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## CONSIDERATIONS ON THE REVISIONIST TENDENCIES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION EXPRESSED THROUGH THE „SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION” IN UKRAINE

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### ABSTRACT:

*AIM: THE STUDY SOUGHT TO PRESENT THE NEW REVISIONIST TENDENCIES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, MANIFESTED WITH THE START, ON FEBRUARY 24, 2022, OF THE “SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION” IN UKRAINE, WHICH AIMS TO RECONSIDER ITS POSITION IN THE INTERNATIONAL GEOPOLITICAL ARCHITECTURE.*

*RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS: FOR THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, THE SUCCESS OF THE ACTIONS TAKEN IN UKRAINE - UNDER THE NARRATIVE OF “SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION”, “ANTI-TERRORIST OPERATION” OR “HOLY WAR” -, IS THE DETERMINING FACTOR FOR THE RE-EMPOWERMENT OF ITS ROLE AS A GREAT POWER AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL AND THE TRANSITION FROM A UNIPOLAR SYSTEM, LED BY THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (USA), TO A MULTIPOLAR ONE, WITH SEVERAL CENTERS OF POWER.*

*PROPOSED OBJECTIVE: TO DEMONSTRATE THAT, FOR THE CURRENT REVISIONIST EXPRESSIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, THE MAIN INSTRUMENT USED IS MILITARY AGGRESSION IN THE FORM OF A WAR OF OCCUPATION, THROUGH WHICH THE INTEGRITY AND SOVEREIGNTY OF UKRAINE ARE THREATENED.*

*RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: THE RESEARCH IS BASED ON A THEORETICAL COMBINATION BETWEEN THE POWER TRANSITION THEORY REGARDING THE ISSUE OF REVISIONISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES ON WAR. THE RESEARCH IS MAINLY FOCUSED ON THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE OPEN-SOURCE INFORMATION FOUND IN THE PUBLIC SPACE AT THE MOMENT OF FEBRUARY 01, 2023, FOR THE ACCURATE ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE OF INTEREST, IN THE FORM OF A CASE STUDY DEALING WITH THE SUBJECT REPRESENTED BY THE ARMED CONFRONTATIONS IN UKRAINE, TRIGGERED LAST YEAR BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION.*

*CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND ANY NARRATIVE USED BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO DESCRIBE THE MILITARY CONFRONTATIONS ON THE TERRITORY OF UKRAINE, THEY CAN BE FRAMED IN TERMS OF A CLASSIC WAR OF TERRITORIAL OCCUPATION, WHICH CAN BE ANALYZED IN CONVENTIONAL TERMS, AS PART OF RUSSIA’S REVISIONIST ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE US-LED UNIPOLAR WORLD.*

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**KEY WORDS:** SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION; WAR OF OCCUPATION; ANTITERRORIST OPERATION; HOLY WAR

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## **REVISIONISM AS A PARADIGM OF THE POLICIES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

After the period of decay in the 90s, with the breakup of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) - considered by Vladimir Putin to be “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century” [1] - and the relative political and economic comeback since the beginning of the current century, against the background of maintaining the status of a great military power, conferred by the impressive nuclear arsenal it possesses, the Russian Federation represents, today, the revisionist actor advocating for the redefinition of the international systemic order, calling for the transition from a unipolar system, led by the United States of America (USA), to a multipolar one [2], with several centers of power, from one based on unilateralism, to one guided by principles based on multilateralism, considering itself the de facto Eurasian leader [3].

The rhetoric of the leaders of the Russian Federation in the last two decades and their recent actions confirm the pattern of the revisionist state dissatisfied with its own position at the systemic level, which believes that the rules of the international political and economic system function against its interests, and the power it holds/considers that it holds is not consistent with its own goals and status in international politics, being concerned to overthrow the hierarchy in force at the systemic level, coveting an advantageous position in world affairs [4], including through the use of force [5], and believing that it stands to gain more from confrontation than from cooperation [6].

In fact, the revisionist policy of the Russian Federation challenges the hegemonic status [7] at the global level held by the USA, as the main actor in the institutional architecture of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an international security institution which is in a continuous expansion, including in the geographic areas in the vicinity of the Russian Federation, which, in its perspective, seeks to block, by using global mechanisms, the reverberation of systemic multipolarity and the emergence of future centers of this configuration [8], such as BRICS, the Community. Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Eurasian Economic Union.

In this context, at the 2022 Madrid Summit and in the strategic concept that followed, NATO categorized the Russian Federation as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area”, which “seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation” [9].

Almost three quarters of a century after the end of the Second World War and over three decades after the end of the Cold War - events that deeply marked the parameters of the global security equation -, when the role of the military component in realizing the concept of security, seemed to have been replaced by diplomacy and intelligence, humanity was put, on February 24, 2022, in front of a new reality - the reappearance of military conflict in the space of the civilized world, in a geographical area located at the interference of democracy with authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

It can be said that the war in Ukraine is a new phase in the revisionist policy of the Russian Federation, a policy aimed at undermining the American unipolar order. It is obvious that, by attacking Ukraine, with the objective of occupying it, the Russian Federation aims to undermine the status quo in the area - where it sees itself surrounded by enemies [10] -, by strengthening its influence in Ukraine.

## **THE LAUNCH OF THE „SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION” AND THE NEW CRISIS IN UKRAINE**

Seeking to undermine the international order and redefine their own status quo - which they consider unfavourable -, at least at the regional level, the Kremlin leaders adopted the decision to invade Ukraine under the pretext of carrying out the so-called “special military operation”.

According to the statement of President Vladimir Putin, from February 24, 2022, the purpose of launching the “special military operation” on Ukraine was to “demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine”, to protect the population that was subjected to “harassment and genocide by the Kiev regime” after “the 2014 coup d’état in Kiev” and the accountability of those guilty of the previously presented state of affairs [11, 12]. To be noted that in that statement it is specified that the launched operation was not directly aimed at the occupation of Ukrainian territories, not wanting to “impose anything by force”, claiming, however, the right of every citizen on the territory of Ukraine - them to have the “freedom to choose (...) to independently determine their own future” [11]. However, it should be noted that the Russian Federation holds a position of strength, even towards the international community, as conveyed by their unequivocal warning to those „tempted to intervene in the unfolding of events, or “create threats” for it, warning them of the seriousness of the consequences of such actions [11, 13]. We are witnessing, therefore, the emergence of a new crisis in Ukraine, which acquires completely exceptional values in the context of the recent developments of the new military conflict.

From the very beginning, the Russian Federation's actions have been circumscribed by the intention of reaffirming its importance from a geopolitical point of view and regaining the status of a global superpower. In this context, the political scientist Alexandr Dughin - considered to be one of the ideologues of the Kremlin regime -, emphasized in March 2022 the need to return to a “multipolar world”, with several “decision-making centers” and “regional hegemons”, claiming that “this is the meaning of the confrontation in Ukraine” [14].

The recognition, just two days before the launch of the “special military operation”, of the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic - thus violating the Minsk agreements of 2015 -, can be seen as an approach that would confer the relative legitimacy of the approach of the Russian Federation, in territories that would not de facto belong to Ukraine. On the other hand, the invocation of the right to self-defense stipulated in the UN Charter (Article 51) and mutual assistance treaties with the two “republics” and the “special military operation” carried out by the Russian Federation in these “Russian territories” ceded to Ukraine with the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, represent “a strong signal” sent to ethnic Russians in the territories of the former USSR regarding the efforts of the authorities to regain importance at the global level by the Russian Federation [15].

## **CHANGING THE OBJECTIVE OF THE OPERATION – „WAR OF LIBERATION”**

Complementary to the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, the statement of the head of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff, Sergei Rudskoi, dated March 25, 2022, according to which Russia's objective is the “complete liberation” of the Donbass region, can be seen as changing the objective of the invasion of the Russian Federation [16], an aspect also confirmed by President Vladimir

Putin, a few months later, when he supports the need to eliminate the “anti-Russian enclave that is being created on the territory of Ukraine”[17].

The real purpose of the “special military operation” we are referring to is unequivocally confirmed, on May 6, 2022, by Andrei Turciak, first vice-president of the Federation Council in the Russian Parliament, who announced the intention of the authorities of the Russian Federation “to remain in the territories conquered by the Russian army” [18]. It should be noted that, on September 30, 2022, President Vladimir Putin formalized the annexation of four Ukrainian regions - Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, occupied during the military operations -, after the organization of formal referendums, not recognized by the international community.

Therefore, we can affirm that, in fact, the “special military operation” launched by the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine has the characteristics of a war of occupation of new territories by the aggressor state - complementary to the efforts, since 2014, to occupy the Crimean Peninsula and integration into the Russian Federation, unrecognized by the international community - despite the reluctance of the Kremlin authorities to assume this intention. The statement is confirmed by the declarations, from September 2022, of the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, a supporter of the steps taken by Vladimir Putin, - according to which “the special military operation turned into war a long time ago”, which would should continue until the objectives declared at the beginning of the operation [19] -, of the ultranationalist writer and politician Zakhar Prilepin - who claimed that “the special operation has long ended, the war has begun” [20] - , and, last but not least, by the political scientist Alexandr Dugin - who affirmed, in September 2022, that “the special military operation has already ended and a large-scale war with the West has begun”, its determining factor being represented by the “religious aspect”. [21] Similar conclusions reside, indirectly, from the statement of President Vladimir Putin, from December 7, 2022, which claimed that “the special military operation of the Russian Federation in Ukraine could be a long-term process” [22], and only on the 22 December 2022, for the first time, in a public statement, Vladimir Putin classifies the “special military operation” as being, in fact, a war [23], but without taking the legal steps to declare this state of fact, namely the proclamation of a war declaration against Ukraine.

Since the situation in Ukraine represents a military aggression recognized by the UN General Assembly through the Resolution of March 2, 2022 [24] and related to the provisions of Geneva Conventions 1-4 of August 12, 1949, which regulate the application of international humanitarian law, “even if the state of war is not officially recognized” by the Russian Federation, we are in the situation of an international armed conflict, because the aggressor state uses armed force against Ukraine, thus giving this aggression the connotations of war [25] We are, therefore, in the presence of a military conflict in which the aggressor state resorts to intimidation tactics, by endangering the critical civil and military infrastructures of Ukraine - road, rail, sea or air transport, electricity, communications, agriculture and food safety, public health, education, etc. - and their basic functions, for thwarting the effectiveness of its internal security policies circumscribed by the need to maintain social and political order, counteract external aggressions and defend the fundamental institutions of the state, as imperative for maintaining its integrity, existence and functioning.

The history of the last decades showed the predisposition of the Russian Federation to use the terminology of “operation” in the initiated military confrontations – “operation to maintain the constitutional order in Chechnya” (the first Chechen war, from 1994-1996), “anti-terrorist operation in the Northern Caucasus” (the second Chechen war, from 1999-

2000), “peace enforcement operation” (invasion of Georgia, in 2008, in support of separatists from Ossetia), “special military operation” (started on February 24, 2022 ) - [25] , precisely to create the appearance of legality of military interventions in territories not recognized as sovereign states with the right to self-determination.

In fact, one can speak of a Soviet legacy in the practice of motivating interventions, in this sense the intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops, led by the USSR, from 1968, in Prague, is relevant. In the same manner as the so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, the intervention in Czechoslovakia was called “normalization” [26]. Also, as Russian soldiers were sent to Ukraine without being informed of the place and the reason in advance, in a similar manner it was done in 1968, when the troops of the Warsaw Pact were not informed of the nature of the mission they were going to undertake [26], i.e. that of invading and occupying Czechoslovakia and replacing the Czechoslovak leadership with one that corresponded to the vision of the USSR leadership, that of Marxist orthodoxy imposed by force on the smaller satellites [27, 28].

Despite the claims of Dmitry Medvedev, the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, who claimed that the “special military operation” undertaken involves the use of “high-precision weapons” aimed at destroying Ukraine's military capabilities, with the aim of minimizing the threat to the population and of civil infrastructures [29], the consequences of the armed conflict, both the material destruction of military and civil infrastructures, but especially the human victims - hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded among military combatants and the Ukrainian civilian population -, highlight a grim reality, namely that we are facing the bloodiest war in Europe since the Second World War, the initiator of which is the regime of President Vladimir Putin [30].

### **„ANTI-TERRORIST OPERATION”, ANOTHER OBJECTIVE OF THE MILITARY INTERVENTION**

Just one month after the beginning of the invasion in Ukraine - on March 31, 2022 -, the political scientist Alexandr Dughin appreciated, in a public intervention, the fact that the current state of affairs in Ukraine, initially defined as a “special military operation”, actually represents a “anti-terrorist operation” aimed at eliminating revisionist elements connected to the “progressive West”, who oppose the traditional values that define the Russian cultural space and promote Russophobia [14].

The same idea was brought back into the public space by the head of the Crimean occupation administration, Serghey Aksenov, on September 27, 2022, in the context of the temporary closure of the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), invoking some internal regulations that would allow suspension of the operation of nuclear facilities during counter-terrorism operations [31]. Moreover, some of the military actions carried out by the Russian Federation were motivated by the federal decision-makers by the need to undertake “counter-terrorism” operations that would have been orchestrated by Ukrainian forces [32].

The conveyance of such points of view by the authorities of the Russian Federation aimed to increase the degree of support by the internal public opinion, considering the major psychological impact of terrorist actions on the collective mind.

The theory of the “anti-terrorist operation” carried out by the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine has been disputed and disavowed at the international level, considering that in fact the military intervention of the Russian Federation on the civilian population not involved in the armed conflict can be assimilated to a terrorist action [33]. It should be noted that, in November 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the Russian Federation's attacks “against civilians in Ukraine, the destruction of

civilian infrastructure and other serious violations of international and humanitarian law”, considering them assimilated to acts of terrorism and war crimes, a context in which the Russian Federation is included in the category of states that sponsor terrorism and “use terrorist means” [34].

### **LEGITIMATION OF THE CONFLICT THROUGH THE „HOLY WAR” NARRATIVE**

In the context of the firm opposition encountered by the army of the Russian Federation on the battle fronts in Ukraine, in order to justify possible additional military measures, the Russian authorities tried to offer a religious, sacred dimension to the initiated actions, translating the perception of public opinion from “special military operation” to “holy war”, having in mind the fact that religion can, in certain contexts, represent a vector of legitimizing the conflict, and in the collective mentality of the Russian space, predominantly of the Orthodox Christian religion, the religious war is perceived as a legitimate step for the defense to some sacred concepts or values, and identification with Orthodoxy is, in fact, a way of identification with Russian ethnicity [35].

The conferring of this dimension is achieved both by the statements of some high officials of the Russian Federation - President Vladimir Putin tried to legitimize the intervention in Ukraine by claiming that “moral justice” is on the side of the Russian Federation, while Dimitri Medvedev affirmed that “the sacred objective” of this intervention is to stop the “lord of Hell”, with indirect reference to the American hegemony -, by the high prelates of the Russian Orthodox Church - Patriarch Kirill of Moscow expressed his support for the decisions of the political authorities regarding the military offensive, the combatants' actions being deemed as supreme acts and „sacrifice that washes away all sins” [35] - as well as by supporters of the Kremlin regime - Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov refers to a “holy war” directed against “satanists and fascists” in the European region, which would pay attention to the “interests, customs and traditions” of Christians and Muslims in the region, thus conceptually amplifying the dimension of the conflict [36]; the political scientist Alexandr Dugin issues the theory of the “orthodox, apocalyptic battle (...) of holy Russia, against the antichrist” (...) “against the satanic West” [37].

Ever since March 2022, less than a month after the beginning of the intervention of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, a group of renowned theologians drew attention, through a public appeal, regarding the use of the ideology of the “Russian world” - a form of “religious fundamentalism with a totalitarian character”, considered to be a “false teaching” -, as its justification. In fact, it is claimed that the operation on the territory of Ukraine aims to reconfirm the theory of the uniqueness of the matrix elements defining the “Russian world”, respectively: Moscow - political center; Kiev - the spiritual center; Russian language – common language; The Patriarchate of Moscow, representative of the Russian Orthodox Church - common church; The Patriarch of Moscow - the common patriarch; the president of the Russian Federation - joint national leader [38]. Some authoritative voices denounce this ideology preached within the Russian Orthodox Church, which conveys the idea that Russia “is a unique and independent civilization”, considering it as “a corrosive heresy”, “neo-imperialist”, “revanchist and restorationist”, challenging, at the same time, the repeated attempts to legitimize the interventions of the Kremlin authorities in geographical areas with a significant presence of Russian ethnic minorities [39].

It should be emphasized that, regarding the military intervention in Ukraine, both Vladimir Putin - as a political leader, and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow - as a religious leader, used, as a mobilizing message, the narrative of “the triumphant history of Russia as a holy

people” and “holy sacrifices”, as defining elements of the “holy war” ideology, a message that was taken up and disseminated among the public opinion of many of the Russian Orthodox clergy [39].

The recent decisions of the authorities in Kiev, regarding the rights of national minorities on the territory of Ukraine [40], constituted an additional motivation for the authorities of the Russian Federation - see the statement of Minister Sergey Lavrov, dated January 23, 2023 - to reaffirm the justice and legality of the measures taken against the vectors of interest of the West in the area of the “Russian world”, which would have triggered a „real war” aimed, in fact, at undermining the defining elements of the “Russian space” civilization [41].

Beyond any narrative of the decision-makers of the Russian Federation, it is obvious that the war in Ukraine has also, in addition to the political substratum, a strong religious dimension, religion being used as a formidable and unpredictable ideological weapon and subjective form of influence, which legitimizes the conflict, some authorized voices considering that it is potentiated by the “Cain Syndrome” - found in the conduct of the political authorities of the Russian Federation - and by the “Stockholm Syndrome” - so evident in the recent manifestations of the representatives of the Orthodox Church in the Russian Federation [42].

In this context, the relationship between religion and politics - as it is understood and claimed by the authorities of the Russian Federation - fundamentally departs from the universal perspective that advocates for spiritual renewal adapted to the natural evolution of humanity, in which the connections and interactions between religion and politics it must be found in a biunivocal relationship and evolve peacefully, without slippage and outside of any subjective interpretive paradigm.

## CONCLUSIONS

As we have argued, the so-called „special military operation” can be seen as a subsumed instrument of a new phase of Russia's revisionist policy, through which it aims to regain its position of influence at the international level, trying to undermine American hegemony. With all the discursive forms that the authorities of the Russian Federation adopted to justify the invasion of Ukraine, from “special military operation” to “war of occupation”, “anti-terrorist operation” or “holy war”, the military confrontations on the territory of Ukraine can be framed in the terms of a classic war, which can be analyzed in conventional terms.

First of all, referring to a simple, broad definition of war, “as sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations” [43], in the present case we note a military confrontation between two independent, internationally recognized political entities, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, whose forces are organized according to principles that more or less respect international standards.

Secondly, even if, in general, the war is reduced to the simple engagement of armed actors and this presupposes a set of political relations that influence the belligerent parties [44], in the case of the situation in Ukraine we are dealing with a real war in the true sense of the word, seen as a political-military confrontation on a regional scale, where each side uses all capabilities, including physical force, to compel the opponent to submit to its will (Russian Federation - gaining influence in new territories; Ukraine - defending the territory and thwarting the aggressor's intention), trying to thwart any resistance of the opposing party. [45]



Thirdly, if we refer to the objective of disarming the opponent, found in the case of the classic war, - which stipulates the enemy “must be disarmed, and disarmament becomes therefore the immediate object of hostilities in theory” [45] -, we can note that the disarmament of Ukraine was a goal announced in President Vladimir Putin's speech as early as February 24, 2022, even though he used the term “demilitarization”.

Last but not least, the military conflict in Ukraine has the classic characteristics of a war of occupation, in which the aggressor state resorts to specific tactics to destroy Ukraine's critical civil and military infrastructures [46] and affect their basic societal functions, necessary to maintain social and political order, as imperative for maintaining the existence, integrity and state sovereignty.

In the context of the reconfiguration of the geopolitical architecture at the international level as a result of the emergence and manifestation of the conflict in Ukraine [47], almost a year after its beginning, its evolution is still unpredictable, a fact that justifies the hypothesis that the horizon of its end is quite far and the chances of turning into a new and dangerous frozen conflict - like others in the Black Sea Region - are increasingly evident.

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