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The Idea of Failed States in Russian Post-Imperial Context¹

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Abstract. This article presented by late Oleg. B. Podvintsev explores the concept of *failed states* through different stages of its development, with particular attention being paid to the intrinsic characteristics of a state system which is prone to erosion. Nevertheless, the idea of failed states has been broadly discussed in Western academic literature, the author acknowledges that it still remains understudied in Russian academic discourse, so he is inclined to consider those curious transformations that have been occurring with the term *failed state* in Russian context. Apart from evaluating numerous Russian equivalents to the term *failed state*, this article dives into semantic analysis of those connotations each of these equivalents bring into Russian public and academic discourse. The article concludes with the idea that manipulating with references to a former colony or a former part of the bigger state as a *failed* one, might compensate for certain traumas of those bigger states who experienced a collapse of their imperial well-being. In other words, recognizing the fact that the countries separated from ‘the Empire’ started to go downhill after this separation, might cause a feeling of satisfaction in minds of those who share an imperial system of values.

Keywords: failed states; weak states; failed countries; geopolitics; discourse analysis; collapse of the Empire; Westphalian system

A term *failed-state* has become established in recent years both in Western political science and journalism, and in global political practice. On the *Wikipedia* website, the famous electronic encyclopedia, *failed-state* is referred to “a state that lost its ability to fulfill fundamental security and development functions, lacking effective control over its territory and borders”. The opposite of this

¹ This article was originally published in Russian, see: Подвинцев О.Б. Идея «несостоявшихся государств» в российском постимперском контексте // Научный ежегодник Института философии и права Уральского отделения Российской академии наук. 2007. № 7. С. 204–214.



is a *succeeding* state. Another meaning of *failed-state* mentioned on the same resource emphasizes the collapse in which the state finds itself when it can no longer perform its basic functions and reproduce the conditions for its own continued existence. In this case, the antonym is an *enduring* state. According to the editors of the encyclopedia the controversial nature of this term stems from political and military consequences of labeling any state as 'failed', i.e. from ignoring the laws and calls of its government. It is highly likely for such state to be invaded by armed forces from outside, which itself has "extremely dubious legality"².

And indeed, at the turn of XX–XXI centuries, states labeled as *failed* were also defined as *hotbeds of terrorism* by the establishment of the West (primarily the United States and Great Britain), as *a threat to the world community*, and this became an important argument in justification for sending troops to Afghanistan and then to Iraq. In 2006, the concept of *failed state* was used to justify the introduction of Australian troops into East Timor, which was engulfed in civil unrest. It should be noted, however, that in the latter case, unlike the first two, it was not a question of overthrowing the existing political regime in the country that became the object of intervention, but on the contrary – of saving it. Labeling a state as *failed* can also be used in terms of scare tactic for preventive reasons, i.e. to prevent a possible situation when a military invasion would be required. Thus, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of South Africa stated in the summer of 2005 in relation to Zimbabwe, that "his country was doing everything possible to prevent the emerging of a *failed state* next door"³.

At the turn of XX–XXI centuries, the concept of *failed state* started to gain a scientific foundation. Considering legal aspects of this concept, Dr. Daniel Thürer from the University of Zurich referred to the famous Westphalian system of international law, where he discovered numerous cases similar to *failed states* in the modern world (e.g. China in the 1930s). *Failed states*, according to the professor, result from total or partial collapse of state institutions and law structures, which happens under pressure and amidst the confusion of erupting violence, however these states remain to be ghostly presented on the world map. At the same time, Dr. Thürer noted that proceeding from modern international legal norms, states with *aggressive, arbitrary, tyrannical or totalitarian regimes* can also be considered as *failed states* (Thürer 1999).

A group of researchers from the Berlin Foundation for Science and Politics, including Ulrich Schneekener, suggests that *fragile statehood* comes into being when state institutions fail the capacity to govern in their main areas of state competence. There are three such areas to be mentioned: the monopoly on the use of force, state services and mechanisms for distributing economic resources; public participation in politics and decision-making procedures; the stability of political institutions. At the same time, it is properly emphasized that "for each function, there are certain indicators that help us to estimate the degree of statehood erosion"⁴. In this regard, three types of states are dis-

²URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Failed_state (accessed May 10, 2007).

³See: *BBC-news*, 16.08.2005.

tinguished having *statehood* issues: *weak states*, *failing states*, and *failed states*. States belonging to the third type “do not possess any of the three functions to any significant extent, so that one can speak of a complete collapse or breakdown of their statehood”⁵.

The American think tank *Foundation for Peace* publishes an annual rating of *failed states*, based on twelve different factors, including galloping demographic pressure, massive movement of refugees and internally displaced persons, sharp and/or deep economic decline, criminalization and delegitimization of the state, and intervention by other states or external factors. However, the idea of failed states in Russian academic discourse remains understudied, so this paper is going to consider curious transformations that are taking place with the term *failed state* in Russian context.

In many cases, *failed state* is simply not translated into Russian, i.e. borrowed in English spelling. For example, the website *New Terms of the Russian Language* gives the concept of *failed-state* the following interpretation: “a weakened, bankrupt state”. The term denotes a state that demonstrates its inability to perform its main function – “to ensure the life and physical safety of its citizens and improve their well-being”⁶. If a Russian-language equivalent is still required for *failed state*, then a wide variety of terms are refereed to, including «провалившееся государство» (eng. *collapsed state*), «пропащее государство» (eng. *hopeless state*), «гиблое государство» (eng. *worthless state*), государство-банкрот (eng. *bankrupt state*), etc. However, it is most often translated as «несостоятельное государство» (eng. *insolvent state*) or «несостоявшееся государство» (eng. *failed state*). Moreover, the latter option is especially common.

The translation of this term into Russian even became the subject of a special discussion on the Internet forum *Lingvo*, which is maintained by the Association of lexicographers. The initiator and the most active participant in this discussion, Pavel Palazhchenko, considered the definition *failed* to be preferable to *insolvent* when translating. The latter, from his point of view, is quite acceptable, but “may create an impression that we are talking exclusively about the economic and financial insolvency of the state”. Palazhchenko also emphasized that if discussing relatively new states (e.g., former colonies or republics of the former USSR), the phrase *failed state* should be used, but if discussing a state in general, *incompetent state* should be chosen as a definition (it has already been encountered in Russian political theory in this context)⁷.

The economic perspective of the *failed state* concept differs significantly from its political one. Nevertheless, even in this perspective in Russian discourse, the term often sounds like «несостоявшееся государство» (eng. *failed*

⁴ Schneckener U. *Raspad gosudarstva kak global'naya ugroza* [The collapse of the State as a global threat], 27.11.2003, IA «Rosbalt». (in Russ.).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ URL: <https://peace-conflict.ru/cgi-bin/yabb2/YaBB.pl?num=1162717334> (accessed May 10, 2007).

⁷ URL: <https://www.lingvoda.ru/forum/actualthread.aspx?tid=76> (accessed May 10, 2007).

state) in analytical works. For example, Igor Berezin who was the Guild of Marketers president, writes that the poorest countries, where the GDP does not exceed 1200 dollars per person, are sometimes called *failed*. According to his words, “with such a level of GDP, it is impossible to even create the minimum necessary conditions for economic growth in the future” (Berezin 2003: 4). Thus, the term «несостоявшееся государство» (eng. *failed state*) has already entered the Russian discourse, but it originates from political rhetoric and journalism, rather than from serious academic research.

It might seem that the difference between «несостоявшееся государство» (eng. *failed state*) and «несостоятельное государство» (eng. *incompetent state*) is not very significant. And in general, the issues of translating appear to depend on the context. So this paper is about to consider the word «несостоявшееся» to be very indicative, nevertheless, it is not fully compatible with the definition of *failed* that was discussed above. However, this word is commonly used in Russia, first of all, due to the fact that in the political discourse, the term *failed state* is most often related to a number of former Soviet republics.

Some countries once belonged to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) appear as *failed states* in Western literature, but, as a rule, not as illustrative examples. Ulrich Schneckener tends to include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Belarus among the *weak states*; Georgia among those *unable to cope* with its statehood. When listing *failed states*, it is mentioned that Tajikistan belonged for some time to their group⁸. The top ten of the *Foundation for Peace* rating for 2006 were mainly represented by African and Asian countries (e.g. Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d’Ivoire led the list, Iraq took the fourth place, Afghanistan was the tenth). Former Soviet republic did not make their appearances in this top ten. Uzbekistan took the highest, twenty-third place among them, then Kyrgyzstan (28th place), Tajikistan (42nd), Russia (43rd), Turkmenistan (45th), Belarus (50th)⁹. These results have been questioned by many experts on the CIS issues, and in particular, Sergei Markedonov challenged them due to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine and, especially, Georgia being absent among the most vulnerable states in the rating. At the same time, the high position of Belarus has been evidently doubted¹⁰.

However, in Russia, the word «несостоявшийся» (eng. *failed*) obviously happened to tune into the public sentiment. The point is, as it seems, that *failed* is a signature of a final and accomplished condition for a state. This state has not

⁸ Schneckener U. Op. cit.

⁹ URL: <https://www.fundforpeace.org/programa/fsi/fsiindex2006.php> (accessed May 10, 2007).

¹⁰ See: Markedonov S. *Reyting «nesostoyavshikhsya gosudarstv» diskreditiruet nauchnoe soobshchestvo Zapadnogo mira* [The Rating of “Failed States” Discredits the Scientific Community of the Western World], available at: <https://www.24.kg/news-stall/2006/08/18/5908.html?print=yes> (accessed May 10, 2007). (in Russ.); Markedonov S. *Mozhet li Gruzija vozglavit' spisok «nesostoyavshikhsya gosudarstv»* [Can Georgia Top the List of “Failed States”], available at: <https://www.fondsk.ru/print.php?id=282> (accessed May 10, 2007). (in Russ.).

come into being and it hardly ever comes into being in the future. Moreover, it is often implied that it could not come into being because it was created artificially, and not at all in some *natural* way, and therefore does not and cannot have a real basis. For example, a well-known Russian politician of a statecraft attitude, named Konstantin Zatulin, argued that “Georgia is a classic example of a *failed state*” due to the fact that “Georgia never existed as an independent state”, and the form it takes now was established during Stalin's period¹¹.

In fact, Alexander Dugin, an ideologist of the new Eurasianism, used the term «несостоявшееся государство» (eng. failed state) in the same meaning. He does, however, refer to a different English equivalent of this term – *fault country*, which, by the way, can be translated into Russian as «страна-ошибка». At the same time, Alexander Dugin mentioned another term, which was *turn country*, to designate “a country destined for rupture, a country with a failed national statehood, which is too late to develop, and for which, by and large, there are no internal grounds to preserve it”¹². Both, from Dugin's point of view, could be applied to Ukraine: “Ukraine is a geopolitical nonsense, absolutely right. Either it must define itself in the Eurasian direction, where most of its civilizational territories gravitate, or it must be split. A united Ukraine, oriented towards and all the more integrated into Western European civilization, simply cannot exist...”¹³.

Mikhail Leontyev provided a rather incoherent commentary on the Kyrgyz events from the autumn of 2006, which was replete with terms of abuse like *monsters, idiots, bandits, mules*, and he asserted that “Kyrgyzstan is not just a failed state, Kyrgyzstan is a powder keg”. At the same time, this country was also defined by him as “one of the most unfortunate, the most complex post-Soviet formations”. According to M. Leontyev, any other form of political activity besides stealing is “entirely unknown” in Kyrgyzstan, since “other activity should happen organically from another form of civilization, another *form of geopolitical structure of the region* (Editor's note: italics were used by the author)”¹⁴. Obviously, such form could be gained after the region having transited under the complete patronage of Russia.

It is worth mentioning that the term «несостоявшаяся страна» (eng. *failed country*) in relation to the former Soviet republics is encountered in Russian

¹¹ URL: <https://www.materik.ru/print.php?section=analitics&bulsectionid=5292> (accessed May 10, 2007).

¹² Dugin A. *Chto budet, esli Ukraina raspadetsya?* [What will happen if Ukraine collapses?], 04.12.2004, available at: <http://www.evrazia.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2089> (accessed May 10, 2007). (in Russ.). Since we are dealing with a transcript of a radio interview, it becomes possible to consider the term *turn country* to be a simple English misspell. However, it is quite possible that this term, actually unknown in the academic discourse until a certain time, resulted from Alexander Dugin's own discourse.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Leontiev M. *Kirgiziya – ne prosto nesostoyavsheesya gosudarstvo, Kirgiziya – eto porokhovoy sklad* [Kyrgyzstan is not Just a Failed State, Kyrgyzstan is a Powder Magazine], available at: https://uncensored.km.ru/magazin/view_print.asp?id={42D3FB25-5E5B-400B-922FA2B48E2C2172} (accessed May 10, 2007). (in Russ.).

public discourse almost as often as «несостоявшееся государство» (eng. *failed state*). At least the number of queries mentioning *failed states* and *failed countries* in the Russian-language segment of the Internet, is approximately equal, according to the Yandex search engine. A solution to the problem of a *failed state* may be provided with a simple change of the political regime or developing new state institutions (if the previous ones simply collapsed). With a *failed country*, however, is impossible to manage without changing the borders. Sometimes *failed* means only that the given country did not succeed within its artificial borders that were outlined in the imperial past by the mother country. This is, apparently, what Sergei Karaganov, a famous Russian political analyst, meant when asserting: “Nobody said that the USSR had to disintegrate into exactly 15 states. Maybe, in the end, there will be 17 or more”¹⁵. However, this statement should be recognized as rather contradictory, given that before, he proclaimed an idea that “the biggest mistake of the last half-century was granting to dozens and dozens of former colonies, breakaway territories a status of independent states, there have never been able to become established states that provide minimal guarantees of rights to their residents, opportunities for effective economic development”. According to Karaganov, “they became sources of bloody conflicts, terrorism, environmental degradation, and other troubles”. It remains yet unclear whether granting an independent state status to several more *break-away territories* will not then exacerbate these problems?

From Dugin's point of view, *failed states* will not be able to come into being even if they give up uncontrolled and problematic territories. Ultimately, there is only one way out for them – to merge with Russia: “Greater Russia should include not only those parts breaking away from the failed post-Soviet states that blindly rush to join NATO, to disappear in Atlanticism and globalism, losing their dignity, identity and future. Greater Russia should include Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, and not just Transnistria, South Ossetia or Crimea”¹⁶. Another point of view suggests that Russia, in contrast to the *failed states*, should focus on successful and healthy forces in the post-Soviet space. An analytical program called *Vremya*, which tends to translate conservative political perspective, concluded on the occasion of the Eurasian Economic Community summit held in Minsk in June 2006, that in relation to the CIS countries “the time has come to decide who is who and who is with whom. *Failed states*, like Georgia and Moldova, are falling away. The rest are gathering around Russia”¹⁷.

However, such a solution to the issue seems a temporary one and things will probably change after the *failed states* finally realize that they *have failed*.

¹⁵ Karaganov S. *SNG i nepriznannye gosudarstva* [CIS and Unrecognized States], 03.06.2005, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, available at: <https://karaganov.ru/sng-i-nepriznannye-gosudarstva/> (accessed May 10, 2007) (in Russ.).

¹⁶ Dugin A. *Pridnestrov'e – avangard Bol'shoj Rossii* [Pridnestrovie – the vanguard of Greater Russia], *Rossija*, 2006, no. 37(989), available at: <https://evrazia.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3326> (accessed May 10, 2007) (in Russ.).

¹⁷ Goncharov V. *Sammit integratorov* [Summit of Integrators], 29.06.2006, *Vremja*, no. 23–24(543–544), available at: <https://www.partia-nv.ru/vremya/Numbers/2006/23-24/ni5.html> (accessed May 10, 2007) (in Russ.).

It is quite reasonable that controversial discourse about *failed states* spreads far beyond the Russian borders and into the post-Soviet space. It is also natural that representatives of unrecognized states are actively joining in the criticism of their mother countries, accusing them of being *failed*. For example, the words of the former plenipotentiary representative of South Ossetia in Russian Federation Dmitry Medoev could be cited on that matter: “Georgia has never become a full-scale state. This is a *failed country*. That is all its problems”¹⁸. “A *failed country*” is what the former President of South Ossetia Eduard Kokoity also named Georgia. The same is true for Transnistria, whose representatives tend to define the Republic of Moldova as a “surrogate *failed state* that has nothing to do with historical Moldova”¹⁹.

At the same time, South Ossetia and Transnistria themselves are sometimes considered *failed states*, along with other similar unrecognized states or unrealized state projects. Russian establishment sympathizing with unrecognized entities shares a different point of view. For example, the international conference *Parallel CIS. Abkhazia, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh as realities of the post-Soviet space*, held in Moscow in September 2005, with Konstantin Zatulin participating actively, reported that “despite unfavorable external circumstances complicating the development of these states, they demonstrate much greater effectiveness in terms of solving their socio-economic problems than the mother countries they abandoned, which, despite their full international status, are often considered (including in the West) as failed states”. It was also emphasized at the conference that “in terms of establishing democratic institutions, those unrecognized republics appear to offer greater values. Despite all the difficulties and costs, a change of power has already taken place in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Karabakh through general elections on an alternative basis. At the same time, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the former ruling regimes were replaced by yesterday's opposition. As is known, there have been no such precedents in Azerbaijan, where power was seized through political intrigue (Elchibey's resignation) or passed from father to son. And in Georgia, during its short post-Soviet history, two presidents legitimate from the point of view of the constitution and international law were violently overthrown – Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze”²⁰. Unrecognized states, therefore, find themselves in the position of *healthy forces* gathering around Russia.

Political events of the early 2000s in Ukraine played a controversial part in applying the concept of a *failed state* to this country. One of the authors from *Ukraine.ru*, hoping for the upcoming election of Viktor Yanukovich, wrote in August 2004 that “having celebrated 13 years of «незалежності» (eng. *independence*) on August 13 in the position of a *weak state*, a *failed state*” Ukraine still has a chance to come to the 13th anniversary of the referendum on independence

¹⁸ URL: <https://mayak.rfn.ru/schedules/6852/29209.html> (accessed May 10, 2007).

¹⁹ See: URL: http://lentapmr.front.ru/doc/5_vzglyadov.htm (accessed May 10, 2007).

²⁰ Krylov A. *SNG-2: novye tendentsii* [CIS-2: New Trends], available at: <http://russ.nago.ru/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=343> (accessed May 10, 2007) (in Russ.).

as a more established country with its own national leader and an emerging national project”²¹.

After the re-vote in the second round of the presidential elections in Ukraine, another Russian author, Yuriy Krupnov, wrote that from now on Russia should treat Ukraine (as well as Georgia, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq) as a *failed state*, that is, a country that has proven incapable of reproducing power on its own accord. “It failed to maintain its sovereignty”²². On the contrary, after Viktor Yushchenko was confirmed as President, one of the Expert authors wrote: “Now it will never occur to anyone to label Ukraine as a *failed state*, which many did a couple of years ago”²³. Nevertheless, *Ukraine as a failed state* or *failed country* discourse has resurfaced on Russian and Ukrainian Internet forums, especially, in connection with the gas crisis of the winter of 2005-2006, and the forming of government process, which was protracted in the spring and summer of 2006.

Issues of democracy, including transfer of supreme state power, are constantly discussed in Russia in relation to the concept of *failed state*, which is rather unlikely an accidental thing to have happened. According to the third criterion developed by Schneckener, Russia itself was finding itself as a seriously vulnerable state, at least at the beginning of the Vladimir Putin era). A number of other serious problems complemented the picture, such as separatism, corruption, disproportions in socio-economic development, etc. Accordingly, Russian conservative establishment who stood on the statehood ground, had to somehow prepare themselves to defend against the propaganda campaign that aimed to discredit Russian Federation, promising to “transfer their military operations to the enemy’s territory” (i.e., Western countries, primarily the United States)²⁴. It was a quite widely spread fear that, having declared Russia a *failed country*, the United States might sooner or later undertake an armed intervention against it, as they did before with Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Apparently, this is another reason why Russian patriotic circles tend to place quite an emphasis on criticizing Americans’ actions aimed to bring Afghanistan and Iraq to the category of *established states*.

Despite the fact that in Western world more or less successful attempts have been made recently to give the *failed state* phrase a strict academic mean-

²¹ Preobrazhensky I. *Den' nezavisimosti i natsional'nyy proekt* [Independence Day and the National Project], available at: <http://www.ukraine.ru/stories/04/07/02/3515/224391.html> (accessed May 10, 2007) (in Russ.).

²² Krupnov Yu. *Ukraina poluchila okkupatsionnuyu demokratiyu* [Ukraine has received an occupation democracy], available at: <http://www.contr-tv.ru/common/545/> (accessed May 10, 2007) (in Russ.). According to this author, Ukraine had all the signs of a *failed* or at least *failing* state. Having mentioned Georgia, Krupnov did not hold back from noting that Russia is opening up new opportunities in relation to such countries in terms possible “donor assistance for the restoration of sovereignty”.

²³ *Sostoyavshayasya strana* [An Established Country], available at: <http://www.expert.ru/printissues/ukraine/2005/02/02uk-2ukeditrl/> (accessed May 10, 2007) (in Russ.).

²⁴ See: Frolov V. *Nuzhnyy obraz «nesostoyavshegosya gosudarstva»* [The Necessary Image of a “Failed State”], *Ekspert*, 2006, Sept. 18. (in Russ.).

ing, these words, like, e.g. *fascism* or *terrorism*, in many cases remain a political label stuck on the adversary. It cannot be denied that individual cases of criticism to which many Western countries are subjected seem entirely justified, especially when Russia calls on them to be consistent both in theory and in practice. However, this fair criticism is regularly combined with general use of the term *failed state* by the very Russian establishment in a clearly offensive and dismissive sense. It should be noted that the perception of *failed states* on the borders of Russia differs significantly from that in other countries, due to in Russia these characteristics imposed to the former Soviet republics are perceived not with alarm (as in South Africa in relation to Zimbabwe, in Australia in relation to East Timor), but with a certain satisfaction.

Referring to V. Frolov, *failed state* is indeed “a necessary image”, but first and foremost necessary for those who relishes Russian state greatness. It seems this image compensates to some extent for the trauma they experienced from the empire having collapsed, and it gives rise to some their hopes for its possible future revival. The very recognition of the fact that the countries that separated from the Soviet Union (read *Russia*) are doing badly gives rise to a certain feeling of revenge in minds of those who share an imperial system of values. And in this regard, it does not matter what exactly the problems of the near abroad countries are – a drop in GDP and other economic troubles, internal political conflicts and revolutions, or part of their territory has been preserved under control of unrecognized separatists. To a certain extent, being confident that *former domains* have failed as independent states restrains state consciousness in post-imperial realities. If one continues to believe in the absurdity of the imperial collapse, he or she will accordingly find inevitable for the empire *to gather* what once belonged to it in a natural way that does not require any special efforts. That is, there is no need to develop a new political course, to offer new solutions to existing problems – everything will return to normal anyway, one just has to wait for it to happen (see: Podvintsev 2001).

However, the desire to maintain the ideal image of *failed neighbors* still, to a certain extent, results in implementing a practical political course. If the signs of a *failed state* suddenly threaten to weaken or disappear altogether, the Russian side may take actions to prevent this from happening. Sergei Karaganov admits: “Some people here really want the *status quo* to continue, they believe that keeping these territories (*O.P.* – self-proclaimed entities in the near abroad) in limbo strengthens our position vis-à-vis the corresponding countries”²⁵. It seems that there is a certain amount of truth in the judgment of one English journalist that “Russia collects *failed states*, as if she adorns her borders with a terrible necklace of severed ears”²⁶.

²⁵ Karaganov S. Op. cit.

²⁶ Reed T. *Ukraina idet k raskolu?* [Ukraine Heading for a Split?], 16.12.2004, available at: <https://inosmi.ru/20041216/215705.html> (accessed May 10, 2007). (in Russ.).

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