



## **Foreign Youth Exploited for Military Drone Production at the Alabuga Special Economic Zone**

**By Spencer Faragasso and David Albright**

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### **Key Findings**

- JSC Alabuga dealt with an acute labor shortage to build Shahed 136 drones by raising salaries and exploiting high school-age students and immigrant employees recruited under false pretenses.
- JSC Alabuga has been using two programs to actively recruit young men and women, primarily aged 16-22, to make military drones: Alabuga Polytechnic is used to recruit students within Russia, and the Alabuga Start program is used to recruit workers from the Commonwealth of Independent States (also known as CIS countries) and other countries, primarily African countries.
- This deceptive and manipulative recruitment effort is intended primarily to enable JSC Alabuga to meet its ambitious Shahed 136 kamikaze drone production goals for the Russian military, a project that Russia steeps in secrecy, to the point of calling it motorboat manufacturing.
- Potential recruits are not told that they could be involved in producing Shahed 136 drones. Instead, when drone production work is mentioned, the recruitment process emphasizes the making of M5 drones, built in the same building as the Shahed 136 drones, but by a different company, Albatross LLC, and on a much smaller scale, and advertised for civilian use (but leaked documents and media reporting state that some fraction of the M5 drones have been used in Russian combat operations).
- Alabuga Polytechnic's students and Alabuga Start's recruits have produced thousands of Shahed drones and dozens, perhaps hundreds of Albatross M5 drones for Russian combat operations against Ukraine, often against civilian targets in the case of the Shahed 136 drones.
- For the Albatross M5 drone, participants are employed and trained in building the airframe, assembling and installing electronics, and testing the drone. For the Shahed 136 drone, they are involved in all aspects of making the drone. According to early internal Alabuga plans, many students and recruits worked on Albatross M5 production

before participants were moved to work on producing Shahed 136 drones for JSC Alabuga.

- The Alabuga Start program primarily targets African women, using the promise of a high monthly salary (double what can be earned on average in their native country; and more than such a position would normally earn in Russia), work training, long-term accommodations and integration into Russian society.
- Twenty-seven countries are documented to have sent nationals to Alabuga through Alabuga Start. It is unknown whether any countries have withdrawn their participation, but they should do so immediately. If they continue to send workers, these countries directly support a U.S. and EU sanctioned entity and support Russia's military efforts, thus risk getting sanctioned themselves.
- The Start program uses deception and manipulation to attract low-skilled workers to perform the many relatively simple operations involved in making the airframes for Shahed 136 drones.
- Both the Polytechnic and Start programs are exploitive of young people and require the students and recruits to work long hours, often more than full-time. More than 90 percent of the Start program personnel and about one-third of the Polytechnic students are estimated to work in drone production, mostly the production of Shahed 136 drones.
- Based on JSC Alabuga plans in early 2023, the design, planning, support, and production of Shahed drones would entail over 1000 personnel per daytime shift, of whom at least 70 percent would be from Alabuga Polytechnic and Alabuga Start.
- In the first half of 2023, about 100 Alabuga Polytechnic students received training in Tehran, Iran, from Iranian experts on making the Shahed 136 airframe.
- Alabuga is actively indoctrinating the young participants at its site into supporting the Russian military through patriotic and military themed activities.
- The use of teenagers in the production of military drones used against Ukraine, including against civilian targets, should be viewed as a crime.

## Background

This report supplements media publications, originally the groundbreaking reporting by the Russian publication *Protokol* and most recently by the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>1</sup> It seeks to provide in English more details about JSC Alabuga's use of young workers, many under 18 years old, to make military drones used in Ukraine.

The Institute has conducted research and uncovered extensive evidence highlighting the efforts by JSC Alabuga to recruit workers and employ them in on-site factories producing Shahed 136 kamikaze-type drones for the Russian military for use in Ukraine. Part of that effort includes

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<sup>1</sup> "Alabuga. Production of death by the hands of students," *Protokol*, July 24, 2023, <https://protokol.band/2023/07/24/alabuga-rukami-studentov/>; Benoit Faucon, Nicholas Bariyo, and Matthew Luxmoore, "The Russian Drone Plant That Could Shape the War in Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/the-russian-drone-plant-that-could-shape-the-war-in-ukraine-7abd5616>.

the use of the nearby, but smaller, Albatross LLC plant that makes M5 drones, a reconnaissance drone intended mainly for non-military purposes but also to a limited extent sold to the Russian military for use in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Albatross, which also needs workers and benefits from JSC Alabuga's recruitment efforts, serves a more important role as a cover for JSC Alabuga's recruitment effort to staff Shahed 136 drone production. Figure 1 shows advertisements on the Alabuga Polytechnic website to make drones at Albatross LLC and participate in a work-study program where part of program would entail work at Albatross assembling drones.




Finding the requisite workers for Shahed 136 production posed an early, existential challenge. In an early December 2022 Deputy General Director for New Production, S. S. Alekseev, wrote a letter to the head of the Human Resources department, A. A. Galiev, for JSC Alabuga about the then situation affecting many of Alabuga's drone projects, not just the Shahed 136 project. He wrote, "Due to the lack of the necessary number of people according to the staff schedule of the project 'UAV Production,' the terms of the project 'UAV Production' are disrupted." He ordered Galiev to take steps to hire the necessary people and "provide a timeframe within which the required number of qualified people will be recruited." In this case, of the 479 people needed, only 16 had been hired. According to another leaked document, Alabuga still lacked significant numbers of personnel in January 2023. At that time, based on these documents, almost 75 percent of the positions were vacant, especially leadership positions, and all production areas had much less than 50 percent of the "required" personnel.


To help meet its ambitious Shahed 136 drone production targets and to develop a long-term workforce, JSC Alabuga and its respective organizations moved to recruit young men and women, aged 16-22, from within Russia, the CIS countries, and countries in Africa and beyond. JSC Alabuga made rosy offers of educational and professional work opportunities; however, underneath these offers is a dark and deeply sinister program that is ultimately engaged in criminal behavior by exploiting young Russians and underaged migrants to engage in labor to mass produce Shahed 136 drones for use in Russia's illegal war in Ukraine.


Aware of the Russian legal problems of hiring workers under 18 years old, defined as children by the United Nations, JSC Alabuga lobbied Russian authorities to change labor laws to allow minors under 18 to work in riskier work environments, which includes Alabuga because of the use of toxic chemicals in making the airframe and the danger of explosions from fuel and high explosives.


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<sup>2</sup> "Russia deploys 'Albatross' made in Iran-backed drone factory," *Financial Times*, July 6, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/3135edf7-2b80-4df4-9923-b96382d2fee5>.

-  Working in a high-tech **composite** production
-  Drone production aircraft
-  Wage **from 52,000 rubles in hand**

 **Anchor employer**  
- Albatross LLC

 **Assembly training**  
Autel Dragon Fish







### Direction "UAV Programming and Air Navigation"


Dual program. Work + college


**Profile "Information systems"**  
Nizhnekamsk College of Petrochemistry and Oil Refinery. Lemaeva



**Profile "Microelectronics"**  
Elabuga Polytechnic College



 **Anchor employer**  
Albatross LLC

 **Autel Dragon Fish assembly tutorial**

In the era of market transformation, when unmanned vehicles are actively being introduced into all spheres of life, specialists in their assembly will be very highly valued in the market.

The demand for copters is huge - more than 100 thousand per year.

**Welcome to the new program!**

**Figure 1.** Two translated advertisements by Alabuga Polytechnic to participate in the UAV drone manufacturing program at Alabuga in conjunction with Albatross LLC. The top image shows a participant holding an Albatross M5 drone. The program includes the assembly of Chinese-made Autel Dragon Fish drones. (A separate, forthcoming Institute study assesses documents related to the Chinese-made Autel Dragon Fish drones.) **Source of images:** Alabuga Polytechnic website.

JSC Alabuga used two programs to attract young people to its facilities, Alabuga Polytechnic and Alabuga Start. The programs are distinctly different, where the former is a more traditional educational-work program for male and female Russian high school students that provides them with accredited – albeit low-quality – education and training in a variety of technical fields and the promise of a job onsite, while Alabuga Start is a purely work program that provides foreign female migrants with a job onsite and a basic certificate of professional training, not a formal educational degree. More than 90 percent of the Start program personnel and about one-third of the Polytechnic students are estimated to work in drone production, mostly the production of Shahed 136 drones. Based on leaked 2023 planning documents for the number

and assignments of workers making Shahed 136 in a daytime shift, of the more than 1100 workers in total, over 70 percent, in some periods well over 70 percent, would be Polytechnic students and Start recruits.

The production of drones takes place in several buildings. Production of the Shahed 136 requires the vast majority of manufacturing floor space. Based on leaked documents and open-source information, Albatross occupied 2500 square meters in a 40,000 square-meters building; the rest of the building was devoted to Shahed 136 production.

The participants receive financial compensation and housing onsite at the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ) or at nearby Alabuga owned facilities. The Institute's review of leaked internal documents from JSC Alabuga revealed that groups of recruited workers had received training in Tehran, Iran, on the production of Shahed 136 drones and have been employed in producing these drone systems at JSC Alabuga.<sup>3</sup> This cooperation reveals the extent to which Russia is determined to build combat systems and fuel its war of terror against the Ukrainian people, using in significant part, youth under the age of 18 .

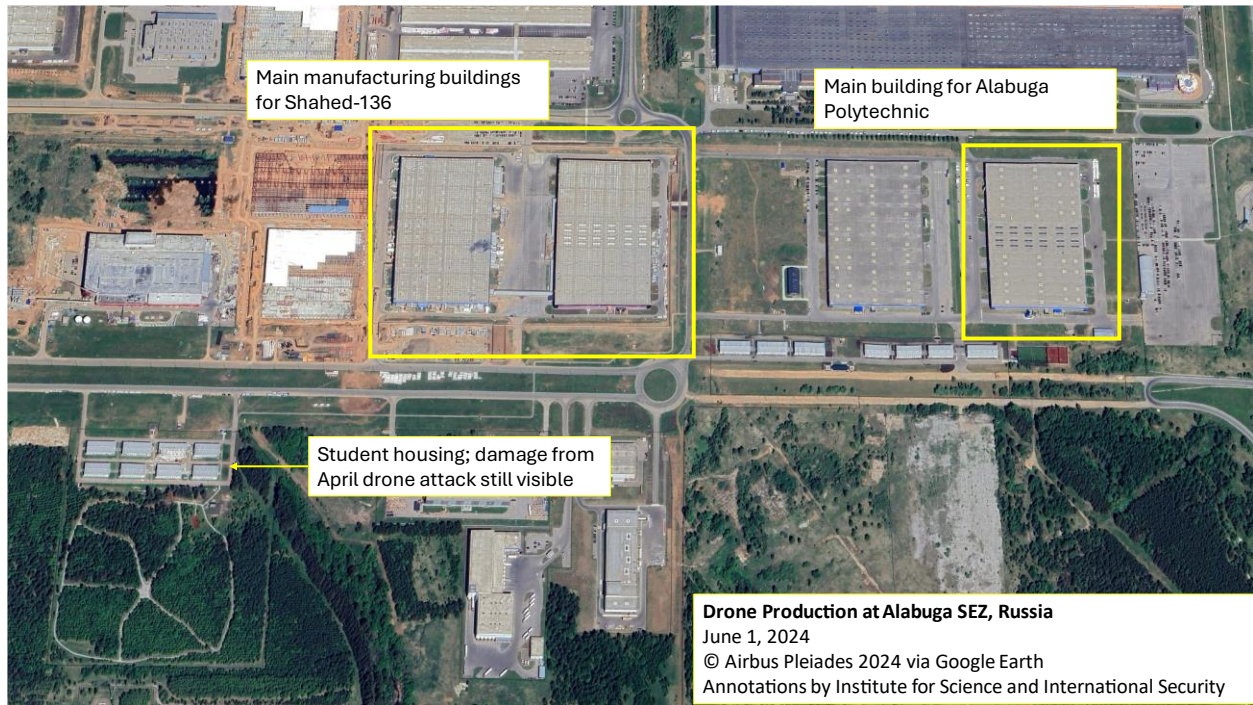
## **Alabuga Polytechnic Recruitment and Exploitation**

Alabuga Polytechnic has existed since 2019 and has emerged as a technical school designed to attract Russian students aged 15-16 (highschoolers) to participate in four-year dual work-educational programs. Recruited participants are required to pass an entrance exam for admission. The program, through both study and work, intends to train a long-term workforce in technical and managerial skills for the enterprises at the SEZ. The participants have the ability to rise in the ranks at JSC Alabuga facilities and are being prepared for engineering, managerial and senior specialist positions. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, shifted JSC Alabuga's priorities away from placing students in civilian enterprises at the SEZ to solving a critical worker shortage problem at its new Shahed 136 drone production facility for the Russian Armed Forces.

Alabuga Polytechnic employs a major portion of its participants to produce Shahed 136 and Albatross M5 drones while others receive training and employment in other areas besides drones. Figure 2 shows Polytechnic's proximity to the Shahed 136 production buildings and a ground image of the front of the building.

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<sup>3</sup> David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Spencer Faragasso, "Highlights of Institute Assessment of Alabuga Drone Documents Supplied by Dalton Bennett at the Washington Post," *Institute for Science and International Security*, August 17, 2023, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/highlights-of-institute-assessment-of-alabuga-drone-documents/>.



**Figure 2.** Images of Alabuga Polytechnic. The top image provides an overview of the area at Alabuga SEZ. The bottom images are a Google Earth closeup of Polytechnic and a ground image of Polytechnic, respectively. Source: Google Earth, June 1, 2024; *Protokol* (cited above).

Alabuga Polytechnic offers many degree areas such as “Industrial Robotics,” “Laboratory and Chemical Analysis,” “Business Programming,” “Microelectronics,” “Industrial Automation,” “International Pedagogy,” “Electrical Engineering,” “BIM design,” “Jurisprudence,” “Economics,” “Business informatics on the 1C platform,” “Medical equipment,” “Installation and operation of industrial equipment,” “Programming of CNC machines,” “Air navigation and programming of

UAVs," "Industrial Safety," and "Medicine."<sup>4</sup> A presentation posted to the Alabuga Polytechnic YouTube.com channel on May 27, 2024, lays out career paths for Alabuga Polytechnic participants at JSC Alabuga, offering 16,500₽ per month as a first year Intern, up to 91,300₽ per month as a second year "specialist," and 260,000₽ as a third year "deputy project manager."<sup>5</sup>

Polytechnic students can rise rapidly in the Shahed 136 drone production hierarchy. According to a leaked early 2023 Alabuga presentation on staffing, an Alabuga employment unit is a module (M), composed of both senior staff and students and recruits. For example, the design, production, technology and IT departments, which form the engineering and management staff of the project, had a total of 34 modules with 242 personnel, of which 136 were "interns," meaning Polytechnic students. These specific modules are not located in the main manufacturing building but in other nearby buildings. Each of these modules includes a senior lead specialist position, two senior specialists, and four interns. The intern positions were intended to be filled by outstanding Alabuga Polytechnic first year students. The positions of senior specialists would be hired employees or outstanding second-year students, the positions of senior leading specialists would be employees or outstanding third or fourth year students.

However, public advertisements by Alabuga Polytechnic do not show such career paths, instead showing employment by Albatross LLC for Albatross drone production and testing (see Figures 3 and 4). Multiple videos linked to by Alabuga Polytechnic on its website, and originally published on YouTube.com, show participants building Albatross M5 drone components.<sup>6</sup> The participants work on almost all aspects of producing, assembling, and testing the drones.<sup>7</sup> However, the story is different. Even for those Polytechnic students who do work at Albatross, they may end up working for JSC Alabuga in more complex roles producing Shahed 136 drones after gaining experience producing the Albatross M5. They also are required to work long hours on producing drones, often more than would be seen as standard full-time employment.<sup>8</sup>

As the Shahed 136 project was ramping up in the first part of 2023, JSC Alabuga sent many Polytechnic students to Iran for training under its contract with Iran. One of the leaked documents analyzed by the Institute and the *Washington Post*<sup>9</sup> provides the schedule for

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<sup>4</sup> Alabuga Polytech, "'The main thing is not to be afraid to communicate': the final of the All-Russian Entrepreneurship Olympiad took place at Alabuga Polytech," Zen, April 16, 2024, <https://dzen.ru/a/Zh5Ak8yjkCHIOOEj>.

<sup>5</sup> "Are you ready to enter Alabuga Polytechnic?," Alabuga Polytech YouTube Channel, May 27, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reHwjwTJw70>; These figures equate to \$185 USD per month, \$1025 USD per month, and \$2919 USD per month, respectively, at current exchange rates, June 7, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> "Alabuga Start. Composite," No Name YouTube Channel, June 5, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMHD4pBn5no&t=4s>.

<sup>7</sup> "Work in Composites," No Name YouTube Channel, June 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtnuNq--u40>; "Alabuga Start. Composite," No Name YouTube Channel, June 5, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMHD4pBn5no&t=4s>.

<sup>8</sup> "Alabuga. Production of death by the hands of students."

<sup>9</sup> Dalton Bennett and Mary Ilyushina, "Inside the Russian effort to build 6,000 attack drones with Iran's help," *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/08/17/russia-iran-drone-shahed-alabuga/>.

Shahed 136 drone production. Under the section “Education,” it lists that “at least 100 students and 10 staff” were sent to Iran for two months of training on the process of making the Shahed 136 airframe. The training started on March 3, 2023, and finished on May 2, 2023. For example, one leaked document, titled “Travel List,” contains 52 Russian names of which 40 are listed as students.



**Figure 3.** Alabuga Polytechnic participants producing the composite airframe for the Albatross M5 drone. **Source:** An Alabuga Polytechnic video posted to its Youtube.com channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMHD4pBn5no&t=4s>).





**Figure 4.** Alabuga participants testing an Albatross M5 drone. **Source:** An Alabuga Polytechnic video posted to its Youtube.com channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtnuNq--u40>).

## Alabuga Start

Alabuga Start is tailored to attracting foreign female participants, aged 16-22 years old, to participate in a two-year work program at JSC Alabuga.<sup>10</sup> The main countries that have been targeted include the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a few other Asian countries, and many African countries.

The program was started in 2022 after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but before JSC Alabuga decided to produce drones. As opposed to Alabuga Polytechnic, the Alabuga Start program has lower admission requirements and does not require an entrance exam. Participants are only required to know 100 Russian or English words. The participants are employed in simple manual labor operations, with few options for career advancement or job prospects outside the Alabuga Special Economic Zone. With JSC Alabuga's decision in late 2022 to produce Shahed 136 drones for the Russian military, the importance of the Start program increased as JSC Alabuga faced an acute labor shortage in its Shahed drone program. But many of the steps to make the Shahed 136 airframe involve simple operations that inexperienced personnel can learn quickly on-the-job.

Some of the program's advertisements are specifically directed towards recruiting participants from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), specifically, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In one post by Alabuga Polytechnic, the

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<sup>10</sup> "Alabuga Start Program," Alabuga Start, June 2024, <https://startrussia.alabuga.ru/>.

Alabuga Start Program claims that in 2022, 24 female CIS nationals were recruited (see Figure 5). Other advertisements are directed towards primarily African countries. An early post on the Alabuga Start website lists 24 participants from Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Pakistan were recruited to the program in 2022 (see Figure 6).

The *Wall Street Journal* reported since its inception that over one thousand women from all over Africa went to Alabuga under Alabuga Start, and another thousand are likely to go this year, based on Ugandan officials aiding or knowledgeable about the recruitment effort.<sup>11</sup> At least twenty-seven countries have sent participants through Alabuga Start to work at Alabuga, most are in Africa, but also seven are in Commonwealth of Independent State countries (see Table 1).

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<sup>11</sup> “The Russian Drone Plant That Could Shape the War in Ukraine.”

<b>Countries that Have Sent Nationals to Work at Alabuga</b>
Algeria
Armenia
Azerbaijan
Belarus
Benin
Burkina Faso
Central African Republic
Colombia
Ethiopia
Kazakhstan
Kenya
Kyrgyzstan
Lesotho
Malawi
Mali
Mozambique
Nigeria
Pakistan
Rwanda
South Africa
South Sudan
Tajikistan
Tanzania
Uganda
Uzbekistan
Zambia
Zimbabwe

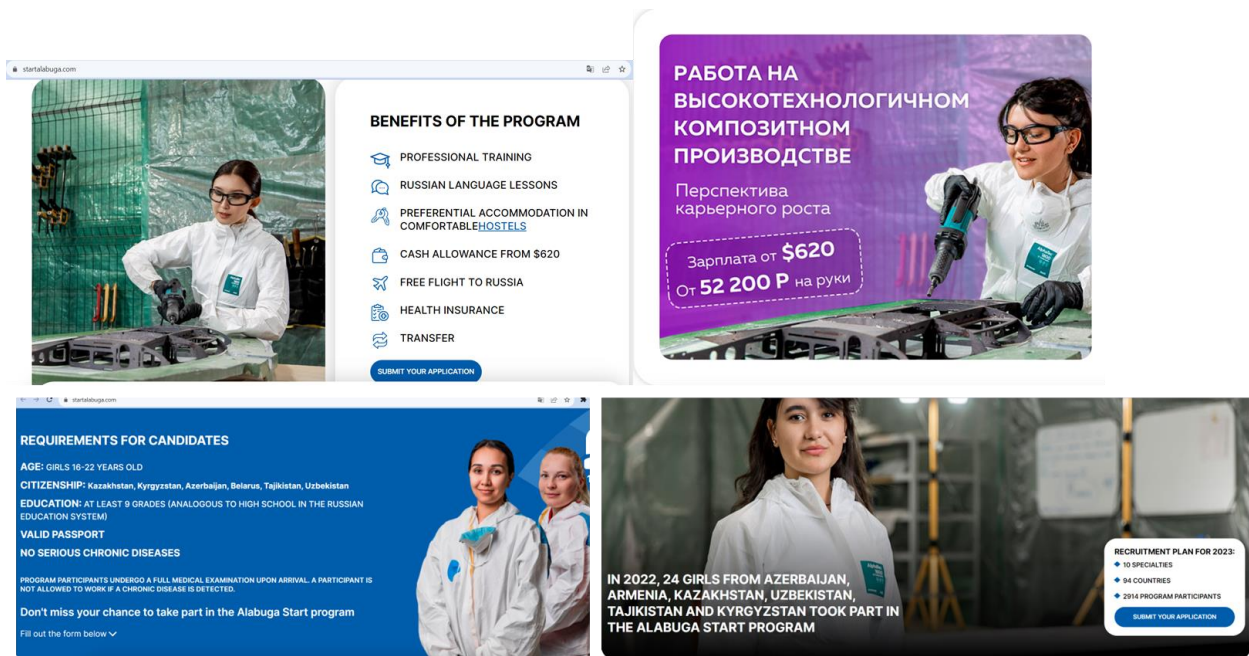
**Table 1.** A complete list of the countries identified by the Institute in open-source Alabuga Start social media posts that have sent workers to Alabuga. **Source:** Alabuga Start Telegram channel.

Alabuga Start uses several tactics to attract foreign females to join its program. It offers a generous pay of 60,000₽ per month (\$673 USD) and a certificate of professional training such as in “Quality Management of Products, Processes and Services” from the technological college Kazan National Research Technical University -KAI.<sup>12</sup> The participants are not formal students at the technical college and are only listed on the school’s roster to obtain a professional training certificate. Alabuga Start notes that the salary it offers is at least double the average monthly salary in countries such as: Zimbabwe, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo,

<sup>12</sup> “Alabuga Start Program,” Alabuga Start, June 2024, <https://startrussia.alabuga.ru/>; “Students of TC KAI met with a representative of the SEZ ‘Alabuga’,” KAZAN NATIONAL RESEARCH TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY NAMED AFTER A. N. TUPOLEVA – KAI, February 28, 2023, <https://kai.ru/news/new?id=12726252>; “SEZ “Alabuga” is waiting for young specialists,” KAZAN NATIONAL RESEARCH TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY NAMED AFTER A. N. TUPOLEVA – KAI, July 15, 2023, <https://kai.ru/events/event?id=12833060>; Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, November 8, 2023, <https://t.me/AlabugaStart/135>.

Senegal, and Rwanda.<sup>13</sup> The program even goes as far to claim through videos and advertisements that Alabuga Start participants can “find love” and start families in Russia, and that the Alabuga Polytech offers a great way to do that.<sup>14</sup>

The program also recruits African locals to help them identify and recruit female high school student candidates (see also next section). The *Wall Street Journal* reports on a case of a Ugandan recruiter who doubled as a deputy headmaster at a secondary school.<sup>15</sup> He said that the Russians want to recruit female students who excelled in science subjects in high school. He admitted that he did not know that the recruits would be involved in drone production.

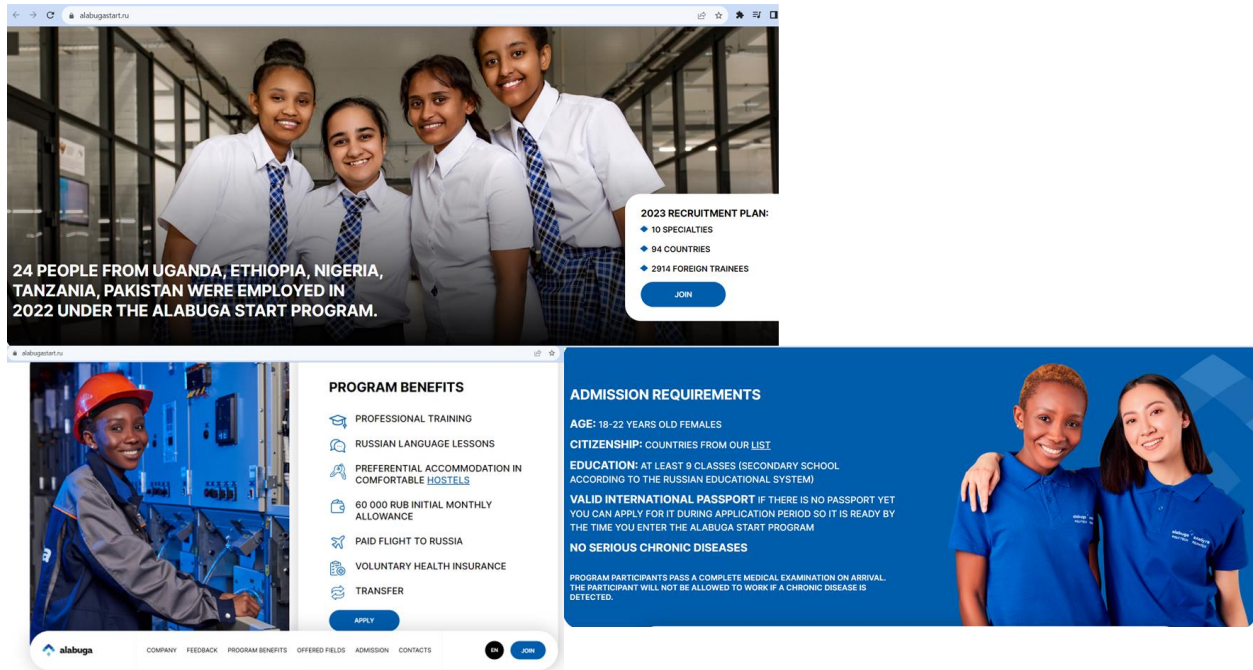


**Figure 5.** Advertisements by Alabuga Start on its website showcasing its recruitment efforts and programs targeted at CIS nationals. One advertisement shows a worker assembling the airframe of the Albatross M5. **Source:** Alabuga Start program website.

<sup>13</sup> Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, November 8, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> “Work and Marry,” No Name YouTube Channel, June 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zv1zb0xtlGs>.

<sup>15</sup> “The Russian Drone Plant That Could Shape the War in Ukraine.”



**Figure 6.** Advertisements by Alabuga Start on its website showcasing its recruitment efforts and programs primarily targeted at African and Asian nationals. **Source:** Alabuga Start program website.

Start participants are offered employment in three programs: “Production Operator,” “Service and Hospitality,” and “Catering.” The first program, “Production Operator,” in reality employs the participants in the production of Shahed 136 and Albatross M5 drones. The other two programs have very limited participation, and few participants are employed in those areas. The primary goal of this program is to acquire a cheap migrant labor force for the JSC Alabuga to carry out the labor-intensive work necessary to produce the Shahed 136 and Albatross M5 drones. This is evident in a video posted by Albatross LLC from March 12, 2024, on its website and found on RUTube.com, a Russian copy of YouTube, showing female African Alabuga Start workers assembling the airframe of the Albatross M5 (see Figure 7).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “Our production in Yelabuga was visited by the famous blogger Dmitry Puchkov.,” Albatross LLC, March 12, 2024, <https://www.alb.aero/about/news/nashe-proizvodstvo-v-elabuge-posetil-izvestnyy-blogger-dmitriy-puchkov/>; “Our production in Yelabuga was visited by the famous blogger Dmitry Puchkov.,” Albatross LLC RUTube Channel, March 12, 2024, <https://rutube.ru/video/e1c970d1784c7c89ea07b177e85baee3/?t=146>.

Dmitry Puchkov (aka Goblin) came to our production. They greeted us hospitably and told us all their secrets.



**Figure 7.** Two screenshots from a tour of the Albatross LLC facilities at Alabuga given to Dmitry Puchkov, a prominent Russian propagandist and an individual sanctioned by the European Union.<sup>17</sup> Female African Alabuga Start participants are seen constructing the composite airframe of the Albatross M5. One of the interviewed workers is from Nigeria and was recruited through the Alabuga Start program. **Source:** Albatross LLC company website and posted to RUTube.com (<https://rutube.ru/video/e1c970d1784c7c89ea07b177e85baee3/?t=146>).

<sup>17</sup> “Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/2477 of 16 December 2022 amending Decision 2014/145/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine,” European Union, December 16, 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.LI.2022.322.01.0466.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2022%3A322I%3ATO%3A>

Unlike the participants in Alabuga Polytechnic, the Alabuga Start participants are relegated to work in simple, yet labor-intensive roles. According to the Alabuga Start Telegram channel, the flagship educational program is the “Composite Materials Production” program. In this program, participants would be involved in “gluing, cutting, drying chamber, painting, assembling, and quality control of items” (see Figure 8).<sup>18</sup> The skills learned through this program are directly linked to producing drone airframes, a labor-intensive process.

As mentioned earlier, more than an estimated 90 percent work in drone production. In some leaked documents from 2023, they were called "mulattoes," a term referring to people of mixed race but apparently used here in a derogatory manner. The modules where they worked were labelled with an additional “M,” or “MM, for “mulatto module.” The structure of this module was similar to the usual ones, but the number of trainees was twice as large, i.e., eight trainees in one module, two senior specialists and one leading specialist. Senior and leading specialists were adult employees, Polytechnic students trained in Iran, and experienced participants of Alabuga Start. Regular participants of Alabuga Start took the position of trainees. The mulatto modules were in the most technologically simple portions of airframe production. The participants of this program had fewer opportunities to advance from their assigned module. It is unclear if this structure and the likely derogatory designation survived the early days of Shahed 136 production, but it shows the principle of the distribution of Alabuga Start participants relative to Alabuga Polytechnic students.

A recent job advertisement posted by JSC Alabuga shows that it is still seeking employees without experience or professional education, for “composite production” and offering a monthly pay of 86,000₽ (roughly \$1007 USD) and corporate housing for non-residents (see Figure 9).<sup>19</sup> This appears to be a simplified version of an Alabuga Start advertisement. Interestingly, the same advertisement also lists at the bottom openings for two senior line operators, suggesting that JSC Alabuga needs more senior staff.

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<sup>18</sup> This figure was taken at current USD exchange rates for 60,000 rubles, as of June 5, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> The advertisement offers two work schedules: two days from 8:00 to 20:00 with two days off, or work five days from 8:00 to 17:00 with two days off.

alabuga Alabuga Start Programme  
6,08K subscribers

alabuga Alabuga Start Programme  
Composite materials production 🏭

This is the flagship field of the "Alabuga Start" programme. Here you will gain the experience of real production of composite materials. During the programme, you will work on different sections of production:

- Gluing;
- Cutting;
- Drying chamber;
- Painting;
- Assembling;
- Quality control of items.

The work on composite production will not be easy at first (work schedule 2/2, wearing personal protection suits), but with due diligence it is possible to master the training in a few weeks.

Additionally, you get experience in high-tech production with advanced conditions:

- Salary: from 60,000 rubles before taxes 🤝;
- Ticket to Russia;
- Preferential accommodation;
- Transfer from the place of residence to work;
- Personal protective equipment (because it is production);
- Russian language courses;
- Certificate of professional training.

Start your career in high-tech production! 😊

Watch here: <https://youtu.be/VtnuNq-u40>

YouTube  
Work in composites

8.2K 👁 05:23

**Figure 8.** An English-language employment advertisement from Alabuga Start posted on its Telegram seeking workers to produce composite materials, a key production process in drone development.  
**Source:** Alabuga Start Telegram channel.



**Ищем сотрудников на производство**

**ЗАРПЛАТА ОТ 86 000 руб**

**БЕЗ ОПЫТА**

ОЭЗ «Алабуга» открывает дополнительный набор сотрудников на композитное производство!

**Мы предлагаем:**

- ◆ Заработную плату от 86 000 Р на руки;
- ◆ Работу без опыта и профессионального образования;
- ◆ Официальное трудоустройство
- ◆ Корпоративное жилье для иногородних;
- ◆ Транспорт из соседних городов;
- ◆ График 2/2 с 8.00 до 20.00 или 5/2 с 8.00 до 17.00;
- ◆ Работу в лучшей экономической зоне России.

**Производство находится в г. Елабуга, Республика Татарстан.**

👤 Свободна вакансия «Старший оператор производственной линии».

✉ Подать заявку на трудоустройство: [здесь](#)

💬 Написать нам по всем вопросам: @Alabuga\_HR

🇷🇺 Россия ждет тебя! 🇷🇺 🇷🇺

👁 121,8К 22:04

**Figure 9.** A job advertisement posted by JSC Alabuga seeking employees with no work experience for composite production. It also advertises two senior positions.

## Alabuga’s Extensive Diplomatic Outreach

Alabuga has gone to great lengths to conduct outreach to countries around the world to recruit foreign workers. Outreach has occurred in numerous ways, through Alabuga delegation visits to countries to meet foreign Ambassadors, host workshops, events, and meet potential recruits, meetings with officials at foreign embassies inside Russia, and meetings at official diplomatic forums. For example, a Telegram post shows that at the Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum on July 27-28, 2023, a meeting took place between Alabuga officials and delegations from Uganda and Ethiopia.<sup>20</sup> Alabuga claims to have visited the embassies of 26 countries in Russia.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, August 4, 2023, <https://t.me/AlabugaStart/94>.

<sup>21</sup> Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, August 1, 2023, <https://t.me/AlabugaStart/8>.

Posts on the Alabuga Start Telegram page show that Alabuga officials have met with numerous officials from African nations. Notably, a delegation from the Republic of Angola, headed by Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Russian Federation Augusto da Silva Cunha, arrived at Alabuga, based on a September 9, 2023, Alabuga Start Telegram post, and announced a cooperation agreement with the Alabuga Start program.<sup>22</sup> In another instance, Alabuga visited Burkina Faso and met with the Ministry of Higher Education and Ministry of Employment, as seen in a Telegram post from June 26, 2023 (see Figure 10). In a Telegram post from June 15, 2023, the Alabuga team met in Sri Lanka and discussed the program with officials there.<sup>23</sup> A delegation from Sri Lanka headed by the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Russian Federation Janita Abeyvikrema Liyanage visited Alabuga and toured the facilities as seen in a post from May 30, 2023.<sup>24</sup> A post from June 13, 2023, shows a delegation from Nigeria headed by the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Russian Federation Prof. Abdullahi Y. Shehu visiting Alabuga and touring the facilities.<sup>25</sup> Alabuga claims in the same Telegram post that the outreach to Nigeria has been ongoing for over a year (meaning since 2022). An April 20, 2023, post to Telegram shows a business trip by Alabuga to Uganda, with a workshop being held on April 19, 2023.<sup>26</sup> Outside of Africa, an event was held by Alabuga in Sao Paulo, Brazil, according to a Telegram post on April 23, 2023.

As discussed above, Alabuga Start has recruited African locals in their efforts. In Uganda, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, some of the recruiters were schoolteachers, administrators, and student leaders, all apparently oblivious of the true purpose of the recruitment effort.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “Angola: President Appoints New Ambassador to Russia,” AllAfrica, May 7, 2021, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202105100112.html>.

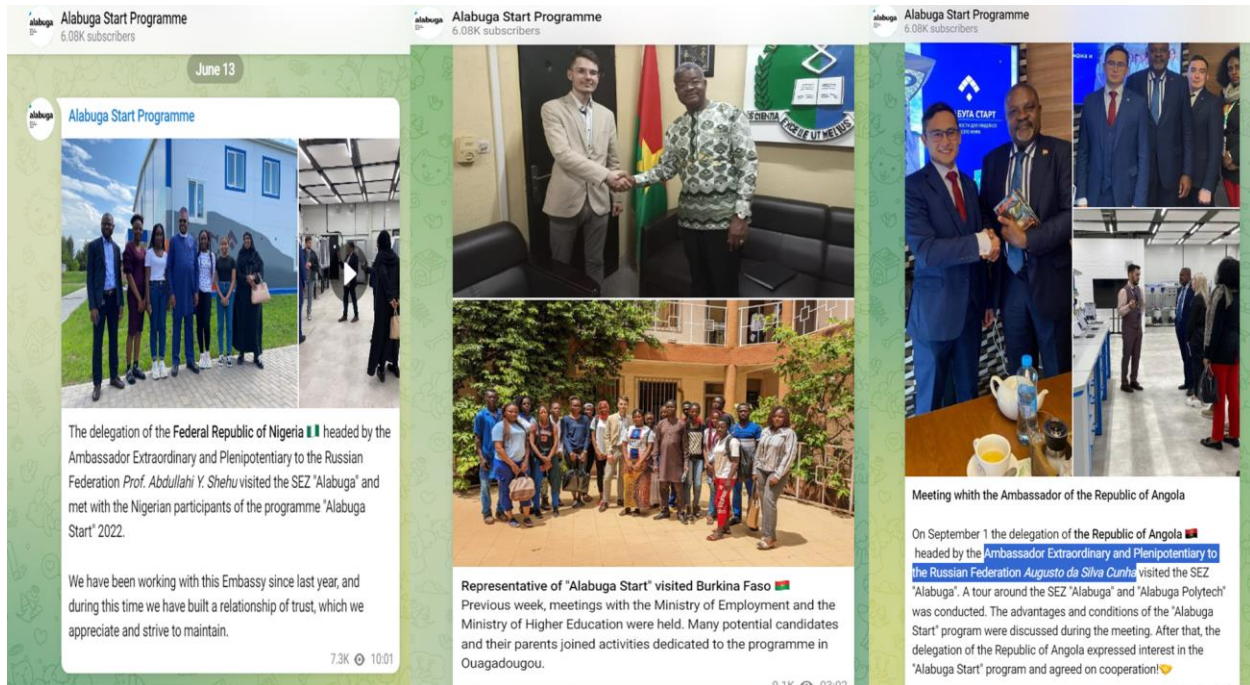
<sup>23</sup> Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, June 15, 2023, <https://t.me/AlabugaStart/72?single>.

<sup>24</sup> “AWARDING OF SRI LANKAN AMBASSADOR JANITA ABEYVIKREMA LIYANAGE WITH THE TITLE OF HONORARY WORKER OF KSMU,” Kursk State Medical University, February 14, 2023, <https://ksmu.com.my/awarding-of-sri-lankan-ambassador-janita-abeyvikrema-liyanage-with-the-title-of-honorary-worker-of-ksmu/>.

<sup>25</sup> Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, June 13, 2023, <https://t.me/AlabugaStart/67?single> ; “The Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, with concurrent accreditation to Belarus; His Excellency, Professor Abdullahi Yibaikwal SHEHU,” Embassy of Nigeria in the Russian Federation, June 2024, <https://nigerianembassy.ru/the-mission/his-excellency-the-ambassador/>.

<sup>26</sup> Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, April 18, 2023, <https://t.me/AlabugaStart/28>.

<sup>27</sup> “The Russian Drone Plant That Could Shape the War in Ukraine.”



**Figure 10.** Alabuga Start telegram posts of examples of meetings between Alabuga and Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Angola. **Source:** Alabuga Start Telegram channel.

## Indoctrination of Alabuga Polytechnic and Alabuga Start Participants

Alabuga Polytechnic and Alabuga Start are advertised as purely educational and hands-on civilian work experience programs. However this façade is quickly eroded, and the true militarization aims of its organization are further revealed by the posts found on its social media. The posts signal an effort by JSC Alabuga to indoctrinate foreign participants with a sense of pride and patriotism for the Russian military and for the work they are doing at the site. A Telegram post on the Alabuga Start page from May 9, 2024, showcasing the Victory Day (World War Two) celebrations at Alabuga prominently displays two female Alabuga participants from Nigeria and Rwanda wearing 1943 Soviet Union World War Two uniforms (see Figure 11). According to the Telegram post, Alabuga Start participants participated in a “themed performance alongside students from the Suvorov military school.” Another post by Alabuga Polytechnic on its VKontakte social media page shows a group of Alabuga Polytechnic participants wearing the same 1943 uniforms, and one participant is even holding a real or replica PPSH-41 sub-machine gun (see Figure 12).

Alabuga Polytechnic even hosts an annual oddly themed military paintball tournament. The university sees the paintball games as part of the “military-patriotic education of Alabuga Polytech.”<sup>28</sup> A paintball tournament was held for Alabuga Polytechnic participants (see Figure

<sup>28</sup> Alabuga Polytech, “I’m waiting for the rain and mud to start”: Alabuga Polytech freshmen shared their impressions and expectations of paintball,” Zen, September 29, 2023, [https://dzen.ru/a/ZRBP\\_HXmJBGQrQrx](https://dzen.ru/a/ZRBP_HXmJBGQrQrx).

13).<sup>29</sup> Participants wore military camouflage and reportedly recreated “key military battles of the Great Patriotic War.” As part of the tournament, Alabuga Polytechnic hosted lectures by Russian military historians Mikhail Timin and Alexey Isae. Alabuga boasted that the tournament “creates a special moment when freshmen can feel like a piece of history and understand the exploits of those who stood in defense of our Motherland.” In May 2023, Alabuga arranged for participants to meet with World War Two veterans and discussed “courage, dedication, and love for the Motherland.”<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 11.** Two female Alabuga Start participants from Nigeria and Rwanda wearing 1943 Soviet Union World War Two uniforms during the May 9, 2024, Victory Day celebration at Alabuga.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Alabuga Polytech, “Paintball at Alabuga Polytech: a game or a test? Unraveling the mysteries of the student tournament,” Zen, February 19, 2024, <https://dzen.ru/a/ZdMSSzWs1kpwUyQ2>.

<sup>30</sup> Alabuga Polytech, “Memory is immortal: students of Alabuga Polytech met with veterans of the Second World War and Northern Military District,” Zen, May 14, 2024, <https://dzen.ru/a/ZGCqEwnRUwnRz-Uh>.

<sup>31</sup> Alabuga Start Program Telegram Channel Post, May 9, 2024, <https://t.me/AlabugaStart/285>.



**Figure 12.** A post by Alabuga Polytechnic to its VKontakte social media for its May 9, 2024, Victory Day celebrations. Participants are seen wearing 1943 Soviet Union military uniforms, and one participant is even carrying a real or replica PPSH-41 sub-machine gun.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 13.** A photo published in February 2024 of the Alabuga Polytechnic annual military paintball tournament showing participants in military camouflage. **Source:** A post by Alabuga Polytechnic to its Zen blog page.

<sup>32</sup>Alabuga Polytech VKontakte Post, May 9, 2024, [https://vk.com/wall-204798518\\_8413](https://vk.com/wall-204798518_8413).

## Last Word

JSC Alabuga is keenly aware of the critical role that Alabuga Polytechnic and Alabuga Start participants have played in filling worker shortages and creating a long-term skilled-worker base at the site to produce Shahed 136 drones. The production of drones is labor intensive, particularly the manufacture of the airframe.

With regards to the Alabuga Start program, JSC Alabuga has used deception and manipulation to recruit participants from Russia, African countries, and other countries into this program. It has lured young and underage people into physically demanding, hazardous work, using education and work on ostensibly civil projects as a cover. In addition, Alabuga does not provide applicants with information that they will be forced to engage in the production of drones intended for use in Ukraine, often against civilian targets. Potential entrants are told only that they will work in composite manufacturing. However, answers to "what is composite manufacturing?" are evasive, citing that composites are used in many industries, including mechanical engineering, aircraft construction, mining, recycling, and medicine. In reality, JSC Alabuga has no other composite-related production facilities other than its drone production plants, in particular its Shahed 136 plant.

The use of students from Polytechnic is also exploitive. These young people are subjected to long hours of work and study, many are exposed to toxic chemicals in the manufacturing process, and they all are complicit in war crimes and the violation of sanctions, almost always without being told the nature of the work they would do.

The fact that evidence exists that JSC Alabuga and Albatross LLC exploit Polytechnic students and Start recruits, many under the age of 18 and from foreign countries, to produce combat drones should be viewed as a crime.