of the process was the military nature of employment revealed to him. The “purpose” of the recruitment was deployment to the front line under conditions equivalent to servitude, since he was not allowed to terminate the contract.

694 Carla Gloria Colomé, “Russia Recruits Cubans for the Frontlines in Ukraine: ‘It’s All Been a Scam’”, *El País*, 9 June 2025; “Cuba: Average State Salary Falls from US \$18 to \$16 a Month”, *Havana Times*, 2 September 2025.

695 Interview Ca-2.

7.3.4 State Responsibility

This section assesses Cuba's state responsibility for possible violations of its international law obligations under the mercenarism and human trafficking conventions.

As noted above, Article 135 of the Cuban Criminal Code implements the crime of "mercenarism" into domestic law, adopting a broader definition than that enshrined in the UN Convention on Mercenaries. Although Cuban foreign fighters are unlikely to meet the treaty definition, broader scope of domestic law does not negate Cuba's other obligations under the Convention.⁶⁹⁶ Under Article 10 of the Convention, any State Party in whose territory a person suspected of having committed a mercenarism offence is present is required to conduct a preliminary investigation into the circumstances of the case if there are reasonable grounds to believe an offence has been committed. Cuba's awareness of the scale of recruitment, as demonstrated by the public statements of its officials and complaints from returning fighters on Cuban territory (see **Chapter 3.5.4**), constitute sufficient grounds to trigger the duty to investigate these activities and prosecute individuals who meet at least the narrow definition of mercenarism enshrined in the Convention, as well as the recruiters. While some of the 17 individuals arrested in 2023 might be investigated for mercenarism offences and 26 individuals were allegedly prosecuted and convicted of mercenarism (see **Chapter 3.5.4**),⁶⁹⁷ this number is insignificant given the total number of Cuban fighters in Ukraine. The absence of any publicly available data on these investigations and prosecutions suggests a failure by Cuba to fulfil its obligations under Article 10, particularly given the broad domestic law provisions criminalising mercenarism and related offences.

Having ratified the Palermo Protocol, Cuba is obliged to prevent human trafficking, prosecute offenders and protect victims.⁶⁹⁸ While Cuba appears to have met its obligation to incorporate the prohibition of human trafficking in its domestic law through Article 363 of the Criminal Code, which broadly aligns with the Protocol's requirements, it appears to have failed to enforce this provision through active monitoring and prosecution. As described in Chapter 3.5.4, the Cuban authorities have been aware for some time of the presence of structured recruitment networks that have organised a system of collection and transfer of Cuban citizens into the Russian army, as evidenced by official statements.⁶⁹⁹ While there is no evidence to suggest Cuba's complicity in the scheme, its scope and high degree of organisation indicate a lack of proper governmental oversight. Following the 2023 arrest of 17 people potentially involved in schemes to recruit Cuban citizens into the Russian army, there has been no publicly available information about court proceedings or sentences. Some Cuban human rights activists report that these individuals have been released, viewing their detention as a show for the media.⁷⁰⁰ Given that the government's actions are not sufficiently proactive or visible to prevent and remedy the apparently significant number of existing cases of human trafficking, it is likely that Cuba has not fully met its obligations under the Palermo Protocol.

7.4 Kenya

Following reports of Kenyan fighters killed or captured in Russia's war against Ukraine and growing mobilisation by victims' relatives demanding government action,⁷⁰¹ Kenya has emerged as one of the most vocal African states addressing the recruitment of its nationals into the Russian armed forces. This chapter analyses Kenya's domestic legal framework, relevant international obligations, and the

696 Moreover, Art. 27 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties prohibits the invocation of provisions of internal law to justify a state's failure to perform a treaty.

697 ["Cuba Arrests 17 in Connection with Network to Recruit Cuban Nationals to Fight for Russia in Ukraine"](#), *The Guardian*, 8 September 2023.

698 Articles 9 and 10, Palermo Protocol.

699 Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX), ["Cuba Faces Human Trafficking Operations for Military Recruitment Purposes"](#) [in Spanish], 5 September 2023.

700 Schemes: Radio Svoboda, ["Mercenary Unit Exposed. Another Country on Russia's Side | Investigation"](#), YouTube [in Ukrainian], 13 February 2025, at 22:15.

701 Evelyne Musambi and Vivianne Wandera, ["Families of Kenyan recruits duped into fighting in Russia's war on Ukraine demand their sons return"](#), *APNews*, 5 March 2026.

potential individual and state responsibility arising from the recruitment and trafficking of Kenyan nationals to fight in Russia's war against Ukraine.

While revenue from labour migration is a critical economic factor for Kenya, high unemployment rates and economic hardship have historically exposed workers abroad to severe exploitation, most notably in the Gulf states, where Kenyans recruited as domestic workers face conditions that often amount to forced labour.⁷⁰²

Kenyans seeking employment abroad usually turn to private agencies, which advertise opportunities in Kenya and overseas. In cooperation with their counterparts in the countries of destination, the agencies provide their clients with job offers and make travel arrangements. Importantly, foreign employment contracts must be authenticated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection before departure (a process known as foreign contract attestation).⁷⁰³ Often, candidates must also undergo medical examination and a pre-departure training, which aims to prepare them for work abroad and to educate them about their rights. Once overseas, the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, as well as local Embassies, provide assistance to Kenyan workers abroad and ensure their protection, including by responding to crisis situations and repatriating citizens.

Private employment agencies are under the oversight of the National Employment Agency (NEA), established under Kenya's Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. The NEA is tasked with their accreditation, vetting and inspection,⁷⁰⁴ but also the verification of foreign job offers. Other institutions central to this effort include the Counter Trafficking in Persons Advisory Committee, which coordinates national anti-trafficking policy, the National Assistance Trust Fund, which provides financial resources for the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of victims, and the Transnational Organised Crime Unit responsible for the investigation of human trafficking cases.

Although Kenya's legal and institutional frameworks appear strong, civil society organisations have long criticised inadequate implementation and enforcement. Key concerns include limited criminal accountability, weak oversight of employment agencies,⁷⁰⁵ as well as corruption and involvement of government officials in human trafficking.⁷⁰⁶

This permissive context has facilitated the recruitment of reportedly over 1,000 foreign fighters from Kenya (see **Chapter 3.4.1**). A recent report by Kenya's National Intelligence Service revealed that state officials, including immigration officers, law enforcement officers and employees of the NEA, may have been involved in the recruitment of Kenyans to fight in Russia's war against Ukraine, colluding with staff at the Russian Embassy in Nairobi and the Kenyan embassy in Moscow to help recruits obtain Russian visas.⁷⁰⁷

7.4.1 Applicable international law

Kenya is a State Party to several core international and regional human rights treaties, such as the ICCPR and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Banjul Charter). These instruments not only oblige States Parties to refrain from violating the rights enshrined therein, such as the right to life and the right to security of the person, but also to take positive measures⁷⁰⁸ to safeguard these rights for all individuals within their jurisdiction.

Regarding human trafficking, Kenya has ratified the Palermo Protocol, requiring it to prevent human trafficking, protect trafficking victims, and prosecute perpetrators.

702 Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia: Locked in, left out: The hidden lives of Kenyan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia*, 12 May 2025, p. 4ff.

703 "Foreign Contracts of Service/Attestation", Kenya's State Department for Labour and Skill Development.

704 See Kenya's *Labour Institutions (Private Employment Agencies) Regulations*, 2016.

705 Mureithi, 2026, *supra* note 431.

706 US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report: Kenya*, 2025.

707 Muia, 2026, *supra* note 401.

708 UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment 36 to Article 6 of the ICCPR: Right to Life*, CCPR/C/GC/36, 3 September 2019, para. 21; *General Comment No. 3 On The African Charter On Human And Peoples' Rights: The Right To Life (Article 4)*, para. 41.

By contrast, Kenya's participation in treaties addressing mercenarism is highly limited. In particular, Kenya has not ratified the UN Mercenary Convention, and never proceeded to ratify the 1977 OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, which it signed in 2003.⁷⁰⁹ As a result, Kenya is not legally bound by the specific obligations contained in these conventions, which creates a significant gap regarding the obligations to prevent the recruitment of mercenaries in its territory. Additionally, at the regional level, the African Union has sought to expand individual criminal responsibility for international crimes by broadening the mandate of the prospective African Court of Justice and Human Rights (ACJHR). Specifically, while deliberately omitted from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Article 28H of the 2014 Malabo Protocol would give the ACJHR jurisdiction over the crime of mercenarism. However, as of March 2026, the ACJHR remains non-operational, and the Malabo Protocol – widely criticized by civil society organisations for granting personal immunity to acting senior state officials⁷¹⁰ – has not secured the number of ratifications required for its entry into force.

7.4.2 Domestic legislation

The issue of foreign fighters presents complex challenges for Kenya's domestic legal framework, which addresses the phenomenon through a fragmented set of legal provisions, namely the crimes of foreign enlistment and human trafficking.

Criminalisation of "foreign enlistment" under Section 68 of Kenya's Penal Code

Under Section 68 of Kenya's Penal Code, "foreign enlistment" constitutes a crime punishable by up to ten years of imprisonment, a significant fine, or both.⁷¹¹ Under this provision, any Kenyan national who "accepts or agrees to accept any commission or engagement in the military, naval, air, police or other armed forces" of another state without the written authorisation of the President commits a criminal offence, unless the accused proves that such engagement was "not voluntary" in nature. Furthermore, any person, "whether a citizen of Kenya or not", can be held responsible for inducing another person to accept such commitment or engagement.

Criminalisation of human trafficking under the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act

Kenya's 2010 Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act,⁷¹² enacted following the country's ratification of the Palermo Protocol in 2005, establishes a comprehensive legal framework criminalising human trafficking. Under Section 3, read in conjunction with the definition set out in Section 2, a person who traffics another person for the purpose of exploitation – which explicitly includes the "forcible or fraudulent use of any human being to take part in armed conflict" – faces a minimum prison sentence of 30 years, high fines, or both. Any person who finances, controls, aids or abets such acts faces identical penalties. Additionally, a person who "manages, runs or finances any job recruitment agency for the purposes of promoting trafficking in persons" or promotes human trafficking "by any other means" faces a minimum of 20 years of imprisonment. Importantly, Section 9 of the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act stipulates that permanent or life-threatening bodily harm or the death of the victim "by reason of" the act of human trafficking constitutes an aggravating circumstance, leading to life imprisonment.

7.4.3 Individual responsibility

The above legal framework raises questions regarding both individual criminal responsibility and the potential state responsibility of Kenya for internationally wrongful acts.

709 ICRC, OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa: [States parties and signatories](#), International Humanitarian Law Databases.

710 See, for example: Kenyan Human Rights Commission, "[Ruto's push for Malabo Protocol an affront to justice for victims of international crimes](#)", 8 August 2023; Human Rights Watch, "[Call for African States to Reject Immunity for Serious Crimes by African Civil Society Organisations and International Organisations with a Presence in Africa](#)", 24 August 2014.

711 [Penal Code of the Republic of Kenya](#).

712 Kenya, [Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act](#), 2010.

Foreign fighters

In accordance with the legal framework outlined above, Kenyan nationals joining the RAF may face prosecution for “foreign enlistment” under Section 68 of the Penal Code if the decision to sign a military contract with the Russian military was voluntary in nature. This includes cases where recruits who enlisted with the Russian army were motivated by economic considerations. However, in numerous reported cases, including a case documented for this report, Kenyans were clearly deceived and later compelled to sign Russian-language contracts they could not read. In at least one reported case, a recruit was coerced into signing a military contract through death threats.⁷¹³ In such cases, the individuals cannot be held criminally responsible for foreign enlistment, and would instead qualify as victims of human trafficking.

Some Kenyan nationals recruited into Russia’s military are reportedly former members of the Kenya Defence Forces.⁷¹⁴ While the 2012 Kenya Defence Forces Act⁷¹⁵ does not apply to ex-members of the Kenya Defence Forces whose military service was duly terminated (for example, through retirement, resignation, dismissal or discharge),⁷¹⁶ and applies to reservists only in a limited number of cases, it contains several criminal provisions, such as desertion,⁷¹⁷ absence without leave,⁷¹⁸ or the acquisition of dual citizenship while in service,⁷¹⁹ which may apply to regular members of the army who enlist with the Russian military.

Recruiters

Recruiters involved in sending Kenyan nationals abroad under deceptive circumstances may incur criminal liability under the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act. Under Section 3 of the Act, any person who recruits, transports, transfers, harbours or receives another person for the purpose of exploitation commits the offence of human trafficking. The definition of exploitation explicitly includes the “forcible or fraudulent use of any human being to take part in armed conflict”,⁷²⁰ making the provision applicable where individuals are deceived by recruiters into joining Russia’s armed forces. In addition to direct perpetrators, the Act extends liability to those who finance, control, aid or abet trafficking, and contains a specific offence for persons who manage or operate recruitment agencies for the purpose of promoting trafficking. As a result, intermediaries, local agents, and recruitment staff involved in facilitating such schemes may face severe penalties, including at least 20 years of imprisonment and significant fines.

Recruiters may also incur criminal liability under Section 68 of the Penal Code for inducing Kenyan nationals to enlist in Russia’s armed forces without presidential authorisation, a crime punishable by up to ten years of imprisonment. Notably, this offence applies to “any person, whether a citizen of Kenya or not”, thereby extending liability to foreign nationals operating within Kenyan territory, including potential Russian nationals involved in recruitment.

7.4.4 Analysis of State responsibility

State responsibility for sending foreign fighters or failing to prevent their recruitment and departure to Russia

As discussed above, international law does not impose a general obligation on states to prevent their nationals from joining the armed forces of a foreign state. Instead, more specific obligations

713 “Trompés, traumatisés”, *supra* note. 87.

714 “Bring our sons home: Kenyan families demand action over Russian war recruitment”, *RFI*, 6 March 2026.

715 [Kenya Defence Forces Act](#).

716 Section 247, Kenya Defence Forces Act.

717 Section 74, Kenya Defence Forces Act.

718 Section 75, Kenya Defence Forces Act.

719 Section 129(1)(b), Kenya Defence Forces Act.

720 Section 2, Kenya’s Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act.

relating to the prevention of mercenary recruitment may arise under the UN Mercenary Convention, or the OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa. However, Kenya has not ratified either instrument, and is therefore not bound by the specific obligations they contain. Nor can such an obligation clearly be inferred from customary international⁷²¹ or customary regional law, despite the significant number of ratifications of the OAU Convention among African Union member states.⁷²²

In addition, Kenyan nationals who signed contracts with the Russian armed forces would *prima facie* be considered members of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict and, as a result, fall outside the definition of mercenaries.

Finally, the recruitment or departure of Kenyan nationals to Russia does not constitute an act of aggression attributable to Kenya under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. Under the definition of aggression contained in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX), aggression includes the sending by or on behalf of a state of armed bands, groups, irregulars or mercenaries. Based on the scarce available evidence, it cannot be assumed that the Kenyan authorities “sent” fighters as irregulars to fight in Ukraine.

State responsibility for potential violations of the Palermo Protocol

However, Kenya is a party to the Palermo Protocol, which requires states to take measures to prevent human trafficking, to protect and facilitate the repatriation of victims, and to prosecute perpetrators. To the extent that agencies use deception to recruit individuals to participate in armed conflict, Kenya may incur international responsibility if it fails to exercise due diligence in preventing and prosecuting trafficking activities within its jurisdiction.

While the Kenyan authorities continue to implement broad measures against human trafficking, including several comprehensive strategies and roadmaps,⁷²³ this analysis focuses on measures taken specifically in response to the recruitment of Kenya’s citizens into the Russian army. In this respect, the Kenyan authorities have undertaken several measures to prevent the military recruitment of its nationals, as required under Articles 9ff. of the Palermo Protocol. Since autumn 2025, the authorities have publicly condemned fraudulent recruitment practices and reportedly deregistered over 600 recruitment agencies.⁷²⁴ Most notably, in March 2026, Kenya’s Foreign Minister Musalia Mudavadi met with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, to address the fraudulent recruitment of its nationals into the Russian army. As a result, according to Mudavadi, Lavrov agreed that Kenyan nationals would “no longer be eligible to be enlisted” in Russia’s armed forces.⁷²⁵ If enforced, this agreement would indeed effectively end the enlistment of Kenyans into Russia’s army. These initiatives, also prompted by mounting public “pressure from some of the affected families (...) gathering more courage to come forward”,⁷²⁶ demonstrate a degree of institutional response, although the continued emergence of recruitment networks and the significant number of Kenyans reportedly recruited suggest gaps in oversight, monitoring, and enforcement.

Additionally, under Article 5 of the Palermo Protocol, Kenya has a duty to criminalise human trafficking and to prosecute potential perpetrators. Notably, two Kenyan recruiters linked to the same employment agency have been charged with human trafficking before the Kahawa Law Courts, an institution specialised in prosecuting such offences. While investigations against additional individuals are reportedly ongoing,⁷²⁷ the scale of the recruitment suggests that prosecution efforts could be further strengthened and expedited.

721 Holger P Hestermeyer, “[Mercenaries](#)”, in Max Planck Encyclopedias of International Law [MPIL].

722 As of March 2026, the OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa has been ratified by 32 of 55 African Union member States.

723 See, for example, Kenya Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, [National Plan of Action for Combating Trafficking in Persons 2022-27](#); Republic of Kenya, Alliance 8.7, [Kenya Country Road Map \(2025-30\)](#); and Kenya Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, [National Policy on Labour Migration 2023](#).

724 Muia, 2026, *supra* note 401.

725 Elizabeth Schumacher, “[Kenyans will no longer fight for Russia, top diplomat says](#)”, *DW*, 16 March 2026.

726 David Lewis and Tim Cocks, “[African nations tiptoe around recruitment of citizens by Russian networks](#)”, *Reuters*, 15 March 2026.

727 Muia, 2026, *supra* note 401.

Lastly, under Article 8 of the Palermo Protocol, states are also obliged to facilitate the return of trafficking victims “without undue or unreasonable delay”. While Ukraine classifies foreign fighters as POWs who may be interned until the cessation of active hostilities under Article 118 of GC III, it may, as noted above, be argued that the Palermo Protocol, as the more specific and protective regime, could constitute *lex specialis*. Read in conjunction with Article 118 of GC III, it might result in an obligation of the state of detention and the state of origin to cooperate in order to facilitate and expedite the return of trafficking victims through diplomatic means. In the case of Kenyan fighters, this includes their repatriation both from Ukrainian detention and from Russia. In November 2025, Kenyan President William Ruto asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to “facilitate the release of any Kenyan in Ukrainian custody”⁷²⁸. Following a further confidential diplomatic intervention, as of April 2026, 47 Kenyans have reportedly been repatriated,⁷²⁹ pointing towards substantial efforts of the Kenyan government to facilitate the repatriation of its nationals.

728 William Ruto, “I have had a fruitful phone conversation with President @ZelenskyyUa”, X, 6 November 2025.

729 Moges, 2026, *supra* note 445.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, tens of thousands of foreign nationals – by available estimates, at least 27,000 foreign nationals from more than 130 countries – have passed through Russian military recruitment and ended up on the front lines.⁷³⁰ This figure does not include the approximately 14,000 North Korean soldiers deployed to Russia under a formal state-to-state agreement, a distinct form of foreign military participation addressed separately in this report.⁷³¹

The geographic breadth of this recruitment is itself significant. It encompasses not only states with historical ties to Russia but also flows from Asia, Africa, and Latin America that have no obvious precedent in the context of a European land war. Understanding this scale requires first examining Russia's chosen method of warfare. The tactic of continuous mass assaults, used to locate Ukrainian firing positions, test defensive lines, and maintain pressure through attrition, requires a sustained supply of personnel prepared to absorb high casualties at the front. That supply cannot easily be drawn from domestic conscription without a second full mobilisation, a measure Russia's political leadership has so far avoided.⁷³² The recruitment of foreign fighters emerges as a response to that gap: not as a substitute for mobilisation, since the numbers involved are too small to serve that function, but as one means of managing the tension between what the tactic demands and what the political situation permits. The result is a campaign that is organised and expanding, with the number of confirmed foreign fighters growing by roughly a third in the three months between November 2025 and February 2026 alone, driven by pressure that consistently prioritises quantity over the conditions of recruitment.⁷³³

The cases documented in this report span a wide spectrum, from individuals who joined voluntarily and with full awareness of the commitments they were making, to those who, by their own accounts, were subjected to pressure or outright physical coercion rendering genuine consent effectively absent. Much of what lies between involves various combinations of deception, dependency, and constrained choice. A consistent thread throughout is the instrumentalisation of vulnerability. For those recruited from outside Russia, that vulnerability is primarily economic. Average monthly salaries across the main sending states range from the equivalent of a few dozen to a few hundred Euros, and research for this report found that the large majority of those who agreed to travel to Russia had done so only after exhausting conventional economic options.⁷³⁴ The decision to sign a contract was rarely impulsive; it typically followed a series of setbacks that had progressively narrowed the opportunities to escape poverty or debt.

For individuals already present in Russia at the time of recruitment, economic vulnerability was compounded by legal precariousness. The majority were migrant workers, predominantly from Central Asia. However, recruitment within Russia was not limited to this group; students and workers from Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia were targeted through the same mechanisms. A significant number of foreign fighters were recruited from prisons and other places of detention. Lacking regularised legal status, migrants had limited access to labour protections or legal recourse and were acutely exposed to police enforcement. From 2022 onwards, raids on migrant residences, workplaces, and mosques increased sharply, and detention was used as a recruitment

730 Interview with Vitaliy Matvienko, Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 19 November 2025; Ukrainian Military Intelligence data presented to the authors.

731 Lee Yu-Jung, "North Korea, Russia hail 'invincible' alliance on anniversary of strategic partnership treaty", *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 20 June 2025.

732 Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 647, "On the announcement of partial mobilisation in the Russian Federation", 21 September 2022.

733 Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Statement of 19 November 2025 (18,000+ confirmed from 128 countries); "Hochu Zhyt" project data, February 2026 (24,000+ confirmed).

734 TIMESCA, average salary data, 2024; World Bank Open Data, 2024; Havana Times, April 2025.

tool, with the signing of a military contract presented as an alternative to deportation, criminal prosecution, or continued detention.⁷³⁵ Acquisition of Russian citizenship, long pursued by Central Asian and other migrants as a pathway to stability, was progressively conditioned on registration for military service, transforming what had previously functioned as an incentive into an instrument of pressure.⁷³⁶ This pattern is consistent across the period studied and across regions, and the evidence points to a recruitment approach that was very likely state-sponsored or operated with institutional sanction.

In almost all cases documented in this report where recruitment began outside Russia, recruitment and transfer of foreign nationals were organised through a combination of state institutions and private intermediaries. Initial offers typically described civilian employment: construction work, security, cleaning, logistics, or driving. These offers were disseminated through social media platforms, recruitment agencies, and personal networks, by intermediaries whose connections to the Russian state ranged from direct to opaque. Enticement of potential recruits through purchase of air travel and facilitation of visas, with the apparent involvement of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, frequently formed part of the initial pitch. At the signature stage, contracts were presented in Russian to individuals who did not read or understand the language, often without any oral explanation and in circumstances that made meaningful comprehension impossible. Recruits were repeatedly assured that they would not be sent into combat, by intermediaries, recruiters, and in some cases by other recruits who had already served. The overwhelming majority – at least thirteen of the sixteen people interviewed for this report – reported having been told they would not fight, most nevertheless found themselves deployed to forward positions within weeks of signing. The consistency of this pattern across regions, types of intermediary, and recruitment channels is difficult to explain as coincidence and suggests that deception about the nature of the work is not incidental, but intrinsic to recruitment.

The gap between what recruits were offered and what they were ultimately required is both substantial and consistent across the cases documented in this report, and warrants legal qualification. The Palermo Protocol, to which Russia is a party, provides a framework for assessing this gap. It defines human trafficking through three cumulative elements: an act of recruitment or transfer, carried out through deception, coercion, or the abuse of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation.

In the cases examined, the means of recruitment employed included systematic deception about the nature of the work and, for those recruited within Russia, direct coercion. The purpose was deployment to high-casualty assault operations, often referred to as “meat assaults”, to which a significant proportion of those recruited did not know they were agreeing. That some individuals entered service voluntarily and with full awareness of the terms does not diminish the weight of that shown by the broader evidence.

The recruitment practices documented in this report support a *prima facie* finding that Russia's conduct amounts to human trafficking, in violation of its obligations under the Palermo Protocol, both through direct participation in recruitment and through its failure to prevent or prosecute those operating on its behalf.

International humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) do not always point in the same direction, and the situation of captured foreign fighters in this conflict illustrates why that matters. Under IHL, a person held as a prisoner of war (POW) is subject to repatriation to the state whose forces they served, rather than to their country of origin or on the basis of their individual circumstances. Where that person was also recruited through deception or coercion for the purpose of exploitation, however, the logic of victim protection under IHRL pulls the other way. No established legal mechanism currently bridges that gap. The practical consequence is visible in Ukrainian POW

735 Yulia Paramonova, “We will frame them, lock them up, label them as ‘extremists’: how immigrants from Central Asia end up in war and what they experience on the front line” [in Russian], *Verstka*, 1 August 2025.

736 Federal Law No. 281-FZ, 8 August 2024; Executive Order No. 821, 5 November 2025.

camps, where a number of foreign fighters remain with limited prospect of exchange, their home states having made little diplomatic contact and Russia prioritising the return of its own nationals.

States of origin of recruits have responded with varying degrees of commitment to their obligations under international law on mercenarism and human trafficking, and none has fully prevented or remedied the phenomenon within its borders. In some cases, the constraints are legal. For example, Nepal's anti-trafficking legislation does not adequately address the practice of deceptive recruitment into armed conflict, while Kazakhstan has prosecuted fighters without extending equivalent scrutiny to recruiters. Kenya has mounted the most sustained institutional response among the states examined, combining diplomatic engagement, and criminal charges; nevertheless recruitment continued for a considerable period of time. Cuba has adequate domestic legislation to address the conduct but has provided limited publicly available evidence of enforcement.

The analysis and findings of this report could be extrapolated to other contexts. In the case of Tajikistan, for instance, no proceedings have been initiated against either fighters or recruiters, and the government has not publicly articulated its position. The overall picture is one of states responding to a phenomenon that has, in most cases, moved faster than the institutions tasked with addressing it.

This report does not purport to establish individual criminal liability, which can only be determined by a competent court. It does, however, set out the applicable domestic criminal law frameworks against which the conduct described may be assessed. Nor does the report characterise all foreign recruitment as human trafficking: the evidentiary record makes clear that voluntary, informed enlistment did occur and accounts for a portion of the documented cases. What the evidence does establish is the existence of a recruitment system whose structural features – namely the exploitation of economic and legal vulnerability, the systematic use of deception, the deployment of recruits to operations to which most did not know they were agreeing – meet the legal criteria for human trafficking at a systemic level. Russia's recruitment apparatus drew on existing migration channels and labour networks, which were progressively repurposed for military recruitment alongside the development of new legislative and financial infrastructure designed to expand its reach. The extent to which private intermediaries coordinated with Russian state institutions, and whether particular forms of intermediary involvement systematically increased the risk of coercion or deception, are questions raised by this report but not fully resolved, and they warrant further investigation. These findings engage Russia's responsibility as the state that organised and enabled this recruitment system, as well as the responsibility of states of origin whose obligations to prevent, prosecute, and protect have not been fully discharged. The accounts documented in this report come from diverse regions and circumstances, but they converge on a single system and a common set of unanswered responsibilities.

Recommendations

States of Origin (excluding North Korea)

Governments of states from which foreign nationals have been recruited into the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) should:

- Conduct effective investigations to identify victims of human trafficking, and identify and prosecute both natural and legal persons involved in the recruitment of individuals into the RAF, in accordance with their obligations under international law, particularly the Palermo Protocol;
- Dismantle commercial entities and trafficking networks involved in the recruitment of foreign fighters, and strengthen national oversight mechanisms;
- Where domestic legislation criminalises mercenarism or foreign enlistment, conduct effective investigations into individuals suspected of having voluntarily joined the RAF, while establishing effective mechanisms to distinguish voluntary recruits from individuals who were deceived, coerced, or trafficked into service;
- Strengthen anti-trafficking legislation by bringing it fully into line with international law, especially the Palermo Protocol, and ensure its robust and consistent enforcement;
- Urgently take all necessary measures to prevent human trafficking, in line with the Palermo Protocol, including:
 - i. publicly acknowledging Russia's predatory recruitment practices and issuing timely and accessible warnings to their citizens;
 - ii. implementing public awareness campaigns, particularly targeting those most vulnerable to such recruitment, including labour migrants, students and individuals who transit through, reside in, or lack legal status in Russia. These campaigns should emphasise the legal consequences of joining foreign armed forces, the deceptive and/or coercive practices used by recruiters, and available avenues to report any suspicious recruitment activity. Ministries of Education (or equivalent national authorities) should ensure that students studying in or preparing to depart for Russia receive adequate information on recruitment risks and on how to seek assistance if coerced or deceived into service in the RAF;
 - iii. ensuring proportionate and evidence-based departure screening for individuals heading to Russia, particularly where indicators suggest recruitment risks. These indicators may include irregular travel patterns or prior contact with recruitment networks. These measures must remain targeted and non-discriminatory, ensuring full respect for international human rights law, including the right to freedom of movement. States should also foster intelligence sharing and cooperation with transit countries to detect potential recruits;
 - iv. requiring digital platforms operating in their jurisdiction to detect, flag, and remove content used for fraudulent military recruitment, including misleading job advertisements, and to report such content to competent national authorities, drawing on existing frameworks for the removal of trafficking-related content online;
- Actively negotiate with the Russian authorities to facilitate the timely repatriation of mobilised foreign nationals who wish to return to their countries of origin;
- Engage in diplomatic and public advocacy efforts to urge Russia to cease its predatory recruitment of foreign nationals and to demand accountability;

- Seek to establish contact with their nationals held in Ukraine and to cooperate with the Ukrainian authorities to facilitate the timely repatriation of POWs who may be considered victims of human trafficking;
- Exert pressure on Russia to ensure that families of individuals recruited into the conflict have access to information about the status and whereabouts of their relatives, and provide practical assistance in navigating repatriation procedures or the return of their remains; and
- Establish state-funded support programmes for repatriated trafficking victims and their families, including access to medical and psychosocial care, legal assistance, and social and economic reintegration.

Transit States

States through whose territory foreign fighters pass on their way to Russia should:

- Establish or strengthen monitoring mechanisms at border crossings and other points of entry to identify individuals travelling to Russia for suspicious purposes or with the apparent intent to participate in the war against Ukraine. Identified cases should be reported to the relevant authorities, states of origin and, where appropriate, to international partners or bodies with a relevant mandate. Transit states bear obligations under the Palermo Protocol independent of those incumbent on states of origin, and should designate a national authority responsible for coordinating the detection and referral of potential trafficking victims transiting their territory.

Ukraine

- Continue applying a presumption of POW status to all captured foreign fighters in line with Article 45 AP I. Where a foreign national's POW status is in doubt, provide a hearing before a competent tribunal to determine status under IHL, in line with Article 5 of GC III, while ensuring that protective treatment is maintained throughout any status determination process;
- Continue notifying states of origin when their nationals are captured by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, informing them of the identity, health condition, and whereabouts of individuals held as POWs;
- Where there are compelling reasons to believe that individual foreign fighters have been victims of human trafficking, apply a more protective human rights framework. Engage with states of nationality and relevant international mechanisms to facilitate the timely repatriation of such individuals, prioritising their best interests and ensuring that allegations of human trafficking are duly investigated. Ensure adequate protection in Ukraine until their repatriation, including by:
 - i. allowing contact with or visits from diplomatic missions and family members;
 - ii. ensuring continued visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), allowing them to interview foreign combatants in line with applicable IHL standards; and
 - iii. providing such individuals with adequate medical and psychological support.

The International Community and International Organisations

The phenomenon of institutionalised recruitment for participation in foreign conflicts poses serious security risks and has significant consequences for international human rights law and international humanitarian law, to which the international community must respond. International organisations should:

- Apply coordinated pressure on Russia using various means to bring an end to the recruitment of foreign nationals;
- Recognise and affirm Russia's responsibility for the coercive and institutionalised recruitment of foreign nationals in support of its war of aggression against Ukraine and apply pressure to hold Russia accountable;
- Explore existing mechanisms to hold Russia accountable, including the invocation of international responsibility before the ICJ, referrals to relevant UN Special Procedures, and targeted sanctions against individuals and entities involved in recruitment networks;
- Promote a shared understanding that international recruitment into armed conflict may involve human trafficking and exploitation, and other related forms of coercion and abuse; and
- Support and cooperate with non-governmental organisations and research institutions to encourage the documentation and exchange of information regarding the recruitment and deployment of foreign fighters.

In particular:

European Union (EU)

Acknowledging the EU's efforts aimed at halting Russia's foreign recruitment, including the resolution of 12 March 2026 (2026/2641(RSP)) and broader initiatives undertaken by EU missions, particularly in African states, these measures should be further strengthened by:

- Integrating the issue of Russia's predatory recruitment of foreign nationals into broader policy responses to the war against Ukraine;
- Issuing guidance clarifying that fraudulent military recruitment content constitutes illegal content under the Digital Services Act, and use DSA enforcement mechanisms to require large online platforms to identify and remove such content proactively;
- Encouraging states of origin, including those in South Asia and Latin America, to implement the measures outlined above, while initiating dialogue with transit states and urging them to counter the recruitment flows through their territories;
- Continuing to monitor the growing number of foreign nationals recruited into the RAF and developing appropriate institutional responses;
- Supporting the efforts of journalists, researchers, and civil society representatives investigating these recruitment practices; and
- Calling for the accountability of states of origin or transit that disregard, tolerate or facilitate the outflow of foreign fighters to Russia's armed forces, and engaging in diplomatic efforts with such states to curb recruitment.

United Nations (UN)

- Review the existing definition of mercenaries under international law to account for indirect forms of material gain, such as acquisition of foreign citizenship or residency rights, expungement of criminal records, and debt relief. This review should adopt a contextual approach to financial incentives, recognising that nominally equivalent salaries offered to Russian nationals and foreign nationals from developing countries represent a fundamentally different economic proposition. In doing so, it should take into account the draft legal definition of a mercenary proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the use of mercenaries as a means of impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, in his report submitted to the Commission on Human Rights at its sixtieth session;⁷³⁷ and
- Promote a common understanding across UN bodies and member states that recruitment into armed conflict may, under existing international frameworks, constitute human trafficking and exploitation and should be addressed accordingly.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

- Expand existing anti-trafficking programming to address the coercive recruitment of foreign nationals into armed conflict, through the framework of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Palermo Protocol);
- Identify trafficking routes and monitor recruitment patterns; and
- Provide technical assistance to states of origin and transit to strengthen their capacity to detect, investigate, and prosecute recruitment networks, and to protect victims. The UNODC should work with member states to develop operational frameworks for distinguishing between victims and mercenaries.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

- Undertake a review of the criteria on the definition of “mercenary” set out in Article 47 of Additional Protocol I, guided by the broader and more functional definition provided by the Special Rapporteur on the use of mercenaries as a means of impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination in his report submitted to the Commission on Human Rights at its sixtieth session.⁷³⁸ This review should further clarify that individuals may simultaneously be victims of human trafficking and persons entitled to combatant status, and should be treated accordingly;
- Establish, in coordination with the relevant national authorities, a confidential international registry of foreign nationals suspected of having been recruited through coercive or deceptive means, to serve as an evidentiary foundation for future accountability processes and repatriation procedures.

Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

- Establish a monitoring mechanism to track online military recruitment patterns, including identification of suspicious job advertisements, development of indicators of trafficking and provision of preventive guidance to local populations; and
- Strengthen engagement with Central Asian states, within the framework of its Human Dimension mandate, by encouraging the development of prevention and response guidelines and mechanisms to counter the recruitment of their nationals.

⁷³⁷ UN Commission on Human Rights, *Use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination*, Report submitted by Mr Enrique Bernales Ballesteros, Special Rapporteur, E/CN.4/2004/15, 24 December 2003, para. 47.

⁷³⁸ *Idem*.

NGOs and think tanks

- Continue documenting and exposing recruitment practices, with particular attention to trafficking routes, patterns of coercion, deception, exploitation, and actors engaged in recruitment, using documentation methodologies compatible with evidentiary standards applicable in international criminal and human rights proceedings, in coordination with relevant international legal bodies;
- Provide support to victims of human trafficking;
- Advocate for efforts to hold state and non-state actors accountable and to strengthen policy responses, including the incorporation of transnational military recruitment into existing trafficking and human rights frameworks, and the establishment of dedicated accountability mechanisms;
- Raise awareness at local and international levels regarding the risks associated with recruitment into foreign armed conflicts; and
- Continue to research existing gaps and develop further actionable policy recommendations for decision-makers.

Russia

While recognising that the Russian Federation is waging a war of aggression against Ukraine in violation of international law and has repeatedly demonstrated disregard for calls from the international community regarding its human rights obligations and unlawful conduct, the following recommendations are nonetheless addressed to the Russian authorities. They reflect Russia's obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law and call for measures to curb the expansion of transnational military recruitment and prevent further abuses against foreign nationals recruited or deployed in the war. In this regard, Russia must:

- Immediately cease the predatory recruitment, training and deployment of foreign nationals, particularly students, migrant workers, detainees, individuals with irregular administrative status and other individuals from vulnerable backgrounds who are targeted through coercion, deception, or exploitative practices, and enable the repatriation of such individuals should they already find themselves in Russia's jurisdiction;
- Halt the recruitment of foreign nationals to participate in an illegal war of aggression, regardless of their motivations for financial or material gain, including through promises of high remuneration, expedited citizenship, residency, or other benefits; repeal existing legislation, policies, or practices that facilitate or promote such recruitment, and refrain from introducing new ones;
- Provide timely and transparent information regarding missing foreign nationals recruited into the RAF to their families and to relevant international humanitarian organisations, such as the ICRC, in accordance with obligations under international humanitarian law;
- Guarantee consular access for states of origin to their nationals serving in the Russian Armed Forces, in line with the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations;
- Effectively identify and repatriate the remains of foreign nationals killed in hostilities; facilitate their return to their families in their countries of origin and cooperate with relevant international mechanisms responsible for the dignified handling and transfer of the dead; and cover all necessary repatriation costs; and
- Investigate and prosecute individual recruiters, recruitment networks and intermediaries who target foreign nationals, particularly students, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups, who often lack prior military training or experience, and who are targeted through coercion, deception, or exploitative practices, both inside and outside Russia.

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Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking?

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

DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATION:

Alexis Deswaef

EDITORS:

Ilya Nuzov and Maria Tomak

AUTHORS OF THE REPORT:

Alexandra Leibova, Andrii Latsyba, Artur Alkhasov,
Denys Sultanhaliiev, Elene Kobakhidze, Ilya Nuzov,
and Kenza Rharmoui

DESIGN:

Noam Le Pottier

VISUALS:

Lera Riezanova

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FIDH

**WE ARE UNITED IN FIGHTING FOR
A FAIR AND JUST WORLD**

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

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CHASING PERPETRATORS,
AND LEADING EXPERTISE**

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