Dear Readers,

A state has to fulfil certain basic criteria if it is to be considered a functioning state. It has to ensure the security of its citizens, provide public utilities, and prevent arbitrary actions and corruption. If we take a look around the world, it is clear that – unfortunately – many countries are still far from achieving this. In extreme cases, they cannot even guarantee a minimum level of law and order, and the state's monopoly on the use of force is replaced by terrorist groups, warlords, or organised crime. In other countries, the situation is less clear-cut. They may be functioning states in certain areas, but are failing to adequately fulfil their duties in others. There is a broad continuum between consolidation and disintegration.

It is the local people who suffer most when states are fragile. Their personal and economic development is hampered, and they may even suffer physical threats. However, fragile states also harbour risks at global level, as conflicts can spread well beyond national borders and regions. A local power vacuum can be exploited by actors who also present a threat to geographically more distant countries.

This is currently happening in West Africa, where the African offshoot of so-called Islamic State in particular is gaining strength. Instability continues to increase in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, whose state structures are far too weak to effectively counter this development. The crisis also threatens to spread to other, comparatively stable, countries in the Gulf of Guinea. This could entail serious consequences: more violence, fewer opportunities for people to improve their lives, more refugees. In their article, Anna Wasserfall and Susanne Conrad therefore call on Germany and the EU to make a stronger commitment to preventing such a scenario.

The situation is also serious in South Sudan, a state that was founded with high hopes in 2011, but which regularly occupies one of the worst positions in some of the most widely recognised fragility rankings. Mathias Kamp discusses why this fledgling state has descended into chaos and violence and failed to create a resilient polity. He describes South Sudan's statehood as a "story of failure".

Along with asserting its monopoly on the use of force and providing basic public utilities, a state's stability also depends on maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of its population. States are built on a more solid foundation when the majority of their people have confidence in them, and generally view them in a positive light. Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar provides a good example of what happens when a state almost completely loses this legitimacy among its people. In her article, Annabelle Heugas describes the junta's seizing of power as both a consequence and a catalyst of state fragility, and highlights how people have been trying to defend themselves against their illegitimate rulers through civil disobedience and parallel political structures.
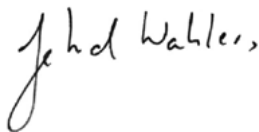
In their article, Pavel Usvatov and Mahir Muharemović turn the spotlight on Bosnia and Herzegovina. This Western Balkan country may not be considered fragile in many respects, but deficiencies in the rule of law, a low level of trust in institutions, and ethnic-nationalist special interests are impeding its path to becoming a truly stable state. Although it initially made progress in its consolidation since 1995, more recently it has been in the throes of a serious political crisis, partly brought about by the wilful actions of its political elites.

However, even when they are generally effective, states can still lose control over parts of their territory through no fault of their own. Ukraine has been experiencing this since 2014, even before Russia's imperialism called its whole existence into question with the invasion of February 2022. Against this backdrop, Brigitta Triebel, Hartmut Rank, and Daria Dmytrenko describe how, over the past eight years, the judiciary has developed into an important pillar of Russian-influenced arbitrary rule in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, which declared independence from Ukraine. In doing so, they also look ahead to what could happen in territories that have been newly occupied by Russia.

"Our lives have become so interwoven that the effects of state fragility, of crises and bloodshed, can be felt even in Germany." This sentence is from former Chancellor Angela Merkel's foreword to the German government's policy guidelines on preventing crises, resolving conflicts, and building peace, published in 2017. It illustrates a key aspect: events that may seem "far away" can have consequences extending beyond their immediate location. This is why a wise foreign policy is focused on crisis prevention, but also has to be able to respond to conflicts and contribute to stabilising the situation. Whatever happens, simply standing on the sidelines is not an option – not only from a humanitarian perspective, but also for reasons of self-interest. The mistakes that have undoubtedly been made in the past will hopefully lead to effective and lasting consequences.

I hope you will find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

Gerhard Wahlers

Dr. Gerhard Wahlers is Editor of International Reports, Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Department European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (gerhard.wahlers@kas.de).