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Russia's Policy of Recruiting Fighters and Female Workers in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This study on Russian recruitment policy in sub-Saharan Africa highlights the following elements:

- Russia is conducting a recruitment campaign for female labor and non-professional combatants in sub-Saharan Africa to support its war effort;
- This campaign is orchestrated by Russo-African networks and is particularly attractive to impoverished urban youth who view economic migration as a solution for a better life and understand that Europe is an increasingly inaccessible destination;
- Primarily driven by economic motivation, the recruited individuals are often deceived by false training and employment offers;
- These abusive and deceptive recruitments are akin to a form of human trafficking, the most tragic consequence of which is sending amateur mercenaries to the front as “cannon fodder”. For some, this migratory adventure in a foreign war is a one-way journey and, for many, the war is a trap that closes in on them;
- African governments are now beginning to react against this abusive recruitment policy. While most governments have oscillated between indifference and avoidance of the problem, since this fall investigations have been launched in several countries and the Kenyan and South African governments have requested that Moscow repatriate their citizens serving in the Russian army. Other African governments will have to follow their example, which will further expose Russian recruitment policy.

Résumé

Cette étude sur la politique de recrutement russe en Afrique subsaharienne met en lumière les éléments suivants :

- La Russie mène une campagne de recrutement de main-d'œuvre féminine et de combattants non professionnels en Afrique subsaharienne pour soutenir son effort de guerre.
- Cette campagne est orchestrée par des réseaux russo-africains et est particulièrement attractive pour une jeunesse urbaine pauvre qui conçoit l'émigration économique comme une solution pour une vie meilleure et comprend que l'Europe est une destination de plus en plus inaccessible.
- Majoritairement animées par une motivation économique, les personnes recrutées sont souvent trompées par des offres de formation et d'emploi mensongères.
- Ces recrutements abusifs et trompeurs s'apparentent à une forme de trafic d'êtres humains dont la conséquence la plus tragique est l'envoi sur le front de mercenaires amateurs comme « chair à canon ». Pour certains, cette aventure migratoire dans une guerre étrangère est un aller sans retour et, pour beaucoup, la guerre est un piège qui se referme sur eux.
- Les gouvernements africains commencent désormais à réagir contre cette politique de recrutement abusif. Si la plupart des gouvernements ont oscillé entre indifférence et évitement du problème, depuis cet automne des enquêtes ont été déclenchées dans plusieurs pays et les gouvernements kenyan et sud-africain ont réclamé à Moscou le rapatriement de leurs concitoyens servant dans l'armée russe. D'autres gouvernements africains les suivront certainement, ce qui va exposer davantage la politique de recrutement russe.

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Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian war, which began on February 24, 2022, quickly became internationalized. Russia and Ukraine were both quick to mobilize their allies in order to secure political and diplomatic support, as well as military and economic resources. But both belligerents also sought to recruit foreigners on a private basis to support their respective war efforts. On Ukraine's side, foreign fighters chose to join its armed forces on their own initiative from the very start of the conflict, which led to the formation of an International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine.[1] On Russia's side, the authorities have implemented a systematic recruitment policy targeting two categories of foreigners: female workers for the arms industry on the one hand, and fighters for the front on the other. While Ukraine welcomes volunteer foreign fighters, Russia, for its part, scouts abroad in search of labor and fighters. The recruitment of female workers is carried out through official channels, whereas the recruitment of foreign fighters is, by contrast, secret and illegal.

This policy is global, extending from Latin America to the Far East.[2] Sub-Saharan Africa, in this landscape, is of particular interest because it constitutes a vast and easily accessible recruitment pool, owing to high poverty rates in most countries of the region combined with a strong desire to emigrate.[3] Estimates of the recruitment of foreigners, especially in wartime, must be treated with great caution. In November 2025, the Ukrainian authorities claimed to have identified more than 1,400 African fighters on the Russian side, originating from 36 different countries.[4] A Ukrainian official, speaking at the Crimea Global event in October 2025, stated that there were 18,000 foreign fighters in the Russian ranks.[5] In September 2022, a Zambian student became the first foreign fighter

1. "Apply to join the service", International Defenders for the Liberty of Ukraine, available at: http://ildu.mil.gov.ua; S. Sele, "Why Colombian Mercenaries are Fighting in Ukraine", NZZ, July 8, 2025, available at: www.nzz.ch.

2. Z. Aucaigne, "Guerre en Ukraine : comment des combattants étrangers viennent gonfler les rangs de l'armée russe, parfois malgré eux", France Info, November 27, 2024, available at: www.franceinfo.fr. For a numerical assessment of foreign fighters in the Russian forces, see: M Kalinin, "Lost in Translation: How African Migrants are Tricked and Threatened into Russian Military Service", *The Insider*, November 7, 2024, available at: https://theins.ru.

3. Currently, 60% of the world's extremely poor people live in Sub-Saharan Africa, whereas East Asia and the Pacific was the most affected region in the 1980s. See "L'extrême pauvreté dans le monde ne recule plus", Observatoire des inégalités, May 13, 2025, available at: www.inegalites.fr.

4. "L'Ukraine dénonce l'enrôlement par la Russie de plus de 1 000 soldats africains", Africa News/Associated Press, November 10, 2025.

5. E. Chaze, "Guerre en Ukraine : près de 18 000 étrangers enrôlés de gré ou de force dans l'armée russe", RFI, November 18, 2025.

officially killed in the ranks of the Wagner Group on the Russo-Ukrainian front.[6]

This paper explores Russia's policy of recruiting Africans for its war in Ukraine, analyzing its recruitment channels as well as the profiles and motivations of those recruited, their journey to Russia, their treatment, and their fate in this war.

This investigation draws on data collected from open sources (media, social media, public reports, etc.) and on anonymized interviews conducted with people currently living in Africa, Ukraine, and Russia. The only individuals clearly identified in this study have a public presence on social media or in the media. The authors wish to thank all of their interlocutors and to acknowledge the courage of some who will recognize themselves.

6. "Zambian Student Lemekhani Nyirenda Killed in Russia-Ukraine Conflict", Newzroom Afrika, March 23, 2023.

Recruitment: offers, recruiters and recruits

Russia's recruitment policy in sub-Saharan Africa aims to supply female workers to the arms industry and fighters to the Russian army, even if they have no military experience. The policy is highly attractive: the skill level required is low, and the salary offered is high by the standards of the countries of departure. Moreover, this recruitment policy exploits the demand for economic emigration among the young, urban African population, as well as among low-ranking personnel in the administration and the army. African candidates' motivation to emigrate to Russia is therefore essentially economic and social, not political or ideological.

The offers

For fighters

At the start of the conflict, the Russian authorities enlisted Africans already present in Russia through various ruses (threats and lies directed at Africans studying or working in Russia,[7] imprisoned for various offenses,[8] or visiting as tourists).[9] In 2025, they twice expanded the possibility for foreigners living in Russia, or wishing to settle there, to enlist in the Russian army. On July 7, 2025, the Russian president signed a "decree authorizing foreign nationals to serve in the Russian army not only during a state of emergency or martial law, but also during the period of mobilization."[10] Then, on November 5, he signed Presidential Decree No. 821, which stipulates that "any foreign man aged 18 to 65 will have to enlist in the army in order to hope to obtain a residence permit or naturalization in Russia."[11] As these recruitments of

7. Africans working or studying in Russia, sometimes without legal status, have been recruited into the Russian armed forces. See D. Glez, "Russie-Ukraine : ces étudiants africains pris au piège de la guerre", *Jeune Afrique*, April 25, 2025, available at: www.jeuneafrique.com. See the following Facebook links (accessed in September 2025): https://web.facebook.com, www.facebook.com and www.facebook.com; See "POWs Reveal Why They Fought for Russia and What They Regret", *Kyiv Post*, September 2, 2025.
8. Early in the conflict, African prisoners were released in exchange for enlisting in Russian forces, particularly in the Wagner Group. See A. Lasteck, M. Hussein et A. Soy, "Tanzanian Killed in Ukraine: We Told Him Not to Go", BBC, January 20, 2023, available at: www.bbc.com.
9. "Guerre en Ukraine. Un athlète kényan raconte avoir été enrôlé de force par les Russes", *Ouest-France*, September 19, 2025, available at: www.ouest-france.fr.
10. "La Russie élargit son recrutement en autorisant des étrangers à servir dans l'armée", *Euronews*, July 8, 2025.
11. "En Russie, tout étranger doit désormais servir dans l'armée pour obtenir un permis de séjour", *Le Point*, November 23, 2025.

foreigners in Russia were far from sufficient, Moscow activated recruitment networks on the African continent.

In Africa, the first recruitments were carried out by the Wagner Group in countries where it had been established for several years (Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso). But recruitment is now organized and has been extended to African countries that host no Russian paramilitary forces and that have not aligned diplomatically with Russia since the start of the conflict (Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Kenya, etc.). These recruitments of fighters are based on job offers that are attractive given pay levels in Africa, and do not always state their true purpose explicitly. They seek both military and law enforcement professionals (soldiers and police officers) as well as civilians. For candidates for mercenary work, as some testimonies attest, the recruitment package may include:[12]

- an initial payment of around €2,300 upon signing the contract;
- a monthly salary of €2,300 to €2,500;
- health insurance;
- a Russian passport for the candidate and his close family.

Since the start of the conflict, the rules for obtaining Russian citizenship have been relaxed for foreigners who sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense.[13] According to some testimonies, recruits are even promised that once the war is over, they will be rewarded and will be able to live comfortably in Russia, that is, be employed and housed by the Russian state.[14]

For female workers

For its part, the "Alabuga Start" program recruits young women to work in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Tatarstan, one of the main military-industrial complexes producing drones for the Russian army.[15] The program offers: "A salary ranging from $500 to $1,380, the possibility of career advancement and the development of professional skills. It covers round-trip airfare, as well as accommodation costs and medical insurance in

12. "African POWs on Fighting for Russia in Ukraine", *Kyiv Post*, September 18, 2024.
13. M. Bartosiewicz and P. Żochowski, "Putin's Foreign Legion: Foreigners Fighting in the War with Ukraine", Center for Eastern Studies, February 20, 2024, available at: www.osw.waw.pl.
14. Telephone interview with a mercenary, May 2025.
15. On drone production at this military complex, read: "Who is Making Russia's Drones, The Migrant Women Exploited for Russia's War Economy", Global Initiative against transnational organized crimes, May 2025, available at: https://globalinitiative.net (PDF); D. Albright, I. Anokhin and S. Faragasso, "Update: Alabuga's Production Rate of Shahed 136 Drones", Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), September 26, 2024, available at: https://isis-online.org.

the Alabuga SEZ. A diploma confirming professional skills and a Russian language proficiency certificate are issued at the end of the program."[16]

Advertising on the Alabuga Start website also promises paid training and an employment contract after only one month in Russia. The speed of the process is emphasized: within two months, candidates can come to Russia.[17] On its website, the Russian embassy in Côte d'Ivoire sets out the conditions for applying to this program: "Applicants must meet the following criteria: be aged 18 to 22, hold a secondary school diploma (*baccalauréat*), and have no medical problem. Currently, four employment sectors are offered to candidates: catering and food service, hospitality (guest services), manufacturing, and automotive."[18] The program is all the more attractive because the recruitment requirements are low and the promised salaries are high compared with African standards. Safety and/or docility may be the reasons behind the strictly female recruitment.

Recruiters and their intermediaries

For fighters

On the Russian side, the recruitment networks for the army rely on the Wagner Group, diplomatic missions, and commercial and cultural entities; on the African side, they rely on individual intermediaries, overseas employment agencies, and youth and women's organizations. In some cases, these Russian-African recruitment networks can be considered human trafficking networks.

African armed groups close to the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso have been asked to supply fighters for the Russo-Ukrainian front. As early as 2023, Wagner paramilitaries, who were then training militiamen of the Unit for Peace in Central Africa[19] who had defected with some of their leaders (Hassan Bouba and Colonel Kiri), offered several of them, as well as Central African soldiers, the opportunity to go and fight in Ukraine.[20] In Burkina Faso, several hundred Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland,[21] auxiliaries of the army organized by the authorities to fight jihadist groups, have also been recruited.[22] Since the Wagner Group

16. "Travailler en Russie", Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, available at: https://cotedivoire.mid.ru.
17. See the website of the program, available at: https://startworld.alabuga.ru.
18. Ibid.
19. T. Vircoulon, "Écosystème des groupes armés en Centrafrique", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, April 2020.
20. Telephone interview with a researcher, June 2025. See "Sur le front ukrainien, le soldat centrafricain Derrick Agoma enrôlé clandestinement par Loïc Ouangapou retrouvé mort en Russie", *CorbeauNews*, October 22, 2025, available at: https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org.
21. "Burkina Faso : armer les civils au prix de la cohésion sociale ?", International Crisis Group, December 15, 2023.
22. Telephone interview with a Burkinabè activist, June 2025.

trains local soldiers and militiamen in countries where it is deployed, it has the necessary contacts to recruit African fighters.

In countries where the Wagner Group is not present, recruitment is more informal. In Cameroon, for example, mercenaries were enlisted through a Cameroonian based in Moscow (Claude, alias Youri), working with local travel agencies. He collaborates with Cameroonian agencies specializing in fully managed stays abroad (visa, ticket purchase and accommodation on site) and lures Cameroonians by touting the benefits offered to foreign fighters. In Yaoundé and Douala, travel agencies and intermediaries boast about work opportunities in Russia. In September, the arrest of some twenty Kenyans about to travel there revealed the same type of organization also relying on individual intermediaries and travel companies.[23] In November 2025, in South Africa, media outlets revealed that one of the daughters of former president Jacob Zuma, Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, who is also a member of parliament for her father's party, was involved in the recruitment by the Russian army of seventeen South Africans aged 20 to 39 (see below).[24]

For female workers

Unlike the recruitment of mercenaries, which is generally discreet, recruitment for the Alabuga SEZ is conducted openly, through channels of inter-state cooperation and relationships between private actors.[25] African diplomats posted in Moscow (Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Angola, etc.) have been invited to visit the SEZ,[26] and, in parallel, Russian recruiters have traveled to Africa. They canvassed several African countries (Botswana, South Africa, Benin, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo in July 2025, etc.) and took part in meetings at higher education institutions to attract young female candidates.[27] In addition, advertising for the program is widely circulated on social media,[28] in African media,[29] and

23. W. Muia, "Police Break Up Ring Trafficking Kenyans to Fight for Russia in Ukraine", BBC, September 27, 2025, available at: www.bbc.com.
24. "Zuma's Daughter Linked to Recruiting Africans for Russia War", Bloomberg, November 19, 2025.
25. See the website of the program, available at: https://startworld.alabuga.ru.
26. "Who is Making Russia's Drones? The Migrant Women Exploited for Russia's War Economy", op. cit.
27. "Opportunités professionnelles pour les citoyens de RCA : le programme Alabuga Start", Embassy of the Russian Federation in Côte d'Ivoire, available at: https://rca.mid.ru. Available on the website of the program: https://startworld.alabuga.ru.
28. An example on Instagram: www.instagram.com.
29. A few examples of promotional articles published in online media in Ethiopia, Uganda, Mali, the Central African Republic, Senegal, Madagascar, and Cameroon: "'I Developed a Lot of Skills: leadership, Time Management': Alabuga Start Participant Talks about her Experience of Working in Russia", *Capital News*, June 26, 2025; "Programme professionnel Alabuga Start pour les citoyens de la RCA et organisation de l'Olympiade sur les fondamentaux de l'entrepreneuriat et des connaissances financières", Le Potentiel Centrafricain, April 2, 2025; "Publireportage/Carrière sans frontières : le programme Alabuga Start est un ticket pour le meilleur avenir ?", Adakar, July 26, 2024; "Des jeunes filles d'Afrique se voient offrir un emploi et un déménagement gratuit en Russie, Que dois je savoir sur le programme?", Agence Malagasy Presse, February 17, 2025; F. Mouano, "Carrière sans frontières : le programme Alabuga Start est un ticket pour le

on the websites of several African ministries of education and Russian embassies in Africa. The ministries of education of Nigeria, Uganda and Côte d'Ivoire refer to the Alabuga Start program, while the Russian embassy in Côte d'Ivoire mentions this training opportunity on its website and encourages young Ivorian women to apply online.[30] In March 2025, in the Central African Republic, the Russian House, a center for "cultural and economic cooperation" run by the local representative of the Wagner Group, organized a selection test for the program.[31]

On the African continent, Alabuga Start recruiters use educational institutions and civil society associations as entry points, some of which exist to strengthen relations with Russia. For instance, the association "Friends of Russia" in Madagascar presents itself as "the only official and exclusive representative accredited by the Alabuga SEZ for Madagascar."[32] Recruitment sessions have been organized in educational institutions in Uganda, Burkina Faso, and elsewhere. In South Africa, women's and youth organizations taking part in BRICS+ meetings relay job offers from the Alabuga Start program and other Russian companies.[33] In May 2025, the South African businesswoman and representative of the BRICS Women's Business Alliance, Lebogang Zulu, signed an agreement to supply 5,600 workers to Alabuga and to the construction company Etalonstroi Ural.[34] In her response to the Bloomberg article revealing this agreement, she confirms it and presents it as a solution to the problem of youth unemployment in South Africa.[35] The Africans serving as intermediaries for the Alabuga Start program are generally people involved in business, women's and youth organizations, education, or even politics. They justify their promotion of training and employment offers in Russia by their desire to reduce youth unemployment in their countries.

meilleur avenir?", *Journal du Mali*, November 17, 2025; "Carrière sans frontières : le programme Alabuga Start est un ticket pour le meilleur avenir ?", CameroonCEO, August 22, 2024.

30. "Travailler en Russie", Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, op. cit.

31. "Centrafrique : le programme "Alabuga Start" organise une Olympiade sur les fondamentaux de l'entrepreneuriat et des connaissances financières", Oubangui médias, April 2, 2025.

32. Available at: https://amisrussemadagascar.org.

33. Telephone interview with a journalist, South Africa, August 2025.

34. A. Sguazzin, L. Prinsloo and M. Ralengau, "Russia's Push to Recruit South African Women Triggers Probe", *Bloomberg*, August 22, 2025, available at: www.bloomberg.com.

35. LinkedIn post by Lebogang Zulu, accessed on November 1, 2025.

Some profiles of African intermediaries for the Alabuga Start program

Cameroon

Michel Guy France Awana Ateba, a business owner and local partner of the Russian company Yango, advertises the program on social media.[36] In May 2025, he reported on the arrival of around twenty Cameroonian women at Alabuga.[37]

Uganda

Edson Rugumayo, a young member of parliament for the ruling party and former secretary for External Relations of the National Youth Council, advertises the program, has been invited to Russia several times for official events, and has notably visited the Alabuga SEZ.[38]

Botswana

Pelinah Gorata Pinaemang, a young businesswoman, prominent figure in youth organizations and participant in the World Youth Festival in Russia, works to develop relations between Botswana and Russia. She promoted the program on a Botswanan television show.[39]

Image 1: Advertisement for the program circulating on social media in Côte d'Ivoire



Source: Screenshot sent by a researcher based in Côte d'Ivoire.

36. LinkedIn post by Michel Guy France Awana Ateba.
37. Facebook publication by Enangue Holding, May 20, 2025.
38. L. Sithe, "60 Ugandan Females aged between 18 and 22 have been Recruited to Work in Russia, under the Alabuga Start Program", Muwado, November 21, 2024, available at: https://muwado.com.
39. "HE Pelinah Gorata Pinaemang at BTV talking about the #Alabuga economic zone", Jujuvine, Facebook, accessed in September 2025.

Recruits and their motivations

For female workers

Because the Alabuga Start program specifically targets young women who have just finished secondary school or who have a low level of higher education, these women are unqualified students, generally from urban areas. In a context where higher education is becoming ever more expensive, they are looking for paid training that will secure them a better future.

For fighters

Sometimes called "Black Wagners" by the media, the African fighters are all men from modest urban backgrounds.[40] The interviews we conducted and media investigations across the continent reveal similar profiles from one African country to another. Among them, policemen and militaries represent only a small minority. The majority of those enlisted in the Russian army are civilians who turn into amateur mercenaries. In Cameroon, they come mostly from the cities of Yaoundé, Douala and Bafoussam.[41]

They are not all unemployed or informal-sector workers; there are also students, civil servants, soldiers, etc... Some try their luck in Russia for lack of opportunities in their own country and because migrating to Europe has become more difficult, as the following excerpt shows:

> "I am the eldest of a single-parent family of 6 children. My mother fought to pay for our studies by selling fresh produce at the central market in Yaoundé. From 2013, when I obtained my baccalauréat, until 2019, when I obtained my master's degree, I took civil service entrance exams, in vain. Tired of seeing me wander around the neighborhood doing nothing, my mother had to go into debt in the tontines (informal saving groups) in 2021 so that I could go to Italy, but I was repatriated. Since my return, I have done nothing serious, just small jobs here and there, and the debt my mother took on has still not been fully repaid. As soon as I heard about the recruitment in Russia, I did not think twice; I told myself that, given the salary and the other benefits being offered, I could finally help my family out of this misery. It's true that it was not clearly explained to me that I would have to go and fight at the front; I was simply told that I could serve as a security guard or a cook in the military camps, and that I would not have to go to the front."[42]

40. In reference to the Wagner paramilitary group founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin.
41. Telephone interview with an intermediary, Cameroon, May 2025.
42. Telephone interview with a mercenary, May 2025.

It should be noted that soldiers and non-commissioned officers have deserted their army to go to Russia, a well-identified problem that has not been officially acknowledged by the Cameroonian authorities.[43] These deserters are estimated at around 150.[44] For them, "better to go and die in Russia earning millions than to die for nothing in Cameroon."[45] Going to fight on the Russo-Ukrainian front is, in theory, an opportunity that allows them to multiply their salary by ten to twenty times.[46]

Image 2: Cameroonian soldiers in the Russian army



Source: Screenshot of the Facebook page of N'Zui Manto, a Cameroonian whistleblower.

Furthermore, there are reports of secondary school teachers, another category of poorly paid civil servants in Cameroon, leaving for the Russo-Ukrainian front. In a Facebook forum called "Collectif des enseignants du Cameroun: ON A TROP SUPPORTÉ (CECA-OTS)",[47] one can read this request: "Please, senior teachers. How do we go about enlisting in the Russian army? I am a civil servant teacher, grade A1, in the western region. I also want to try my luck."[48] The comments from teachers that follow his message echo his request. Indeed, the mercenary offers are far more attractive than the 250,000 FCFA (€380) that represents the average salary of a Cameroonian teacher.[49]

43. See chapter 2.
44. Telephone interview with a mercenary, May 2025.
45. Ibid.
46. R. S. Tayo, "Grave Risks for Cameroon as Soldiers Desert to Fight in Ukraine", Institute for Security Studies, April 2, 2025, available at: https://issafrica.org.
47. Meaning: "Cameroon Teachers' Collective: WE'VE PUT UP WITH ENOUGH (CECA-OTS)".
48. Facebook account of Cameroon Teachers' Collective.
49. "Analyse des salaires des fonctionnaires toutes catégories au Cameroun : entre justice sociale et disparités", Le bled parle, September 18, 2024, available at: www.lebledparle.com.

While the Alabuga Start workers and the amateur mercenaries have economic motivations, a minority of Cameroonian fighters on the Russo-Ukrainian front enlisted out of a taste for war adventure. For example, one mercenary interviewed, who had tried unsuccessfully to be recruited into the army in Cameroon, saw an opportunity to realize his dream:

> "I am physically fit and I have gone through military recruitment more than 5 times in Cameroon; I still don't understand why I was always turned down. [...] In June 2023, a friend tipped me off that Russia was hiring mercenaries to fight in Ukraine. As soon as I heard this, I did not hesitate for a single moment. I told myself that, in addition to the financial gain, this was finally my opportunity to bear arms and wear the uniform."[50]

Finally, a minority of mercenaries justify their enlistment on political and ideological grounds. They fully embrace the Russian rhetoric that denounces the interference and domination of "the West" in Africa, highlights Russia's support for the continent's emancipation, and champions the values of moral conservatism. By enlisting on the front, they take sides in the war between Russia and "the West" and contribute, under European skies, to the struggle against Western domination in Africa.[51]

50. Telephone interview with a mercenary, May 2025.
51. Telephone interviews with an intermediary and a mercenary, May 2025.

What becomes of Africans in Russia?

Africans who go to Russia take great risks, but only a minority do so knowingly. Not only are the extravagant benefits promised not always granted, but the very purpose of the contract is deceptive: the young women do not know that they will be working in the defense sector, and many young men do not know that they will end up on the front line. Despite disappearances, complaints from families, and growing media coverage of this issue, governments, with a few exceptions, have not yet really tried to prevent these abusive recruitments, the outcome of which has been fatal for a few hundred Africans.[52]

A one-way ticket for the fighters?

African mercenaries wishing to go to Russia must first pre-finance their trip and complete a series of costly procedures. They must obtain a passport, which costs 110,000 FCFA (about €120) in Cameroon, and negotiate travel costs with the travel agencies designated to them by the intermediaries. Once these fees are paid, they are asked to leave their passport with the agency, which takes care of the formalities and of appointments with the Russian embassy. The interview at the embassy lasts only a few minutes, and the tourist visa is quickly issued on the spot. In addition to the visa, they receive a document written in Russian that they must present on arrival in the country.[53] They travel to Russia via Istanbul, Dubai or Addis Ababa, then arrive at Moscow airport or at Platov airport in the Rostov region. The recruitment for Russia reveals a chain of corruption involving travel agencies, their intermediaries and the border police, as the following testimony indicates:

> "Our brother left for Russia because he was contacted by an acquaintance who told him that Russia was recruiting young people to serve as security guards, cooks and so on in military camps. When he approached the immigration agency in charge of sending potential candidates abroad, he was asked to pay a sum of 2 million FCFA (about €3,050). After negotiations, they agreed that he would pay 1 million (about €1,500) in cash and, once in Russia, would pay the rest after he started receiving his salary. So, within the family we pooled money for him, to pay that sum and his plane ticket. After the administrative formalities to obtain the visa, they boarded at the airport with two friends who were also going to Russia. However, they were held at the airport by border police officers, who

52. Telephone interviews with researchers and journalists, June 2025.
53. Interview with an intermediary, May 2025.

> questioned them and warned them about the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia's recruitment of mercenaries in Africa. They were held because the police demanded that they show the money they had on them for tourism in Russia. They called on the head of the immigration agency who had handled their travel procedures. She came in person to hand them 1 million FCFA in cash, and another woman called one of their phones and asked to speak to one of the police officers. At the end of their conversation, they gave money to the police officer, who let them through. [...] It could be that Russia finances the candidates' trips and that, in principle, they do not have to pay any money, but the intermediaries pocket this money and still make the candidates pay up to 3 million FCFA (about €4,500), if you add up the money paid to the immigration agencies, the plane ticket and the visa fees."[54]

During the formalities for entering Russia (fingerprinting and photographs), the African travelers present the document given to them at the embassy. They are then picked up by Russian soldiers, accompanied by interpreters, and sign enlistment contracts in Russian lasting 9 to 12 months, without understanding their terms. Their passports are systematically taken from them, and their phones are carefully inspected. The very next day, they are sent to shooting training for a period of 10 to 15 days, assisted by interpreters who speak French or English. They are then assigned to units deployed to the front and incorporated into battalions of foreigners under Russian command, notably in infantry or logistics support units.[55] They are sent to the front line, in direct contact with the enemy, and to the second line, within supply battalions. Besides frontline combat, their missions include earthworks and fortification, guarding and securing occupied territories, and digging trenches.[56] At the front, they are subjected to extremely harsh combat conditions: lack of food, mistreatment, no leave, no medical support, and constant exposure to Ukrainian artillery, mines and drones. They sometimes serve as "human bait" to detect enemy positions.[57] They have been deployed to high-intensity combat zones such as Bakhmut, Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk, where losses were very high:

> "We are sent to the front line in areas of intense fighting or in Russian-occupied localities that we have to hold. In these battalions, foreign mercenaries are in the majority. The Russians with us are generally prisoners or drug addicts who have nothing to do with the Russian army. These are guys who were pulled out of prisons or detention centers for drug users, who received brief military training and were dropped into the field just like us."[58]

54. Interview with a victim's family, May 2025.
55. Telephone interviews with a mercenary, May 2025. "African POWs on Fighting for Russia in Ukraine", op. cit.; "A Kenyan Man Tricked into War: How Ruben Was Taken to Russia in the Name of Work", TV47 Kenya, October 28, 2025, available at: www.youtube.com.
56. Telephone interviews with a mercenary, May 2025.
57. Telephone interviews with researchers, June 2025.
58. Telephone interview with a mercenary, May 2025.

Around 50 Burkinabés and 150 Cameroonians are reported to have been killed in combat (that is, 30 % of the Cameroonians who reportedly joined the Russian army).[59] Only a few families in Burkina Faso seem to have received financial compensation after the deaths of their young men.[60] In Cameroon, Senegal, the Central African Republic, Kenya and Ghana, families of fighters killed on the Russo-Ukrainian front complain of having received no official information and no compensation for the deaths of their relatives.[61]

For those who do not die at the front, the only escape routes are fleeing to the Ukrainian lines or deliberately wounding oneself in order to be evacuated to the rear.[62] On this subject, a Cameroonian soldier who fought and managed to escape from Russia stated:

> "I arrived in Russia in June 2024, after a friend told me about the Russian mercenary recruitment network. After the administrative formalities, I went to Russia via Douala airport, transiting through Addis Ababa on an Ethiopian Airlines flight. Once there, we were dropped at the front with other mercenaries from the C.A.R., Sudan, Burkina, Nepal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, etc. Combat conditions on the ground were so hard that I resolved to shoot myself in the arm to get out of that hell. Once I managed to shoot my left arm, I was evacuated to Moscow because there was no hospital to look after me anywhere near the frontline. After a week of treatment, I managed to escape by ordering a taxi that took me to the Cameroonian embassy in Russia. There, I explained the situation and the hell our compatriots are living through. They simply put me up, and after a few days, arrangements were made to send me back to Cameroon."[63]

59. Telephone interviews with a Burkinabè activist and with a mercenary, May and June 2025.
60. Telephone interview with a Burkinabè activist, June 2025.
61. "Les tirailleurs de Poutine : enquête sur ces Africains dans les rangs de l'armée russe en Ukraine", France 24, June 13, 2025, available at: www.youtube.com ; "Soldats FACA tués en Ukraine : le cri de détresse des familles face au silence russe", December 9, 2024, available at: https://cnc-app-lyart.vercel.app/article/85863 ; "Kenyans Take Lucrative VISA & End Up in a Military Camp in Russia", Citizen Tv Kenya, October 11, 2025, available at: www.youtube.com.
62. "Guerre en Ukraine. Un athlète kényan raconte avoir été enrôlé de force par les Russes", op. cit.
63. Telephone interview with a former mercenary, May 2025.

Image 3: Cameroonians killed at the front



Source: Screenshot of the Facebook page of N'Zui Manto, a Cameroonian whistleblower.

Broken promises

For female workers

Officially recruited for vocational training in civilian sectors (catering, hospitality, automotive, etc.), the young African women of the Alabuga Start program work on assembling drones, and therefore for the Russian arms industry.[64] They do not appear to receive the promised vocational training, and some complain of long working hours and salaries lower than those advertised.[65] Working in these assembly plants is not without risk to their lives. In 2024 and 2025, the Alabuga drone manufacturing plant was targeted by the Ukrainian army, causing several casualties.[66] The Russian authorities deny all of these accusations outright.[67]

64. M. Olivier, "Quand la Russie recrute des Africaines pour assembler ses drones de guerre", *Jeune Afrique*, October 11, 2024, available at: www.jeuneafrique.com ; "Les tirailleurs de Poutine : enquête sur ces Africains dans les rangs de l'armée russe en Ukraine", op. cit.
65. L. Sithe, "60 Ugandan Females Aged between 18 and 22 have been Recruited to Work in Russia, under the Alabuga Start Program.", op. cit.; M. Schwikowski and K. Tiassou, "Alabuga, le rêve brisé de jeunes Africaines en Russie", DW, June 18, 2024, available at: www.dw.com.
66. L. Latypova, "Difficult to Keep Calm': Tatarstan Residents Shaken by Ukraine-Linked Drone Strikes", *The Moscow Times*, April 2, 2024, available at: www.themoscowtimes.com.
67. "Commentary of the Embassy on Alabuga SEZ", Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Kenya, available at: https://russembkenya.mid.ru.

For fighters

While some confirm having signed a contract to fight in full knowledge of what it entailed, others say instead that they were deceived by offers of civilian work or of logistical tasks in the Russian army (cook, mechanic, nurse, etc.).[68] As for salaries, they are generally lower than promised or sometimes not paid at all, which suggests that sums are being embezzled by the Russian officers heading their units. They can no longer return to their countries, as their passports have been confiscated.[69]

68. Telephone interviews with a mercenary, May 2025. Several Togolese, Somali, Kenyan and Sierra mercenaries claim to have been deceived: "Les tirailleurs de Poutine : enquête sur ces Africains dans les rangs de l'armée russe en Ukraine", op. cit.; "A Kenyan Man Tricked into War: How Ruben Was Taken to Russia in the Name of Work", op. cit.
69. "Les tirailleurs de Poutine : enquête sur ces Africains dans les rangs de l'armée russe en Ukraine", op. cit.

African authorities and Russian recruitment: between silence and inaction

Whether the matter concerns the young women recruited for the Alabuga military-industrial complex or the amateur mercenaries, African governments have so far not officially denounced Russia's recruitment policy as part of its war effort. Yet they are informed of this policy by the media, by the families of missing African fighters, and by their own administrations. Several African embassies in Moscow have exfiltrated their citizens,[70] and some families have filed complaints:

> "Once he arrived in Russia, until his enlistment, our brother kept us updated. After 2 months, his silence had become worrying for us. We therefore tried to get in touch with one of the friends he had traveled with, who told us about his disappearance during an operation in Ukraine. We then decided to file a complaint against the woman who had handled their travel, who was summoned and questioned. [...] The woman in question told the police that she was only an intermediary and had been contacted by a woman who runs an emigration agency. Unfortunately, the premises of that woman's agency were closed. She is the subject of numerous complaints from several families whose children have disappeared on the Ukrainian front, and she is on the run."[71]

However, faced with the number of desertions (some 150 soldiers so far)[72] by men trying their luck on the Russo-Ukrainian front, the Cameroonian authorities have been forced to react and are trying to curb the phenomenon. On March 7, 2025, the Minister Delegate at the Presidency in charge of Defense informed the territorial commands that "consistent and credible information reports clandestine departures of certain members of the Security Forces (FDS) to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict."[73] Consequently, he ordered them to take the following measures: "Firstly: urgently take all appropriate measures for tighter control of personnel within the military ranks. Secondly: prohibit anyone without a duly signed authorization, issued after the opinion of the chain of command, from leaving the national territory. Thirdly: immediately take appropriate measures against deserters, in accordance with the regulations in force."[74] In this context, the

70. "A Kenyan Man Tricked into War: How Ruben Was Taken to Russia in the Name of Work", op. cit.
71. Interview with the family of a victim, Cameroon, May 2025.
72. Telephone interview with a researcher, September 2025.
73. Radio message No. 251673/MRP/MINDEF/01 dated March 7, 2025.
74. Ibid.

commander of the Gendarmerie Legion for the Littoral region in turn ordered the "suspension of training courses and missions abroad for non-officer personnel, following repeated instances of desertion abroad."[75] Despite these measures, the Cameroonian army seems to be struggling to stop the desertions. Indeed, no salary increase has been decided for the lower ranks of the military hierarchy.

Because African authorities fail to acknowledge the problem, African amateur mercenaries find themselves at a dead end. If they have been captured and are held in Ukraine, they are not part of prisoner exchanges (a common practice between Moscow and Kyiv), because the Russian authorities do not claim them. They are therefore imprisoned for as long as their governments do not claim them.[76] Several interviews with prisoners illustrate their difficulties.[77] Many of those fighting in the Russian army have realized that they are trapped. Most of the Cameroonian mercenaries interviewed would reportedly ask to return to their country, even if they are not paid by the Russian authorities, but their repatriation can only take place after an agreement between Russia and their government.[78]

Ultimately, the fate of the fighters is ignored by their governments, with a few exceptions. The Kenyan government has publicly admitted the presence of around 200 of its citizens in the Russian forces.[79] In September, discussions took place with the Russian authorities on their repatriation, while the Kenyan police arrested smugglers who were about to send some twenty individuals to Russia.[80] This diplomatic and police reaction was widely publicized in Kenya in order to alert public opinion.[81] In South Africa, Russian recruitment caused a political scandal in November 2025. Seventeen South Africans serving in the Russian army issued a call for help to be repatriated. They were initially sent to Russia by their political party to undergo bodyguard training. This opposition party, called MK, is that of former president Jacob Zuma (head of the country from 2008 to 2018), who is pro-Russian. One of his daughters is reportedly behind these departures to Russia, and a police investigation is under way.[82] This issue further tarnishes the image of the Zuma clan, already involved in numerous trials in South Africa and now potentially facing allegations of involvement in mercenary activities, which is prohibited by South African law. Following these revelations, former president Jacob Zuma asked the Russian Minister

75. Message No. 00000229-2MRP/GN/243 dated April 22, 2025.
76. Telephone interview with a human rights activist, Ukraine, July 2025.
77. "African POWs on Fighting for Russia in Ukraine", op. cit.
78. Telephone interviews with a mercenary, May 30, 2025.
79. "Kenyan Government Confirms Citizens Forced to Fight in Russia after Human Trafficking Scam", KTN News Kenya, October 27, 2025.
80. W. Muia, "Police Break Up Ring Trafficking Kenyans to Fight for Russia in Ukraine", op. cit.
81. "A Kenyan Man Tricked into War: How Ruben Was Taken to Russia in the Name of Work", op. cit. See also: "Plus de 1 400 Africains combattent pour la Russie en Ukraine : le Kenya tire la sonnette d'alarme", *Jeune Afrique*, November 15, 2025.
82. "Zuma's Daughter Facing Legal Action over Russia Recruitment", Bloomberg, November 23, 2025.

of Defense to repatriate his militants.[83] This is the first time a political party has served as a recruiter for Moscow in Africa.

Regarding the Alabuga Start program, this recruitment could be likened to human trafficking. Consequently, investigations are under way in several African countries (Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, South Africa, etc.). In Botswana, Interpol has been brought in,[84] while in South Africa the authorities are investigating and have warned their citizens against job offers in Russia.[85] As the controversy surrounding this program for recruiting young women grows, several African intermediaries of the Alabuga recruiters have been implicated. Some, such as the Ugandan MP Edson Rugumayo and the Cameroonian businessman Awana Ateba,[86] deny any involvement of African female workers in drone production, while Botswanan and South African influencers[87] are distancing themselves from the program. Likewise, African organizations that partner with training institutes in Russia have had to state publicly that they do not work with the Alabuga Start program.[88]

83. Telephone interview with a journalist, South Africa, November 2025.
84. A. Sguazzin and F Tadesse, "Russia Expands Global Outreach for Program Linked to Drone Production", op. cit.
85. Telephone interview with a journalist, South Africa, August 2025. A. Sguazzin, L. Prinsloo and M. Ralengau, "Russia's Push to Recruit South African Women Triggers Probe", op. cit.; A. Sguazzin, "South African Women's Ministry Warns on Russian Job Offers", Bloomberg, August 25, 2025.
86. L. Sithe, "60 Ugandan Females Aged between 18 and 22 have been Recruited to Work in Russia, under the Alabuga Start Program.", op. cit.; "Looking for Oceanne", *Makanday*, September 9, 2025.
87. Available on the Facebook account of Briefly-Botswana News; K. Ngcobo, "South African Influencer Apologises over Viral Russian Job Videos", BBC, August 27, 2025, available at: www.bbc.com.
88. T. Lesenya, "UAT Addresses Concerns Over Russian Scholarship Program", *Lesotho Tribune*, July 20, 2025, available at: https://lesothotribune.co.ls.

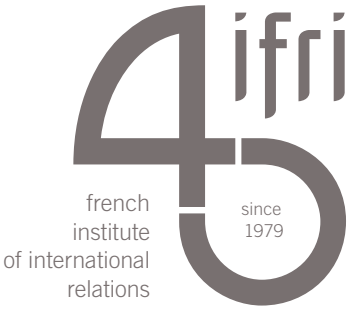
Conclusion

Governments are increasingly resorting to the use of mercenaries in all its forms in contemporary armed conflicts. Foreign fighters make it possible, to a certain extent, to offset recruitment difficulties in Russia and to reduce the compensation owed to the families of soldiers killed in combat.[89] But this privatization of war creates problems between states. After the revelation of the enlistment of their citizens at the front, some poor Asian states (Sri Lanka, Nepal, etc.) asked the Russian authorities to send them back and to repatriate the bodies of the dead. The governments of these countries, which generate large flows of economic migrants, now warn their citizens against Russia's recruitment policy and remind them of the legal proceedings they may face on their return.[90]

Indeed, these recruitments violate the laws of these states, lead to mistreatment and even death, exploit the economic distress of poor populations, rely on human trafficking networks, and represent an indirect involvement in a foreign conflict. The neutrality that African states display with regard to this conflict risks being contradicted by the continued recruitment by Russia on their soil with complete impunity. So far, Kenya and South Africa are the only African countries to have reacted officially to Russia's recruitment policy, but several southern African governments are conducting investigations, and media coverage of this Russian policy is only beginning. Other political scandals similar to the one that erupted in South Africa are to be feared.

Moreover, this recruitment policy demonstrates Russia's considerable need for manpower for its war effort. Both at the front and in its arms factories, the country is short of personnel. Its recruitment policy also highlights the networks it has in Africa. These networks are not limited to Africans trained in the USSR, like Jacob Zuma; they also include young men and women working in the private sector, politics, and civil society organizations, who are turning to the new external powers to satisfy their personal ambitions. From Jacob Zuma to his daughter, the Russian regime has managed to renew its networks in Africa by following the demographic evolution of the continent. To achieve its goals, it is betting on a discontented, enterprising African youth, eager for individual success, to the point of risking their lives in a one-way adventure.

89. D. Kirichenko, "Putin Seeks More Foreign Fighters amid Mounting Russian Losses in Ukraine", Atlantic Council, October 16, 2025, available at: www.atlanticcouncil.org.
90. H. B. Jha, "Plight of Nepalis in Russian Army", *The Kathmandu Post*, October 1st, 2024, available at: https://kathmandupost.com; K. Francis, "Colombo and Moscow Discuss the Issue of Sri Lankans Fighting alongside Russians in Ukraine", Associated Press, May 30, 2024, available at: https://apnews.com.



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