

## Uncontrolled Territories as a Phenomenon of a Global Political and Spatial Structure: Insights from Geopolitics and Terminology

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### Abstract

*This paper addresses the issue of uncontrolled territories, which represent a specific phenomenon of contemporary global political and spatial structure. Its analysis is a relatively new avenue of research in political science and political geography. The term uncontrolled territories overlaps in meaning with several terms that have been used in such oriented research and presented in the works of individual authors. The methods of synthesis, inductive analysis and abduction have been employed in order to provide pertinent insights from geopolitics and terminology. The results of the offered conceptual analysis serve to enhance a complex picture of the existence of dysfunctional states.*

**Keywords:** uncontrolled territories, territory control, dysfunctional states, de facto states.

### Introduction

The founder of the so-called classical theory of the state, Georg Jellinek in his work *Allgemeine Staatslehre* (1900) defined state as a union of settled people, endowed with the original power of the state (Křížkovský, Adamová 1992). In essence, then, there is an organic union of three elements: state territory, population that lives on it, and a certain organisation of this population that serves the exercise of state power. The territory of a state consists of a defined part of the space subject to its sovereignty under international law.

The concept of state territory is indicative of the relationship of the state to a particular territory or territoriality, which is the most visible attribute of the state. This follows from the fact that the organisation of the population in a defined territory is a prerequisite for the exercise of power, and the exercise of state sovereignty is also linked to the territory. Territoriality, in the context of the state, refers in particular to the fact that a given territory be-

longs to someone; and that it is influenced, organised and controlled by state power. The territoriality and sovereignty of states have been contested throughout historical development, resulting in their demise or collapse. Alongside this, a decolonisation process took place, resulting in the creation of numerous new states, many of which have struggled to exercise territoriality in the sense of exercising power over their entire territory.

The power-political control over the entire territory of a state by the authorities of an internationally recognised state is one of the conditions for its stability and effective functioning in the global space. At the same time, the control of the territory is not only a symbol of the exercise of state power, but also its source since the territory possesses the potential for its functioning. In addition, it is the space in which the activities of the population of the state are carried out in the context of its life and activity (production and extra-manufacturing activities).

The weakening of the power-political control of the territory by the state authorities after the end of the Cold War led to the emergence of a large number of dysfunctional states. This trend was also reflected in the focus of political science and political geography research, within which the issue of countries that failed to perform the basic functions of the state gradually became prominent. This resulted not only in numerous studies and publications, but also in terminological inflation, which led to a lack of clarity in the terms used and how they were defined (see e.g. Jihlavec 2007; Šmíd and Vaďura 2009; Ištók and Bednárová-Gibová 2021).

### **Uncontrolled territories – terminology and research**

In a number of dysfunctional states, more or less extensive territories have emerged over which the government of the state has lost its power-political control and whose administration has been taken over by rebel commanders, leaders of criminal groups, local separatist politicians, or politicians whose aim is to gain control over the entire state. These developments have resulted in some cases in the formation of “competing statehood”, even in the context of declarations of independence by these territories and the creation of their own state institutions. These territories continue to be considered by the international community as part of its individual members - internationally recognised states - and this is reflected in the content of the commonly used political map of the world. Thus, such a map does not correspond to the real state of the global political and spatial structure (see Pořubská, Gurňák 2018).

The number of such territories has been growing over the last thirty years, although some of them have existed only for a relatively short period of time. This development has prompted research in political science and political geography on the causes of the emergence and functioning of such political-territorial units. Similar to the study of dysfunctional states, such analyses are characterised by terminological inconsistency (see Sebencov and Kolosov 2022). In the studies of Western authors, the terms such as ‘ungoverned territories’ (or areas, spaces, zones) or ‘grey areas’ have become established for such territories. It should be noted that considerable attention is paid to this issue by Russian political scientists and political geographers. This interest stems from the fact that such territories originated in the 1990s in the post-Soviet space (e.g. in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh). The internationally renowned political geographer V. A. Kolosov, who advocated the term ‘uncontrolled territories’ for these political-territorial units, which we also use in this paper, has dealt with the issue at hand in an intense manner.

The reasons for the emergence of uncontrolled territories may be sought in the global trends that have influenced the development of the political and spatial structure of the world in recent decades. Globalisation processes have not only brought about the growth of interdependence, but have also deepened the contrasts between states and sub-state regions. This, in addition to the need for integration, has led to the intensification of fragmentation tendencies in the global political and spatial structure. All of these tendencies have had a significant impact on the behaviour of the population, which is sensitive to the submissiveness of governments to the rules created by globalisation, as well as to the asymmetrical development of neighbouring territories, which has translated into the frustration of the population and an identity crisis. The growth of spatial mobility among people, which disrupts the unity and integrity of the collective memory of former territorial communities, also contributes to this trend (Kolosov et al. 2021).

Research on uncontrolled territories is closely linked not only to the issue of dysfunctional states, but also to questions of secession, separatism and unrecognised statehood. It follows the need for analyses of the complex political and spatial structure of the world, which consists not only of independent states and dependent territories (as depicted on the commonly used political map), but also of the uncontrolled territories found on it. It should be stressed that the development of this structure is very dynamic, and in the case of performing an analysis of the situation in specific states and regions, as well as its cartographic interpretation, objective data are difficult to obtain.

## **Characteristics of uncontrolled territories and territory control**

The definition of uncontrolled territories has not been settled yet. We can loosely rely on the concept of control or governance to characterise them. Uncontrolled territories are characterised by the absence of control by the central government of an internationally recognised state. This fact results mainly from its power and economic weakness, when it is unable to exert its control over the entire territory of the state. The resulting power vacuum is filled by various rebel and separatist groups, criminal networks, or tribal and clan groups.

As mentioned earlier, territory is one of the attributes of the existence of a state, and its control is a key concern for any country. This control is understood as a comprehensive management of its human and natural resources, as well as the results of the activities of the state's inhabitants (i.e. production, infrastructure, financial capital). The control of a territory can be classified according to several criteria (see Sebencov and Kolosov 2022).

Thus, it is possible to speak of force control, which results mainly from the use or demonstration of police and military force by the central government. The groups rivaling it may assert a guerrilla or terrorist form of force control. This form of force control can be used to intimidate the population not only by groups administering uncontrolled territories, but also by legal governments. Economic control in the sense of supporting the legal economy should be exercised predominantly by the central government, while the criminal dimensions of economic control are linked to the activities of anti-government groups. The informal economy can also be used as a source for territory control on both sides.

The authors also make a distinction between political and ideological control of territory. With regard to the political control, it refers to the creation of power-political institutions by the state whose actions legitimise its administration of the territory. The ideological control consists of measures aimed at justifying the control of a territory from a particular centre of power. The assertion of political and ideological forms of control is characteristic of both the operation of the government of an internationally recognised state as well as the activities of anti-government groups.

As a rule, the support of neighbouring countries is important for maintaining the existence of uncontrolled territories: these so-called patron countries may economically sponsor the activities of their leaders or the functioning of their governing institutions, support the activities of armed groups with military supplies, as well as contribute to the ideological justification of their emergence and existence. This is particularly the case with

anti-government groups whose aim is irredentism, i.e. the annexation of part of the territory of the parent state to a neighbouring patron country.

For the stability of an internationally recognised state, the ideal is to assert an economic political and ideological form of control over the entire territory of the country. The use of a coercive form of control by the state, especially through the use of military force in certain regions of the country or even in its entire territory, is indicative of a destabilisation of the state. This may result not only in the emergence of long-term uncontrolled territories but, in extreme cases, in its transformation into a dysfunctional state.

In terms of territory control, it is also necessary to consider its spatial interpretation in the context of the parent state's territory. The aforementioned authors distinguish compact, focal and network control. Of these forms, the compact form is the most important for the control of a territory by an internationally recognised state, which expresses the administration of the entire territory of a country by its government. The form in question is also characteristic of stable states. However, compact control of part of the territory of an internationally recognised state can also be exercised by anti-government forces, particularly in the case of regions which they have long controlled by force, economically, politically and ideologically, where this state of affairs often results in a declaration of independence, i.e. the creation of *de facto* states. This form of uncontrolled territories will be analysed in the next section of the paper.

## **Forms of uncontrolled territories**

In the course of development, several types of uncontrolled territories have emerged in the last thirty years as the role of the state has weakened in the context of globalisation trends. Based on their characteristics, drawing on the level of control of the territory or state-building, four types may be distinguished (stateless territories and three types belonging to the territories of transitional statehood) that operate in the contemporary world. Their common feature is the absence of recognition by the international community.

1. Stateless territories, the first one of these types, are based on the displacement of the control of the power-political institutions of the internationally recognised state that administered them from these territories. They may be the result of the activity of criminal or terrorist groups. In general, stateless territories are characterised by anarchy. In such territories, there is no succession of political power in the form of power-political institutions. Regions in which state power is not exercised can also be considered as such a form of uncontrolled territories, being controlled by various group-

ings, often based on ethnicity and dominated by a conglomerate of competing clans and tribes. Stateless territories have been formed mainly in the countries that originated from the decolonisation process and where there is no long-standing experience of statehood.

2. According to Sebencov and Kolosov (2022), territories of transitional statehood can be distinguished within uncontrolled territories. As a rule, their emergence is related to the activity of secessionist or separatist movements, the aim of which is to create state power institutions and thus create the preconditions for the formation of a new independent state, or for annexing a neighbouring, ethnically related country (irredentism). Thus, in these territories, a transformation of statehood takes place, when the control of the original state is removed, and in its place, the control of the emerging separate power authorities is formed. Territories of transitional statehood come in three types: rebel states, quasi-states and de facto states.

(a) Among the uncontrolled territories, there are a relatively large number of rebel states that have declared insurgent movements. They are based on the control of territory by force, i.e. based on armed violence. The aim of rebels is not always to form a separate state, but often to seize power in the entire internationally recognised state. However, rebel movements are unable to fulfill the main functions of the state. They usually form a kind of concentric circle in spatial terms, with a core in which the power of insurgents is concentrated, around which there are transit zones where this power is diminished. In these areas, secondary areas of control can be formed, backed by, for example, smaller rebel groups with related objectives.

(b) Quasi-states can be considered a higher degree of uncontrolled territories in terms of the formation of their statehood. In contrast to rebel states, these are regions where, although still dominated by rebel control by force, they have managed to create institutions capable of carrying out some of the main functions of the state. If insurgents are concerned with taking power over the entire territory of the mother country, then the successful functioning of such political-territorial units is meant to be an agitation for support for the insurgency by all its native inhabitants.

(c) In terms of state formation, the highest form of uncontrolled territories is de facto states. Scott Pegg (2019) classifies them based on five criteria listed below:

- the establishment of some degree of political leadership by the local population;
- the ability to provide state administration in the claimed territory;
- the ability to enter into a relationship with another state;

- at least two years of existence;
- inability to achieve international recognition, or only recognition by a few states.

With regard to the last criterion, it is particularly important to stress the lack of recognition of *de facto* states by the world powers, in particular the permanent members of the UN Security Council. In addition to the four *de facto* states, formed in the post-Soviet space mentioned above, this group includes the Republic of China (Taiwan), Northern Cyprus and Somaliland. Moreover, Kosovo (unrecognised by Russia and China, though) can also be included here.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we wish reiterate that the issue of uncontrolled territories is a relatively new direction in political science and political geography research, as well as in the analysis of international relations. The emergence of uncontrolled territories is a manifestation of the weakening position of the state in the era of globalisation. At the same time, it is a manifestation of the crisis of statehood, especially in those world macro-regions that are beyond the positive influence of globalisation processes. Another stimulus for the formation of such political-territorial entities lies in the complexity of the geopolitical situation in the last decade.

It is possible to concur with the view that the emergence of uncontrolled territories represents a specific case of the fragmentation of political space. It is the result of the turbulent transformation of the global geopolitical order caused by a number of factors. These include, for example, the contradiction between ethnic self-determination and the principle of the integrity of state territory (Kolosov et al. 2021). This contradiction takes on new dimensions in a changing situation.

Last but far from least, the existence of uncontrolled territories is both a cause of the genesis of dysfunctional states as well as a consequence of their functioning. The research on dysfunctional states has a tradition of about thirty years and, despite certain terminological problems, it has generated its own methodological approaches and has achieved relevant results. This line of analysis has been followed by the study of uncontrolled territories in terms of their emergence and functioning, as well as their power-political structure, relationship with their parent states or the countries that support their existence (so-called patron states). In the course of this research, there will undoubtedly be an ongoing process of creating new concepts that will become the subject of wider debate.

### Funding acknowledgement:

*This article has been written as part of the VEGA 1/0544/21 research grant project entitled “Dysfunctional States – a Current Phenomenon of the World’s Political and Spatial Structure”, Project leader: prof. RNDr. Robert Ištók, PhD.*

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