

# LATIN AMERICA AND CENTRAL ASIA IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL POLITICAL TENSIONS: POPULISM AND POLARIZATION

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes the genesis of political regimes in Latin America and Central Asia, the Latin-American polarization during the period of waves of populism and its impact to Central Asian countries. In the twentieth century, the countries acutely experienced two waves of populism, which coincided with the historical periods of political transitions of the change of power, namely, the transition from oligarchy to mass politics, from authoritarian regimes to democracy, which subsequently created the solid ground for neoliberal reforms. The article notes the left-populist regimes and their anti-elitist orientation, and also analyzes that weak institutionalization, class orientation and a high level of polarization of left-wing populism after the consequences of COVID-19 will finally lead to an institutional crisis, a violation and lose of the balances and a straight shift to competitive authoritarianism in the future.

**Key words:** *Latin America, Central Asia, Geopolitics, Populism, Polarization, COVID-19, Neoliberalism, Crisis of Party System, Left Turn and Democracy.*

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## ЛАТЫН АМЕРИКАСЫ МЕН ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ ЖАҒАНДЫҚ САЯСИ ШИЕЛЕНІС ЖАҒДАЙЫНДА: ПОПУЛИЗМ ЖӘНЕ ПОЛЯРИЗАЦИЯ

Айтжан Кулумжанова, Әйгерім Оспанова

**Андатпа.** Мақалада Латын Америкасы және Орталық Азия елдеріндегі саяси режимдердің генезисі, популизм толқыны кезеңінде пайда болған поляризация, Латын Америкасы елдері талданады.

XX ғасырда елдер популизмнің екі толқынын бастан кешірді, олар биліктің ауысуының саяси транзиттерінің тарихи кезеңдерімен, атап айтқанда олигархиядан жаппай саясатқа, авторитарлық режимдерден демократияға көшумен сәйкес келді, бұл кейіннен неолибералды реформалардың негізін қалады. Мақалада солшыл популистік режимдер және олардың анти-элитарлық бағыты көрсетілген. Мақалада әлсіз институционализация, таптық бағдар және солшыл популизмнің поляризациясының жоғары деңгейі, сондай-ақ КОВИД -19 одан әрі институционалдық дағдарысқа, тепе-теңдіктің бұзылуына және бәсекеге қабілетті авторитаризмге ауысуға әкеледі деген талдау жасалады.

**Түйінді сөздер:** *Латын Америкасы, популизм, поляризация, Ковид-19, неолиберализм, партиялық жүйенің дағдарысы, Орта Азия, геополитика, сол жақ бұрылыс және демократия.*

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## ЛАТИНСКАЯ АМЕРИКА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ГЛОБАЛЬНОГО ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОГО НАПРЯЖЕНИЯ: ПОПУЛИЗМ И ПОЛЯРИЗАЦИЯ

Айтжан Кулумжанова, Айгерим Оспанова

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируются генезис политических режимов в странах Латинской Америке и Центральной Азии, поляризация, латиноамериканских стран возникшие в периоды волн популизма. В XX в. страны остро пережили две волны популизма, которые совпали с историческими периодами политических транзитов смены власти, а именно переходом от олигархии к массовой политике, от авторитарных режимов к демократии, которая в последующем создала почву для неолиберальных реформ. В статье отмечается левопопулистские режимы и их антиэлитарная направленность. В статье проводится анализ в том, что слабая институционализация, классовая ориентация и высокий уровень поляризации левого популизма, а также КОВИД -19 в дальнейшем приведет к институциональному кризису, нарушению баланса и к сдвигу в соревновательный авторитаризм.

**Ключевые слова:** *Латинская Америка, Центральная Азия, геополитика, популизм, поляризация, COVID-19, неолиберализм, кризис партийной системы, левый поворот и демократия.*

## Introduction

The first wave of populist regimes swept the countries of Latin America in the 1940s, when the region was experiencing the total collapse of the agrarian capitalism economic model, as well as the accompanying crisis of the oligarchic state legitimacy. And those were the echoes of the polarization of the region within the states, which were gradually invading the political system. If refer to the book of James M. Malloy "Authoritarianism and corporatism in Latin America", he discusses the situation of Latin American countries in the period between two world wars from the standpoints of the theory of dependence, he says: "populism gradually turned out to be the regional response to the crisis of the catching-up development model" [1, p.6]. The integration of Latin American countries into the world economy through the establishment of agricultural products supplies to Europe and the United States prevented the accumulation of modernization potential, overcoming internal backwardness and entering the path of sustainable development, as it step by step led to excessive dependence of the countries of the region on importers of their products. Perhaps, restrictions in the political sphere also contributed to this. In most countries, the local oligarchy associated with agricultural export restricted the access of the population to political participation. Perhaps these facts led to the restrictions of the political systems in this region as most of the local oligarchy associated with agricultural export programs deliberately restricted the access of the population to political participation in major part of the Latin American region. For example, in Brazil, even in the first years of the "Vargas era" (1933-1934), the number of voters did not exceed 3.5% -6.5% of the

country's population [2]. The world economic crisis of 1929, and accompanying the consequences of the Second World War, forced the governments of Latin American countries to curtail the economic model of agricultural export sector and transform into the policy of import-substituting industrialization, which resulted into accelerated urbanization and led to the imperfection of the political system and management of the states. The massive internal displacement of the population in 1950's progressively brought to the appearance of the so-called unoccupied masses in most of the large cities. Representatives of this social cohort most of them mainly were workers, having escaped from the control of the local elite (landowners), began to ensure that their interests should be represented at the national level. They insisted on the expansion of their political, economic and social rights. Under the pressure of the unemployed masses, the process of transition from oligarchy to mass politics dynamically started and such political figures (populist leaders) as Juan Domingo Peron in Argentina, Lazaro Cardenas in Mexico, Getulio Vargas in Brazil, Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador and others appeared and tried to make commitments in restoring the social justice in society. And the new area of populism slowly but surely initiated its process and the vivid shadows of polarization of political climate within the states started its intense development.

## Research methods

In this article we used cross-case comparison and synthesized the analyses of the genesis of political regimes in Latin America and their polarization during the period of waves of populism. There were used three analytical

stages that structure the case studies of the article, such as: problem understanding; foreign policy goals and strategies; outcomes. During the research we used case and cross case analyses with its dynamics so that to examine two waves of populism, which coincided with the historical periods of political transitions of the change of power, namely, the transition from oligarchy to mass politics, from authoritarian regimes to democracy, which subsequently created the solid ground for neoliberal reforms. We also provided set of cases to study the influence of the left-populist regimes and their anti-elitist orientation, and also analyzes that weak institutionalization, class orientation and a high level of polarization of left-wing populism after the consequences of COVID-19 will finally lead to an institutional crisis, a violation and lose of the balances and a straight shift to competitive authoritarianism in the future.

The paper analyzes the processes of institutionalization of paternalistic autocracies in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The political regimes of these states can be classified as authoritarian, but with their own specifics and varying degrees of democracy. Quite democratic, external political and institutional design of regimes in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, formed on the basis of family-clan relations. Turkmenistan under S. Niyazov was distinguished by authoritarianism, the so-called leader type, where there were practically no elements of real political competition. The changes taking place today under his successor, G. Berdimuhamedov, are generally external in nature, without affecting the institutional essence of the regime. Within the framework of neo-institutionalism, the formal and informal

institutions existing in the Central Asian states that determine the nature and essence of the established authoritarian regimes were studied.

The fundamental method of this research is the method of comparative analysis / comparative method, which allows by comparison to identify common and specific features of the institutionalization of paternalistic authoritarianism in the republics of Central Asia, as well as similarities and differences with the political regimes of other former Soviet republics and states of the Near and Middle East. The functional method makes it possible to reveal the mechanisms of influence of the "verticals of power" on the political space and society of the Central Asian states.

## Results

An internally oriented, statistic model of development, which implied state regulation of the economy, subsidizing key industries, income redistribution and an expansive budget policy, can characterize the first wave of Latin American populism. It is worth mentioning that the first wave regimes were not only the orientation of their leaders to achieve economic independence, but also antagonism towards the oligarchic elite, that was "a red flag" for the populist regimes of the first wave rise.

But it should be taken into account that the populist regimes of the first wave were not left-wing regimes, their proclamation course towards economic independence and social justice relied not on the working class, which is important to notice, but on multiclass coalitions, and, more importantly, did not seek to carry out deep social reforms. Overall, the populist regimes of the first wave were less successful and they could not ensure the

stability of economic growth 1960s. By that time, the evolutionary cycle had moved to the stage of manifestation of the bottleneck effect that resulted into further aggravation of devastating economic problems. In accordance to the discussion paper series on “Towards the change of the economic paradigm through the experience of the developing countries” by Marcelo Diamand, he says: “A bottleneck can be defined as the insufficiency of an item not very significant in terms of its own value but essential for carrying out an activity of a much greater value. The main bottleneck appears when country lacks the foreign exchange required to maintain its productive capacity fully employed. If the problem is not solved, domestic production is forced to diminish in a magnitude several times greater than the original insufficiency of foreign exchange.” [3, p. 5]. In order to rehabilitate a full-scale economic crisis, the political and economic elite of a number of countries made successful attempts at a military coup, which led to the replacement of populist regimes with authoritarian and bureaucratic ones with further prospect of technocrat politicians to power. During that time the political landscape underwent significant political changes, all the forces of the political spectrum – both the right and the left-celebrated the defeat of populism: if the right criticized the populists for poor macroeconomic indicators and political instability, the left called the populist leaders pseudo-reformers who only aggravated social inequality in the region.

The second wave of populist regimes began in 1982 during the global debt crisis. The increase in interest rates in the United States against the background of the global economic recession, as well as the very structure of short debts made

it difficult for a number of countries in the Latin American region to continue servicing external debt, in some cases exceeding GDP. In order to be able to negotiate with creditors on the terms of debt restructuring and solve other economic problems, the governments had to adopt an anti-crisis package of reforms led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was a first shock therapy for Latin American region. In Argentina, Peru and Venezuela, under pressure from creditors and international financial organizations, political leaders who came to power with the promise of continuing the course of ISI were forced to make a sharp turn towards neoliberal reforms, which was negatively perceived by the population.

### **Discussion of the results**

In comparison with the second wave of populism, the third wave of populist regimes emerged at the turn of the XX-XXI in Venezuela and Bolivia in which the protests against neoliberalism finally took non-institutionalized forms. And the neoliberal turn in the region was quite heterogeneous, which is important to notice. In the works by Raul L. Madrid “The rise of ethno populism in Latin America” he notes that due to low polarization and multiple ethnic identification the ethnic parties win by mobilizing their base through exclusionary ethnic are unlikely to be successful [4].

The compilers of the so-called reform index tried to identify early and late, moderate and aggressive reformers among Latin American countries. For example, in the article “Neo-populism and neoliberalism in Latin America: Unexpected affinities” by Kurt Weyland, he summarizes that neo-populism and neoliberalism strive for winning massive support from the low-class population but

at the same time marginalizing autonomous organizations of better-off cohorts [5]. The dynamic growth of corruption, along with other signs of a public administration crisis during the structural transformations of the 1990s led to the discrediting of government institutions with the gradual "elitization" of the party system or the emergence of new pro-Indian parties, contributed to the blurring of voter identification with traditional political parties. This was expressed in a high level of electoral volatility and absenteeism, which ultimately led to a crisis of the party system and the formation of political vacuum. Due to this vacuum, new anti-systemic political actors have emerged on the political scene, that have decided to fight for power in order to correct the mistakes of neoliberalism and reboot the inefficient political system. And since neoliberalism was considered an economic project of the right-wing forces, these political actors soon began to be perceived as leaders of left-wing movements. Thus, the coming to power of a left-oriented anti-system opposition, as well as the presence of masses subject to mobilization, led to the emergence of left-populist regimes that are considered part of the Latin American left turn. It is worth noting that the left-wing populist regimes in Latin America largely retain continuity in relation to the previous regimes of two previous waves of Latin American populism. Since the leaders of these regimes, as a rule, were political outsiders their main programmatic characteristic was focused on to be anti-elitist and anti-imperialist orientation. The mid-2000s was obsessed with the "left turn" in Latin America in political arena. It characterized the mass "fascination" of the countries of the region with left-wing ideas, which found its expression in the electoral

successes of the left forces in various countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, etc. Leftist governments and presidents set the tone at the regional level, and their domestic political initiatives seemed very promising. However, some time ago, the situation began to change. The year 2016 supplemented the picture with the brightest examples - these are Argentina and Guatemala, where "right-wing presidents" came to power and where Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, Peru won the elections. Among the earlier incidents that could once have been mistaken for individual stand-out cases that do not constitute a trend are Honduras, Paraguay and even Chile during the presidency of Sebastian Pinheira. Events in traditionally left-wing states, such as Venezuela or Bolivia, also fit into the "right turn".

The case of Venezuela was particularly indicative, since it was there that the "right-left" conflict was mentioned and in an openly confrontational form. It is obvious that if it were not for the control of the "Chavistas" over electoral procedures and institutions, Nicolas Maduro would have already been recalled through a referendum, and a right-wing politician would most likely have come into his place because there were not enough "leftists" in the Venezuelan opposition, and the socialist ideas themselves were and are already quite tired of Venezuelan citizens, driven by their own government into the deepest economic and food crisis. The crisis of "left" ideas in Latin American region is systemic; it would be unfair to link it only with the coming of the "right" to power in certain states of the region. At the same time, the region-wide integration projects of the "left" that once seemed promising are crumbling in front of our eyes. A striking example of this is ALBA (Alianza

Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América), which united countries with socialist and left-nationalist regimes in 2004. ALBA is the project of U. Chavez, which allowed the leader of the Venezuelan Bolivarian revolution to sponsor almost any ambitious initiatives. The death of Hugo Chavez in 2013 dealt the first blow to the alliance, then there was a crisis in the energy markets, and 2016 finished off the ALBA with a grandiose political collapse in Venezuela due to death of Fidel Castro. It is possible to dispute the role of F. Castro in ALBA, but, we must agree, it is difficult for any organization to exist and develop, having been left first without a main sponsor, and then also without a main ideologue and symbol. In addition, it is becoming increasingly difficult for such organizations to compete with “right — wing” regional initiatives, for example, with the Pacific Alliance -Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Peru.

If refer to the current situation, so we can see that the vivid victory of the socialist candidate Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru in 2021 gives a slight hint for left tendency in Latin America. The COVID-19 played a fundamental role in it, but the key factor of turning into the left-wing government is more profound. However, going beyond the paradigm of the left and right, the last events indicate an increase of the wave of populism and political polarization in the region again.

### **Central Asia**

After the collapse of the USSR, the system-forming process in the Central Asian states that declared independence became the process of de-modernization, the essence of which was the archaization of political systems, institutions, mechanisms, and values. The process of

archaization contributed to the formation of paternalistic authoritarianism/"Bashism" around the figures of the "presidential fathers", which, despite several trends common to the region, has specific features for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan. Within the framework of paternalistic autocracy, the personification of the institutions of power, as well as the ways of exercising authority, is noted. It can be assumed that the transformation of "Bashism" is primarily determined by the nature of the political practices and tools used by "Bashi".

At the beginning of the XXI century, the coup d'etat in Kyrgyzstan and mass protests the current government in Andijan (Uzbekistan) highlighted the importance of Central Asia for security and stability in the region. The natural proximity of the Central Asian republics to the "anti-terrorist front" in Afghanistan and Iran, where the United States and its allies are solving their foreign policy tasks, also programs an increase in the geopolitical role of states, the "southern outskirts" of the former USSR, as well as a steady interest in the personalities of political leaders who have been in power (with the exception of the current President of Turkmenistan G. Berdimuhamedov) since Soviet times.

Near the Russian borders and in the zone of direct geopolitical interests of our country, contradictory, but equally conflict-prone scenarios are unfolding, fraught with undermining Russian positions in the region and even the complete displacement of the Russian Federation from Central Asia.

Even more dangerous is the option of turning the republics of Central Asia into a testing ground for the "Caliphate" - a project of Islamic fundamentalists trying to "revive" the Muslim

empire in the Eurasian space. This prospect is fraught with the dangers of spreading Islam in its militant, radical form to the regions of the Russian Federation with a Muslim population and the escalation of internal Russian conflicts according to the "Chechen" scenario. Thus, the countries of Central Asia can be considered as the "distant" border borders of Russia, where the security and stability of the country is largely ensured. Do not forget about the dangers to the health and future of Russian citizens from drug trafficking that goes through the states in question.

Therefore, the political processes in the Central Asian region need an objective, impartial scientific analysis of the situation that has developed after the collapse of the Soviet state. In the early 90s, all the former Soviet republics found themselves in approximately equally difficult conditions, i.e., faced with the need to solve the framework, from the point of view of generally accepted standards of "world civilization", tasks: transition to a market economy, democratization of society, search for a new ideology, new priorities. This process was influenced by the factors of the traditional culture widespread in the region, and the so-called Soviet heritage, represented, among other things, by the political elite in the form of the former communist party nomenclature, who turned from internationalists into champions and defenders of the "national identity" and "exclusivity" of their peoples in the shortest possible time.

The assessment of the essence and prospects of the development of the political regimes of the Central Asian republics is of great importance here. This problem is also of great importance for the discussion that has developed especially actively in the world political science about the relationship between

democracy and authoritarianism in the modern world, about the possibilities and potential forms of transformation of authoritarian political regimes.

The range of distribution of authoritarian regimes is quite wide, and their number is currently very large. The interweaving of various factors, the diversity of living conditions, the uniqueness of the political cultures of different countries give rise to numerous variable forms of authoritarian regimes. Each of them is characterized by its own alignment of socio-political forces in the political arena, methods of implementing power relations, institutional opportunities for citizens to participate in political life, etc.

In the early 90s of the twentieth century, the newly independent states that appeared in the post-Soviet space were considered an integral part of the global movement towards democracy. By the end of the 2000s in Central Asia around the leaders/The "fathers of nations" have formed essentially undemocratic regimes, which can be described as "paternalistic autocracies". At the same time, the mechanism of a kind of political deactualization of institutions and rituals characteristic of traditional societies and cultures was launched. There is a kind of return to the past, where the figures of the "fathers of nations" were perceived as ancient "ethnarchs", therefore, the definition of "ethnarchies" as a system of relations between most of the society and the bearer of supreme power is also applicable to political regimes of this type. In the Eastern European space, this phenomenon has been defined as "batkovschina". And to characterize the institutional essence of the Central Asian states, the term "Bashism" is used. The need

to introduce this term is explained not only by the clan-tribal features of the structure and development of traditional Eastern societies, but also by the combination of power and property, forming special social, political, economic and cultural conditions for their evolution.

### **The impact of COVID-19 to populism and polarization in Latin America**

The COVID-19 has undermined the normal process of functioning of states, which even before that was complicated by various difficulties, including numerous cases of inequality in society, a crisis of public administration, discontent of the population, an economic downturn, and etc.

According to expert Daniel Zovato, in his article “The rapidly deteriorating quality of democracy in Latin America” he says that would be possible that the authoritarian methods of government would strengthen in the Latin American region [6]. Along with this, the trend of growth of nationalist sentiments also increases and there we could foresee a slowdown in the integration processes, which have largely come to naught after the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) lost its role in the region, and many left-wing governments gave way to right-wing ones.

However, it is also impossible to exclude the possibility that the new political and socio-economic reality emerging in Latin American countries will create conditions for strengthening left-wing sentiments. In addition, anti-globalization processes are already being observed in Latin America, and with an impressive degree of probability, the positions of anti-globalist nationalists who advocate the creation of strong, self-sufficient

and stable national states may strengthen their positions. This allows us to conclude that in the coming years Latin America will have to overcome difficulties not only in the economic, social and humanitarian spheres, but also in the domestic and regional fields. The big problem of Latin America is that in the face of the global threat of a pandemic, the region has been politically and ideologically divided into three opposing blocs: authoritarian, left-wing and right-wing governments. It is likely that this is one of the factors that has become key in the reluctance of the states of the region to coordinate efforts to combat the COVID-19 jointly. In addition, such consequences coincided with the decline of importance and integration activity processes on the continent. By the beginning of the pandemic, the priority for the ruling elites was to retaining and strengthening their own power, as well as adapting management systems to new values and goals. In this regard, it is interesting that Mexico and Brazil, the unofficial leaders of the Latin American region, did not dare to take a leading role in the confrontation with COVID-19, but preferred to solve the problems caused by the pandemic only within their own countries. This reduced the importance of the integration of Latin American states to a minimum. The pandemic has only worsened the structural problems of Latin American countries that have been accumulating for decades.

### **Conclusion**

It can be recognized that almost all republics of the former USSR, not excluding Russia itself to a certain extent, are defined today within the framework of such concepts as "managed democracies", "democratic tsarism" etc.

Therefore, the study of the institutionalization of Central Asian "Bashism" is important for assessing the potential for the development of political processes in the Russian state, as well as the possibility of avoiding external and internal political risks associated with paternalistic autocracy.

Unfortunately, the protests and political divisions in Latin America are likely to worsen in the medium term. This is partly due to the fact that, despite signs of economic recovery and the introduction of vaccines against COVID-19, the region's recovery from the pandemic is likely to be slow. The World Bank predicts that regional GDP per capita in 2022 will be 1.5% lower than the level that existed before the pandemic [7]. Investment in the region and economic growth itself can be called into question by investors' perception of political unrest.

The Colombian presidential election in 2022 is also an event to watch out for. Although presidential candidates have not yet been announced, it is likely that the left-wing senator Gustavo Petro will run for election, as he did in 2018. It will also further strengthen the idea of a left populism in the region again.

The left-right political pendulum of Latin America ultimately shows the growing influence of populist politicians such as Jair Bolsonaro, Pedro Castillo and Gustavo Petro on Latinos who are increasingly desperate for change and disillusioned with political moderates. Latin America is increasingly finding itself in a situation where far-reaching socio-economic reforms are needed to restore public confidence in democracy and institutions. Nevertheless, the election of populists, whether left or right, who promise to correct the mistakes of Latin America, could further undermine democracy in the region.

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