

# Chapter 4: Populism in Armenia: A Conceptual Framework and Its Application<sup>1</sup>

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## *1. Introduction*

The Republic of Armenia is a semi-democratic, semi-authoritarian independent state in the Caucasus region. Formerly part of the Soviet Union, since the latter's collapse, Armenia has shifted towards liberal democracy and capitalism but has become mired in corruption and authoritarian rule (Freedom House 2018). Armenia retains an ambivalent relationship with Russia; while it is dependent on Russia for military security, Armenia remains suspicious of its motives. Armenia is in a state of conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan over the status of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which, according to most international actors, forms part of Azerbaijan but has declared its own independence and has close ties to Armenia. Armenia also has tense relations with another neighbor, Turkey, due to the latter's support for Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and also its refusal to recognize the genocide of Armenians that occurred starting in 1915 under the collapsing Ottoman Empire. Armenia holds regular elections, parliamentary and presidential, and there is a diversity of political parties and actors competing in the semi-democratic system.

This chapter will address the question of whether populism is an aspect of the political scene in Armenia. It expands on the argument that populism is largely absent from post-Soviet states due to the prevalence of patron-client political relations creating a political environment not conducive to populism (March 2017: 220-1). Furthermore, discussions of populism in Armenia and the post-Soviet region are largely absent in the academic literature. A study of 158 articles on populism in 14 academic journals finds that the focus falls mainly on the geographical areas of Western Europe or Latin America and no article discusses populism in the former Soviet

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Union (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017a). This lack of academic coverage may be thought to indicate an absence of populism in the post-Soviet states, such as Armenia.

However, this chapter will argue that despite these indications, populism is alive and well in Armenia. The first section provides a conceptual framework for defining and classifying populism. Section two provides a map of different types of populism. Sections three and four provide an overview of populist actors in Armenia. Section five demonstrates that they fit the defining features of populism. The chapter concludes with supporting explanations for populism in Armenia and contests March's claim that patronal politics precludes populism. On the contrary, the presence of patronal politics is compatible with populism. As the chapter will show, the political environment in Armenia is not only compatible with but conducive to populism; the absence of strongly ideological political parties makes it more likely that actors take a populist stance.

## 2. *Understanding populism*

The concept of populism is largely contested in political science. In this case, it involves examining movements or actors labeled as populist and identifying what they have in common. Commonly cited examples of populism include the farmers' political movement and the People's Party in late nineteenth century U.S., the Russian revolution and sometimes later Stalin himself, fascism in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, the dictatorships in the 1950s and 60s of Juan Perón in Argentina, Carlos Ibáñez in Chile, and Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in Columbia, anti-immigration political parties in Europe, Hugo Chávez, Berlusconi, Erdoğan, Trump, and the Brexit decision. But defining populism is not just a matter of trying to come up with a general concept which captures all these instances. It is also partly a matter of stipulation; stating that such-and-such is what the concept ought to mean given other theoretical commitments such as usefulness, conciseness or simplicity, and appropriate fit with other political concepts. Hence understanding populism turns upon at least two factors: firstly, how much a definition fits the phenomenon it is intended to capture and secondly, how useful it is as an analytical tool. Populism has been

defined as either an ideology, a movement, a strategy, or a style, and may consist of combinations of these aspects.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of adopting a single definition of populism, this chapter will set out a number of characteristics or markers of populism. This way, the concept of populism can be understood as consisting of a set of family resemblances, rather than having a definitive set of necessary and sufficient conditions (Judis 2016: 13-14).<sup>3</sup> The most common characteristics that emerge from the literature on populism are (1) the antagonism between people versus elites, (2) personalistic leadership, (3) direct communication, and (4) short-termism. The first is central to Cas Mudde's ideational understanding of populism, whilst the second and third belong to the strategic or organizational understanding of populism favored by other scholars.<sup>4</sup>

The first characteristic of populism is that it views society as "ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and [...] argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004: 543; Canovan 2004: 242; Judis 2016: 14).<sup>5</sup> Populism conceives of the people as a homogeneous whole, downplaying class, ethnic, or other divisions (Müller 2016; Deiwiks 2009: 2) and holds that the will of the people is somehow ignored or not given its appropriate place in decision-making by elites that have opposing interests.

A second marker of populism is personalistic leadership. This person is often viewed by many as charismatic (Weyland 2001: 13-14; Canovan 2004: 243; Diewiks 2009: 5). This defines leaders who use their communication skills, persuasiveness, and general appeal to influence others. Charismatic leaders are able to connect with people on an emotional level and forge intense and deep bonds with their followers.

A further characteristic of populist actors, whether individuals, parties, or movements, is direct communication to 'the people.' Populists speak

2 For more discussion of the conceptualization of populism see the essays in Part 1 of Heinisch et al. 2017 and the essays in Part 1 of Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017b.

3 The concept of family resemblances is originally from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953); the idea being that we can recognize several individuals as members of a family even though they share no essential condition(s) and instead they possess a number of overlapping similarities. See also Laclau 2005:7.

4 For more on these different approaches to populism, see the essays in part 1 of Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017b.

5 Cas Mudde has more recently reiterated and further defended the definition in Mudde 2017. For this characteristic, see also the entry for 'Populism – Political' in Miller et al. 1991: 394.

directly to the people rather than through intermediaries (Weyland 2001; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). In doing so, they present themselves as authentic and legitimate representatives of the people.

A final characteristic of populism is that it focuses on the immediate or short-term interests and will of the people. It is the starvation of the people that now calls for political action, or the immediate threat posed by immigrants, or the urgent need for a change of government. Populists tend not to hold long-term views about politics, focusing instead on what they state is the immediate interest of the people. This last characteristic is not as common in definitions of populism as the first three. There is not space in this chapter to fully justify its inclusion, however it is necessary to further differentiate populism from a belief in democracy in general. Advocates of democracy hold that the will of the people should prevail and that there should be direct communication to the people and perhaps personalistic leadership. Populism, however, seems to be a distinct idea from a general belief in democracy, and the characteristic of short-termism can help explain why.<sup>6</sup>

The understanding of populism as per the above characteristics is a morally neutral one; they leave open the possibility that populism can be justified or unjustified depending on whether it poses a threat to democracy. There is nothing wrong per se with championing the people against elites, having a personalistic leader, communicating directly to people, or focusing on the short-term. But the focus on the will of the people, without saying too much about what that is, leaves populism open to the charge of naivety and simple-mindedness, ignoring political complexities, and creates avenues for gaining political support by using simple slogans. Personalistic leadership also tends to distract from complex policy issues. Direct communication again favors simplicity over complexity, and the focus on the short-term makes populism open to the charge of unwisely ignoring long-term consequences. This is not, however, to condemn all populism. Perhaps corrupt elites are obstructing the people's will, perhaps having a personalistic leader can be justified, perhaps direct communication is what is needed, and perhaps short-term solutions are sometimes what is most

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6 For more on short-termism as a characteristic of populism, see Müller 2016: 13 and Guiso et al. 2017. Short-termism is also suggested by the entry on populism in *Encyclopedia Britannica*: a populist program, it says, “promotes the interest of common citizens and the country as a whole ... without regard to the consequences for the country” (Munro 2023).

justified. In other words, the characteristics of populism may or may not be justified—that is a separate question from describing what populism is.

### 3. Mapping populism(s)

Populism is a ‘primitive’ political concept, not in a pejorative sense, but in that its characteristics are too broad, making it an undeveloped political outlook. In particular, the feature of populism which pits the people’s will and interests against corrupt elites allows room for various interpretations of people’s will and interests.<sup>7</sup> Does the interest of the people lie in being as happy as possible, as wealthy as possible, as free as possible, a combination of all these, or something else? Populism per se does not remain agnostic about what in particular the people’s interest consists of. Particular populist actors may, however, specify a view of the people’s interests more precisely, and this is why populism may come in different varieties. For example, right-wing populists focus on the will and the interests of the people being subverted by meddling government or liberal elites, while left-wing populists emphasize the subversion of the will and the interests of the people by big businesses and corporate interests.

Additionally, we can differentiate between democratic and authoritarian populist tendencies. Do the people know their own interests best, and are they able to exercise those interests through their own will? If so, then populism will support democracy in the form of elections and even more directly through referenda and other forms of direct participation. This is democratic populism. Or, are there leaders who know better what the interests of the people entail? Can those leaders do a better job of serving the people’s will, perhaps because of existing elites blocking the will of the people? If so, the result is authoritarian populism. Instead of the people’s interests and will being expressed through democratic decision-making, better to trust in a single person or group of people who can cut through the institution red-tape to give expression to what the people really need and want (Dix 1985; Norris and Inglehart 2018).<sup>8</sup>

7 Mudde makes the same point, defining populism as a ‘thin-centered’ ideology, one that can be combined with others (Mudde 2004: 544; Mudde 2017: 30).

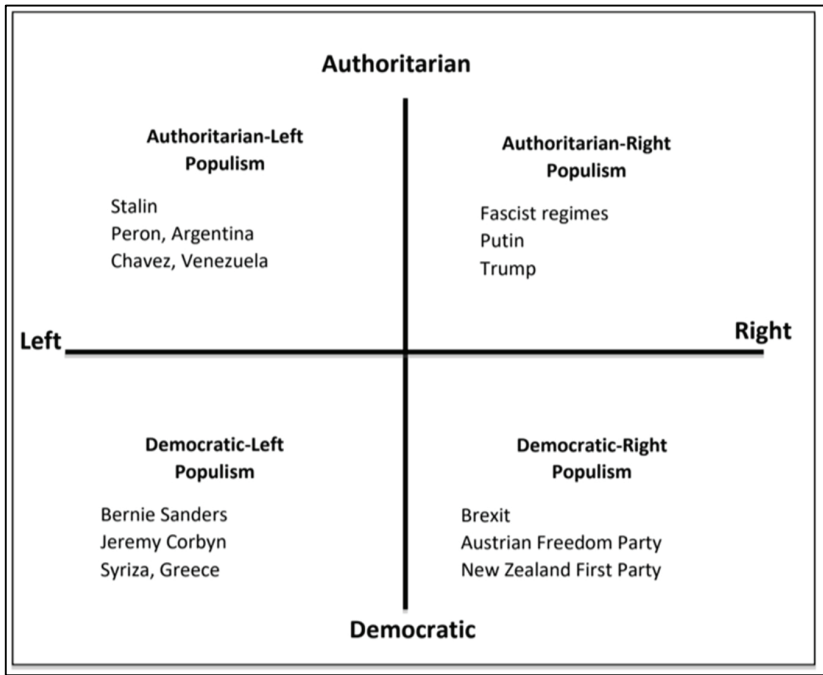
8 Norris and Inglehart (2018) discuss authoritarian-populism at length, but it should be noted that their understanding of authoritarianism, as involving values of conformity, security, and loyalty elides the distinction I am making between right-wing populism

Note that the democratic-authoritarian distinction cuts across the left-right distinction. The left-right distinction refers to the substance of policies that populist actors favor. Typically, left-wing populists favor policies of welfare-state and state intervention in the economy, are pro-abortion, pro-gay rights, etc. Right-wing populists often, but not always, favor conservative/classical liberal/libertarian policies, such as free market policies and are against abortion and gay rights (Betz 1994; March 2011: Chapter 6). The democratic-authoritarian distinction refers to the political decision-making process which results in these policies, whether they are left-wing or right-wing policies. When we combine these two distinctions, we can conceive of four different varieties of populism; authoritarian populism can be either left- or right-wing, and similarly, democratic populism can be either left- or right-wing. Alternatively, left-wing populists can be either democratic or authoritarian, while right-wing populists can also be either democratic or authoritarian. Figure 1 below sets out these four types and provides examples of each. I do not intend to present these examples as definitive, nor will I defend their classification. I offer them as suggestive of the broad types I am providing a taxonomy of.

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and authoritarian populism. By authoritarianism I merely mean non-democratic forms of government where the people are not included in decision-making. Norris and Inglehart (2018) take this as part of authoritarianism, but also mix in substantive values affecting policies, such as being anti-abortion, against LGBTQ+ rights, etc. In my taxonomy such positions would be right-wing populism but not necessarily authoritarian.

Figure 4.1 Populism map



Source: Author's own analysis.

The left-right distinction and the authoritarian-democratic distinction crossing each other is a general phenomenon of politics, not just populism. Political systems and parties in general can be placed in such a classification. For example, Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. belong to the democratic-left and democratic-right, respectively. Similarly, dictatorships can be either left-wing in their policies (for example, Soviet communism) or right-wing (for example, Russia today). But I suggest that these two distinctions are useful for illustrating varieties of populism. When the relevant factors (left or right; democratic or authoritarian) are combined with the characteristics of populism described previously, we get the four types of populism set out in the graph above. Hence, we can perceive what is meant when populism is sometimes described as a separate dimension of politics, different from both left-right ideologies and different from democratic-authoritarian systems of government (Laclau 2005: 14-15, who

credits Worsley 1969 for the insight). Populism, as understood in terms of the characteristics described, cuts across other dimensions of political classification but combines with them to create (at least) four different types of political populism.

#### 4. *A populist revolutionary*

Having set out the necessary conceptual framework, I now turn to the situation in Armenia. The presence of populism can be identified in the political environment of Armenia in a number of individuals, parties, and movements. There are two individuals in particular I will focus on: Nikol Pashinyan and the 'Velvet Revolution' of April 2018 and Gagik Tsarukyan and his party Prosperous Armenia (BHK).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Nikol Pashinyan was a journalist and editor of newspapers which were highly critical of the ruling Republican government. One of his newspapers was closed down by the government in 1999. He was an organizer of the Armenian National Congress (ANC) during the 2008 election in which former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan was defeated by the Republican candidate, Serzh Sargsyan, and was the principal organizer of mass protests following the election, alleging that the election had been fraudulent. During these protests, several people were killed and Pashinyan was arrested and spent a term in prison before he was released in 2011. He won a seat in the National Assembly in 2012 and also left the ANC to set up his own political party named Civil Contract (KP). In 2016, the KP joined forces with two other parties to form an alliance named the Yelk Alliance or Way Out Alliance (Civil Contract 2018; National Assembly 2018b; European Friends of Armenia 2017: 17-18). The alliance won 8% of the vote in the 2017 elections, securing nine seats in the 105-seat chamber (Election Guide 2018). The Way Out Alliance also contested in local elections later in the same year, and won one-fifth of the seats on the Yerevan City Council. Pashinyan and the Way Out Alliance are of a liberal persuasion in favor of free market policies and low taxes. In the past, they have advocated leaving the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union to form closer ties with the European Union (Armenian Weekly 2017; PanArmenian Net 2017).

Pashinyan was on the fringes of the country's politics until April 2018, when he became the leading figure of large demonstrations against the rul-



ing regime. The ruling Republican Party (RPA) president, Serzh Sargsyan, came to the end of his ten-year term as president. The party had previously (after a disputed constitutional referendum held in November 2015) made constitutional changes which weakened the powers of the president's office and strengthened those of the prime minister. Sargsyan had publicly pronounced he would not run for prime minister, but in early 2018, he signaled a reversal. Pashinyan and his supporters began a protest in late March 2018, starting in Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, calling for a stop to Sargsyan's move to become prime minister. The number of protesters was initially small, with 4,500 estimated on the day the protest reached Yerevan (Atanesian 2018), but the size of the protests grew to over 50,000 after Sargsyan was elected by the National Assembly to become Prime Minister. People also engaged in acts of civil disobedience, such as blocking roads by physically sitting in intersections, paralyzing much of the capital city and beyond. Pashinyan and some other leaders of the protests were arrested on April 22, 2018 but released the next day, and Sargsyan unexpectedly resigned the same day. In front of huge crowds, Pashinyan called for a 'people's prime minister' to be elected. He was at first blocked by the RPA, however, following another week of protests and civil disobedience was chosen as prime minister. However, the RPA maintained almost the absolute majority in parliament.<sup>9</sup>

This was a stunning sequence of events, surprising to everyone in and outside the country. In a snap election called by Pashinyan in December 2018, the My Step Alliance, which included the KP, won a massive 70% of the vote, resulting in 88 of the 132 seats in the National Assembly, in an election that was considered by international observers as free and fair (Election Guide 2018). The incumbent RPA-led government achieved less than 5%, which was below the minimum electoral threshold. This marked the removal of a party that had been in power for twenty years. The political scene remained turbulent and particularly so in 2020. Like the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic struck Armenia severely. Moreover, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh reignited from September to November 2020, with Azerbaijan initiating hostilities and retaking parts of the disputed territory. The brief war was viewed as a defeat for Armenia and resulted in demonstrations against the Pashinyan government. Snap elections were held in 2021, but the KP still won 54% of the vote and held 71 of 107

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9 In the fallout of the events, several members of the Republican party defected, ending its majority in parliament.

seats in the assembly. Although less than the 70% in the previous election, Pashinyan's party was running alone rather than as part of a coalition, and so it was a decisive victory. The main opposition, Armenia Alliance (HP), led by former president Robert Kocharyan, received 21% and 29 seats, and an alliance containing the RPA managed to gain 5% and 7 seats (Election Guide 2018).

Much work remains to be done by political scientists regarding the causes, significance, and effects of what has been called Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution' and the subsequent events. Here however, I will focus on the relation with populism. Is Pashinyan a populist, and were the protests a case of populism in action?<sup>10</sup> Pashinyan and the protests in general fit the first three characteristics of populism outlined earlier in this chapter: emphasizing the people versus corrupt elites, personalistic leadership, and direct communication with the people. The protests were clearly guided by a discourse of people versus a corrupt elite, with the targeted elite being President Serzh Sargsyan and the ruling RPA government. This was explicitly present in statements of Pashinyan and the protestors' calls for a people's prime minister. The overarching narrative of Pashinyan was 'to turn the people's will into a political reality' (Bedevian 2017). At one point, he even suggested that the prime minister should be chosen directly by the people in the central square of the capital city (Gadarigian 2018). Other illustrative statements include: "The real power in Armenia stems from the people gathered in Republic Square" (Gadarigian 2018). Emphasizing the division between the people and the ruling elite, Pashinyan stated:

"Beloved nation, proud citizens of Armenia. People in parliament have lost the sense of reality. They don't understand that 250,000 people who came onto the streets in Armenia have already won. Power in Armenia belongs to you—and not to them" (The Economist 2018). Similarly, upon becoming prime minister, Pashinyan stated that "the power of the few in Armenia has been overthrown and the power of the people ... has been established" (Armenpress, 2018).

Illustrating Pashinyan's personalistic style, the article continues that he "managed to personify Armenians' resentment against a corrupt elite. Donning Che Guevara-style fatigues, he went around the country on

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10 I include social movements, not just individuals and political parties, as themselves potential populist actors. In doing so, I follow Mudde, who discusses the 'versatility' of populism, in that it can be a characteristic of protests, not just individuals and parties (Mudde 2017: 39).

foot, preaching non-violent protest” (Roth 2018). Pashinyan addressed the crowds in the central square every day during the protests, giving fiery speeches against the ruling elite. The movement was very much dominated by his personality. He initiated it and set its agenda and procedures. He maintained a fervent following amongst his close advisors and the crowds too. “You can absolutely compare him with historical figures like Gandhi and Nelson Mandela,” one of his advisors said (Roth 2018).

Whether Pashinyan satisfies the characteristic of short-termism is less clear. One indicator of a short-term perspective emerged during a policy discussion on the issue of local government reform. Reforms can have short-term costs but overall gains in the longer term, and Pashinyan expressed a focus on the short term. When asked about consolidating local government structures, he noted that the resulting loss of jobs may have priority in this thinking, that a concern for short-term unemployment would outweigh long-term gains (Vardanyan 2014: 41-42). To focus on short-term jobs rather than on long-term structural reform is an indicator of the short-termism characteristic of populism.

Upon gaining power, Pashinyan initiated anti-corruption actions against the former regime, including charging former president Robert Kocharyan with a crime in connection with the violent breakup of protests. These charges were dismissed by the Constitutional Court, whereupon Pashinyan proceeded to reform the Court itself (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 2020). This may be viewed as a populist attack upon the rule of law and due procedure, but it should be noted that members of the Court had been appointed by and maintained close ties with the former regime. Another policy of the Pashinyan government was to reduce income tax rates to a flat tax of 23%, when there were previously three tax brackets of 23%, 28%, and 36% (Hetq, n.d.). This simple act of reducing taxes could be viewed as a populist stance. Yet, its effect on reducing taxes for the rich is decidedly un-populist.

Unlike populist leaders in other countries, such as Trump and Bolsonaro, Pashinyan did not question the science of COVID-19, nor was he a vaccine-skeptic. A state of emergency was declared in March 2020 and a lockdown was imposed. It was initially enforced, although enforcement was later relaxed. Armenians have been hesitant to follow social distancing and to get vaccinated, resulting in large numbers of cases and deaths, particularly in late 2020 (World Health Organization, n.d.).

To conclude, it seems that Pashinyan was a populist during the Velvet Revolution throughout the first years of coming to power, although his

populism has tempered somewhat the longer he has been in power. This is a general characteristic of populism that has been noted by several scholars (e.g., Krause and Wagner 2019, but for a contrary view see Schwörer 2021).

### 5. A right-wing populist

While Pashinyan is the most prominent populist politician in Armenia, he is not the only one. Gagik Tsarukyan, a wealthy businessman and former arm-wrestler (European Friends of Armenia 2012)<sup>11</sup>, formed the BHK in 2004. It is a conservative nationalist party, advocating for economic liberalism, in support of businesses, and assistance to the most vulnerable in society (European Friends of Armenia 2012: 10). In the elections for the National Assembly of 2007, 2012, and 2017, the BHK won 15%, 30%, and 27% of votes, respectively. In Armenia's partly-proportional system of seat allocation, these votes resulted in 26 seats (of 131), 37 (again of 131), and 31 (of 105 seats in a reformed system) in the assembly (Election Guide 2018). Hence, the BHK was a major force in Armenian elections, even though it did not take part in government. It usually supported the Republican government from 2007 to 2012, but the BHK had a period of opposition in 2012-13 before again turning to support the ruling RPA government once more (European Friends of Armenia 2012: 2). Its support declined to 8% in the 2018 election and even further in the 2021 election—to just 4%.

Tsarukyan fits the mold of a wealthy populist politician. Contrary to one source (Nazarian 2021), it is he and not Pashinyan who is Armenia's Trump. He uses his vast wealth for philanthropic purposes, providing agricultural assistance and free medical aid to less well-off members of society (The Economist 2007). The BHK is closely identified with its leader, Tsarukyan, and since the 2017 elections, its parliamentary presence is even officially referred to as the 'Tsarukyan faction,' with several members of the assembly who do not belong to Prosperous Armenia joining the bloc.<sup>12</sup> Tsarukyan is now no longer the leader of the BHK officially but seems

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11 Tsarukyan claims to be the former world arm-wrestling champion; his personal website states 'In 1996 he was declared the world arm-wrestling champion' (Gagik Tsarukyan Official Website, n.d.). He in fact came third in 1996 and 1998 (Arm Wrestling Archives, n.d.).

12 See the website of the National Assembly of Armenia, which lists members of the Tsarukyan faction, most of whom are members of Prosperous Armenia but some of whom are not (National Assembly 2018a).

to be the de facto leader of the Tsarukyan alliance. The BHK favors close relations with Russia. Several years ago, it criticized the government for its perceived pro-Europe leanings and then praised the government when it announced the decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union (Grigoryan 2014).

Further analysis of the political views of Tsarukyan and the BHK strengthens the case for classifying them as populists. As a result of the framework of analysis set out in the first part of this chapter, we are looking for (1) championing of the interest and will of the people, understood in a primitive, ideologically-thin way, (2) personalistic leadership, (3) direct communication to the people, and (4) focus on the immediate rather than on long term interests. We will also look for evidence to locate him and his party on the left-right, authoritarian-democratic populism compass.

According to a report by Open Democracy, prior to the election of 2017, Tsarukyan runs “on the universal populist promises of jobs, lower taxes and patriotism—none of the high-brow ideological rhetoric.” He also champions his working-class roots and anti-intellectualism; “I am from a working family... I am no Harvard graduate. My life has been my university,” he is quoted as saying at a campaign rally (Sanamyan 2017). Two pre-election statements by Tsarukyan outline his and the party’s views. In one he states that the key objective of the Tsarukyan Alliance is simple: “to create appropriate conditions for workers who participate in the Armenian economy so that they no longer want to leave the country, but choose to stay instead, to support their families and their country” (Tsarukyan 2017a).

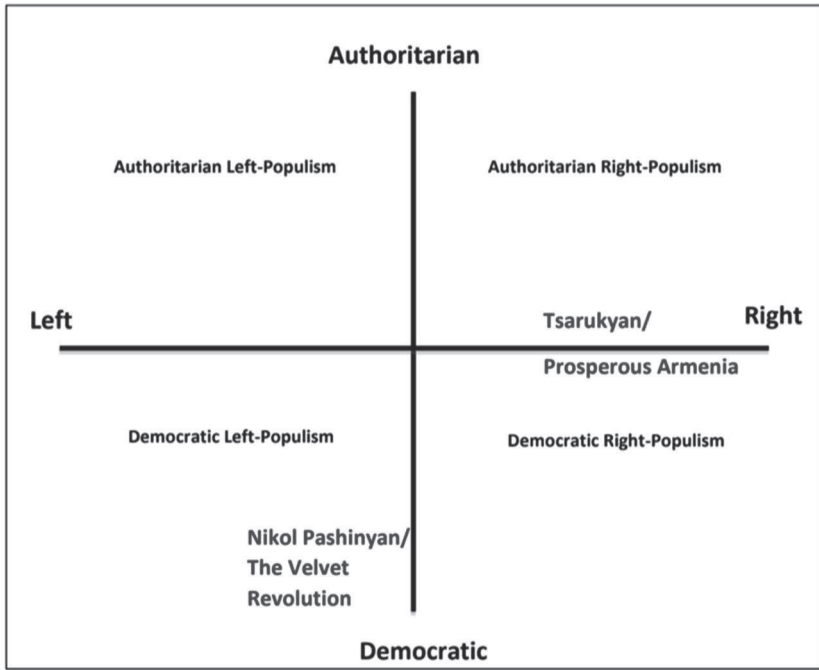
Working people “should not be interfered with” and conditions should be created “that are as favorable as possible to them” (Tsarukyan 2017a). If elected, he and the party will “start working to improve the lives of all Armenians” (Tsarukyan 2017a). He also mentions that “it is only possible to fix the backbone of our economy in the short term with effective and fair management and with sound economic policies” (Tsarukyan 2017a). These vague statements about the interests of the people and the reference to the short-term support classify Tsarukyan and the BHK as populist based on the first and fourth criteria. The second and third criteria, personalistic leadership and direct communication to the people, are also satisfied by Tsarukyan. He is the face of the BHK and its events are personal rallies focused on him. He has even produced a documentary about himself that aired on his own television channel. At rallies, he speaks directly to the people and walks among them, interacting with young and old alike.

More specific policies were mentioned in another pre-election statement, where Tsarukyan advocates for a favorable environment to small and medium businesses by exempting them from taxation for three years, raising the average pension by €48 per month and increasing the minimum salary to €153 per month (Tsarukyan 2017b). These help us locate Tsarukyan on the right side of the populism compass due to the pro-business stance but not too far right since they favor some social assistance to the less well off. Where to place them on the authoritarian-democratic dimension is less clear. Tsarukyan advocates for “strong democratic political leadership” but then states his alliance would work to put in place “a technocratic government” (Tsarukyan 2017b) which has authoritarian connotations. Along with their pro-Russian sympathies, there is enough evidence to place him and the BHK somewhere in the middle of the authoritarian-democratic dimension.

## 6. *The populist map in Armenia*

Having surveyed these manifestations of populism in Armenia, I now locate them in the conceptual graph presented earlier. As stated previously, Tsarukyan and the BHK can be located in the middle of the right side and on the border between authoritarianism and democracy. Pashinyan and the revolutionary movement can be classified in the lower half of the compass as extremely anti-authoritarian democrats. The guiding principle of him and the movement was the undemocratic nature of the ruling government and the need to replace it with a government that would reflect the will and interests of the people. For the left-right dimension, Pashinyan and the movement can be placed in the left-side quadrant. They are in favor of social assistance and a fairer distribution of wealth, but Pashinyan and the KP are clearly in favor of pro-liberal market freedoms. Hence, they should be placed in the lower left quadrant but not too far left, close to the border. Figure 2 below places the populist actors in Armenia in their respective positions in the populism compass.

Figure 4.2 Armenia's populist map



Source: Author's analysis

## 7. Discussion

As has been shown, populism is present in two locations in the political landscape of Armenia. But what general explanation can be given for the presence of populism in Armenia? I argue in favor of two factors. The first is in response to March's claim, noted at the beginning of this chapter, that populism is typically not found in post-Soviet states due to the prevalence of patron-client political relations. In such relations, patrons of high economic status provide benefits to persons of lower status in return for support to the patron (Scott 1972: 92; Baghdasaryan 2017: 3). Individuals organize their political activities around the exchange of rewards rather than around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological beliefs (Hale 2014: 9-10, 20). The political situation in Armenia, like that of many post-Soviet states,

is one of political patronage. Political actors, whether presidential candidates or political parties, act as patrons towards factions of the public, providing benefits in return for political support. Most political parties in Armenia are based on the patron-client relationship (Hale 2014: 356). March argues that patronal politics is incompatible with populism because the former is a kind of authoritarianism while the latter is fundamentally democratic. The former Soviet states are “authoritarian, patrimonial, and hence anti-populist” (March 2017: 220). Appearances of leaders such as Putin as populist are mere mirages, he claims, since they are in reality elitist by nature. I argue that it is a conceptual error to hold that populism is incompatible with political structures dominated by patron-client relations. As I hope to have shown in the first section, the notion that authoritarian politics are incompatible with populism is untrue; populism can be either authoritarian or democratic. Furthermore, the compatibility of populism and patronal politics can be seen by considering the nature of the two. A populist actor, one who emphasizes the antagonism between the people and corrupt elites, has a personalistic leadership style, communicates directly with the people, and focuses on short-term solutions to problems, could very well simultaneously engage in patron-client relations, offering benefits to followers in return for their support.<sup>13</sup> Gagik Tsarukyan of the BHK, discussed in the previous section, is an illustrative case. Tsarukyan offers benefits to his supporters in the form of housing and welfare support. His championing of the people against elites, his personalistic style, direct communication, and short-termism mark him as populist. Hence, the presence of patron-based politics in Armenia is no barrier to populism.

The second explanation for populism in Armenia builds on the first, which shows that populism characterized by clientelism is possible in a post-Soviet political environment. But what makes it likely? Scholars have pointed to a number of conditions which promote the emergence of populism. According to Deiwiks, whom I follow, there are two chief conditions (Deiwiks 2009: 3). Deiwiks has a third condition, charismatic leadership, which I leave out, since I have been including it as a defining feature of populism rather than a factor explaining why populism occurs. First, poor socioeconomic conditions or crises such as civil, political, eco-

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13 See Müller 2016: 4, who also notes the compatibility of populism and clientelism and Kenny (2017: 32-33) who argues from empirical grounds that political parties can be populist and patronage-based at the same time. Hale notes something similar when he comments that patronal politics ‘can be a form of mass empowerment’ (Hale 2014: 19), although there he is mainly referring to corruption and bribes.



conomic, or natural, together with the political system's inability to cope with these problems. This condition is satisfied in Armenia's case, which has been through several crises in recent years, such as the flaring up of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. A continuous low-level conflict, tensions increased in April 2016 with several hundred casualties on both sides. The economy has for several years been in a dismal condition, with a third of the population living at the poverty-line (Gevorgyan 2018).

The second of Deiwiks' conditions for the emergence of populism is the opaqueness of political institutions. In this way, the political arrangements of the society are such that it is unclear who rules and how. People lose trust in government and perceive it as no longer responsive to their needs. This also is a characteristic of Armenia's politics. The last two decades have seen the RPA-led government become dominant but through questionable elections, accompanied by a loss of public trust. Caucasus Barometer is a regional survey of public opinion asking questions on a number of dimensions. The barometer shows low levels of trust of parliament and executive government in Armenia since 2008 (Caucasus Barometer 2018). The perceived opaqueness of the government in Armenia further explains the emergence of populism there.

A further explanatory factor is particularly relevant for Armenia. Populism seems connected with ideological politics in an inverse relationship: the greater the degree of ideological content of politicians' and political parties' policies and manifestos, the less scope there is for populism. Conversely, the less ideological the parties are in a political environment, the more scope there is for populism to occur. This can be connected to the ideological thinness or primitiveness noted earlier. Although populism has some ideological content, by focusing on the people's will and interest against those of corrupt elites, as discussed previously, that content appears shallow in the sense of being left open for the people's interest/will to fill in the gaps. Populism's characteristic as a thin or primitive ideology creates a condition for making its emergence more likely. Political environments in which ideological parties are lacking mean that populism is more likely to occur. An ideological vacuum is an ideal place in which populism can flourish. The absence of sophisticated political parties and actors with reasonably well-worked out left- or right-wing platforms and manifestos mean that parties and actors who instead simply emphasize 'the people'

against 'the elites' are more likely to garner support.<sup>14</sup> Armenia fits this situation. Few parties have any ideological content to their election manifestos, instead having general policies, such as reducing corruption and providing security. Hale notes the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party (ARF) is an exception to this rule due to having an ideological position as a traditionally socialist party (Hale 2014: 356). However, over recent decades, its socialism has become so watered-down that it is barely an ideological party any more. The lack of sophisticated ideological debates in Armenian politics is another explanatory factor of the presence of populism.

Several factors account for the occurrence of populism in Armenia. Populism is compatible with (rather than contrary to) the patron-client political relations that exist in Armenia, much like the former Soviet Union. Moreover, Armenia has poor socioeconomic conditions and crises and opaque political institutions, both of which are conducive to the emergence of populism. Finally, the ideological deficit of many of the political parties in Armenia make it more likely for the characteristics of populism to prevail.

## 8. Conclusion

This chapter has identified two populist political actors in Armenia by way of a general conceptualization of populism and provided supporting explanations. Populism is indeed present in Armenia. This finding is important for several reasons. First, it enriches our understanding of the political landscape of a former Soviet Union country. We seek to understand different political systems, and identifying populism is a further component of the general task of understanding politics. Second, although there is still work to be done on the consequences of populism, there is reason to think those consequences are significant. An empirical study of populism across many societies found that when populists come to power, populist rule ultimately results in a decline in effective constraints on executive government. One

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14 However, one must be aware of a chicken-and-egg situation here. An ideological vacuum may be a precondition for populism but on the other hand, perhaps an environment favorable to populism makes ideologically sophisticated parties and actors less likely to emerge. Whatever the precise causal connection however (more complexly the factors could be mutually reinforcing), the hypothesis being put forward here is that a less ideologically rich political environment corresponds with greater scope for populism.

year of populist rule results in an average decline of five percentage points in judicial independence, two percentage points in political rights, and 1.6 percentage points in civil liberties (Kenny 2017: 44). Since a populist leader has become prime minister of Armenia, the question is whether this could lead to similar results. However, it should be noted that other studies see these consequences resulting from right-wing and authoritarian populists (Norris and Inglehart 2018) rather than left-wing populists, such as Pashinyan. What happens in Armenia will provide further data for assessing these more general claims about populism.

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