Download date: 14. Nov. 2026

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Publication date:
2026

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Larsen, K. P., & Cold-Ravnkilde, S. M. (2026). *Russia's extended war: Foreign nationals on the frontlines*. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). DIIS Report Vol. 2026 No. 04

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DIIS REPORT 2026: 04

RUSSIA'S EXTENDED WAR

Foreign nationals on the frontlines

Karen Philippa Larsen and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde

Authors
This report is written by Karen Philippa Larsen, Postdoc, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, Senior Researcher, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

We are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers, whose thoughtful and constructive feedback on an earlier draft greatly strengthened this report. Our thanks also go to Luna MacDonald Heilmann for her careful transcription of the interviews, and to Oscar Lihn Wu for his invaluable support with Zotero reference management. We further acknowledge BLOOM Analytics for their assistance in the online data collection and analysis that underpins key findings in this study. The responsibility the for the content of the report lies with the two authors, who have added interpretations to the many reports, interviews and meetings held as this project was implemented.

Publisher
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DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark
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Design and Layout
Layout by Lone Ravnkilde
Cover illustration by Cecilie Castor

Printing
Printed in Denmark by Eurographic A/S, Scandinavian Print Group
All DIIS Reports are printed on Ecolabel and FSC certified paper

ISBN
978-87-7236-219-9 print
978-87-7236-220-5 pdf

Access
DIIS publications can be downloaded free of charge from www.diis.dk

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ABSTRACT

This report examines Russia's recruitment of foreign nationals to support its war efforts through two interlinked practices: online recruitment through the Alabuga Start project and offline mobilisation of foreign nationals onto the frontline. By analysing these dynamics together, the report demonstrates how labour migration, propaganda and warfare are increasingly entangled within broader global geopolitical, economic and digital-platform ecosystems. These systems, characterised by power asymmetries and structural inequalities, create and reinforce vulnerabilities among workers and fighters, particularly those originating from the Global South.

The report argues that Russia has effectively marketised its military labour, transforming service in its armed forces into a transactional exchange in which foreign nationals seek economic mobility or pathways to citizenship. Yet the global inequalities and dependencies shaping these transactions significantly limit foreign nationals' bargaining power and their ability to influence the terms of this exchange. Once inside Russia, many recruits encounter unfulfilled economic promises and working conditions that diverge sharply from recruitment narratives circulating online and through state-linked intermediaries.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights how neoliberal logics shaping the global labour market extend into the military sphere, driving the commodification of human labour even in wartime. Interviews with captured fighters illustrate how this commodification continues after they are taken prisoner and enter Ukrainian prisoner of war camps.

Together, these findings underscore the need for policy-makers to understand Russia's war not only as a military conflict but also as a transnational labour phenomenon shaped by global inequalities and digital infrastructures.

INTRODUCTION

> Officers ... officers, your hearts are in the crosshairs.
> For Russia and freedom.
> To the end.

In a video shared on Telegram, Samuel – a Cameroonian man dressed in a green Russian military uniform – looks straight into the camera and sings in Russian the well-known lines of a Russian patriotic song. He is sitting in front of a building visibly destroyed by years of war.

The caption declares him a volunteer fighting for Russia, 'a shining example of someone who should receive citizenship through a simplified system and as soon as possible! He truly deserves it' (Telegram: African initiative, 2023).

As the war in Ukraine has entered its fifth year, Russia faces rising demand for labour across three sectors: army, defence industry and civilian. Heavy battlefield losses make recruitment of soldiers difficult, and competes with the military's continuous need for drones and the large workforce required to produce them. To fill these gaps, Russia is increasingly looking beyond its borders. While spectacular cases, such as the North Korean or Chinese soldiers fighting for the Russian army, tend to dominate headlines (Wong, 2025; Bae and Yeung, 2025), Ukrainian sources indicate that more than 18,000 foreign nationals from 128 countries have fought alongside Russian forces in Ukraine (Butenko, 2025). Ukraine also recruits foreign nationals, and a few weeks after the full-scale invasion, Ukraine claimed that over 20,000 foreign nationals joined the international legion, and independent analysis estimates that around 4,000 foreign national fighters remained active by early 2024 (Tactics Institute, 2025).

Media reports from the frontlines of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine often portray details about trenches, territorial gains and drone activity. This report looks beyond the immediate battles to show how sustaining a war of this scale depends on less visible forms of support. It depends on migrants and foreign workers navigating precarity and limited global mobility, as well as on information warfare, which shapes narratives, motivations and opportunities far beyond the tangible battlefield.

Russian social media posts, featuring foreign nationals fighting for Russia, serve a dual purpose: recruiting new fighters by portraying them as satisfied with their choice, while reinforcing Russia's narrative of global legitimacy - especially among the so-called 'world majority', Russia's rebranding of the Global South.

For years, credible sources indicate that Russian actors have been luring African migrants into frontline service (Bobo, 2025; Hawkins and Sauer, 2025; Godwin Asediba, 2024; BBC News, 2026) and to the dangerous work in drone factories supporting Russia's military production. These drone factories are strategic military targets of the Ukrainian armed forces (Kupfer and Solomon, 2024; Burrows and Hinnant, 2024), thus harbouring discreet danger to migrants. Promises of civilian work, education and, at times, citizenship are used to deceive African migrants. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Russia has changed its legal frameworks several times to make citizenship easier to obtain for foreign nationals who fight on the frontline of its 'special military operation', as Russia continues to call its war in Ukraine. These legal changes have enabled non-Russian fighters to join the official ranks of the Russian forces.

These developments raise crucial questions: How does the recruitment of foreign nationals unfold? What motivates individuals to travel for work or to join combat operations? And to what extent do Russian disinformation campaigns – and alleged Western counter-efforts – shape these decisions?

To address these questions, this report examines two cases of foreign nationals' involvement in the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and the associated war economy. More specifically, it analyses Russia's recruitment efforts from two perspectives: online recruitment of workers for its weapons production industry in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (ASEZ), and offline recruitment of foreign

nationals for its army. These recruitment channels are part of a broader strategy in which Russia increasingly taps into global labour forces by drawing in workers and fighters from regions such as South and East Asia, former Soviet republics, and parts of Africa through financial incentives, promises of employment and often misleading or incomprehensible contracts.

Russia is thereby externalising the labour demands required to sustain its war effort. Together, these two cases illustrate how Russia's recruitment practices extend beyond the needs of direct military action and into the broader labour needs that underpin its war economy.

The approach of the research is interdisciplinary, combining online quantitative data analysis with qualitative fieldwork to examine how digital and offline recruitment practices intersect as mechanisms for supporting Russia's war. Online narratives function both as recruitment and as a vehicle for legitimising Russia's war in Ukraine, while on-the-ground realities reveal the commodification of workers and fighters, who often face exploitative conditions.

This report argues that Russia has increasingly marketised military service and military support work. Marketisation refers to the process by which public institutions, such as the military, adopt market logics and practices, treating services and citizenship as transactional exchanges while remaining state-run (Cowen and Siciliano, 2011). Marketisation of military services is not a Russian invention, and existing studies of marketisation have focused on the UK and US recruitment efforts, and their gendered and racialised hierarchies (Cowen and Siciliano, 2011; Bailey, 2007; Eichler, 2014; Chisholm, 2014). Reliance on workers from the Global South for security work, is also not a Russian invention, rather it is 'intrinsic to the emerging global economies in the field of security outsourcing' (Mynster Christensen, 2016). Forged perhaps most notably by demands for security labour for US bases in Afghanistan and Iraq, global market economies have long been sustained by cheap labour from countries in the Global South. This process, was also adopted and internalised by the Russian state as it marketised its military service.

In this context, posts to Russian social media channels, like the one described at the beginning of this chapter, featuring foreign nationals willing to fight for Russia, serve a dual purpose. First, they function as recruitment and advertisement, portraying the fighters as satisfied with their decisions to travel to Russia, highlighting the opportunities they have gained. Second, they reinforce Russia's narrative that its war in Ukraine enjoys worldwide legitimacy, particularly among the so-called 'world

majority', Russia's rebranding of the Global South (Stent, 2024). Since the beginning of the war, Russia has framed it as a struggle against Western, notably American, imperialism waged by the world majority, seeking a fairer world order, not dictated by the US or Europe (Audinet, 2025; Šćepanović, 2024; Jacobsen and Larsen, 2023; Stambøl et al., 2025). Posts showing foreign nationals fighting for Russia bolster this narrative, especially as captions often emphasise their ideological motivations.

Yet, the experiences of foreign national fighters or workers in Russia differ sharply from what is depicted in Russia's online campaigns. Several reports have drawn attention to how African migrants are lured into the frontline and to the recruitment of young migrant women to work in drone factories sustaining Russia's military production efforts (Kupfer and Solomon, 2024). Furthermore, the risks of working in a drone production site repeatedly targeted by Ukrainian strikes were concealed during recruitment (GI-TOC, 2025).

These accounts point to the gap between propaganda imagery and on-the-ground realities, illustrating how aspirational depictions are used to mislead potential recruits. Such gaps between recruitment propaganda and lived experience are well documented in other historical contexts as well, including Cold War-era foreign fighter mobilisation and US and UK volunteer recruitment campaigns, where idealised imagery routinely obscured hazardous or exploitative conditions (Maartens and Bivins, 2021; USA History Timeline, 2025; Pokalova, 2020).

These trends suggest that influence campaigns are central to Russia's strategy for sustaining global support of its war. As this report demonstrates, the use of influencers and digital propaganda also contributes to the digital infrastructure that can facilitate online recruitment. However, greater nuance is needed. Research on social media and public engagement underscores the complexity of human agency in decision-making processes (Markussen, 2022). Similarly, encountering recruitment content online cannot automatically be equated with the decision to enlist or travel to a war zone. Indeed, the prisoners of war (PoWs) interviewed for this report stated that they had not been exposed to online recruitment before travelling to Russia. More often than not, they had heard about the possibility to travel through local fixers or personal networks.

Importantly, these dynamics of concealment and misrepresentation do not occur in isolation. They intersect with broader global patterns of state-mediated labour mobility, where migration regimes and recruitment infrastructures shape how certain groups become available and vulnerable to military, paramilitary or industrial

labour markets. A growing body of scholarship shows how Western and Asian states design visa regimes and temporary migration schemes to channel cheap and unskilled labour from the Global South into their agricultural, industrial and service sectors (Infantino, 2023; Zhang and Axelsson, 2021). Complementing this, Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) concept of migration infrastructures draws attention to the interaction between state bureaucracies, intermediaries and regulatory systems that organise and constrain cross-border labour mobility (see also Kleist and Bjarnesen, 2023).

Seen through the lens of migration infrastructure, Russia's Alabuga SEZ and its Start programme represent another contemporary iteration of these regimes that mobilise foreign labour under tightly controlled conditions. Situating our cases within this literature highlights how Russia's wartime labour demands replicate global patterns in which states expand or tailor migration infrastructures to secure flexible and politically low-cost labour supplies.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

Following the section on method and ethics below, the report proceeds in four parts:

The first part briefly outlines recent legal changes in Russia connected to the recruitment of foreigners. The section highlights an apparent paradox in Russia: on the one hand, the state wants to attract foreigners to fight in the army and work in the military industry; on the other hand, it must cater to an increasingly anti-migration atmosphere. This has resulted in legislation that makes it easier for foreigners who fight for Russia to obtain Russian citizenship, while tightened migration laws have increased Russian authorities' possibilities of intimidating migrants to join the army.

The second part analyses Russia's online recruitment through the Alabuga Start programme. Alabuga Start, linked to the ASEZ in Tatarstan, a republic in the east-central part of European Russia, recruits and relocates foreign workers to high-tech, petrochemical and defence industries – including facilities producing Shahed drones. While the programme has prominently targeted African nationals, it is not limited to them. Online campaigns serve as recruitment advertising but are also sites of contestation, often challenged by alleged Western counter-disinformation initiatives. While it is not possible to verify the creators or financers of false accounts and websites engaged in countering recruitment campaigns, our data aligns with recent research on online social media manipulation that has identified characteristic

behaviours associated with automated or semi automated accounts, such as unusual posting patterns, disproportionate amplification, and atypical interaction structures, which are hallmarks explored in the social bot detection and computational propaganda literature (Stella et al., 2018a; Aljabri et al., 2023).

The third part draws on interviews conducted in Ukrainian PoW camps in Spring 2025 (see the following section on methods and ethics), to examine Russia's recruitment of foreign nationals to the frontline. These testimonies reveal that fighters' motivations to join Russia's fight are rarely ideological. Rather, they are driven by aspirations for citizenship, economic survival and the hope for a better future. The soldiers' real-life stories, often obscured by Russian propaganda, reveal a broader pattern: Russia exploits global economic inequalities and entrenched neoliberal logics to marketise citizenship and military work, effectively trading passports for service. This system incentivises fighters – most of whom, with a few exceptions, face limited possibilities to sustain their livelihood at home – to engage in high-risk labour migration. In seeking to exchange their labour for citizenship and a better future, these fighters are ultimately commodified, ending up in PoW camps, where they are largely treated as currency by Ukrainian authorities to exchange them for Ukrainian soldiers.

The fourth part of the report synthesises these findings to demonstrate how Russia's approach reflects broader processes of the marketisation and globalisation of military labour, highlighting the commodification of workers from the Global South. It concludes with implications for international policy responses to transnational recruitment, wartime labour exploitation, and countering Russian online narratives.

METHOD AND ETHICS

The report combines multiple methods. The ASEZ case details the Russian supply chains for Shahed drone production, and more specifically, the recruitment campaigns seeking to attract a workforce to its factories, primarily from the Global South. Part of this inquiry details Russian strategy and communication through a network analysis supported by social media data scraping, and provides new information on the use of influencers and cultural personalities to disseminate such recruitment efforts. Furthermore, the case study briefly details what is alleged to be Western counter-campaigns, utilising AI imagery and bot farms to hamper this Russian campaign. Digital platforms like Facebook, by enabling the use of both human and non-human trolls, are described as the triumph of 'like' wars, which

makes their content prone to online warfare (Singer and Brooking, 2018). Due to the labour-intensive nature of Application Programming Interface (API) scraping, the online data scraping of public profiles related to the Alabuga Start project, was conducted with support from BLOOM Social Analytics, a European social intelligence deep tech firm specialising in detecting influence operations, disinformation and online manipulation across more than 36 languages, which provides analytical insights into digital ecosystems relevant to this study (BLOOM Social Analytics, 2025). For ethical reasons, we focus only on publicly available profiles and posts, and prominent influencers have been anonymised.

Finally, the online section builds on the two authors' long-term digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015) following African influencers (Cold-Ravnkilde and Sylla, 2024) and the Russian Wagner Group's online social media presence on Telegram and Vkontakte (Larsen, 2025b, 2025a).

For the qualitative methods, the report draws on 18 interviews conducted in two Ukrainian PoW camps in Spring 2025 with non-Russian PoWs from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Yemen, the Republic of Togo, Morocco, Egypt and Brazil. One of the authors, Karen, spent four days in one camp and an afternoon in another. Access to two PoW camps in Western Ukraine was obtained through the organisation 'Khochu Zhit' (Eng: I want to live), a Ukrainian governmental project, established under the Coordination Headquarters on the Treatment of Prisoners of War. The project's goal is to get Russian soldiers to surrender (Khochu Zhit, N/A).

Access to the camp was granted in line with Ukraine's official decision to open the camp to the public and researchers as a way to demonstrate the humane living conditions of the PoWs. Several international media outlets have published articles about the PoWs, including pieces about the non-Russians fighting on the Russian side (Al-Maghafi and Kiran, 2026; Chaussoy et al., 2025; Olivier and Plumey Bobo, 2024; Kalinin, 2024). A representative of the Coordination Headquarters on the Treatment of Prisoners of War, in an interview conducted online one month after the visit to the PoW camps, explained that the decision to open the camps, was based on the expectation that it could improve the conditions for Ukrainian PoWs in Russia. It is important to note that Ukrainian PoWs in Russia nonetheless still return with stories of brutal treatment in Russian captivity (Amnesty International, 2025).

Throughout the visits in the camps, Ukrainian authorities were eager to show the researcher that Ukraine adheres to the Geneva Conventions. The impression was that opening the camps also gave Ukraine an opportunity for political communication

and reinforcing its identity as a European country (this will be elaborated on later in the report). Importantly, the researcher did not experience any pressure to reproduce a particular narrative, neither about the camp nor about the interviewed POWs.

Research in places of detention has been described as a constrained, iterative, pixelated process where it is challenging to gather data and where the researcher can be subject to some of the same controls and limitations faced by detained persons (Liebling, 1999; Jewkes, 2014; Reiter, 2014; Jefferson and Gaborit, 2015). Prison ethnographers write about research as a series of boundary negotiations (Martin, 2015), referring not simply to the negotiations around access at the front gate but to the sense that in each new space the researcher enters, a new negotiation begins. This also means that ensuring privacy in places of detention is one of the most fraught exercises given their character as sites of control and surveillance.

In our case, one continuous negotiation was the presence of Karen's guide, R, during interviews. To secure privacy during interviews, R – a consultant with the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, was asked to sit in the adjoining room. On the first day, he agreed. On the second day, when an interpreter joined via Zoom, R initially remained in the interview room to monitor the screen but moved next door after two interviews. On the third day, he began by sitting in the interview room due to activity in the adjoining room, but moved out after the first interview. Later that day, a room change left no adjoining space, so R remained present during the interviews for the rest of the day. This is an example of how a researcher inside a place of detention is rarely in full control of the process (Martin et al., 2014, Martin, 2019), creating the need for extra careful attention to the position of the interviewees.

All but one PoW appeared unaffected by R's presence. R is a civilian, not in uniform, and does not resemble a guard. Although R was familiar with the camp from escorting visitors, it did not appear that any of the participants knew him. One PoW glowered at R before answering questions regarding his time in the Russian army. To mitigate this, Karen changed the topic and the PoW answered more comfortably.

All interviews were conducted in accordance with the Geneva Conventions regulations of humane treatment of PoWs (Geneva Convention, 1950; ICRC, 2020), the Commission on Journalistic Ethics (CJE)'s guidelines for interviewing PoWs (2023), the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) ethical guidelines (AAA, 2026).

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in two camps in Western Ukraine, for safety reasons and because most of the non-Russian PoWs were imprisoned here. During preparation the researchers received a list of the non-Russian PoWs in the two camps, and interviews were arranged with all of them, except for one PoW, for whom linguistic services could not be found in time. Five of the interviews were conducted in English; the remaining interviews took place in each participant's mother tongue with online interpreters, who called in via Zoom on the researcher's computer. Participants reacted positively to the possibility of speaking in their mother tongue. Based on the documentaries about non-Russian PoWs in camps in Ukraine, this is not routine (BBC News, 2026; UNITED24, 2025).

A common challenge to conducting research in any prison or detention facility is the risk of recriminations. Participants might fear reprisals or punishment from camp guards, which can lead them to feel forced to participate, or hesitant to speak freely. In the preparation for the fieldwork, the researchers evaluated this risk based on various reports from the PoW camps. The UNHRC regularly visits PoW camps in Ukraine. According to UNHRC, about half of the PoWs interviewed by UNHCR in Ukrainian captivity reported torture and ill-treatment during capture; however, the report underlines that with rare exceptions, 'mistreatment stopped when POWs arrived at official internment facilities' (UNHRC, 2024: 13). Notably, the UNHRC does not record reports of abuse linked to PoWs' willingness or unwillingness to participate in interviews.

During the researcher's stay in the camp interviewees' expectations were managed by providing clear information about how the interview would take place, the purpose for conducting interviews, the ability to choose whether or not to participate, and the right to withdraw from the conversation at any time. These points were reiterated after each interview. The PoWs were given the researcher's email, and although PoWs do not have access to the internet, they regularly receive visits from the Red Cross representatives, via whom, we agreed, they could retract their statements at any time, before publication.

Furthermore, to mitigate possible risk of recriminations, and because the participants are classified as vulnerable people, the interviewer paid careful attention to any sign of discomfort, hesitation or emotional strain and redirected the conversation as necessary. For example, after the first three interviews, the researcher adjusted the interview guide for future interviews, by excluding questions about the circumstances of the prisoner's capture by the Ukrainian armed forces after participants found

these memories distressing. Interviews focused on PoWs' lives before joining the Russian army, their motivations, and the practicalities of their travel to Russia. We did not ask questions about Ukraine or their time in captivity.

The Geneva Conventions protect PoWs not only in their condition of detention but also from 'insult and public curiosity' (ICRC, 2020). The ICRC furthermore stipulates that no material enabling the identification of detainees should be made public. To ensure our obligations to the principles of 'do no harm', we anonymised all participants during the interviews throughout the report. We know first names only, when they choose to share it. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were carefully selected from a list of the most common male names in their respective countries. As an added layer of anonymity, each participant is given two different names, used interchangeably throughout the report.

Despite these challenges, all participants expressed both willingness and desire to talk and share their stories of motivation and recruitment. As one participant said, 'I haven't had the opportunity to speak to anyone in this way. People here are just focused on leaving; they don't talk about their dreams. But then you ask me about my dreams. Thank you for that'. Providing the PoWs with a platform to share their stories – and representing them as truthfully as possible while safeguarding their anonymity – offers them a measure of agency over how they are seen and understood by the wider public as an alternative to the propaganda and political communication centring on them from both sides of the war.

A raid against illegal migration at a landfill. Moscow, Russia, 2021.
Photo: Artyom Sobolev / Shutterstock.com

FOREIGN RECRUITMENT AND ANTI-MIGRATION MEASURES IN RUSSIA

Since it invaded Ukraine in February 2022, reluctant to mobilise large parts of its own population, Russia has sought to fill its military ranks through hidden channels, including the use of private military companies and the recruitment, sometimes through forced enlistment, of prisoners and foreign nationals.

To facilitate the growing demand for military labour, Russia has introduced extensive legal measures to simplify the immigration processes and attract foreigners with promises of a simple and fast citizenship procedure. The immigration promises, including fast-track citizenship, financial incentives and opportunities for family reunification, make military service more appealing to foreign nationals.

RUSSIA'S NEW LEGAL PATHWAYS TO ATTRACT FOREIGN NATIONALS

- The age limit for foreign recruits has been raised from 30 to 40 years, and citizenship requirements have been eased (Miłosz and Żochowski, 2024).
- Foreign nationals who sign a one-year contract with the armed forces gain the right to Russian citizenship and an immediate temporary residence permit upon concluding their contract. (Decree N690 of 30.09.2022, 2022).
- Families of foreign nationals who serve in the armed forces are allowed to apply for Russian citizenship (Nechepurenko, 2024; Decree N10 of 04.01.2024, 2024).
- Foreign nationals serving prison sentences in Russia, and stateless individuals are permitted to volunteer for military service (Miłosz and Żochowski, 2024).
- Foreign nationals and stateless recruits are required to remain in service for the duration of mobilisation and wartime (Slychko, 2025).

Catering to a general anti-migration mood in Russia, alongside these new legal pathways enabling foreign labour mobility, in February 2025, Russia adopted a set of migration laws, which made it easier to deport unwanted migrants. This change, while making it significantly easier to deport migrants, also gives the Russian government new possibilities to intimidate migrants into joining the army (Beeching, 2025). Under new migration enforcement measures, foreign nationals who lack valid status, overstay permits or violate migration rules can be placed on a 'controlled persons' registry and face administrative removal without court oversight (Beeching, 2025).

New citizens are furthermore required to be drafted for military service immediately following the receipt of their citizenship, and reports show that in some cases foreign nationals in Russia have not been able to submit their application for permanent residency or citizenship without a signed contract with the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) (RFE/RL, 2023). Human Rights Watch reports that pressure to sign military contracts comes from police and enforcement agents, telling migrants that their option is 'deportation or service' (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Information from independent reporting and rights monitors indicate that in raids on migrant workplaces and residences, individuals have been told they must sign up for military service or risk arrest, detention and removal (Global Detention Project, 2025). According to a Russian official, quoted in an article in The Moscow Times, by 2024, up to 10,000 new citizens had been sent to the frontline (The Moscow Times, 2024).

Furthermore, Russia has established recruitment offices in the main migration centres, from where migrants are reportedly recruited under threat of deportation or imprisonment (Olivier and Plumey Bobo, 2024).[1]

With the legal changes that Russia introduced to facilitate citizenship for foreigners, Russia also started to marketise its military work, by effectively 'trading' citizenship for participating in frontline combat in Ukraine. Scholars have noted that security and military work have increasingly been subject to marketisation, understood as 'the incorporation of market rationalities into institutions that may remain public' (Cowen and Siciliano, 2011: 1518). This process has largely been associated with the transition from draft-dependent militaries to all-volunteer forces, by which the military increasingly relies 'on the logics of the market' (Bailey, 2007: 48) to recruit soldiers.

Although formally, the military draft is still in place, the high demand for manpower created by the war, coupled with the political elite's efforts to shield the Russian middle class from its effects, has resulted in a marketisation of military service targeting foreign nationals. These new legal pathways have incentivised migrants, particularly from the Global South, to embark on high-risk migration in Russia, seeking livelihood opportunities unavailable to them in their country of origin.

Source: Cover illustration by Cecilie Castor from DIIS Policy Brief, January 2026.

RUSSIA REACHES OUT: DIGITAL RECRUITMENT OF FOREIGN WORKERS

Russia has been widely identified as a major initiator of global mis- and disinformation directed at the Sahel region in Africa (Clifford, 2022) and in the US (Garner, 2024) in their effort to manipulate impressions about the war in Ukraine (Giles, 2021; Johansson-Nogués and Şimanschi, 2023; Serritzlev, 2025). Scholars have argued that the instrumental use of information and propaganda has long historical roots in Russian statecraft, dating back to Lenin's approach to information as a weapon to combat geopolitical adversaries (Okholm, 2025). Since 2022, we have seen Russian state-directed information operations expand significantly across the Global South, especially in Africa, where Moscow positions itself as an anti-colonial partner and seeks to sway political elites and publics through regime security packages and

influence campaigns. Here, Russia's control over the information space to build legitimacy is increasingly shaped digitally (Brankova, 2025): TikTok, Facebook, YouTube and Telegram have become geopolitical arenas where narratives about 'who protects' and 'who exploits' Africa are formed.

At the same time, Russia's information manipulation must be understood as just one component within a wider and more complex global landscape of mis- and disinformation, in which diverse state and non-state actors operate across different contexts. Digital influence today is co-produced within a media ecosystem where commercial platform providers, such as Meta, X, YouTube and TikTok, function not only as arenas for geopolitical narratives about 'protection' and 'exploitation', but also as powerful disinformation accelerators and geoeconomic actors in their own right. Their algorithmic architectures, data extraction models, and moderation regimes can shape, constrain or amplify states' information influence – including Russia's – and have themselves been shown to limit or distort information flows, facilitate targeted manipulation, and pull states into regulatory battles (Zuboff, 2019; Madianou, 2019; Bradford, 2023).

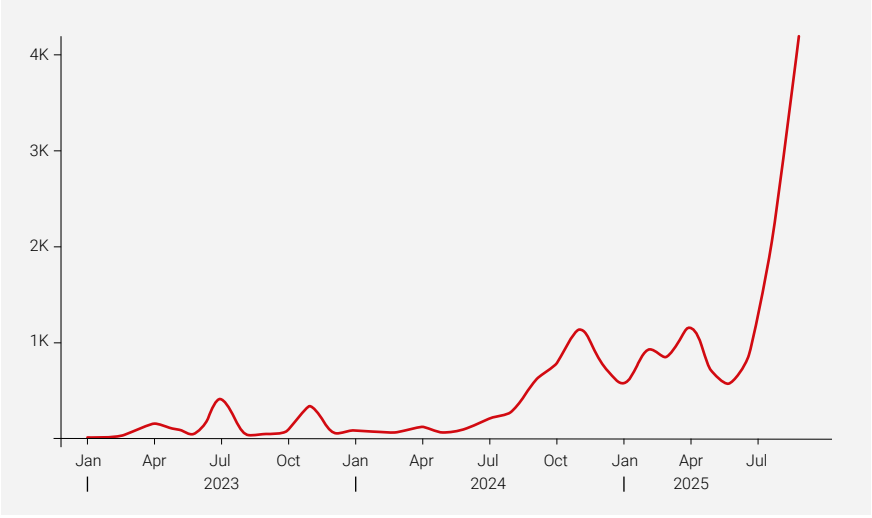
Digital influence is co-produced within a media ecosystem where platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube and TikTok function not only as arenas for geopolitical narratives, but also as powerful disinformation accelerators and geoeconomic actors in their own right.

That said, the significance of Russia's online recruitment aligns with emerging research on the country's expanding use of African influencers as agents of digital propaganda (Cold-Ravnkilde and Sylla, 2024; Pilling et al., 2023). Russian-led initiatives such as the Africa Initiative have invited African influencers on sponsored media tours to occupied territories in Ukraine to promote alternative narratives of the war (Nwonwu et al., 2024). This trend illustrates how social media has become integral to the global interconnectedness of crisis, wars and conflict dynamics (Norman et al., 2024). By portraying Russia as an anti-colonial power supportive of African sovereignty, African influencers, often self-identified as cyber activists, play a pivotal role in shaping African public opinion and amplifying a pro-Russian narrative across the continent (Cold-Ravnkilde and Sylla, 2024).

Yet, the embeddedness of digital platforms extends well beyond warfare: social media ecosystems increasingly structure a wide range of crisis arenas. For instance, the EU has also turned to social media to promote 'non-migration' narratives, recruiting influencers and cultural personalities to shape decision-making among populations in the Global South regarding migrating to Europe (Vammen, 2021, 2024). These dynamics point to the heterogeneity and complexity of the digital spaces through which people in regions like the Sahel navigate. These digital spaces are marked by competing narratives, overlapping crises, and influencers that switch between contexts and audiences. Russia's positioning as an anti-colonial power can thus be understood as leveraging longstanding discontent with French and EU influence in the region, drawing on and repurposing locally rooted critiques to strengthen its own appeal (Jegen, 2023; Van Dessel, 2023).

Meanwhile, Russian military recruitment campaigns targeting foreign nationals have also expanded significantly. Between June and September 2025, the number of Russian military service promotion posts aimed at foreigners increased from 621 to 4,600. This meant that by mid-2025, one in three contract announcements targeted foreigners, compared to only 7% in 2024 (OpenMinds, 2025).

Figure 1. Number of Vkontakte posts targeting foreign nationals, January 2023-July 2025



Source: OpenMinds, Telegram. Layout: Ravnkilde Design.

However, non-military workers are also persistently targeted through online campaigns. Local 'fixers' connect Russian operators with influencers who post content to large audiences and sometimes visit recruitment hubs such as the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (ASEZ) – a key case for analysing the recruitment of African citizens into Russia's industrial-military complex, including its drone production.

ALABUGA START: TARGETING AFRICAN MIGRANTS FOR RUSSIA'S DRONE INDUSTRY

> We are here to grow and build our future: 'Alabuga Start'. Smiling, neatly dressed, and waving at the camera, eight young African women take turns delivering each part of the line in the Alabuga Start advertisement. Toward the end, they come together to complete the sentence with 'Alabuga Start'. The video's headline caption reads: 'Different countries – one goal'.
>
> Telegram: Alabuga Start Programme, 2025.

Launched in 2022, Alabuga Start is a recruitment and relocation initiative associated with the ASEZ in Tatarstan, Russia. The ASEZ has become an important node in Russia's military-industrial supply chain since the onset of the war in Ukraine. While SEZs are formally designated areas operating under special economic regulations, Alabuga is managed by a state-linked joint-stock company, with the Republic of Tatarstan as a principal shareholder, rather than being a purely private entity (GI-TOC, 2025).

Within the SEZ, manufacturing facilities near Yelabuga are operated by companies such as Albatross, which has been linked to the production of reconnaissance UAVs and, according to multiple open-source investigations, to the localised production of Geran-2 (Shahed-136) attack drones used by Russian forces in Ukraine (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024; GI-TOC, 2025).

Its location along the Kama and Volga rivers provides direct access to the Caspian Sea and onwards to Iran. Leaked documents confirm Russian-Iranian co-operation with drone components shipped from Iran to Alabuga (Albright et al., 2025)

This industrial infrastructure situates Alabuga within Russia's broader war economy, where civilian industrial zones and private firms are increasingly integrated into military production under conditions of sanctions and supply-chain constraints. Reporting indicates that the SEZ has been repurposed to support large-scale drone manufacturing and assembly, drawing on both domestic labour and migrant recruitment schemes, including the Alabuga Start programme (GI-TOC, 2025). Taken together, this constellation of actors – the SEZ management company, manufacturing firms such as Albatross, and recruitment initiatives – reflects the hybrid political economy of Russia's contemporary military-industrial supply chain, where state oversight, private enterprise and wartime labour mobilisation intersect.

According to the Institute for Science and International Security (Albright et al., 2025), by 2025 the Alabuga SEZ claimed it had 'successfully recruited 8,498 workers from 77 countries through the Alabuga Start programme. Exact numbers are difficult to verify, but the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC) estimates that around 800 women from 27 countries have participated, with 90% placed in drone assembly work (GI-TOC, 2025).

On its official website, the programme advertises attractive relocation benefits – free or subsidised housing, vocational training or 'work-study' schemes, relatively high salaries (in a Russian context) and international travel (Afrique Média TV, 2023). The Alabuga Start programme also arranges physical recruitment events, often through local intermediaries including pro-Russian NGOs, youth empowerment programmes, Russian cultural centres, and schools and universities, primarily in countries in Africa. However, online recruitment remains the main channel for recruiting migrant workers, and the most effective way to reach a large audience (GI-TOC, 2025). Media outlets, including Associated Press (2024), Euronews (Euronews, 2024), Premium Times Nigeria (Premium Times Nigeria, 2024), ISIS Center (ISIS Center, 2025) and GI-TOC (2025) have reported on misleading conditions for recruitment and workers reportedly facing exploitative conditions, including unpaid overtime, coercive withdrawal penalties, restricted communication, surveillance, harassment, and coercive practices with African women diverted into drone production instead of the advertised education or tech jobs. Furthermore, the risk of working on a drone production site repeatedly targeted by Ukrainian strikes was concealed during recruitment (GI-TOC, 2025). GI-TOC discusses in their report whether the programme can be categorised as human trafficking and concludes that while the programme 'fulfils several of the conditions for a case of human trafficking', it does not fully meet the internationally accepted thresholds (GI-TOC, 2025).

Given this background, we initially expected to find a high level of online activity in social media posts mentioning Alabuga or related content.

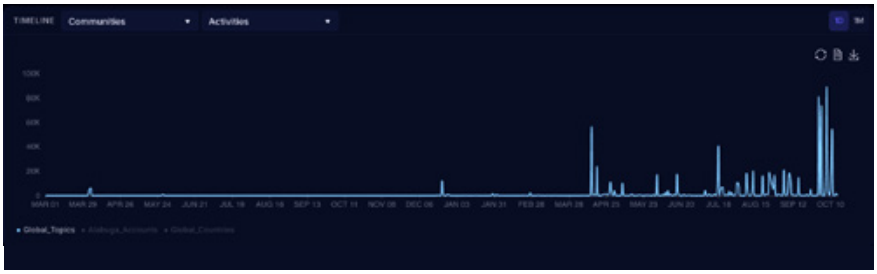
From March 2024 to October 2025, we collected a total of 13,000 documents (defined as any publication on social media – posts, tweets, videos…) mentioning Alabuga across Facebook, Telegram, TikTok and X. As shown in Illustration 1, Facebook accounted for 77% of these documents and represented 81.8% of the engagement activity such as likes, RTs and shares. BLOOM collected mentions of the project in English and French, and over 79% of the conversation was in English, primarily driven by Nigerian and South African news outlets and opinion leaders who criticised the recruitment process.

Illustration 1. Alabuga Start project recruitment efforts and social media response, March 2024–October 2025

Source: BLOOM, Social Analytics, 23 October, 2025.

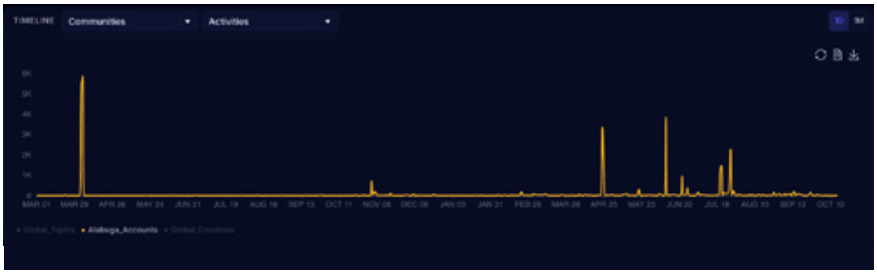
During the data collection period surrounding Alabuga Start (March 2024–October 2025)), in April 2025, we observed a sharp increase in online activity, including posts, comments and temporary homepages, most of which aimed to denounce rather than promote the recruitment operation. As shown in Illustration 2, mentions of the project saw an uptick from April 2025 onwards, with the accusations of human trafficking becoming commonplace through Facebook pages like Les Voix du Sahel (39k followers) and Eveil Africain (30k followers). This suggests that recruitment efforts disappeared from social media following the negative mediatisation of the project in Europe and Africa.

Illustration 2. Uptick in mentions from April 2025 onwards



Source: BLOOM, Social Analytics, 23 October, 2025.

Illustration 3. Activity of the official accounts for Alabuga Start



Source: BLOOM, Social Analytics, 23 October, 2025.

As seen in Illustration 3 above, activity of official accounts of Alabuga Start has been quite low, registering a peak on 3 April 2024, due to a highly shared propaganda video following a Ukrainian bombing of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

Illustration 4 shows African and European (mainly Ukraine-based) influencers, opinion leaders and media accounts denouncing the Alabuga Start project. Notably, recruiters are absent, highlighting the dominance of critical voices in the public discourse. Social media promotion of Alabuga Start (e.g. via Facebook pages) appears limited, with minimal engagement restricted to closed student groups. Media reports of trafficking-like conditions likely influenced the decline in overt recruitment activity online, explaining why the scale of observable recruitment posts was lower than initially expected.

Also notably, the increased international scrutiny of Alabuga (Africa Defence Forum, 2025) coincided with what BLOOM analysts describe as possible European and Western counter-campaigns aimed at denouncing the Russian recruitment operation. According to BLOOM some of this activity may involve information campaigns by Western actors using false accounts and websites, although the actual origin of these accounts cannot be independently verified.

Illustration 4. Source of interactions on Facebook with mentions of Alabuga

Source: BLOOM, Social Analytics, 23 October, 2025.

On X, Alabuga's main account (@sezalabuga) serves as the primary instigator of conversations. As represented in Illustration 5, Mohamed A. Zubeyr, the Somali Ambassador to Russia, appears, having promoted 'opportunities' in Alabuga after the denunciations became public. On the right-hand side, actors such as Brainless Partisans and Camille Moscow – known French-speaking pro-Kremlin influencers – promote the SEZ without mentioning recruitment. The Russian Embassy in South Africa appears on the illustration, likely due to its communiqué on Alabuga and addressing the human trafficking allegations. The remaining accounts include various influencers, opinion leaders and media outlets calling out the Alabuga project.

In sum, the online data analysis shows that both Russian and allegedly Western actors rely on intermediaries – notably African influencers and networks of fake social media accounts – to disseminate recruitment messages and run counter-information campaigns.

Illustration 5. Interactions on Twitter (X) with mentions of Alabuga

Source: BLOOM, Social Analytics, October 2025.

THE RECRUITERS

Although many recruitment pages have since disappeared, examples of semi-underground recruitment networks remain. These can be categorised into four main types:

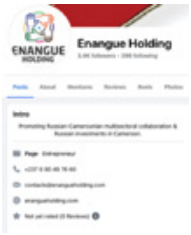
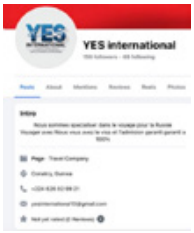
- Local companies in Africa, notably in Cameroon and Guinea-Conakry, are occasionally linked to youth organisations promoting 'international training opportunities' and showcasing 'happy workers' in Alabuga.

- The Alabuga Start programme has attracted attention from both individual African officials and social media channels. African officials or intermediaries providing endorsements or facilitating travel logistics. This category includes ambassadors, former senior regional officials, and national-level political figures whose public statements or social media activity have been used to endorse or promote the Alabuga Start programme.

- Influencers – multiple African social media personalities were reportedly approached by Alabuga representatives to post sponsored content.

- Telegram channels that continue to circulate recruitment offers and videos from the Alabuga SEZ.[2]

Table 1. Examples of local African companies promoting Alabuga Start

Organisation	Enangue holding	YES International	NPC Jeunesse Congolaise
			
Location	Cameroon	Guinea (Conakry)	DR Congo
Documents / Engagements	521 / 3,860	500+ / ~2,500	500+ / ~3,000
Focus / Activity	French-language recruiter; promotes Alabuga Start; tracks Cameroonian recruits; tags Russian official pages	Travel agency claiming to organise trips to Russia; posts sponsored recruitment content; low engagement	Youth organisation; posts daily lives of women in Alabuga positively, active in July 2024; tags Alabuga location
Key Individuals	CEO Awana Ateba Michel	Chrīs Le Guineen (community manager)	–
Notable links / Examples	Sponsored posts to attract followers; frequently shared by *Centre Culturel Russe au Cameroun*; tags official Russian pages	Sponsored recruitment posts; in-facility photos from Alabuga; promotional posts for YESI services	Posts showing the daily life of women in Alabuga tags Alabuga's Facebook location page

Source: BLOOM. October 2025.

African officials promoting Alabuga Start

On 20 May 2025, the Ambassador of Somalia to Russia, Mohamed Abukar Zubeyr, shared a tweet promoting the project on his X account (see Illustration 6).[3] The post received over 600 engagements, mostly negative, with many accusing the ambassador of 'promoting human trafficking and slavery'. Mohamed A. Zubeyr continued to promote 'opportunities' in Alabuga after these denunciations became public.

Illustration 6. Tweet shared on Ambassador of Somalia to Russia Mohamed Abukar Zubeyr's own X account 29 May, 2025

Source: Mohamed A. Zubeyr på X.

In addition, the official Alabuga account and its affiliates, including Enangue Holding and YES International, cited several African officials as endorsing or promoting the programme. These included Nathalie-Aziza Munana, a former Congolese government official (DRC),[4] Peter Mutuku Mathuki, a Kenyan diplomat and former Secretary General of the East African Community (EAC),[5] and as of mid 2024 Ambassador of Kenya to Russia, Moses Kizige,[6] a Ugandan politician and diplomat,

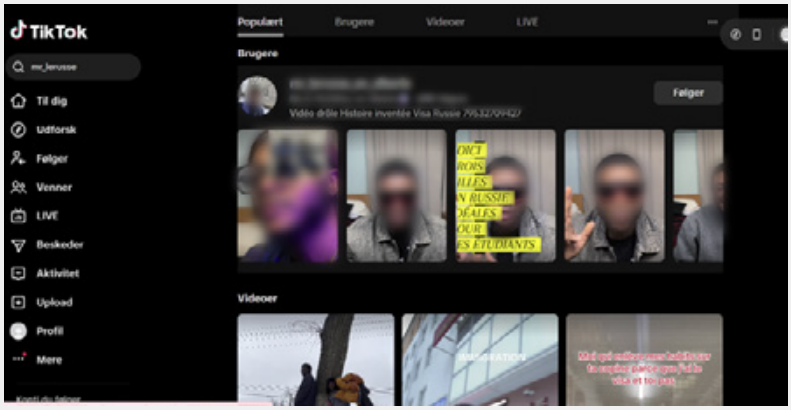
currently serving as Uganda's Ambassador to Moscow, Seydou Kamissoko,[7] designated as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Mali to Russia, and Bassirou Zoma,[8] Chargé d'Affaires at the Burkinabé Embassy in Moscow.

Russian embassies in Africa appear not to participate directly in recruitment activities but focus instead on responding to human trafficking allegations. Meanwhile, French-language pro-Kremlin propaganda accounts, including Brainless Partisans and Camille Moscow, discuss the Alabuga factory while omitting both the origins of the labour force and the documented human trafficking concerns.

AFRICAN INFLUENCERS AS INTERMEDIARIES

African influencers play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion about Russia. This is part of Russia's broader strategy of working through digital intermediaries to reach potential recruits and logistical supporters. Social media and apps such as TikTok, Facebook and Telegram are central to recruitment. Videos depict aspirational lifestyles – Africans dressed in furs, wearing gold jewellery, and sipping champagne in the backseats of luxury cars – presenting a stark contrast to the realities reported from the factories in Russia.

Illustration 7. A Cameroonian TikToker with over 67,000 followers sharing practical advice on how to move to Russia.



Source: Screenshot from Tik Tok, 15 November 2025.

Similar patterns appear in Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, DRC, Somalia, South Africa and the CAR, and reflect a broader trend: the app economy as a weapon in hybrid warfare. Smartphones and platform infrastructures allow anyone with a device at hand to participate in war and crisis, from wherever they are. Here, smartphones and platform infrastructures primarily facilitate participation in the information and cyber dimensions of conflict, including the spread of disinformation, propaganda, and politically or socially mobilising content. While such devices could, in theory, also support physical operations such as remotely operated drones or other technologies, the patterns observed in these contexts mainly concern how digital platforms shape perceptions of opportunity, risk and mobility, and how they enable large numbers of actors to engage in conflict from a distance through information networks.

Alabuga operators engaged multiple African influencers to publish sponsored content promoting the project on social media. Some influencers even visited the SEZ and posted content directly from the site. While many of these posts have since been deleted, some remain online as paid content. Yet, after the international exposure of Alabuga Start (see section below), African influencers appear reluctant to be associated with the project and international trafficking.

The engagement of influencers reflects a broader trend of Russian information operations, observed globally across diverse topics (Audinet, 2025). Russian operators linked to Alabuga Start contact local 'fixers' in Africa, or local marketing agencies. These fixers then engage influencers, paying them to post promotional content and, in some cases, facilitating visits to the SEZ. Influencers are key instigators of traffic to Alabuga Start recruitment pages.

Influencer caught in a media storm

The use of local influencers as intermediaries since the Alabuga Start launched in 2022 was confirmed when a Motswana influencer reported being contacted by a local intermediary known to collaborate with Russian operators. The Motswana influencer, singer and comedian, with over 500,000 followers, published promotional content promoting the Alabuga Start project on Facebook in late December 2024, tagging a local recruiter for Alabuga Start.

In August 2025, he posted about the project again. However, later that day, amidst backlash from commentators, he removed part of the message and issued a statement claiming he had been misled. Other examples of prominent influencers include one of Nigeria's most famous influencers and media personalities. He posted a paid ad to his 1.1 million Twitter followers on 27 February 2025, promoting the

project, and received 41 replies, 798 retweets, and around 2000 likes. Two months later, he posted content on Twitter and YouTube denouncing the Alabuga Truth – a network of journalists investigating the human trafficking allegations against the Alabuga SEZ.

Following media exposure of the Alabuga Start project, in late November 2024, and in line with the Tech Against Trafficking initiative and its own community guidelines, several social media channels, including TikTok, X and Facebook shut down accounts used for Alabuga recruitment (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024). TikTok subsequently banned over ten accounts belonging to women who had shared positive content about their working experiences and promoted the project.[9] Some of these videos reportedly displayed signs of coercion or physical violence as documented by a South African media outlet, leading viewers to believe that women in the Alabuga Start program were forced to share the positive content[10] Several South African influencers initially promoted Alabuga Start but later issued apologies and removed their content. However, other accounts remained active on Russian-owned platforms, including Telegram and VKontakte (GI-TOC, 2025a).[11]

Several bloggers and influencers worked directly with official Alabuga accounts. For example, one South African influencer engaged with the project in July 2025, but she did not post promotional content on her Instagram account, which has over 500,000 followers. She did post a video from an airplane on the same day as the Alabuga tweet, suggesting that she could have made at least an Instagram story related to the project. During August 2025, multiple South African influencers apologised and removed their promotional content of the Alabuga Start project.[12] In general, it seems as if influencers are afraid to lose their audience and reputation if associated with trafficking-related content.

COUNTER-CAMPAIGNS

A key finding of this report is the existence of counter-influence initiatives operating to discourage the Alabuga Start programme in Russia. These initiatives illustrate how information campaigns can amplify real issues while shaping narratives and influencing audiences.

Alabuga Truth operates at the intersection of activism, investigative reporting and strategic influence. The initiative presents itself as an independent network of female investigative researchers, journalists and activists documenting the Alabuga Start

programme in Russia. However, Alabuga Truth also exemplifies a counter-influence campaign. BLOOM's data analysts suggest that it exhibits hallmarks of a counter-intelligence operation. It is anonymous, with no verifiable information on authors, funding or affiliations; its content is highly emotive, and some content, including AI-generated images and unverifiable claims, goes beyond what independent sources have documented. Though we cannot verify the attribution of these campaigns, the observed patterns, such as disproportionate amplification and synchronised activity, are consistent with behaviours documented in social bot and influence operations research (Stella et al., 2018b; Shao et al., 2018). Alabuga Truth aligns with narratives critical of Russian military industrial activity and labour diplomacy in Africa, illustrating how such campaigns target strategic vulnerabilities and shape public perception. The initiative leverages investigative-style reporting, evocative imagery and calls to action to amplify awareness, showing the mechanisms by which counter-influence campaigns operate.

This case demonstrates that counter-influence initiatives can: highlight real abuses, selectively frame narratives, mobilise online audiences and function as instruments of strategic messaging. Recognising their existence is essential to understanding the broader information environment surrounding programmes like Alabuga Start.

In a similar vein, counter-activity was observed on Facebook pages such as Le Voix du Sahel (39K followers) and Éveil Africa (30K followers), where posts accused the programme of human trafficking and exploitation. These accusations generated further online debate and the circulation of counter-narratives defending the programme. This indicates a rapid counter-response aimed at disrupting the Russian recruitment operation.

Both pages, created in January 2024 (Voix du Sahel) and July 2024 (|Eveil Africain), are managed by a small group of individuals – four Togolese and two Burkinabese accounts – who conceal additional identifying information. They present themselves as platforms promoting African sovereignty and democracy, publishing content in French and English, including AI-generated images and videos covering African freedom, agro-tech innovations, development programmes and alleged atrocities against African nationals in Alabuga. Analysis of audience engagement shows that while most posts generate 10–15 reactions, content related to Alabuga consistently receives 30,000–40,000 interactions – far exceeding the channels' organic reach. This pattern indicates either bot amplification or heavily sponsored content, highlighting deliberate manipulation of audience perception. Eveil Africain is also active on X, demonstrating cross-platform amplification strategies.

While the origin of the accounts remains unknown, this phenomenon could be seen as indicative of how some counter disinformation efforts – which BLOOM analysts hypothesize could involve Western actors – are veiled as West African accounts. This strategy may reflect the current political context, in which Western actors, particularly France and the EU, are highly discredited in West African media spaces. Such reliance on inorganic accounts may help campaigns navigate a contested information environment, but it also carries risks of user backlash and raises concerns regarding transparency.

Finally, multiple recently created Twitter accounts, often using AI-generated images, actively accuse Alabuga Start of human trafficking. Notably, Alabuga Start's own accounts (or accounts related to the programme) do not appear to be engaging in bot activity, suggesting the inauthentic behaviour is primarily aimed against the programme rather than in its defence.

Russia's online narratives about foreign nationals contribute to sustaining the war efforts while shielding the Russian middle class from their direct effects, which allows them to continue living their relatively comfortable lives, despite the ongoing war.

Alabuga Start's online recruitment illustrates how digital recruitment, propaganda and labour mobility intersect within Russia's global outreach strategies. It underscores the complex entanglement of migration, industrial labour and warfare – and points to the particular vulnerability of young Africans to misleading recruitment campaigns embedded within larger geopolitical and digital ecosystems. At the same time, our findings suggest that online recruitment is not as straightforward. Public recruitment campaigns are contested – including by counter-disinformation initiatives that may involve Western actors. Our initial findings, albeit from a limited data set, did indicate these potential counter-disinformation efforts and media reporting including international allegations of human trafficking, had an effect. Some influencers did not want to be associated with criminalised activities and removed the content from their accounts as well as some, not all, platforms took steps to remove accounts associated with Alabuga Start. However, this does not imply that the problem is solved. First, methodologically, online scraping and analysis are limited and only provide a snapshot of what is circulated online. Activities may have occurred before the scraping and may continue after as well. It is also beyond the scope of this report to cover all online activities related to Alabuga Start in and across Africa.

Second, even though negative promotion can temporarily halt public campaigning, research on European campaigns to counter migration shows that these campaigns rarely have the intended effects (Vammen, 2025). If there is a push to migrate and a pull from Russia opening new avenues, it is most likely that people in need of work and livelihood opportunities will find a way to travel.

This calls for broader debates over legitimacy, visibility and interpretation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for situating programmes like Alabuga Start within the wider information environment and unpacking the ways in which digital campaigns can shape public perception and international narratives.

The Alabuga Start project also illustrates how the war is sustained from the margins. Migrant workers recruited to support Russia's military industry, alongside other marginalised foreign nationals and prison-recruits, form part of Russia's extended warfare. Russia's online narratives about foreign nationals contribute to sustaining the war efforts while shielding the Russian middle class from their direct effects, which allows them to continue living their relatively comfortable lives, despite the ongoing war (Zeveleva, 2025).

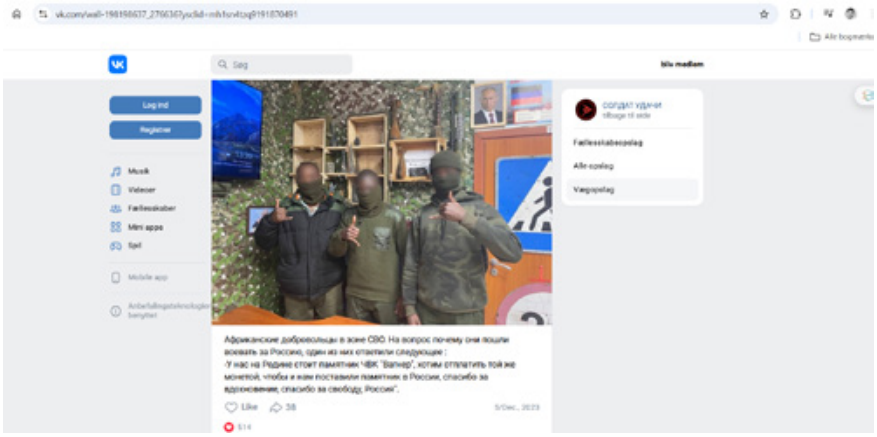
Furthermore, Russia's online propaganda reinforces its broader framing of the war as legitimised among populations in the Global South. This narrative is constructed and instrumentalised as a struggle against Western, noticeably American, imperialism, aiming at advancing the political sovereignty of the so-called 'World Majority' and promoting a world order that is not dictated by the US or Europe (Audinet 2025; Šćepanović 2024; Jacobsen and Larsen 2023). Online portrayals of foreign nationals fighting for Russia bolster this narrative, especially when accompanied by captions emphasising the recruits' ideological motivations for fighting.

Hence, to get a better understanding of how the foreign nationals ended up in the frontline in Russia's war in Ukraine, the report now turns to a different form of recruitment campaign: i.e.those targeting individuals who travelled to become military personnel rather than to join industrial or civilian workforces.

Originally, Russia's online posts about the foreign nationals fighting in the ranks of its army sparked the authors' interest. Assuming that the foreign nationals would have been recruited online, we set out to learn more about their motivations and their road to Russia. Interestingly, as it turned out, only one of them was recruited online

(through LinkedIn), and only a few said they saw Russian recruitment materials online before deciding to travel to Russia, while none connected this material with their decision to travel.

Illustration 8. Post in the Russian Social Media site, Vkontakte



Source. https://vk.com/wall-198198637_276636?ysclid=mh1sn4tzq9191870491 05.12.2023.

Caption says:

> African volunteers in the SVO zone. When asked why they went to fight for Russia, one of them responded: "We have a monument to the Wagner PMC in our homeland. We want to repay them in kind by having a monument erected for us in Russia. Thank you for the inspiration, thank you for freedom, Russia."

Prisoners of war lining up before entering the dining hall, 2025. PoW camp in Western Ukraine. Photo: Karen Philippa Larsen.

PRISONERS OF WAR IN UKRAINE – A VIEW FROM THE CAMPS

Prologue

Entering the PoW camp in Western Ukraine, I count four thick metal doors in different shapes and sizes. The first leads into the checkpoint admissions office. Between the first and the second door, the space narrows, and the five of us, myself and the four representatives from the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, are squeezed together. Through a small window, we hand over our identification papers to the guard.

The next door is barred, allowing only three people to pass at a time. Eager to get out of the tight admission space, we pass through one by one. I glance towards my guide, R, to show me how to pass through the security system, which, for him and the others, seems entirely routine. The tight security measures make me acutely aware that I am about to enter a space where no one enters or leaves without permission.

Inside the camp, the PoWs wearing dark blue uniforms – a blue fleece jacket, a blue cap and boots – are easy to recognise. Some are working, carrying large wooden logs from a truck to a place behind a wall. The PoWs are earning money, I'm later told, to buy stuff – 'chocolate or coffee', in a small shop in the camp.

On a tour of the camp, we enter the living quarters by first passing through another checkpoint, moving between two metal-barred doors into a large, tiled, square courtyard. A large yellow and blue poster outlining the rights of PoWs under the Geneva Conventions, written in Russian, covers the outer wall of a nearby building.

We step inside the building and climb two flights of stairs to the dormitories. The atmosphere is unexpectedly homely, soft and familiar. Each PoW has a bed, some of which are bunk beds, each neatly covered with red-chequered woollen blankets. They are also permitted a few personal items: books, glasses, a watch and notebooks. On one windowsill, a game of draughts lies neatly arranged. Everything the PoWs are allowed to keep, R explains, is regulated by the Geneva Conventions.

We then enter another building, where we are to conduct the interviews. It smells of food, and R points to the cantina behind a door. We walk upstairs to the second floor, and there is a sharp smell of raw meat, which makes my stomach turn. Inside the interview room, further down the hall, the smell is lighter. Sparsely furnished with a desk and chairs along the wall, the room is normally used for psychological therapy, R explains. From the window, I can see a small lawn where laundry is hanging to dry: 20 white t-shirts, 20 jackets and 20 pants.

A uniform removes identity, making the one who wears it one of many.

I receive the PoWs in the room individually, some of them are shy as they enter; however, as I introduce myself and we start to talk, they open up to tell me their heartbreaking stories.

A STORY OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN NATIONALS: DHAN

Dhan comes from a South Asian country. He was injured and captured by the Ukrainians during battle at the frontline. A focused expression marks his slim face as he sits down across from me, with his hands clenched. I offer him a Danish butter cookie; he takes one but places it carefully on the table in front of him, with an 'I will eat it later'. Then he starts talking with marked engagement and only reluctantly pauses to allow the translator to translate.

Before coming to Russia, he had already worked abroad for more than four years in two different countries. After completing his last contract, he returned home but could not find a job despite being qualified as both a bus and truck driver: 'I couldn't sell myself in the job market, despite my qualifications', he says, leaning slightly forward, pressing his lips together in apparent frustration.

Dhan has two kids to take care of. Unable to afford even basic necessities for himself and his family, let alone his children's education, he saw travelling abroad again as his only option to earn money.

> For me, the priority is my children. I want to give them a better education, he says and looks down. I will work very hard to get my family to the level of others. So that they are not left behind.

When Dhan decided to go to Russia, he did not initially intend to join the army; he hoped to use his skills and work as a taxi or truck driver, as he had done before. Once in Russia, however, it proved difficult to find such work. A friend told him about the opportunity to join the army.

Dhan recalls that when he called home to tell his parents that he had joined the army, his father started crying: 'He called me several times through a friend's phone and asked me to come home.... He told me many times to come back'. For the first time during our conversation, Dhan smiles as he remembers his father's reaction.

> I am the main pillar, their main support, I am the person who supports the family. If I am not there, then the family would probably break down. They cannot support themselves, Dhan explains.

After joining the army, Dhan was sent to a training camp in Russia for three months. He initially signed up for a Russian passport, paying 300 USD to his commander to be added to the list for Russian documents. However, when he learned that this required serving at the front line, he asked his commander to remove him from the list.

> I told the commander that I don't need the passport. That he can remove my name from the list. Please don't send me to the frontline.

Like the other foreign national fighters I met in the camp, Dahn could not avoid serving at the front; 'I couldn't run away because I hadn't received any money from the Russian army at that time. My other friends tried to flee, but they found them in Moscow and sent them back to war'.

Later, however, Dhan did try to avoid the frontline in other ways. He sits up straight as he explains that he contacted people back home – politicians and authorities. But in the end, no one helped, he says, looking down at his hands, his shoulders slightly slumped.

Unlike him, two Indian fighters he met during training were able to leave after being recalled by the Indian government. Other PoWs also mentioned Indian fighters, who were able to leave the Russian army. They were able to terminate their contract with the Russian army and return home after Prime Minister Modi discussed with Putin the reports of Indians being lured into signing contracts with the Russian army (Sebastian, 2024). This give the PoWs a small hope that their own ambassadors or politicians might be able to help them return home as well.

When asked about the future, Dhan says that a few months ago, he would have answered that he wanted to go straight home. But because 'a lot of blood has been flowing from my body', he has changed his mind. Now, he wants to go back to Russia to collect the money he is owed before returning to his family.

> Towards the end of the interview, Dhan asks me if I can ask the Ukrainian government to ensure that he and others can return home as soon as possible, showing how the fighters also have their agendas and reasons to talk to me. I respond with a longer explanation about the importance of publishing their stories so that people can become aware of their situations.
>
> Dhan interrupts me with a polite and friendly 'thank you'. He eats the butter cookie with a slender smile on his face. As he gets up to leave, the initial focused expression he carried through most of our conversation slowly returns.

FOREIGN NATIONALS' JOURNEY INTO RUSSIA'S MILITARY

Despite the sustained Russian effort to promote its war through online campaigning, few of the PoWs turned out to have been exposed to online recruitment material. Across the interviews, the PoWs displayed varying levels of knowledge about what they signed up for: Some were aware that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) contract involved frontline fighting but enlisted to obtain a Russian passport or for financial reasons. Others knew they were joining the MoD, but did not expect to be sent to the frontline. And finally, some were unaware that they were enlisting with the Russian MoD and felt deceived into signing the contract.

Ten of the 18 fighters interviewed were recruited before travelling to Russia; the other eight were already in the country for work or to study. Seven PoWs reported that they heard about the opportunity to work in Russia through a friend, while others said they were recruited through an 'agent'. When asked about the agent, one elaborated that the agent 'did the paperwork with the Russian embassy in [country of residence]' (Gayan).

José was the only foreign national who said he had been recruited online. Unlike typical online advertisements, he was approached via LinkedIn by recruiters presenting themselves as representatives for a large tech company, 'I received the first job offer via LinkedIn. So, I made a lot of calls, emails and conversations with two recruiters. And they gave me all the information about the job, salary, benefits, social packs, everything I needed. And then, I decided to leave to go to Russia' (José). The recruiters did not mention any involvement in war during their conversations.

Pressure to sign army contracts

PoWs who initially came to Russia to study or for work unrelated to the war explained that at first, they were not involved in military activities. Several described facing financial difficulties, particularly in renewing their visa or other papers and permits, which led them to join the military as a last resort. For example, Anura, who had been working in a burger restaurant in Moscow, explained: 'I was working in Moscow. I didn't have a visa. That was the way to stay'.

Others had less of a choice, as enlistment was presented as the alternative to economic fines or prison sentences. Youssef signed up when he was imprisoned for three months because of problems with his registration. Hamza studied medicine in Russia and explained that he was pressured into enlisting in the army after he was arrested for not having his registration in order.

> Well, I had been there [in Russia] for two years, and after that, I had some problems with the documents. I saw the judge for the first time. After that, I was told that if you see the judge again, you'll be hit with a long sentence. I was offered the contract; I signed the contract and was shipped out to the war.
>
> When asked what problems he had with his papers, he replied: The registration. Registration, whatever it is?! Normally, it's not a problem, but it is now because of the war - it's very new. They say you are a spy.

These testimonies indicate that Russia has developed a practice of using changing legal requirements to coerce foreign nationals into signing contracts with the armed forces, which, before the war – at least as explained by Hamza – were not considered important. This coincides with news reporting from Russia on how protocols are drawn up for violations that do not exist, simply to pressure migrants into signing contracts to fight in Ukraine (RFE/RL, 2023), as well as reports about anti-migrant raids at markets, construction sites and catering outlets, to force newly naturalised citizens to sign contracts (Nastoyashcheye Vremya, 2025).

This pathway into military service highlights how administrative and economic precarity can be leveraged as a recruitment mechanism. The intersection of migration, legal vulnerability and limited livelihood options creates conditions in which military enlistment becomes one of the few available solutions, raising important questions about the voluntariness of such decisions and the structural pressures that shape them.

Futures for sale: marketisation of military work

Trading citizenship for military service resonated with the motivation expressed by several fighters. Getting a Russian passport represents a gateway to work abroad and to secure future income, and the passport was even more important for some than the promised monthly salary.

'I knew about the risks, but I decided to join anyway … Not just for money, but because first of all, I want a Russian passport', said Krishna, hinting at the desperation the fighters feel in their everyday economic situation, in their home countries. Similarly, Surendra explained that he expected: 'a passport and other documentation that allows you to work in other European countries afterwards and to study freely in Russia' in return for his time in the Russian army. When asked about his thoughts on

the future, the possibility of obtaining Russian 'documents' again featured in his answer: 'The first thing I want to do is go back to Russia because I've taken a big risk for the documents'.

However, with market logics constituting the relationship between the foreign nationals and Russia, the racial and economic inequalities that are embedded in global neoliberal labour hierarchies are also underpinning this relationship (Eichler, 2014; Chisholm and Eichler, 2018; Barker, 2009).

For many fighters, a Russian passport represents a gateway to work and income abroad — for some even more valuable than the promised monthly salary.

These global inequalities leave the fighters with little bargaining power. Several of the interviewees mentioned the struggle of finding jobs in their home countries and connected this to the desire of wanting to secure a better future for their children, and the pain of not being able to do this at home.

Kasun came to Russia with his family: 'Me, my wife, and my son planned that we would go to Russia [to work]. We came on a six-month visit visa. I wanted to put my son in school, and I went to a Russian school, but they said that I could not enrol him because the visa was not valid for schooling. One of my friends told me that if you join the army, you can get a passport, and you can get money. You can also get schooling'.

As in the case of Kasun, his children's education plays a large role in the imagined future, explicitly mentioning being unable to pay tuition fees as a reason for going abroad to find a job. 'I was working in [home country], but the money [I earned there] is not enough for my daily needs. ["Enough"] means for eating and my children's school fees, everything' (Kasun).

Reflecting the aspects of high-risk migration, some fighters mentioned the possibility of working for Russia's war efforts simply as a job opportunity. Some fighters have worked in the United Arab Emirates as security guards in hotels and tourist resorts in the US, and one had been in Oman. 'So many like myself – I've been to Dubai. Like me, so many people used to go to other countries for jobs'. (Ram).

This underscores that labour markets are globalised, and people with few other options are willing to engage in work migration and make use of developing routes and destinations when they arise. Mynster Christensen also underlines the willingness to engage in work migration for Sierra Leonian ex-militias who played a large role in the US's outsourcing of base security in Iraq and Afghanistan. She argues that the supply of global security depends on a tension between mobility and immobility, i.e. on 'people who are stuck, but urgently aspire to be on the move' (Mynster Christensen, 2016).

In Ethiopia, where EU pressure has driven the adoption of stricter migration control structures, Mengiste (2022) shows how migrants and smugglers continually adapt, developing alternative infrastructures to sustain movement. Although the EU provides development funding and financial incentives in exchange for curbing irregular transit, these interventions do not halt irregular migration nor deliver on promises of 'safe and orderly' mobility. Instead, they redirect flows towards the Middle East and southern Africa (Eresso and Sørensen, 2025).

Russia's marketisation of military service and citizenship is closely related to the commodification of foreign nationals. 'Excessive marketisation can "disembed" the economy from social relations, turning labour, alongside money and land, into "fictitious commodities"' (Lin and Nguyen, 2021: 323). Treated as a commodity, these foreign nationals, stripped of their basic rights, face exploitative conditions in Russia.

Abuse of vulnerabilities in Russia's recruitment

Regardless of the motivations for joining Russia's war, as discussed above, most fighters experienced exploitative conditions after they joined the army.

Exploitative working conditions for foreign nationals employed in the security sector, beyond Russia is a well-known phenomenon in the literature. Foreign nationals employed by American private military and security companies (PMSCs) and their subcontractors have experienced passport confiscation, inflated payment promises and misleading information about the nature of their work. In some cases, recruits pay prohibitive recruitment fees, leaving them trapped in debt (Eichler, 2014). Also ex-militias from Sierra Leone faced misleading promised conditions, unmet salary expectations and what they describe as slave-like condition after deploying to do security jobs in Iraq, protecting American bases (Mynster Christensen, 2016).

Similar patterns stood out from our interviews with the PoWs, revealing three overall categories of exploitation of foreign fighters: bondage caused by debt, misleading promised working conditions, and threats and violence.

Bondage caused by debt

Several fighters reported borrowing money from family and friends to cover the costs of the trip, health insurance, and visa fees required to enter Russia, indicating the onset of indebtedness. Some fighters explained how they found themselves in a condition of economic bondage, caused by debt: 'I didn't have any funds to pull myself out of the army or go back home' (Hari).

One fighter explains that before he signed a contract with the MoD, he worked hard in Russia to pay off the bank loan he took for coming to Russia; however, when his visa expired and he didn't have money to extend it, he still did not want to return home without savings: 'If I return home without any money or without any job, I would just be a burden on my family' (Surendra), and therefore he chose to sign a contract with the MoD, as a way to get his Russian passport and be able to stay.

One fighter said that apart from visa and travel expenses, he also had to pay the 'guide' who recruited him for the army and arranged for his travels. The guide was a local national, who worked with the Russian embassy.

Other reports on foreign nationals fighting in Russia have shown that they often have to hire expensive agents, who demand high sums of money to facilitate contacts and the journey to Russia. Recruitment agents in India, United Arabic Emirates (UAE), Nepal and Sri Lanka have charged up to 3,619 USD (Qureshi and Farooquee, 2024). In October 2025, an agent in Kenya was arrested for allegedly trafficking Kenyans to Russia, charging up to 17,600 USD for promised employment in Moscow; upon arrival, recruits were reportedly pressured to join the Russian army. Those unable to pay were subjected to daily penalties, leading to debt spirals that effectively trapped them in the Russian army (Sahara Reporters, 2025).

These accounts point to a precarious and uncertain payment system, where financial vulnerability is both a recruitment tool and a mechanism of retention. They furthermore highlight how the foreign nationals are often vulnerable to exploitation by agents or other intermediaries, who facilitate labour mobility and, at times, sham recruitments.

Misleading promised working conditions

A subset of fighters reported that they were unaware until arriving in Russia that the contracts they had signed would require them to fight on the frontlines. Carlos only realised after arriving at the military base that he had signed a contract with the army, he recalls: 'When I realised that I was going to war, I panicked'. Another fighter signed a contract in Russian, 'expecting to work within, a kind of security, perhaps cultivation, or some work inside of Russia, not on the front line since I didn't speak the language' (Abdullah).

Also, fighters who knowingly signed a contract with the Russian army reported misrepresentation of the promised working conditions. As Prem explains: 'My friends told me that this job is going to be like a security guard. The real Russians will report to the front line, and we will just protect camps as if we were security guards'.

The interviewees also reported a significant discrepancy between the compensation promised and the actual wages received once deployed: 'They [recruiters] told us that we would earn about 7,000 USD. But then it turned out to be a lie' (Abdullah).

This overstatement of pay and misleading promised conditions highlights a recurring pattern of misinformation and unmet expectations, which further compounds the vulnerability of recruited fighters. Matilda Gillis (2025) describes the group of fighters, who arrives in Russia not knowing that they are to take part in the conflict, as 'forced fighters'. She presents the argument that under international human rights law, they "might be classified as victims of servitude and/or human trafficking" (Gillis, 2025: 714). She concludes this based both on the deceiving promises during recruitment, and because of the threats and violence many of them report about.

Threats and violence

Some fighters' testimonies underlined the abuse of vulnerabilities they faced, for example, when their passports and personal belongings were taken away from them. José says that upon arriving at a training camp close to the Ukrainian border, 'they took my passport, they took my telephone, they took all my documents.... It made me feel like a prisoner'.

Other fighters experienced threats and violence, for example, when they tried to cancel their contract as they learned that they were to be sent to the frontline. Hamza tried several times to cancel the contract he had initially signed with the MoD: 'The first time I tried, they said no, this was before going to the camp. At the camp, I asked again, but they put a rifle directly at my chest and said: "Well, this is your cancellation".

If you want, you can cancel. Okay. It's a threat. The third time, it was pretty much "if you do this, we'll kill you". Don't try to run'. Despite the violent message, Hamza ends the sentence with a slight, unimpressed smile as he looks straight at me. I glance down at my notepad, and when I look back up, he is still looking directly at me. As our eyes meet, he smiles and raises his eyebrows.

Other reports confirm these types of threats. In interviews with foreign national fighters who managed to escape the Russian army, the Africa Report also documents accounts of constant threats and being forced to watch 'videos of people who had tried to flee, executed in horrible ways' (Olivier and Plumey Bobo, 2024).

These findings suggest that the conditions surrounding their recruitment reflect vulnerabilities that are commonly associated with coercive or exploitative labour practices. These testimonies underscore the need for closer scrutiny of Russia's recruitment mechanisms and the broader structural inequalities that enable such practices.

The interviews in Ukrainian PoW camps show that rather than 'falling in love with its [Russia's] culture and traditions' (Telegram: African Initiative/9642, 2025), as Russian propaganda suggests, foreign nationals express other motivations to travel to Russia to fight. Economic hardship, unemployment and limited prospects in their home countries often drive their decisions to enlist. Russia's marketisation of military work and offers of citizenship attracted fighters, who are willing to trade military service for a Russian passport, and who, due to increasingly tight anti-migration measures in western countries have fewer options to migrate. The passport is seen as a gateway to secure a life in Russia, or as a possibility to migrate to Europe from Russia. Importantly, some claim that the conditions of the transaction were unknown to them before arriving in Russia.

Having been motivated by hopes for a better future for themselves and their families, once in Russia, many find themselves trapped, with no possibility of leaving the military. This dynamic illustrates how global push-and-pull factors – such as poverty, lack of employment and restricted mobility – drive individuals to engage in military labour. The pursuit of a passport is not merely symbolic; it reflects a broader system in which citizenship is militarised and labour commodified, reinforcing exploitative recruitment practices and deepening global disparities.

Russian prisoners of war line up before dinner at a POW camp in Western Ukraine in late September 2023.
Photo: Alexander Khrebet/ The Kyiv Independent.

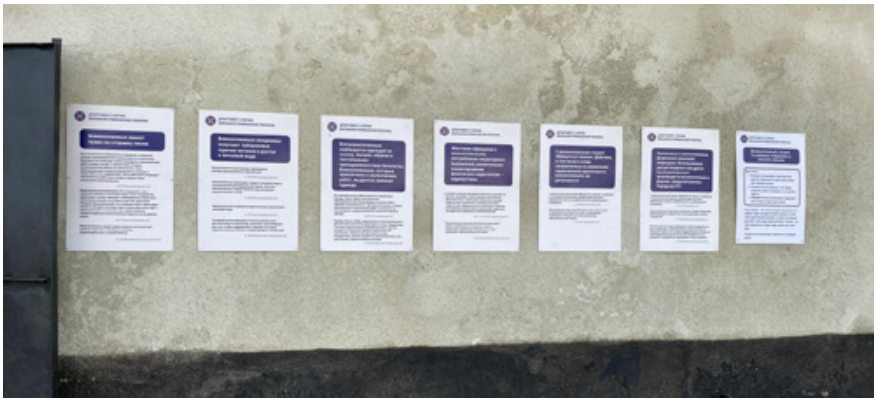
REFLECTIONS AFTER LEAVING THE CAMP

As I exit the camps for the last time, I say goodbye to R and the others. Soon I am in the city of Lviv, getting ready to cross the border to Poland. I reflect on Ukraine's position in the war, their approach to PoWs and the Ukrainian authorities' role in my visit to the camp.

The Geneva Conventions seemed omnipresent. They were the conditions under which I was allowed to enter the camp in the first place. The camp authorities demonstrated adherence to international humanitarian law – R, for example, during my tour of the prison facilities, pointed out how the food portions and the number of daily meals are regulated by the Geneva Conventions. The salary PoWs earn from work is also mandated in the Geneva Conventions. And Geneva Conventions posters are hanging in the PoWs' living area in the camp.

I cannot help but think that adhering to the conventions is also an important part of Ukraine's political narrative and self-understanding.

A month later, back in Copenhagen, I conduct an online interview with a representative of Khochu Zhit. We discuss reports of Russia's treatment of Ukrainian PoWs, who return home with experiences of hunger, torture and months spent in darkness with



Geneve Conventions posters in the Camp. Photo: Karen Philippa Larsen, 24 April 2025.

no possibility of contacting their families (Amnesty International, 2025). When I ask how he feels about the stark contrast between the conditions of the PoWs on the two sides, he replies:

> Personally, I never connect those two things. I don't think that if they violate the Geneva Conventions, if they torture PoWs, then we should do the same. I don't think like that. It's not even rational – from a rational perspective it would be very bad for Ukraine, because Ukraine declares itself a European state, sharing humanitarian values, following the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law.… If we acted like them, then for our allies – the EU, the US – it would look incomprehensible. So even pragmatically, we can't do that. But for me, above all, they are still human beings.
>
> (Representative of Khochu Zhit, 'Khochu Zhit', 17 June 2025, Online).

Beyond an indication of his humanitarianism, his comments also reflect Ukraine's effort to align itself politically with Europe and the United States. Demonstrating adherence to the Geneva Conventions becomes a way for Ukraine to affirm its European identity, and a way to distance itself from Russia as the illiberal 'other'. In this context, the PoWs inevitably become part of Ukraine's political narratives constructing Ukraine for a Western and European audience, by adhering to a more humane approach to PoW treatment as opposed to the approach by Russia.

Commodification continues

Ukraine's focus on the Geneva Conventions plays a role in the ongoing battle of narratives. By insisting that detained Russian soldiers are PoWs, Ukraine asserts not only compliance with international law but also the fundamental nature of the conflict: Ukraine is fighting a war against Russia. This is in direct opposition to Russia's official narrative of a 'special military operation'. The transparency Ukraine is showing in allowing media and researchers into the camps supports Ukraine's political narrative by demonstrating adherence to international humanitarian law; in addition, this transparency is also intended to improve the conditions for Ukrainian PoWs held in Russia. In an interview, the representative from Khochu Zhit remarks that after Ukraine started showing the conditions under which the PoWs live in Ukraine: 'Our PoWs, returned in exchanges in autumn and winter 2022, said that at first the detention centres had awful conditions – materially, not even mentioning the attitude of staff and guards. Later, in some penal colonies where Ukrainian PoWs are held in Russia, they started renovating, improving conditions, giving more food'. He connects the transparency of the conditions in Ukraine with slight improvements in the conditions for Ukrainian PoWs in Russia. Russia's insistence that the war with Ukraine is a 'special military operation' assumes the Geneva Conventions are not relevant, and there are no PoWs: captured Ukrainian soldiers are treated as terrorists, a point reiterated by President Vladimir Putin in March 2025 (Kremlin, 2025).

The disparity of narratives between Russia's denial of having PoWs and Ukraine's insistence on their legal status also shapes how detained soldiers are understood and used within the broader wartime system. It is within this politicised landscape that another form of commodification emerges.

Another layer of commodification meets the fighters once they are captured in Ukraine. Throughout the fieldwork in Ukraine, PoWs were frequently described in terms of their exchange value. One Russian PoW, whether foreign national or Russian citizen, was framed as equivalent to one Ukrainian soldier held in Russian captivity. This was articulated explicitly in an interview with a representative from Khochu Zhit: 'All Russian PoWs are an opportunity, a chance to return Ukrainians from Russian captivity through exchange… there are no such Russian PoWs [foreigner or Russian] … that we would not be ready to return to Russia in exchange for Ukrainians. For us, bringing back our people is more important' (Representative of Khochu Zhit, 'Khochu Zhit', 17 June 2025, Online).

This dynamic underscores how the bodies of foreign nationals are not only instrumentalised during recruitment but continue to be instrumentalised within the logic of wartime negotiations and prisoner exchanges. It reflects a troubling extension of market logics into the realm of human life, where individuals are valued not for their rights or dignity, but for their utility in geopolitical bargaining. Prisoners of war exchanges have a long history as an integral part of warfare, and the case of non-Russian PoWs in Ukrainian captivity underlines how PoWs remain a form of currency, in this case in blue and white uniforms, traded within the wider architecture of war.

PoW walking in the living area of the PoW camp, 2025.
PoW camp in Western Ukraine. Photo: Karen Philippa Larsen

CONCLUSION

Beyond the trenches, the cities devastated by years of fighting, and the drones at the frontlines, global structures of economic inequality driving incentives for high-risk mobility, along with the marketisation of citizenship, continue to sustain Russia's war in Ukraine. By examining two dimensions of Russian recruitment of foreign nationals, i.e., the Alabuga Start project and the involvement of foreign nationals fighting on the frontlines, this report illustrates what the war in Ukraine looks like from the perspective of places, people and political economies that rarely make the headlines, yet help sustain a grinding conflict now entering its fifth year.

The report highlights how the entanglement of labour migration, propaganda and warfare must be understood in close relation to the geopolitical, economic and digital global ecosystems that create and reinforce inequalities and vulnerabilities among workers and fighters, primarily in the Global South. Foreign nationals travel to Russia only to encounter unfulfilled economic promises and working conditions that diverge sharply from recruitment narratives. The marketisation of military labour and the transactional exchange of service for citizenship underscore the neoliberal market tendencies shaping global labour systems and driving the commodification of human labour.

These same systems leave foreign nationals in Russia with little bargaining power to improve the transaction in their favour. Russia is currently simultaneously managing two contradictory dynamics: an intensifying anti-migration sentiment leading to stricter migration regulations (Yudina, 2024), and an increasing demand for labour within its military industry and armed forces, prompting the marketisation of citizenship and the simplification of procedures for granting it to migrants soldiers who fight on the frontlines. These opposing trends leave migrants in Russia few viable options other than joining the country's army or the adjacent military industry.

This forms part of a broader trend of migration restrictions across Europe and the United States. Opportunities for labour migration to the EU have become increasingly constrained due to tightened anti-migration policies, thereby creating a vacuum that Russia has exploited to attract workers seeking employment and economic stability for themselves and their families.

Many of the fighters interviewed for this report had already spent years working abroad, for example in Dubai, the US, Australia and Malaysia, which made enlistment in the Russian army seem like a continuation of their labour migration trajectory. Several cited previous failed attempts to secure employment elsewhere. As Surendra explained: 'I tried to go to Japan first. I tried to go to the Netherlands as well. I didn't get accepted to go to those countries…. After being rejected from many countries, I just wanted to leave'. Similarly, Mohammed reflected on his childhood dreams of migrating westwards: 'Since I was a child, I was dreaming about going to Europe or the US'. He added, 'I tried to migrate to Serbia and from there to the Netherlands, but I didn't succeed because I didn't have the money for that'. As argued by Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde and Lucht (Vammen et al., 2022), the EU's efforts to tighten border controls push migrants onto more perilous routes and reorient mobility towards new south–east and south–south pathways, and, as these testimonies suggest, towards new migration destinations.

Russia has intensified its online recruitment campaigns targeting foreign nationals to fight its war with Ukraine. As Russia expands these efforts, and as the EU and the United States continue to reinforce anti-migration measures, the need for more data to ascertain the effectiveness of counter-influencing measures increases. Hence, understanding what measures against online recruitment of a foreign industrial workforce are effective becomes paramount, as does investigating if reduced recruitment potential simply evolves into other accounts or campaigns, or moves into non-public forums. In the context of this report, particularly the EU awareness-raising campaigns about migrant decision-making, are relevant for further analysis.

In light of this, a finding from the interviews conducted for this report is worth repeating: improvement of PoW conditions appears to be attributed to reporting on them openly. This is an example of an essential information campaign.

Russia's recruitment of foreign nationals for its military industry and frontline fighting relies on the complex interplay between online and offline recruitment mechanisms. Additionally, it is crucial to pay attention to how local conditions of conflict, persecution, unemployment, food insecurity as well as various forms of debt, lead people to move across borders and to seek out precarious working conditions. For Denmark and its EU partners, the findings of this report call for a coordinated response that extends beyond immediate security measures. Addressing Russia's offline and online recruitment of foreign nationals requires tackling the underlying socioeconomic vulnerabilities that Russia exploits, including the global inequalities that make such recruitment strategies effective.

Policy-makers should also consider how Denmark and the EU engage in the information domain to raise awareness among civil society, the media, and potential migrant workers about the risks of exploitation. Responses should strike a balance between counter-disinformation efforts and broader policies that address the structural drivers of labour migration.

One possible approach could involve facilitating safe and regulated migration pathways by supporting partner countries in monitoring exploitative labour flows and developing legal frameworks that hold intermediaries and states accountable. Such measures would help mitigate the risks posed by Russia's recruitment strategies while reinforcing Denmark's and the EU's commitment to international security, global stability and human rights.

NOTES

1 Russia's migration administration is centred on the Sakharovo Multi-Function Migration Centre in the Moscow region. A key site where migrants can file applications, register status, and where those facing irregular status may be detained and held pending deportation (Sultanalieva, 2025). Furthermore, in April 2025, Russian president Putin ordered the creation of the Service for Citizenship and Registration of Foreign Citizens, under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (The Moscow Times, 2025). The service provides migration processing in major cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Kazan, Krasnoyarsk and Sochi as the primary institutional points for migrant registration, monitoring, enforcement and removal procedures.

2 The following Telegram channels are used by Alabuga operators to promote and recruit the programme: Alabuga Start - https://t.me/AlabugaStart, 🪆 РУССКИЙ ДОМ в Банги 🇷🇺🇨🇫 Maison Russe RCA 🪆 - https://t.me/1905296403, VD:Розвідка Ворога - https://t.me/1844313985, RusAfr Россия-Африка - https://t.me/1777293384, Rusafroclub - https://t.me/1645638789

3 Mohamed A. Zubeyr på X: "Excited to share that the 'Alabuga Start' program is now open to ambitious young Somali girls following my engagements. This initiative offers career tracks in various fields, enabling participants to relocate to Russia & build successful futures. A golden opportunity for growth! https://t.co/uQlWhxdQcr" / X

4 https://www.facebook.com/1198471512077851

5 https://twitter.com/sezalabuga/status/1925436840414183439

6 Link to RusAfroclub Telegram channel https://t.me/rusafroclub/8064?single

7 Link to RusAfroclub Telegram channel https://t.me/rusafroclub/6462

8 https://twitter.com/sezalabuga/status/1779766172843417896

9 https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php? story_fbid=pfbid0wRPVMgB7t69meje3x HAjQc77JEv7DUD3Y8ftnJErTy2qT5mfSGvLUkS7VqMoBFxel&id=100076322363390

10 https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid032sSTz2vKnxQqn5tULaxf ge5xuG4o17TpVQj7MerHhCUGk9AVEiu7TKNuzUzjSxmYl&id=100076322363390

11 The TikTok accounts of these influencers were banned from the platform before BLOOM was able to collect them, so the only evidence is the screenshots provided by BLOOM.

12 BLOOM's collection start was too late to capture these posts.

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