



A Ukrainian soldier examines an abandoned Russian tank in the Severski Donets river. In May 2022, Ukrainian forces inflicted heavy losses on a Russian battalion that attempted to cross the river

Vranyo

How lies undermine the performance of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine

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The Russian language contains two different terms for lying. *Vranyo* is a form of institutionalized lying, which means that everybody knows that everybody is lying but they all go along with it. This form of lying is deeply entrenched in the Russian culture and within the military. All militaries are susceptible to a culture of lying but the Russian armed forces are more susceptible than their Western counterparts. This susceptibility results from a commander-centric approach to Russian military decision-making and force employment. These practices have contributed to the poor performance of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine. *Vranyo* is a specific Russian phenomenon and there are wide interests to maintain this culture of lying instead of changing it.



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When analyzing the (poor) performance of the Russian Armed Forces (RuAF) in Ukraine, analysts tend to focus on hard factors like weapon systems' effectiveness, command and control, or the number of combat troops employed. This is not the whole picture, however, and it is insufficient to explain why, for example, the overall maintenance situation of the RuAF is so poor that engines fail, tires run flat and artillery tubes explode.¹ Nor does it explain why many troops are badly trained,² or why tactical commanders show ineffective leadership.³ When Russian military analysts on state television or military bloggers analyze the performance of the armed forces, a common narrative is that commanders on all levels of the operation are lying.⁴ This reported institutional form of lying is by no means the only factor contributing to the disappointing performance of the army once considered second strongest in the world.⁵ Factors like corruption, lack of training, and inherent doctrinal weaknesses are also important factors,⁶ but will be left out of the scope of this article. This article will focus

solely on institutional lying undermining the performance of the RuAF.

This article starts by explaining what entails the specific Russian culture of lying. Secondly, it elaborates on why all armed forces, and especially the RuAF, are vulnerable to lying. This is followed by an exposition of the consequences of a culture of lying for the Russian forces operating in Ukraine and how it impacts at all levels of command up to the political level. Finally, the article provides some remarks on how typically Russian the phenomenon of *vranyo* is and also a short assessment on the likelihood of the RuAF being able to change the phenomenon.

A Russian culture of lying

The Russian language has two different words for what most European languages would describe as lies. One is *lozh* (ложь), best translated into what we consider to be a lie; something that is the opposite of the truth. There is also *vranyo* (вранье). *Vranyo* is more than a simple lie. It is described as: 'You know I'm lying, and I know that you know, and you know that I know that you know, but I go ahead with a straight face, and you nod seriously and take notes.'⁷

This kind of culture is not created overnight and often rooted deeply in society. Institutionalized lying is part of many cultures and organizations across the world. For example, employees lie to their superiors to keep them happy or because it is easier this way to conform to the bureaucratic standards. It often becomes a survival skill in more authoritarian cultures, like the Russian Federation and its predecessor the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, there were two major state-owned newspapers, *Pravda* (truth) and *Izvestia* (news). The joke was that, in the truth there was no news, and in the news, there was no truth.⁸ *Vranyo* only functions when there is collective or majority participation, just as is the case with endemic corruption. In the states of the former Soviet Union, lying became a survival skill and people lied about everything.⁹ Once a

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- 1 D. Davydenko, 'Lessons for the West: Russia's military failures in Ukraine', *ECFR*, 11 August, 2022. See: <https://ecfr.eu/article/lessons-for-the-west-russias-military-failures-in-ukraine/>.
- 2 M. Starr, 'Russia's mobilized troops poorly trained, lack proper gear for war – western intel', *Jerusalem Post*, 29 September, 2022. See: <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-718458>.
- 3 N. Musumeci, 'Russia's military leadership has only become "increasingly dysfunctional", UK intel says', *Business Insider*, 19 October, 2022. See: <https://www.businessinsider.com/russian-military-leaders-increasingly-dysfunctional-uk-intel-2022-10?international=true&r=US&IR=T>.
- 4 N. Hodge, 'Why the failures of Russia's top brass are now fair game', *CNN*, 8 October, 2022. See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/08/europe/russia-war-criticism-analysis-intl-cmd/index.html>.
- 5 M. Karpova, 'Russia ranked world's 2nd military power after U.S.', *Russia Beyond*, 17 February, 2016. See: https://www.rbth.com/defence/2016/02/17/russia-ranked-worlds-2nd-military-power-after-us_568639.
- 6 Pavel Baev, 'Russia's War in Ukraine: Misleading Doctrine, Misguided Strategy', *Etudes de l'Ifr* 40 (October 2022) 6-21.
- 7 N. Bermel, 'Ukraine war: 'vranyo' – Russian for when you lie and everyone knows it, but you don't care', *The Conversation*, 12 April, 2022. See: <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-vranyo-russian-for-when-you-lie-and-everyone-knows-it-but-you-dont-care-181100>.
- 8 B. Popik, 'There is no truth in news and no news in truth', *Barrypopik.com*, 10 August, 2016. See: https://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/there_is_no_truth_in_news_and_no_news_in_truth.
- 9 D. Mikheyev, 'The Soviet Mentality', *Political Psychology* 8 (1987) (4).

culture like this exists and is entrenched in society, it can become very powerful and very difficult to eliminate. Take as an example lies that were being told about industrial or agrarian output for which the Soviet Union was well-known. This required workers and farmers, management, but also government officials and politicians colluding to maintain the lie. Of course this kind of distorting of the truth in many cases was intertwined with different degrees of corruption. This whole system of lying and corruption is self-sufficient and can continue for a very long time. This is not the case with the military, especially when it is being deployed for combat operations. If one state is generally believed to have a very powerful military, and invades another state that believes otherwise, things may go very wrong when the attacked state calls the attacker's bluff. This, of course, refers to Russia invading a well-prepared Ukraine. In this context, it is important to understand why people continue to lie.

One reason is that it is often just easier to lie than to deal with reality. Ignoring uncomfortable facts makes a job easier and life more comfortable. Also, systems within organizations can be configured to reward liars and even punish the honest, as is the case in authoritarian (and often corrupt) societies, like – Russian society.¹⁰ Lying may lead to promotion, whistleblowing to dismissal, or worse.¹¹ There are cases where participation in lying is enforced, for example, by the fake news laws in Russia concerning the armed forces and the war in Ukraine.¹² In a military context, among the few honest officers in a Russian unit, there will be some who will almost by default hand in the worst readiness reports of the whole unit. This will either lead to not being promoted or being forced out of the army by colleagues who do not like anyone rocking the boat. This is not a characteristic phenomenon of every single officer and his commander, but requires a culture of institutionalized lying deeply permeating a society, like Russian society as a whole.

In the former Soviet Union lying became a survival skill

Why all militaries (and especially the RuAF) are vulnerable to vranjo

Institutionalized lying at all levels can be dangerous to all military organizations. First of all, this is because all militaries are complex networked organizations that operate under the presumption that information is both timely and accurate. Military operations require accurate information from various sources to produce accurate (digital) overlays, gain situational awareness, and provide input into the military decision-making process. If this information flow is of low quality due to lying, the output (decisions) will be of low quality as a result. This is known as 'garbage-in, garbage-out'.

As stated before, all military organizations need accurate information to make correct decisions. There are, however, several factors that make it even more damaging to the RuAF when the information they use as input is of low quality. The RuAF are more vulnerable to vranjo for

- 10 L. Hamers, 'Corrupt Societies encourage lying', *Science*, 9 March, 2016. See: <https://www.science.org/content/article/corrupt-societies-encourage-lying>.
- 11 The whistleblower attorneys, 'Why Companies Self-Sabotage by Punishing Whistleblowers', 11 February 2021. See: <https://www.whistleblowerattorneys.com/blog/companies-sabotage-punishing-whistleblowers>.
- 12 V. Jack, 'Russia expands laws criminalizing "fake news"', *Politico*, March 22, 2022. See: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-expand-laws-criminalize-fake-news/>.

three reasons. First, Russia takes a mathematical/scientific approach to decision-making. Second, Russia adopts a commander-centric decision-making hierarchy. Finally, Russia applies the doctrine of using subsequent waves (echelons) of forces during defence and attack, hereafter referred to as 'echelonment of forces'.

Scientific approach to decision making

In every military, there is an ongoing discussion about the nature of warfare: is it an art or a science? In most armies, warfare will be regarded as a mix of both, with a preference towards either science or art.¹³ In the RuAF, however, there is a clear preference for a scientific approach to warfare, especially on the tactical level.¹⁴ Much emphasis is put on mathematical decision-making. This is implemented, among others, by the extensive use of nomograms during decision-making processes. A nomogram is a graphical calculating device, used to perform mathematical operations by drawing a line through a series of scales on a chart. Nomograms can be used to solve complex equations quickly and easily without the need for a calculator or other computational tools. They are also used in science, engineering, and other fields where precise calculations are needed. Nomograms can be drawn by hand or created using specialized software. They are used by the RuAF for a wide variety of applications, such as calculating the duration of a march, the acquired amount of personnel, or fire missions.¹⁵

Mathematical formulas and nomograms are being extensively used to mathematize military decision-making in the RuAF. Another key component of mathematical planning on the

tactical and operational level is determining the correlation of forces and means (COFM).¹⁶ This methodology is a mathematical determination of the combat power of the adversary after mathematically assessing differences in combat systems, quantity and quality, et cetera. COFM provides the ability to determine a mathematical probability of success. This outcome can be used as the decisive determinant in the commander's decision.¹⁷

Because the decision-making process itself is captured in a set of equations, it is also possible to (semi) automate decision-making. This is supported by dedicated, digitally-automated command and control systems.¹⁸ The RuAF still believe their first priority is high-speed manoeuvre warfare, demonstrated in the opening stages of the invasion in Ukraine. For this purpose, their automated planning system is considered very useful. They believe this will give them an edge over NATO adversaries, rooted in the belief that their decision-making cycle at a certain level is faster than NATO's equivalent. This ensures that the Observe, Orient, Decide, Act (OODA) loop is faster than that of the adversary, at least in theory.¹⁹

This rigid decision-making approach is very vulnerable to the already mentioned 'garbage-in, garbage-out' principle. If the inputs to the equation are faulty, then the decision will be faulty as well. When there is a deeply-embedded culture of lying at all levels, the faulty input will heavily bias such an automated decision-making process towards a damaging result. If, for example, the formula accounts for an attack against the enemy with 500 troops, it will render a certain probability of success. But, if in reality, the attack comprises just 100 troops, that probability is useless. This example is anecdotal for what is happening in Ukraine at the moment.

Commander-centric planning

In NATO armies, staffs use direction and guidance from commanders to study the situation and develop courses of action for the commanders' review and approval. In the Russian system, the commander, not the staff,

13 M. Vego, 'Science vs. the Art of War', *JFQ* 66 (3rd Quarter 2012).

14 L. Grau, *The Russian way of War* (Fort Leavenworth, FMSO, 2016) 38.

15 Grau, *The Russian way of War*, 51-59.

16 C. Reach et al, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means* (Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 2020) 4-24.

17 Grau, *The Russian way of War*, 56.

18 R. McDermot, 'Russian Military Introduces New Automated Command-and-Control Systems', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16 (2019) (86), The Jamestown Foundation, 11 June, 2019.

19 Grau, *The Russian way of War*, 56-58.



Vranyo: 'You know I'm lying, and I know that you know, and you know that I know that you know'

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develops the course of action.²⁰ The Russian tactical military decision process not only starts with the commander but he also strictly controls the execution of the order. The Russian process is facilitated by battle-drills, quick staff procedures, and digital planning tools. The RuAF consider speed to be more important than being meticulous, so they accept a rigid system that supports that. This is very different from the more staff-centric, more flexible planning processes in most NATO armies.²¹

The commander's decision is also the law. When he issues his orders, the staff starts working out the details; there is no room for discussion and there is little room for flexibility and creativity on the part of the staff. They fill out the details based on the strict guidelines provided by the commander and on available planning data in the manuals used, including the aforementioned nomograms. The subordinate commanders are also expected to execute the orders to the letter, with little room to exercise initiative and flexibility. The commander bases his decision

often on mathematical decision-making techniques, like the aforesaid COFM calculations. Because he makes this decision himself, and there is little to no discussion with his staff or subordinates, the whole process is even more vulnerable to 'garbage-in, garbage-out'. And once issued, the faulty order has to be executed to the letter and to its conclusion. This is a partial explanation to why Russian units continue to conduct attacks when they lack any military logic to external observers.

Echelonment of forces

During both defence and attack, the RuAF use echelonment of forces. This means that the available forces are divided into several echelons, each with specific tasks assigned to it. During the attack, the first echelon is to achieve a certain objective. When in one sector the first

20 C.K. Bartles, *Recommendations for Intelligence Staffs Concerning Russian New Generation Warfare* (Kansas City, University of Missouri, 2017).

21 Grau, *The Russian way of War*, 58.

In Russian doctrine only success is reinforced

echelon is successful, the second echelon is sent in to exploit the success in that sector. It will not be sent in to reinforce the sector that has been struggling because, according to Russian doctrine, only success is reinforced. The decision when, where, and how to send in the second echelon is also a decision that can be mathematically-determined and automated.²²

Therefore, this process is also very susceptible to 'garbage-in, garbage-out'. When the data feeding the commanders' decision to engage the second echelon is faulty, the decision to release the second echelon may end in disaster. This cycle can reinforce itself when commanders of subsequent echelons provide inaccurate reports, creating a situation where several waves of units throw themselves against a well-entrenched defender, being destroyed one echelon at a time. This is illustrated by the disastrous river crossing near Bilohorivka across the Severski Donets river between 5 and 13 May 2022, whereby several Russian Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) were committed to an already-failing river crossing. After an attempt had failed on 5 May the Russian forces attempted a pontoon bridge crossing on 8 May. A Ukrainian reconnaissance detachment from the 17th tank brigade, using drones and artillery and mines

floating downstream in the river, successfully destroyed the pontoon bridge the Russian forces had constructed. This trapped a number of Russian forces and their vehicles on the west bank of the river. What is striking is that follow-up mechanized elements arrived at exactly the same location, seemingly adding to the defeat instead of reinforcing the success, as doctrine dictates. It can therefore be deduced that commanders at the failed crossing handed in inaccurate reports which led the higher command level to conclude the crossing was (at least) a partial success, thus triggering the second echelon being committed. So, in the minds of the commanders they were actually reinforcing a success instead of a defeat.

Tactical ineptitude led the mechanized units piling up in a restricted area near the destroyed bridge, offering an excellent target to Ukrainian artillery. In the period from 8 to 13 May Russian forces made several attempts to cross the river, committing even more follow-on echelons and even trying to broaden the crossing at different locations. This further points to a continuous cycle of inaccurate reporting by multiple layers of command triggering the commitment of fresh echelons of mechanized troops. In the end all attempts to construct bridges were thwarted by artillery, drones and air support, which resulted in more troops being cut off on the wrong side of the river. Furthermore, Russian units suffered heavy casualties in the approaches towards the location of the failed crossing, especially while they remained static, waiting to cross. In the end nearly all troops and equipment that managed to cross the river were destroyed or captured. Finally, on 13 May the Russian forces gave up any further attempt to cross the river at this location. Afterwards open source analysts estimated that approximately two BTGs worth of equipment (70 to 80 vehicles) were destroyed and Russian units suffered between 400 and 1,000 dead, wounded and captured. Ukrainian troops are reported to have described the subsequent echelons following their predecessors in the Russian assault as lemmings, a further indication that commanders received faulty triggers to commit fresh troops to an already failing operation.²³

²² Ibidem, 24-50.

²³ N. Aleksejeva, 'Russian War Report: Drone footage confirms failed Russian military pontoon crossing', *Atlantic Council*, 13 May, 2022. See: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-drone-footage-confirms-failed-russian-military-pontoon-crossing/>.

The consequences of vranyo in Ukraine

Vranyo can have severe consequences on military units during peacetime. It undermines discipline, unit cohesion and readiness. As a consequence, Russian units were deployed to the combat zone in Ukraine lacking manpower, having low training standards, being short on supplies and spare parts, and they were not fit for a large-scale war. This resulted in many units that ran out of fuel, had flat tires, ran out of food, and had insufficient communication equipment while they lacked manpower. For example, infantry fighting vehicles were sent into action with only a driver and a gunner, and not carrying infantry squads. This was, however, not reported by their officers, who lied in their status reports about the combat effectiveness of their units, as well as about the results of their operations.

Going to war based on the wrong assumptions

In hindsight, it has become clear that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion based on faulty intelligence. It is unlikely that the intelligence reports given to Putin and the contents of the various briefings and decisions will ever become public. It is, however, possible to reconstruct the Russian decision-making process almost entirely, based on insights in intelligence reports that indicated that an invasion in Ukraine would be similar to the simple walk-over operation during the annexation of Crimea in 2014.²⁴ Ukrainian armed forces would be no match for the RuAF because the Ukrainian soldiers were unmotivated, would not put up a fight, and would defect in considerable numbers. It was furthermore reported that a significant part of the population would welcome the Russian troops as liberators, while other parts of the population and security forces were waiting to be employed as agents in the service of Russia. Adding to this, Putin was given inaccurate data about RuAF combat readiness. It was therefore concluded that the invasion would be over in several days, that Kyiv would be taken quickly, and that Russia could install a friendly regime while taking possession of the territory it wanted.²⁵

A final assumption made by the Russian authorities was the low probability of a reaction by the West, just as in 2008 and 2014. The force posture of the RuAF is in line with the assumptions mentioned above, because it was aligned to conduct a swift operation and secure an easy victory. This would be done with air-assault forces taking possession of some key positions including airports that could serve as a jump-off point to strategic targets. These were followed by a speedy advance by light units, special forces and Russian airborne forces, the *Vozdushno-desantnye voyska* (VDV), to do the link up, who would thus avoid zones of resistance to reach their strategic targets in a matter of hours. The VDV were followed by mechanized forces that would conduct thunder-run like operations in march formation to overwhelm the remaining opposition. According to the faulty assumptions created by vranyo mentioned above, there was no need for a prolonged, infrastructure-damaging shaping operation using the (strategic) air forces and high-precision long-range weapons as the Coalition forces did in Iraq prior to Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Therefore, the RuAF only conducted a limited bombardment using a small number of stand-off weapons, like SRBM and cruise missiles, before the invasion kicked off.

The strong point of the RuAF, their immense arsenal of tube and rocket artillery, also was not initially used to shape the battlefield for the same reasons based on the same faulty assumptions. Neither was there a unified theatre command because, according to the false assumptions, there would not be a coherent opponent that required such a unified effort. Therefore, the operation consisted of more or less separate operational axes of advance without the need for complex coordination. Of course, the invasion did not deliver the swift victory anticipated, and the war is now more

24 D.V. Gioe, 'Putin Should Have Known His Invasion Would Fail', *Foreign Policy*, 24 February, 2023. See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/24/ukraine-russia-putin-war-invasion-military-failure/>.

25 Imperial War Museum, 'Russian invasion of Ukraine: How Putin lost in ten days', 2023. See: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-putin-lost-in-10-days>.



Destroyed Russian equipment in Kyiv. The Russian invasion did not deliver the swift victory anticipated by the Russian leadership

than two years old.²⁶ As a reaction to this debacle, the 5th Directorate of the Russian Federal Security service, Federalnaja Sloezjba Bezopasnosti (FSB), which had been responsible for providing Putin with intelligence about Ukraine, was purged. The FSB is not only focused on the Russian Federation itself but also on Russians living elsewhere, the 'Compatriots abroad', especially those living in former Soviet states like Ukraine. Therefore, the FSB always had an excellent information position, which has always been used with a certain degree of success to improve Russian security at home, and to direct Russian foreign policy and interests abroad. This is a clear indication that the intelligence processes themselves are in general quite successful, with the successful annexation of Crimea in 2014 as a clear example. Therefore, is it highly plausible that vranyo is to be blamed for the faulty intelligence provided to Putin and his circle of trusted policy makers on Ukraine in the run-up to the invasion in 2022.

At the same time that the FSB was purged, the foreign military intelligence service of the Russian army, the Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye, (GRU), was made responsible for providing intelligence reports on Ukraine to Putin.²⁷ It is a clear sign that the FSB was punished for providing faulty intelligence.

The final step in the intelligence processing cycle involves the transfer of processed information from the intelligence bureaus to the decision-makers. It is quite possible that Putin was not open to this kind of intelligence or that the FSB told Putin what he wanted to hear, instead of basing their reports on reality. Historically Russian intelligence services have

26 Robert Dalsjö, et al, 'A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War', *Survival* 64 (2022) (3) 7-28.

27 M. Jankowicz, 'Putin purged large numbers of FSB agents in retribution for poor Ukraine intelligence, Russia expert says', *Business Insider*, 12 April, 2022. See: <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-purges-fsb-over-ukraine-failures-bellingcat-expert-2022-4?international=true&r=US&IR=T>.

often been very effective, which points to well-established processes. In Russia, however, it is all too common to tell the higher ups what they want to hear. It is the moment when vranjo comes into play, and that is what happened in the run-up to the invasion in 2022. A very specific example is the fact that the FSB knew from surveys that large parts of the Ukrainian population would defy Russian occupation and that the notion that Russia would be greeted as a liberator was unfounded. Yet the FSB reported the opposite. Once the lies were circulating, most Russian authorities started to believe them. It is difficult to stop this continuous chain of lying once it has been initiated. Imagine being an analyst at the FSB knowing very well what is actually going on?. Will that analyst risk being the one to tell the emperor he is not wearing clothes? This is unlikely in a culture where conformity is the norm and where mavericks are punished. Vranjo is a culture in which the majority participates so, as a consequence, also competent FSB personnel simply went along with the flow.²⁸

Being the emperor himself, Putin continues with lying about the reason for the invasion and the progress of the war in general and, of course,

everybody follows suit. From day one of the war the narrative of a special military operation has been in use and using terms such as invasion or, let alone war, is prohibited. Regardless of what actually transpires in the field, the special military operation is still making progress according to Putin, his government, the military and the official Russian state-owned news outlets. Moreover, most of Russian society still appears to accept this narrative or does not openly speak out against it. It is also partly due to repressive measures in force within the Russian Federation, but the Russian people are accustomed to being led by a strong leader, even if he keeps them cowed with fables.

Operations defying all military logic

For many months on end, the Russian army and in the recent past also the Wagner group, have conducted continuous frontal assaults using human wave tactics. This happened amongst others near Pavlivka,²⁹ Vuhledar,³⁰ Bakhmut,³¹ and Avdiivka.³² This type of assault is characterized by waves of troops that continue to advance regardless of previous (catastrophic) failures. This resulted in thousands of dead and wounded Russian troops and hundreds of armoured vehicles destroyed or abandoned. It has been assessed, for example, that the 155th naval Infantry Brigade, a former elite formation, has already been replenished at least three times using freshly-mobilized troops as of summer 2023. One infamous assault by this unit near Vuhledar in February 2023 resulted in the destruction of one complete BTG worth of armoured vehicles and the loss of several hundreds of soldiers during one assault. This unit repeatedly drove into a minefield, which caused it to become easy pickings for Ukrainian artillery and anti-tank missiles.³³ The same kind of behaviour is being reported more recently during attacks on Avdiivka, raising the question whether the culture of vranjo also prohibits units to learn from their mistakes on the basic tactical and technical level. This is exemplified by the following quote from the *Kyiv Independent* about the assaults on Avdiivka: 'Reminiscent of the mindless columns of armor that tried to take Vuhledar last winter, Russian tanks and armored vehicles were churned up in their dozens by

28 G. Miller, C. Belton, 'Russia's spies misread Ukraine and misled Kremlin as war loomed', *Washington Post*, 19 August, 2022. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2022/russia-fsb-intelligence-ukraine-war/>.

29 D. Axe, 'The Village Of Pavlivka Is A "Furnace" Burning Up Russian Marine Brigades', *Forbes*, 21 November, 2022. See: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/11/21/the-village-of-pavlivka-is-a-furnace-for-two-russian-marine-brigades/?sh=6e52c59c19d3>.

30 M. Eckel, 'What Happened in Vuhledar? A Battle Points To Major Russian Military Problems', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 17 February, 2023. See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-battle-vuhledar/32276547.html>.

31 S. Roblin, 'In Pictures: Russia's Strange Assault On Bakhmut Wreaks A World War I Hellscape', *Forbes*, 16 October, 2022. See: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2022/10/16/in-pictures-russian-forces-assault-world-war-i-hellscape-at-bakhmut/?sh=2969d3e358d3>.

32 J. Psaropoulos, 'Russia unleashes assault waves on Ukraine's Avdiivka, refugees on Nordics', *Aljazeera*, 29 November, 2023. See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/29/russia-unleashes-assault-waves-on-ukraines-avdiivka-refugees-on-nordics>.

33 I. Birrell, 'Putin's marine brigade of 5,000 men is all but destroyed in one of the most brutal battles since the start of the war', *Daily Mail*, 13 February, 2023. See: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11746903/Putins-marine-brigade-5-000-men-destroyed-brutal-battle.html>.

Ukrainian artillery, anti-tank fire, and first-person-view (FPV) drones.’

All these assaults defy prevailing military logic, at least by Western standards. The operational and even tactical benefits of gaining control over the aforementioned towns are very limited, or even non-existent, according to Western military analysts. Also, Russian military doctrine clearly states that success and not defeat needs to be reinforced. The failing assaults likely continued in 2022 and 2023 because Putin needed a success to make up for suffering two major setbacks due to the Kharkiv and Kherson counter-offensives and being on the defensive for months during the summer of 2023. ‘Liberating’ the rest of Donbass could be one such success. The fact that this area has not yet been liberated remains a thorn in Putin’s side. Putin (and also the Defence Minister and senior commanders) really want a victory. For Russian commanders, though, it is better to tell the leadership what it wants to hear than to report failures as they occur. This is proven by the fate of General Ivan Popov, the former commander of the 58th army, who publicly criticized the conduct of the war and complained about the horrendous casualties suffered by his 58th army. He was subsequently fired in July 2023.

Although hard evidence is lacking, and if ever it becomes available, it is highly plausible that the officers at all levels lie about what is happening at the front and within the armed forces. They lie about the staffing of their units, the supplies at hand, availability of weapons and about the outcome of their assaults. That can also be a contributing factor to the continuation of the assaults; when partial successes are reported, even though the assaults are actually failing, then doctrine dictates that partial result must be reinforced. When the majority of officers continue to lie, those who speak the truth are punished in the Russian system as it functions at the moment, as the case of General Ivan Popov shows.

The fall of Izyum

Until now most examples about the consequences of vranyo were offensive actions by the

For Russian commanders it is better to tell the leadership what it wants to hear than to report failures

Russian army. Vranyo can also have devastating consequences when military units are surprised and forced to defend. The fall of Izyum, for example, during the Kharkiv counteroffensive in September 2022, was highlighted on Russian state television by former Russian officer Mikhail Khodarenok. Referring to the earlier-mentioned COFM calculations, he stated that the fall of Izyum should not have been possible because there is a mathematical formula to determine whether a position can be held or not.³⁴ In theory it should not have been possible to be overwhelmed as they were in Izyum. If the outcome of the mathematical formula used was based upon lies, Russian forces would have been taken by surprise and overrun by the enemy. As a result, these forces were routed, leaving behind their dead, large amounts of destroyed equipment, and, on top of that, large quantities of weapons, ammunition, vehicles and other supplies.³⁵ Of course, there are also other factors contributing to the defeat like the redeployment of regular Russian formations, leaving the area to be partially defended by the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) militias. Finally, faulty intelligence, or successful deception by the Ukrainian forces, are also likely contributing factors.

34 T. Spirlet, ‘Russian commander admitting “constant lying” around Putin’s war defeat cut live on TV’, *Express*, 2 October, 2022. See: https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1677145/putin-russia-ukraine-war-propaganda-lies-defeat-annexation-luhansk-donetsk-kherson-vn/amp#amp_tf=Van%20%251%24s&aoh=16790797121850&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com.

35 Reuters, ‘Russian state media grapples with Kharkiv defeats’, 12 September, 2022. See: <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/russian-state-media-grapples-with-kharkiv-defeats-2022-09-12/>.

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Russian President Putin and the Moscow-appointed heads of the four annexed Ukrainian regions. Vranjo is deeply entrenched in all levels of Russian society and politics, making it unlikely to disappear

Final remarks

It is questionable whether the RuAF can fix the problem of vranjo because it is so deeply entrenched in Russian society in general. State Duma Deputy and former Commander of the Southern Military District, Lieutenant-General Gurulev made a remarkable telegram post in September 2023, giving a rare glimpse into the effects of vranjo on the military operating in Ukraine. In this post he complained that the culture of lying in the Russian military is the main issue preventing a Russian victory in Ukraine and claimed that false reports lead to poor decision-making at many levels within the Russian military.³⁶

Of course, other cultures also have to deal with lies and their effects on society, government and armed forces. For example, the English language

makes a distinction between white lies and black lies. Black lies are plain lies for one's own benefit. A white lie, on the other hand, is a lie that may be told for the benefit of another person, to protect that person or his feelings. This is something different than vranjo, though. White lies are individual acts with good intentions, whereas vranjo requires a sort of conspiracy where multiple actors collude to maintain a chain of lies benefiting them to the detriment of others.

The Russian authorities have a deep-rooted interest in maintaining the system of vranjo as it is. Where corruption gives them material and financial gains, vranjo helps them to further their careers and protect their reputations. In fact, there will be no internal resistance from the soldier to the top political level to change this system of lies. To genuinely change this phenomenon, the political will to implement a comprehensive change programme from the top down is necessary, and it is very unlikely that this will happen in today's Russia. ■

³⁶ ISW press, 'Russian offensive campaign assessment', 15 September, 2023. See: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-15-2023>.