

# Responsibility for ensuring the world biosafety: Rethinking in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vladyslav Teremetskyi<sup>1\*</sup>, Yevheniia Duliba<sup>2</sup>, Galyna Didkivska<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Civil Law, Western Ukrainian National University, Ternopil, Ukraine

<sup>2</sup>Department of Civil Law, Ternopil National Economic University, Ternopil, Ukraine

<sup>3</sup>Department of Criminal Law and Criminology, University of the State Fiscal Service of Ukraine, Ternopil, Ukraine

## Abstract

The article provides insights on the current mechanisms for regulating relations in the field of global health and international interaction in the world, holding the States of the world internationally responsible for internationally wrongful acts in the field of health, including consideration of the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Significant attention is paid to find the response to the question of what COVID-19 pandemic a health emergency is or bioterrorism. It analyses the current international norms governing the field of the production and use of biological weapons, with particular emphasis on standards of regulation and international responsibility in this field. The findings of this study suggest that biosafety worldwide is a key dimension of global security and ensuring world peace. This study also recommended the establishment of the strong global norm that would provide for verification of disarmament and compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention, the responsibility of States to develop, manufacture, and accumulate of biological weapons should be adapted to that end. Furthermore, it is noted that the world community should reconsider the position on the mechanism of investigations by the United Nations Security Council, as well as the procedure for the use of the veto of the five permanent members of the Security Council in any decision concerning the maintenance of international peace and security.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, Bioterrorism, Biosafety, Biological weapons, International responsibility, Global health-care.

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## Introduction

Ensuring peace and international security is a major concern of our times. The establishment of a comprehensive system of peace and security consists of ensuring the effective functioning of the mechanism for the maintenance of peace, maximizing the potential of existing regulations, strengthening the existing international legal order, and developing new international legal obligations, principles, and norms.

The COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak is an international public health issue. The COVID-19 pandemic, which in three and a half months has virtually spread to all continents and affected 80% of the world's countries, is a test of humanity's ability to counter common civilizational threats, organize to solve pressing issues and draw the right conclusions. In the first months, there have been uncertainties on almost any area: infection transmission route, virus origin and persistence in the environment, diagnostic tests, therapeutic approach, high-risk subjects, lethality, and containment policies [1]. As soon as it was apparent that humanity has been facing a serious threat, the question of the origin of the coronavirus COVID-19 arose in the world community. The emergence of this issue is attributable to the fact that during the past century, the progress made in biotechnology and biochemistry has simplified the development and production of biological weapons, and genetic engineering holds perhaps the most dangerous

potential. Ease of production and the broad availability of biological agents and technical know-how have led to a further spread of biological weapons. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world is not a common attack on government or military targets, it is an attack on the lives and health of citizens and the global economy as a whole. The emergence of new, potentially possible forms of terrorist activity involving the use of biological weapons necessitates a new approach to peace and security on the planet.

## Literature Review

The empirical basis of this article is presented by the provisions of the international legislation, as well as decisions of the WHO, the WTO, the OECD, the United Nations. The collected empirical evidence and statistics have been compiled and analysed, using descriptive statistics. The theoretical basis of this article is the foreign researches of normative regulation, the elimination of legal uncertainty, ways to fill in gaps in the law, the process of decision-making of the United Nations Security Council.

The methods of research are selected based on the object, object, and purpose of the article. The main methods used in this research are analysis, synthesis, and comparison. Data synthesis and analysis are key elements in this work that can help to elucidate special features of the responsibility for

violating the world's biosafety during the COVID-19. The historical method helped us to study the history of biological weapons in the world [2]. The system analysis method made it possible to define the role and priorities of international biosafety in the world. The formal legal method was used in the analysis of international instruments governing relations in the field of health and international interaction. The statistical method, logical methods, and the method of comparative analysis were used for the analysis of the WHO, United Nations data as well as for own conclusions.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***COVID-19 pandemic: natural phenomenon or bioterrorism?***

Given the severity of health threats related to climate change, biosecurity, and biosafety, the linkage between global health and the environment should be considered.

Today, the threat of bioterrorism is real and significant, given the volatile situation with infectious diseases in the world, heavy traffic flow, and the flow of people between and within countries, the imperfection of the state systems of biohazard prevention.

Bioterrorism is one of the most important under-addressed threats relating to peace and security. Bioterrorism is defined as the intentional or threatened use of viruses, bacteria, fungi, or toxins from living organisms to produce death or disease in humans, animals, or plants to accomplish political or social objectives. Bioterrorism is a growing threat and meticulous strategies and programs are being formulated globally to increase the awareness, preparedness, and mitigation of these threats for tackling the problem responsibly since the use of biological weapons can inflict great trauma upon the civilian population [3]. The spectre of the threats posed by biological weapons is further causing serious concern. Bioterrorism is aimed at creating casualties, terror, social disruption, or economic losses inspired by ideological, religious, or political beliefs. The success of bioterrorist attempts is determined by the degree of societal disruption and panic, and not necessarily by the sheer number of casualties. These biologic weapons can cause large-scale mortality and morbidity in a large population and create civil disruption in the shortest possible time.

Biological weapons are considered to be among the most uncontrolled weapons aimed at the mass destruction of living organisms. The classification of biological weapons as the most dangerous weapons is since the detection of infection may not occur immediately, but after the incubation period, which can last from several days to several months. Viruses, bacteria, toxins, fungi, and even genetically modified organisms that are dangerous to humans can be included in the list of biological weapons. Some bio elements can be transmitted from an infected plant, animal, or human to a healthy one, causing the epidemics of certain diseases. Further, it is apparent from experiences worldwide that the world is not prepared to combat the effects of these weapons, because we are unfamiliar with most of the agents of biological warfare

and are ill-equipped to handle the consequences of such attacks. Besides, current surveillance systems may be inadequate to detect biological attacks. The detection of the use of such weapons and the subsequent elimination of the consequences and the manufacture of antidotes require lengthy laboratory research, which greatly complicates the fight against the use of such weapons [4].

Public health systems and clinical laboratories worldwide are continually challenged by emerging and re-emerging viruses, owing not only to natural outbreaks and potential acts of bioterrorism. The appearance of a new infectious disease is always a complex situation, especially if it is an epidemic of significant extension or severity. Health services across the world face an unprecedented situation as a result of a global COVID-19 outbreak. According to the WHO, as of there have been 111419939 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 2470772 deaths in the 216 countries World Health Organization [WHO].

At the individual country level, the number of deaths and Case Fatality Rates of confirmed cases vary enormously. This can be due to numerous reasons, including the extent of testing, the measures taken to mitigate the spread, healthcare access, underlying population demographics, socio-economic development and prevalence of comorbidities [5]. Loss of lives due to any pandemic causes definite irretrievable damage to society. But apart from this, COVID-19 has severely demobilized the global economy. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), world merchandise trade is set to plummet by between 13 and 32% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For that reason, the COVID-19 pandemic has been identified as the greatest threat to the global economy since the financial emergencies (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

International practice indicates that the world's economies have suffered considerable losses, and the World Bank is taking urgent measures to support member countries to cope with health and economic impacts of the global outbreak, to take the effective response and, where possible, to reduce the tragic consequences posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (an initial package of up to \$12 billion in immediate support).

Today, the COVID-19 pandemic is considered as the most crucial global health calamity of the century and the greatest challenge that the humankind faced since World War II. It has rapidly spread around the world, posing enormous health, economic, environmental, and social challenges to the entire human population [6]. An act of bioterrorism could have the same effect on our lives and the economy as the COVID-19 pandemic: terrorist organizations actively seek to cripple a target economy through the employment of simple technologies in coordinated and sophisticated attacks for key infrastructures.

At the outbreak of the unknown coronavirus COVID-19 in the Chinese province of Hubei and its rapid spread around the world, many countries around the world faced the problem of organizing protection against dangerous diseases. The current

COVID-19 pandemic has exposed some of the weaknesses in the public healthcare systems and lack of preparedness for dealing with infectious disease outbreaks. Fortunately, China has shown a good model of such protection. Facing this unknown infectious disease, the Chinese government took preventative measures immediately, including implementing a nationwide quarantine, offering medical support and mobilizing resources from all over the country, enhancing public education, strengthening individual protection, medical isolation, controlling population mobility, and reducing gatherings [7]. These measures are not only directly associated with China's overall containment of the epidemic, but also contribute valuable experience for the international community in its fight against it.

Outbreaks of infectious diseases pose a constant threat to global health. But global health also poses a set of interstate cooperation problems, as states have different capabilities and vulnerabilities that shape their responses to health risks. These differences create externalities, as one state can impose risks on another: often, states conceal outbreaks to avoid becoming "the target of other states' costly [trade] barriers".

The COVID-19 pandemic has vividly demonstrated that the underlying challenge of improving global health is not one of poor coordination among scientists, or even one of lack of scientific cooperation, but a lack of political cooperation. The WHO's efforts to combat the pandemic have been plagued by competing for economic, political, and social demands—conflicts that render coordination difficult and cooperation impossible.

Most epidemics emerge because of external, often climatological or geographical, factors. Sometimes, however, human interference with nature influences the spread of disease [8].

As the priority lies in addressing the humanitarian challenge through proper preventive measures to stop its spread, as well as finding curative measures to develop a vaccine, it is essential to strengthen global solidarity to cooperate in a bid to conquer the pandemic, and to improve global public health governance. Currently, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19. However, in 2020, scientists embarked on a race to produce safe and effective coronavirus vaccines in record time. Researchers are currently testing 68 vaccines in clinical trials on humans, and 20 have reached the final stages of testing [9]. It often takes years to approve, manufacture, and distribute globally vaccine. WHO will continue to provide updated information as soon as clinical findings become available.

The epidemiological situation in many countries of the world has led the governments to pursue unprecedented measures to contain the rapid spread of the disease.

This situation has resulted in several theories about the alleged use of biological weapons in China. Today, no one can give with certainty an accurate answer to the question: is this the virus of natural phenomenon, or is it man-made in a laboratory? Is it a disease that emerged in nature came to light

as a result of the accidental release of pathogens or a laboratory accident?

In trying to answer these questions, we turned to the history of the use of biological weapons and the search for evidence to confirm or disprove that the COVID-19 pandemic is a natural phenomenon or a man-made phenomenon.

In the 20th century, the emphasis on biological weapons development or research and their possible use was widely undertaken around the world. Developers of biological weapons have found that experiments with such weapons and their use can have unpredictable consequences and become uncontrollable and affect their citizens. Moreover, the development and stockpiling of biological weapons by one country has proved that biological weapons indeed pose a threat. As a consequence of this, significant steps in that regard were had been the adoption a Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and Bacteriological Methods of Warfare and the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction (The Biological Weapons Convention).

The Biological Weapons Convention is strengthening global defences against biological weapons and bioterrorism. Also, this act makes it a crime for any person to develop, produce, stockpile, acquire or retain any biological agent or toxin that has no justification for prophylactic or peaceful purpose, or as a biological weapon.

However, active research into bio elements and various poisons have not completely ceased. Many countries, despite the prohibition, continued to conduct experiments with dangerous strains of anthrax, plague, smallpox, including Russia, China, Israel, South Africa, Iraq.

Neither the Geneva Protocol nor The Biological Weapons Convention provides clear guidance regarding the inspection and control of disarmament and compliance with these acts. Also, there are no enforcement guidelines and no remedies for violations, and there are unresolved disputes over the definition of "defence research" and the number of agents required for benevolent research. In case of possible violations of The Biological Weapons Convention any State Party to this Convention which finds that any other State Party is acting in breach of obligations deriving from the provisions of The Biological Weapons Convention may complain with the Security Council of the United Nations. Such a complaint should include all possible evidence confirming its validity, as well as a request for its consideration by the Security Council. Each State Party to this Convention undertakes to co-operate in carrying out any investigation which the Security Council may initiate, following the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, based on the complaint received by the Council. The Security Council shall inform the States Parties to the Convention on the results of the investigation. However, international practice demonstrates the complexity and the enormous difficulties faced by the United Nations in implementing these provisions. In particular, article 27 of the

Charter of the United Nations refers to the “joint vote” of the five permanent representatives of the Security Council, which was urged by the founders to promote unity among powerful States. Thus, for decision-making in the Security Council from 1945 and to this day is being made by an affirmative vote of nine members, including the concurring votes of all permanent members [10]. And if one country of the permanent members of the Security Council applies a veto, the decision is not accepted.

### ***China, WHO, the international community and international responsibility***

While the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis, its implications are more far-reaching and could threaten global peace and security, also poses a significant threat to the maintenance of international peace and security - potentially leading to an increase in social unrest and violence that would greatly undermine our ability to fight the disease.

In looking for the source of the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO member states have adopted resolution, which initiated a stepwise process of impartial, independent, and comprehensive evaluation into the response of individual states and WHO to the COVID-19 pandemic and the application of measures to stopping the spread of coronavirus. Also, this resolution includes the necessity to review experience gained and lessons learned from the WHO-coordinated international health response to COVID-19, including the effectiveness of the mechanisms at WHO's disposal; the functioning of the IHR and the status of implementation of the relevant recommendations of the previous IHR Review Committees; WHO's a contribution to United Nations-wide efforts; and the actions of WHO and their timelines pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, and make recommendations to improve global pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response capacity, including through strengthening, as appropriate, WHO's Health Emergencies Programme.

The only binding legal regulation which addresses the prevention, protection and control of the international spread of disease is the International Health Regulations. These International Health Regulations were adopted by the World Health Assembly to control six infectious diseases: cholera, plague, yellow fever, smallpox, relapsing fever, and typhus. The revision added smallpox, poliomyelitis due to wild-type poliovirus, SARS, and cases of human influenza caused by a new subtype, set forth in the second annex. According to Article 6 of the International Health Regulations, a State has to assess events occurring in its territory and if there is a possibility of the events constituting a public health emergency, they must notify WHO about it within 24 hours of the assessment. Following this notification, the State has to continuously communicate to the WHO timely, accurate, and sufficiently detailed public health information available to it on the event. Also, according to Article 7 of the International Health Regulations, if a State Party has evidence of an unexpected or unusual public health event within its territory, irrespective of origin or source, which may constitute a public health emergency of international concern, it shall provide to

the WHO all relevant public health information in accordance with Article 6. WHO also has a mandate in Article 10 to seek verification from states with respect to unofficial reports of pathogenic microorganisms? States are required to provide timely and transparent information as requested within 24 hours, and to participate in collaborative assessments of the risks presented.

As one of the 196 states that are parties to the legally binding International Health Regulations, China has to rapidly gather information about and contribute to a common understanding of what may constitute a public health emergency with potential international implications. However, for a long time, China has refused the successively repeated offers of assistance in investigating the epidemic. And in this case, one question immediately comes to mind: what is the role of the international community in preventing and responding to health emergencies in such a case?

According to article 1 of Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts every internationally wrongful act of a State entails the international responsibility of that State. An internationally wrongful act of a State may consist of one or more actions or omissions or a combination of both. Whether there has been an internationally wrongful act depends, first, on the requirements of the obligation which is said to have been breached and, secondly, on the framework conditions for such an act [11]. An internationally wrongful act of a State is an action or omission which “is attributable to the State under international law”, and “constitutes a breach of an international obligation of the State”. The conduct of any State organ shall be considered an act of that State under international law, whether the organ exercises legislative, executive, judicial or any other functions, whatever position it holds in the organization of the State, and whatever its character as an organ of the Central Government or a territorial unit of the State. But apart from that, the conduct of an organ of a State or of a person or entity empowered to exercise elements of the governmental authority shall be considered an act of the State under international law if the organ, person or entity acts in that capacity, even if it exceeds its authority or contravenes instructions.

According to article 1 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants. China is divided into provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the Central Government. The President of the People's Republic of China, on behalf of the People's Republic of China, engages in activities involving State affairs and receives foreign diplomatic representatives and, in pursuance of the decisions of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, appoints or recalls plenipotentiary representatives abroad, and ratifies or abrogates treaties and important agreements concluded with foreign states. Although the COVID-19 pandemic in China started locally, it spread rapidly throughout China. Given that China is a socialist republic, the responsibility of the local government devolves to the President, who is all organs of the State in

China, and whose conduct also applies to China. Even if China renounces the conduct of local authorities or State-owned media as necessarily direct, referring to the national Government, such actions are still granted to this status, "if and to the extent that the State acknowledges and adopts the conduct in question as to its own" as were made by officials in Beijing.

It follows that China's refusal to report timely, accurate and sufficiently detailed public health information about the events happening in its territory to the WHO following the International Health Regulation promptly and transparently, is a breach of its legal obligations and a violation of international law because a violation is an act that "remains not in conformity with this obligation". In summary, China should be accountable at the international level for its internationally wrongful acts.

Critically, China had taken significant steps to help the international community to fight the pandemic, including medical materials and knowledge-sharing. China's commitment has been highly recognized and appreciated by many countries, such as Italy and Serbia. However, this is only an international responsibility for non-compliance with legal obligations. And it is because of this international wrongful act there are a lot of issues arise to China: why didn't they want to provide up-to-date information about the incident in Wuhan Province, why didn't they allow the WHO commission to conduct an inspection. It is the lack of answers to these issues. It is suggested in the world community that the COVID-19 pandemic may be the result of a biological weapons test. However, the facts of the deliberate use of biological weapons are incredibly difficult to document officially, if the researchers themselves do not admit it and do not carefully hide such facts.

### ***About the pursuit of truth***

The legal consequences of an internationally wrongful act are subject to the procedures of the Charter of the United Nations. Chapter XIV of the charter recognizes that states may bring disputes before the International Court of Justice or other international tribunals. Article 75 of the Constitution of WHO also refers to the International Court of Justice which stipulates that any question or dispute concerning the interpretation or application of the Constitution of WHO which is not settled by negotiation or by the Health Assembly shall be referred to the International Court of Justice in conformity with the Statute of the Court unless the parties concerned agree on another mode of settlement. In this case, the parties to the dispute are free to choose any means of settling the dispute, and not to invoke the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. Besides, the parties must agree that the dispute between them must be presented and resolved by an international court. The State, therefore, could not be compelled to appear before an international court without its consent. This reflects a general proposition in international law and its fundamental weakness.

What is the way out of this dilemma? One option for the prosecution is the application to China of legitimate coercive measures, which are taken to restore the violated rights and to

limit or eliminate the rights of another state in response to its wrongful conduct. This category of legitimate coercive measures can be attributed to political and economic measures. Economic measures can be attributed to the rupture of trade and economic relations with China's complete economic isolation or to reverse China's entry into the World Trade Organization. This will hurt China's economy, as China is the world leader in merchandise trade with shares of 13% of total exports and 11% of total imports. China's exports amounted to \$2.49 trillion, and its imports amounted to \$2.14 trillion in 2018 (World Trade Organization (WTO)).

The political measures include the removal of China from leadership positions and memberships in international organizations. In particular, China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and China now heads four of the 15 organizations in the UN system: Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (Food and Agriculture Organization), Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Secretary-General of International Civil Aviation Organization (International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Director-General of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) (United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)). Also, States could suspend air travel to China for years, broadcast Western media in China, and undermine China's famous internet firewall that keeps the country's information ecosystem sealed off from the rest of the world.

As the past decade shows, that there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed. Therefore, until a full investigation into the emergence of COVID-19 disease is conducted, the international community will never receive a true answer as to what this phenomenon is. However, the emergence and spread of coronavirus COVID-19 worldwide has posed additional challenges to national and international security and requires adequate responses. In a scenario of a biologic threat, a more sophisticated and integrated public health response is needed, which requires the assessment of the outbreak by prompt methods of disease surveillance and accurate laboratory diagnosis and characterization of the biologic agent enabling the implementation of prevention and treatment protocols.

Biosafety is a major emerging aspect of global security and involves many fields such as health, agriculture, science and technology, education, and the military. It concerns such aspects as concealment, sudden onset, diffusion, spill over, and destructive impact, and is an integral part of national security. Given the enormity of that is possible in the event of a biological attack, we must be ready to detect, diagnose, diagnose and respond appropriately to biological weapons, we must be prepared to detect, diagnostics, surveillance, epidemiologically characterize and respond appropriately to biological weapons. Only observations and rapid detection are critical to an effective response to a bioterrorist attack. Rapid detection and diagnosis require access to an extensive sequence database and high throughput laboratories. Specimen collection needs to standardize and automated. Indeed, specimen collection is often the major obstacle to rapidly processing a

large number of samples and the weak link in what seems to be an otherwise very promising detection and diagnosis technology. A policy of engagement and cooperation in the biosecurity should seek to engage biological scientists and combat biological threats worldwide by providing assistance to improve biosecurity and biosafety, conducting cooperative research and improving infectious disease detection and control.

The capability to use molecular sequences to rapidly detect and identify bioterrorist agents could serve as an important form of deterrence and might prevent bioterrorist attacks from occurring in the first place. One vision is an international molecular forensics lab that would rely on a molecular fingerprint global database to identify the source of the bioterrorist agent. This capability could provide the biological equivalent of the threat of nuclear retaliation. Again, it must be emphasized that bioterrorism is a national security issue and bioterrorism preparedness efforts are a strategic defence.

Bioterrorism preparedness as a national security imperative also raises many important legal issues. The first step toward evaluating the necessity of a legal strategy for bioterrorism is to assess the adequacy of the existing legal infrastructure for dealing with bioterrorism issues. The threat of bioterrorism requires countries to work together proactively and develop collective strategies to thwart the next deliberate-or even unintended-outbreak. Considering that, measures to improve the counter-terrorism policy and the fight against bioterrorism, both at the national and international levels, must be permanent, even at low threat levels. The efforts of the countries of the world should be aimed at strengthening protection against the terrorist threat. That applied not only to ensuring global compliance with the United Nations Biological Weapons Convention, but also requires the creation of a strong global norm that would reject the development of biological weapons and provide for the responsibility of states for its development. Moreover, the development of measures aimed at enhancing public health is crucial for combating bioterrorism as well as disease outbreaks that enhance the ability of society to combat 'regular' infectious disease outbreaks and mitigate the effects of bioterrorist attacks. Monitoring, early warning, and responsive measures to combat serious cross-border threats to health are essential elements to ensuring a high level of health protection in the world. A strong public health system is an integral component of bioterrorism defence [12]. Even if the contents of our biodefense arsenal were sufficient to treat all diseases caused by a bioterrorist agent, we would still need a rapid detection and response system for the delivery of therapeutics or prophylaxis to all exposed individuals. However, there are many critical gaps in health care infrastructure.

## Conclusion

At this point in the discussion of the complex issue of the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are in a position to raise more questions than answers. However, in receiving responses to this request about the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world must be ready for our preparedness and the nation's

defence against the threat of bioterrorism. Biosafety worldwide is a key dimension of global security and ensuring world peace. The strong global norm that would provide for verification of disarmament and compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention, the responsibility of States to develop, manufacture, and accumulate of biological weapons should be adapted to that end. This omission must be remedied and such an amendment would lead to the further development of international agreements, for modifying international practice on the solution of identified problems.

Further, the world community must realize that it should reconsider the position on the conduct of investigations by the United Nations Security Council and the veto power of the five permanent members of the Security Council in any decision concerning the maintenance of international peace and security. In this context, we deem it necessary, that of the Un Charter needs to be amended and supplemented with the provision that if a party to a dispute under is a permanent member of the Security Council, decisions of the Security Council shall be made by an affirmative vote of eight members including the concurring votes of the permanent members except for the vote of the permanent member, whom shall abstain from voting.

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**\*Correspondence to**

Dr. Vladyslav Teremetskyi

Department of Civil Law

Western Ukrainian National University

Ternopil

Ukraine

E-mail: vladvokat333@ukr.net