



ANTI-SCAM NETWORK

Countering Russian recruitment in Africa and beyond

by
Rossella Marangio

Russia is no longer recruiting just mercenaries for its war machine in Ukraine; it is also recruiting vulnerable job seekers. Across Africa and elsewhere, young people looking for a better future are being lured into Russia's war economy through fake jobs and false promises of scholarships, citizenship or high salaries. According to the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Russia is [estimated](#) to have recruited more than 28 000 foreign nationals from 135 countries, including [3 000 Africans](#), notably from Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon and Ghana. Ukraine has developed awareness-raising initiatives and launched the '[I Want to Live!](#)' [project](#) to offer pathways for disengagement for combatants fighting in the ranks of the Russian army.

The EU should establish an anti-scam network linking Ukraine, African partners and civil society to prevent, expose and disrupt Russia's deceptive

recruitment schemes. The network would protect vulnerable individuals and strengthen accountability through intelligence-sharing, victim support and law enforcement cooperation. As current responses remain fragmented, the proposed anti-scam network would connect these efforts into a single operational ecosystem. Its added value would lie in advancing the shared interests of African countries and societies, Ukraine and the EU.

Idea

Russia needs more people to feed both its war effort and its wartime economy, and it is increasingly looking abroad to find them. It exploits unemployment and other drivers of migration, weak consular protection in countries of origin, and information gaps to recruit foreign nationals. Many recruits are reportedly enticed by promises of jobs or education through locally embedded transnational networks that spread disinformation. Once in Russia they discover that they have instead been recruited to fight on the frontline or work in [drone factories](#). The Kremlin's denial of involvement in this recruitment process is not credible.

As Russia faces growing manpower shortages, it is likely to double down on recruitment beyond its borders. African countries, meanwhile, risk seeing their citizens exploited and trafficked

through fraudulent recruitment schemes that often cost them their lives.

For Ukraine, disrupting these networks has the potential to reduce Russia's pool of recruits and damage its credibility by exposing the coercive nature of its war effort. For the EU, helping achieve these goals advances its own strategic interests: in addition to empowering Ukraine and countering Russian influence, it would also help deepen partnerships with African countries and civil society. At the same time, it would protect vulnerable individuals and establish new avenues for cooperation in disrupting criminal networks, including those linked to irregular migration to the EU and other forms of organised crime.

Impetus

The EU should establish an anti-scam network bringing together Ukraine, African governments, civil society organisations, diaspora communities, labour agencies, journalists and digital platforms. Working together, these actors would identify, expose and disrupt deceptive recruitment schemes sustaining Russia's army and war economy, while offering safe channels for victims and their families to seek help.

The core aim should be to distinguish mercenaries from potential victims of deception, coercion or economic exploitation. This distinction matters and evidence should be gathered through cooperation between countries of origin and Ukraine when African nationals are captured or surrender. Such cooperation pathways can generate actionable intelligence, facilitate the prosecution of those behind the recruitment scams, and raise public awareness.

The network should operate on three levels. The first is *prevention*: public campaigns in local languages, school and university briefings, alerts through labour offices, outreach to diaspora communities, and the moderation of online recruitment advertisements. Targeted campaigns in local languages can warn young people about fake job offers, bogus scholarships, and military-linked contracts.

The second is *protection*: confidential reporting, case verification, legal counselling, family liaison, and repatriation support. Safe reporting mechanisms would improve the detection of recruitment scams. Hotlines, WhatsApp channels, embassy focal points, and civil society

organisations can collect reports from families without exposing them to retaliation or prosecution.

The third is *accountability*: evidence-sharing with national police and law enforcement agencies with the support of Europol and INTERPOL. Mapping recruitment patterns and networks, intermediaries, travel routes and online tactics would help dismantle these schemes and make them harder to operate.

Together, these efforts would strengthen resilience, improve protection and increase deterrence. In addition, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR)-inspired programmes could encourage defections by people already trapped in Russia or in Ukrainian territories currently under Russian occupation. Safe corridors should be created to enable those who choose to leave to do so securely.

Instruments

Ukraine is already raising awareness of Russian deceptive recruitment tactics and providing information on safe surrender options. Building on these efforts, the EU could launch a pilot initiative with Ukraine and a small group of willing African partners, prioritising countries such as Kenya, Ghana and South Africa where recruitment cases have already been documented. The EU and African countries already cooperate in the security sector, especially in the fight against organised crime through INTERPOL and Europol. Existing frameworks could therefore be expanded to include this component and foster coordination through enhanced intelligence sharing and cooperation among law enforcement and judicial authorities in Africa, the EU and Ukraine. In addition, cooperation with both governments and civil society could help gather evidence, expose recruitment networks and raise public awareness.

A dedicated rapid response fund could finance key elements of the network, including civil society awareness campaigns, a secure reporting platform, standard operating procedures for repatriation, and targeted sanctions against recruiters and facilitators. The costs would be modest compared with the consequences of inaction: continued recruitment, more deaths, heightened diplomatic friction, and the further spread of Russia's coercive influence.