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# Russia's War Aims in Ukraine

## Objective-Setting and the Kremlin's Use of Force Abroad

**R**ussia's war in Ukraine is Moscow's most significant use of force outside its borders since World War II. Even in the early stages of its full-scale invasion, which began in February 2022, the operation entailed by far the largest commitment of ground forces in decades, and the scale of military resources devoted to the war has grown significantly since then. In short, the stakes for Russia could not be higher.

Despite these stakes, the Kremlin did not offer a coherent public narrative on the objectives of the operation. Often, goals were simply not articulated; when they were, vague concepts were used that allowed significant room for interpretation. Senior Russian leaders regularly made contradic-

tory claims about the goals, often even contradicting themselves. It is true that statesmen often dissemble in public about what they hope to accomplish in foreign policy: In particular, Russian President Vladimir Putin is notorious for his untruths, particularly when denying his country's violation of a commitment or norm. However, it is remarkable that the Russian leadership has not told either the public or the troops in clear terms what Moscow is trying to achieve in its most consequential use of force abroad in several generations.

Such confusion about objectives contradicts a core tenet of Russian strategy; namely, the necessity to link political goals and military action.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Russian strategists recognize the importance of clear, publicly articulated objectives when using military force.
- Russian strategists emphasize the need to adjust political objectives to realities on the ground.
- Since 2014, Russia's military operations abroad have either been deniable and semi-covert (Crimea and the Donbas); when its operations are acknowledged and overt (Syria), such operations are accompanied by a clearly stated objective.
- Moscow's failure to consistently articulate a coherent objective in the first year of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine deviates from both the postulates of Russian military science and the country's past practice since 2014.
- Russian military and political leaders have pronounced objectives for the war in Ukraine, but those objectives have been numerous and have varied significantly in the first year of the war.

Furthermore, this ambiguous approach diverges significantly from Russia's practice prior to 2022. In the operation to annex Crimea and the post-2014 invasion of the Donbas, the Russian leadership denied the very fact that force was used, thus obviating the need for a public narrative. In its intervention in Syria, which Russia acknowledged, the Kremlin has been careful to stick to a consistent public narrative about its goals, even as it adapted to changing circumstances on the ground.

In this report, we analyze Russia's objective-setting in the first year of its full-scale war in Ukraine. We begin with an analysis of Russian military-scientific writings on the political objectives of war. We then examine recent cases of Russia's use of force abroad to develop a better understanding of past practices in publicly communicating objectives. Using these two sources of information, we extrapolate expectations about objective-setting in Russian policy in wartime.

We then analyze Moscow's public objective-setting during the first year of what the Kremlin calls the "special military operation." We do so using a qualitative analysis of key speeches and a quantitative analysis of an original dataset of Russian leaders' descriptions of their goals in 2022. We coded statements made by Putin, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, and defense minister Sergei Shoigu from several months prior to the full-scale invasion through the

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end of 2022. We documented the variety of objectives these leaders cited in justifying the war and the relative frequency with which they invoked those objectives. We then analyzed our findings. We found that Russian military and political leaders articulated objectives for the war against Ukraine, but those objectives were inchoate, contradictory, and inconsistent throughout 2022. Paradoxically, the stated objectives remained unchanged despite the dramatically different political decisions and military context that emerged in fall 2022. This vagueness about what Russia was trying to achieve could suggest that its leadership wanted to keep its options open about acceptable war outcomes. It could also indicate that there were no strongly fixed goals for this war.

The scoping of this report was deliberately circumscribed. We do not have access to the inner workings of the Russian state or the private conversations and thoughts of key decisionmakers. Therefore, we focused on leaders' public statements. However, in the context of a war that has directly involved hundreds of thousands of officers, soldiers, and civil servants and affected the lives of nearly every Russian citizen, these public statements bear special significance. Even if such statements do not provide an accurate or fulsome accounting of Putin's motives, they are the means by which the leadership conveys a sense of purpose to those involved in this massive undertaking. Therefore, these statements are inherently important as a subject of study regardless of their veracity.

It is important to note that analyzing these statements does not imply condoning them or endorsing their content. The views and assertions of Russia's leadership are at significant odds with those widely held by Western officials and observers. Many of the Russian leadership's views and assertions are either empirically false, morally abhorrent, or both. However, this normative judgment does not diminish the significance of these assertions for the analysis presented in our report.

## Russian Military Strategists on the Goals of War

With its strong grounding in the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz, Russian strategic thought recognizes the centrality of establishing clear political objectives for wars and of articulating them publicly. Strategists argue that lower-level goals must be subordinated to the high-level political objective, which suggests an awareness of the cascading and potentially catastrophic effects that a lack of clarity in communicating war aims can have for the rank and file and public as a whole. That said, classical and contemporary Russian strategic thinkers also recognize that the rigidity of war aims can be just as problematic as not having clear ones. They see the need for flexibility and for enabling the revision of political objectives in light of developments on the ground. Even when revised, however, these thinkers contend that those goals should be clearly specified and known down the chain of command.

### The Centrality of Political Objectives in War

Russian military science accords von Clausewitz's ideas pride of place, along with the country's own classic authors of the genre, such as Aleksandr Svechin and Georgiy Isserson. In particular, Russian strategists often laud von Clausewitz's views on the objectives of war and the importance of specifying those objectives clearly. Contributing authors to *Military Thought* often cite his letter to Roeder,<sup>1</sup> which states:

The political purpose and the means available to achieve it give rise to the *military objective*. This ultimate goal of the entire belligerent act, or of the particular campaign if the two are identical, is therefore the first and most important issue that the strategist must address, for the main lines of the strategic plan run toward this goal, or at least are guided by it.<sup>2</sup>

From von Clausewitz's writings, Russian strategists conclude that a war should not begin until its main objective is clearly defined.<sup>3</sup> Once it is clear that this objective cannot be realized with peaceful means,

it is transformed into military goals that jointly contribute to achieving the objective through war.<sup>4</sup>

Militaries tend to see their goal in any war as defeating the enemy. This goal can be translated into various scenarios, such as prevailing over the adversary's military, capturing its territories, or forcing the government and population to submit. However, Russian strategists argue that a political objective for war must be about making the world better for the protagonist than it was before the war.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, politicians can and should restrain the wishes of the military. For example, they might expect the defeated enemy to become a partner after the war. In that case, the enemy's full destruction would be counterproductive.<sup>6</sup>

According to Russian strategists, the political objective of a war has to account for the current state of the military and the country as a whole. In turn, the military goal needs to be grounded in a proper understanding of available resources and constraints.<sup>7</sup> Victory in war requires comprehensive preparatory work. War affects the entire population, so the economy has to be prepared and, if necessary, transformed to accommodate the needs of the military.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, strategists argue that the preparatory stage involves ideological work.<sup>9</sup> Using information operations, the country that is preparing to launch an offensive should break the adversary's spirit in advance of any military actions. It is also essential to ensure the support of one's own population. Russian military thinkers often contend that the failures of U.S. operations abroad can be attributed to a lack of public support at home.<sup>10</sup>

As the officer E. F. Podsoblyayev argued, the military goals of war must be hierarchical:

Of foremost importance is establishing a goal for each element of the warring polity and its institutions. Next, the goals at the lower levels of the hierarchy stem from the higher-level goals. So, the highest political objective that cannot be achieved peacefully determines the objectives of the armed forces and so on . . . Additionally, achieving goals at lower levels determines success at higher levels. You cannot win a war unless every soldier on the battlefield sees himself as winning his

own “little war.” . . . Finally, the highest-level objective will determine the means chosen for achieving goals at all levels down to the lowest.<sup>11</sup>

Every soldier needs to understand why they are fighting. Furthermore, every action within the war must contribute to achieving overall strategic or political objectives. He goes on to say that the Soviets’ failure in Afghanistan “clearly demonstrates” what happens when military means do not match the political goal.<sup>12</sup>

Although all operations should ultimately focus on achieving the strategic political objective, strategists acknowledge that the operational plan can and should be adaptable to the situation on the ground.<sup>13</sup> History shows that assumptions in initial war plans are often wrong about key aspects of the conflict. The ability to adapt plans to new circumstances is thus crucial for victory. When establishing political and military goals, strategists must bear in mind that their successes are likely to peak at a certain point and then decrease because of resource exhaustion. Wise political leaders and military commanders must ensure that this culmination point has been identified correctly and accurately account for available resources. If not, even the most ingenious strategic offensive operation can end in disaster. The political goal of the war should not drive the military beyond that culmination point.<sup>14</sup>

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Russian strategy recognizes that a war’s political and military goals are interconnected in complex ways rather than being purely hierarchical.

## Flexible Plan of War

Another group of Russian military strategists filled what they saw as certain gaps in von Clausewitz’s ideas on the hierarchy of war aims. Specifically, they emphasized the need for a degree of flexibility in adjusting political objectives to operational realities. In 2019, two strategists argued that military decisions based purely on nonmilitary goals can result in operational deadlock.<sup>15</sup> In such cases, military effectiveness is intentionally sacrificed to political or symbolic objectives. These suboptimal choices are not caused by a lack of knowledge or experience but by the intentional prioritization of political or symbolic objectives despite the high cost. To get out of operational deadlock, war objectives should be revised to reflect what is going on the ground. Svechin proposed to solve this problem with the idea of a flexible plan of war. His ideas continue to have wide currency in Moscow and are cited by senior leaders, including the Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov. In a speech that subsequently became a frequently cited article, Gerasimov emphasized Svechin’s belief that each war was unique; it is impossible to predict how any modern war will unfold.<sup>16</sup> Thus, strategy should follow the logic of a particular war and not ready-made templates or prior experiences.

Although Svechin emphasized the importance of comprehensive war preparation across various domains (e.g. military, domestic, economic, diplomatic), he argued that the political objective of the war, which is set prior to any military actions, can and should be revised based on the situation on the ground.<sup>17</sup> The war’s development and the results of military operations can force reconsideration of the political objectives of the war. Both military failure and success can lead to such modifications. However, it is crucial to realign goals at the operational and tactical levels after the political objective is changed. These military goals, which are subordinate to the political objective, can be revised (shrunk or expanded) or even completely transformed (e.g., from offensive into defensive) to match the change at the higher level.

In short, Russian strategy recognizes that a war’s political and military goals are interconnected in

much more complex ways rather than being purely hierarchical. The political goal set prior to the war should be informed by the military leadership, who, in turn, must possess an understanding of political objectives so that they can advise the politicians wisely.<sup>18</sup> The course of the war can influence the political objective at any stage of fighting. Political objectives must reflect reality.<sup>19</sup> And wars driven by ideology pose particular challenges given the inherent rigidity of an ideological goal.<sup>20</sup> A political objective can be adapted to the realities of war, but ideological goals cannot. Therefore, adopting ideological objectives can produce significant operational shortcomings.<sup>21</sup>

## Recent Evidence of Russian Objective-Setting in War

The disconnect between the science of war and its practice is perhaps more the norm than the exception. But in the decade before 2022, the Kremlin appeared to operate according to principles that were somewhat akin to those described by the theorists. It is important to note that we have only three cases—Crimea, the Donbas, and Syria—from which we can extrapolate patterns of behavior, and none were close to the scale of the 2022 invasion. Therefore, the conclusions we present in this report must, by definition, be tentative.<sup>22</sup>

The evidence we have of the Kremlin's approach to objective-setting suggests that the Russian leadership understands that a coherent public narrative is required when overtly committing forces abroad; conversely, they also see a need to maintain deniability, whether plausible or not, when the objective cannot be articulated for whatever reason. Russia's political leadership treated the two cases of military intervention in Ukraine before 2022 as covert, never directly acknowledging the presence of Russian forces in their public comments. In the one case of an overt Russian military intervention that has involved a significant commitment of forces over a long period, Syria, the leadership publicly articulated a clear political objective—fighting terrorism—from the start of the conflict. Although many questioned the Kremlin's sincerity, it was a coherent explanation that had resonance within the military, society, and

even the international community. Even though realities on the ground forced changes in the character of the Syria intervention, the counterterrorism narrative was flexible enough to accommodate them.

## Crimea

Russia's invasion of Crimea in late February 2014 began in the days following the Maidan Revolution, which brought a pro-Western government to power in Ukraine. Russian troops began to bolster the sizeable deployment already in Crimea as part of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, while special forces with the insignias removed from their uniforms spread out across the peninsula and took over Ukrainian military facilities and government buildings.<sup>23</sup>

A Ukrainian government account of a senior Kremlin official's call with Ukraine's acting president at the end of February 2014 suggests that Russia's original objective in the invasion was to force the new government in Kyiv to reach a political accommodation with Moscow and the Kremlin's allies in Ukraine. According to the document, Kyiv refused a compromise on Russia's terms.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the actual goal of the intervention was, Russian political leaders never stated one publicly because the operation itself was denied and they claimed that actions were being taken by self-defense forces in the region. Even if the initial intention was to use Crimea as a bargaining chip, the invasion quickly became an operation to take and incorporate the peninsula into Russia. Nevertheless, Moscow denied that its forces had acted beyond the mandate of its basing agreement with Kyiv. After conducting a hastily arranged referendum on separating from Ukraine under the watchful eye of Russian soldiers, the Kremlin justified the entire Crimea operation by pointing to the self-determination clauses of the United Nations Charter. Regardless, the operation was over within less than three weeks and essentially with no loss of life. Russian citizens were already receptive to the idea of seizing Crimea; surveys in 2013 had shown that more than half of the population thought that Crimea was part of Russia.<sup>25</sup> There were clear signs of improvisation and ad hoc decisions along the way to annexation.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the denial of the intervention while it was ongoing, accompanied by a

consistent narrative after the fact (and after the intervention was acknowledged), demonstrated the leadership's sensitivity to the need for a public declaration of the goals of an overt military operation.

## The Donbas

Russia's intervention in the Donbas that began soon after the annexation of Crimea followed a different pattern. Moscow covertly supported the insurgency in the Donbas beginning in March 2014. Russian forces engaged in two more-direct (although unacknowledged) interventions: one in August 2014, which culminated in the battle of Ilovaisk, and another in January–February 2015, which ended in the seizing of Debaltsevo. Despite the radically different time scales (three weeks compared with eight years) and divergences between the populations of Crimea and the Donbas, the two operations shared two fundamental features. First, Russia never directly and publicly acknowledged the intervention in Crimea while it was ongoing, always claiming that the combatants were locals. Similarly, Russia never acknowledged that it had invaded the Donbas, despite ample documentation of both regular and irregular Russian forces fighting there. Second, the goals of both operations were never openly stated. Analysts could deduce these goals from Russia's demands at the negotiating table and the patterns of its military's behavior, but, by definition, Moscow could not openly declare the objectives of a war that it claimed did not exist.

## Syria

During Russia's intervention in Syria, by contrast, the operation was openly acknowledged, and the political objectives of the operation were explicitly stated from the outset. In messages to both domestic and foreign audiences, Putin put out a clear narrative about the threat that transnational terrorism posed to the Russian homeland and the need to counter it at the source: He pointed to the need to “take the initiative and fight and destroy the terrorists in the territory they have already captured rather than waiting for them to arrive on our soil.”<sup>27</sup> The campaign had several other interconnected goals

(e.g., supporting the Assad regime and countering what Russia alleged to be a U.S. regime change strategy), but the public framing of the operation focused on counterterrorism, a threat that many Russians understood viscerally.

Prior to 2022, the Syria intervention was Moscow's most significant use of force abroad—in terms of power projection and size of the force committed—since the invasion of Afghanistan. Russia was unprepared for a long involvement in Syria, and to a certain extent, the desired goal has yet to be achieved even as of 2023.<sup>28</sup> Despite several “mission accomplished” announcements and pledges that Russian troops would withdraw,<sup>29</sup> Moscow has committed to maintaining its presence in Syria indefinitely.<sup>30</sup> Russian strategy demonstrated an unusual adaptiveness to the situation on the ground, allowing for a kind of experimentation and flexibility that was previously unconceivable.<sup>31</sup>

## Prewar Assumptions Based on Recent Theory and Practice

Our analysis of Russia's prewar theory and practice regarding objective-setting in war leads us to expect that Moscow would operate according to the following principles and learned behaviors when using military force abroad:

- Any overt military operation requires a political strategy. Without one, failures at the operational and tactical levels are almost inevitable.
- For overt military operations, clear political goals would be articulated publicly.
- The goals of an operation can be publicly obfuscated and even be unclear to the military and civilian population only if the mission is conducted covertly or with some degree of plausible deniability.
- Unless covert or deniable, even operations with an expected short time horizon require a strategic narrative.
- Moscow can respond to changing circumstances by adapting the public narrative about its goals to developments on the ground.

However, such flexibility does not relieve the requirement to clearly articulate war aims.

## Objective-Setting During Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

The scale of Russia's February 2022 attack on Ukraine dwarfs previous episodes of the use of force. The initial invasion force was more than 100,000 strong and involved units from all service components and military districts.<sup>32</sup> By comparison, the initial force in Syria likely numbered no more than 4,500. The attack on Ukraine is far and away the most consequential organized act of violence undertaken by the Kremlin since the World War II. Prewar expectations would suggest that leadership would articulate a clear narrative about the war's objectives so that a variety of domestic constituencies would understand why, exactly, their country was fighting. It would not be possible to hide the military's participation from the public eye—or at least to deny it—as Russia did in Crimea or the Donbas in 2014. Establishing clear objectives would be particularly important for a military that was engaged in a massive undertaking, which was unprecedented in scope and scale for any of those serving at the time. An ambiguous, inconsistent, or confusing message could affect the morale and sense of mission of those being asked to fight. Given the complexity of the mission and the possibility of a longer engagement, establishing clear goals around which military operations could be scoped would be essential.

However, nothing of the sort occurred. Even at the end of the first year of the war, it was still unclear to many what political objective Russia was pursuing. To document this dynamic, we analyzed senior Russian officials' statements starting in the months before the full-scale invasion through the end of 2022. This section begins with a qualitative analysis of Putin's key speeches announcing the invasion and then proceeds to a broader quantitative look at an original dataset of Russian pronouncements on war aims that we created for this project.

### Qualitative Analysis

For reasons that remain unclear, the war essentially began not with an invasion, but with the signing of two treaties. After a crescendo of international tension, Putin released a 23-minute speech at around 11 p.m. on February 21, 2022, which covered an array of grievances with the status quo, from the nature of the formation of modern Ukraine (a Bolshevik invention, he claimed) to U.S. ballistic missile defense programs. But rather than declare the start of the invasion, he announced that Russia would recognize the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics as independent states and sign bilateral treaties of alliance with them.<sup>33</sup> This move represented a wholesale reversal of eight years of Russian policy, during which Moscow insisted that Kyiv reincorporate the rebel-held areas of the Donbas as part of Ukraine with special status.

Three days after Putin's speech, at 6 a.m. local time, he issued another video address, this time announcing what he called the "special military

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operation.” He described the goal of the military operation in these terms:

The goal is the protection of people [in the Donbas] who have been subject to persecution and genocide at the hands of the regime in Kyiv. To achieve that end, we will seek the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine and to bring to justice those who committed numerous murderous crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, these claims were absurd on their face. For the purposes of our analysis, however, there is at least the semblance of an internally consistent narrative: The people of the Donbas cannot be safe if the current regime remains in power in Ukraine; therefore, that regime must be removed or fundamentally transformed, which is how the “denazification” term has been widely interpreted in the West. If Moscow was seeking regime change, the protection of the people of the Donbas was among the least significant drivers behind that decision. (The separatist authorities in Donetsk reported a total of seven civilian deaths from the conflict in 2021.)<sup>35</sup> If Putin’s initial

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If Putin’s initial plan had gone as he anticipated, this thin veneer of humanitarian justification for a war of aggression might have sufficed. Instead, it became clear within days that it had failed and the war would not be over quickly.

plan had gone as he anticipated—a successful takeover of major cities and thunder run to the capital to overthrow President Volodymyr Zelensky and install a Moscow-friendly government in less than a week—this thin veneer of humanitarian justification for a war of aggression might have sufficed, similar to the public justifications and obfuscations in the earlier military operations in Ukraine. Instead, it became clear within days that the initial plan had failed and the war would not be over quickly. The publicly stated objectives would soon become a problem. As the Kremlin’s spin doctors discovered through post-invasion polling, the Russian public did not understand the “denazification” term. “After that, it became a free-for-all: We were looking for new terms every week . . . the polling showed that the population only wanted to hear a declaration of victory,” one spin doctor was quoted as saying.<sup>36</sup>

The spin doctors’ challenge was compounded by a lack of clarity from the top. It might be expected that as the war progressed, its objectives would crystallize and become clearer: While the objectives would have to change to account for the initial failure to seize Kyiv, communication with the public and consistency among various government officials would improve as the Kremlin adjusted to the reality of a longer conflict. Instead, our research findings suggest that the opposite was true. Even in the early days, senior officials could not draw coherent links between Russia’s stated objectives and the actions of its forces in Ukraine. For example, in a televised interview on March 2, 2022, Lavrov said that the main objective of the “special military operation” was to protect the people in the Donbas. However, when asked why Russia was attacking the capital, Lavrov answered “demilitarization” without suggesting how such an outcome could help the Donbas.<sup>37</sup>

For nearly six months following the March 31, 2022, the Russian decision to withdraw forces from the outskirts of Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other areas of the northeast, which was framed by Moscow as a “good-will gesture,” no semblance of a coherent public narrative emerged. There was no clear articulation of a Plan B now that Plan A had been discarded. When discussing war aims, Russian leaders mostly said that they sought to protect the Donbas; in official press releases, the invasion was referred to as the “special



military operation to protect the Donbas.”<sup>38</sup> Most of the fighting had indeed shifted to the Donbas. However, at the time, Russia was occupying parts of four other Ukrainian regions outside the Donbas: Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Mykolaiv. Its occupation of these areas had been an artifact of battlefield outcomes; those were the only contiguous areas where Russia’s military foothold was viable. The contradictions between Moscow’s stated aims and its on-the-ground actions suggested improvisation or strategic confusion that could have been managed if the occupation of these areas were covert or denied. However, the Kremlin actively advertised the Russian military presence and Russia-backed civilian administration there.

Ukraine’s successful September 2022 counter-offensive in Kharkiv changed the dynamic. On September 21, Putin not only announced a “partial mobilization” of military forces, but he also called for referenda in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson on joining Russia (i.e., he intended to annex these regions). This annexation was formalized within weeks, although Russia did not control any of the four regions in their entirety. Even this seeming shift in strategy did not produce a clear narrative about war aims. One might have expected that establishing full control over all four regions would be the specified goal following the annexation. However, that was not explicitly stated. Moreover, Moscow’s view on the location of the borders of these so-called new Russian regions was not specified. Therefore, when the Russian military was forced to retreat across the Dnipro river in November 2022, ceding control over the regional capital of Kherson city to the Ukrainians, it was unclear whether Russia would seek to retake the city as a means of restoring what it claimed to be its “territorial integrity.”

Days after Putin’s September 21 speech, Lavrov was asked directly about Russia’s war aims and evaded answering; instead, he discussed the situation in the Donbas and the Ukrainian government’s alleged discrimination against the Russian language. He repeatedly referred to Putin’s February 24 address as the source for any information about the war’s objectives and even accused the journalists of asking this question multiple times so they could later write that Lavrov did not have an answer.<sup>39</sup> Putin himself

was no clearer in the following months, stating that “all was going according to plan” and that the “goals of the special military operation would be fulfilled.”<sup>40</sup> In October, an interviewer directly asked Putin to explain the “goals” to “the public” that “did not understand” what it meant for the special military operation to go “according to the plan.”<sup>41</sup> He responded that the intent was to protect the Donbas, even though the conversation took place after the annexation of the four provinces—two of which are not part of the Donbas—had nominally been completed. In short, Russian war aims remained unclear to both foreign and domestic audiences throughout 2022. Even the purported annexation and concurrent mobilization—events which seemingly would suggest specific goals and a new resolve to achieve them—did not meaningfully alter the public narrative about what Russia was trying to achieve.

## Quantitative Analysis

To examine trends in the Kremlin’s public messaging quantitatively, we created a dataset of Russian leaders’ statements on the goals of the conflict. We began by casting a wide net, including a variety of senior Russian officials’ pronouncements on the subject. It quickly became clear that only three Russian officials—President Putin, foreign minister Lavrov, and defense minister Shoigu—addressed the issue systematically and regularly over the period of interest; thus we focused on these three figures. Other officials (such as Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, secretary of Russia’s security council Nikolai Patrushev, and deputy chairman of Russia’s Security Council Dmitry Medvedev) only addressed the goals of the war episodically, if at all. Even Gerasimov’s comparatively infrequent public appearances were predominantly focused on the operational level, describing the events of the war without any references to why the war was being fought. In short, apart from Putin, Lavrov, and Shoigu, the number of references to objectives in statements by these other officials was too small to make any meaningful observations.

To scope the data, we collected formal statements, interviews, and releases attributed to the three principals from official government websites:

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the Kremlin,<sup>42</sup> the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,<sup>43</sup> and the Ministry of Defense.<sup>44</sup> Since the start of the war, Russia’s communication efforts have expanded to other platforms; the social network Telegram is the most prominent. Given the unique nature of Telegram posts, which often are not attributed to a particular speaker, we did not include them in this comparative analysis.

To ensure that the dataset included statements that implicitly describe the objectives of the war (rather than only including those that use keywords like “goal”), we collected and coded entries manually. Because the Russian military buildup along Ukraine’s borders began in late fall 2021 and leaders began speaking publicly regarding the purpose of the buildup (even while denying it) toward the end of that year, we included statements that were made before the “operation” began. Including these statements allowed us to track the evolution of objectives from the time when they were expressed as “concerns” to justify the buildup and resulting tensions prior to the war, as well as to understand which concerns were translated into objectives. We collected data until the end of 2022. The dataset thus includes statements from December 1, 2021, to December 31, 2022.

To summarize, to be included in the dataset, a statement must have met the four following criteria:

1. The statement was published on one of the following websites: the Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, or the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.
2. The statement was published between December 1, 2021, and December 31, 2022.
3. The statement was attributed to Putin, Lavrov, or Shoigu (either as a transcript of their remarks or in an official press release regarding an event involving one of them).
4. The statement mentioned the so-called special military operation and provided justification(s) for why Russia started it, was continuing it, or both.

Entries in the dataset include the transcripts of speeches or interviews by these three top officials, and press releases or other prepared statements. Both source groups reflect the official position of the Russian government. However, to account for the differences between prepared written texts and statements delivered orally, which can include unplanned phrasing, the entries were also coded as transcripts or non-transcripts.

The objectives mentioned in the statements were coded inductively. We developed a list of objectives organically as we saw them mentioned by the leaders. The coding was done in several iterations: Each time a new objective was added to the list or existing objectives were modified, all previously analyzed statements were re-coded to specifically determine whether any reference to this new issue was present. Because we strived to include not only explicitly stated goals but also indirect indications of objectives or mentions of concerns, the list was created dynamically: We coded objectives that might seem intuitively similar (e.g., protection of the Donbas and denazification). We found that some combination of objectives could be present in some cases but absent in others. To capture the range of explicit and implicit objectives and the fluctuations in their usage, we made the categories as narrow (i.e., as close to the wording used in the statements) as possible.

Ultimately, we identified eight declared security concerns or objectives of the war. At times, these

FIGURE 1

Number of Statements on War Aims by Putin, Lavrov, and Shoigu, by Month

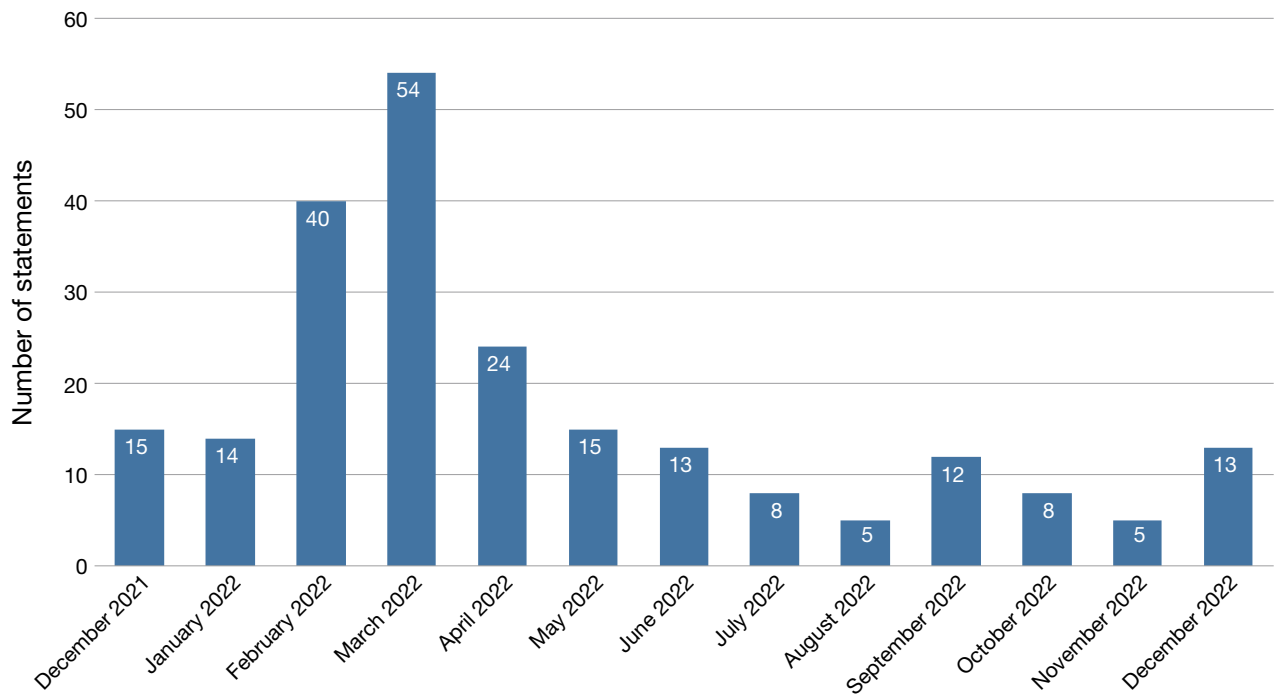
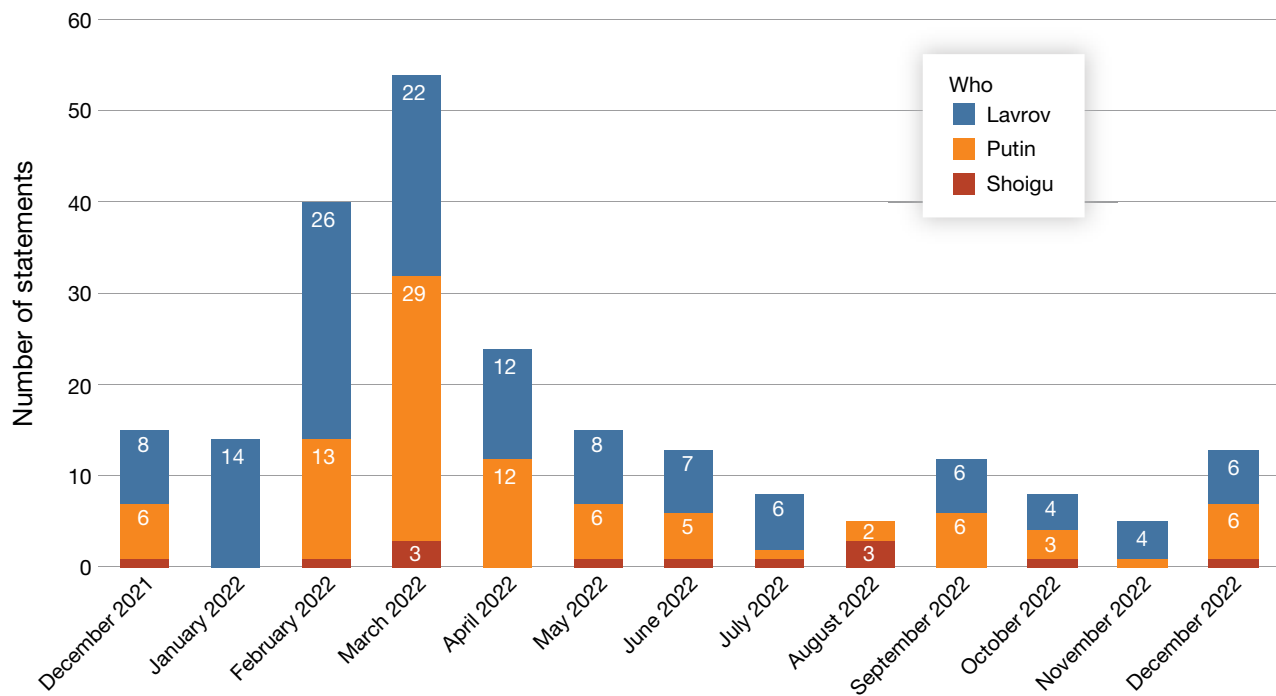


FIGURE 2

Russian Leaders' Statements on War Aims over Time



issues were framed as security concerns that implied a goal. After the invasion began, some of these issues were framed as objectives of the “special military operation.”

Figure 1 shows the number of statements included in the final dataset and the statements’ distribution over the observed period. Understandably, the majority of statements containing references to the reasons for the war were made during the first months of the full-scale invasion (February–March 2022).

Figure 2 breaks down the statements by individual leader, which demonstrates clearly that Lavrov was a more frequent speaker on the objectives of the war than Putin or Shoigu. Lavrov was active in expressing Russia’s concerns prior to the invasion, and a large portion of his statements during the first two months of the war referred to the reasons why it was started.

Table 1 shows the security concerns and related war objectives that we identified in the leaders’ speeches and demonstrates just how diverse the goals cited by Russian leaders were. In addition, a given statement on Russia’s objectives did not necessarily emphasize one issue. Indeed, 99 of the 226 entries in the dataset mention more than two issues. Therefore, we examine the frequency of mentions relative to other issues (presented in percentages in Figure 3).

Before the full-scale invasion began, Russian officials most frequently raised concerns about the European security architecture and NATO’s earlier enlargements.<sup>45</sup> This concern was mentioned in about one-third of all statements. The security and well-being of the residents of the Donbas was raised with almost the same frequency. Ukraine was accused of preparing to attack these territories and violating the Minsk agreements.<sup>46</sup> Protection of the Donbas is by far the issue that was most consistently mentioned by Russian leaders both prior to and after the invasion.

Table 2 further breaks down the distribution of mentioned issues by individual leader. Prior to the invasion, Lavrov mostly referred to the Donbas and the European security architecture. Lavrov also talked about the West providing military aid to Ukraine, making Ukraine a de facto NATO member. These same three concerns are also the ones most frequently mentioned by Putin. Putin, however,

focused on the threat to the Donbas and Ukraine’s militarization more often than on Russia’s broader security concerns.

To determine overall trends, this first round of data coding was broadly scoped. All instances that could plausibly be interpreted as an explanation of Russia’s security concerns or a justification for its “special military operation” were included. However, to isolate the leadership’s messaging on the objectives of the war, we then adopted a more targeted approach. For this second data selection, only statements made on or after February 24, 2022 (the start of the full-scale invasion), were included. Additionally, whereas the original dataset included both prepared statements (such as press releases) and the transcripts of remarks made by the three officials (such as speeches, interviews, or answers to questions at press conferences), we included only transcripts in this second selection. Because many of the non-transcripts were clearly prepared by communications staff—e.g., readouts of calls with foreign leaders—and often contain identical, boilerplate language, we considered them to be less significant than public remarks delivered live by the leader himself, usually in front of a camera. Out of the 162 statements made after the start of the invasion, 105 qualified as transcripts. For reference, Figure 4 shows the share of the transcripts compared with non-transcripts in the dataset and their distribution over time.

We further narrowed the analysis to include only those statements that explicitly referenced the goals of the “special military operation.” The coding was conducted parsimoniously to include only those that specifically had the word Russian “goal” (*tseľ*). We found such an explicit reference to the goal of the war in just over 30 percent of all statements. To summarize, the dataset was filtered for this second selection to include only statements that met the following three additional conditions:

1. The statement was made on or after February 24, 2022 (the start of the full-scale invasion).
2. The statement was a transcript of live remarks, such as a speech or a press conference, that was verbally delivered by one of the three Russian officials.

TABLE 1

## Russia's Declared Security Concerns and War Objectives

Issue	Security Concern	War Objective	Example
The Donbas	Ukraine threatens the Donbas or Ukraine violates Minsk agreements	Protection of the Donbas	"I have formulated the overall goal, which is to liberate the Donbas, protect its people, and create conditions that will guarantee the security of Russia itself." <sup>a</sup>
Russian language and culture	Ukraine as "anti-Russia"	"Denazification" or protection of Russian language and culture	"Russia's clash with the neo-Nazi regime that developed in Ukraine—was inevitable, and had we not taken action in February, it would have been the same, only from a worse position for us. . . . It is Ukraine and the Ukrainian people that have become the first and the main victims of breeding hate towards Russians and Russia." <sup>b</sup>
Security threats	Ukraine's NATO membership or NATO infrastructure in Ukraine	Ukraine's neutrality or demilitarization of Ukraine	"We are not going to justify our actions in Ukraine. Their goals are perfectly clear: We don't want the militarization of Ukraine, whether it is or isn't a member of NATO, because U.S. [missile] systems targeting our territory can be deployed there without NATO." <sup>c</sup>
European security	Earlier rounds of NATO enlargement	Reordering of the European security architecture	"Our task is to ensure long-term security in Europe. This cannot be done without cutting off attempts to draw Ukraine into NATO, or without agreeing on security guarantees that will take into account the interests of Russia, Ukraine, and European countries." <sup>d</sup>
Protection of the "motherland"	Ukraine poses threats to "Russian lands" (including newly annexed territories)	Protection of the "motherland"	"We are committed to ensuring that the special military operation's objectives are achieved. As President Vladimir Putin said, our indisputable priority is the four new regions of the Russian Federation. an end must be put to the threat of Nazification they have been exposed to for many years." <sup>e</sup>
WMD	Ukraine possesses WMD or plans to develop WMD and possibly use them against Russia	Ensuring nonnuclear status of Ukraine	"Kyiv declared that it could attain nuclear weapons. The NATO bloc launched an active military build-up on the territories adjacent to us. Thus, an absolutely unacceptable threat to us was steadily being created right on our borders." <sup>f</sup>
Crimea	Ukraine plans to retake Crimea	Recognition of Crimea as Russian	"After the Kyiv regime publicly refused to settle the issue of Donbas peacefully and went as far as to announce its ambition to possess nuclear weapons, it became clear that a new offensive in Donbas—there were two of them before—was inevitable, and that it would be inevitably followed by an attack on Russia's Crimea, that is, on Russia. In this connection, the decision to start a preemptive military operation was necessary and the only option." <sup>g</sup>
Traditional values	Threats to "traditional values"	"Desatanization"	"Let me repeat that the dictatorship of the Western elites targets all societies, including the citizens of Western countries themselves. This is a challenge to all. This complete renunciation of what it means to be human, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom are coming to resemble a 'religion in reverse'—pure Satanism." <sup>h</sup>

NOTE: NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization; WMD = weapons of mass destruction.

<sup>a</sup> President of Russia, "Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists' Questions."

<sup>b</sup> President of Russia, "Meeting with Historians and Representatives of Russia's Traditional Religions."

<sup>c</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions Following Talks with Foreign Minister of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu and Foreign Minister of Ukraine Dmitry Kuleba, Antalya, March 10, 2022."

<sup>d</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with the Serbian Media, Moscow, March 28, 2022."

<sup>e</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with the Great Game Programme on Channel One, Moscow, December 28, 2022."

<sup>f</sup> President of Russia, "Victory Parade on Red Square."

<sup>g</sup> President of Russia, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation."

<sup>h</sup> President of Russia, "Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia."

FIGURE 3  
Relative Frequency of Mentions of Particular Issues

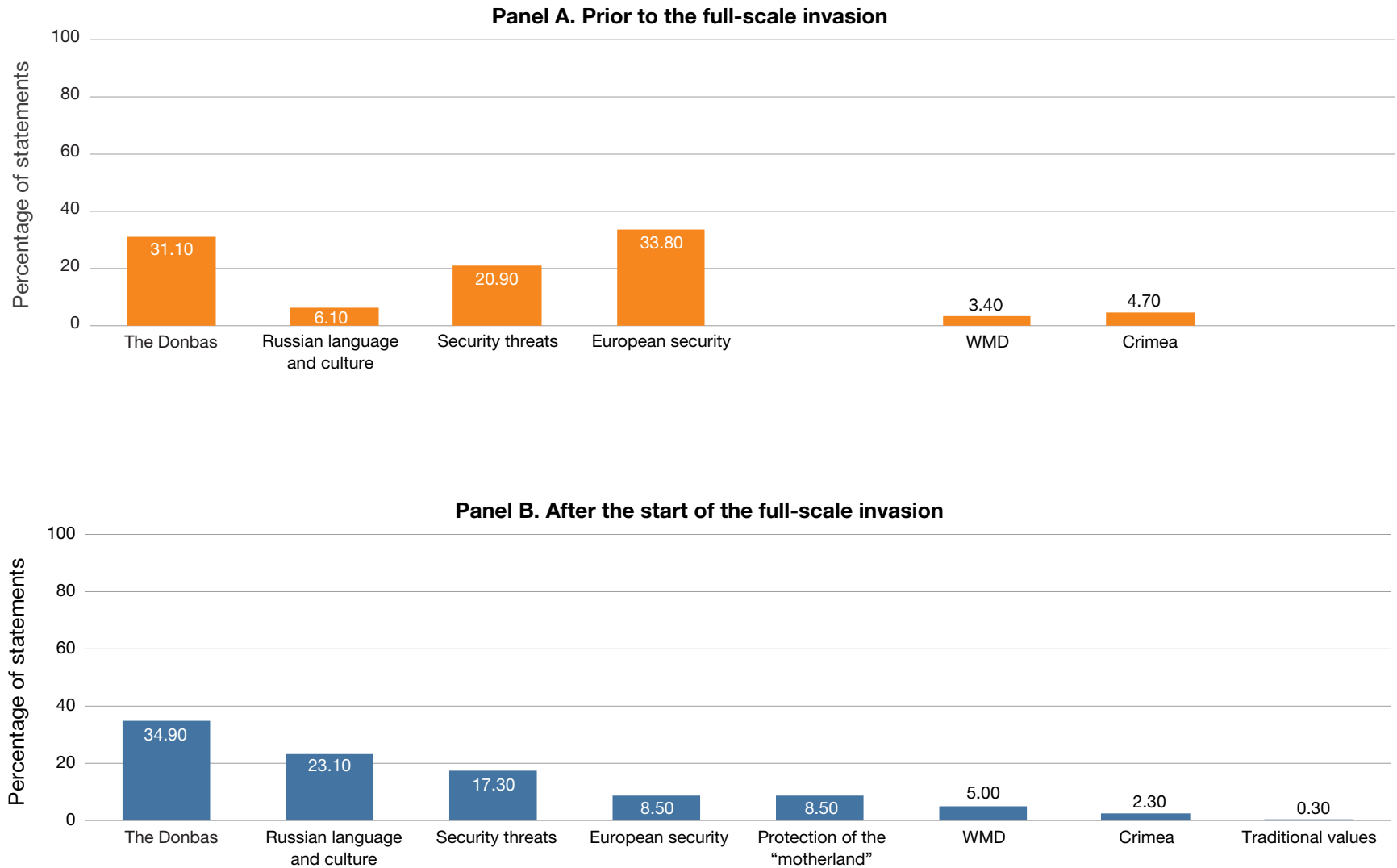


TABLE 2  
Frequency of Issues Mentioned by Individual Leader

	Prior to the Invasion (%)			After the Invasion (%)		
	Lavrov	Putin	Shoigu	Lavrov	Putin	Shoigu
The Donbas	35	26	29	27	45	56
Russian language and culture	2	12		29	14	22
Security threats	16	28	29	24	9	6
European security	46	21		10	6	6
Protection of the “motherland”				6	12	11
WMD	1	3	29	5	6	
Crimea		10	14		6	
Traditional values					1	

NOTE: Empty cells = zero.

FIGURE 4  
Transcripts of Live Remarks Compared with Prepared Releases (Post-Invasion)

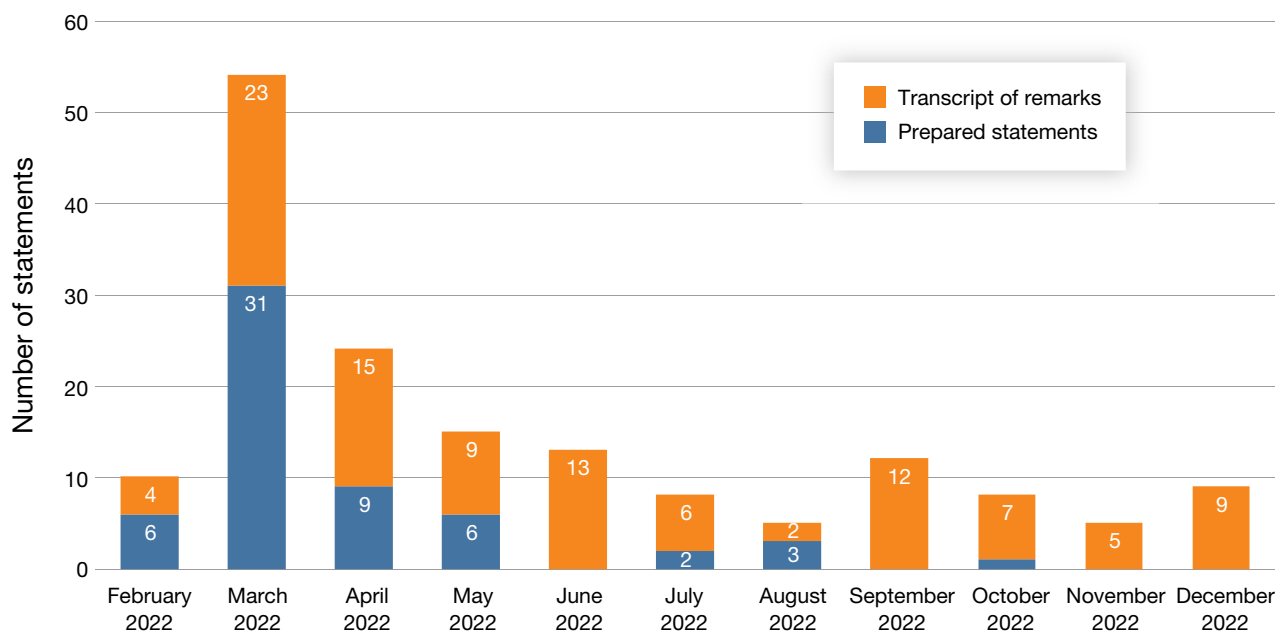
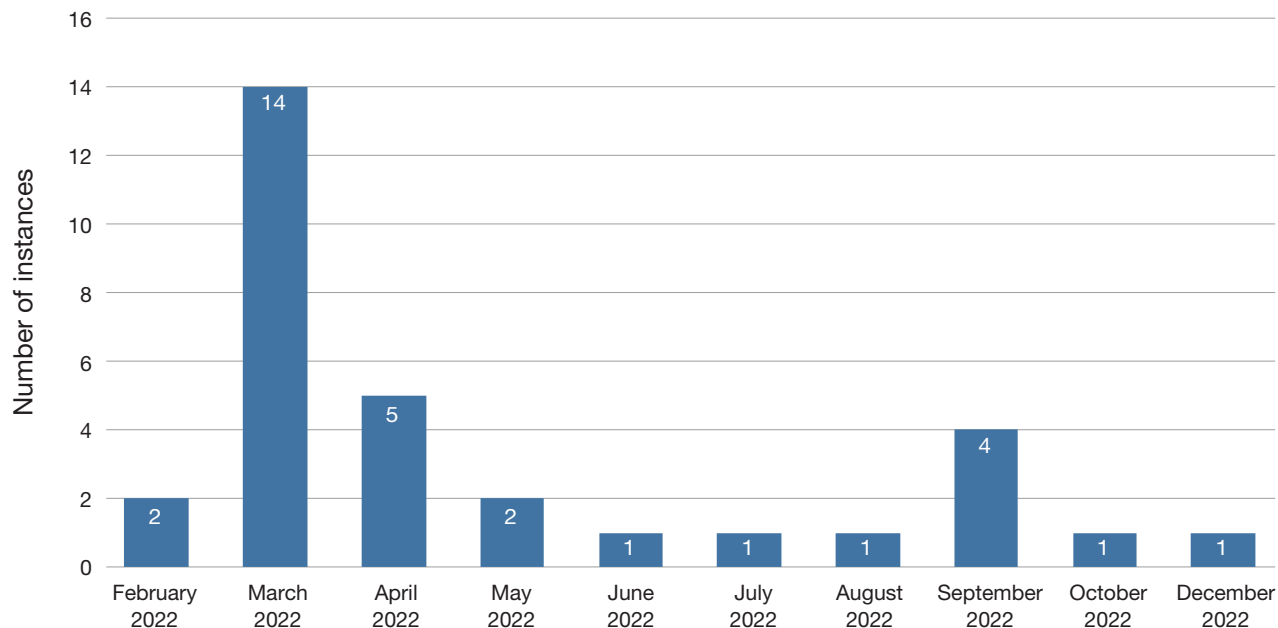


FIGURE 5

Direct Articulation of War Aims in Transcripts of Live Remarks, by Month (Post-Invasion)



3. The statement contained clear articulation of the objective(s) (*tseľ*) of the “special military operation.”

Only 32 statements met these conditions.

Figure 5 shows their distribution over the observed period. Most of these statements were clustered around the start of the invasion in March and April. Only two statements explicitly mentioning the objective(s) of the war were made in February, one of which was Putin’s televised address that announced the start of the “special military operation” (discussed earlier).<sup>47</sup> The second statement was made by Lavrov the next day at a press conference following his meeting with the heads of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR).<sup>48</sup> Although the few statements in February can partially be explained by the fact that there were only five calendar days of that month remaining, the lack of a coordinated messaging campaign is striking.

Of the 32 statements examined in this second selection, Lavrov made 19, Putin made 11, and Shoigu made two. Figure 6 shows the distribution of these statements over time. Both speeches by Shoigu were made in March 2022. After March, he never explicitly

stated the objectives of the war publicly during the period of our analysis. The first remarks were made on March 1, 2022, during a meeting with top military leaders. Shoigu named three main objectives: to protect the Donbas, “demilitarization,” and the “denazification” of Ukraine.<sup>49</sup> On March 29, again during a meeting with military leadership, he stated one objective: the “liberation” of the Donbas.<sup>50</sup> At a time when Russian forces were still attempting to take control over Ukraine’s capital, this seemed particularly odd, but it did foreshadow Russia’s April 1 withdrawal of forces from areas around Kyiv. Of the three Russian officials, Lavrov stated Russia’s explicit objective(s) in Ukraine most often.

Figure 7 shows the specific objectives cited in these 32 cases. Remarkably, even in this subset of non-prepared statements in which specific objectives are explicitly mentioned, on average, there were almost two objectives per statement. One might have expected to see a more focused approach demonstrated in this subset, but the lack of specificity is present here too.

Table 3 breaks down these 60 goals mentioned according to the date, the speaker, and which specific goal was cited. Lavrov cited more objectives than the



FIGURE 6

Direct Articulation of War Aims in Transcripts of Live Remarks, by Month and Individual (Post-Invasion)

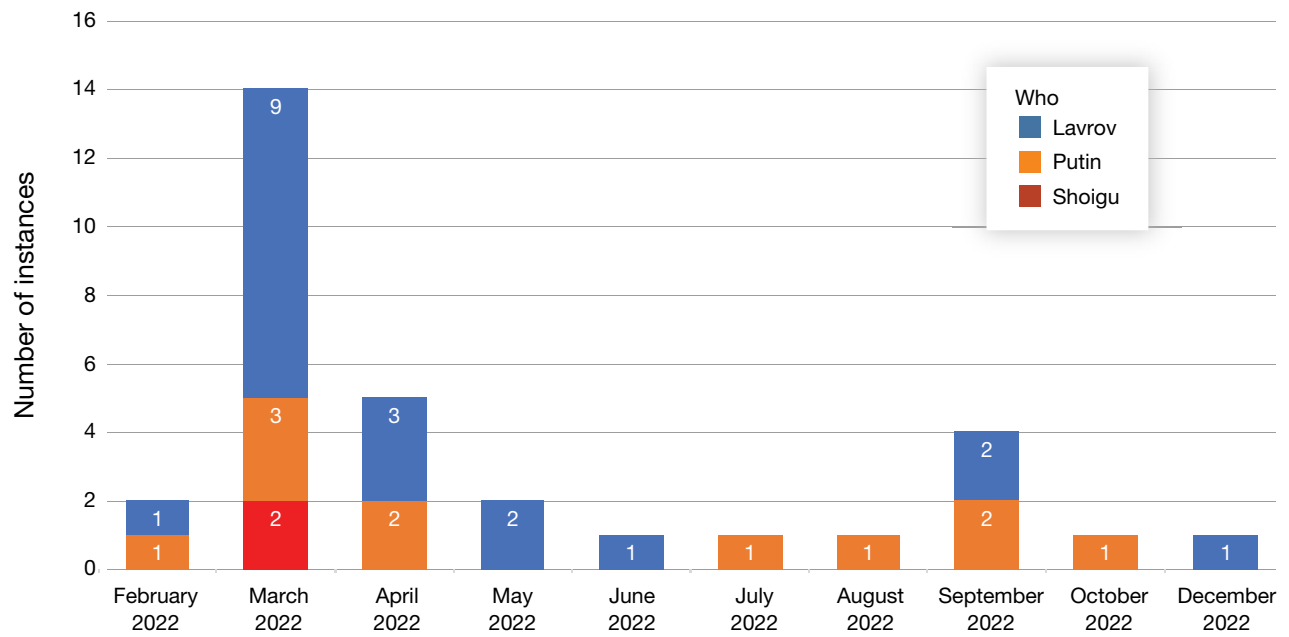


FIGURE 7

Frequency of Mentions of War Aims in the Post-Invasion Transcripts

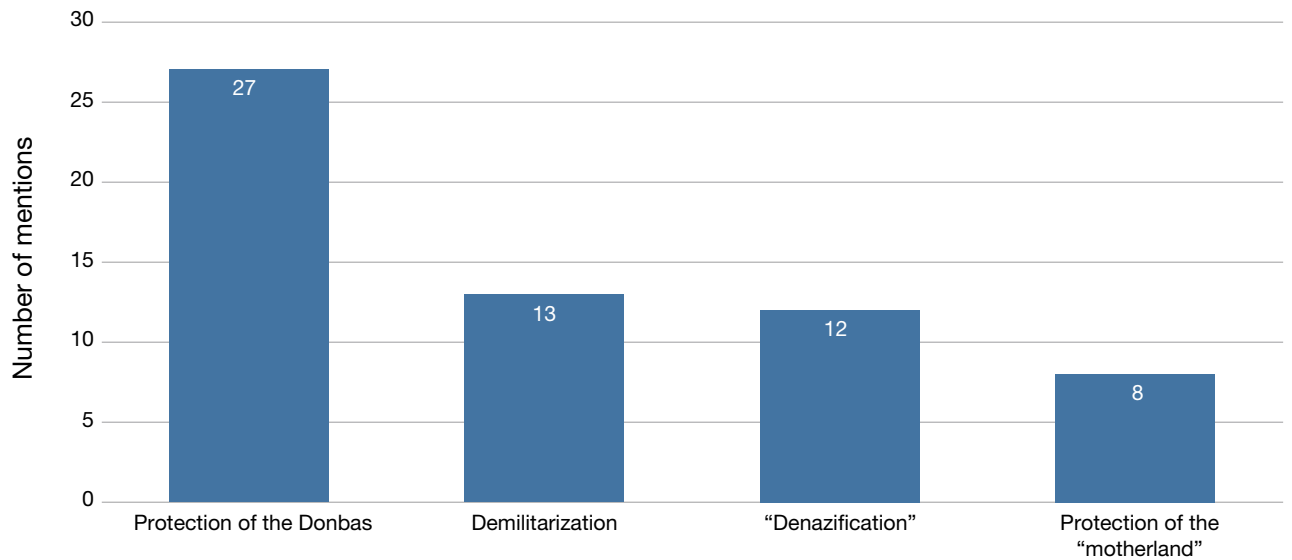


TABLE 3  
Aims Explicitly Cited, by Speaker and Month (2022)

	Lavrov				Putin		Shoigu		
	Demilitarization	Denazification	Protect Donbas	Protect “Motherland”	Protect Donbas	Protect “Motherland”	Demilitarization	Denazification	Protect Donbas
February	1	1			1				
March	7	6	7	1	3		1	1	2
April	2	2	2	1	2				
May	1	1	1	1					
June			1						
July					1	1			
August					1	1			
September	1	1	2	2	2				
October					1				
December			1	1					

NOTE: Empty cells = zero.

others—on average, 2.3 objectives per statement. He referred to early Putin speeches in which he said that Putin defined the objectives. Lavrov predominantly mentioned “denazification” and demilitarization as the objectives of the “special military operation” and often noted that these objectives were set by Putin. However, Putin himself never explicitly said that “denazification” and demilitarization were the goals of the operation. Instead, he almost exclusively referred to the liberation of the Donbas and the protection of its people from Ukraine as the objective. When Putin did raise “denazification” and demilitarization, he referred to them as a means to achieve the goal of protecting the people of the Donbas, not as objectives in themselves.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, in this second, more targeted analysis aimed at isolating clearly stated goals, we did not consider Putin’s invocation of these terms as a declaration of war aims.

In nine of Putin’s 11 speeches or remarks in which he explicitly described the goal of the “special military operation,” he mentioned only one objective: to liberate the Donbas and protect its people from the actions of the Ukrainian government. The two other remarks mentioned the protection of the Donbas objective along with protecting “Russian lands.” Putin’s focus on the Donbas was consistent

over time and did not seem to have been affected by developments on the ground.

### Summary

These descriptive statistics demonstrate an overarching trend of consistent incoherence regarding declared objectives throughout the war. The Kremlin began with a story about the need to save the populations of the two Ukrainian regions that it had just recognized as independent states. This narrative—its falsehood notwithstanding—might have been enough had Russia’s wildly optimistic initial war plan succeeded. Instead, its failure would render the narrative absurd. However, neither the failure of that plan, the withdrawal from the outskirts of Kyiv, the annexation announcement on September 21, or the Ukrainian counteroffensives in fall 2022 seemed to prompt a rethink. Indeed, protecting the Donbas remained the most consistent objective cited throughout 2022. One might have anticipated that the annexation decision would have been accompanied by a focus on taking all the territory that Russia now claimed as its own. Yet even this move, which entailed amending Russia’s constitution, did not bring clarity to war aims: Putin seemed to fixate on the Donbas long after his own claims on Ukraine’s territory extended far beyond the Donetsk river basin.

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## Conclusion

Before 2022, the Russian strategic community and political-military leadership seemed to understand the importance of establishing clear war aims when overtly employing force abroad. Theory and practice suggested that Moscow could be flexible in its war aims. However, in the full-scale invasion that began in February 2022, we saw essentially the opposite. Instead of a clear goal, multiple, often contradictory objectives were declared. An inchoate messaging strategy led to widespread confusion about what exactly Russia was trying to achieve in Ukraine. The message was either mixed, inconsistent, or completely mismatched with the situation on the ground.

There are likely many factors that contributed to this outcome. We mention several possibilities here. First, in retrospect, the previous instances either involved a fraction of the forces deployed in Ukraine, were unacknowledged, or lasted for less than a month. This war is simply in a different category of intervention in terms of ambition and the scale of resources employed. Russian leadership had no experience conducting military operations at this scale. Second, Russian military planners seem to have assumed that the invasion would not be a categorically different operation than those that came before it: a short, relatively low-intensity “special military operation”—not a drawn-out war of attrition.

Finally, following the failure of the initial plan, Putin might have been deliberately avoiding specifying an empirically observable end goal to maximize his political freedom of maneuver. After all, he could define success in “defending the people of the Donbas” in any way he chose. Despite the hardships stemming from the war, sanctions, and mobilization, the Russian people were not committed to a

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If governments are to gain insights into Russia’s bottom line at any given point in time, they might have to rely on direct, private communication with the leadership in Moscow.

particular outcome. As of February 2023, 37 percent of Russians were unable to give a clear answer when asked about the objective of the war,<sup>52</sup> and Russians seemed to support negotiations or prolonging the operation in equal numbers.<sup>53</sup> Although Putin’s vagueness about what he was trying to achieve might be extremely detrimental to the military’s morale, this ambiguity also suggests that he might have been trying to keep his options open about how to proceed and particularly on what terms he was prepared to settle.

For those outside Russia trying to understand the Kremlin’s goals, this report suggests that, if 2022 patterns hold, publicly declared objectives are unlikely to be of much use. If governments are to gain insights into Russia’s bottom line at any given point in time, they might have to rely on direct, private communication with the leadership in Moscow.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Military Thought* is a military science journal published by Russia's Ministry of Defense (and previously by the Soviet Union's Ministry of Defense).
- <sup>2</sup> von Clausewitz, "Clausewitz to Roeder."
- <sup>3</sup> Mikryukov, "Tsel' voiny," p. 10.
- <sup>4</sup> Podsoblyayev, "O sodержanii osnovnogo zakona voiny," p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Mikryukov, "Tsel' voiny," p. 10.
- <sup>6</sup> Mikryukov, "Tsel' voiny," p. 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Yefimov, "O politike, strategii, razvedka," pp. 78–79.
- <sup>8</sup> Mikryukov, "Podgotovka k voine," p. 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Mikryukov, "V osnove pobedy v voine lezhit pobeda v ideologicheskoi bor'be."
- <sup>10</sup> For example, see Mikryukov, "V osnove pobedy v voine lezhit pobeda v ideologicheskoi bor'be."
- <sup>11</sup> Podsoblyayev, "O sodержanii osnovnogo zakona voiny," p. 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Podsoblyayev, "O sodержanii osnovnogo zakona voiny," p. 3.
- <sup>13</sup> Mikryukov, "Plan voiny," p. 2.
- <sup>14</sup> Mikryukov, "Pravila' vedeniya voiny," p. 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Zablotskii and Larintsev, "Tupiki voiny," p. 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii."
- <sup>17</sup> Svechin, *Strategiya*.
- <sup>18</sup> Vinokurov, "Kak upravlyat' oboronoi gosudarstva," p. 24.
- <sup>19</sup> Kokoshin, *Voprosy prikladnoi teorii voiny*.
- <sup>20</sup> Kokoshin, *Voprosy prikladnoi teorii voiny*.
- <sup>21</sup> Kokoshin, *Voprosy prikladnoi teorii voiny*.
- <sup>22</sup> We consider only interventions involving the regular Russian military, not private military companies or other irregular forces.
- <sup>23</sup> For a full timeline of events leading up to and following the annexation of Crimea, see Howard and Pukhov, eds., *Brothers Armed*, pp. 209–213.
- <sup>24</sup> Committee on National Security and Defense of the Ukrainian Parliament, "Stenohrama zasidannya Rady natsional'noi bezpeky i oborony Ukrayiny vid 28 lyutoho 2014 roku."
- <sup>25</sup> For more on polling data, see Mezhdunarodnyi diskussionnyi klub Valdai, "Sovremennaya rossiiskaya identichnost': izmereniya, vyzovy, otvety."
- <sup>26</sup> Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, p. 43.
- <sup>27</sup> President of Russia, "Meeting with Government Members"; President of Russia, "70th Session of the UN General Assembly."
- <sup>28</sup> Adamsky, "Continuity in Russian Strategic Culture: A Case Study of Moscow's Syrian Campaign."
- <sup>29</sup> Demchenko, "Shoigu dolozhil Putinu o vyvode rossiiskikh voisk iz Sirii."
- <sup>30</sup> Molchanov, "Missiya Rossii v Sirii ne okonchena."
- <sup>31</sup> Adamsky, "Continuity in Russian Strategic Culture: A Case Study of Moscow's Syrian Campaign." See also Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" p. 18.
- <sup>32</sup> Harris and Sonne, "Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive Against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns."
- <sup>33</sup> President of Russia, "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii." However, the boundaries of these "republics" created significant ambiguity in regard to the stated goal of "protecting the Donbas."
- <sup>34</sup> President of Russia, "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii."
- <sup>35</sup> "DNR naschitala 77 pogibshikh v zone konflikta v Donbasse za god," Interfax, December 30, 2021.
- <sup>36</sup> Rubin, Arenina, and Badanin, "Komu mat' rodna. Chast' pervaya. Rasskaz o tom, kak Rossiya okazalas' ne gotova k voine, k kotoroi gotovilas'."
- <sup>37</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu 'Al'-Dzhazira', Moskva, 2 marta 2022 goda."
- <sup>38</sup> President of Russia, "Telefonnyi razgovor s Prezidentom Frantsii Emmanuelem Makronom."
- <sup>39</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "Press-konferentsiya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V.Lavrova po itogam nedeli vysokogo urovnya 77-y sessii General'noi Assamblei OON, N'yu-Iork, 24 sentyabrya 2022 g."
- <sup>40</sup> "Putin uveren, chto zadachi SVO budut vypolneny," "Putin poblagodaril rossiiskikh voennykh na Ukraine: vse idet po planu."
- <sup>41</sup> President of Russia, "Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdai.'"
- <sup>42</sup> Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, homepage.
- <sup>43</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, homepage.
- <sup>44</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, homepage.
- <sup>45</sup> See, for example, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V. Lavrova na 28-m zasedanii Soveta ministrov inostrannykh del OBSE, Stokgol'm, 2 dekabrya 2021 goda."
- <sup>46</sup> President of Russia, "Vstrecha s Prezidentom SShA Dzhozefom Baidenom."
- <sup>47</sup> President of Russia, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation."
- <sup>48</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V. Lavrova v khode sovmestnoi press-konferentsii s Ministrom inostrannykh del LNR V.N. Deinego i Pervym zames-titelem Ministra inostrannykh del DNR S.S.Peresadoi po itogakh peregovorov, Moskva, 25 fevralya 2022 goda."

<sup>49</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Vooruzhennyye Sily Rossii prodolzhat provedenie spetsial’noi voennoi operatsii na Ukraine do dostizheniya postavlenykh tselei.”

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Ministr oborony Rossii provel selekturnoe soveshchanie s rukovodyashchim sostavom Vooruzhennykh sil.”

<sup>51</sup> For example, see President of Russia, “Vstrecha s predstavitel’nitsami letnogo sostava rossiiskikh aviakompanii.”

<sup>52</sup> Chronicles, “Chapter 12. The Latest Chronicles Survey.”

<sup>53</sup> “Konflikt s Ukrainoi: otsenki aprelya 2023 goda.”

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## About This Report

Russia's war on Ukraine is by far its largest and most consequential commitment of military forces abroad in decades. The stakes for Russia are extremely high. However, despite these stakes, the Kremlin has not provided a clear and consistent public narrative regarding its objectives, maintaining significant ambiguity and even adopting contradictory stances. In this report, the authors provide an analysis of Russian theory and practice in objective-setting when using force abroad prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022; they then compare these prewar precedents with the way that Russian leaders established the goals of the war in 2022. Wartime practice is documented through a qualitative analysis of Russian leaders' key speeches and a quantitative study of an original dataset of Russian leaders' statements on the war.

The research reported here was completed in May 2023 and underwent security review with the sponsor and the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review before public release.

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