

# RMS<sup>+</sup>



REVUE MILITAIRE SUISSE INTERNATIONALE : RUSSIAN VDV



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Russian airborne troops riding on top of their BMD-2 in Ukraine, flying the Russian and VDV flags.

## Editorial

### Russian VDV in the Ukraine War

**COL (GS) Dr. Alexandre J. Vautravers**

Editor in Chief, RMS+

The first issues of RMSINT+, launched in the summer of 2023, have been focused on national armed forces and defense or security policies of a number of countries.

But in order to address the ongoing war in Ukraine, it may be necessary to adapt the focus and format. Building mostly on texts originally appearing in RMS+ No. 1 and 2/2024, this international edition will cover the Russian Federation's airborne troops (VDV), as well as their engagement and the broader evolving situation in Ukraine.

After more than two years of war, it is possible to draw a number of conclusions about the capabilities, doctrines and equipment of the Russian paratrooper formations. They have indeed been at the tip of the spear of the 'special military operation' in the very first days of 2022. As such, they can be seen as the units making the greatest tactical and territorial gains in South Ukraine, taking and crossing the Dniepr by force in the Kerson oblast. But they have also been at the center of the failure to achieve the taking of the strategic objective of Kyiv, in the course of the misfortuned landing at Hostomel airport.

We also know that proud VDV have a long history - as they were indeed the precursors of their speciality, having been developed in the 1930s as an instrument of strategic surprise and an elite 'entry force' by air or by land.

The articles in this edition will present the VDV's origins, doctrine, reorganization and equipment. We will also

discuss the evolving situation in the Ukraine war. As we will see, the VDV is more an operational than a strategic instrument. And its specialized and expensive equipment may give way to an increased standardization and integration into the regular land forces.

For more information about the Ukraine war, two thematic issues have been entirely devoted to this coverage, in 2022 and 2023. One of these also concentrated on the air and drone war going on in Ukraine. These issues can be ordered online at [www.revuemilitairesuisse.ch](http://www.revuemilitairesuisse.ch), and it is also possible to subscribe to the French language original RMS+.

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Unable to build large vessels, the Russian Navy has developed smaller platforms - like the *Buyan-M* corvette, which weighs just 500 tonnes but was built in 14 units - capable of long-range strikes using cruise missiles. This trend has been dubbed "Kalibrization".

## Strategy

### Return of the 'Strategic Surprise'

**LIEUTENANT GENERAL Laurent Michaud**

Head, Joint Operations Command, Swiss Armed Forces

The year 2023 confirms the downward trend in the global security situation. The return of power politics is compounded by natural disasters and other climatic, migratory and food crises. It is now clear that war has long since settled on Europe's doorstep, that it is only too eager to spread to the Middle East and Africa, and could break out in the Balkans and in Asia-Pacific.

After years of a unipolar world order, the world is now divided into multiple zones of influence that are increasingly emancipating themselves from that of the West. Disagreements can no longer be arbitrated in the discussion circles of international bodies, as they have been in recent decades. In the absence of a truly hegemonic world policeman, latent conflicts, often created by arbitrary border demarcations, are reawakening. Many no longer recognize the authority, if only the moral authority, of international organizations, or accept the authority of the great powers by force.

The bipolar international order inherited from the Second World War, at the time a unipolar order, ensured a certain predictability in international relations. Even the Cold War was governed by the rules of nuclear escalation and the Red Telephone. While not all the rules have disappeared in 2024, today we have to acknowledge that the return of multipolarity and the proliferation of actors, each more heterogeneous than the last, are making it more difficult to predict and manage tensions. As a consequence of this disappearance of predictability, surprise is a notion that must once again be taken into account in the calculations of political and military decision makers.

Much more than a principle in the conduct of *operative* or *tactical* operations, with which we are familiar, surprise is a constant that every player, whatever his size, can exploit at the operational and strategic levels, and which he must guard against. Surprise occurs when an actor's actions cause his victim to suddenly become aware of a discrepancy between his perceptions and reality. Surprise is therefore a psychological shock which generally involves the use of offensive means of action to get ahead of the victim, create a fait accompli and impose one's will. Surprise, through its element of psychological stupefaction, is greater when it is generated by cumulative effects in all areas of operation. This is one of the driving forces behind the shock principle theorized by Soviet thinkers in the

1920s. Unlike uncertainty or friction, surprise is an effect deliberately sought to gain the upper hand. If well executed, it can be decisive for the success of an operation.

### Information as the Preferred Vector for Surprise

The extreme virality of information highlighted in the article on the information space enables actors with few resources to influence the perceptions of their adversaries in depth and in a very short time, and to easily spread their narratives among populations and decision makers. Many actors today see the freedom of speech in democratic societies, the difficulty of moderating social network content, and the distrust of institutional speech as critical vulnerabilities that can be exploited to deceive them about their intentions and weaken the will to fight. Russia makes extensive use of this to influence Western opinion on arms deliveries to Ukraine. Generally speaking, because it plays with perceptions and fear, terrorism also makes use of surprise, previously confined to the battlefield, by moving it into the societal realm.

Threat is the result of the multiplication of capabilities and intention. While capabilities evolve slowly, intentions change very quickly, and the characteristics of the information space make it possible to transmit, or hide, these intentions rapidly in order to generate surprise. Convincing thus becomes an essential capability. Despite a concentration of forces in plain sight, Russia was able to maintain its element of surprise until February 24, 2022, thanks to skilful work on perceptions. The attack on October 7 however showed that a lengthy effort to undermine Israeli perceptions had led to the belief that Hamas had mellowed and that it no longer represented a threat. The result was a notable strategic failure for a state considered to be at the cutting edge of intelligence capabilities.

This undermining can also be seen in international perceptions of the conflict. Despite being attacked by terrorist actions deliberately targeting civilians, Israel is struggling to impose its «just war» narrative on the Palestinian question. Through the information space, legitimizing recourse to a «just war» is becoming increasingly difficult, and this is further reinforced by the decay of international norms and mediation bodies.

At the operational level, the Hamas attack showed that