CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AS A UNIVERSAL CATALYST OF IDENTIFICATION POLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE STATES OF THE ASSOCIATED TRIO

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Annotation. *The authors analyze possible consequences of COVID-19 which triggered political processes both in the states of the European Union and the states of the Associated Trio. It is noted that in current conditions, European nations will have to affirm their European status and their own self-reliance. Besides, in a new world order, during new political fragmentation, there is the probability of individual states' enhanced roles and the discovery of new opportunities for the states of the Associated Trio. The article states that the pandemic objectively provided a convenient opportunity for the legitimization of the new world order philosophy, based on self-interest and protectionism. Because many states adopted a self-centered strategy of behavior, the issue of identifying opportunities and related political proceedings had been brought to the forefront. The authors of the article defined the main negative and positive consequences of the pandemic. Among the negative ones, the democratic regime's weakening of competitive abilities is highlighted, which can lead to the volatility of the identification of political processes in the Associated Trio states. The possible revision of the balance of power between nations is noted as positive consequence for the Associated Trio states, which is associated with the effectiveness of response to the spread of the virus in each individual nation and the societal unity based on identification priorities.*

Key words: *pandemic, identification, globalization, civil society, universalism.*

1. Introduction.

The relevance of research. The epidemiological situation in different European countries, combined with the global recession, will undoubtedly affect the contemporary identification processes of world politics. The emergency circumstances connected with COVID-19 have fully exposed those disguised political plans and intentions that they previously tried not to demonstrate. The infectious virus acted as a universal catalyst for the information virus, which intensified the information war unleashed by the West in the world space in order to retain its dominant position in the world despite the collapse of globalization.

With the increase in COVID-19 cases, it has become clear that political optimism has nothing to do with reality. "The first modern pandemic", as Bill Gates called it [9], provoked the stagnation of global political processes and a "rollback in the integration capabilities" of the states that are at the stage of transformational shifts, in particular the states of the Associated Trio (on May 17, 2021, a tripartite format was created for enhanced cooperation, coordination and dialogue between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, as well as with The European Union on issues of mutual interest related to the European integration of states, including cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership [28]). For the first time in several decades, the idea of "national self-sufficiency" has become the primary system-forming factor for the collective West, which has entailed the closure of borders, the adoption of anti-crisis measures and the accumulation of funds to fight the pandemic. Unfortunately, being a universal indicator, the crisis once again pointed to the unsteadiness of European unity and the impossibility of the European Union to speak with one voice. The spread of the virus forced countries to resort to the "every man for himself" strategy as a universal form of social organization. Therefore, in the context of new global challenges, the issue of the identification of opportunities and

related political processes, which will dominate in the establishment of the political agenda of European states in the coming years, has become more relevant, in particular for the states of the Associated Trio which are in the transformation phase.

In this regard, the globalization processes, which have entailed qualitative changes in all spheres of social and political life, require a deep understanding and analysis of modern ideas about transforming the political world, the disclosure of its universal characteristics, taking into account the realities of the coronavirus pandemic.

2. The purpose of the study is to comprehend the universal catalytic influence of the corona pandemic and the accompanying trends towards the identification of political processes in the states of the Association Trio.

In the context of this study, the authors put forward a hypothesis: the corona pandemic promotes the launch of identification processes and the determination of the configuration between the tasks of national and global development in the behavior of the states of the "geopolitical connecting bridge between Europe and Asia" (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia).

The following approaches and research methods have been used as tools to achieve this goal:

– systemic and activity-based approaches – to study the problem of the impact of a pandemic as a complex phenomenon that has a catalytic effect on the institutional components of the political system, where each of them, with the help of their functions, tries to work out a balance between the tasks of national and global development, as well as to resist the negative consequences of a pandemic, which can lead to the decline of political institutions or a change in the positions of their influence in the international arena;

– a case study research method – to study the degree of influence of the pandemic on the identification of political processes in the European states and above all the states of the Associated Trio, as well as on the ability of individual states to counter the negative consequences of COVID-19. The use of the case study method has also been aimed at studying general patterns on the example of analysing the impact of the pandemic in specific states and solving the problem of universality in determining the equilibrium configuration between the tasks of national and global development of the Associated Trio states.

3. Analysis of scientific publications.

The problem of the spread of the pandemic and its impact on world political and socioeconomic processes is within the scientific developments of most contemporary researchers. Thus, F. Fukuyama notes that the pandemic has become a global political stress test, and states, due to the peculiarities of political regimes, are fighting the coronavirus in different ways. He predicts that states with legally capable, legitimate governments, as opposed to states with weak state capacities, will cope with the coronavirus crisis relatively successfully and will be able to implement reforms that will make them even stronger [8]. J. Frieden, Professor of Government at Harvard University, examines how the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the intersection of politics, economics and other dimensions [7, p. 6]. At the same time, IMF analysts, E. Dabla-Norris, V. Gaspar and K. Kochhar note that the coronavirus pandemic will entail a global crisis and reveal problems,the solution of which will encourage the world community to consolidate [2, p. 24].

D. Susskind, Fellow in Economics at Balliol College, Oxford University, analyzes the global challenges and changes connected with COVID-19. These coronavirus problems, in his opinion, are only more acute versions of the problems that exist today [30, p. 26-29]. In his analysis, he relies on the opinions of authoritative analysts, in particular of J. Manyika, the Director of McKinsey Global Institute, who focuses on the growing need for the development of the digital economy, which has confirmed its relevance against the background of the increase in the use of digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This position is also held by S. Rebelo, the MUFG Bank Distinguished Professor of International Finance at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, who argues that the coronavirus pandemic

will have lasting consequences for the global economy and will make significant changes in the everyday life of people around the world. According to J. Saldanha, the Director of the European Network on Debt and Development, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to test the limits of opportunities for global political and economic cooperation. In particular, the researcher notes the continued low level of support for developing countries. In his research, R. Edelman, the expert in the field of communications, raises the question of the low level of trust in political institutions and encourages them to work together. At the same time, according to the expert, in the conditions of COVID-19, there is a revival of trust in specialists [4, p. 31].

This kind of research during the period of the global COVID quarantine remains in the area of increased attention of both theorists and practitioners. They demonstrate the full range of sociopolitical and economic problems, the universal catalyst of which has been COVID-19. However, there is a lack of research attention to the issues of the influence of the corona pandemic on transformational political processes and the further development of states that are at the stage of transition in the context of the formation of their identification preferences. It refers primarily to the states of the Associated Trio. Because, on the one hand, it is them, due to their geopolitical position, that are the link between Europe and Asia. On the other hand, they are capable of influencing the redistribution of forces in the struggle for the hegemony of individual states.

4. Review and discussion.

I. Strategies for combating COVID-19 of the Associated Trio states.

Considering the multifaceted nature of the changing world order through the prism of the coronavirus infection, the possibility of transformational shifts towards authoritarianism in the policies of European states with well-established democratic principles should be noted in case they fail to successfully overcome the challenges of the pandemic.

The policy of the states that are at the stage of democratic transition, the participants of the Associated Trio initiative of the European Union (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) also deserves special attention (UNDP, 2020). Each country chooses its own strategy to combat COVID-19.

Georgia was one of the first countries in Europe to take effective measures to combat the coronavirus, concentrating all "political and economic forces" on containing, at the earliest stage, an outbreak of coronavirus infection compared to richer countries. "The fact is that prevention is the only viable option for a country like Georgia, having scarce resources and a fragile healthcare system", said expert Giguashvili [18]**.** A large-scale coronavirus outbreak would destroy the health care system and lead to disastrous consequences in Georgia.

In Moldova, amid the fight against coronavirus, a change of power took place. The decades-long "political maneuvering" between East and West left "deep scars on the body" of Moldovan society. Therefore, the victory of the pro-Western politician Maia Sandu in the presidential elections can be compared to a tectonic shift. The focus of media attention was on the constructive approach of Maia Sandu to effectively combat the coronavirus. This scenario was unanimously approved by citizens, especially after the scandalous statement of the chief epidemiologist of Moldova Nicolae Furtune, that the coronavirus "took the lives of those who were already a burden for those around them" (UNICEF, 2021). For Moldova, all opportunities to turn the European dream into a success story have emerged.

In Ukraine, even the coronavirus did not stop the active political life of society. Politicians are actively intervening in the government's "chaotic fight" against the coronavirus pandemic. The authorities have to maintain a delicate balance: on the one hand, to take anti-crisis measures to "diffuse" (to ensure a moderate spread of the virus, without sharp surges, so as not to overload hospitals), and, on the other hand, to minimize the negative socio-economic consequences of these measures. The Ukrainian government has decided that openness in solving the coronavirus problem is the priority important to deepen good-neighborly and partnership relations with the European Union in the fight against COVID-19. Its success could be the beginning of the implementation of Ukraine's European dream. However, there are also

dissatisfied ones who argue that Ukraine's efforts and direct countermeasures to control the coronavirus, were belated and insufficient, and / or, conversely, went too far.

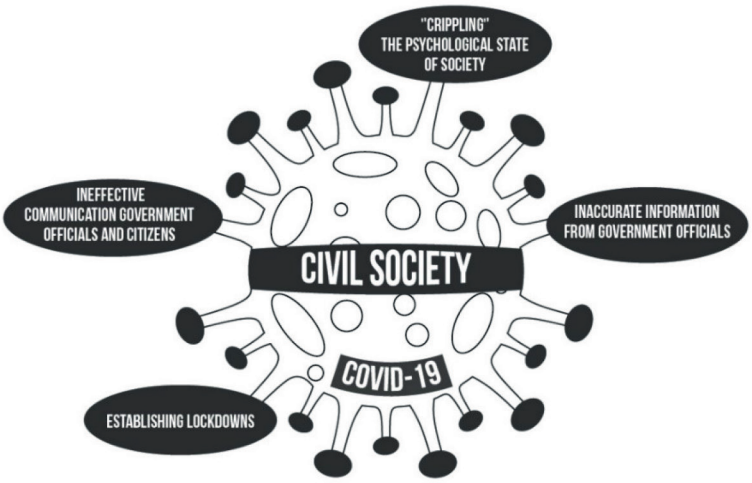
The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the ground for authoritarianism, strengthening the role of the state on a global scale [6]. Therefore, it is the effectiveness of the fight against coronavirus in developed European countries that can become one of the determining factors in the identification processes in countries that are in the transition phase.

II. Political Streisand effect of the coronavirus pandemic.

In general, the coronavirus infection was the biggest shock to the global political community since the Second World War. The coronavirus pandemic, which has paralyzed the "usual course of life" of most states, has brought significant changes to the world's political everyday life. The legitimacy of the existing world order has been challenged: the perception of political realities is changing, the hierarchy of values is being rebuilt, new policy guidelines are emerging, which highlight "old political problems" from a new coronavirus position [1].

For the first time (since the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918-1919), such a significant number of people around the world have perceived the coronavirus pandemic as a significant threat to one's own health and to the national security of the state. The extraordinary nature of such a situation can be illustrated by the political *Streisand effect* of the corona pandemic (when any attempts by the state to forcibly restrict citizens' access to any information about the corona pandemic lead to the complete opposite effect) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Political Streisand effect of the coronavirus pandemic



Source: Authors' representation

Firstly, the abundance of "information waste" and the lack of official information give rise to "an attack of anxiety and fear" in civil society, which is accompanied by a feeling of powerlessness and impossibility to influence and / or change what is happening. Mass hysteria over the danger of coronavirus is caused by the fact that the virus is new. Fear is much worse than any virus, and in order not to succumb to panic, it is needed to limit the "informational fast food", not to fill one's life with fear, and also not to "feast in the time of the plague". During the excitement around COVID-19, a lot of fake news has appeared in the media, which especially "shakes" the psychological state of society. Moreover, there is more negative news about the coronavirus, which spreads faster than the infection itself, than positive news. And the measures taken by the authorities by citizens are regarded and perceived as an alarm. Any information about a coronavirus, if misused, can spread in society unreasonable fear or unjustified thought that the fight against coronavirus is over, leading to inevitable consequences.

The situation in Ukraine and Moldova can serve as an example of this. In Ukraine, the confrontation of political elites and political speculation gave rise to an increase in civil society's distrust of political institutions. The belated reaction of the authorities to the informational stuffing of political opponents ensured the loss in the information domestic political war and, as a result, the rejection of official information on the situation with the spread of COVID-19 in Ukraine [24, pp. 307-308]. As for Moldova, the

quick reaction of the authorities became a decisive factor in the victory in the fight for the social trust in official sources of information. Sharp criticism of the scandalous statements of epidemiologists, combined with decisive actions for the fair distribution of vaccines, within the framework of which Moldova became the first country in Europe to receive a free vaccine, neutralized the ability of fake news to influence the mood of society, maintaining and even increasing the level of trust in political institutions.

Secondly, a high level of everyone's distrust on everyone and of the state can be observed. People all over the world are frightened by the lack of understanding of the situation, uncertainty against the background of the abundance of information from "armchair political critics", often with destructive content [10]. For citizens of independent post-Soviet states, the "Soviet phenomenon" is still relevant, which can be described as "the predictability of power based on the citizens' distrust", more precisely, complete definiteness with the opposite sign [15, p. 90]. All this is the result of unreliable and / or ambiguous information from government officials.

As for Ukraine, the official authorities lost the information war from the very first days, allowing "armchair political critics" to influence the formation of public opinion in matters of the spread of the virus and the fight against COVID-19. In the case of Georgia and Moldova, the situation does not look so unambiguous, rather it is even extremely opposite. If in Georgia, the authorities have effectively taken preventive measures both on the medical and informational fronts, in Moldova, the policy of immediate counter-reaction to information leaks, combined with an effective dialogue within the framework of international cooperation, has strengthened the support of the authorities and the level of trust in them.

Thirdly, communication and understanding between civil society and the authorities has declined to critical levels. During the coronavirus pandemic, citizens and government officials began to define the motives of current actions in different ways and evaluate the results of joint work. There was a real threat of breakdown in communications between statesmen and the people. At the same time, the "political hypertrophy" of the state became possible, when the state, having become a mega-actor, would communicate with itself and stop receiving a feedback from society. The growing number of scandals in the media environment related to unsuccessful statements by officials, the widespread decrease in the level of trust in government institutions recorded by sociological companies, and the demonstrative passivity of key political players speaks in favor of the observed negative trend. Today, there is a risk that ineffective communication between the highest authorities and citizens can lead to unpredictable consequences of the coronavirus epidemic.

In this context, Ukraine has become a platform for illustrating the negative manifestations of ineffective communication between representatives of the authorities and civil society, which has provoked an increase in the number of COVID-dissidents, i.e. people who deny the existence of a new pathogen (there is no virus – this is just another information noise), who have managed to form a pool of supporters around themselves who promote these ideas. While in Moldova and Georgia there is no such situation.

Fourthly, civil society is entering the "next wave of lockdowns" to prevent the consequences of a large-scale unexpected shock– a "medical catastrophe" that could result from the collapse of the global healthcare system, although a few months ago it seemed that modern scientific advances and discoveries in the field of medicine would significantly increase the life expectancy of people on the planet. A similar situation developed at the end of the 19th century, when it seemed to many physicists that all the questions of this science were solved and only some ambiguities remained, which later became the theoretical basis of nuclear physics and the theory of relativity.

It should be noted that in this situation, the discussion in society about the introduction of nationwide lockdowns, the motives of the authorities and the interests of citizens in the fight against coronavirus infection is clearly unproductive. Everything happens according to Steven Pinker [23, p. 565-583]: more security and less freedom. Therefore, even the citizens of developed Western democracies, albeit with fears, are ready to sacrifice their freedoms, because security as the price of life is more precious than freedom.

In the states of the Associated Trio, there is no unanimous position regarding the forced temporary restriction of some freedoms. First of all, this is due to the fears of civil society regarding the further policy of the authorities in the post-pandemic period. And if in such states as Moldova and Georgia, a compromise is quite predictable due to a rather high level of trust in the authorities, in Ukraine, the

deployment of a policy of restricting certain freedoms provokes a new stage of confrontation between representatives of the authorities and civil society, where the key role is played by an irreplaceably low level of trust in official authority and information.

III. Vaccine diplomacy and the role of observers for the Associated Trio states.

In the context of the actualization of coronavirus threats, transformations of political values and demands are taking place. Sovereign states (in the sense of *nation-state*) are the fulcrum that "calms down" citizens and allows them to survive a difficult period, including during political turbulence.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (spring – summer 2020) in the post-Soviet space is mainly related to the fear of a significant threat to the health of citizens and the national security of the state, information pressure, lockdowns, and economic collapse. There was a split of civil society into people with a "pathological feeling of fear and powerlessness" in front of the danger of coronavirus infection and COVID-dissidents. The observed reaction of the political elites of Georgia, Moldova (to a greater extent) and Ukraine (to a lesser extent), in general, is similar to the European and North American practice of combating the pandemic: the solidarity of civil society and the state around the idea of saving human lives. It should be noted that some political leaders sometimes even successfully used media power and quarantine to solve their political tasks.

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (autumn 2020 – spring 2021) turned out to be harder than the first one. Among the post-Soviet countries, even in Georgia, which successfully defeated the first wave of the epidemic by early summer, morbidity and mortality set records in November.

Citizens' dissatisfaction with restrictions during quarantine and concern about economic problems are growing. Quarantine creates a deficit in the feeling of freedom. Therefore, citizens who complied with quarantine restrictions and avoided severe coronavirus consequences are more inclined to believe that the danger of a coronavirus is exaggerated, and the sacrifices to prevent it are unreasonable and unnecessary. People who themselves have struggled with coronavirus disease and / or have lost loved ones tend to scold the government for not being strict enough [12]. In fact, this is a feedback that makes the authorities look for compromise solutions, introduce restrictions more delicately (for example, transfer high school students to distance learning, but not close schools; oblige people to wear masks not everywhere, but only in public places and transport). In such a way, the leaders of states expect to prevent an uncontrolled growth of infection with the smallest set of compromise measures. As a result, the government's strategy should be to search for targeted restrictions in order to minimize the population's irritation and overburdening of the economy [11]. This is the search for a balance between freedom and security: citizens and the ruling elite decide what to sacrifice on the basis of their beliefs and views.

The announcement of the creation of a vaccine was an encouraging and unifying factor for citizens of all countries. The success of the vaccine has become not only a matter of national pride, but also a way of demonstrating the superiority of the states (USA, China, Great Britain, Russia, Germany), which received it first. This excitement is primarily due to political considerations: the image and geopolitical influence of countries in the international arena in the coming years, the formation of new alliances. What is happening was assessed by Brad Loncar, founder of Loncar Investments: "The race to develop a vaccine is like the US and Soviet Union competing in the space race ... it's like a cold war" [20].

Later, the lack of information about the properties and possible adverse reactions of the vaccine on the human body deepened the split of civil society into people who believed in vaccination as a "panacea for all diseases" and people who did not trust health management, healthcare teams, information about the vaccine.

Vaccine diplomacy, or rather the delivery of vaccines on a priority or preferential basis, has become an important element of the foreign policy of states. According to Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus: "It isn't about all people in some countries being vaccinated, but about some people in all countries" [5]. Previously, the Soviet Union produced vaccines, which were distributed free of charge, as a manifestation of good intentions and friendly attitude towards developing countries; it took an active part in the fight against smallpox, poliomyelitis and other diseases. Now the post-Soviet states are countries with a lower-middle income level and cannot even afford to purchase vaccines from pharmaceutical companies in the required quantities. Therefore, the populist promises of the presidents and governments of the post-Soviet countries about the earliest possible vaccination, the acquisition of herd immunity and the return

to the usual way of life are perhaps the most effective tool for earning political points, raising the ratings of political leaders, retaining power in contrast lockdowns and growing unemployment. And if, in the case of Ukraine and Georgia, such statements are indeed mostly populist, Moldova nevertheless managed to make a breakthrough and receive a batch of vaccines as a matter of priority. "Vaccine diplomacy" follows the logic of political hegemony and is combined with disinformation and manipulation efforts to undermine the credibility of its political opponents.

However, the vaccination program in the European Union is implemented in different ways – from political accents to economic arguments. Public opinion, from layman to observer, is under the control of the "pandemic" project (the example is an interview "Deutsche Welle" with the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde [13]). The problem of the coronavirus is not in itself, but in how our attitude towards this situation has been formed in a very short time.

Countries with a hybrid regime (including the Associated Trio states) have found themselves observers in a situation where developed states with established democracies are "passing the test of strength" of democratic values.

The announcement of the start of mandatory vaccination against COVID-19 for some groups of the population and the introduction of "COVID passports" by the leaders of some EU countries (France [17], Greece [25]) has become a "cold shower" for freedom-loving Europeans. Dissatisfaction with compulsory vaccination led to mass rallies and protests of citizens of these countries [16; 31]. Among the slogans chanted by the dissatisfied Europeans were the following: "Freedom!", "Down with health passports!", "Down with dictatorship!". "Every person has the right to choose. We're choosing that the government does not choose for us", said Faidon Vovolis, a cardiologist, one of the protesters.

The German authorities have taken a completely opposite position and did not intend to force their compatriots to be vaccinated against their will. The right to physical integrity of citizens is enshrined in the country's constitution. "We are not going to follow the path proposed by France. We have already stated that there will be no compulsory vaccination, the willingness to be vaccinated among the German population is high and the vaccination will continue on a voluntary basis", said German Chancellor Angela Merkel (2021).

In the United States, Jacobson v. Massachusetts (1905) is already used in disputes over the coronavirus. Authorities forced Pastor Jacobson, originating from Sweden, to get the smallpox vaccine mandatory for all residents of the state. The Supreme Court decided that the authorities were right: "The liberty secured by the Constitution of the United States to every person within its jurisdiction does not import an absolute right in each person to be, at all times and in all circumstances, wholly freed from restraint. There are manifold restraints to which every person is necessarily subject for the common good. On any other basis organized society could not exist with safety to its members" (The Supreme Court of United States, 1905).

While the population tried to understand and accept the introduction of lockdowns in democratic countries, the forced vaccination was regarded as an attempt to encroach on democratic values. For advanced democracies, the need for security and economic viability can motivate and justify government decisions. For citizens of transitional states, particularly the Associated Trio states, who have learned the lessons of the Soviet past, this attitude towards the right to freedom of choice spreads political doubt and destroys the political value of established democratic practices. The corona pandemic caused a general panic, bureaucratic chaos and, at the same time, created new opportunities for political parties and movements in the post-Soviet space. An important but still open question is whether political leaders will be able to take advantage of this window of opportunity to conduct identification political processes in the states of the Associated Trio.

The third wave of coronavirus infection (autumn 2021-spring 2022). Mortality rates from COVID-19 are several times higher than during the first two peaks. Doctors and the Ministry of Health are urging people to get vaccinated and stressing that the spread of the Delta strain is triggering new cases.

At the same time, the situation in the Associated Trio countries looks somewhat contradictory. The Ministry of Health claims that the covid situation is under control; doctors in major cities speak of overcrowded medical facilities. Such statements provoke public distrust of the authorities. The zoning of territories into "red," "yellow," and "green" also becomes a reason for public indignation and non-acceptance of the policy

of restrictions, which in the future may provoke an increase in internal political conflicts and confrontation between the government and society.

The next wave of the coronavirus (summer-autumn 2022) was marked by the spread of the Omicron strain and its new variations. This prompted the UK to strongly recommend administering the third dose of vaccine, citing that the previous two doses would not help against the new strain. In this wave, the president of the vaccine company, Moderna, stated that the vaccine must be updated for each new strain. For their part, Scandinavian countries continue to pursue a much more restrained policy. During previous pandemic waves, their governments did not impose such severe restrictions compared to other European countries. And at this stage, they are becoming committed to the idea that covid is moving into the category of influenza-type diseases.

In the Associated Trio states, with each new pandemic wave, restriction policies are becoming less stringent. On the one hand, this is due to possible political risks for the current government, on the other hand - to foreign policy factors (in the case of Moldova and Georgia) and martial law (in the case of Ukraine). There is a shift of emphasis, partly related to the change of value orientations, as well as the need for a prompt response to new challenges.

One of the significant universal trends in the coronavirus situation is the large-scale expansion of the practice of using restrictive measures as a tool to counter threats to international security.

The "digitalization" of the state is perceived as a political project – the information society creates new political institutions that are not the product of a pandemic, but are institutions of the future. This has already happened in worldwide social and political practice. The printing press, invented in the 15th century, was a "breakthrough into the future". Just as without Johann Gutenberg there would have been no Erasmus and Martin Luther, without Erasmus and Martin Luther there would have been no modern European civilization.

States are introducing the "medicalization" of everyday life, the "digital control" of society, and are increasingly expanding their powers, which may remain in the post-pandemic period. Because COVID-19 is a polyhybrid pandemic, based on the hidden union of "coronavirus mutation freedom" and "arbitrariness of the state bureaucracy". This is what causes the fear of citizens and is perceived by them as an encroachment on freedom.

At the same time, it is especially important not to absolutize any trend, since there is already a precedent in history. The September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States changed the lives of people around the world (new special services, new technologies for universal control of corporations and state supervision over citizens appeared), but America did not become autarchy.

IV. COVID-19 as a universal catalyst of political processes.

Today, COVID-19 has become a kind of trigger for political processes. In connection with new challenges, the status and positions of European states in the international system have practically been reset. The results of testing the strength and updating the image characteristics in the near future will also predetermine the place and role of individual states in the processes of world political evolution. The confirmation of the status of Europeanness (on the basis of mutual assistance and consolidation of actions) and confirmation of their own self-sufficiency in the fight against COVID-19 – these are the two key exams that European states must successfully pass in order to find their own place in the renewed world order.

The pandemic test of strength has become a kind of a litmus test, when, in direct contact with a problematic situation, the ability to resist and fight the spread of the virus becomes an indicator that the state, as a cohesive construct of political and social institutions, has taken place, has passed the test of strength and, presumably, is developing in the most effective direction for successfully building its future. In support of the above, it is pertinent to quote the words of the American diplomat Henry Kissinger: "When the COVID-19 pandemic is over, the institutions of many countries will collapse. The reality is that the world will never be the same after the coronavirus" [14].

On the other hand, in recent decades, the world has turned into a scene of global competition; therefore, with the advent of a new world order, a new political fragmentation, a significant increase in the role

of individual states will be observed. In addition, competition between democratic and authoritarian political regimes will intensify. And the results of overcoming COVID-19 will become a powerful argument for the supporters of each of the regimes. Democratic political regimes in the process of dealing with the pandemic are likely to feel resistance from populists, whose activities are predominantly counterproductive to the functioning of the state in emergency conditions [21]. In this context, it is appropriate to mention the warning of Oxford Economics experts: "The policy of restricting communications and freedoms can only aggravate the crisis and create additional problems in the future" [22]. Such a situation can provoke a destabilization of the political situation within states. Therefore, it is rational to assume that the competitive superiority of a democratic regime may lose its positions, and supporters of regimes with authoritarian tendencies will have new arguments in their favor.

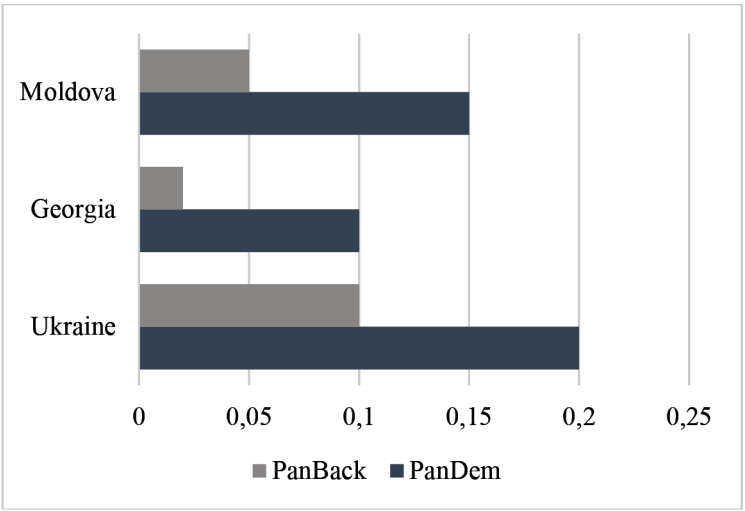
This may have a special effect on states that are at the stage of transformation. The effectiveness of the adoption of unpopular measures with elements of authoritarianism will reveal new problems of political processes of states' identification, primarily in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, which for several decades have not been able to complete the transition process. And in the conditions of new political realities, the effectiveness of the choice of the democratic vector of state development can become debatable.

Over the past two years, the quality of democracy in the member states of the Associated Trio initiative of the European Union (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) has noticeably suffered. A project by the V-Dem Institute of the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg monitored the response of states to COVID-19 and their potential impact on the overall quality of democracy in the country from March 2020 to June 2021 [34].

The results of the study were presented in the form of a ranking of countries for two indexes: The Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards Index (PanDem), which measures the extent to which government responses to COVID-19 have violated democratic standards for emergency response and also the Pandemic Backsliding Index (PanBack), which reflects the degree to which a given response poses a risk to the overall quality of democracy in a state. In combination, the use of these two indexes provides an overview of how an emergency response to COVID-19 can affect the quality of democracy in states. Depending on the violations committed, the states were assigned the following points: 0 – no violations; 0.05-0.15 – minor violations; 0.20-0.30 – moderate violations; 0.35-1.00 – serious violations.

As a result of comparing the scores received by the Associated Trio states on the Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards Index (PanDem) and the Pandemic Backsliding Index (PanBack), the following results were obtained (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Impact of the emergency response to COVID-19 on the quality of democracy in the Associated Trio states



Source: Varieties of Democracy Institute (2022)

In Ukraine, in comparison with other states of the Associated Trio, there is the largest number of violations of democratic standards associated with the introduced measures of the state's response to COVID-19. And, although these indicators of the PanDem index are classified as moderate, such a trend raises concerns, since this may negatively affect the transformation processes in the state and lead to a rollback in the democratization processes. At the same time, the level of compliance with democratic standards in Moldova and Georgia is recorded as with minor violations. But if in Georgia, the restrictive measures introduced by the state do not raise concerns, then in the case of Moldova, provided that democratic standards in the fight against COVID-19 are further ignored, the indicators can overcome the conditional line and classify the state as a group of countries with moderate violations of democratic standards.

With regard to the comparison of the results obtained by the Associated Trio states on the Pandemic Backsliding Index (PanBack), a similar trend is observed here. Ukraine shows a higher risk to the overall quality of democracy in the state compared to Moldova and Georgia. However, according to this indicator, it still remains in the group of states with minor violations. At the same time, Georgia and Moldova are among the states that, either without violations, or with minimal violations of democratic standards, are fighting COVID-19 and, accordingly, their responses pose less risk to the overall quality of democracy in the states.

In fairness, it should be noted that while in Western European states, the violation of the "freedom" of citizens remains a fragile topic for the authorities, China, for example, was not afraid to take tough measures to suppress coronavirus infection and, as a result, achieved significant results in the fight against the spread of COVID-19.

The current situation is caused by the fact that a second front has opened up for the authorities of democratic European states – the fight against the opposition, whose representatives, with the help of populist statements, are trying to reckon with the current government and are counting on the maximum amount of political dividends. Representatives of the power structures do not have enough political will to resist the destructive actions of the opposition. A similar situation is observed in the states of the Associated Trio, primarily in Ukraine, where, despite the threat of coronavirus infection, the degree of political struggle is off scale.

In states with an authoritarian form of government, there is a different aggravating aspect in the fight against coronavirus. Under the guise of a coronavirus, the authorities are trying to concentrate maximum powers in their hands – to usurp power – and to hide the real problems and threats to the life of the population, to create the illusion of control over the situation in the state on the part of the authorities.

In addition, the corona pandemic objectively provided a "convenient opportunity" for legitimizing the philosophy of a world order based on "selfishness and protectionism". This has had an impact on the behavior of states: there has been a transformation into a "focus on national interests" acceptable to the majority of society [35]. Thus, the "every man for himself" strategy, which was established during the period of the coronavirus, can influence identification political processes in the world. The results of its implementation will significantly reflect on the policy of the Associated Trio states.

In this situation, it is possible to record a "positive" for the political development of states that are at the stage of transformation and are characterized by weak positions in the context of geopolitical confrontation for world domination. It lies in the fact that the balance of power between states will be significantly adjusted; moreover, this will be connected mainly with the effectiveness of the response to the spread of the virus in each individual state [30, p. 27]. Consequently, some countries will become politically "stronger", and countries that have been afraid to take "non-standard" decisions in the fight against the pandemic will become politically "weakened".

It can be assumed that, in addition to the speed of administrative response, the cohesion of civil society based on identification priorities will become a new appreciable criterion for assessing the position of the state [27, p. 57]. For democratic states, the assessment of the activity of the "society-state" ligament becomes decisive in the context of compliance with the basic principles of the functioning of democratic political regimes. The ability to maintain citizens' trust in political institutions, as the experience of Moldova and Georgia has shown, can contribute in the future not only to their further democratization, but also to strengthen the positions of states within the global democratic community.

The worldwide epidemic will also contribute to further "social atomization". Along with the economic sphere, where recovery and / or expansion of national industries in strategically important sectors is predictable in the coming years, the localization of social relations will be the mainstream for sociopolitical relations, because the demand for security has taken the lead again [19, pp. 142-143]. And in this case, it is not about intentional restrictions, but on the contrary, about a deliberate internal choice of states.

An important role belongs to political and psychosocial shifts, which will determine the style of behavior of actors in the updated sociopolitical conditions and will become a direct universal identifier of political processes of the future. It can also be assumed that the importance of "ideological beliefs" is increasing in the context of identification political processes [26, p. 108]. Assessing the actions of their opponents, the states-leaders will strategically and economically build new "rules of the game", which will require the formation of new conditional "teams" in the arena of the world geopolitical struggle. The Associated Trio states are unlikely to be able to claim leadership positions even if they successfully overcome the pandemic and post-pandemic period. However, they will be able to claim competitive positions in the renewed world order, having secured their place in the European political family.

In summary, it is worth noting that the challenges connected with COVID-19 have shown that the current configuration of the global world looks completely impractical, even dangerous in the technical sense of the word in the event of new global cataclysms. It is obvious that the process of globalization will continue to evolve, both in ideological and applied aspects. The importance of the coronavirus pandemic as a universal catalyst for the processes of "political world transformation" should be emphasized, when globalization is replaced by global isolation and new sociopolitical practices appear.

5. Conclusions.

The coronavirus pandemic turned out to be a universal catalyst for world globalization processes, shifting the focus to the role of nation states. The leadership of European states has resolutely moved to taking emergency measures and increasing their own powers to overcome the pandemic. Upon completion of the coronavirus crisis, democratic regimes may face the threat of government officials' disagreement to "roll back" and abandon new powers. This can strengthen authoritarian tendencies in the states of the European space, and especially in the states that are at the stage of transformation. In this case, the political Streisand effect of a corona pandemic can lead to the "undermining" of the psychological state of society, the provision of inaccurate information by the authorities, as well as ineffective communication with citizens and the introduction of lockdowns.

COVID-19 catalyzes the strengthening of the position of the East in the geopolitical arena and weakens the position of the West. China has been much more successful in its "test of strength" in the fight against the pandemic than Western states. The anti-epidemic measures taken in Europe turned out to be haphazard and particularly cautious. Due to fears of criticism from civil society and populists, the adoption of anti-crisis measures related to restrictions on the rights and freedoms of the population by officials was atomized and belated. Pro-government political forces continued to actively participate in the internal struggle against the opposition, which also had a destructive effect on internal political stability and the consolidation of civil society during the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, the image of the West may suffer irreparable losses.

The pandemic has shown that universal ideological formulas ("democratic values", "European choice", "Soviet nostalgia") do not work in the realities of the consequences of the coronavirus infection pandemic. In critical situations of such magnitude, the priority is the effect of "rallying around the flag", the responsibility of political leaders and the professionalism of doctors. The demand for order, the growing distrust of fellow citizens and the rejection of freedoms in favor of security also come to the fore. The growth of support (ratings) of the current political leadership confirms the orientation towards maintaining the status quo and conservative attitudes.

The reaction to the corona pandemic has shown significant differences between states in the post-Soviet space, and above all, in the socio-political dialogue between the authorities and citizens; it has revealed the strategic demand for the states cooperating with world political players (USA, EU and China).

After two years of pandemic, the quality of democracy in the member states of the Associated Trio initiative of the European Union has noticeably deteriorated. According to the results of tracking the reaction of states to COVID-19 and their potential impact on the overall quality of democracy in the country (a project of the V-Dem Institute at the Department of Political Science of the University of Gothenburg), Ukraine demonstrates (according to the Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards Index PanDem) and the Pandemic Backsliding Index (PanBack)) higher risk for the overall quality of democracy in the state compared to Moldova and Georgia. The response of Georgia and Moldova to the COVID-19 challenge poses less risk to the quality of democracy in society, since they relate to states that are fighting COVID-19 either without violations or with minor violations of democratic standards.

Referring to the negative experience of developed European states, it can be concluded that the democratic vector of development of the Associated Trio states, namely Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, can be partially changed to an authoritarian one. Moreover, the national interest will dominate the global one. This is due to the adoption of a "policy of protectionism and selfishness" focused on protecting national interests by the majority of European states. The corona pandemic acted as an "effective political catalyst", contributed to the activation of identification processes and the determination of the configuration between the tasks of national and global development of these states.

In the case of an effective fight against the pandemic, the studied states will have a chance to make a "leap", prove their consistency and become equal, at least partially, to the countries of Western Europe in the context of having the same positions regarding the influence on political processes on the European continent. Moreover, due to their geopolitical position, they will be able to become a weighty actor in world politics and have a significant impact on the redistribution of forces in the struggle for the hegemony of individual states.

Taking into account the experience of past decades, it can be argued that only well-coordinated consolidated actions of states lead to general world development, and, therefore, interaction and the search for consensus for the common good and further development of states and societies is inevitable. And studies of this kind, devoted to understanding the universal catalytic effect of the corona pandemic and the accompanying trends on identification processes in European states, will help predict the possible vectors and nature of the further development of states in the post-pandemic period.

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