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REPORT

# CUBA IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Evidence of Mass Recruitment  
of Combatants for Russia

Carolina Barrero

# Imprint

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# Executive Summary

This report documents the massive participation of Cuban combatants in Russia's war against Ukraine, presenting evidence from multiple intelligence sources, international media, and direct testimonies. Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate officially confirms at least 1,076 Cuban citizens fighting for Russia, with 96 confirmed dead or missing. Intelligence estimates place the actual number between 5,000 and 25,000 combatants, positioning Cuba as one of the largest providers of foreign fighters to Russia, comparable only to North Korea.

The report reveals two parallel recruitment flows: approximately 60% of civilian workers deceived with false promises of construction employment, and 40% of military and intelligence personnel deliberately deployed. Recruits are attracted by the extreme economic disparity: monthly salaries of \$2,000 versus the Cuban average of \$17. Once in Russia, they sign contracts in a language they do not understand, receive barely two weeks of training, and are sent to the most exposed positions on the front, with an average life expectancy of 140-150 days after signing their contracts.

The United States Department of State has formally classified this operation as state-sponsored human trafficking

in its 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report. The evidence documents systematic deception in recruitment, coercion through contracts that cannot be broken under threat of imprisonment, and exploitation by sending recruits to combat zones without adequate preparation. The documented participation of Colonel Mónica Milián Gómez, military attaché of the Cuban Embassy in Moscow, and the facilitation of direct flights from Cuban airports contradict official denials by the Havana regime.

The report situates this operation in the historical context of Cuba's tradition of deploying military forces in foreign conflicts (Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua), but identifies crucial differences: current participation is officially denied, combatants do not go under the Cuban flag, and their families receive no recognition or compensation. This plausible deniability allows Cuba to maintain diplomatic relations with both sides while providing Russia with a critical resource without the political cost of mobilizing more Russian citizens.

For Europe, the report identifies four critical dimensions: (1) Security: returning veterans with knowledge of modern warfare can transfer tactics to other authoritarian actors; (2) Policy coherence: the EU maintains normal relations with Cuba while sanctioning

Russia, undermining its own position; (3) Normative precedent: allowing human trafficking for military purposes without consequences establishes a dangerous precedent for authoritarian regimes; (4) Legal obligations: under international protocols, economic support to regimes involved in human trafficking may constitute a violation.

The report concludes that the evidence builds a compelling case of Cuban state complicity in a large-scale human

trafficking operation, and presents policy options for Europe: targeted economic sanctions, formal designation of Cuba as a state complicit in aggression, coordinated diplomatic pressure, and suspension of trade and cooperation agreements. The central question is whether Europe will maintain coherence between its rhetoric of support for Ukraine and its policies toward regimes that actively facilitate Russian aggression.

# Introduction

When the first images began to circulate in the summer of 2023, many received them with skepticism. Videos of young men speaking Spanish in Russian military hospitals, photographs of Cuban passports found on the frontlines in Donetsk, testimonies of soldiers claiming to have been deceived with promises of construction work. It seemed almost implausible: Cuba, the small Caribbean nation that for decades presented itself as a victim of U.S. imperialism, sending mercenaries to support Putin's imperial invasion of Ukraine?

Two years later, the evidence accumulated by Ukrainian military intelligence, documented by first-tier international media such as CBS News, The Kyiv Independent, CNN and TIME Magazine, and partially confirmed even by

officials of the Russian government itself, presents a disturbing panorama that demands Europe's attention. This is not about dozens or hundreds of combatants. Maryan Zablotsky, member of the Ukrainian Parliament, has declared that *"the number of Cuban troops will reach at least 25,000, becoming the number one contingent of foreign troops in Russia"*<sup>1</sup>, surpassing even the North Korean contingent.

To understand the magnitude of what is occurring, it is necessary to methodically examine the available evidence, from recruitment mechanisms to the geopolitical implications of an operation that, according to all indications, has the active complicity of the Cuban government.

# 1. How many Cubans are fighting? The profile and motivations of combatants

The most conservative estimate comes from Ukrainian military intelligence itself. Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR) has officially confirmed that at least 1,076 Cuban citizens have fought or are fighting for Russia in Ukraine, with 96 confirmed dead or missing in combat<sup>2</sup>. This figure, however, represents only the cases that have been verified with complete documentation: names, passports, signed contracts.

Estimates based on signals intelligence and other sources suggest significantly higher numbers. An internal cable from the U.S. State Department, seen by Reuters, placed the number of Cubans fighting in Ukraine at around 5,000. In September 2025, during a national security briefing in Washington, Andriy Yusov, spokesman for Ukrainian military intelligence, stated that *"at least 20,000 people from Cuba have filled out documents and have been recruited to fight for Russia"*<sup>3</sup>. **CBS News reported that Ukrainian officials estimate that up to 20,000 Cubans have been recruited by Russia<sup>4</sup>. The highest projection, cited by Maryan Zablotskyy, member of the Ukrainian Parliament, speaks of 25,000 combatants<sup>5</sup>.**

Even taking the most conservative figure of 5,000, Cuba would position itself as one of the largest providers of foreign fighters to Russia, comparable only to North Korea.

The profile that emerges from Ukrainian intelligence analysis and interviews with captured combatants is consistent. The average age of Cuban mercenaries is 35 years, and many of the recruits live in poverty and desperately need money. The average monthly salary of a Cuban state worker is equivalent to \$15<sup>6</sup>, while Russian contracts promise monthly payments equivalent to just over \$2,000<sup>7</sup>.

**The marked economic disparity – given that the offered salary exceeds the average monthly income in Cuba by more than one hundred times – explains why thousands of Cubans accept what is presented to them as an employment opportunity in Russia.**

The average monthly salary in Cuba is 4,219 Cuban pesos, approximately \$17 dollars on the informal market<sup>8</sup>. For an average Cuban, the promise of \$2,000 monthly is not simply attractive, it is the difference between survival and desperation.

## 1. How many Cubans are fighting? The profile and motivations of combatants

However, the composition of the Cuban contingent reveals something more complex than simple economic migration. **Ukrainian intelligence sources estimate that approximately 60% are civilian workers deceived with false promises of employment, while around 40% are special forces personnel from the Cuban regime's intelligence services. This division suggests two parallel flows: one of economic desperation, another of deliberate military deployment.**

Evidence of Cuban military personnel participation is particularly revealing. The case of Yusbel González Turcas, 52 years old, currently detained in Kyiv, who worked as a security consultant at

a state computer club and has multiple entries to Moscow stamped in his Cuban passport, suggests links with the regime. Multiple trips to Moscow before being captured in combat do not correspond to the pattern of a deceived civilian worker seeking an economic opportunity.

**Mortality among these combatants is devastating. According to Andriy Yusov, foreign fighters from Cuba die, on average, between 140 and 150 days after signing their contracts with Russia. Less than five months of life expectancy. This statistic suggests that Cubans are being deployed in the most exposed positions on the front, functioning as disposable assault troops<sup>9</sup>.**



## 2. The recruitment of Cuban combatants: Legal and political implications

The recruitment mechanism has been documented in detail by multiple sources. Ukrainian intelligence indicates that some Cuban citizens are deceived into traveling to Russia after being lured by promises of lucrative construction jobs advertised on social media, especially on Facebook, YouTube and TikTok The<sup>10</sup>. TIME Magazine, in an investigation published in September 2023, documented that advertisements soliciting Russian military service began to appear in Facebook groups for Cuban expatriates in Moscow, posted primarily by a woman named Elena Shuvalova, a young Russian woman who spoke fluent Spanish and had built a reputation as a trusted travel agent<sup>11</sup>.

Shuvalova's operation was not marginal. According to a letter written by her lawyer, obtained by Radio Free Europe's investigative unit Systema, Shuvalova recruited more than 3,000 foreigners<sup>12</sup>. A single person, operating primarily through social media, was responsible for recruiting thousands of combatants. In April 2024, Smirnova was arrested and charged with theft after several Cubans claimed she had embezzled money from their bank accounts. Russian court documents reveal she was accused of pocketing the salaries of between 300 and 400 Cuban mercenaries<sup>13</sup>.

But the Smirnova case raises a fundamental question: How could a travel agent operate a recruitment network of this magnitude without official knowledge or support? The answer becomes clearer when examining other pieces of the puzzle. Colonel Mónica Milián Gómez, military attaché of the Cuban Embassy in Moscow, has been identified as one of the coordinators of the recruitment network<sup>14</sup>. **The participation of a high-ranking military officer from the Cuban embassy is difficult to reconcile with the Cuban government's claims that it is unaware of these operations.**

**The journey itself from Cuba to Russia reveals logistical facilitation that would be impossible without at least state acquiescence. Cubans do not need visas to travel to Russia and can take direct flights to Moscow from Cuba's major airports.** Frank Jarrosay, a musician and teacher subsequently captured by Ukrainian forces, recounted that he departed from Juan Gualberto Gómez International Airport in Varadero along with five people he did not know, and upon arriving in Russia went through normal airport procedures. In a country where state control over population movements is strict, where obtaining a permit to move internally from one prov-

## 2. The recruitment of Cuban combatants: Legal and political implications

ince to another can require months of bureaucracy, thousands of military-age men simply take international flights without obstacles.

Once in Russia, the trap closes. Jarrosay described how *“they presented us with a contract in Russian, nobody explained it to us. We signed a paper that we didn’t even know what it was about”*<sup>15</sup>. According to reports, the contracts establish that if recruits attempt to break the agreement, they could receive sentences of up to 15 years in prison for desertion, as if they were Russian citizens<sup>16</sup>. The training they receive is minimal. HUR claims that Cubans receive only two weeks of training at the Avangard center in Moscow oblast before being sent to the front<sup>17</sup>.

The official position of the Cuban government has been contradictory. On September 8, 2023, the Cuban regime arrested 17 individuals, alleging their participation in human trafficking for mercenary recruitment<sup>18</sup>. However, days earlier, Cuba’s ambassador to Moscow was quoted by Russian media saying that Cuba does not oppose the “legal participation” of its citizens in Russia’s special operation in Ukraine<sup>19</sup>. This statement directly contradicted

subsequent declarations from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Havana.

**The contradiction suggests a deliberately ambiguous policy: public denial combined with practical facilitation.** Yusov, the Ukrainian intelligence spokesman, alleged that *“taking into account the totalitarian nature of the Cuban regime, such recruitment could not have occurred without the Cuban regime’s blessing”*<sup>20</sup>.

**The United States Department of State has reached that conclusion. In its 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP 2025), the Department officially classified the recruitment of Cubans for Russia’s war in Ukraine as a form of state-sponsored trafficking.** This designation is not rhetorical; it is a legal category with specific implications under international law. For an operation to qualify as human trafficking under international protocols, it must involve deception, coercion, and exploitation. The evidence documents all three elements: deception in recruitment (promises of civilian work), coercion (contracts that cannot be broken under threat of imprisonment), and exploitation (sending to combat zones with minimal training, withholding of salaries)<sup>21</sup>.

### 3. Truths and falsehoods of combat: Testimonies from the front

The testimonies of Cuban combatants provide the most direct evidence of how this system functions. Frank Darío Jarrosay Manfugá, 35 years old, is the best documented case. A musician, resident of Guantánamo, industrial engineer graduated from the University of Guantánamo Jarrosay had abandoned teaching to dedicate himself to music, seeking to improve his economic situation. Seeing a post on his phone promising a work trip to Russia, Jarrosay saw an opportunity: *“For a Cuban, going to another country to work is more than an achievement. My goal was to help my family advance”*<sup>22</sup>.

He was immediately transferred to a military base in Rostov, where there were other Cubans, all deceived. *“They presented us with a contract in Russian. Nobody explained it to us. We signed a paper that we didn’t even know what it was about. We were thinking about the work form we had filled out in Cuba”*. From Rostov he was sent to Donetsk and from there to the front. *“At no time did we know we had to go to war, do you understand? We came to do masonry work. They gave us a contract in Russian that we didn’t understand... When you realize it, you’re in a bunker firing”*<sup>23</sup>.

Jarrosay, who is colorblind and does not see well at night, got lost during a night mission to move a battery. The Russian soldier accompanying him abandoned him. He walked through a minefield without suffering injuries and stumbled into a Ukrainian trench, where he was captured. From his prison in Ukraine, Jarrosay has given multiple interviews. His most revealing statement: *“In my mind there is no guilt. I have not killed anyone. I never touched a weapon. I am not a mercenary even though they consider me one”*<sup>24</sup>. **And more strikingly: Jarrosay said he prefers to spend 50 years in a Ukrainian prison than return to Cuba.**

The case of two 19-year-olds, Alex Vega and Andorf Velásquez, was one of the first to become public. Speaking from a military hospital in Kaliningrad, they recounted that they had traveled to Russia *“to make some money,”* a trip arranged by a trio of women: two Russians, one Cuban. Upon arriving in Moscow they were forced to sign a contract in Russian that they did not understand<sup>25</sup>. Their interview on a popular Cuban YouTube program went viral. They said that when they realized they were being sent to fight, they asked to return to Cuba

### 3. Truths and falsehoods of combat: Testimonies from the front

and were denied. *“There are dead Cubans, there are missing Cubans, and this will not end until the war ends. We know Cuba is aware and our advice to Cubans is not to come here”*<sup>26</sup>.

Not all were fortunate enough to be captured or wounded. Ukrainian officials have presented a list of 39 confirmed dead Cubans, although they emphasize this figure represents only a portion of actual losses<sup>27</sup>. Individual cases reveal the pattern. Giovanni Gómez Basulto began working at the geominig company in Camagüey in July 2023. In early September, his eldest son announced his death, somewhere between Russia and Ukraine<sup>28</sup>. Denis Frank Pacheco Rubio, resident of Santa Clara, was identified through documents found on the battlefield<sup>29</sup>.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect is the treatment received by families of the dead and missing. Zablotskyy shared a letter from Paola Bermúdez Sabugo pleading for information about her husband who disappeared in January 2025, lamenting that Russia *“will not pay him anything and neither will the Cuban government since unfortunately he is missing in combat, not even for-*

*mally dead”*<sup>30</sup>. A family interviewed by CBS News said their loved one has been missing since November and they have received no money<sup>31</sup>.

**The Russian government is obligated to provide additional compensation in cases of injury or death for its citizens, but this responsibility does not extend to Cuban citizens. As one recruiter explained:** *“When you come here for financial gain, your death is your problem”*<sup>32</sup>. Yusov explained the logic: Russia benefits from using foreign combatants because *“if a foreigner dies, there are no social payments and no responsibility... there are no relatives inside Russia who are unhappy with the war”*<sup>33</sup>.

Fed up with humiliation and mistreatment, Cuban soldiers from the 428th regiment, based in Donetsk, carried out an operation to kill their own regiment commander. According to reports from the rebel group ATESH, after the incident, the mercenaries were transferred to Rostov<sup>34</sup>. This extraordinary act of armed rebellion against a Russian officer suggests both the brutality of conditions and the prior military experience of at least some of the Cuban combatants.

## 4. Military and intelligence cooperation on Cuban territory

### Historical and current context

To fully understand Cuban participation in Ukraine, it is necessary to situate it in the broader context of military relations between Cuba and Russia, and beyond that, in Cuba's tradition of deploying military forces in foreign conflicts.

**Cuba's history of sending troops abroad is long and not entirely well documented.** On November 5, 1975, in response to an urgent call from the Angolan government, Cuba launched Operation Carlota. This military intervention mission that Cuba strategically called "*internationalist solidarity*" lasted more than fifteen years. More than 400,000 soldiers, teachers, doctors, engineers and Cuban workers served in Angola in various capacities. More than 2,000 Cubans lost their lives<sup>35</sup>. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Cuba expanded its military presence abroad, with deployments reaching 50,000 troops in Angola, 24,000 in Ethiopia, 1,500 in Nicaragua, and hundreds more elsewhere. This proves the consistently imperialist and warlike nature of the Cuban regime throughout its history, of which Ukraine is no exception.

However, there are crucial differences between those official missions and the current operation. The interventions in Angola and Ethiopia were presented

openly. The soldiers were regular troops of the Cuban army, deployed under the Cuban flag, with official logistical support. When they died, the Cuban State recognized them as fallen, their families received recognition, although frequently little subsequent material support, and returning veterans had official status, though many ended up abandoned and in poverty.

In contrast, participation in Ukraine is officially denied by Havana. Cuban combatants do not go under the Cuban flag, there is no economic obligation to their families by not recognizing their disappearance, death or veteran status. **The Cuban government claims to be unaware of their presence, or alternatively, that they are citizens acting individually. This plausible deniability allows Cuba to maintain formal diplomatic relations with both sides of the conflict, while simultaneously providing Russia with a critical resource: bodies to absorb devastating Russian losses without the internal political cost of mobilizing more Russian citizens.**

The military and intelligence cooperation infrastructure between Russia and Cuba provides the context for this operation. The Lourdes SIGINT facility, located near Havana, was the largest fa-

#### 4. Military and intelligence cooperation on Cuban territory

cility of its kind operated by Soviet and Russian intelligence services outside Russia, located less than 150 km from Key West, covering 73 km<sup>2</sup>. Raúl Castro, as Cuban defense minister, boasted to journalists in April 1994 that 75 percent of Russia's strategic intelligence flowed through the Lourdes SIGINT facility.

Putin officially closed Lourdes in 2001, but in July 2014, there were reports of new secret agreements between Cuba and Russia to reopen the radioelectronic center. After popular protests in Cuba in 2020-2021, General Andrei Gushchin was assigned to serve in Havana, heading a group of military specialists in Cuba<sup>36</sup>. Gushchin is no ordinary diplomat; he commanded Russian marines in Syria in 2016.

**The Chinese dimension adds another layer of complexity. China reactivated Lourdes as well as three other intelligence stations in Cuba in 2019<sup>37</sup>.** In

May 2025, the U.S. House of Representatives National Security Committee held a hearing to examine Chinese surveillance infrastructure in Cuba.

**Cuba, 90 miles from Florida, has become a joint Russian-Chinese intelligence platform directed against the United States and, with strong implications for NATO<sup>38</sup>.**

In May 2024, Miguel Díaz-Canel publicly expressed his support for Russia's "*special military operation*" during a conference with Vladimir Putin. During that meeting, the Cuban president declared: "*We wish success to the Russian Federation in the special military operation*," using the Kremlin's euphemism to refer to the war, and added that Russia could always count on Cuba's support. The visit took place as part of the celebrations of the 79th anniversary of the Soviet victory in World War II.

## 5. Why should Europe care?

### Implications for transatlantic security

For European readers, the natural question is: why should what Cuba does in Ukraine matter? The answer has multiple dimensions, all with direct implications for European security.

First, there is the security dimension.

**Foreign combatants are receiving training in drone warfare and electronic warfare. Tactics learned in Ukraine could be exported to other conflicts in Europe, Latin America or Asia.** Cubans who survive and return will be veterans of the most technologically advanced war of the 21st century. They will have learned drone warfare tactics, electronic warfare, modern artillery coordination. This knowledge will not disappear. It can be transferred to other actors of the authoritarian axis: Venezuela, Nicaragua, insurgent groups in Latin America, or even back to Cuba to strengthen its security and internal repression apparatus.

Second, there is the question of policy coherence. Europe has clearly defined its position regarding the Russian invasion: broad sanctions, military support to Kyiv and a policy of welcoming millions of Ukrainians. This line is based on defending the international order and continental stability. However, the European Union maintains normal trade relations with Cuba and avoids applying

sanctions to Havana, despite existing political tensions.

Many European states such as Spain continue to help finance Cuba through credit extensions and debt forgiveness, contributing to financing Putin's strongest ally in the Western Hemisphere. The Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement that the European Union fervently defends also legitimizes the Havana regime, as do many member states including Germany. Every euro that flows to Havana, whether through credits, investment, trade or cooperation funds helps keep afloat a regime that is actively facilitating the supply of combatants to Russia. This discrepancy makes it difficult to sustain a uniform foreign strategy and reduces the effectiveness of European discourse.

Third, there is the normative precedent. If Cuba can send tens of thousands of mercenaries to Russia without facing significant consequences from the international community, what message does this send to other authoritarian regimes? What prevents Nicaragua, Venezuela, or any other member of the authoritarian axis from doing the same in future conflicts? **The normalization of human trafficking for military purposes by states is an extremely dangerous precedent.**



The Ukrainian response has been forceful. Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha explained the decision to close the Ukrainian embassy in Havana: *"We remember the Cuban president's wish for 'success' to Putin in his war of aggression against Ukraine. This year, we decided to close our embassy in Havana and downgrade our diplomatic ties"* Sybiha was explicit: *"Havana's unwillingness to stop the massive deployment of its nationals in Russia's war against Ukraine constitutes complicity in aggression and must be condemned in the strongest terms"*.

Oleksandr Merezhko, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Ukrainian Parliament, declared that Castroism is *"Russia's greatest arm in Latin America"* and that *"the Cuban regime must be recognized in Europe for what it is: a terrorist state"*<sup>39</sup>. This is not empty rhetoric. **If Russia is considered an aggressor state for its invasion of Ukraine, what is the appropriate status for a regime that actively supplies combatants for that invasion?**

The situation raises uncomfortable questions for European policy. Germany, with its strong historical commitment to international law and human rights, must ask itself: Is it sustainable to

maintain normal diplomatic and economic relations with a regime that is attested to be involved in what the U.S. State Department has formally classified as human trafficking for military purposes? **Can Europe continue with the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement with Cuba while simultaneously claiming to be on Ukraine's side?**

Fourth, there is the legal precedent dimension. The U.S. State Department, by formally classifying this operation as state human trafficking, has established a legal framework that Europe can, and must, adopt. Under international protocols against human trafficking, states have obligations not to support, directly or indirectly, regimes that engage in these practices. If this classification is accepted, continued European economic support to Cuba can be seen as a violation of these obligations.

Finally, history offers uncomfortable lessons about the cost of moral inaction. The underlying principle remains: when authoritarian regimes discover they can violate international norms without consequences, their behavior becomes progressively bolder.



## Conclusion

The evidence presented, from multiple sources of Ukrainian intelligence, documentation from first-tier international media, testimonies of captured combatants, and analysis from human rights organisations, builds a compelling case: **Cuba is actively involved in a large-scale operation to supply combatants to Russia for its war in Ukraine and this actor is a threat to European and NATO security.** The scale, measured in thousands or tens of thousands of combatants, goes far beyond what could occur without state knowledge and facilitation. The recruitment mechanisms, documented in detail, show a pattern of systematic deception. The treatment of recruits and their families meets the legal definition of human trafficking.

The situation with Cuba and mercenaries in Ukraine presents a test of Europe's postwar commitment to human rights, international law, and the rules-based order. It is not a distant and irrelevant problem. It is an issue that directly touches the core of what Europe claims

to defend. If Europe continues to maintain normal relations with a regime that is substantiated as facilitating one of the largest human trafficking operations for military purposes since the Cold War, then its claims of support for Ukraine and commitment to human rights are hollow.

**The policy options are clear: targeted economic sanctions against Cuban regime hierarchs, similar to those imposed on Russia; formal designation of Cuba as a state complicit in aggression against Ukraine; coordinated diplomatic pressure; suspension of political, cooperation and trade agreements.** None of these options is without cost, but the cost of inaction, both in terms of lives is greater.

For Europe the question is simple: Whose side are we on? If the answer is on the side of Ukraine, on the side of international law, on the side of human rights, then policy toward Cuba must reflect that position.

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## About the Author



### **Carolina Barrero**

is founding director of Ciudadanía y Libertad (Citizens and Freedom), an organization dedicated to promoting civil and political rights in Cuba. An activist and writer, she works from exile in Spain after being forced to leave Cuba in February 2022. Carolina Barrero participated in the protest movement during 2021 associated with the 27N group and the San Isidro Movement in different protests in Havana that contributed as a spark for the civil uprising of July 2021

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