

## **Rethinking the Concept of a Dysfunctional State: Semantic & Geopolitical Encounters and Interactions**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper centres on the issue of terminology connected with the designation of states, which are going through a process of decline or complete failure. The decline of states has been presented in detail in secondary literature since the 1990s. The development of research on this phenomenon is, however, associated with terminological chaos. Drawing on semantic and geopolitical interpretative insights, the authors of the paper propose the term 'dysfunctional state', which may be used to overcome the chaos. The article also analyses more broadly the issue of a 'failed state' as the most frequent term used for countries that can be classified as dysfunctional.*

**Keywords:** terminology, dysfunctional state, failed state, semantics, geopolitics.

### **Introduction**

The problem of the meaning and position of a state in the international political space is a traditional subject of interest in political science. In recent decades, the issue of countries failing to perform basic functions of the state has been strongly promoted within the given research focus. This phenomenon is linked to the development in the world, where the international political space has not been stabilized after the end of bipolarity and the Cold War associated with it. In addition, globalisation processes have significantly interfered in the development of the state's position in the international space. After 1990, the number of states which, for various reasons, failed to respond adequately to the new conditions have grown significantly. Such states are characterised by the weakness of the central power, manifested by the inability to ensure basic conditions for the life of their population, as well as for the functioning of the country's economy and infrastructure, and also for ensuring control of the state territory. It is the weakness of power that is considered to be the essential cause of the decline of states (Roman 2014: 114).

State decline is generally the result of a number of interrelated factors, namely the disintegration of state structures in the form of an inefficient administrative apparatus, manifested mainly by the gradual disruption of internal order, the increasing disintegration of social structures, continuous economic decline, unstoppable escalation of violence, the failure to respect basic human rights, and so forth. The territory of the state is controlled by a number of rival groups, competing with the armed forces of the central government. However, none of the warring parties has the potential to gain power control over the entire territory of the country. This development has been reflected in international relations scholarship, which has pursued a line of enquiry that focuses on the analysis of states characterised by the weakness of their central authority (Ištók, Vlkolinská 2019: 7). The treatment of the issue is also topical from the point of view of global security, as evidenced by the opinion of Fukuyama (2004), who, based on his analyses, concludes that such states can be considered the most significant threat to the international order in the post-Cold War era. It is therefore necessary to pay due attention to the issue in question in interdisciplinary research involving political science, (political) geography, sociology, economics, historiography, cultural studies, semantics and other sciences.

On the one hand, in the Slovak professional literature, the issue of states in danger of decline has not yet received due attention. In this context, we can speak only of a few studies. On the other hand, in the neighbouring countries – in the Czech Republic and Poland, not only numerous contributions have been published in professional periodicals, but also several monographs, focusing on both the global and theoretical views of the issue, and also on the application of knowledge to specific regions and countries (see e. g. Waisová et al. 2007, Šmíd and Vaďura 2009, Riegl 2013, Remešová 2014, Kłosowicz 2013, Kłosowicz and Mania 2012, Gil 2013, Szpak 2013 and Klin 2014). Perhaps less striking is the fact that scant attention has been paid to the issue at hand in our country, not only in professional journalism, but also in the Slovak opinion-forming media, thus creating for the reader an incomplete picture of the contemporary world, which is reduced to the development in Europe, or to the action of world powers. The aim of the present article is to offer a critical evaluation of the concept of a dysfunctional state, methodologically fusing interpretative insights from semantics and geopolitics.

### **Dysfunctional state: An attempt at proposing a term bridging terminological heterogeneity**

The trend of conceiving all-round analyses, focusing on states that have failed and are failing to fulfil the classic functions of the state, has been reflected in the terminological chaos that, inter alia, hinders the comparison of the knowledge gained. Among the available literature, the issue has been dealt with in more detail, e.g. by Jihlavec (2007), Šmíd and Vaďura (2009), Riegl (2010) or Remešová (2014). In the Polish literature, the issue has been tackled by e.g. Kłosowicz and Mormul (2013). However, almost every analysis focusing on the decline of the state also includes a reflection on the terminology used in connection with this problem, or a characterisation of the terms used. This is where a common reflection space between semantics and geopolitics is created, offering room for their enriching encounters and mutual interactions.

Several attributes, taking form of adjectives, appear in scholarly studies and reviews when characterising countries where weakening of central authority is occurring. In this connection, it is necessary to mention perhaps the most widely used notion of a *failed state*, which is discussed in more detail in the ensuing section of this paper. At the same time, in the relevant literature also the terms such as *weak, fragile, collapsed, soft, crisis, disrupted, ramshackle, problem, anemic, anarchic, anarchic*, and others, may be encountered. As a semantic analysis reveals, the complex terminological situation is complicated by the use of terms that characterise the stages of state decline, as analysed by several authors (e.g. Rotberg 2010 writes about *strong states, weak states, failed states* and *collapsed states*).

Alongside this, a number of terms are used to refer to geopolitical entities that have declared independence but have not been more widely recognised internationally<sup>1</sup>. In this connection, the terms such as *quasi-states, de facto states, para-states* or *pseudo-states* are also used. Such political formations may likewise be classified as dysfunctional states, as on the one hand, they fulfil their obligations to their populations to some extent, but on the other hand their existence is not respected within the international community, as they do not have diplomatic representation abroad or are not members of major international organisations.

In terms of terminology, it should be mentioned that some terms are even intertwined in their cognitive contents, e.g. the term *quasi-state* is used not only in the aforementioned sense of internationally unrecognised geopolitical

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<sup>1</sup> Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Northern Cyprus and Somaliland, among others, should be mentioned here.

units after the proclamation of independence, but also to refer to declining and failed internationally recognised states. The weakness of these approaches and the resulting terms is generally the absence of a demarcation of the boundary of the state's decline into the category we have identified as 'dysfunctional' (even in the context of the other terms mentioned), but also between its different stages.

Therefore, this – beyond doubt, certainly far from complete – review calls for the creation, justification and characterisation of an overarching concept with which we can operate in the terminological coverage of the phenomenon of declining or failed states. We wish to reiterate that this is a very difficult problem, since in the nearly thirty years of systematic research on failed states, there has been no universalization of its terminological apparatus.

For this reason, from our point of view, we consider it beneficial to use an approach related to the characterisation of the state functions and their performance. In compliance with the attendant literature it can be stated that the functions of the state are considered to be the main directions of its activity, aimed at the fulfilment of the objectives defined by the state power. Traditionally, the internal and external functions of the state are distinguished (Dudek et al. 2013). The internal function of the state aims to achieve and maintain social order within the state organization, relying on a number of activities. Within these, the state acts as a provider of law, security and public order, a custodian of the administrative apparatus and social system, an organizer of the economy, and a patron of education, science, culture, and public awareness. The external functions of the state include the protection of borders and safeguarding of the state's interests in the international arena by establishing and maintaining diplomatic, consular, commercial, economic and other contacts, etc., with other states and international organisations.

Drawing on the semantic interpretations given in the Dictionary of the Contemporary Slovak Language, Kálmánová (2010: 80) argues that the term 'dysfunction' can be interpreted in the sense of "disturbance or malfunction", "disturbance of the activity of some element of the system" or "disturbance of normal activity". Thus, the meaning of the adjective 'dysfunctional' may be grasped in the sense of the characteristics of a certain phenomenon (in our case, the state), "which has a disturbed function, being dysfunctional" (ibid.: 80, translated by the authors). On these grounds, in the context of the state, we can speak of a *dysfunctional state* in the case of a disruption of its particular function or functions, which may lead to a complete absence of their fulfilment vis-à-vis its population and, in the case of external functions, also vis-à-vis foreign countries. The concept in point seems to be sufficiently broad to be applied as an umbrella term for states which generate pathological

phenomena in the national as well as in the international space (Gil 2013: 379).

Furthermore, Piotrkowski (2005) has terminologically adapted the concept of a dysfunctional state to the phases of its disintegration. He divided its course into three stages, which have been aptly characterised by Potocki (2011) as follows:

- (a) a pre-dysfunctional state, in which the government performs basic functions in relation to the population only to a minimal degree, while at the same time nominally exercising control over its territory and borders;
- (b) a para-functional state, where the government only nominally performs its normative functions while having control over a significant part of its territory, and where this control is threatened by secessionist movements or organised criminal groups;
- (c) a genuinely dysfunctional state in which the government is unable to effectively perform its functions vis-à-vis its population and also to exercise any effective control over a significant part of its territory.

As can be inferred from the preceding, a dysfunctional state has a weakened capacity to perform basic functions of governing its population and territory, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive and empowering relationships with society. As a result, trust and mutual relations between the state and its citizens have weakened (OECD 2011). Long-term stable countries, labelled by several terms (e.g. *empirical state*, i.e. a state based on a tradition of statehood, Jackson and Rosberg 1982), may be adduced as the opposite of dysfunctional states. This category of states is marked by stability as well as the ability to withstand internal and external pressures, and can be identified with the originally European notion of the ‘modern state’ in terms of internal sovereignty. It is therefore a model of the state that has full control over its territory and borders, is able to provide its population with public services, security and respect for human rights and, last but not least, strives for economic growth through its governance.

### **Failed state as a dysfunctional state**

The term *failed state* was one of the first terms used to refer to countries we call dysfunctional. It still resonates in analyses today, mainly because of the annual *Failed States Index* report, published by the American think tank *Fund for Peace* in cooperation with the *Foreign Policy* magazine. The report clas-

sifies the world's states into four groups according to their degree of vulnerability to internal failure on the basis of twelve scored indicators<sup>2</sup>. As Šmíd and Vaďura (2009) maintain, the history of the use of the term *failed state* goes as far back as the studies published in the U.S. and Canada in the 1990s, when it referred to states in which a large-scale political crisis was underway (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Liberia and Somalia). The term *failed state* was first used in the article *Anarchy Rules: Saving Failed States* written by Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner, and published in the *Foreign Policy* magazine in 1993 (Szpak 2013).

However, the use of the term *failed state* has been criticised as too loose and non-conceptual, referring to a very heterogeneous group of states that face different internal political issues (Riegl 2010). Aside from this, measuring the degree of state failure is complicated by the fact that in most post-colonial countries the adopted model of a nation state, which originated and became stabilized in Europe, did not function for a long time. The critique was based on the premise that there could not be a decline in something that is European in origin and did not actually work in non-European settings (see Gil 2013). The fact that post-colonial states are currently analysed according to how close they are to the model of the ideal (successful) state built on the historical experience of Westphalian-type Western nation states is considered by critics one of the main reasons why the theoretical basis for examining the concept of a *failed state* is insufficient. In addition, the literature on *failed states* is also accused of paying insufficient attention to or underestimating the influence of external factors on failed states, such as economic pressures from international financial institutions or military threats from other countries (Orman 2016).

According to Eriksen (2011), two approaches to defining *failed states* can be discerned in the terminological chaos, regardless of the choice of a particular term to designate them. According to him, the first approach views the

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to the *Failed States Index*, the results of other initiatives seeking to define and identify dysfunctional states are also published (see e.g. Di John 2008). It should be pointed out, however, that this and similar indices have encountered criticism due to their problematic analytical value, as they are insufficiently sensitive in assessing many of the important differences between the states analysed. For example, Gros (1996) suggests that instead of creating a hierarchy of states according to their degree of decline or development, the states should be displayed in a continuum in which their position will change depending on the dynamics of failure. In his view, establishing indicators of decline is only the first step in the analysis of *failed states*, while it is much more important to subsequently demonstrate how these indicators cause a state's decline and why these indicators, and not others, are the cause of its decline, taking into account factors influenced by historical development.

state as the main service provider; an approach that is mainly personified by the works of Robert Rotberg and William Zartman. In accordance with this approach, the failure of the state is understood as its inability to perform its basic functions for the benefit of its citizens. Eriksen points to the drawback of this approach in the overly broad range of services that the state is supposed to provide its citizens with. The enumeration of services ranging from the protection and security of territory and population as a quintessential function of the state, to ensuring respect for and protection of property rights, political rights, the provision of social services, to the building of infrastructure or effective health and education, is so extensive that realistically most states, perhaps even all, could be labelled as *failed states* (Eriksen 2011).

The second approach promotes the idea that *failed states* are those ones which do not have control over their entire territory due to the loss of the monopoly of violence. This approach, according to Eriksen (2011), is mainly represented by the works of Robert Jackson and Stephen Krasner. Both authors draw essentially on the concepts of positive and negative sovereignty of states. The common feature of *failed states* is their sustained international recognition, i.e. negative sovereignty, despite the absence of positive sovereignty, i.e. effective control of state authorities over state territory. *Failed states* more often than not suffer from the impact of fighting by various armed groups in different parts of their territory and/or are unable to enact laws and ensure their political and socio-economic development, yet the international community allows them to engage in international relations as equal actors. Moreover, this also leads to cases where states simulate sovereignty in order to secure access to international recognition or to financial or military aid.

## Conclusion

In summary, it transpired from the preceding discussion that the issue of dysfunctional states is very complex. Their existence should be seen first and foremost as a threat to regional, but also global security stability. The identification of dysfunctional states is closely linked to the international community's efforts to address this problem. So far, attempts at coming up with effective procedures and mechanisms for actions, resulting in the recovery of the crisis situation in such countries, have been largely unsuccessful. Seeking a solution to the problem of dysfunctional states, especially those that have reached the stage of a genuine dysfunction, may have several political-geographical connotations, which are related to the transformation of the spatial-political structure in regions threatened by the decline of states. In this vein, Sørensen (2008) envisages a solution in the form of the removal of incapable

state entities and the creation of new units (*statebuilding*) that will be able to provide their population with appropriate public services. This process, however, runs up against the conservatism of the international community, which seeks to maintain the status quo, with regard to the immutability of state borders, in particular. Therefore, in Sørensen's view, the emergence of new states as members of the international community is acceptable only if such a state builds on pre-existing statehood, with its independence recognised by the countries affected by this development.

The second option represents an alternative to the international community's policy in the sense of maintaining the status quo. In this case, developing a pressure on the elites of the dysfunctional states to create new, viable states through secession, is meant. Georg Sørensen (2008) relies on the views of other authors for this alternative argument, according to which the international community should not recognise the sovereignty of highly ineffective states in the long term and thus cease to consider them as its part. Both solutions, indeed, can be considered radical and feasible only in special cases<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, developments in dysfunctional states may lead to changes on the political map in the course of their evolution.

As Hamre and Sullivan (2002) argue, the international community has several alternatives in dealing with this problem. Among them they mention the change of their status in the sense of establishing some form of supranational international authority, i.e. some kind of international protectorate. This model is, however, subject to criticism as a return to colonialism. With regard to future outlooks, the issue of dysfunctional states, vast and intricate in its essence, will surely continue to challenge geopoliticians and semanticians alike, bringing hopefully further interdisciplinary interpretations and solutions resulting from their encounters and reinforcing interactions.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, consider the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the recognition of the independence of states formed by secession, such as Eritrea and South Sudan after the end of the Cold War.



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