

# Legitimacy of the political power in post-Soviet Central Asian countries

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## **Abstract**

The research paper aims to identify the determinants of political legitimacy in post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, to analyse the specific model of leadership in the region and to study the main directions of political transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism in the Central Asian systems including paradigms of political power. In post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, the remains of a former regime are reflected both in the traditional mentality and in the informal or formal oligarchic and clan political connections. The authorities represent the model of the „neopatrimonial” authoritarian regime with a super-presidential ruling. A specific phenomenon is the significance of a strong leader based on its own ruling party or the armed forces. Elections in the countries have lost their character of a free political competition. Although the elections are held regularly, they do not provide an opportunity to transfer power. Their only purpose is to legitimize it so they have become a plebiscite for presidential popularity rather than a democratic form of people’s representation.

## **Keywords**

authoritarianism, Central Asia, legitimacy, legitimization

## **Introduction**

Processes on the post-Soviet area including Central Asian region are dynamic. They are also determined by external political, geostrategic and economic conditions, as well. Thus, there is a necessity of a permanent scientific penetration within the area

of unpredictable political processes, verification of previous views and evaluation of trends in transformation of particular countries and the whole region.

The main purpose of the paper is to identify determinants of political legitimacy in post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, analyze specific model of leadership in the region and the main directions of political transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism including paradigms of political power in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The author undertakes the following research challenges: theoretical description of terms „power” and „legitimacy”, identification and comparative analysis of determinants and functioning of specific leadership model in the region and evaluation of conditions and perspectives of political legitimacy in Central Asian republics. The research paper relies on different sources. These have included academic works on the politics in the region, analytical articles on the elite political groups and definitions of power and legitimacy, documents and reports of international organizations and professional expertise.

In a cognitive sphere the study is complementary to the previous research projects within the post-Soviet area led by The Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw University or Wrocław University. The results of the paper contribute to enhance a previous knowledge on transition processes in the post-Soviet area, especially in the region of Central Asia. The research paper enables to complete a research gap in: identification and evaluation of directions of the political changes in the Central Asian region, comparative analysis of conditions and courses of legitimization processes and description of perspectives in transition of political systems considering the peculiarity and specificity of the region.

## **1. Conceptualization of „power” and „legitimacy”**

The power means a type of relation between individuals, individuals and groups or social groups, which means a kind of a social relation. This asymmetric social relation enables one overriding side to achieve its goals by shaping of subjectivity of the second subordinated side. Political power is a specific type of power because a state stands always on a higher level and requires a legitimization of the society (authority), (Pałeczki, 2002, p. 195).

Politics means a power with a legal and social legitimacy (legitimization). Thus, it contains not only compulsion but also element of acceptance and recognition it legal. According to Lipset „legitimacy involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society” (Lipset, 1995; Żyro, 2004, p. 229).

Dahl says that legitimacy exists „if the people believe that the structure, procedures, acts, decisions, policies, or leaders of government possess the quality of rightness, propriety, or moral goodness-the right, in short, to make binding rules” (Dahl, 1965; Szmulik, Żmigrodzki, 2002, p. 223). Therefore, legitimacy means a social consent. The society legitimizes a person who exercises power (power authority). In democratic systems such power is based on agreed rules and its principles are socially accepted (Beetham, 1991, pp. 3-17; Beetham, Lord, 1998, p. 15). Taking into account constitutional norms the power can be illegal or not fully real but still can be accepted as legitimate. Legitimization allows to maintain a political stability, because a regime obtains a right to rule and sustains his authority – „capital of legitimization” (Apodaka, Villarreal, 2006).

Political regime constitutes the institutional frames of particular political actors’ roles in a process of decisions making by definition of the formal and informal rules and mechanisms that regulate an organization of political power and its relations with the society (Antoszewski, Herbut, 2000, p. 507).

Linz describes authoritarian regimes as „political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones” (Linz, 2000; Żyro, 2004, p. 209). Thus, authoritarian regimes remain beyond any social control and base on an absolute acceptance of the power. Top administration positions are taken by relatively low professional politicians rooted in bureaucracy, interest groups or religious groups.

## **2. From totalitarianism to authoritarianism. Historical analysis of determinants of political legitimacy**

In a comparative systemic analysis authoritarian regimes are perceived negatively for a lack of the open and participatory institutions or a weak legitimization of power. Whereas, totalitarian regimes are based on: top-down distribution of resources, official ideology and organization of the citizens’ lifestyle under the one-party ruling.

Lindblom perceives authoritarian regimes as repressive because they aim at suppression of internal protests and all forms of civil activity and restoration of order („strong thumbs and no fingers”). In turn, the totalitarian systems mobilize the citizens in political life by officially approved instruments and institutions which do have nothing in common with a plural civil society (Lindblom, 1977).

After 1991, the former Central Asian republics of the USSR appeared in a new geostrategic and geopolitical reality. So far, they implemented the Soviet Union strategy. The foreign and internal policy was centralized and corresponded with a „proper” ideology. The reforms initiated by Gorbachev crushed the concept of a strong centre of power. At the time, leaders of the new republics faced a chance to implement new ideas of the governance considering democratic rights and liberties. The most important task was to define a status of new countries on international stage and develop their own rules and legal bases (Rashid, 2003, p. 69).

An important element of a new states building process was the „ethnicisation” („ethnopolitization”). Particular ethnic, language or culture groups („titular nations”) gradually took over particular areas of a legal-public space, for example: legal system, system of public administration, education, culture or economy. Such process led to marginalization of many ethnic minorities (Wierzbicki, 2010, pp. 122-124).

The new states had to face the new economic, social and religious challenges that intensified an increase in political and ethnical tensions in the region. Escalation of the conflicts led to delegalization of the oppositional parties and a strict control over the media, instead of further liberalization and limitation of rights and liberties.

Political leaders of new independent republics came directly from the Soviet communist „nomenklatura” supported by Moscow and used to previous model of governance. The remains of the former regime are reflected both in traditional mentality as well as in informal or formal oligarchic political connections. All Central Asian presidents promote state ideology and identify themselves with a state (Zapaśnik, 2006, p. 69). All republics in the region remain secular but traditional organization of the society is based on family or clan ties (tribalism) which shows a weakness of formal state institutions in comparison with informal social networks.

**Tab. 1.** „Nomenclature revolution” according to Bodio and Mołdawa

<b>Communist totalitarianism</b>	<b>Controlled authoritarianism</b>
Leader – first secretary of the communist party	Leader - president of new republic
Monopoly of the communist apparatus of power	Consolidation of power (previous political elites)
Monopoly of the communist party	Domination of presidential party
Restrictions on the opposition	Restrictions on the opposition
Fight with the Islam	Control over the Islam politicization
Indifference of the society	Indifference of the society
Violation of human rights and civil liberties	Violation of human rights and civil liberties

Source: author’s elaboration on the basis of (Bodio, Mołdawa, 2007, pp. 60-69).

Bodio and Mołdawa define the Central Asian transition as an evolution from communist totalitarianism to controlled authoritarianism („nomenclature revolution”), (Bodio, Mołdawa, 2007, pp. 60-69), (tab. 1).

The controlled authoritarianism is an effect of the controlled direction and nature of the evolution of the political systems in Central Asia region (so-called „top-down transition”). Thus, we cannot say here about typical systemic democratization or transformation towards democracy (Herbut, Baluk, 2010, pp. 30-31).

The fifth edition of *The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy 2012* underlines that only one post-Soviet country of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan may be classified as hybrid regime and the other systems are recognized as authoritarian regimes (*The Economist...*, 2013).

**Tab. 2.** Type of regimes in post-Soviet countries of Central Asia according to The Economist Intelligence Unit

	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>	<b>Turkmenistan</b>	<b>Uzbekistan</b>
<b>Type of regime</b>	authoritarian	hybrid	authoritarian	authoritarian	authoritarian

Source: author's elaboration on the basis of (*The Economist ...*, 2013).

The Freedom House, in its last reports *Freedom in the World 2014* and *Nations in Transit 2014*, emphasizes that recently the governments of the post-Soviet republics have not managed to implement any democratic reforms to limit the power of president. Only Kyrgyzstan was classified as a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime. The other Central Asian states were recognized as the consolidated authoritarian regimes (*Freedom ...*, 2014; *Nations ...*, 2014).

**Tab. 3.** Type of regimes in post-Soviet countries of Central Asia according to Freedom House

	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>	<b>Turkmenistan</b>	<b>Uzbekistan</b>
<b>Type of regime</b>	consolidated authoritarian	semi-consolidated authoritarian	consolidated authoritarian	consolidated authoritarian	consolidated authoritarian

Source: author's elaboration on the basis of (*Freedom ...*, 2014; *Nations ...*, 2014).

### **3. Specificity of the political power in the states of Central Asia**

In post-Soviet countries of Central Asia, the authorities represent the model of an authoritarian regime with a super-presidential (*cesarean*) ruling system (Zamara-jewa, 2007, p. 35). A specific phenomenon is the significance of a strong leader (based on its own ruling party or force power) with a weaker role of opposition parties and other democratic organizations. Political crises are based on competition between two decision centers, parliament and president and corruption scandals within political elites.

The authoritarian models of power in Central Asian countries are characterized by:

- way of come to power – presidents were successors of the Soviet power, communist leaders or leaders of revolutions;
- personification of a state power – power is identified with a person not with an office („neopatrimonial” authoritarian regime);
- creation and promotion of a specific state ideology;
- corrupted system of governance;
- politicization of clan interests – developed network of formal and informal relations („patronal presidentialism”, clan ethnokratism);
- marginalization and fragmentation of the opposition;
- „dynasticism” – predetermination of next successors (members of family or close associates) with a lack of the oppositional political elites;
- lack of alternation of power (extending terms of office, unlimited reelections, lifelong exercising of power), (Konopelko, 2010, pp. 139-140; Herbut, Baluk, 2010, p. 31).

As we can notice, determinants of political power in post-Soviet Central Asian republics are also rooted in informal relations of the political elites.

In 2009 President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon appointed his daughter Ozoda Rahmonova deputy foreign minister. A son-in-law of the president is Djamoliddin Nuraliev, deputy ministry of finance. The above nominations enabled further consolidation of a power in presidential family hands initiated by the nomination of the president’s son Rahmon for a deputy head of Tajikistan’s Youth Union. Analysts speculate that his son becomes potential candidate for president’s office in 2020 (Sodigov, 2009).

The Kazakh political system is characterized by dynastic pattern of power. President Nursultan Nazarbayev as the „Leader of the Nation” practically received lifelong special powers to govern a country. For many years, the oldest daughter of president, Dariga Nazarbayeva, was preparing to succeed him. She worked as a head

of the official state-run news agency Khabar and she formed a political party Asar. Then, she was appointed as a head of the ruling Nur Otan party. Her former husband Rakhat Aliyev served as deputy foreign minister and then he was appointed as ambassador to Austria. The second son-in-law Timur Kulibayev was appointed to the post of a chairman of the state oil and gas company Samruk-Kazyna and a member of the Board of Directors in Gazprom (*Nations ...*, 2014).

Before the coup in 2010 the parliament of Kyrgyzstan adopted an amendment to the constitution which changed the status of the „second person” in a state from a head of parliament to another person appointed by the President’s Council. It was to enable a succession for the president’s son Maksim. Maksim Bakiyev was recognized as the „second person” in the state, having chaired the Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation (Osmonov, 2009).

In Uzbekistan the oldest daughter of the president Islam Karimov, Gulnara Karimova, the Uzbek envoy to the United Nations in Geneva, is one of the serious candidates for the president’s inheritance. Another potential successor of Karimov is Rustam Azimov, deputy prime minister (Matusiak, 2013). The recent political crisis showed uncertainty of the foregoing assumptions and revealed more potential successors of Karimov: Rustam Azimov, deputy prime minister, Rustam Inoyatov, the chief of the Uzbek National Security Service and Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Uzbek prime minister.

Recently, Kazakhstan have not managed to implement any democratic reforms to limit the authoritarian regime. Since 1991, president Nursultan Nazarbayev consistently has increased his control over the parliament, judiciary and local authorities. Pro-presidential party Nur Otan occupies most of seats in parliament with no effective opposition. President exercises full control over the nominations of governors in regions and other officials in the state. The only cosmetic amendments to the constitution removed term-limits of the president Nazarbayev and opened him way to life long term (Strachota, 2012). Moreover, in 2010 by the constitutional amendments Nazarbayev, as the „Leader of the Nation”, received a special status and superior position in the state and enjoys unlimited special powers. Apart of many life-long prerogatives, plenty of privileges were granted for the president. The changes are to enable the controlled succession (Jarosiewicz, 2010).

By 2010 the President of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiyev strengthened his power. Pro-presidential party Ak Jol took control over the legislature and government. However, political system remained more decentralized and competitive than in other countries. Local authorities received more autonomy from the central government (*Nations ...*, 2014).

Mass protests in 2010 brought to collapse of the Bakiyev regime, that confirmed instability of state institutions and virtual control of authorities over the state. The coup made a chaos at central and regional levels. Stabilization in the state was supposed to provide by: next parliamentary and presidential elections and constitutional referendum that enhanced position of the parliament and government and weakened the president's competencies (Strachota, 2010). However, due to weaknesses of political parties and their leaders, corruption, nepotism and individual business interests, considerable changes and complete stabilization have not been achieved.

Emomali Rahmon, the President of Tajikistan, with support of most citizens continues the nation-state building. Political life is dominated by regional-clan networks. In parliament most of the mandates belong to pro-presidential People's Democratic Party. President has the special powers to appoint and recall state top and regional officials. His power is protected by the police, military and security services (*Nations ...*, 2014).

In Turkmenistan, a real power belongs to executive power or actually to president Berdimuhamedow who holds the most important posts in the country. The parliament operates as a residential appendage. The constitution introduced only virtual, cosmetic reforms, such as: modification of internal structure of the parliament or future possibilities of registering political parties. Since independence none of the elections were free and competitive. The only registered political party remains the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. President exercises control over the nominations of officials in the state (*Nations ...*, 2014).

In Uzbekistan president and the executive power dominate the legislature and judiciary. Strong position of president Islam Karimov guarantees only simulation of a relative stability in the state. The government suppresses all political opposition and restricts the rights and civil liberties. Only four pro-government political parties are registered in the country and allowed to participate in elections. The citizens do not have any possibility to undertake any forms of a social activity. State administration is highly centralized and most of decisions are taken in presidential environment (*Nations ...*, 2014).

The amendments that were adopted to the Uzbek constitution in 2011 did not weaken the president's position but strengthened a role of parliament in relation to prime minister. Since then, new elected government needs to gain a support of a parliamentary majority. Besides, an institution of parliamentary vote of no confidence in government was approved (*Uzbekistan...*, 2011).



## Conclusions

Contemporary post-Soviet transition is hermeneutically placed in the context of Soviet Eurasian tradition and means a process of interactions between universal value patterns and specific cultural code. In Central Asian countries political power is based on personalities not on institutions. The evolution of political power in particular republics is determined by their leaders.

Model of the power succession is based on the Russian scheme—a predetermined successor—the closest associate or member of family. Nominations of the top officials are rooted in the party or clan key („politicization of ethnicisation”), (Łomanowski, 2006; Wierzbicki, 2010, p. 122).

Authoritarian leaders of the Central Asian countries do not need to change the established Soviet models, strengthened by traditional model of leadership. They identify themselves with a state and perceive the short-term objectives only, which means: strengthening their position in a state in relation to society (limitation of civil rights and liberties) and strengthening their status in relation to other state powers (violation of separation and balance principle). On the other hand, parliamentary elections are to confirm a strong position of president, neutralization of the opposition, stabilization of political stage. Thus, they became a plebiscite for presidential popularity rather than a democratic form of people’s representation.

As we can notice, there are no visible changes in Central Asian models of power. On the other side, the countries and societies with no democratic and civil tradition are not prepared for total systemic reforms. It seems that possible radical steps could activate anarchistic groups (including extremist Islam groups) and in consequence destabilize the state order. Besides, free and fair elections would open a gate to power for many different groups (also fundamental ones) what could initiate many conflicts and chaos at government level and finally a total crisis in state. The previous attempts of implementation of democratization processes in Kyrgyzstan turn out a failure (party fragmentation in parliament, strengthening of president, instability of government, increase in corruption). Similarly, in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan initiated some democratic changes but they were illusory such: enhancement of the parliament position or extending of the president’s term.

Many Uzbek citizens think that less severe leader would be overthrown by the rivals what could bring chaos and anarchy. According to citizens „during historical breakthroughs sometimes a strong leader and severe authorities are needed. The authoritarian power is necessary”. Perhaps such opinions excuse relative public support for president Islam Karimov. Authoritarian leaders persuade that too much democracy leads to chaos and anarchy. Karimov stated that democracy does not mean

rallies but that people know what they are allowed and what not (Bielewicz, Rakowska, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the constraints in implementation of democratic principles in Central Asian states mainly come from internal conditions: central management of state administration, growing level of corruption, traditional mentality, lack of reforms, economic development and freedom of speech. Stabilization of an authoritarian power in Central Asia is fostered by ethnocracy (domination of titular nations) and politicization of the clan interests, so developed network of the informal relations and rules within the formal institutions. On the other hand, it is also being argued that stabilization and growing prosperity (revenues from hydrocarbon sector) ensure the political legitimacy of Central Asian governments.

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## **Legitymacja władzy politycznej w postradzieckich krajach Azji Centralnej**

### **Streszczenie**

Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja uwarunkowań legitymacji (legitymizacji) politycznej w postradzieckich krajach Azji Centralnej, analiza specyficznego modelu przywództwa w regionie i głównych kierunków transformacji politycznej od totalitaryzmu do autorytaryzmu przy uwzględnieniu paradygmatów władzy politycznej. W postradzieckich krajach Azji Centralnej pozostałości poprzedniego reżimu są widoczne zarówno w tradycyjnej mentalności, jak i formalnych i nieformalnych powiązaniach klanowych i oligarchicznych. Władza reprezentuje model „neopatrymonialnego” autorytarnego reżimu z superprezydenckim systemem rządów. Specyficzna jest silna pozycja przywódcy oparta na partii rządzącej bądź na armii. Wybory utraciły swój charakter wolnej politycznej rywalizacji. Pomimo, że są regularnie organizowane, nie gwarantują alternacji władzy, a jedynie legitymizują dotychczasową. Stanowią one raczej plebiscyt prezydenckiej popularności niż demokratyczną formę reprezentacji narodu.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

autorytaryzm, Azja Centralna, legitymacja, legitymizacja