

Nepali Youths in the Russian Army: A Precarious Path for Nepal's Foreign Policy and National Security

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin of Russia authorized a "Special Military Operation" against Ukraine[1]—a full-scale invasion of the largely unprepared Eastern European country that had had a troubled relationship with the former.[2] As stated by Putin, the sole purpose of the operation against Ukraine is "demilitarization and denazification."[3] However, just over two years since the invasion, more than 10,000 civilians have lost their lives to the conflict,[4] nearly six million have been internally displaced, and eight million have been forced to flee to neighboring countries,[5] in addition to over 315,000 Russian troops either killed or injured[6] and 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers who have been killed, according to President Zelensky.[7] A particularly harrowing, and perhaps surprising, report on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is Russia's recruitment of youths from Nepal—a peaceful, south Asian country landlocked between India and China thousands of miles away from the conflict.

Russia's private military organization Wagner had been recruiting foreign nationals to fight in the Russia-Ukraine war, offering them "bumped-up salaries" and other incentives; however, the recruits primarily hailed from Latin America and Europe,[8] and the presence of Nepali youths in the Wagner mercenary group was probably either nil or negligible.[9] When Russia's military strength started to wane due to its declining size and a struggling mobilization, forcing it to lose the gained territories, Putin took some unconventional measures to replenish the army. A significant move was the announcement of partial mobilization on September 21, 2022, to call up "only military reservists, primarily those who served in the armed forces and have specific military occupational specialties and corresponding experience."[10] More concerning were the decrees that encouraged foreign nationals to join the Russian Army.

Putin's Decrees Facilitating the Recruitment of Foreign Nationals in the Russian Army

On September 31, 2022, Putin signed an executive order to simplify the procedure "for granting Russian citizenship to foreign nationals who have signed a contract to serve in the Russian Armed Forces."[11] According to the decree:

> *"…foreigners who have signed a contract for service in the Russian Armed Forces, other troops or military formations for at least one year, as well as those who are*

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[1] https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/
[2] https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine
[3] https://stories.state.gov/what-is-a-special-military-operation/
[4] https://ukraine.un.org/en/253322-civilian-deaths-ukraine-war-top-10000-un-says
[5] https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine
[6] https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-toll-on-russia-from-its-war-in-ukraine-by-the-numbers/
[7] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68397525
[8] https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/wagner-group-russia-foreign-mercenaries-salaries-suffers-losses
[9] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/nepali-gurkhas-are-joining-wagner-the-lure-of-the-private-military-companies/articleshow/101276410.cms?from=mdr
[10] https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-partial-mobilization-mean
[11] http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69467

participating (participated) in combat operations in such units for at least six months and who have suffered an injury in the process that resulted in their discharge from military service, are entitled to apply for Russian citizenship under a simplified procedure.

Spouses, children and parents of these persons and close relatives of those who have died in combat are eligible for the simplified procedure for obtaining citizenship."[12]

On May 15, 2023, Putin added amendments to this executive order and simplified the process of granting Russian citizenship to foreigners with contracts for military service. According to the amendment:

"…foreign citizens will be able to receive Russian citizenship in a simplified procedure if during the period of the special military operation they sign one-year contracts for military service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation or military units. The same rule applies to members of their families (spouses, children, including adopted children and their parents)."[13]

Finally, on January 4, 2024, Putin signed a third executive order to further simplify and fast-track the citizenship granting process:[14]

"The Executive Order updates the special aspects of granting Russian citizenship to foreigners on contract.

The new Executive Order on conferment of citizenship under simplified procedures applies to certain categories of foreigners. These include those who have concluded a contract for military service in the Russian Federation Armed Forces or in military formations during the special military operation or who are performing military service during this period; foreigners who were dismissed from military service during the special military operation on certain grounds; spouses, children, and parents of such persons."[15]

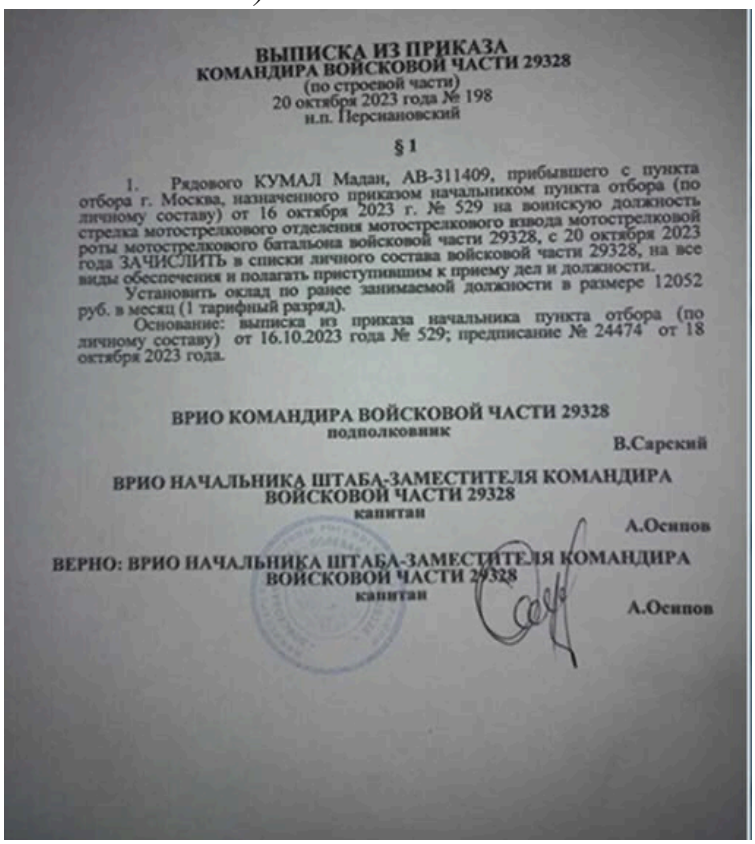
The Road to Russia: Nepali Youths on the Frontline

For a country that sent over 771,000 of its youths to foreign countries for employment in the fiscal year 2022/2023,[16] the decree alone should have acted as a warning bell for its leaders to dissuade Nepali youths' temptation to join the Russian Army. After all, lack of employment opportunities at home, inflation, and public frustration against the never-ending nexus of politics and corruption have made emigration the most desirable option for most Nepali youths. Against this backdrop, Russian citizenship could feel pretty tempting for the Nepali youths who are

[12] http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69467
[13] http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/71128
[14] https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/01/04/putin-speeds-citizenship-path-foreigners-who-enlist-russian-military.html
[15] http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/73221
[16] https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/over-771-000-youths-sought-foreign-employment-in-fy-2022-23

unaware of the severity of the war. More than that, however, it was the prospect of making up to 195,000 rubles (over 2100 USD) per month[17] that was more appealing to the Nepali youths, as confirmed by the returnees. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the Nepali recruits have been either former or currently serving army and police personnel. Reportedly, the agents amplifying the message and facilitating the process include senior officials of the Nepal Army.[18] Those who joined the Russian Army admit to having paid between 800,000 and 1,100,000 NPR to the agents. However, the contracts they signed with the Russian military indicate that a rifleman was paid as little as 12,052 rubles per month—a much lower salary than they were promised.

Image: Contract between a Nepali youth and the Russian military (Source: Ukaalo.com/ Devendra Bhattarai)



ВЫПИСКА ИЗ ПРИКАЗА
КОМАНДИРА ВОЙСКОВОЙ ЧАСТИ 29328
(по строевой части)
20 октября 2023 года № 198
н.п. Персиановский

§ 1

1. Рядового КУМАЛ Мадан, АВ-311409, прибывшего с пункта отбора г. Москва, назначенного приказом начальником пункта отбора (по личному составу) от 16 октября 2023 г. № 529 на воинскую должность стрелка мотострелкового отделения мотострелкового взвода мотострелковой роты мотострелкового батальона войсковой части 29328, с 20 октября 2023 года ЗАЧИСЛИТЬ в списки личного состава войсковой части 29328, на все виды обеспечения и полагать приступившим к приему дел и должности.

Установить оклад по ранее занимаемой должности в размере 12052 руб. в месяц (1 тарифный разряд).

Основание: выписка из приказа начальника пункта отбора (по личному составу) от 16.10.2023 года № 529; предписание № 24474 от 18 октября 2023 года.

ВРИО КОМАНДИРА ВОЙСКОВОЙ ЧАСТИ 29328
подполковник
В.Сарский

ВРИО НАЧАЛЬНИКА ШТАБА-ЗАМЕСТИТЕЛЯ КОМАНДИРА
ВОЙСКОВОЙ ЧАСТИ 29328
капитан
А.Осипов

ВЕРНО: ВРИО НАЧАЛЬНИКА ШТАБА-ЗАМЕСТИТЕЛЯ КОМАНДИРА
ВОЙСКОВОЙ ЧАСТИ 29328
капитан
А.Осипов

Anecdotes from Nepalis active in the Russian Army and those who have managed to return confirm that the underlying motivation for them was primarily a pursuit of better economic opportunities[19] and hopefully Russian citizenship for themselves and their families. However, Nepali youths' journeys to Russia have had diverse routes. As former Foreign Minister Saud admitted, a large number of the Nepalis "who went to Russia for work, study, and visit have joined the Army."[20] But this is only a partial picture; according to the Nepali recruits' stories, it

[17] https://www.ukaalo.com/news/20240202-thousand-nepalis-in-russia-ukraine-warfare/14566
[18] https://www.ukaalo.com/news/20240202-thousand-nepalis-in-russia-ukraine-warfare/14566
[19] https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1714955395037278371
[20] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/12/26/around-100-nepalis-serving-in-russian-army-are-reportedly-missing-says-foreign-minister-saud

was not just those who had been to Russia for work, study, or visit who ended up joining the Russian Army; Nepali youths were actively seeking *and* obtaining labor permits to go to Russia—up until January 4, 2024, when the labor department finally stopped issuing labor permits for Russia and Ukraine.[21] According to the report by Ukaalo, over 600 people had obtained labor permits for Russia in less than a year and a half.[22] And this number is just those who went from Nepal to Russia explicitly with labor permits. There is no accurate account of the Nepali citizens who traveled to Russia from third countries. In all of these, a network of agents facilitated the journey, whereas Russian Embassies seem to have fast-tracked the VISA-granting process.[23] On December 5, 2023, the Nepali police arrested 12 people from Kathmandu, who were involved in sending Nepalis to Russia.[24]

A more unconventional agent that has amplified Russia's message among potential foreign recruits and has likely influenced the Nepalis is social media. Platforms like Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have played crucial roles in spreading Russian propaganda. Targeted towards African and Asian youths, a majority of these posts are intended to seduce them with the prospects of not just making money but landing cars and Russian women. For instance, a tweet (with a photo of a blonde young woman intimately embracing a black young guy),[25] which had over 386,000 views, 225 comments, 393 likes, and 95 retweets, said:

#Russia women like REAL men

If you from #Africa #Nepal #Indonesia this is YOUR chance to get a HOT chick, money, Russian passport and a car Join the army, work in #Avdiivka assisting us against #NATO in #Ukraine

Similarly, a post on X by Anton Gerashchenko, Ukraine's former deputy minister of internal affairs, included a video that he claimed was "posted by an Arab news agency and got over a million views."[26] The video said that "there are not enough men in Russia due to war and so there are many brides available, it's quite easy to obtain a Russian citizenship and child support and preferences are good." For the Nepali population that is super active on social media sites, such propaganda materials are likely to cause the most harm. It was evident in private live-streaming sessions on TikTok, where Nepali youths exchanged their curiosity and explored options to join the Russian Army. Rather expected, such sessions usually have agents or brokers who can link the interested individuals to the right channels, where they can pursue the arduous journey.

Given the conditions under which most of the youths commit to the journey, they are neither fully aware of the stakes nor prepared to participate in the gruesome war. For some, Russia is just a "better" alternative to Malaysia or gulf countries—the primary destination of Nepali migrant

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[21] https://dofe.gov.np/DetailPage.aspx/id/488/lan/ne-NP
[22] https://www.ukaalo.com/news/20240202-thousand-nepalis-in-russia-ukraine-warfare/14566
[23] https://nepalitimes.com/news/nepalis-in-the-russian-army-want-to-quit
[24] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/12/11/over-200-nepalis-may-be-serving-in-the-russian-army-says-pm-dahal
[25] https://twitter.com/DasRgen4/status/1744984035032531118
[26] https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1730674225734640118

workers—as assured by their agents, until they find themselves on the front line of the war, with limited training and no proficiency in the Russian language. Suman Rai, a returnee, explained his similar fate while admitting that it is almost impossible to return from the war, where Nepalis (and other foreign recruits) are sent to the front as shields to the Russians.[27] Even worse, a Nepali returnee recounted to have been raped by Russian armies in the camp.[28]

Estimating the Number of Nepalis Fighting for Russia

The exact number of Nepali youths fighting in the Russia-Ukraine war has been difficult to pinpoint. In fact, only after the deaths and disappearances of those enlisted in the Russian army and their families' subsequent appeal for the government's intervention did the government display some seriousness on the issue. In late December, the Nepali Embassy in Russia reported that around 200 Nepali nationals were serving in the Russian Army, out of which seven had been killed.[29] Foreign Minister NP Saud also maintained that about 200 Nepali citizens were serving in the Russian Army but cautioned that the number may be higher.[30] Unofficial government sources point the number to be somewhere between 330 and 350. However, the accurate number remains unconfirmed, while Russia has continuously declined to provide this "sensitive" detail to Nepal.

This uncertainty has caused several speculations, some of which are rather astonishing. For instance, a CNN report on February 11, 2024, claimed that "Russia has recruited as many as 15,000 Nepalis to fight its war."[31] Although there had been obvious uncertainties regarding the total number of Nepali youths serving in the Russian Army, Nepali media almost unanimously discredited CNN's much-inflated number—with some even labeling it as outright Western propaganda.[32] Although CNN stated "multiple sources" to have confirmed it, the number had been picked up from the returnee's anecdotal accounts[33] and amplified by lawmaker Bimala Rai Poudel. Based on the number of dead, disappeared, and actively fighting youths along with their families' activism, CNN's number was unreasonably high. A more convincing and precise number—531 Nepalis in the Russian Army—was reported by the Nepali Times on February 25; it was based on "information given by family members" who have been "lobbying the Nepali and Russian government to facilitate their return;"[34] on February 6, 2024, they even staged a demonstration in front of the Russian Embassy in Kathmandu.[35] Even the more convincing number of 531 Nepalis in the Russian Army is unconfirmed by the government.

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[27] https://www.onlinekhabar.com/2024/02/1428932
[28] https://himalpress.com/2024/02/119006/
[29] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/12/24/russia-ignores-calls-to-stop-hiring-nepalis-to-fight-against-ukraine
[30] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/12/26/around-100-nepalis-serving-in-russian-army-are-reportedly-missing-says-foreign-minister-saud
[31] https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/10/asia/nepal-fighters-russia-ukraine-families-intl-cmd/index.html
[32] https://recordnepal.substack.com/p/off-the-record-129-how-many-nepalis
[33] https://www.nepalpress.com/2024/02/02/425599/
[34] https://nepalitimes.com/news/531-nepalis-in-russian-army
[35] https://ekantipur.com/news/2024/02/06/demonstration-near-the-embassy-demanding-the-return-of-nepalis-in-the-russian-army-52-39.html

The Nepal Government's Response: Politics and Diplomacy

The Nepal government's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was rather quick. On the very first day, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) issued a statement condemning Russia's "use of force against a sovereign country in any circumstance" and reiterating its commitment to the "principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity as enshrined in the UN Charter."[36] Nepal also voted twice in favor of United Nations (UN) General Assembly resolutions that demanded Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine—while its neighbors India and China notably abstained both times.[37][38] For a 'small' country sandwiched between two regional rivals, the staunch position it took in favor of sovereignty and territorial integrity is not just meaningful but essential. However, several communist leaders who are known to be close to Russia criticized the government for condemning the Russian attack.[39] One of them was the senior leader of the United Socialists and former prime minister, Jhala Nath Khanal.[40] Nepal's Political polarization over such a critical world event that bears clear implications for the country can be interpreted as the beginning of Nepal's failure to anticipate and prevent Nepali youths' recruitment in the Russian Army and repatriate them.

What also contributed to this failure is Nepali leaders' preoccupation with domestic politics—largely elections, coalitions, and power-sharing. In September 2022, when Putin issued the first decree on easing citizenship for foreign recruits, the Nepal government was led by Nepali Congress (NC) president Sher Bahadur Deuba, whereas the foreign ministry was under NC's Dr. Narayan Khadka. After the general election in November 2022, the CPN-Maoist Centre's Pushpa Kamal Dahal led a coalition government, with NC's N.P. Saud as the foreign minister, up until March 2024, when Dahal reshuffled the cabinet with a fresh coalition, sidelining NC. Since 5 August 2022, however, Milan Raj Tuladhar has been Nepal's Ambassador to Russia. Evidently, during the most sensitive period, which would have required extra attention to interpret Russia's actions and their implications for the country, Nepali leaders were busy with internal political wranglings.

Due to the political leadership's failure to direct attention and resources to the issue in the earlier months, a large number of youths ended up joining the Russian Army. The most obvious failure is the inability to track and assess Putin's decrees facilitating citizenship for foreign recruits. For a country as vulnerable as Nepal, this was crucial; a timely notice to the general public regarding the risks of joining the Russian Army, suspension of work permits to war-torn countries, and an early diplomatic note to both Russia and Ukraine could have prevented the youths from joining the Russian Army to a great extent. However, as mentioned above, the government stopped issuing labor permits to Russia and Ukraine only on January 4, 2024. Until then, it had only "asked Nepali nationals not to join a foreign army except those approved by the government."[41]

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[36] https://mofa.gov.np/statement-on-the-recent-developments-in-ukraine/
[37] https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152
[38] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/24/un-tells-russia-to-leave-ukraine-how-did-countries-vote
[39] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/03/08/on-ukraine-nepal-has-not-taken-sides-foreign-minister-says
[40] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixOJnqLizvM
[41] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/12/24/russia-ignores-calls-to-stop-hiring-nepalis-to-fight-against-ukraine

Rather astoundingly, only about two months since it suspended issuing (institutional) labor permits to Nepali citizens for Russia, the government was reported to have resumed it again without serious consideration of its implications for its citizens' security and Nepal's foreign policy.[42] The Department of Foreign Employment made this decision, arguing that those going to Russia with labor permits do not join the Russian Army. This conclusion was made by a study task force by the Labor Ministry, which concluded that not even a single Nepali citizen who went to Russia with a labor permit through manpower agencies was found to join the Russian Army.[43] It was found that the decision was made by the former Labor Minister Sarat Singh Bhandari—two days before stepping down. To benefit a particular manpower company, the secretary-level decision was made on February 28. Since then, some 370 Nepali citizens have reached Russia with institutional labor permits.[44] Besides the obvious irregularity, the decision can potentially enable manpower agencies to recruit Nepali nationals and send them to war-torn Russia, where Nepal holds little to no diplomatic leverage for its citizens' safety.

The intelligence units of Nepal's security forces are equally responsible for their failure to pick up on the signals (SIGINT), particularly from the social media platforms, and take preemptive measures. Although several video clips of Nepalis fighting in the war floated around on the internet, they were dismissed as fake. The videos attracted interest and inquiry from a large number of audiences in Nepal. However, they are unlikely to have generated a seriousness for monitoring and follow-up.[45] This failure points out a gap in and, therefore, an opportunity for intelligence sharing with other countries that may have better resources for intelligence gathering and analysis.

On the diplomatic side too, Nepal was not able to gain much through its multiple efforts. The government has sent multiple diplomatic notes to Russia, requesting it to repatriate Nepali citizens serving in the Russian Army and to stop recruitment.[46] However, the only little diplomatic victory was Russia's eventual agreement to compensate the victims of the war through the embassy.[47][48] More recently, the newly appointed foreign minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha held a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov, who reportedly pledged "to act on Nepalis' pleas" particularly about returning the dead and compensating their families.[49] This positive development was the result of the efforts laid out by Shrestha's predecessor.

Some commentators have argued that Russia's hesitance to comply with Nepal's request—to repatriate those serving in its army and stop further recruitment—is due to its negative coverage in the Nepali media and the landlocked country's vote in Ukraine's favor by "ignoring the

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[42] https://www.onlinekhabar.com/2024/03/1454976

[43] https://ekantipur.com/news/2024/03/28/work-permits-open-to-workers-going-to-russia-closed-to-israel-23-50.html

[44] https://nepalkhabar.com/economy/196105-2024-3-28-22-0-36

[45] https://nepalitimes.com/news/nepalis-in-the-russian-army-want-to-quit

[46] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2024/01/10/115-nepali-families-ask-government-to-rescue-their-members-from-russian-army

[47] It initially required the victims' families to be physically present in Russia to claim compensation.

[48] https://nagariknews.nagariknetwork.com/social-affairs/1426785-1707784429.html

[49] https://kathmandupost.com/national/2024/03/08/lavrov-pledges-to-act-on-nepalis-pleas-over-kin-in-russian-army

non-alignment principle."[50] While there may be some truth to it, the argument that Nepal ignored its non-alignment principle when it voted in Ukraine's favor is rather weak. Communicating Nepal's sensitivity regarding the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and assuring Russia of an amicable bilateral relationship is what the art of diplomacy should have been about. Achieving national consensus on the issue and mobilizing communist leaders such as Pradeep Gyawali and Ganesh Prasad Timilsina, who have closer ties with Russian counterparts,[51] might have yielded better results. Similarly, preventing the issue from being sensationalized (in the media) could have been a better tactic. For instance, India, which has several of its citizens enlisted in the Russian Army too,[52] has kept it low-key and instead worked silently on repatriating them. Leveraging its close ties with India, or even China, Nepal could use diplomacy to urge its more powerful neighbors to facilitate the repatriation of its citizens.

Conclusion

The prolonged Russia-Ukraine war has had wide-ranging effects on countries across the globe, and Nepal is not an exception. In fact, due to a large number of its youth enlisting themselves in the Russian Army—largely for monetary benefits—Nepal faces some more pressing challenges. Most importantly, it is the loss of its citizens' lives in a distant war. The involvement of local and foreign agents in the youths' recruitment raises further questions about where the Nepalis are fighting and what likely scenarios might develop in the future. If the trend continues, Nepalis are likely to be fighting against each other—for money—in a war between third countries. This potential scenario is a huge risk to national security. At the same time, Nepali citizens fighting for third countries will lead to strained relations with other countries. At present, Nepal has agreements with only a handful of countries, such as India, the UK, Brunei, Singapore, and Oman, for which its citizens can fight. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that Nepali citizens do not fight in wars that may jeopardize Nepal's non-alignment principle and lose its trusted allies and partners. Nepali youths fighting for Russia against Ukraine is a prime example of this; instead of making immature decisions, the government should not only stop the further recruitment of its citizens in the war but put all its political and diplomatic weight behind the issue to get its citizens back to Nepal from Russia—to avoid geopolitical complications but more importantly to save its people's lives.

[50] https://nepalkhabar.com/politics/189187-2024-1-18-22-21-19

[51] https://nepal.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/shairman_of_the_state_duma_vyacheslav_volodin_held_a_meeting_with_chairman_of_the_national_assembly_/

[52] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-68366861