



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The enemy in its pocket



Russia needs to be aware of how dangerous it is to use unprotected telecommunications in wartime conditions. It was a pioneer in such targeting when, in April 1996, before the abundance of mobile communications, Russia killed Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev with an anti-radar missile while he was talking on a satellite phone. The war in Ukraine showed that such awareness does not exist within the Russian army, and neither does its superior technological equipment, about which Russia created its own mythology.

Hundreds of Russian soldiers were killed on Sunday in Makiivka, in the occupied eastern region of Ukraine, when their facility was hit by HIMARS system missiles. The reason for the high death toll was “the turning on and massive use by personnel of mobile phones within reach of enemy weapons”, said Russian Lt Gen Sergei Sevryukov. Apart from this confession, another curiosity from the Russian Ministry of Defence was that it confirmed a large number of its victims in just one Ukrainian attack, first 63, and later 89.

This is far less than the Ukrainian estimate that as many as 400 Russian soldiers died in this attack, but it was certainly surprising that the military command in Moscow admitted it suffered such huge losses.

Command denies responsibility for the deaths of soldiers

The Russian military's confession that the deaths were caused by the soldiers' indiscipline when using phones was important for at least two reasons. Shifting responsibility from the main command to lower levels and even to the victims themselves indicates the Kremlin's desire, perhaps even strategy, to protect itself from future public discontent due to a series of war failures.

A similar strategy was used by Vladimir Putin himself, in peacetime, when, due to the chaotic state of Russian healthcare at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, he transferred responsibility for a large number

of the sick and deceased from the central government to the governments of Russian provinces. By putting mobile phones at the centre of the mass killing of soldiers in Makiivka, the Russian military wants to solve two big problems.

Russia wants to use an immense tragedy to try to control unprotected phone usage which has proven to be an intractable problem since the beginning of the aggression. Furthermore, the army wants to eliminate the use of mobile phones because of the huge number of humiliating video clips, where troops complain about poor equipment, poor organisation and low morale, and even record and broadcast conflicts between soldiers and their superiors. The Russian army has failed to implement this type of military censorship during the last 10 months.

Someone in the Russian General Staff was happy about the victims in Makiivka

Perhaps someone in the Russian General Staff saw the casualties in Makiivka as an ideal opportunity to bring military's phone calls, taking pictures, and recording video clips, including locations, under control, because this was a problem that has accompanied the invasion since day one. For part of its success in stopping the Russian penetration towards Kiev, at the very beginning of the aggression, the Ukrainian defence should also thank the Russian invaders, who took photographs of themselves in combat positions and posted them, with the location, on social media.

They should also thank the conversations that those soldiers had with their families, and among themselves, whilst using the Ukrainian telecommunications infrastructure. Even if the Russian army succeeds in its intention to intimidate its members not to use mobile phones on account of the victims in Makiivka, it will not be entirely possible. Quite simply, in Ukraine, the Russian army showed, amongst other things, the serious obsolescence of its communication methods and networks.

"Russian technological quality is a myth.

Moscow's troops used encrypted phones at the beginning of the conflict but they were old-generation phones from the 80s and 90s which ran into problems. So they started using civilian phones instead", said Stephane Dubreuil, a French telecommunications expert, to France 24. British Defence Minister Ben Wallace said last May that Ukrainians often found paper maps from the 1980s in captured armoured personnel carriers, and civilian GPS devices attached with adhesive tape in the cockpits of bombers, because the pilots could not trust the built-in electronics.

It is too late to introduce communication discipline

Any ban on the use of mobile phones will be very difficult for the Russian army, because phones are not only a concession for contacting family. Mobile phones are often the main means of communication with the troops in the field. Even if mobile phone communication is tolerated because of this, it will require extremely strict protocols, which is almost impossible to establish in an army with low security discipline, such as the Russian one.

This is the trap which the Ukrainian army has awaited for 10 months. It is equipped with modern devices for intercepting communications, but also with very sophisticated skills for absorbing cyber-sphere kit into an attack plan. "Russian forces should not underestimate the Ukrainian ability to exploit poor operational security practices on the frontlines", has been the assessment of Russian military bloggers, reported by the US Institute for the Study of War.

Even if Russian military communication protocols change overnight, for many reasons it is too late. Particularly for the many war crimes they have committed in Ukraine, for which their photos and selfies, with locations where the crimes were committed and their unprotected communication about where they

talked about the crimes, will serve as direct or indirect evidence. "Ukraine is a crime scene", said Karim Khan, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in The Hague to AP, as part of the research story according to which Ukraine has been investigating as many as 58,000 potential war crimes committed by the Russian army.

For many of them, valuable evidence will be the invaders' posts on social networks, or their telephone conversations.