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THE IMPACT OF THE SARS-COV 2 PANDEMIC ON THE GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL GAME

***Abstract:** Human history has been written by epidemics and technology. While technologies cemented the world order, epidemics undermined it, heralding its end. So it was with the great plague epidemics of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the great Spanish flu of the modern era. This article aims to analyse the impact of the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the global geopolitical game. Or, in other words, whether this disaster has been powerful enough to herald the ‘dawn’ of a new historical era or whether it will merely be a reset of the international system, like many others in contemporary history.*

***Keywords:** SARS-CoV-2, reset, world order, international system, geopolitics, geoeconomics.*

Looking back on humanity's history, we see that the great epidemics heralded the end of one historical epoch and the beginning of a new one. Antiquity, with its ‘Pax Romana’ (‘Roman peace’) and slave republics, was wiped out by the Antonine plague (165-180), which killed over 5 million people. The early Middle Ages and the greatness of Byzantium faded into the lime pits where millions of victims of Justinian's plague (541-542), which killed about 10% of the world's known population, were thrown. In turn, the late Middle Ages ended in the funeral corteges of the 'black death', the bubonic plague epidemic (1346-1353), which wiped out 60% of Europe's population.

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And, the Renaissance collapsed in the face of the millions of deaths of the plague epidemic in the second half of the 17th Century. Beginning with the age of Enlightenment and industrialization, with the development of sanitation and hygiene rules, plague epidemics decreased in intensity, but were replaced by another calamity – influenza. At the end of the first global conflagration of the 20th Century, the great Spanish flu (1918-1920) killed more citizens of the planet than all the war years, putting an end to the bourgeois romanticism of the ‘Belle Epoque’ and heralding the ‘entry on the scene’ of the Trotskyist-Bolshevik and Nazi left-wing totalitarianism. And not only that – against the backdrop of this medical cataclysm, in 1920 the foundations of global health governance were laid, with the establishment of the Health Organization of the League of Nations, which later in 1948 became the World Health Organization (WHO).

Since the end of 2019, humanity has been facing a new influenza, which has reached pandemic proportions due to technology-driven human mobility and urbanization-driven human agglomeration. A pandemic that has swept across every continent except Antarctica and has so far infected over 632.5 million people, killing 6.5 million of them². A pandemic produces an atypical viral infection with an unpredictable course, and a multitude of clinical pictures but with a low lethality of only 1,027%. A pandemic created by a beta-coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19³, which officially emerged in November 2019 in a fish market in the Chinese city of Wuhan, and through a complex of mismanagement errors ended up infecting an entire world and shutting down the economies of major powers. This article aims to identify whether the current pandemic could be the trigger for a new historical era and, if so, where might we be heading. Or will it only be followed by a common reset of the international game? Or, in other words, what is the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the global geopolitical game?

The geopolitical and geoeconomic impact

Let's take into consideration the thesis of French geopolitician Jacques Attali, which argues that human history is the result of the competition for power between the three non-state ‘orders’ – the priestly, the military-imperial and the economic one. The current economic crisis heralds great changes in the world's power cartel. As the real world order is commanded by the economic power concentrated in the ‘heart of the world’ – as Attali calls the pulsating core of global economic unipolarity – a change of its location, from one port-city to

² *COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*, <<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>>, (22.10.2022).

³ Acronym for coronavirus disease 2019.

another, is possible only in the context of major financial crises. Specifically, the current 'heart of the world', in the context of the post-pandemic and intra-war economic crisis, might be about to leave its current host, the port city of Los Angeles, and move across the Pacific Ocean. It would be a move in the logic of the westward dynamic of this 'heart' which, as Attali stated, was born in the 13th Century in the Belgian city of Bruges and after a few continental European locations moved to London, then Boston, New York and Los Angeles. Or, the most likely future location of the world's economic and power centre can only be in an Asian port city. Such a shift would represent a reconfiguration of the global hierarchy of continental power. Thus, Asia could take the place of North America at the top of the global power pyramid and Europe could lose its chances of regaining its former global stature, at least for the foreseeable future. Also, if Attali is to be believed, the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and amplified by the decoupling of the Russian economy from the Western market could contribute to the birth of a polycentric world dominated by nine nations: USA, Mexico, Brazil, China, India, Russia, the European Union, Egypt and Nigeria, with the proviso that Nigeria, China and India could undergo processes of fracturing similar to the implosion of the USSR. Also, countries such as Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Australia, Canada and South Africa could play important roles as major regional powers. The time horizon for the rest of the global geopolitical game envisaged by Attali would be 2035.

Moving beyond the literature of anticipation and back to the real world, we have to say that both at the level of human organisms and societies, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has hit vulnerable, already dysfunctional areas.

The European Union – the geopolitical battleground of the US-China-Russian Federation trilateral

The "biggest test since the Second World War", as the pandemic crisis has been called by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, has called into question European unity and solidarity and the ability of the United Europe to withstand shocks. Unfortunately, the answer was negative.

Although Italy called for the activation of the *European Union Civil Protection Mechanism* amid the avalanche of sickness cases in the first months of the disaster, the reaction of other European countries was virtually non-existent. Instead, the first state to respond to Italy's call for help was China, followed by the Russian Federation and the USA, which as of 12 March 2020, sent medical personnel, dozens of tons of medical supplies, including equipment for intensive care units, medical protective equipment and antiviral

drugs to Rome⁴. Subsequently, extra-European aid also reached other countries severely hit by the pandemic, such as Spain, France, Poland, and the Netherlands⁵.

The ability of the three major powers of the international system to intervene and the Europeans' lack of reaction demonstrated that, geopolitically, the EU is not a viable player. More precisely, United Europe has the status of a geopolitical 'theatre'/'battlefield' where the competition within the trilateral of the ordering powers of the current uni/multipolar system acts. This has been verified in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian War, in which the independent geopolitical player called Europe is practically non-existent.

Moreover, the failure of European solidarity in the face of the pandemic has amplified Euroscepticism. As I said in the book called *Geopolitics and Pandemics*, although Ursula van der Leyen, President of the European Commission, sent on behalf of the EU 'heartfelt apologies' to Italy, for the lack of support during the early days of the pandemic⁶, a survey conducted by the *Dire Agency* in Italy on 12-13 March 2020 showed that "88% of Italians believe that the EU has failed in its mission to support Italy in times of crisis". Also, "67% of respondents believe that joining the EU has been a loss for Italy⁷". And, an opinion poll, conducted on a representative sample of the Italian population between 9-10 April 2020 by the *Tecne Agency*, showed an increase in the share of Eurosceptics by a further 2%, reaching 69%⁸, of whom 49% say Italy should leave the EU!⁹ At present, the Euroscepticism amplified by the European failure to manage the pandemic is fully reflected in the emergence of anti-system leaders and parties and in the consolidation of parties

⁴ E. Braw, *The EU Is Abandoning Italy in Its Hour of Need*, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/14/coronavirus-eu-abandoning-italy-china-aid/>> (20.11.2022); A. Nikolova, *Russian COVID-19 aid to Italy: PR stunt or covert operation?*, <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/russian-COVID-19-aid-to-italy-pr-stunt-or-covert-operation/>> (20.11.2022); *USAFE supports Italy COVID-19 response*, <<https://it.usembassy.gov/usafe-supports-italy-COVID-19-response-march-22-2020/>> (11.09.2022).

⁵ J. Valero, *EU allocates Chinese aid to Italy to fight against the pandemic*, <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/eu-allocates-chinese-aid-to-italy-to-fight-against-the-pandemic/>> (11.09.2022).

⁶ J. Henley, *EU offers 'heartfelt apology' to Italy over coronavirus response*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/16/eu-offers-heartfelt-apology-italy-coronavirus-response-herd-immunity>> (11.09.2022).

⁷ T. Coratella, *Whatever it takes: Italy and the COVID-19 crisis: Italy's response to the virus is starting to reshape its politics*, <https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_whatever_it_takes_italy_and_COVID_19_crisis/> (20.11.2022).

⁸ *ANALYSIS: Could Italy's coronavirus crisis boost euroscepticism and the far right?*, <<https://www.thelocal.it/20200420/italy-coronavirus-crisis-boost-far-right-euroscepticism>> (20.09.2022).

⁹ A. I. C. Popescu, *Geopolitică și pandemie*, București 2020, pp. 97-98.

with a conservative and sovereigntist discourse, such as the *Sweden Democrats* party led by Jimmie Åkesson and *Brothers of Italy* party led by Georgia Meloni, winners of the September 2022 elections in Sweden¹⁰ and Italy¹¹, the victory in this spring's elections of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán¹² or the victory this summer in the by-elections in the Spanish province of Andalusia of the Popular Party. Victory comes to consolidate the conservative Spanish right after two other victories in Madrid in May 2021 and another in Castile and Leon in February 2021¹³. Moreover, before the outbreak of the pandemic, Euroscepticism had registered a significant increase across the European community. In this regard, in 2019, “statistics showed that 16%, meaning one of six Europeans, voted with Eurosceptic far-right parties and, 33%, or one of three Europeans, voted with Eurosceptic far-left parties”¹⁴. This means that, as of 2019, 49% of Europeans were Eurosceptic! If we consider only the rise of Euroscepticism in Italy as a result of pandemic shock, we may say that in May 2020 the percentage of European Eurosceptics has exceeded the critical threshold of 50%¹⁵. And, it will increase further, amidst the economic crisis and subsequent poverty triggered by the grim and dysfunctional economy following the Russian-Ukrainian War.

Nor should the effect of the pandemic on the stability of the Eurozone be overlooked, again, with the solidarity of European states hardly being tested. The inter-European differences over the ‘corona-bonds’ – the financial mechanism by which the Eurozone debt was to be divided among all Eurozone states – are well known. Germany, Finland and the Netherlands rejected this mechanism. Moreover, Germany's insistence on using the *European Stability Mechanism* (ESM) – the Eurozone's €500 billion bailout fund created after the last sovereign debt crisis, which imposes strict conditions on countries seeking assistance in its rules for accessing it – has heightened tensions between

¹⁰ D. Crouch, *Swedish rightwing on verge of narrow election win but waits on final tally*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/12/swedish-rightwing-on-verge-of-narrow-election-win-but-waits-on-final-tally>> (13.09.2022).

¹¹ G. Jones, *Italy's right heads for clear election victory, final polls indicate*, <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italys-right-heads-clear-election-victory-final-polls-indicate-2022-09-09/>> (13.09.2022).

¹² *Hungarian Parliamentary Election Results*, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/hungary-election-2022/31785004.html>> (13.09.2022).

¹³ *Spain's Popular Party boosted by Andalusia victory 18 months before general election*, <<https://www.euronews.com/2022/06/20/spains-popular-party-boosted-by-andalusia-victory-18-months-before-general-election>> (13.09.2022).

¹⁴ J. Henley, *Support for Eurosceptic parties doubles in two decades across EU*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/support-for-eurosceptic-parties-doubles-two-decades-across-eu>> (11.09.2022).

¹⁵ A. I. C. Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

Eurozone countries. In this regard, the criticism of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who did not sign the final statement, and the statement of French President Emmanuel Macron, who questioned the ‘survival of the European project’, are worth mentioning¹⁶.

Or, the failure of the massive funding program announced on 19 March 2020 by the European Central Bank (ECB), which allowed Eurozone countries to spend more to cope with the impact of the virus. The ECB's €750 billion program was to buy corporate and government bonds of European countries during 2020, including Greek government bonds, which were considered unsafe to invest in. The failure of this program was triggered by the decision of the *Deutsche Bundes-verfassungsgericht* – Germany's Constitutional Court, which ruled that the ECB's bond-buying program to stabilize the Eurozone partly violates the German Constitution, with the Bundesbank having the largest stake in the ECB¹⁷.

On top of the economic burden generated by the pandemic, the economic consequences of the Russian Federation's war of aggression in Ukraine have been superimposed, so that the Euro has now fallen to a historic low against the US Dollar, and has been overtaken by the US Dollar¹⁸. Inflation reached 8.9% in July 2022, and the Eurozone's recession is already a certainty¹⁹.

This economic collapse overlaps with the pre-existing difficult financial situation of the EU which, at the end of 2018, recorded the highest external debt globally, at \$29,270 billion and gold, and currency reserves worth only \$740 billion²⁰. And, also overlaps with the pre-existing structural crises of European construction such as:

- a. the identity crisis, generated by the unknown political status of the European ‘project’ – federation, confederation, NGO, etc.;
- b. the leadership crisis, generated by the rift between the ruling elites and the European people;

¹⁶ J. Barnes, *EU meltdown: Italy slams Merkel for lack of unity – Macron says coronavirus could end bloc*, <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1261075/EU-coronavirus-summit-Italy-economy-Angela-Merkel-Emmanuel-Macron-collapse>> (11.09.2022).

¹⁷ *German court criticises European Central Bank crisis bond-buying*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52542993>> (11.09.2022).

¹⁸ *Euro falls below parity with the dollar. What's the impact?*, <<https://apnews.com/article/dollar-euro-parity-explainer-9f7eb3fe4b87704d7f9e77a0f8c7f123>> (26.09.2022).

¹⁹ J. Cable, *Eurozone likely entering recession as price rises hit demand*, <<https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/euro-zone-likely-entering-recession-price-rises-hit-demand-pmi-2022-09-23/>> (26.09.2022).

²⁰ *CIA WORLD FACTBOOK*, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>> (01.09.2022); A. I. C. Popescu, *Analize in comode*, Bucuresti 2020, pp. 82-85.

- c. the ideological crisis generated by the dichotomy between the new left-wing progressivism of the Brussels elites and the Christian conservatism of an important part of the European electorate;
- d. the geopolitical reality of the 'two-speed' Europe: of the Western 'core', corresponding to the core of the EU's founding states, and of the 'Eastern periphery', made up of the satellite states of the former Soviet Empire;
- e. the crisis of illegal cross-border migration, which has produced a great rift among EU states and fuelled Euroscepticism through a sense of civilizational and cultural aggression, amid the subversion of the European Christian identity;
- f. the fractionalization of the United Europe through the emergence of regional groups of common language and historical past: the 'neo-Hanseatic league' around Germany and the Netherlands, the 'Latin arc' around France, the 'neo-Habsburgs' around Austria, the 'Visegrad group' etc.

What could be the consequences of this state of affairs? The undermining of the Federal Europe project could be followed by any of these three scenarios:

1. The EU is left by some of the states, on the Brexit format, and the process of European enlargement and integration is stopped;
2. Maintaining the EU in the current format, but with major dysfunctions and tensions which, after a while, could lead to a profound reform of the Union followed by the abandonment of the federal project and its replacement with another formula, of confederative (Europe of Nations) or geo-economic (European Economic Community) type of association;
3. The dismantling of the current union format by mutual agreement followed by:
 - a. Abandoning the project and returning to the classical European nation-states;
 - b. regrouping the European states in the 'two-speed Europe' format with the Western states grouped within the borders of the former European Economic Community, and the Eastern states grouped within the borders of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) format;
4. geo-economic and geopolitical regionalization: the 'Latin Arc' in the south, the 'New Hanseatic League' in the north-west, the 'neo-Habsburgs' in the centre, and the North-South/Sanitary/3SI Corridor in the east²¹.

²¹ A. I. C. Popescu, *Geopolitică...*, pp. 47-49.

USA – the hegemon of the uni/multipolar system

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out amid a highly tense domestic situation generated by the power struggle between the two major US parties and the political and geopolitical stakes of the 2020 election year. Although, at the end of 2019, the Republican administration of Donald Trump had reported an undeniable economic success, which was to become the rhetorical focus of the presidential campaign in the following autumn, the poor management of the pandemic weighed heavily on the loss of the second term for the president in question.

However, the legitimacy of the Joe Biden Democratic administration was intensely contested by supporters of the previous president, who charged massive fraud in the electoral process, particularly in the electronic and mail-in ballots, accepted as a preventative measure in pandemic conditions²². This deepened the rift between the two camps, and radicalized the political discourse to the point where loyalists of the former president were labelled as terrorists by some Democratic leaders²³ and Republican political leaders raised the issue of secession of the Republican states²⁴. Ideas are reiterated in the context of campaign rhetoric related to the legislative elections scheduled for November this year.

On the economic front, the pandemic has had enormous costs. Not at all surprising if we remember that the US economy has been in decline for decades due to two major structural causes: the ageing of the US population, which has led to a subsequent increase in healthcare costs, and the negative balance between federal revenues and government costs²⁵. Thus, although measures to counter the effects of the pandemic on the US economy and the incomes of vulnerable

²² B. McCarthy, A. Sherman, *The faulty premise of the '2,000 mules' trailer about voting by mail in the 2020 election*, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2022/may/04/faulty-premise-2000-mules-trailer-about-voting-mai/?gclid=CjwKCAjwhNWZBhB_EiwAPzlhNteapfPwPetAJMuDgMPnYm6nvShlPyRx4J_S6ABrBHd6L3x-67ZF2xoCUA4QAvD_BwE> (01.09.2022).

²³ *Majority Leader Schumer Floor Remarks Announcing The Senate Will Vote This Week On Moving Forward With The Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act*, <<https://www.democrats.senate.gov/news/press-releases/majority-leader-schumer-floor-remarks-announcing-the-senate-will-vote-this-week-on-moving-forward-with-the-domestic-terrorism-prevention-act>> (01.09.2022).

²⁴ N. Mizan, *Texas Republicans want a vote on 'Texas Independence.' But can Texas secede from the union?*, Politifact, <<https://www.politifact.com/article/2022/jun/27/texas-republicans-want-vote-texas-independence-can/>> (01.09.2022).

²⁵ *Why is the National Debt so High?*, <https://www.pgpf.org/national-debtclock?gclid=CjwKCAjwhNWZBhB_EiwAPzlhNs16Uss5NhbDsXypXgyTIdMQ__A361v0MiChrqVKsdpATpUuTMOLMBoC3tgQAvD_BwE> (01.09.2022).

populations were unprecedented in the history of the state, at the end of the first year of the pandemic, the US reported negative GDP growth rates of -3.5% ²⁶.

Although later, in 2021, the US reported a return of the GDP growth rate to positive values of 5.7% ²⁷, the decline of the US economy generated by the pandemic was deepened by the geo-economic consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian War, so that today the national debt of the federal state has exceeded \$30 trillion²⁸ (and a gold and currency reserve that on 31 December 2017, long before the pandemic crisis, was only \$123.3 billion²⁹), inflation exceeds 8.6% and, the price of oil is at a record high. A price that will rise if OPEC implements its plan to reduce oil extraction by 2 million barrels a day³⁰.

How much will the poverty of the American population matter in the future political and geopolitical game of the federal state? Hard to predict. As of this writing, Republican candidates in the November 2022 US Congressional by-election are credited with success³¹. What would it mean for the Senate and Congress to be controlled by Republicans? Possibly blocking or hindering the work of the Biden administration, including its economic, foreign and defence policies, as well as the resurgence of anarchist and extremist political movements on the left³² or right³³, which can dynamite the internal stability of the federal state.

All this in a state whose risk of secession has been theorized since the early 20th century by the American geopolitician Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), who said in his article, titled *Is Sectionalism in America Dying Away?*³⁴, that secessionism not only preceded the building of the federal state, but has survived throughout history, and will not go away, even if the future of the federation will hang in the balance.

²⁶ GDP growth (annual %) – United States, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=US&name_desc=false> (01.09.2022).

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Why is the National Debt so High?*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ United States, <<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-states/#economy>> (09.09.2022).

³⁰ OPEC+ plans major oil production cut despite US pressure, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/5/opecc-heads-for-large-oil-supply-cuts>> (06.10.2022).

³¹ D. Petka, *The Republicans Could Win the U.S. Midterms. Here's What that Means for the World*, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/02/gop-congress-midterms-foreign-policy-ukraine-taiwan/>> (01.09.2022).

³² *What is Antifa?*, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/antifa-200601170721571.html>>; *Measuring Occupy Wall Street's impact, 5 years later*, <<https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/ct-occupy-wall-street-s-impact-20160917-story.html>> (01.09.2022).

³³ M. Wendling, *Proud Boys and Antifa – who are they and what do they want?*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-54352635>> (01.09.2022).

³⁴ F. J. Turner, *Is Sectionalism in America Dying Away?*, “American Journal of Sociology”, vol. 13, 661-675, p. 1908.

China – the main competitor for the hegemon status of the uni-multipolar system

The COVID-19 medical crisis was a great test of resilience for the Chinese state's political and military leadership. There were three major challenges. As the state of origin of the pandemic, with global hegemonic ambitions, the largest worldwide population, interethnic and interconfessional tensions and major problems in managing the discrepancy between the urbanized, modern, cosmopolitan coastal regions and the rural, traditionalist central regions, the challenges were:

1. the population's confidence in the state's ability to manage the pandemic could have ended up in questioning the country's unity;
2. the confidence of international partners in the honesty and good intentions of the Chinese state;
3. the management of the medical crisis that threatened to affect a state with a population of over 1.3 billion and to disengage China economically from its trading partners.

Until 31 December 2019, when the Chinese authorities officially reported to the local WHO office that they were facing pneumonia generated by unknown causes, the Beijing authorities had shown opacity both in their relations with their people and with the international community. This behaviour has been severely reprimanded by its population, especially after the death, on 7 February 2020, of ophthalmologist Li Wenliang. Dr Wenliang had been punished by the authorities for having informed his fellow citizens about the consequences of infection with a 'SARS-like' virus. So strong was the public outcry that, in an unprecedented gesture, on March 20, 2020, the Beijing government issued a 'solemn apology' to the bereaved family, defusing the general mood of anger³⁵. On the other hand, the non-transparent behaviour of the Chinese authorities during the onset of the pandemic and accusations that the pandemic was generated by a virus that escaped from the laboratories of the *Institute of Virology* in Wuhan have generated acid criticism in the international mass-media and even among political leaders³⁶. But, through a sustained and coordinated effort to support countries severely affected by the pandemic, China has successfully countered the image disaster. One such case was Italy,

³⁵ *Li Wenliang: Coronavirus death of Wuhan doctor sparks anger*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51409801>>; *China exonerates Li Wenliang, doctor who warned of coronavirus*, <<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/03/20/asia-pacific/science-health-asia-pacific/china-exonerates-doctor-li-wenliang-COVID-19/#.XpbIs8gzaUk>> (10.09.2022).

³⁶ R. Sharp, J. Elsom, J. Tapsfield, *China's 'Bat Woman' Shi Zhengli denies 'trying to defect with confidential files' as bombshell 'Five Eyes' Western intelligence dossier claims country lied about coronavirus transmission and refused to help other countries prepare a vaccine*, "Daily Mail", 02.05.2020.

where the population ended up being grateful to China for its support during the difficult months of the pandemic and considered it a friendly state³⁷.

On the economic front, in 2020, China recorded an economic contraction of 6.8%, the first contraction in GDP (PPP) since 1992³⁸. For example, one of the victims of the pandemic year was one of the major contributors to the national GDP, *Evergrande Real Estate*, the real estate developer with over 1300 projects in more than 280 cities in China³⁹, which went bankrupt. However, at the end of the pandemic year 2020, China reported economic growth, albeit of only 2.24%, and a year later, in 2021, the Asian economic colossus returned with an economic growth of 8.11%⁴⁰. All of this, while according to the CIA WorldFactbook, China holds the world's largest reserves of currency and gold, worth over \$3.236 trillion (31 December 2017 est.), and an external debt of \$2.027 trillion (2019 est.)⁴¹.

China has therefore passed the test of resilience in the face of the pandemic, and its neutrality towards the Russian-Ukrainian War has given it an advantageous negotiating status both vis-à-vis the Western bloc and the Russian Federation, with which it cooperates within the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization multipolar formats.

The Russian Federation – the third major global player, which before the war it waged in Ukraine was disputing with China its status as the largest continental power and hegemon of Central Asia, and with the U.S. its status as hegemon of Europe

In the Russian Federation, the pandemic has not had significant political consequences. Economically, however, the virus has caused the federal economy to contract, with April 2020 considered the most disastrous month for the Russian economy in the modern history of the state⁴². As an economy built mainly on the export of raw materials, especially energy, it has been affected by

³⁷ *Polls show 52% of Italians view China as a friendly country*, <<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-20/Polls-show-52-of-Italians-view-China-as-a-friendly-country-PQcD8DIHTO/index.html>> (11.09.2022).

³⁸ The year the Chinese government made its first international reports.

³⁹ *Evergrande: China property giant misses debt deadline*, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58579833>> (06.09.2022).

⁴⁰ *China GDP Growth Rate 1961-2022*, <<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/CHN/china/gdp-growth-rate>> (06.09.2022).

⁴¹ *China*, <<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/#economy>> (06.09.2022).

⁴² M. Kotova, D. Shira, *The Social & Economic Impact Of COVID-19 On Russia And Recovery Potential*, <<https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/social-economic-impact-COVID-19-russia-recovery-potential.html>> (05.09.2022).

the 'oil factor'⁴³, which has taken its toll in the context of the global lock-down. At the end of 2020, the Russian Federation reported a negative GDP growth rate of – 2.68%. However, the geopolitical context of 2020, marked by China's international isolation and friction between Europeans and Americans, positioned the Russian Federation as a preferential trading partner of both, so that in 2021 the federal economy has returned to the positive GDP growth rate of 4.82%⁴⁴.

But the war of aggression unleashed by the Kremlin in Ukraine, followed by Russia's economic decoupling from the Western market, will have major consequences for the economy, forecast by the IMF to be – 6% in 2022 and – 3.5% in 2023. Moreover, currently, there is a trend towards a reconfiguration of the global geopolitical game and a return to bipolarity between the Western bloc and the Multipolar bloc of emerging powers.

Emerging geo-economic areas

On the economic front, the pandemic has kick-started the recession of an 'overheated' global economy that was hiding structural deficits. Thus, at the end of 2019, industrialized emerging economies such as Turkey, Indonesia and Argentina were already suffocating under the burden of huge debts, while other, fast-growth-oriented economies such as China, had succeeded in creating a modern industrial system at the cost of escalating national debt up to 300%, and developed economies with chronic budget deficits and 'hot' financial markets had accumulated external debts that could not be repaid in a foreseeable time⁴⁵.

The biggest losses were in economic branches such as tourism, transport, primary industries, automotive industry, film industry, leisure and beauty industries, leather and garment industries, electronic and household appliance industries, etc. Even though there was a slight global economic recovery in 2021, the military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the economic sanctions imposed on the aggressor by the international community wiped out the post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Obviously, in a recession, the risk of inflation increases exponentially. In the most recent *McKinsey Global Economic Situation Survey*, respondents

⁴³ *Three Crisis Scenarios: A Forecast*, <<https://roscongress.org/en/materials/stsenarnyy-prognoz-tri-varianta-krizisa/>> (07.09.2022).

⁴⁴ *Russia GDP Growth Rate 1990-2022*, <<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/RUS/russia/gdp-growth-rate>> (06.09.2022).

⁴⁵ *Three Crisis Scenario...*; A. I. C. Popescu, *Geopolitică...*, p. 62.

listed inflation as the biggest risk for 2023, except for China, which listed the COVID-19 pandemic⁴⁶.

As expected, the worst affected economies were those of developing countries with fragile economies based on extractive primary industries, unable to absorb the shocks of quarantine and global recession. According to data provided by the World Bank, globally, in 2020, temporary unemployment increased by 70% among graduates with the last level of primary education. Also, income losses were higher among young people, women, the self-employed and casual workers with lower levels of formal education. In turn, small enterprises, informal enterprises and enterprises with limited access to formal credit were the most affected by income losses due to the pandemic⁴⁷. Much more resilient, the economies of developed countries have adapted to the challenges of the pandemic, even at the cost of structural transformations such as the shift to the intangible and digital economy.

Thus, we can say that, at a global level, the pandemic crisis and, later, the economic consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian War, have deepened the economic disparities between rich and poor countries, the latter being dependent, since the pre-pandemic period, on foreign aid for survival. Or, to put it another way, the pandemic and the war widened the gap between the technological world of the Northern hemisphere and the developing world of the Southern hemisphere. An aspect that increases the likelihood of new waves of migration from the poor South to the rich and ageing North.

In this regard, the most recent African Development Bank report states that ‘Africa will need at least \$432 billion to address the effects of COVID-19 on its economies and the lives of its people – resources it does not have’, given that ‘around 30 million people in Africa were pushed into extreme poverty in 2021 and about 22 million jobs were lost in the same year because of the pandemic. And the trend is expected to continue through the second half of 2022 and into 2023. The economic disruptions stemming from the Russian-Ukrainian War could push a further 1.8 million people across the African continent into extreme poverty in 2022. That number could swell with another 2.1 million in 2023’⁴⁸. Where could this situation lead, taking into consideration that the EU

⁴⁶ *The coronavirus effect on global economic sentiment*, <<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-coronavirus-effect-on-global-economic-sentiment>> (05.08.2022).

⁴⁷ *Chapter 1. The economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis*, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2022/brief/chapter-1-introduction-the-economic-impacts-of-the-COVID-19-crisis>> (05.08.2022).

⁴⁸ *African Economic Outlook 2022: Africa’s 2021 economic rebound impacted by lingering COVID-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war*, <<https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/african-economic-outlook-2022-africas-2021-economic-rebound-impacted-lingering-COVID-19-pandemic-and-russia-ukraine-war-51865>> (05.08.2022).

and US, the main donors for organizations funding African states, are now in a serious economic crisis? Either to a total failure of the African states, followed by chaos, famine and a huge humanitarian crisis or by a complete surrender of the very vulnerable and rich Sub-Saharan Africa into Beijing's hands and the total transforming of the huge subcontinent into the 'second China'. And what might mean that? It might mean that Europe will be neighbouring Russia's sphere of influence in the East, China's one in the South, and the aquatic masses of the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic Ocean in the rest!

International institutions: WHO, UN

The worst impact of the pandemic has been recorded by the World Health Organization (WHO), the institution responsible for global public health governance. As we state in the book we are dedicated to the analysis of the geopolitical impact of the pandemic, 'as a result of the undue delay with which the WHO officially announced data on the nature of the virus, its transmission pathway, the severity of the infection, the alert on the public health emergency of international concern, the upgrading to pandemic level, the Agency is facing its most serious global credibility crisis since its establishment on 7 April 1948. Suspicions stem from the close links between WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and China. There are accusations against Dr Tedros and the WHO that all these delays, which in turn led to delays in the international community's efforts to counter the disaster, were made at China's express request. If the WHO has not been informed by Beijing about the true aetiology of respiratory infections, China faces serious charges of facilitating the outbreak of the pandemic with all its subsequent consequences. If the WHO knew the nature of the etiological agent and did not immediately confirm the official human-to-human airborne transmission of the virus and avoided declaring the Chinese outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, the Agency bears a huge responsibility for the international disaster'⁴⁹. The discrediting of the WHO has also brought with it a certain discrediting of the UN, amplifying the risk of institutional 'paralysis' through the inability to implement programs, especially compulsory vaccination programs in the event of a future pandemic.

Social impact of the COVID-19 medical crisis

At the social level, the COVID-19 medical crisis has affected human welfare both at the economic level, through a decrease in the quality of life, and at the community level, through the restriction of individual and civic

⁴⁹ A. I. C. Popescu, *Geopolitică...*, p. 82.

freedoms, by limiting citizens' participation in political and administrative decision-making and the exercise of state power.

A report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) states that in the event of a prolonged crisis, 'governments of small and medium-sized states, faced with the spectre of inability to pay, could resort to sacrifice curves, suspending the payment of pensions and salaries to budget staff, suspending funding for non-productive sectors of society. All this translates into accelerated poverty and a marked decline in the quality of life of large masses of people, which could have a major impact on the security environment through increased crime and violent crime, intensified social movements of protest, civil disobedience and insurgency, illegal cross-border migration, etc.'⁵⁰. To these aspects must be added the impact on the educational process in poor countries, the lack of means of digital education, the disruption of cultural, sports, confessional and civic activities, banned during the period of the quarantine of cities, and the social phenomenon of alienation, the social distance imposed on man, a social being by definition.

In terms of public health, in the first months of the pandemic, the impact was devastating. In practice, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the limits of national healthcare systems worldwide. For example, in Lombardy, where the most efficient health system in Italy was operating, or in large metropolises such as New York, Brazil, Mexico City, etc. It also showed that in the face of an avalanche of illnesses, a medical system, however efficient it may be, can only survive if it has stocks of health and medical supplies, protocols for action, reliable information and, above all, inter-human solidarity and international support. In terms of medical scientific research, however, the pandemic has been a catalyst, both for research efforts and for competition and technological nationalism⁵¹.

**Instead of conclusions: was the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic the trigger
of a new historical epoch or was it merely a reset
of the global geopolitical game?**

Therefore, was the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic the trigger of a new historical epoch? The answer is negative. Although it started strongly, generating major dysfunctions, many amplified by the WHO's faults, and highlighted the vulnerabilities of systems anchored in routine, the Chinese flu pandemic did not

⁵⁰ A. I. C. Popescu, *Impactul crizei medicale generate de pandemia COVID-19 asupra actorilor statali*, "INFOSFERA" – Revista de studii de securitate și Informații pentru Apărare", Vol. 12, No. 3/2020.

⁵¹ *Sputnik V: What we know about Russia's coronavirus vaccine*, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/sputnik-russia-coronavirus-vaccine-200813070859021.html>> (13.09.2022).

have the force of such a transformation. The explanations are numerous and have to do primarily with globalization. The real-time transmission of information through the global media and the immediate access of the general public to information through the internet, the risks of political costs of unpopular measures and the uprising of the disgruntled masses, the increased speed of reaction of governments, the advance of medical and health technology, all contributed to the pandemic's extinction before it triggered major transformations of the world order. Thus, unlike the major epidemics listed at the beginning of this article, the SARS-COV II pandemic has not triggered revolutions. It has only brought minor changes in the means of production through the emergence of the digital economy in developed countries. Even so, however, the current pandemic can be seen as a global exercise for a future pandemic, with a much more pathogenic and virulent infectious agent. Could the current system and states withstand a hecatomb of death? Hard to believe. That is why the lessons of this pandemic must not be forgotten, as were those of the Spanish flu or the much more recent HIV infection.

Was the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic the trigger for a reset in the global geopolitical game? Here the answer is positive, but not in the sense anticipated by proponents of globalization. The discrediting of the WHO and the institutional inefficiency of global governance, coupled with the resurgence of conservatism and sovereigntist in Europe, the US and Japan (where the Liberal Democratic Party won the July 2022 parliamentary elections⁵²) have signalled that the process of globalization is beginning to slow down and lose the momentum of the first two decades of this century. So, contrary to the thesis of the new non-Westphalian world order, of global chaos through the fragmentation and devolution of states, the pandemic has generated a recalibration of anti-entropic, conservative, sovereigntist forces. This aspect was reinforced later in the context of the Russian Federation's war of aggression in Ukraine when the Ukrainian resistance demonstrated the importance of the state, of the idea of sovereignty, of patriotic education and patriotism, without which there can be no sacrifice for nation and country.

On the other hand, the overlapping crises that humanity is facing from autumn 2019 onwards could lead to a reconfiguration of the global geopolitical game through a return to bipolarity, this time between the Western bloc and the Multipolar bloc of emerging powers. A geopolitical scenario that could become reality in the context of Chinese military action in Taiwan and the outbreak of new conflicts or the reigniting of frozen conflicts in Asia, Africa, Europe, and South America.

⁵² A. Gunia, *Japan's Ruling Party Wins Big in Election After Ex-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Killing*, <<https://time.com/6195449/japan-election-shinzo-abe-death/>> (13.09.2022).

There is also the possibility mentioned by Attali, of a more or less stable multipolar world. But the security risks of such a scenario, especially when multipolarity is unbalanced and non-polar, will require the creation of blocs that will end up returning the international system to its stable bipolar, tripolar or uni-multipolar formats.

Therefore, contrary to the great epidemics that have led to the end of some historical eras and the ‘dawn’ of new ones, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has reaffirmed the role of sovereign states in contributing to the consolidation of the Westphalian world order, which has been under siege for decades by anti-sovereignist progressivism.

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