

# Chapter 5: The Specificities of Populism in Countries of Democratic Transition: Challenges for Armenia

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## *1. Introduction*

The emergence of newly established democracies in the former Soviet Union has forced the national ruling elites to rethink their mechanisms of acquiring and maintaining legitimacy and public support. Armenia has faced a full spectrum of profound political development crises, arguably more so than any other post-Soviet country. The long list of crises that Armenia has endured includes the 1988 Spitak earthquake, the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, linear liberalization, voucher privatization, closed borders with two of its four neighbors (Azerbaijan and Turkey), as well as challenging international relations, especially with the West and Iran. In this chapter, I argue that the development of populism in the post-Soviet states, specifically in Armenia, has been caused by the protracted democratic transition, resulting in the inability to overcome the crises of political development (crises of distribution, mobility, identity, political participation, and legitimacy).

Before analyzing the case of Armenia, populism must first be defined. In the first section, I explore the multifaceted nature of populism as a concept and discuss how it can be interpreted as an ideology, movement, syndrome, and manipulative mechanism. This section is followed by an extensive in-depth assessment of the current application of populism in the former Soviet Union. In this context, I propose and test an approach according to which three key opposition parties, the Armenian National Congress (HAK), Rule of Law (OEK), and Heritage, are populist. Drawing from Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2017) concept of a 'populism triangle,' which is formed by 'the people,' 'the corrupt elite,' and 'the general will,' I examine and compare these parties in terms of how they have engaged with four issues which are central to Armenian politics to gain public support. These are national social and economic development, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, foreign policy, and the convergence of political and ethnonational populism. This makes it possible to determine the

main specificities of the populist agenda in Armenia, which is based on charismatic leaders and is particularly hybrid in nature, appearing to be a combination of a thin-centered ideology, movement, and strategy.

As theoretical and empirical material, I use a wide variety of published academic research, reports, and studies on the theoretical perception of populism and its application in the post-Soviet space. Taking into account the research gap on populism for the Armenian reality, I analyze the political programs of the discussed political parties and speeches of their leaders. In addition, an interview with a party-member was conducted to compensate for the missing information concerning one of the political parties. In this chapter, I examine the development of populism in Armenia from the mid-2000s until the parliamentary elections of 2017. This timeframe was chosen because the discussed political parties were most active and popular during that period of time.

## 2. *Populism as a concept*

Populism is a multifaceted concept, leading to a wide range of interpretations. Various authors have defined populism as an ideology, a movement, a syndrome, and even a manipulative mechanism. In *Contemporary Populism*, Gherghina et al. (2013: 357) define populism in four different ways, namely as a:

1. Political behavior or movement which celebrates the roles and values of the popular classes.
2. Demagogic behavior oriented towards satisfying people's expectations.
3. In arts, the depiction of people as a positive ethical model.
4. A Russian movement of the second half of the 18th century.

The first definition presents the category of 'people-based populism' and the desire to uphold the general will, while the second definition stresses the demagogic essence of populism. To achieve their political goals, the political theorist Margaret Canovan theorizes that:

a populist leader relies on specific feelings such as fear, envy, selfishness, and to a certain extent, on racism and nationalism. She argues that populists are often demagogues who make use of techniques of persuasion and manipulate the public opinion in order to get wider support. (Gherghina et al 2013: 357)

There is also the Laclauan approach to populism. According to the scholars Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), the work of Laclau is often cited in works of political philosophy and critical studies, as well as in case studies on West European and Latin American politics. This approach is based on the famous Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau and his more recent collaborative work with Chantal Mouffe. The latter perceived populism to be not only a key component of politics, but also an emancipatory force. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)

in this approach liberal democracy is the problem and radical democracy is the solution. Populism can help achieve radical democracy by reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo. (:3)

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) present a more recent approach, one which describes populism as a political strategy which is “employed by a specific type of leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers. It is particularly popular among students of Latin American and non-Western societies” (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017:3). In this context, populism is a strategy or a set of tactics.

A professor of Yale University, Paris Aslanidis (2015), has also set forward some possible definitions of populism. He focuses on Weyland’s approach to defining populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power-based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Aslanidis 2015: 97). The author concludes that:

we consider ‘discourse’ as much better suited to characterize the conceptual genus of populism. If we do away with the unnecessary ideological clause in Mudde’s formulation, we are left with a purely discursive definition: populism modestly becomes a discourse, invoking the supremacy of popular sovereignty to claim that corrupt elites are defrauding ‘the People’ of their rightful political authority. It becomes an anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People. This is, more or less, how the concept has been operationalized in the growing quantitative literature mentioned earlier. (Aslanidis 2015: 96)

Interestingly, this approach outlines the necessity of a strong and charismatic leader for populism to work effectively. A charismatic leader can concentrate power and maintain a direct connection with the masses. “Seen

from this perspective, populism cannot persist over time, as the leader sooner or later will die and a conflict-ridden process for his replacement is inevitable” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 3). It is worth mentioning that this is precisely what occurred in the former Soviet Union, including in Armenia, where all populist forces have been led by strong and charismatic leaders. However, the idea of a charismatic and strong populist leader is contested by Aslanidis (2015), who has taken a different approach to defining populism, one which stresses that the above-mentioned characteristic of populism has been gradually losing its currency (pp. 88-104). What is interesting is that this approach is partially true in regard to post-Soviet space. A clear example is the so-called EuroMaidan in Ukraine. It is hard to claim that Yatsenyuk, Klichko, and Turchynskiy, arguably the most famous representatives of the Ukrainian revolution of the year 2014, were charismatic leaders.

A third approach to populism defines the concept as “a folkloric style of politics, which leaders and parties employ to mobilize the masses,” particularly popular within (political) communication studies as well as in the media (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) characterize this type of populism as being amateurish and unprofessional political behavior, one which is aimed at maximizing media attention and popular support.

By disrespecting the dress code and language manners, populist actors are able to present themselves not only as different and novel, but also as courageous leaders who stand with ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the elite’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 4). Based on the multifaceted nature of populism, they define populism as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6)

The definition of populism as a ‘thin-centered’ ideology proposed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser comprehensively describes the concept. Hence, this chapter will use this definition as a basis for analyzing populism in Armenia. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser explain that

unlike ‘thick-centered’ or ‘full’ ideologies (e.g., fascism, liberalism, socialism), thin-centered ideologies, such as populism, have a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is

even assimilated into—other ideologies. In fact, populism almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public. Consequently, populism by itself can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate. (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6)

This idea of populism attaching itself to other ideologies is very important for our work, as it may explain why populism does not allow political forces in Armenia to gain more public support. In my opinion, the reason is that they do not apply (or at least successfully) any ideology to their political programs. It is worth emphasizing the three core concepts of populism identified by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017): the people, the elite, and the general will. This chapter will use this triangle scheme to analyze the public debates and political programs of HAK, the OEK, and Heritage. This assessment is based on the comparative discussion of the cases of Russia, Belarus, and Central Asia, as examples of state-sponsored populism. This approach is contrasted to those post-Soviet states, which (at least formally) have striven for democracy. In these cases, populism can mostly be described as being opposition driven. This comparison enables the identification of various forms of populism in the post-Soviet space. These are state-sponsored populism and opposition-based populism, as well as a hybrid form of these two—which is what most often occurs.

The logic of this work demands further exploration of the concept of populism to highlight some more specificities. For instance, Aslanidis criticizes Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2017) definition. According to him

the attempt to preserve ideology as populism's genus by resorting to its alleged thinness is open to three major lines of criticism. First, the very notion of thinness is conceptually spurious; second, this position entails significant methodological inconsistencies in the framework of its proponents; and third, its essentialist connotations erect insurmountable obstacles with regard to classification and measurement. (Aslanidis 2015: 89)

It is worth mentioning Canovan's outline of the so called 'new populism.' According to her

the populism that is most likely to be in the news today is the so-called 'New Populism' of the past decade or so: a collection of movements, broadly on the right of the political spectrum, that have emerged in many

established liberal democracies, challenging existing parties and mainstream policies... Typically confrontational in style, these movements claim to represent the rightful source of legitimate power—the people, whose interests and wishes have been ignored by self-interested politicians and politically correct intellectuals. (Canovan 2004: 241)

Finally, an American political scientist Philippe C. Schmitter discusses populism in terms of “movements.” He defines the concept as

a political movement that draws its support across or with disregard for the lines of cleavage that are embodied in existing political formations and does so by focusing on the person of its leader who claims to be able to resolve a package of issues previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible or excluded. (Gherghina et al. 2013: 328)

Thus, I will use Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser`s (2017) approach to identify populist manifestations in post-Soviet reality and Armenia and reveal their specificities and how they differ to the European and Latin American contexts.

### 3. *Populism in the post-Soviet space*

The disintegration of Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union ultimately triggered a series of multidimensional political, economic, social processes throughout the region. The collapse of the totalitarian system and the process of democratization along with other developments laid the foundation for populism to flourish. However, despite the seeming similarities between countries in the post-Soviet space, the process of democratization was different in each country. This has been reasoned by a wide variety of circumstances, including the quality of the elites, the regional and global geopolitical issues they faced, as well as each country’s historical and civilizational background and traditions. As a consequence, this has led to unique manifestations of populism in various parts of the former Eastern Bloc, a region which has occasionally shown similarities to their populist North American, European, and Latin American counterparts.

During the late 1980s, many Soviet republics faced the rise of nationalist movements. The collapse of the totalitarian state with its underdeveloped liberal-democratic and market traditions created a social and ideological vacuum, one which was logically filled with national ideology that was framed as a national renaissance in a national state. This allowed Hunting-

ton (1996) to forecast the 'clash of civilizations' as a basis for the new world order. According to a Russian researcher Baranov (2004), the former nationalist nihilism (which was the mainstream in the USSR) was replaced by the 'dictate of nationalism,' stressing such concepts as 'national sovereignty,' 'national independence and freedom,' and so on. He continues to discuss the ways that the rapid changes, uncertainties and instability have created favorable conditions for populist leaders who use nationalist rhetoric to gain public support.

The new leaders used national populism to demonstrate their love and care for their nation's culture, history, and language. However, they ended up only making appeals. In their speeches, they promoted national feelings and instructed people to search for the guiltiest among other nations.

According to a Russian political scientist Abdualatipov, almost all the leaders from the former Soviet Republics gained power due to national populism. He states:

It is easy to gain power through national populism; however, this method very soon leads the politician to the most radical forms of national patriotism. Whenever the same leader (e.g., after gaining power) tries to establish equal relations with other states, he is dismissed. Hence the whole tactic is based on increasing of national emotions. The motive is simple – to keep power. (Baranov 2004: 370)

Thus, we see that the collapse of the USSR and process of democratization in post-Soviet space started with nationalist populism as it was the easiest method during that period of time to gain public support and acquire legitimacy.

The picture has changed for some countries since 1990s. For instance, the Russian researcher Baranov (2015) thinks that nowadays populism widely applies left-conservative positions, promoting the idea of the leading role of the state to provide social justice. At the same time, the combination of the conservative ideology with the values of justice is becoming the main characteristic of Russian political discourse, since it was initiated by the ruling elite and demanded by different social groups.

There is a popular opinion that populism is suited for those who are not able to rationally evaluate the actions, behavior, and declarations of politicians. However, during crises times, even well-educated and successful people want to hear simple and clear solutions to complex challenges. Very often, this kind of demands increases during periods of modernization. Provided that most (if not all) of the post-Soviet states are still in the

process of democratic transition as well as political, economic, and social modernization, this creates favorable ground for populists.

In support of this idea, Baranov (2015) draws on the approach of Altermatt and Gudvin (2015), who claim that populist movements appear when rapid modernization upsets the balance of the economy, politics, and culture in a society. Consequently, this can lead to uncertainties, fear, and tension among people. It is worth mentioning that while discussing the situation in Central and Eastern European countries, Baranov (2015) discusses that in the period of post-communist transformations, new populist leaders and parties appeared throughout this region and largely exploited national and social problems for political gains.

In this context, a Russian political scientist Achkasov (2018) thinks that we are witnessing the rise of populism in both Eastern and Western Europe. However, the electoral success of right-wing populist parties depends not only on their opportunities to express their dissatisfaction and fears with the voters in regard to the current radical economic and social changes, but also on a number of national factors. Among them are the political-cultural traditions of the country, specificities of political environment, and relations with the leading political forces.

As previously mentioned, populism is rather different in Central and Eastern Europe, on the one hand, and in post-Soviet countries, on the other hand. For instance, Baranov (2015) points out that one difference between European and Russian political practice is how populism is used by politicians in power. In this regard, populist strategies are used to legitimize power and to distract voters from social problems. In this context, the tough political and economic relationship between Russia and the West provided fresh air for populism. Particularly, the discourse around the concept of justice is shifting from a domestic policy agenda and a mandatory discussion of the issue of wealth and poverty to foreign political agenda.

Baranov (2015) states that Russian politicians appeal to populist methods not to accentuate the issue of social justice but to re-orient citizens alongside these problems, depending on their actuality, public importance, and public demand. At the same time, this kind of policy is related to people's expectations. In this regard, it is important to mention that the development of populist tendencies is fraught with costs due to controversial nature of populism, which reflects the controversies of mass consciousness. These costs are the more serious the weaker democratic traditions in a society present. Moreover, populism has certain margins of its effectiveness beyond which it does not work, but, vice versa, serves as a black PR.



Particularly, populism undermines people's trust in institutions and serves as a weapon of political struggle. It promotes a decrease of political activeness, alienation of people, economic and political turmoil, as well as social disorder. For instance, in Armenia, populist politics among different oppositional forces during the late 2000s ultimately led to loss of faith in the future and massive emigration.

Thus, populist technologies have enabled the political elites to foster geopolitical interests in Russia, which contradict the views of those who are aligned with the interests of the West. The latter is partially rooted in a struggle over spheres of influence in the post-Soviet area, which is more important than social problems. However, Baranov (2015) thinks that the great power policy, the unique Russian way, and patriotism are not able to solve current problems of socio-economic development.

Populist strategies are effective in short run (we will clearly see that in the case of Armenia). That is why they are used in electoral campaigns. However, populist strategies in government only offer short-term, limited effects. (Baranov 2015: 34)

When it comes to Central Asia as a part of the post-Soviet space, I would like to discuss the following World Bank review (2016) about the economic situation in Europe and Central Asia. The report is titled *Polarization and Populism*. According to the report, the developing tendencies of global uncertainties, Brexit, rising terrorism, and conflicts around the globe have fostered a sense of instability among people regarding their political and economic futures. This has led to the rise of populist parties, movements, and leaders, that have offered seemingly simple solutions to complex issues. These solutions are presented as being able to provide economic development and increase the standard of living. These parties and movements are becoming popular among people who are disappointed in 'traditional' methods of carrying out democratic reforms, particularly, among people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The above-mentioned report measures the level of polarization among the voters in the region. According to an economic analysis over the last four years (for 2016), a 1% decrease in GDP growth on average brought a 3.1% increase in populist forces. At the same time, a lower life satisfaction and political polarization may also be connected to lower economic mobility. The report stresses that the post-Soviet space, particularly Russia and Central Asia, have experienced a decrease in consumption, an increase in poverty, and the exacerbation of social problems as a result of a weak

economic structure and decreasing raw materials prices. “The countries have not managed to provide active reforms in terms of crisis to strengthen diversification of economy and break dependence on oil or other raw material with simultaneous development of non-primary sectors of economy” (World Bank 2016). In Eastern Europe and Central Asia consumption dropped 4.8% in 2018 in comparison to the 1.2% GDP decrease.

At the same time, the researcher Karimov (World Bank 2016) thinks that more structural reforms are necessary. Such reforms could lead to wider access to education, medical services, as well as the creation of new jobs. Thus, policy reforms should be directed towards the establishment of more equal opportunities, as opposed to social transfers from Russia. The policy should be aimed at decreasing the sense of threat on a rapidly changing labor market and providing life-long education to prepare people to the new conditions and providing appropriate unemployment insurance (World Bank 2016). In this context, it is also interesting to consider the case of Belarus and its model of populism.

After the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, Belarus did not manage to avoid the crisis of modernization. Thus, the country experienced instability in its economic and political transition. This established the necessary ground for populism, as it “rise[s] during the periods of crises, critical periods of societal development and political instability, when majority of people lose faith towards tomorrow” (Bogapova 2015: 106). According to the researcher Bogapova, the Belarussian President, Aleksandr Lukashenko, won the presidential election in 1994 as a non-partisan Member of Parliament that was tough on corruption, a quality which people needed during that period of time (Bogapova 2015: 106).

At the same time, the aforementioned approach that ruling elites use populism to increase public support for Russia applies to almost all post-Soviet countries. From this perspective, according to Bogapova (2015), Lukashenko constantly uses populist methods to legitimize his power. His populist techniques include blaming foreign forces for domestic problems, which enables social consolidation through securitization. The logic is that in conditions of foreign pressure, only a strong and charismatic leader can save the people and the country. Baranov (2011) believes that authoritarianism is justified in terms of the president's paternal care: “The life of the Belarusian people is under the strict supervision of the head of state, who is quietly called *Batka* - he will scold and praise, support and punish.” Makarenko (2017) raises the question of how it was possible for a populist agenda to become popular in countries with a stable liberal democracy

and a developed civil political culture. According to him, populism is a very complex issue, which he explains in simple terms by the resonance of various factors. On the one hand, the rise of populism is explained by the deterioration of economic conditions and, consequently, important aspects that affect people's lives.

On the other hand, populism is fostered by the fact that different sources receive and analyze information about the political sphere, resulting in distrust of mainstream information. According to Makarenko (2017), "the content of this populist coalition" can vary from country to country, but the main line of distinction runs along the "winners versus losers" in the new economy. This means that the populist agenda is pursued by social groups that are not among the poorest, but among the penultimate 25% of postmodern society. This group is relatively safe from poverty, but afraid of losing something more. From a cross-regional perspective, it is worth shortly elaborating on Latin America and Europe to perceive the specificities of populism more clearly in post-Soviet reality. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2011):

there is a consensus among scholars working on Latin American populism that it is predominantly left wing. For instance, two reviews of the different waves of Latin American populisms demonstrated that most of them are characterized by their egalitarian stance and their support for a growing state intervention in the economy—the cases of Fujimori in Peru, Menem in Argentina, and Collor de Mello in Brazil representing the exceptions to this trend. Furthermore, the current wave of Latin American populism is unambiguously distinguished by its leftist nature. Indeed, both Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez see themselves as left-wing leaders and, at the same time, the scholarly literature considers them to be prime examples of the new (radical) left in Latin America. (Rovira Kaltwasser 2011: 21)

They continue and explain that, in contrast to Latin America, populism in Europe is associated with the right-wing ideologies.

This is somewhat surprising as few populist radical right parties define themselves openly and unequivocally as right wing. In fact, both Jörg Haider and Jean Marie Le Pen would have stressed that they are 'neither left, nor right.' Instead, they would argue that the left-right distinction is no longer relevant and is mainly used by the mainstream parties to give the people a false sense of difference and competition. That said, while

no party openly claims to be left wing, some do self-identify as right wing (e.g., the Belgian Flemish Block or the Hungarian Justice and Life Party). Moreover, at least in the West European context, most European populists would see the mainstream right as the lesser evil. (Mudde et al. 2011: 25)

Thus, we can conclude that European populism is mainly right-wing, as it is largely connected and rooted in nationalism as a host ideology. At the same time, populism in Latin America is more left-wing because of its close connection to 'Americanismo.' As a result, European populism is more 'domestic' and tends to develop struggles against internal subjects (for instance, ethnic minorities and immigrants). When it comes to Latin America, the perceived threats identified by populists are more 'external,' and thus populists search for enemies and solutions for domestic problems outside their countries, for instance, by blaming foreign powers.

Thus, we see that post-Soviet experience of populism is rather unique and different from other parts of the world. If populism in Latin America is largely left-wing and populism in Europe is largely right-wing, then populism in Russia and Belarus comprises both elements. What is different is that populists are the ruling elites, while in other post-Soviet countries (which strive to achieve democracy) it is more the privilege of opposition. I will discuss this second group of post-Soviet countries which are striving towards democracy in detail in the next part of the chapter by examining the case of Armenia. The balance between 'state-sponsored' and 'opposition' populism is more about proportions, as all sides apply this mechanism to gain public support. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that despite unique features, post-Soviet populism, generally speaking, complies with Mudde's definition. The only difference is that when we speak about state-sponsored populism, we witness transformation of the second pillar, i.e., 'the corrupt elite,' which can no longer be the case. However, the fight against corruption remains in their agenda, too.

#### 4. *Populism in Armenia*

Nowadays, Armenia faces the whole spectrum of crises of political development. These include distribution, mobility, participation, identity, and legitimacy. According to an Armenian political scientist Mariam Margaryan (2018), these issues are much deeper than in other post-Soviet countries. This is conditioned by Spitak Earthquake of 1988, the ongoing Nagorno-

Karabakh conflict, linear liberalization, voucher privatization (in contrast, for instance, to Baltic states, where contract privatization took place), as well as closed borders with two of four neighbors (Azerbaijan and Turkey) and difficult relations of the third neighbor and with the West. This situation largely affects the political agenda of various political forces in Armenia, equipping them with whole spectrum of populist arsenal. Based on the information above, I will analyze the political programs of the following political forces in Armenia by using the theory of populism as a thin-centered ideology: the HAK, the OEK, and Heritage. Moreover, in my opinion, the strategies of all these forces have followed the theory of Mudde.

The HAK was established in 2008. The party was led by the first president of Armenia Leven Ter-Petrosyan. The Congress comprised eighteen political parties and organization. In the period of 2012-2017, the HAK was presented in Parliament of Armenia with seven deputies. In February 2013, the HAK was transformed into the Armenian National Committee Party (HAK-y veratsvum e 2013).

The peak of the HAK power fell on 2008 when its then-leader, Leven Ter-Petrosyan, ran a presidential campaign. According to the Central Electoral Commission of Armenia, the presidential candidate managed to receive 21.5% votes (Levon Ter-Petrosyan 2008). However, Ter-Petrosyan and the HAK did not agree with the results and initiated multi-thousand protests in capital Yerevan, claiming victory. My consideration of the HAK and its leader as a populist force is based on the approach that it operated with full spectrum of populism arsenal, outlined by Mudde.

To justify this approach, I will now refer to the HAK and Leven Ter-Petrosyan's 2008 electoral program and other conceptual documents as they relate to Mudde's populism triangle. To appeal to people, the HAK publicly presented a social economic policy comprehensive reform program called '100 steps.' This was mainly aimed to fundamentally change the economic situation in Armenia and to provide people's productive participation in sustainable economic development. In discussing the 'corrupt elite,' the program states that:

the essence of the current political system is based on the concentration of the country's economic resources in the hands of a few oligarchs and their families, as well as the use of state power leverages to provide super profits for that group. Illegal tax and customs privileges, monopolies, provision of extra profits for importers by strengthening the national

currency – dram, as well as violation of ownership rights led to critical drop of production and export, elimination of free competition, baseless increase of prices, decrease of business activeness. All these factors brought to gradually worsening of social-economic conditions for the people.” It continues: “Believe us that the electoral programs of the current candidates do not differ by their words and populist promises. At the same time, I deviate from the standards and traditions should try to speak to people with simple and clear language... (Electoral Programs)

Regarding the general will, the HAK program maintains that “in order to change the situation we need fundamental reforms (...). Only ‘massive all-national movement’ which is not connected or depended on the system-connected oligarchs can go against the regime for the development of people and state and provide the necessary reforms” (Electoral Programs, 2018). Interestingly, the HAK program states that it is ready to present to people’s judgment. This demonstrates that the HAK not only speaks about ‘political will’ in referencing reforms, but the party has also presented the exact mechanisms and solutions to achieving its goals. However, the search on the ground has not provided any real indications of these mechanisms. In this regard it is also worth analyzing the ‘100 Steps’ program of the HAK (2010):

- 15. Public governance by polls
- 37. Sufficient growth of the state budget. With the necessary steps, by 2010, the budget will be increased to USD 4.5-5 billion (from approximately USD 3 billion in 2017).
- 38. Refund of deposits.

The latter is a very sensitive issue in Armenia, as most middle and old age individuals had lost their deposits in Soviet banks, due to them being frozen after Armenia gained independence. However, the program talks about multi-billion USD sums. For this reason, it is not clear how the HAK was going to cover that budget.

- 83. Sufficient growth of education spending providing 1% of GDP.
- 91. Subsidization of agricultural production.

As we can see, these points focus mainly on social economic factors, which resembles the Latin American case. However, the HAK does not suggest any answer to the main question: How to increase the budget and GDP to support all these measures? At the same time, it is interesting to mention the

absence of a nationalism component in the HAK and their Ter-Petrosyan programs. On the contrary, provided that the most salient nationalist topic within Armenian society is Turkey and Azerbaijan, the candidate from the HAK advocated for reconciliation with Turkey.

This step required the party to distance itself from the nationalist part of the electorate, while appealing to those who were exclusively more concerned with socio-economic development. Notably, the program did not criticize the Soviet past (as some other populist forces in Armenia and other post-Soviet countries have done). Rather, it clarified that in terms of peace, the period of the Soviet past has become one of the most unique periods in Armenia's three-thousand-year history. Despite the Civil War of 1921, collectivization and hunger (1928-1933), Stalin terror (1937-1938) and World War II, all of which had very negative implications, during that period no enemy entered the territory of modern Armenia. It is enough to mention that almost no European nation managed to escape from this kind of tragedy (Electoral Program, 2018). This could be a step to gain support from those who had this memory of 'old good times,' or the generation of '*homo soveticus*,' as well as appeal to the past and to the people, to their collective memory.

We see the continuation of 'the people' versus 'the elite' discourse in the program. It states that:

nowadays we have correlation from the mainstream development, as state deprived from the perspective of prosperity and sentenced to miserable existence, a people with lost mental calmness. The reason, on one hand, is the disintegration of the USSR and as a consequence, wide ranges of social and economic crises. On the other hand, current situation is determined by the ruling elites (Electoral Program, 2018).

Thus, we see that the program described what the people dreamed about, providing a long list of people's wishes. However, we do not see clear suggestions as to how to overcome the problems and make the dream a reality.

At the same time, the electoral manifesto specified the following major programmatic thrusts in the areas of domestic policy, foreign policy, rule of law, the economy, and social policy. The following points deserve closer attention. Also here, the question of how these promises would be implemented remains open. For example, one of these promises call for an annual income growth of 20% of salaries, and 30-40% for pensions, as well as the development of private pension foundations. Another such point is paying AMD 500.000 (approximately USD 1000) for the first child, AMD

one million for the second one, and 1.5 million for the third (Electoral Program).

It is worth mentioning that the HAK was the major opposition force back in 2008, having acquired a great deal of public support. After Ter-Petrosyan had lost presidential elections to Serzh Sargsyan (the former president of Armenia in 2008-2018), Ter-Petrosyan and the HAK organized massive protests to demand a re-election.

During the 2012 Parliament elections, the HAK promoted only seven deputies to the country's parliament, otherwise known as the National Assembly of Armenia. The reason for this kind of rapid failure will be discussed below. However, at this point, it is worth remembering words of Baranov (2015) that populism is generally a short-term strategy and does not survive in the long run.

When it comes to the organizational structure of the HAK, back in 2008, the presidential candidate Levon Ter-Petrosyan managed to form an electoral bloc, one which was comprised of more than twenty political parties and initiatives, including Heritage, which I discuss below, as well as a few dozens of NGOs. Interestingly, the section of the Party official website which details the history does not provide the history of the movement, but rather the biography of the leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan. To conclude my analysis of the HAK, it is necessary to mention that during the 2017 Parliamentary elections, the party did not receive a single seat, which was objective enough, provided its very low level of public support.

##### *5. The Armenian Renaissance Association and the OEK*

The OEK was established in 1998. The founder, Arthur Baghdasaryan, was elected Party president. For a long time the party cooperated with ruling political forces. Its representatives held various positions in the legislative and executive bodies within the coalition with the ruling Republican Party. Baghdasaryan held the positions of the Speaker of the Parliament and Secretary of the National Security Council. In 2017, the OEK joined the Armenian Renaissance Association (HVM), which was formed earlier in 2016 and encompassed ten parties and 51 NGOs.

It is worth mentioning that the OEK was the only political force among those which this chapter discusses that formed part of the ruling coalition with the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK). However, after leaving the coalition, the OEK started to severely criticize the government



which it was once a part of and the reforms in which it participated in, anticipating public support by opposing the ‘corrupt elites.’

This step was used by political opponents of Baghdasaryan and the OEK to demonstrate his dishonesty and populist nature, as well as to reveal his plan to reshuffle forces leading up to the parliamentary elections of 2017. At the same time, it is necessary to accept that the pre-electoral meaning of such a move was too evident to bring in political dividends and allow Baghdasaryan to play the game he had planned. As a result, for the first time in more than ten years, Baghdasaryan and his party were not able to receive a single mandate in the new Parliament.

When it comes to the organizational structure, it is worth mentioning that the official website under section “Party” contains only the party history and the biography of its leader. At the same time neither the old web site of the OEK nor the new one contains any political program (strangely enough for a political party). More clarity with the OEK populist nature brings the interview with one of the OEK/HVM representatives who wished to remain undisclosed.

The young party member outlined 30 key programmatic points of the party. Among others it is worth outlining the following:

- 17. Development of health insurance system.
- 18. Implementation of measures devoted to decrease prices for gas, electricity, drinking water and irrigation water.
- 19. Support in the amount of 500.000 AMD to every newly married.
- 20. Pension increase for people with restricted abilities.
- 21. Annual increase of minimal wages.
- 28. Decrease of prices for utility services.

These articles are notable with their clear social essence, which brings the party closer to the left-socialist populism. Why populism? Because the political force does not explain how it will promote the implementation of these steps. Moreover, it had leverages for initiation of reforms to achieve this vision while being in the government. However, it never happened on the ground. Interestingly, this political force did not apply any nationalist rhetoric.

The next political party I would like to discuss is Heritage. It considers itself a national-liberal political force, which was established in 2002 by an Armenian public figure and former minister of Foreign Affairs Raffi Hovhannisyán. This is the only party among our populist examples which applied soft nationalist agenda to its political program. The Party program,

as the previous cases, followed Mudde's logic and developed through the above-mentioned triangle: people – corrupt elite – general will. According to the Party Charter, the main objective was to foster the prosperity of Armenian people, and to provide to the upcoming generations well-developed, free and prosperous Armenia. The goal should be accomplished based on universal and national values, as well as past civilizational heritage (Charter). It continues and provides the following list of problems, which needs to be addressed to establish the conditions for national development:

1. Establishment of democratic state in Armenia based on rule of law
2. Development of civic initiatives and their establishment in civil life (Charter).

It is interesting enough (especially for Armenian political life) that a political party speaks not about how to gain power, but to develop civil society. However, Heritage claimed 'participation' in the functioning and establishment of Armenian state and local authorities through free elections. They did not specify the struggle for power or presence in the parliament as one of the main goals to promote legal changes. According to the Charter, Heritage had the following structure: Congress, Council, Board, and President of the Board, Charter Committee, Audit Committee, and territorial divisions. The highest party body is the Congress. However, as in previous cases, power was concentrated around one person. Initially, it was Raffi Hovhanissyan, and then it was Armen Martirosyan, who was recently elected as the Board President. It is worth mentioning that the official web page contains the pre-election program for 2005 and 2008, but not for 2013, which was when the party leader and presidential candidate Raffy Hovhannissyan was closest to success.

The elaboration of these programs allows us to clearly see Mudde's conceptual triangle. Concerning the people, Heritage sees Armenia of future as a state, where a person is the highest value with its rights and freedoms, the state serves the people, the citizen forms the basis of state, the people are the source of state power, the nation is the anchor, and their freedom integral to sovereignty. Regarding social-economic implications: Armenians, who are important economic drivers in other countries, should not live in poverty in their homeland. Interestingly, Heritage regarded the EU membership agenda for Armenia as a priority. However, the question about how realistic it is remains open. As mentioned above, Heritage injected some nationalist discourse into public debate. It stated in particular that "Armenian people should first of all rely on its own forces." The party

also claimed recognition of independence of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) or its reunification with Armenia; and promoted stimulation of repatriation. This of course rings hollow after Azerbaijan seized that territory by force in late summer of 2023.

Regarding the elites: “The main responsible for our failure are, undoubtedly, authorities, which are not formed by the people with free and fair elections. Those in power continuously have promised to change the life but accused in their failure everyone except themselves. They unacceptably abused people’s trust...” (Program). Based on the above two ideas they claim to represent the general will. Thus, we see that Heritage followed the ‘classical’ populist logic presented by Mudde with thin-ideological nature. In addition to social and economic it developed the populist agenda based on nationalist sentiments. The above-presented research allows to conclude that populism in Armenia is a comprehensive and multifaceted combination of global populist trends, post-Soviet experience, as well as domestic specificities. Moreover, it is a combination of thin-centered ideology, as well as populist strategy and tactics. Armenia has witnessed populism of the economy and identity. However, in contrast to the European case, the issue of identity in Armenia has mostly geopolitical essence and is about the geopolitical orientation the country should take for effective transition.

All of these parties have at least one thing in common: in exact political time, they were on the peak of political glory with strong public support. However, they lost this political capital in a very short period of time. Particularly, all the discussed cases, i.e., the HAK, Heritage, and HVM have used, fully or partially, the following issues in their populist agendas:

- National social-economic development
- Nagorno-Karabakh conflict
- Foreign policy priorities
- Convergence of political and ethno-national populism

To answer the question why populism is continuously failing in Armenia, I would outline the following reasons: First, populism is short-term in general. Second, political forces do not heavily rely on an ideological component. All parties have acted according to the logic and ideological underpinnings of liberal democracy with the minor addition, in some cases, of nationalist features. Finally, all these forces claim that only they can ‘save’ Armenia. This is why prior to each election we see long and boring negotiations among opposition leaders who seek to establish a united front against the

ruling elites, which ultimately tends to fail. Finally, I conclude that populist forces in Armenia are based on the idea of a strong and charismatic leader.

## 6. Conclusion

The research evidently demonstrated the multifaceted nature of populism. Depending on regional or national contexts, populism tends to take the form which will bring the most dividends to the actors who practice it. On one hand, this proves that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work with populism. On the other hand, we see that there are certain schemes, i.e., people-elite-general will, which can be applied to analyze populism in North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe, as well as in the post-Soviet space.

At the same time, the post-Soviet populism has a unique feature, i.e., 'populism-from-above,' which is when forces in power apply populism not to gain but hold onto power. Interestingly, this approach could extend to other regions of the world, where people are motivated by decline of democracy. Another specific feature of post-Soviet populism is defined by the ongoing crises of political development. These crises have equipped populist leaders with 'easy solutions' to struggle for power.

In this context, the only way to avoid populism or at least to decrease its impact is to develop participation in democracy, polyarchy, and the overall shift from democratic transition to democratic consolidation.

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