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From Africa to Ukraine: An Investigation into African Prisoners of War

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Sub-saharan Africa Center

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Abstract

The key findings of this research are as follows:

- The Russian authorities are conducting a campaign to recruit non-professional combatants in sub-Saharan Africa, frequently employing deception (false job offers) and coercion;
- Foreign recruits are used as "cannon fodder"; they are not trained for this war, and their experience at the front is extremely brutal;
- African fighters held in Ukraine are not included in prisoner exchanges between Kyiv and Moscow, and—with few exceptions—their own governments are not motivated to get them released. Their future is therefore highly uncertain;
- In general, African governments that wish to put an end to Russian recruitment efforts do not speak out publicly but instead favor discreet contacts with Moscow;
- The Russian authorities' stance on these recruitments is inconsistent, and contrary to their claims, they do not appear to have put an end to them;
- The Ukrainian authorities are relying on cooperation with African governments to reduce recruitment by Russia. In some African countries, Russian recruitment efforts are becoming a political issue, with either favorable or unfavorable consequences for the incumbent governments;
- African states have a range of police and judicial measures at their disposal to combat such recruitment, and they could ask for the repatriation of their citizens who are prisoners in Ukraine in order to try them.

Résumé

Les conclusions essentielles de cette recherche sont les suivantes :

- Les autorités russes mènent une campagne de recrutement de combattants non professionnels en Afrique subsaharienne en utilisant la plupart du temps le mensonge (fausses offres d'emploi) et la contrainte.
- Les recrues étrangères sont utilisées comme « chair à canon » ; elles ne sont pas entraînées pour cette guerre et leur expérience du front est très brutale.
- Les combattants africains détenus en Ukraine ne font pas partie des échanges de prisonniers entre Kiev et Moscou et, à quelques exceptions près, ne semblent pas être réclamés par leurs gouvernements respectifs. Leur avenir est donc très incertain.
- En général, les gouvernements africains qui veulent mettre fin aux recrutements russes ne s'expriment pas publiquement, mais privilégient des contacts discrets avec Moscou.
- Les autorités russes ont un discours à géométrie variable sur ces recrutements et, contrairement à leurs affirmations, elles ne semblent pas y avoir mis fin.
- Les autorités ukrainiennes misent sur la coopération avec les gouvernements africains pour réduire les recrutements.
- Dans certains pays africains, les recrutements russes deviennent un enjeu politique, avec des effets favorables ou défavorables pour les gouvernements en place.
- Les États africains disposent d'une série de mesures policières et judiciaires pour lutter contre ces recrutements et pourraient demander à juger leurs concitoyens prisonniers en Ukraine.

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Introduction

When T. W. received an invitation letter to travel to Russia in November 2025, he could hardly believe it. Two months earlier, he had met a young Russian woman who was ill at the hospital in Kampala where he worked as a nurse. After she returned to Russia, they had kept in touch through social media. Much to his surprise, she invited him to come and study and work in her country, even offering to pay for his plane ticket. Delighted by the opportunity, T. W. left without informing either his family or his employer. He obtained his visa in just three days and arrived in Russia on December 7. But instead of the young woman he was expecting, a man met him at the airport and took him directly to a Russian army recruitment office. On January 4, 2026, he was deployed to the front as part of a group of five fighters. On January 8, he was wounded by a drone and left for dead on the battlefield. Together with a fellow Ugandan, he went into hiding and wandered until they reached an unfamiliar village. It turned out to be a Ukrainian village, where both men were taken prisoner on January 14. T. W. had spent just ten days on the front line.

On October 28-29, 2026, Moscow will host the third Russia–Africa Summit, following those held in Sochi in 2019 and St. Petersburg in 2023. The summit will once again celebrate Russian-African friendship and cooperation. Yet, although Russia's policy of recruiting Africans to fight in Ukraine will not feature on the official agenda, the issue will cast a shadow over the gathering. It is likely to be raised behind closed doors by some African representatives. Indeed, after being carefully concealed, Russia's recruitment of Africans for the war in Ukraine is now extensively documented and widely reported in the media. Journalistic investigations and statements from African officials, recruits and their families have become so numerous that the Russian authorities have been forced to acknowledge the presence of African fighters in their armed forces.[1]

In December 2025, the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) published a *Paper* examining Russia's recruitment policy in Africa,[2] covering both combatants and young women recruited to work in arms factories in the Alabuga industrial zone. The analysis was based primarily on interviews, notably with Africans serving in the Russian armed forces, their family members and prospective recruits. Building on that earlier research, this new

1. See the joint press conference by the Russian and Kenyan Ministers of Foreign Affairs, "Russia Rules Out Compensation for Kenyans in Its Military", Citizen TV Kenya, March 16, 2026, available at: www.youtube.com.
2. T. Vircoulon and M. Bobbo, "Russia's Policy of Recruiting Fighters and Female Workers in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Ifri Papers*, Ifri, December 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.

study focuses exclusively on combatants and draws on a new set of sources: African fighters captured and held as prisoners of war in Ukraine.

The testimonies of African prisoners of war held in Ukraine are the starting point of this study. They illustrate the predicament faced by Africans who have become involved, voluntarily or otherwise, in a war in Europe. Indeed, the recruitment of foreign fighters, most of them civilians, into the Russian armed forces is far from a marginal or isolated phenomenon. On the one hand, the number of recruits is estimated to be in the tens of thousands;[3] on the other, this recruitment policy has both a visible dimension (the recruitment of volunteers)[4] and a hidden one (recruitment through deception and coercion). This form of internationalization of the conflict is particularly problematic. It differs from conventional mercenary recruitment and raises unprecedented and complex issues at the intersection of international law and politics.[5]

This *Paper* confirms the main findings of the previous study on Russia's recruitment policy (I), examines the diplomatic, political and humanitarian challenges arising from this policy (II), and concludes with an assessment of how Russia's recruitment of foreign nationals may evolve and how African states may respond to the issue.

This study is based on fourteen interviews conducted at a prisoner-of-war detention facility in Ukraine in June 2026. Having arrived in Russia in 2024 and 2025, most of those interviewed were captured on the front line during the winter of 2025-26. These interviews, facilitated by the Ukrainian authorities, took place in the presence of a representative of Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War. The interviews were conducted in accordance with the rights of prisoners of war as established under the 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.[6] Before being asked for their consent, interviewees were informed of the conditions and purpose of the interviews. Participation was

3. According to the Ukrainian authorities, more than 28,000 foreign nationals have been recruited into the Russian armed forces, and over 5,000 have been killed on the front line since the beginning of the war. Further details are available at: https://stoprussianrecruiters.org. See the appendix at the end of this publication for the various estimates of foreign nationals killed on the front line.

4. The Russian armed forces officially recruit foreign nationals aged between 18 and 60, promising them Russian citizenship two weeks after signing a military contract, a lump-sum payment of between $23,000 and $50,000, compensation of $30,000 in the event of injury, and social benefits for their entire family. See "Contract Military Service in Russia for Foreign Citizens", available at: https://russian-army.com; "Russia Increases Recruitment of Foreign Fighters Through Targeted Social Media Campaigns", ABC, December 7, 2025, available at: www.abc.net.au.

5. Under Article 47 of Additional Protocol I to the 1977 Geneva Conventions in international humanitarian law, and the 1989 United Nations International Convention in public international law, classification as a mercenary requires the cumulative fulfillment of six strict criteria. These include being specifically recruited to fight, taking a direct part in hostilities, and being motivated by financial gain substantially exceeding the remuneration of regular armed forces personnel. Furthermore, a mercenary must neither be a national of a party to the conflict, nor a member of its armed forces, nor be acting on an official mission on behalf of a third state. See "Mercenaries", Dictionnaire du droit humanitaire, available at: https://dictionnaire-droit-humanitaire.org.

6. Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of August 12, 1949.

voluntary: some declined to be interviewed, while all those who agreed requested anonymity. The author and Ifri would like to thank everyone who contributed, directly or indirectly, to this study.

From recruitment to the front line: the experiences of African fighters in the Russian armed forces

The testimonies of prisoners of war provide insight into the journeys that take individuals from African countries to the battlefields of Europe, contributing to an ethnographic understanding of the internationalization of this war. Their accounts corroborate those of individuals who were fortunate enough to return to their home countries,[7] as well as the main findings of the first study, namely that:

- the Russian authorities are conducting a recruitment campaign targeting individuals without military experience in sub-Saharan Africa;
- recruitment methods largely rely on deception (fraudulent job offers) and coercion;
- foreign recruits are used as "cannon fodder".

Recruitment campaign for non-professional fighters in sub-Saharan Africa

Recruitment is carried out by an organization operating behind the scenes, capable of financing migrants' travel, securing visas rapidly through Russian consulates, and arranging for recruits to be met and assisted upon arrival in Russia. None of this could be organized without the direct involvement of the Russian state.

Travel expenses were fully covered for most of the prisoners interviewed, with only a few having to contribute partially to the cost of their plane tickets. Recruiters may be African or Russian. Russian recruiters sometimes operate in Africa and sometimes from Russia through social media.[8] Among the prisoners interviewed, two Ugandans had been approached by Russians posing as business travelers and tourists in

7. "11 SA Men Stranded in Russia Arrive Home", SABC News, February 25, 2026, available at: www.youtube.com.
8. In addition to conventional social media platforms, two South Africans were recruited online through gaming communities. See "Russia Recruited South Africans for Its War Using a Gaming App", Bloomberg, January 6, 2026, available at: www.bloomberg.com.

Uganda.[9] Russian nationals have also been arrested by the police in Zimbabwe and Kenya. In Nairobi, in 2025, the police arrested a Russian businessman who was subsequently released and quickly left Kenya.[10] This year, two Russian nationals—a man and a woman—were arrested in Zimbabwe on human trafficking charges and brought before the courts. [11]

Local agencies specializing in tourist and business travel abroad often act as intermediaries, while Russian consulates issue visas in just a few days. Africans travel either individually or in groups, transiting through Dubai, Addis Ababa or Istanbul.[12]

African migrants are met and assisted as soon as they arrive at a Russian airport. They are received either by their Russian recruiter or by a third party sent on the recruiter's behalf. Shortly after arrival, they are taken to sign a military enlistment contract written in Russian, without any translation being provided. If they refuse to sign the contract with the army, they are threatened with imprisonment on various grounds, such as debt (because they are required to repay the cost of their plane ticket) or illegal residence (because their visa is cancelled).[13] Those who refuse are indeed arrested and imprisoned: a South African man who refused to enlist died in a Russian prison earlier this year.[14] Following a medical examination, a bank account is opened for them at Promsvyazbank (PSB), which can be accessed via mobile phone. Nationalized in 2018, the bank has direct ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense and the financing of Russia's military-industrial complex.[15] It is headed by Pyotr Fradkov, son of Mikhail Fradkov, a former prime minister who also headed the SVR (Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service) from 2007 to 2016. The Russian Ministry of Defense uses the bank to pay military salaries and bonuses. It also operates in Crimea and the self-proclaimed "republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, making it de facto the bank of the occupation. Both the bank and its chairman, Pyotr Fradkov, are subject to sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom.[16]

9. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.
10. Telephone interview with a journalist, Nairobi, July 2026.
11. L. B. Harris, "Zim Arrests Russia Recruiters, Struggles to Repatriate Deceased", CITE Zimbabwe, August 3, 2026, available at: https://cite.org.zw; "Zimbabwe Probes Russian War Recruiting Schemes", Africa Defense Forum, August 4, 2026, available at: https://adf-magazine.com; "Russian Arrested in Zimbabwe over 'War Recruitment' Plot", Bulawayo24 News, June 5, 2026, available at: https://bulawayo24.com.
12. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.
13. Ibid.
14. "Remains of South African Man Who Died in Russia Return Home", Newzroom Afrika, June 14, 2026, available at: www.youtube.com.
15. The bank's original majority shareholders were brothers Alexei and Dmitry Ananyev (88.25%), alongside the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Following its nationalization in 2018, the Ananyev brothers fled Russia and became the subject of criminal proceedings in Russia for embezzlement. Interview with a Russia specialist, Paris, June 2026.
16. "Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company", Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List, Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), U.S. Department of the Treasury, available at:

Recruitment methods often based on deception and coercion

In a world where six out of ten people living in poverty are African,[17] Africans account for a significant share of the world's migrants. According to the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 2,982 Africans from 37 countries have been recruited into the Russian armed forces.[18] Almost all the prisoners of war interviewed were low-income urban workers (nurses, electricians, schoolteachers, etc.). Recruiters lure them with promises of well-paid employment abroad, offering what appears to be a pathway to a better life. Some of the prisoners interviewed had previously attempted to emigrate to Europe, without success. One had already worked abroad in the security sector in the Middle East (as a security guard) and was hoping to repeat the experience. For others, it was their first journey outside the African continent.[19]

While some had searched online for job opportunities in Russia themselves, others were approached directly by African or Russian recruiters. The most common recruitment method involves job offers, although some were also "invited" to events in Russia (sports competitions, business workshops, etc.). The jobs promised to lure them were generally low-skilled positions, such as drivers, security guards or construction workers. Upon arrival, however, the only employment offered was enlistment in the Russian armed forces.[20]

Among the Africans who had come to Russia to study at university or undertake vocational training and subsequently found themselves serving in the Russian armed forces, some were attracted by the salaries and promises of Russian citizenship offered to foreign recruits. Such offers are particularly appealing to workers in precarious employment or foreign students, who abandon their education or training plans to enlist. They generally sign one-year military contracts. By contrast, some African residents accused of offences and arrested by the Russian police were forced to enlist.[21] Faced with a choice between "prison or the army", they chose the latter, aware of the reputation of Russian prisons. Among those who enlisted while already living in Russia, two distinct categories can therefore be identified: voluntary recruits and those forcibly enlisted.

sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov; "Petr Mikhailovich Fradkov", ibid., available at: sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov.

17. "L'extrême pauvreté dans le monde ne recule plus", Observatoire des inégalités, May 13, 2025, available at: www.inegalites.fr.

18. Information provided by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

19. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.; "Russia Uses Deception to Recruit African Students to Fight in Ukraine", in International Security and Estonia 2026, Tallinn, Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2026, available at: https://raport.valisluureamet.ee.

The previous *Paper* identified another category of voluntary recruits: those who had deliberately sought to enlist in the Russian armed forces while still in their home countries. However, none of them were among the prisoners interviewed.[22] Two possible explanations may account for their absence: either there were none at the detention facility, or they were among those who declined to be interviewed.

Zimbabwe and Madagascar: new recruitment grounds?

Rumors of recruitment activities in Zimbabwe began circulating on social media in late 2025. In 2026, journalistic investigations confirmed that people were being recruited in Zimbabwe, and both Russian and Zimbabwean recruiters were arrested.[23] In March of that year, the Minister of Information confirmed that 18 Zimbabweans had been killed on the front line.[24] One Russian recruiter was arrested at Harare airport alongside Zimbabweans whose travel he had arranged. Another was arrested in Harare after sending several Zimbabweans to Russia through fraudulent job offers. In 2026, Zimbabweans traveling to Russia were also intercepted in South Africa and Tanzania.[25] Paradoxically, although Zimbabwe is the only African country where Russian nationals have been arrested for human trafficking, the Zimbabwean government has remained diplomatically silent on the issue.[26]

After arriving in Madagascar in December 2025, Russia's military intelligence service (GRU) deployed instructors and assumed responsibility for the security of the new Malagasy president, Colonel Michaël Randrianirina. This security partnership quickly led to numerous bilateral visits, including visits to Russia by the president and his prime minister, as well as agreements across a wide range of sectors. African Initiative, a Russian influence organization, established a presence in Madagascar, and a Russian House cultural center recently opened there.[27] At the same time, a recruitment campaign targeting female workers for the Alabuga military-industrial complex was launched.[28] The presence of Malagasy nationals in the Russian armed forces has been confirmed by the Russian embassy in Madagascar.[29] The first Malagasy killed in Ukraine was identified in October 2026.[30]

22. T. Vircoulon and M. Bobbo, "Russia's Policy of Recruiting Fighters and Female Workers in Sub-Saharan Africa", op. cit.
23. "Russia-Ukraine War | CITE Probes Recruiters Network in Southern Africa", SABC News, March 2, 2026, available at: www.youtube.com.
24. L. B. Harris, "Zim Arrests Russia Recruiters, Struggles to Repatriate Deceased", CITE Zimbabwe, August 3, 2026, available at: cite.org.zw.
25. S. Ekanem, "South Africa Linked to Russian Military Recruitment Cases as 6 Zimbabweans Plead Guilty", Business Insider Africa, October 9, 2026, available at: africa.businessinsider.com; "Russia Targets Zimbabwean Youth to Fight Against Ukraine", The Zimbabwean, October 16, 2026, available at: www.thezimbabwean.co.
26. Author's telephone interview with a journalist, Harare, September 2026.
27. On the expansion of Russia's presence in Madagascar, see "Madagascar: l'offensive tous azimuts du GRU pour accéder à l'océan Indien", All Eyes on Wagner, September 23, 2026, available at: alleyesonwagner.org.
28. N. Rakotobe, "Emploi en Russie : des secteurs clés s'ouvrent à la jeunesse malgache", *Midi Madagasikara*, May 26, 2026, available at: https://midi-madagasikara.mg.
29. "Faux. Il n'y a aucun accord entre Madagascar et la Russie pour envoyer des soldats combattre en Ukraine", Studio Sifaka, September 7, 2026, available at: www.studiosifaka.org.
30. G. Borgia, "Les Russes 'utilisent les populations des pays pauvres' pour faire la guerre : la sœur d'un jeune Malgache tué en Ukraine témoigne", TV5 Monde, October 28, 2026, available at: www.tv5monde.com.

Foreign recruits are used as "cannon fodder"

Africans recruited in Russia undergo two months of military training, while those recruited in their home countries receive more basic training lasting no more than three weeks. Under the supervision of military instructors, recruits first spend time at training camps in Russia before being transferred to camps near the front line in Donbas. They learn how to use standard Russian infantry weapons and radio equipment, as well as basic navigation skills (using a compass, etc.). [31]

Rather than being grouped together, foreign recruits are deliberately dispersed across several camps. Recruits of the same nationality are generally separated. They are also sometimes deprived of their mobile phones and identity documents. These measures are intended to reduce the risk of mutiny by preventing contact with the outside world and the formation of groups based on national solidarity that might rebel. For example, a group of 11 Kenyans at the first training camp was split into two groups for the remainder of their training. Africans thus find themselves alongside Asians, South Americans and Arabs. Control over recruits relies on isolation and intimidation. Mock executions have even been reported. Nevertheless, some recruits are believed to have managed to escape from these camps. [32]

Following this rudimentary military training, recruits are assigned to construction work (digging trenches and building underground shelters) before being deployed to the front line, within the kill zone.[33] They are sent to the front in small groups of no more than five men. Positioned in trenches or makeshift shelters, they are tasked with reporting enemy movements by radio.

In addition to gathering intelligence in close proximity to enemy positions, they also take part in attacks against Ukrainian positions, including so-called "meat assaults", a term used to describe attacks that result in particularly heavy casualties.

Deployed on the front line, these soldiers endure the harshest combat conditions. Hit by enemy drones or artillery fire or injured by mines, they may become cut off from their units, without means of communication, food supplies or medical assistance. Difficult to reach, wounded soldiers who

31. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.
32. Ibid.
33. The kill zone separating the two armies can be up to 50 kilometers wide. In this area, under constant aerial and satellite surveillance, strikes are relentless. Author's interview with a member of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, prisoner-of-war camp, June 2026. See also L. Lazo, "'Pendant deux jours, j'ai tiré le corps d'un mort : dans la 'kill zone', les soldats ukrainiens vivent sous la menace permanente des drones russes", France Info, July 8, 2026, available at: www.franceinfo.fr.

cannot receive assistance by drone are left to fend for themselves.[34] By August 2026, Ukrainian authorities had recorded 486 Africans killed in combat, with Kenyans, Cameroonians, Ghanaians and Gambians accounting for the highest numbers of fatalities.[35] Most of the prisoners interviewed had seen their fellow soldiers killed or seriously wounded and had themselves sustained injuries. The time between their deployment to the front and their capture or death is often short. Among those interviewed, the longest period spent on the front line before capture was three months, while the shortest was just ten days. For these prisoners of war, capture marked the end of a traumatic ordeal during which they had come face to face with death and suffered severe physical injuries. Few can speak about their experiences on the front line without shedding tears.[36]

As civilians, most foreign recruits have limited military value. Even those who previously served in their home countries' armed forces have little better chance of survival. Indeed, having served in the military does not necessarily mean having experienced combat, and even those who have fought in African conflicts lack the training required for trench warfare conducted with the most advanced technologies of the 21st century. With their chances of survival so low, African recruits are used as cannon fodder to enable the Russian army to hold a front line that now stretches 1,250 kilometers.[37]

Official estimates of recruitment and casualties reported by African governments[38]

Country	Estimated recruits	Estimated deaths	Estimated missing persons
Kenya	252	10	16
Ghana	272	62	15
Zimbabwe	81	18	
Cameroon		16	

34. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.
35. Information provided by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This figure contrasts sharply with the official estimates issued by African governments, presented in the table below.
36. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.
37. H. Arhirova and B. Hatton, "La ligne de front s'étend maintenant sur 1 250 kilomètres en Ukraine, selon Kyiv", L'Actualité, September 26, 2025, available at: https://lactualite.com.
38. These figures are drawn from oral statements or press releases issued by the governments listed in the table.

The humanitarian, diplomatic and political challenges arising from recruitment in Africa

Recruitment into the Russian armed forces in Africa raises humanitarian, diplomatic and domestic political challenges. Beyond the suffering of families whose relatives have been killed on the front line, the African prisoners interviewed find themselves in an unprecedented situation. Although recognized as prisoners of war, they are not included in prisoner exchanges between Kyiv and Moscow and, with a few exceptions, their own governments do not appear to be seeking their repatriation. Their future is therefore highly uncertain, and they are acutely aware of this. Moreover, diplomatic efforts to put an end to recruitment and secure the repatriation of Africans serving in the Russian armed forces vary between public and behind-the-scenes diplomacy. Finally, Russian recruitment activities raise not only foreign policy concerns but also domestic political challenges for some African countries.

After their capture: the uncertain fate of African prisoners of war

According to their testimonies, the circumstances in which African fighters are captured are broadly similar. Some, having been wounded, headed towards Ukrainian lines; others were intercepted while attempting to return to Russian positions; still others were completely lost, wandering without knowing where they were going. The Ukrainian army seeks to capture as many prisoners as possible, both for intelligence purposes and to secure the release of its own soldiers through prisoner exchanges.[39] To this end, it encourages soldiers serving in the Russian armed forces to defect through social media campaigns.[40]

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39. Prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine have taken place since the beginning of the conflict. They are generally negotiated through countries acting as intermediaries between Moscow and Kyiv. See "La Russie et l'Ukraine échangent 103 prisonniers de guerre de chaque camp, selon Moscou", France Info, August 19, 2026, available at: www.franceinfo.fr; B. Tassart, "Guerre en Ukraine : nombre, conditions de détention, échanges… tout savoir sur les prisonniers du conflit", RTL, March 19, 2025, available at: www.rtl.fr.

40. Author's interview with a member of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026; "I Want to Live", a project of the Coordination

Once captured, prisoners are identified, questioned and held in underground shelters while awaiting evacuation from the kill zone, in accordance with Article 19 of the 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Depending on the intensity of the fighting, evacuation may take several days or even weeks.[41] Wounded prisoners receive first aid before being transferred to a hospital for further treatment, if necessary. They pass through several camps before reaching the detention facility where the interviews were conducted. This facility currently holds both Russian and foreign prisoners of war, but is eventually intended to accommodate only non-Russian fighters.[42] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and human rights organizations visit the prisoners and monitor compliance with their rights under international humanitarian law.[43] Prisoners are thus allowed to correspond with their families by letter. The Ukrainian authorities also permit visits by journalists.[44] Within the camp, detainees have opportunities to exercise and undertake work, such as gardening and manual handling.

The distinction between those recruited in Africa and those recruited in Russia is reflected in their hopes of being released.

- The former describe themselves as victims of a trap and hope for leniency for their "mistake", namely having been deceived and drawn into the Russian armed forces. They pin their hopes for release on the end of the war—while recognizing that there is no clear prospect of when it might end—and/or on intervention by their governments.[45] Ghana's Minister of Foreign Affairs visited the detention facility to meet his imprisoned compatriots and called for the release of Ghanaian nationals held in Ukraine.[46] Some prisoners are aware that civil society organizations and their families are advocating on their behalf with the authorities in their home countries.[47] However, as the Ghanaian prisoners have not been released, the effectiveness of government intervention remains open to question.

Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, supported by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and Ukraine's Defense Intelligence, available at: https://hochuzhit.com.

41. Author's interviews with prisoners of war and a member of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. E. Pierson, "Les combattants africains de Poutine pris au piège en Ukraine : le récit de l'envoyée spéciale du Figaro", *Le Figaro*, August 17, 2026, available at: www.lefigaro.fr.

45. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.

46. "Le chef de la diplomatie ghanéenne à Kiev demande la libération de deux prisonniers de guerre ghanéens", RFI, February 26, 2026, available at: www.rfi.fr.

47. Civil society organizations have mobilized around this issue in several countries. These include associations of victims' families in Ghana, Vocal Africa in Kenya, and the "Bring Back Our Sons and Brothers" collective in Cameroon. See "Cameroun : un collectif alerte sur les 'recrutements' de jeunes aux côtés de l'armée russe", RFI, August 29, 2026, available at: www.rfi.fr.

- Those who voluntarily enlisted while in Russia present themselves as Russian citizens and stand by their decision. When questioned about the issuance of Russian identity documents, they remain vague and sometimes confuse the military documents they received with proof of citizenship. By presenting themselves as Russian citizens, they hope to be included in prisoner-of-war exchanges between Moscow and Kyiv. Moreover, once back in Russia, they hope that the terms of their contracts with the Ministry of Defense will be honored, particularly regarding salaries and financial compensation for injuries.[48] Despite appearances, their desire to return to Russia does not reflect political or military conviction, but rather the hope that their suffering will not have been in vain and that they will receive the financial benefits they had expected. However, to date, no African prisoners of war have been included in prisoner exchanges between Kyiv and Moscow.[49]

The difference in outlook between these two categories of recruits stems from the circumstances of their recruitment: while some enlisted voluntarily, others were deceived and therefore cannot trust those who misled them. Although they do not all envisage the same path to release, all the prisoners reject the label of "mercenaries", which they know carries a strong stigma and could potentially destroy their chances of being released. African prisoners of war suspect that their fate depends on confidential negotiations between governments.[50] Since Russia's recruitment policy came to light, the governments concerned have responded and have been engaging in discreet discussions.

The repatriation of fighters and prisoners of war: public versus secret diplomacy

To date, only three African governments have publicly approached the Russian authorities to put an end to recruitment activities. South Africa, Ghana and Kenya have officially called on Russia to stop recruiting their citizens and to repatriate those already enlisted. Kenya's Minister of Foreign Affairs even traveled to Russia, where he met wounded Kenyan nationals and secured the return of around 30 compatriots enlisted in the Russian armed forces. Moscow also repatriated 15 South Africans who had been sent to Russia through the involvement of one of former president Jacob Zuma's daughters.[51] Several African governments have discussed the issue with Kyiv and Moscow, but Ghana's Minister of Foreign Affairs is the only one to have

48. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, Ukraine, June 2026.
49. Author's interview with a member of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, prisoner-of-war camp, June 2026.
50. Author's interviews with prisoners of war, prisoner-of-war camp, June 2026.
51. "11 SA Men Stranded in Russia Arrive Home", op. cit.

visited both capitals specifically to address it.[52] African diplomatic officials have adopted different approaches: some opt for *mezzo forte* communication (public calls for repatriation and an end to recruitment, information campaigns warning against fraudulent job offers in Russia, etc.), others for *mezzo piano* communication (information campaigns warning against fraudulent job offers in Russia, discreet contacts with the Russian authorities), while others remain silent.[53] Kenya, Ghana and South Africa therefore stand out in the African diplomatic landscape for having chosen public diplomacy on this issue. Most other governments prefer to maintain the utmost discretion in their dealings with Moscow and Kyiv.

In early 2026, seeking to avoid a diplomatic dispute, the Russian authorities pledged to halt recruitment and repatriated a small number of Africans in response to the governments that had been most vocal in their demands. Around 40 persons were repatriated from Russia to Kenya and 15 to South Africa.[54] However, the Russian government has gone no further than this initial gesture of goodwill and has refused to cover the costs of repatriating Africans, whether alive or deceased.[55] The families of African fighters are demanding not only the return of their loved ones but also the repatriation of the remains of those killed in combat so that they can hold funerals. Moscow has categorically rejected these requests.[56] Faced with allegations of abusive recruitment practices that they cannot deny in light of the extensive evidence and compelling testimonies circulating online, the Russian authorities maintain that these are unofficial recruitment activities carried out without their knowledge and declare themselves willing to "work together [with African governments] to put an end to illegal recruitment".[57] They also insist that foreign nationals serving in the Russian armed forces are volunteers.[58] Following a handful of symbolic releases, Moscow has adopted a delaying strategy and has not terminated the military contracts of Kenyan, South African or Ghanaian nationals, despite requests from their respective governments. Moreover, while there is no guarantee that recruitment has genuinely ceased in these countries, evidence shows that it continues elsewhere in Africa.[59]

52. F. Dappah, "Ukraine: Ghana Presses Russia to End Recruitment of Nationals", *The African Courier*, August 23, 2026, available at: www.theafricancourier.de; "La Russie et le Ghana cherchent à renforcer leurs liens diplomatiques et économiques", RFI, August 19, 2026, available at: www.rfi.fr.
53. M. B. Sallama, "Silence and Statements: How African Governments Are Responding to Russia's Recruitment of Their Citizens", *Modern Ghana*, August 28, 2026, available at: www.modernghana.com.
54. "Russia Rules Out Compensation for Kenyans in Its Military", op. cit.
55. Ibid.
56. To date, the only remains repatriated from Russia have been those of a South African man who died in prison, whose repatriation was funded by the South African authorities. See "Remains of South African Man Who Died in Russia Return Home", Newzroom Afrika, June 14, 2026, available at: www.youtube.com.
57. M. M. Dzawu, "Ghana and Russia Seek to End Illegal Recruitment of Mercenaries", Bloomberg, August 17, 2026, available at: www.bloomberg.com; "La Russie et le Ghana cherchent à renforcer leurs liens diplomatiques et économiques", RFI, August 19, 2026, available at: www.rfi.fr.
58. "Russia Rules Out Compensation for Kenyans in Its Military", op. cit.
59. See the box on Zimbabwe and Madagascar, page 12 of this *Paper*.

For their part, the Ukrainian authorities are naturally seeking to stop these recruitment activities. To this end, they are relying on both cooperation with African governments and public communication. Kyiv has thus expanded its diplomatic network in sub-Saharan Africa,[60] and is willing to help African governments stop recruitment by providing them with intelligence.[61]

Beyond bilateral cooperation, however, the Ukrainian authorities are also relying on strategic communication. On the one hand, they disseminate numerous interviews with African prisoners of war on social media to inform and deter prospective recruits. On the other, they expose the Russian army's global recruitment networks through a website dedicated to the issue.[62] Developed by the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the website provides information on the identities of Russian and foreign recruiters, transit routes, recruitment methods, and more. It also allows third parties to report recruitment activities and enables the families of foreign fighters to find out whether their relatives are being held as prisoners of war in Ukraine or are among those killed in combat and identified by the Ukrainian army. By making this intelligence publicly available, the Ukrainian authorities hope to encourage African governments to dismantle recruitment networks and prevent prospective migrants from falling victim to fraudulent job offers.

The political consequences of Russian recruitment practices

Beyond what Russia's recruitment of Africans indirectly reveals about certain African governments (lack of interest in migration issues, policies encouraging emigration or adopting a *laissez-faire* approach, weak security institutions, passive diplomacy, etc.), this practice is already affecting domestic politics in several sub-Saharan African countries. Russian military recruitment activities are having political repercussions that may either benefit or undermine incumbent governments—and this is likely only the beginning.

In Kenya, the Minister of Labor and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfred Mutua, is suspected of involvement in these recruitment activities through certain international employment agencies he owns. The mere fact that the Minister of Labor has headed such companies appears to constitute

60. Of Ukraine's 14 diplomatic missions in sub-Saharan Africa, eight have opened since 2022. Ukraine now has diplomatic missions in the following countries: Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Botswana, South Africa, Senegal, Rwanda, Tanzania, Angola and Mauritania. See "Maksym Subkh Had a Meeting with Ambassador of Great Britain Martin Harris", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, November 28, 2024, available at: https://mfa.gov.ua.
61. Author's telephone interview with a representative of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 2026.
62. Stop Russian Recruiters, available at: https://stoprussianrecruiters.org.

a clear conflict of interest. Already implicated in a scandal involving the migration of Kenyan workers to Gulf countries,[63] he is once again suspected of having promoted employment opportunities in Russia.[64] In 2025, he was summoned and questioned by the Senate and has faced mounting criticism from civil society organizations and families.[65] Beyond Mutua himself, however, Russian recruitment activities have cast doubt on one of the flagship policies of President Ruto's government: the "Kazi Majuu" labor migration programme.[66] As in the case of the Gulf countries, the government appears to have failed to prevent abuses and misconduct associated with this policy, for which it has already faced public criticism.[67] The Russian recruitment scandal thus provides further ammunition for critics of the government.

In South Africa, by contrast, the Russian recruitment scandal has tended to benefit the government. In 2025, 17 activists from *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), the party of former president Jacob Zuma, now in opposition to the African National Congress (ANC), were sent to Russia to undergo training as bodyguards. They were received there by one of the former president's daughters, Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, before finding themselves enlisted in the Russian armed forces. As they appear to have been deceived by their own political leaders, the ruling ANC has sought to capitalize on the affair by emphasizing MK's responsibility for the scandal. The trial of Jacob Zuma's daughter has yet to begin, but it is expected to attract considerable attention in South Africa and must be understood in the context of the rivalry between the ANC and MK.[68] Given the political basis on which these recruits were enlisted, the Russian recruitment scandal risks embarrassing Jacob Zuma, South Africa's most pro-Russian politician.

63. A. L. Dahir and J. Scheck, "Kenyan Workers Get Abused Abroad: The President's Family and Allies Profit", *The New York Times*, November 14, 2025, available at: www.nytimes.com.
64. "Kenyan Minister Accused of Role in Recruiting Civilians to Fight for Russia", Africanews, June 28, 2026, available at: www.africanews.com.
65. "Families of Kenyans Fighting for Russia in Ukraine Petition Parliament", Africanews, March 6, 2026, available at: www.africanews.com.
66. This labor migration program is based on bilateral agreements between Kenya and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These agreements are now being called into question, as Gulf states are currently deporting several thousand Kenyans. See T. Cerullo, "Kenyans Face Deportation as Three Gulf Nations Intensify Crackdown", Kenyans.co, September 5, 2026, available at: www.kenyans.co.ke.
67. Author's telephone interview with a journalist, Nairobi, July 2026.
68. S. Masilela, "Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla Trial Set to Resume in October over Alleged Role in July Unrest", Independent Online (IOL), August 14, 2026, available at: https://iol.co.za.

Conclusion

The humanitarian, diplomatic and political challenges outlined above raise questions about how Russia's recruitment policy in Africa may evolve and how African governments seeking to address the issue might respond.

Student migration: another trap

So far, most of the recruitment practices exposed have involved fraudulent job offers, with migrant workers appearing to be the primary targets. However, as the presence of former students among prisoners of war demonstrates, foreign students in Russia also represent a significant pool of potential recruits for the Russian armed forces.[69] They are young, healthy, exposed to Russian propaganda on a daily basis and particularly attracted by the prospect of obtaining Russian citizenship and earning salaries far beyond what they could expect in their home countries.

In 2024, the Russian authorities reported hosting 35,000 African students out of a total of 355,000 international students.[70] Academic and cultural cooperation has continued despite the war. New Russian cultural centers, known as "Russian Houses" and operating under the government agency Rossotrudnichestvo, have opened in Africa (Madagascar, the Comoros, etc.) and are involved, among other activities, in selecting African scholarship recipients. An analysis of online search activity shows that, in Cameroon, approximately 40 searches are conducted each month about studying in Russia in general, and another 20 specifically about studying medicine there.[71] The Russian authorities aim to host 500,000 international students by 2030. To achieve this, they plan to maintain approximately 30,000 government-funded scholarships for international students each year.[72] By continuously attracting foreign students, the Russian authorities maintain a pool of potential military recruits numbering several thousand young people each year. African university authorities and students must be aware of this risk. A prevention strategy specifically tailored to this group has yet to be developed.

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69. "Russia Uses Deception to Recruit African Students to Fight in Ukraine", op. cit.; A. L. Osipian, "Why Are Russian Universities Pushing African Students to Fight in Ukraine?", *The Times Higher Education*, December 12, 2022, available at: www.timeshighereducation.com.
70. "Bloomberg: Russia Recruits African Students and Workers into Its Army", Radio Svoboda, June 9, 2024, available at: www.svoboda.org; "Government Announces 'Packages' to Attract Foreign Students", University World News, October 23, 2024, available at: www.universityworldnews.com.
71. Network analysis conducted by an IT specialist, Ukraine, September 2026.
72. A. Lefébure, "Russia: International Students at the Heart of a New International Strategy", The Conversation, August 18, 2026, available at: https://theconversation.com.

The evolving response to recruitment

Given the substantial manpower requirements of Russia's military strategy, it is highly unlikely that the Russian army will stop recruiting in Africa. As recruitment continues, some African governments may have little choice but to strengthen police monitoring of recruitment networks, or even bring a case against Russia before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for human trafficking, should the Court have jurisdiction. Indeed, pressure exerted by civil society on government authorities in certain African countries can prove effective. Even in a regime as autocratic and pro-Russian as Uganda's, the authorities have been compelled to meet with and listen to families whose relatives have been trapped in Russia.[73]

Police surveillance of recruitment networks has already yielded results in several African countries, where arrests have been made and legal proceedings are under way (South Africa, Kenya and Zimbabwe).[74] Airports require particular scrutiny. In Togo and Kenya, airport police prevent citizens holding Russian visas from departing. In Botswana and Zimbabwe, prospective recruits have recently been intercepted by police at airports.[75] These measures could be supplemented by administrative and criminal sanctions against organizations acting as intermediaries in recruitment activities (travel agencies, Russian cultural and religious centers, etc.).[76] African authorities could also seek the arrest of identified Russian recruiters who have not yet been apprehended in the countries where they operated. At the request of these authorities, such individuals could be subject to Interpol Red Notices, which are international requests for provisional arrest circulated to all Interpol member countries' law enforcement agencies. They could then be arrested when traveling abroad, thereby restricting their mobility. Furthermore, beyond airports in their countries of origin, the three main transit airports have been clearly identified (Dubai, Istanbul and Addis Ababa). Analyzing passenger lists for flights to Russia departing from these three airports could therefore help identify potential recruits, estimate their numbers and possibly even warn them of the risks.

National and international justice systems also have a role to play. Despite the considerable challenges it currently faces, international justice could provide a platform for raising awareness of and combating abusive recruitment practices. Under the Palermo Protocol, adopted by the United Nations in 2000 to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, and supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational

73. C. Etukuri, "Kadaga Moves to Help Families of Victims Trafficked to Russia", New Vision, August 16, 2026, available at: www.newvision.co.ug.
74. "War in Ukraine: Man Accused of Forcibly Recruiting 1,000 Kenyans into the Russian Army Arrested", *Le Parisien*, February 26, 2026, available at: www.leparisien.fr.
75. M. M. Dzawu, "Botswana Halts Russian Army Recruits at Local, Foreign Airports", Bloomberg, August 21, 2026, available at: www.bloomberg.com.
76. S. Vakulina and A. Brezar, "Moscow Uses 'Russian Houses' in Africa to Lure Recruits into War in Ukraine, Investigation Shows", Euronews, June 18, 2026, available at: www.euronews.com.

Organized Crime, deception and coercion are two elements that can constitute human trafficking. Yet numerous investigations have shown that Russia's recruitment policy relies on both deception and coercion. Since Russia and most African countries have ratified the Palermo Protocol,[77] a state considering itself to have been harmed could bring the matter before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Such a state could seek an advisory opinion from the ICJ on the legal classification of these practices under international law before even initiating proceedings.

As regards prisoners of war, countries of origin that have criminalized mercenary activities could request their extradition in order to prosecute them. This would allow them to return home, bring the fate of these inexperienced mercenaries to public attention and perhaps deter others from seeking to enlist.[78]

To date, Russia's recruitment policy in Africa does not appear to have had a significant impact on Russian-African relations, even though the number of heads of state and government expected to attend the next summit in Moscow is likely to be lower than at the 2023 summit in St. Petersburg. The reasons for this declining interest lie elsewhere.

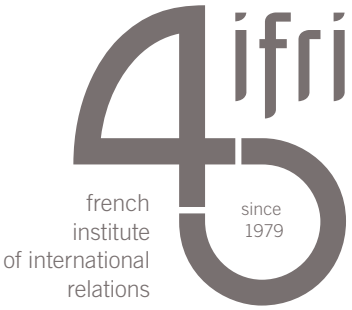
77. In this regard, the South African authorities have decided to prosecute their nationals repatriated from Russia for violating legislation prohibiting mercenary activities. See "Legal Trouble Awaits SA Men Returning from Russia-Ukraine War", eNCA, February 25, 2026, available at: www.enca.com.
78. Ibid.

Appendix

Several estimates have been made of the number of foreign nationals serving in the Russian armed forces who have been killed on the front line, and their findings are broadly consistent. The table below summarizes these estimates, indicating their sourcesand methodologies.

Source	Estimated foreign fatalities	Methodology
BBC and Mediazona[79]	At least 3,586–3,589.	Names verified through official announcements, press reports, social media, memorials and photographs of graves. This represents a documented minimum for the period 2022–mid-2026, rather than a comprehensive statistical estimate.
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Truth Hounds[80]	At least 3,388 confirmed deaths; more than 5,000 estimated casualties.	Report published in April 2026, based primarily on Ukrainian data and field research. "Casualties" likely include those killed, wounded, missing or captured.
Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)[81]	At least 1,399.	Ukrainian data shared with OCCRP, covering an earlier period and a narrower scope.
Ukrainian authorities[82]	More than 5,000.	Data from Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, covering the period 2022–October 2026.

79. "Over 3,500 Foreign Nationals Killed Fighting for Russia in Ukraine, BBC Finds", Meduza, July 10, 2026, available at: https://meduza.io.
80. "Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking: Russia's Exploitation of Foreign Fighters in Its War Against Ukraine", FIDH and Truth Hounds, April 2026, PDF available at: www.fidh.org.
81. S. Pathirana, "Ukraine Says Russia Recruited 24,000 Foreign Fighters, about Half from Asia", OCCRP, March 5, 2026, available at: www.occrp.org.
82. "Stop Russian Recruiters", op. cit.



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