



# A REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORLD BEFORE THE WAR IN UKRAINE: WAS THE PANDEMIC AN INHIBITOR OF THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER?

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*The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the world to consider an increase in international cooperation to manage this security threat, particularly under the WHO and with the support of the great powers. The surprise was that the WHO was accused of failure and the great powers developed protectionist and nationalist tendencies, with states coming to the fore once again as the most important actors in world politics. In this context, the paper explores a trend that continued to exist even during the pandemic, even though the war in Ukraine was clearly not on the international agenda: namely a continuation of the struggle for power as traditional Realism define it, but with new sources of power to be explored according to the current trends in the security environment: medical resources and a continuing development of military power, despite the economic problems that have arisen.*

**Keywords:** *Realism; COVID-19 pandemic; state actors; struggle for power; public opinion; medical resources; military and economic power.*

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## Introduction

Today's world is not what people expected three years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire mankind and has raised new concerns about issues not obviously related to security, such as medical resources and vaccination. They have been important so far, but more on the national healthcare agenda. Still, since the pandemic, these issues have become obvious vital resources for human survival and for the state itself. The paper briefly introduces a Realist approach on these resources as they have been used for the last two years not exclusively for humanitarian assistance, but also for accentuating the struggle for power (respectively, the first section). The analysis will be stopped before the moment of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (February, 2022) because, since then, the pandemic has become a secondary issue and the military matters have once again become the hottest issues on the international agenda.

The question that arises here is whether moving the focus to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and medical resources meant a declining interest in consolidating military and economic power. Or, in other words *have the great powers been slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic in their struggle for power?*

Answering this question requires clarification of three main aspects: first of all, why the Realist perspective was chosen; secondly, what role did medical resources play in defining the struggle for power during this period of time, and thirdly, whether during the pandemic the struggle for power was hindered.

The choice for the Realist perspective is justified by the fact that the contemporary security environment shows that state actors have the most important role in managing a crisis of such magnitude and severity as the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, as Stephen M. Walt wrote in 2020, "the present emergency reminds us that states are still the main actors in global politics" (Walt 2020), despite globalization. One of the arguments used is that, confronted with a new and dramatic threat, people turn to their governments as providers of safety and security (as an implication of states' nature as selfish actors that seek their own security – Realism), not to international organizations (Liberalism) or other people and ideas (Constructivism). Nevertheless, Realism does not exclude the role of non-state actors, but underlines their secondary importance and the fact that such actors are created by states in order to serve their own interests (Vasquez 2004) (Carlsnaes, Risse and Simmons 2013). In this pandemic context, states were the first actors to take action in taming the threat, despite UN (especially its agency, World Health Organization) and EU actions in managing the crisis.

The other two aspects will be clarified in the paper considering the classical Realist analysis on world politics focused on the great powers as defined before the war in Ukraine. This status is a consequence of the number of resources they possess, the way in which these resources are converted in capabilities, and how they are



applied as foreign policy instruments. Apart from the fact that the pandemic has brought to attention the issue of medical resources that were used by certain states in the struggle for power, as shown below, the resources emphasized by realists are natural/geographic, population, military and economic ones. That is why a brief analysis on specific indicators (the second section of the study) is required in order to validate the thesis that the COVID-19 pandemic did not end or at least slow down the efforts to maintain and increase the military and economic power of the great world actors (the United States, the Russian Federation, China, the United Kingdom, France, and especially as a result of the present trends in the security environment, Germany<sup>1</sup> and India).

The paper will show that state's efforts for managing the COVID-19 pandemic and the new focus on medical resources as sources of power have not prevented the struggle for military and economic power in Realistic terms.

### **1. The Revival of States as Main Actors in World Politics during the Pandemic**

Realism is not a school of thought exempt from criticism. Otherwise, the progress in political science would be inexistent. Liberal, Constructivist, and Critical perspectives are the most important alternatives to Realism, each of them offering its own explanations on world politics (Nau 2019, 26-28).

The main assumption for a Realist approach of contemporary political world is that the state's role on international arena is growing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This revival is correlated with individuals' loss of confidence in the main international organizations and growth of public trust in national government during the pandemic.

Why this correlation within a Realist framework and not Liberalism which argues that public support legitimizes the government or Constructivism which is more oriented towards ideas and people? From a sociological point of view, increased trust in national governments is the result of their approach to managing the pandemic and the failure of international organizations to respond to the crisis (or at least represented as such by population). In fact, bringing into question the issue of public opinion is not a digression from the Realist perspective. As H. J. Morgenthau states, anywhere in the world, public opinion on international issues is shaped by national policy institutions, not the other way around (Morgenthau 1997, 279). Moreover, the support of population is important for the success of one government's domestic and foreign policy. The balance between the foreign policy and the power to achieve it must be completed with the balance between various elements of national power. Population is one of those elements and popular support is one of the key requirements, apart from its number or government's capacity to protect it (Morgenthau 1997, 163-168).

It should be pointed out that public opinion is far from legitimizing the role of states as main actors in world politics, however it is an indicator of their revival in

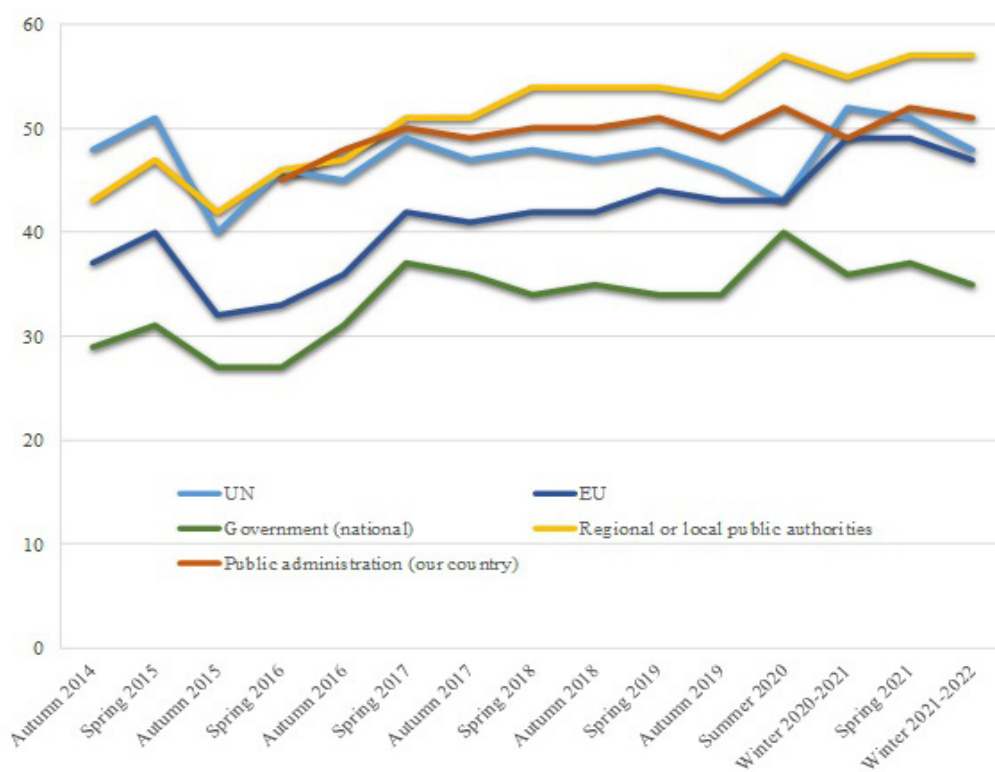
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<sup>1</sup> Even though Germany is not a nuclear power.



comparison with international organizations in the context of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, during the pandemic, the role of the state as *protector of population* was brought to the fore, and the issues of health, medical resources and the lockdown held leading positions on the public agenda.

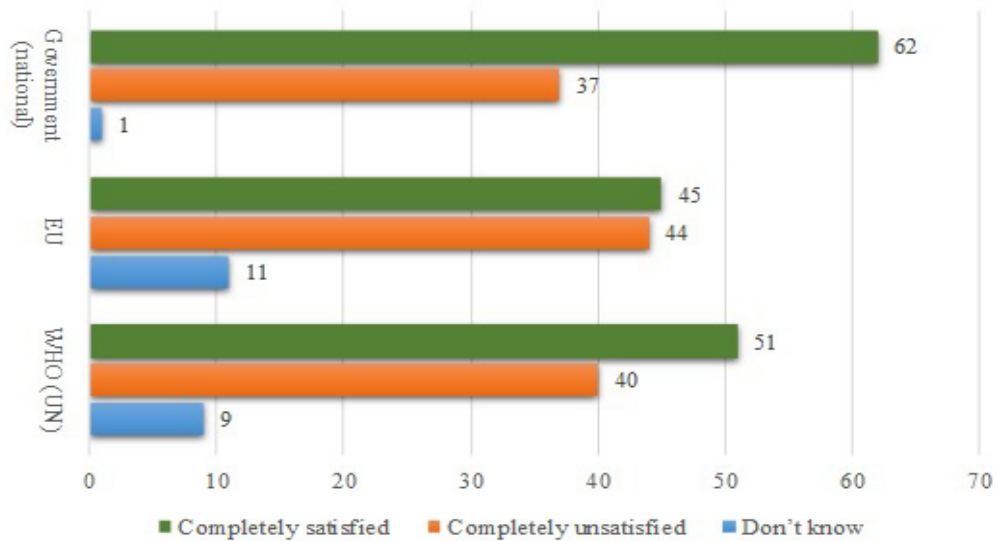
As seen in Figure no. 1, between November 2019 (fieldwork for *Standard Eurobarometer 92*) and July 2020 (fieldwork for *Standard Eurobarometer 93*), trust in national government, regional or local public authorities and public administration increased with 6 pp, respectively 4 and 3 pp, while trust in UN decreased with 3 pp and recorded no changes for EU, although it remains below 50% for the last 6 years. The next three Eurobarometer shows a decrease of confidence in the government and public authorities (Winter 2020-2021), immediately followed by a return in trust in national authorities and an even sharper decline in the UN and EU (Spring 2021 and Winter 2021-2022).



**Figure no. 1:** The answer to the question “How much trust you have in certain media and institutions?”, according to *Standard Eurobarometer 92 - 96* (% - tend to trust at EU level)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Data extracted from Standard Eurobarometer 92 - Autumn 2019 (EC November 2019), Standard Eurobarometer 93 - Summer 2020 (EC July-August 2020), Standard Eurobarometer 94 - Winter 2020-2021 (EC February-March 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 95 - Spring 2021 (EC June-July 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 96 - Winter 2021-2022 (EC January-February 2022) and Standard Eurobarometer 82-91 (EC 2014-2019).

This trend might be explained by the correlation between the economic effects of the pandemic and the pandemic fatigue, on the one hand, and the image of the government as the main actor in managing this crisis. Also, it could be categorized as a perverse effect of the crisis management efforts (Figures no. 2-3) and does not imply the fact that state is no longer the main actor in its management. According to Realists, it shows that public opinion approves or disapproves of government actions, but is not stable and is influenced by various factors.



**Figure no. 2:** The answer to the question “In general, how satisfied are you with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak by...?”, according to *Standard Eurobarometer 93* (% - tend to trust at EU level)<sup>3</sup>

**Table no. 1:** The answer to the question “In general, how satisfied are you with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak by...?”, according to *Standard Eurobarometer 94 - 96* (% - tend to trust at EU level)<sup>4</sup>

	Completely satisfied			Completely unsatisfied			Don't know		
	EB 94	EB 95	EB 96	EB 94	EB 95	EB 96	EB 94	EB 95	EB 96
<b>Government (national)</b>	43	46	48	56	53	50	1	1	2
<b>EU</b>	43	41	42	49	51	49	8	8	9

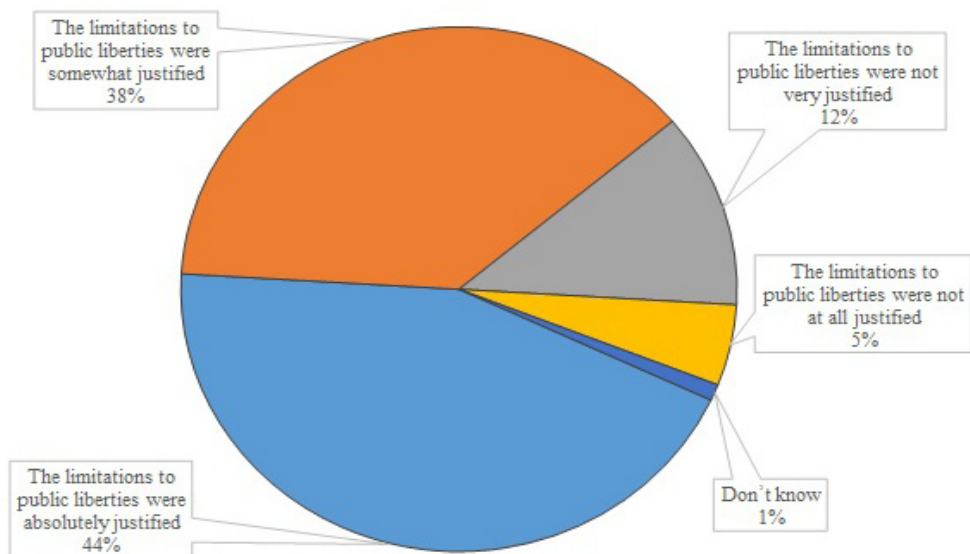
<sup>3</sup> Data extracted from Standard Eurobarometer 93 - Summer 2020 (EC July-August 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Data extracted from Standard Eurobarometer 94 - Winter 2020-2021 (EC February-March 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 95 - Spring 2021 (EC June-July 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 96 - Winter 2021-2022 (EC January-February 2022).

In addition, there is a marked gap between population’s satisfaction with measures taken by various state and non-state actors in fighting the pandemic (Figures no. 2 and Table no. 1).

In the summer of 2020, if the difference between satisfaction and dissatisfaction of population with measures taken by national government is 25 pp, it is lower in the case of EU and WHO (UN) (Figure no. 2). The perverse effect mentioned above is to be seen also in measuring satisfaction with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak (Table no. 1). The last three Standard Eurobarometer before the war shows a decrease in satisfaction both in the case of national governments and the EU, but it does not address the issue of WHO (UN).

In this context, one might argue that the societal trends contradict these opinion polls: the 2020-2021 period showed an increase in the number of social protests against restrictions imposed by national governments from EU countries. An exhaustive analysis reveals that, on the one hand, these protests were rather the result of *pandemic fatigue* and economic problems caused by the *lockdown* and other restrictive measures, and, on the other hand, there are signs that some of them were organized by far-right movements (Sarcinschi 2020). Actually, the Standard EB93 shows that more than 80% of the European respondents think that the limitation of civil liberties was justified in fighting the pandemic (Figure no. 3).



**Figure no. 3:** The answer to the question “Thinking about the measures taken by the public authorities in (our country) to fight the Coronavirus and its effects, would you say that...”, according to *Standard Eurobarometer 93* (% - EU)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Data extracted from Standard Eurobarometer 93 - Summer 2020 (EC July-August 2020).



In the last Standard EB (Table no. 2), the answers to the question regarding the support for the measures taken by public authorities excluded the term “limitation to public liberties” and focused on “restriction measures”. Even if the overall support to such measures fell below 75%, the degree of acceptance is still high and the trend preserves.

**Table no. 2:** The answer to the question “Thinking about the restriction measures taken by the public authorities (in our country) to fight the Coronavirus and its effects, would you say that they were...”, according to *Standard Eurobarometer 94 - 96* (% - EU)<sup>6</sup>

	Absolutely justified	Somewhat justified	Not very justified	Not at all justified	Don't know
B 94	27	46	19	7	1
B 95	27	47	19	6	1
B 96	22	47	21	9	1

The main assumption – the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfirmed states as the most important actors in global politics – is to be validated also by bringing into debate issues such as *vaccine race*, *mask diplomacy*, and *vaccine nationalism* (Blog by HR/VP Josep Borrell 2020) (Ramskar 2020). These trends can be correlated with the Realist perspective on the pandemic. Firstly, the nation that will win the *vaccine race*<sup>7</sup> – defined as a competition for a vaccine with the highest success rate, not only to tame the pandemic, but also to enhance national pride and international image<sup>8</sup> – will gain *greater prestige* in global politics taking into account that prestige politics is a component of the struggle for power (Morgenthau 1997, 52-57). Secondly, *mask diplomacy*<sup>9</sup> might be a form of achieving *political compliance or obedience* by exploiting the need for scarce medical resources (placing the medical resources in the same category of *hard power* sources as military and economic ones<sup>10</sup>).

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<sup>6</sup> Data extracted from Standard Eurobarometer 94 - Winter 2020-2021 (EC February-March 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 95 - Spring 2021 (EC June-July 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 96 - Winter 2021-2022 (EC January-February 2022).

<sup>7</sup> In this case, Germany was the winner with the Pfizer vaccine developed by BioNTech, in late 2020.

<sup>8</sup> See the name given to the vaccines or their development programs: Operation *Warp Speed* (the US), *Sputnik V* (the Russian Federation), *Sinovac* (China), the *BlessedCOVIran* (Iran), etc.

<sup>9</sup> For example, China donated masks and medical supplies in order to rehabilitate its negative international image as source of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Hornung 2020). Instead, the US prohibited the export of five types of personal protective equipment without explicit approval, but offered its support for friends and partners, excepting China (The White House 2020a), and Trump administration threatened to withdraw from the WHO and suspend financing if it did not take action against the Asian state (The White House 2020b). The US withdrawal process was halted by the Biden administration (The White House 2021).

<sup>10</sup> This assumption is detailed in a 2020 paper (Sarcinschi November 2020).



Not last, *vaccine nationalism* – a situation in which a country strives to gain first access to vaccine supply and accumulate key-components for vaccine production (Hafner, et al. 2000) (Guterres 2021) – shows that states are selfish actors seeking their own security.

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic gave states the opportunity to reaffirm their role as a major player in international politics in a Realist manner. If the general image is that they are cooperating in order to manage the pandemic (see cooperation initiatives whose success have partly materialized, such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and EU initiatives), their actions show even a cynical zero-sum game, in which one state's gain means an equal loss by another.

## **2. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Main Sources of Power**

As Realists argue, power derives from a state actor's possession of resources in relation to other actors. In this context, an analysis of world powers must be focused on the comparison between the most important sources of power, especially the material ones of a military and economic nature. Even though this section focuses on military power, this does not mean that the evaluation of one nation's overall power must be performed by only one factor to the detriment of others. As H. J. Morgenthau argues, the process of power evaluation must take into account the fact that power is relative, it is not permanent and that evaluation must not be carried out by a single factor (Morgenthau 1997, 170-183). Still, for most classical Realists, all great powers allocate considerable resources to develop their military capabilities for future crisis and conflicts.

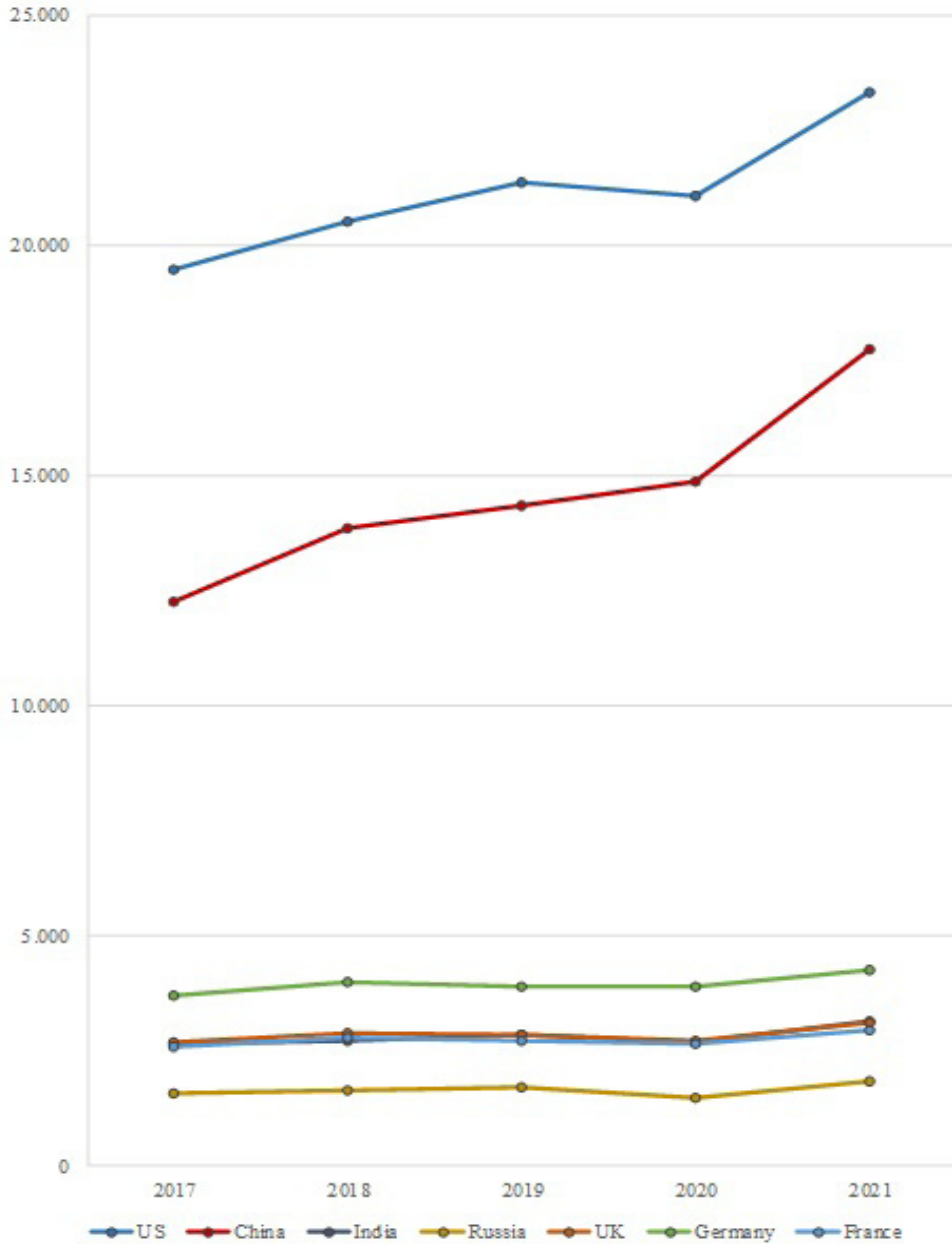
The following analysis is focused on the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and Germany, as the EU's economic engine, also India, who is seeking the status of major power.

The issue that arises in this context is whether or not the Realist competition for power has been hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Theoretically, this crisis has affected the process of maintaining and increasing military power on many dimensions: both the quantity and quality of active military personnel and reserve (the infection with SARS-CoV-2 of a large number of soldiers, the cancellation of training and military exercises, many activities were conducted online), the defence budgets (adjustments as a result of the economic crisis), the military procurement programs and the operationalization of force structures (cuts in military spending), the interoperability (reducing joint planning, training and exercises), etc. In order to verify these assumptions, we will follow the evolution of military budgets in recent years, the acquisition of military technology and techniques, including in the nuclear and space spheres.





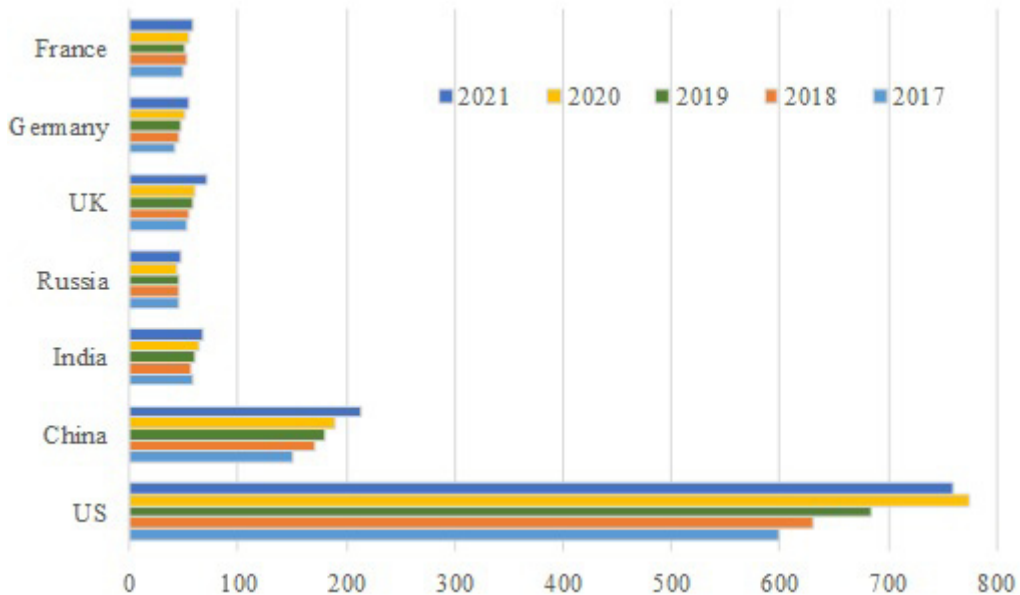
Since economic resources are one of the foundations of military power, the analysis of statistical data shows the evolution of GDP in all analysed countries between 2017-2019, and during the COVID-19 pandemic' (2020-2021) (Figure no. 4).



**Figure no. 4:** Great powers' GDP evolution in the period 2017-2021, according to *IMF Database* (billions USD)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Data extracted from *World Economic Outlook Database (April 2023 Edition)* (IMF April 2023).

The measures taken by national authorities in the second quarter of 2020 to prevent the spread of the coronavirus led to significant declines in almost all economic sectors (especially tourism, hospitality, air transport, automotive industry, and retail), crash of the stock markets, job losses, negative oil prices, disruption of world trade, etc. Amid stimulus packages and the imminent arrival of vaccines, there was hope for an economic recovery in the second half, but the next wave of the pandemic ruined those plans and global economy recorded GDP decline by 3.4% in 2020 (UN 2022, 4). Although all countries under analysis, excepting China, experienced an economic contraction in 2020, the data for 2021 shows growth in all cases as a result of the population vaccination campaigns and economic support programs. This picture did not translate into the area of military budgets, as defence spending continued to increase in 2020-2021, with only Russia and the US seeing a small decrease at the end of 2020 and 2021, respectively (Figure no. 5).



**Figure no. 5:** Great powers' military budget evolution in the period 2017-2021, according to *The Military Balance* (billions USD)<sup>12</sup>

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has affected world's economy, most of the great powers have continued to increase the number of military technologies, weapons and equipment. For instance, the champions of acquisition, before the war in Ukraine, were China, Russia and India, each of them increasing in 2021 compared to 2020 the number of main battle tanks (+87 – Russia and +50 – India), infantry fighting vehicles (+640 – China and +120 – Russia), artillery (+881 – Russia,

<sup>12</sup> Data extracted from *The Military Balance (2019-2023 editions)* (IISS February 2019-2023)



+630 – China, +50 – India), armoured personnel carriers (+400 – China), attack helicopters (+30 – China, +5 – Russia), intercontinental ballistic missiles (+12 – China, +3 – Russia), tactical submarines (+34 – Russia), cruisers/destroyers/corvettes/frigates (+23 – China, +3 – Russia) (IISS February 2019-2023). Also, even as the global stockpile of nuclear warheads fell to 12,705 units in early 2022, the world’s nuclear powers continued to upgrade their arsenals (SIPRI September 2022, 342). During the pandemic up to the reference time chosen in the analysis, Russia continued a significant modernization process of its nuclear forces, including testing the RS-28 Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (CSIS 2021). Moreover, China and India increased the number of warheads to 350 and 160 in January 2022 (SIPRI September 2022, 342) from 320 and 150 in 2020 (SIPRI September 2020, 326) and even 290 and 130-140 in 2019 (SIPRI September 2019, 288). Another example is the United Kingdom which, due to the increased volatility of the security environment, was planning in 2021 to increase the nuclear warhead stockpile to 260 even if the initial target (in 2010) was to reduce it from 225 to no more than 180 in the mid-2020s (HM Government March 2021, 76). Over the period 2017-2021, the US has reduced its number of nuclear warheads by more than 1,000, from 6,450 (SIPRI November 2018, 238) to 5,428 (SIPRI September 2022, 344), but plans to spend 1.5 trillion dollars in the next 30 years on maintenance and upgrading its arsenal (CACNP 2021).

Another important aspect in developing national power is the space dimension (Table no. 3).

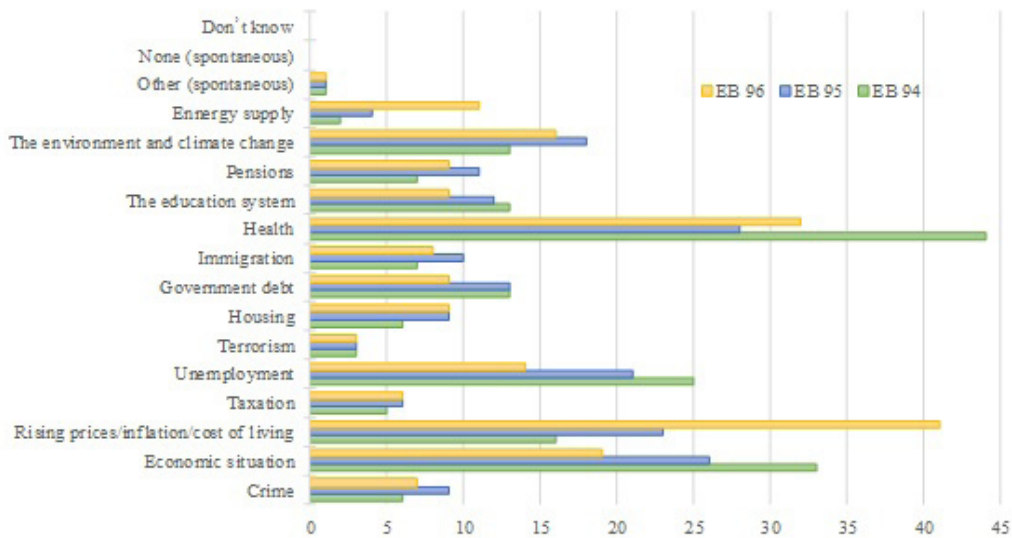
**Table no. 3:** The number of orbital launches in 2020 and 2021 and the number of military satellites operated by great powers at the end of 2021<sup>13</sup>

Number of	US	China	India	Russia	UK	Germany	France
Orbital launches in 2020	44	39	2	17	5 (EU)		
Orbital launches in 2021	51	56	2	25	6 (EU)		
Military satellites in 2021	233	139	9	101	6	7	18

Michael Sheehan argues that even if space has proven to be a domain where non-military aspects of power can be exploited in an advantageous manner, the result might still be a struggle for power and influence in the global system (Sheehan 2007, 13-15). As shown above, during 2020-2021, the pandemic has not impeded the development of various space programs, the great powers showing a special interest in this domain, of which the US, China and Russia exploit an impressive number of satellites for military use.

<sup>13</sup> Data extracted from *UCS Satellite Database* - updated on 01.01.2022 (Union of Concerned Scientists 2022) and *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* - since the official statistics on overall number of orbital launches is scarce and disparate, the source for above data are the following entries: “2021 in spaceflight” (Wikipedia 2022) and “2020 in spaceflight” (Wikipedia 2021).

However, why is the study of public opinion, as presented in the first section of the paper, relevant for a Realist analysis of sources of power, since this theory argues that the states' foreign agenda is not influenced by public opinion? The first section has shown that public opinion, even if does not legitimize states as main actors in world politics, is an indicator of its revival in comparison with international organizations. If one would think that the pandemic situation will impede states in strengthening their power and acting in the logic of power politics, the analysis of public opinion shows that even the main subjects of interest for the population (Figure no. 6) are far from the issue of military power, states dedicate great resources to improving it, as shown in this section. Europeans believe that the most important issues their countries are facing with today are health problems (35% on average in surveys analysed), rising prices/inflation/cost of living (27% on average), the economic situation (26% on average), and unemployment (20% on average), while great powers (including European powers) focus on improving their military capabilities despite the social situation and economic problems related to the COVID-19 crisis.



**Figure no. 6:** The answer to the question “What do you think are the two most important issues facing (our country) at the moment?”, according to *Standard Eurobarometer 94-96* (% - EU)<sup>14</sup>

As shown above, data synthesized in this chapter represents only parts of a larger picture regarding nations' military power. Still, they are enough to understand that, from a Realist perspective, the ultimate benchmark of national power is military capability (Tellis, et al. 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Data extracted from Standard Eurobarometer 94 - Winter 2020-2021 (EC February-March 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 95 - Spring 2021 (EC June-July 2021), Standard Eurobarometer 96 - Winter 2021-2022 (EC January-February 2022).



## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is not to offer a geopolitical essay on today's world, but rather a brief analysis of the main Realist landmarks translated into a globalized world that has faced a new threat. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into attention the issue of states as relevant actors of world politics, to the detriment of international organizations whose role in managing the crisis was criticized by both individuals and governments. However, the revival of state in world politics is accompanied by various pitfalls that validate the translation of specific Realist concepts in a contemporary analysis of International Relations. The struggle for power is one of those concepts and it is illustrated by trends such as *vaccine race*, *mask diplomacy*, and *vaccine nationalism*. They correspond to one of the fundamental patterns of politics, *prestige politics*, that concerns maintaining or increasing the power of a nation. All three of them have been used mainly by the US, China, and Russia to demonstrate their power, by means of medical resources, although the entire world has been suffering from the pandemic.

An important observation correlated with the world's current state is that *medical resources*, most valued in pandemic times, are just beginning to be part of world politics whether referring to *hard power*, *soft power* or *smart power*. A further step in this direction is to explore the validity of the assertion that medical resources are sources of power, more precisely hard power. This is a crucial perspective since the implementation of Realist power politics into the area of global health might impede non-state actors' capacity to predict, identify and manage threats to health security.

Moreover, neither the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic nor the competition for medical resources and vaccines has stopped the development of military power. The most important states of the world show a desire to continue the competition for power in a classical Realist manner. It is important to underline that since the military capabilities are used both for defending and for enabling states to pursue their interests, the continued competition for power, extended even in the area of medical resources, proves that Realist principles are still valid and world's complexity is generated by power stratification and competing self-interests of states. The war in Ukraine demonstrates that the most powerful countries have continued to build up their military power to prepare for future crisis and conflicts: in this case, Russia for invasion, Ukraine and NATO member states for defence.

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