Research Article

The Different Face of Populism in Armenian Politics: Nikol Pashinyan

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Populist leaders have been gaining momentum in countries around the world in recent years, coming to power with great momentum and quickly losing support when their big promises fail to materialize. One of these leaders is Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who discussed a lot with the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh. There are some populist strategy areas in Pashinyan's policies. His promises of economic reforms and anti-corruption measures resonated with the public but implementing these reforms without causing economic instability has proven challenging. This research argues that his communication style, which often appeals directly to the people and bypasses traditional political channels, is characteristic of populist leaders. This study discusses that his populist rhetoric, particularly regarding Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, has exacerbated tensions and hindered diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. All of these issues are explored with analysing Pashinyan's political discourse in this article. The main purpose of this article is both to show that Pashinyan's populism is a unique type of populism different from other types of populism and to fill the gap in the literature on populism in Armenian domestic politics.

Introduction

In many countries across the world, there has been an increasing trend of populist politicians who come to power with an upsurging popularity but lose support as they fail to realize their promises. One among these politicians is Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of Armenia, who aroused public interest and became subject of criticisms with the Second Nargorno-Karabakh War. In Armenia, the "Velvet Revolution" of 2018 broke out as a result of a series of protests held by various political and non-governmental organizations against the government. Nikol Pashinyan, then a Member of the Parliament and known as a dissident journalist, led the protests. Having received the support of the National Council of Armenia in consequence of the protests, Nikol Pashinyan became successful with the movement and seized the seat of Prime Ministry.

A vast majority of the population held the belief that Nikol Pashinyan would be able to help Armenia gain footing in both the internal and international affairs. After becoming a Prime Minister, however, Nikol Pashinyan would use the claims of fight against the former government's corruption as a populist political ideology. To this end, Pashinyan gave provocative and populist speeches behind the National Council rostrum and gradually increased the number of his supporters. Seeing that this proved successful in the domestic policy, Pashinyan further attempted to use the same populist policy approach in the foreign policy of the country. Nevertheless, this approach would only result in a defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the further polarization of the Armenian society. This study aims to reveal how Nikol Pashinyan affected the Armenian society and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War with his political choices after his transformation from being a dissident journalist to a populist politician.

Armenia's party-political system shares both similarities and notable differences with those of other former Soviet republics. Like many post-Soviet states, Armenia's political system has struggled to establish stable, programmatic political parties with clear ideological distinctions. Instead, political life has often been dominated by elite networks and patronage systems, a pattern observed in countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. This reflects the broader post-Soviet challenge of transitioning from single-party rule under the Soviet Union to a competitive multiparty system in an environment marked by weak institutional frameworks and entrenched corruption (Hale, 2014).

A distinctive feature of Armenia's political system, however, is its significant reliance on nationalist rhetoric, rooted in its historical and geopolitical context. The unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has deeply shaped Armenia's political discourse, influencing party agendas and voter alignments. While nationalism plays a role in many post-Soviet states, such as in Moldova or Georgia, its centrality in Armenia has arguably eclipsed other ideological considerations. This contrasts with the party systems of Baltic states like Estonia or Lithuania, where European integration and liberal-democratic values have taken precedence in party competition (Way, 2015).

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Unlike more authoritarian post-Soviet regimes such as Russia, Kazakhstan, or Turkmenistan, Armenia has experienced greater political pluralism and competitive elections, particularly following the Velvet Revolution. However, its party system still struggles with institutionalization, as parties often revolve around charismatic leaders rather than clear ideological platforms. This aligns Armenia more closely with hybrid regimes like Ukraine or Georgia, where democratic institutions coexist uneasily with informal practices and elite-driven politics (Hale, 2014).

This study aims to fill an important gap in the literature in different aspects. In this context, it is important to determine that Pashinyan's populism does not fall within Western-style populist classifications that explains in the section 3. Reinhard Heinisch et al.'s *Populism in the European Periphery* (2023) examines how populism manifests in the unique contexts of post-conflict or divided societies, such as those in Southeastern and Eastern Europe after the collapse of Soviet Union. In these regions, populism is shaped by transitional challenges, weak institutional frameworks, and unresolved national identity questions. Leaders in such societies often employ populism to navigate fragmented political landscapes, leveraging narratives that unite disparate groups or intensify divisions to consolidate power. Post-conflict societies in the European periphery often lack consolidated party systems and institutional stability. This creates fertile ground for charismatic populist leaders to gain support, as voters typically lack strong party loyalties. In divided societies, populist leaders frequently use identity-based rhetoric. This includes appealing to ethnic, religious, or nationalistic sentiments to mobilize support, often framing their political agendas as protecting the "true people" against external or internal adversaries. Moreover, in the Balkans and other regions, unresolved historical grievances and the struggle to achieve political and economic stability allow populist actors to frame themselves as the voice of marginalized or oppressed groups.

Pashinyan has emerged as a populist figure in Armenia, which is an example of a post-conflict and divided society, and has tried to carry out his populist strategies through the main problem areas mentioned above. For instance, his promises of economic reforms and anti-corruption measures resonated with the public but implementing these reforms without causing economic instability has proven challenging. Pashinyan's use of media and rhetoric is another area of debate. This research argues that his communication style, which often appeals directly to the people and bypasses traditional political channels, is characteristic of populist leaders. Pashinyan's foreign policy decisions have also sparked debate. This study discusses that his populist rhetoric, particularly regarding Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, has exacerbated tensions and hindered diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. All of these issues are explored with analysing Pashinyan's political discourse in this article. Another contribution of the study to fill the gap in the literature is from the perspective of studies on Armenian domestic politics. As can be seen in detail in Section 4, the research on populism in academic studies on Armenian politics is quite limited. Therefore, this research fills the gap in the literature from this perspective.

This article first focuses on the basic methodology of the study, then, as mentioned above, it explores why Pashinyan populism is a different type of populism, and then the limitations of the studies on populism in Armenian politics. In the remaining part of the study, Pashinyan's political discourse is analysed and his populist strategies is revealed.

Methodology

The study employs political discourse analysis with exploring Pashinyan's discourses during his Prime Minister period. Having

localized political discourse analysis (PDA) in the broader critical approach to discourse, the main aim of this research is to spell out what it means by political discourse and how it can be studied in this research most interestingly, that is, critically. One major point in our argument is that such an analysis should not merely be a contribution to discourse studies, but also to political science and the social sciences more generally. This means, among other things, that PDA should be able to answer genuine and relevant political questions and deal with issues that are discussed in political science. That the analysis of political discourse is relevant for the new cross-discipline of discourse studies hardly needs any further argument. Indeed, most scholars doing political discourse analysis are linguists and discourse analysts (see, e.g., Chilton 1987; Geis 1987; Wilson 1990; Wodak & Menz 1990). However, when it considers the use or application of discourse approaches in political science, it finds that it is one of the few social sciences that so far have barely been infected by the modem viruses of the study of text and talk. As seen, what it finds in political science are studies on political communication and rhetoric (Bitzer, 1981; Chaffee 1975; Graber 1981; Swanson & Nimmo 1990). Only some of these approaches have recently taken a more discourse analytical orientation (Gamson 1992). Of course, such a plea can make an impression only if it has something to sell that political scientist want to buy. To present the argument that most phenomena in politics are forms of text and talk may be obvious, especially to a discourse analyst, but it is as such not a good reason for political scientists to change their current approach to a more discourse analytical one: Few scholars like Van Dijk (1997) and Fairclough (2013) are prepared to 'reduce' their field, or their methods, to those of another field.

Political discourse analysis is a field of discourse analysis which focuses on discourse in political forums (such as debates, speeches, and hearings from politicians or political actors) as the phenomenon of interest. The linguistics or critical discourse analysts work on discourse analysis rather than political scientists. Nevertheless, this research tries to adopt political discourse analysis in order to understand the Pashinyan's populist strategies in Armenian politics. Van Dijk (1997) and Fairclough (2013) claim that; political discourse analysis is not only the linguistic approach for discourse but also understanding political processes or political actions. In other words, once this study has analysed the particular properties of political contexts, political discourse analysis in many respects will be like any other kind of discourse analysis. The specifics of political discourse analysis therefore should be searched for in the relations between discourse structures and political context structures. Thus, whereas metaphors in classroom discourse may have an educational function, metaphors in politics will function in a political context, for instance in the attack on political opponents, the presentation of policies or the legitimation of political power. An account of the structures and strategies of, e.g., phonology, graphics, syntax, meaning, speech acts, style or rhetoric, conversational interactions, among other properties of text and talk is therefore necessarily part of political discourse analysis only if such properties can be politically contextualized.

Qualitative research methods, including document analysis, are concerned with understanding the context, meanings, and interpretations of data rather than quantifying or measuring variables. Through document analysis, researchers aim to explore complex social and cultural phenomena, providing in-depth insights into individuals' perspectives, historical trends, and societal norms. The process of document analysis typically involves gathering relevant documents related to the research question or topic. Documents can include written texts, reports, policy papers, historical records, interviews, photographs, newspapers, and other visual or textual materials. Document

analysis is a flexible and powerful qualitative method that allows researchers to explore various aspects of a research question. It can be used as a standalone approach or combined with other qualitative or quantitative methods to enrich the research process and provide comprehensive results (Sankofa, 2022). This study combines Political Discourse Analysis and Document analysis within this context. Political Discourse Analysis focuses on the language and rhetoric used to convey political messages, while Document Analysis provides a structured method to examine the content and context of written documents. Together, they allow researchers to analyze both the form (language and discourse) and substance (content and meaning). By cross-referencing findings from Political Discourse Analysis and Document Analysis, researchers can validate interpretations and identify connections between rhetorical strategies and document content.

As discussed, this study is scrutinizing a myriad of sources: official statements from political actors in Armenia, social media posts from their representatives and members, as well as leadership speeches like Pashniyan's public discourses available on YouTube and television channels. In particular, the fact that Pashinyan is a leader who uses social media very actively and gives frequent interviews to journalists led to the use of these data collection methods. As for the time period, the focus was on the period between 2018 and 2023, especially 2018 corresponds to Pashinyan's rise in Armenian politics. Overall, the investigation reveals the versatility of populist narratives in buttressing various political stances. They offer critical insights into the broader implications of political discourse, highlighting its potential to influence and shape diverse political choices across various contexts.

The Lack of Academic Debates on Pashinyan's Populism in Armenia

Populism has become a prominent feature of political discourse in Armenia, shaping public opinion, policymaking, and electoral outcomes. While some argue that populism has empowered the masses and brought about necessary reforms, others contend that it has undermined democratic institutions and exacerbated social divisions. This debate seeks to critically analyze the implications of populism in Armenia, drawing on scholarly research and empirical evidence.

Populist movements in Armenia have mobilized marginalized groups, providing them with a platform to voice their grievances and demand political representation. This has led to a more inclusive political landscape, where previously marginalized voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes (Grigoryan, 2019). Populist leaders like Serzh Sargsyan in Armenia have challenged the entrenched political elite and implemented reforms aimed at combating corruption and nepotism. By prioritizing the needs of the people over the interests of the elite, populist movements have brought about tangible improvements in governance and accountability (World Bank, 2020). Populist rhetoric often emphasizes the importance of direct democracy and grassroots participation, leading to increased civic engagement among ordinary citizens. This has revitalized civil society in Armenia, with grassroots movements playing a key role in holding the government accountable and advocating for social justice (Hovhannisyan, 2018).

Populist leaders in Armenia have demonstrated authoritarian tendencies, undermined democratic institutions and concentrated power in their own hands. By bypassing checks and balances, populists have weakened the rule of law and threatened the foundations of liberal democracy (Freedom House, 2021). Populist rhetoric often relies on simplistic narratives and scapegoating tactics, fueling social divisions and undermining national unity. This has led to heightened polarization within Armenian society before the Velvet Revolution, hindering constructive dialogue and cooperation between different political factions (Keskin, 2020). Populist policies, such as excessive public spending and currency manipulation, have contributed to economic instability and uncertainty. By prioritizing short-term political gains over long-term economic sustainability, populists have jeopardized Armenia's economic prospects and hindered its integration into the global economy (IMF, 2020).

In Armenia, the populism debates regarding the Pashinyan era have only centered on foreign policy and the Karabakh War. Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan (2022) examine the sources of the foreign policy-making style of the populist regime in Armenia and explore the extent to which they have affected the decision-making process and its 'resultants.' The article argues that the incoherent and erratic nature of the new regime's policy formulation and enactment, which underestimated acute security challenges and degraded existing institutional checks and balances, caused unprecedented wreckage to Armenia's national security architecture.

The debate surrounding populism in Armenia is multifaceted, reflecting divergent perspectives on its implications for democracy, governance, and socio-economic development. While some argue that populism has empowered the marginalized and brought about much-needed reforms, others caution against its authoritarian tendencies and divisive impact on society. Ultimately, addressing the challenges posed by populism in Armenia requires a nuanced understanding of its root causes and a commitment to fostering inclusive and accountable governance.

Nevertheless, as can be seen, studies on populism in Armenia are quite limited in the literature. In this limitation, researchers have focused on the corruption in Armenia before the Velvet Revolution, particularly during the Sarghsyan era. Pashinyan, on the other hand, is a politician who strengthened his popularity in response to this corruption, but did not refrain from pursuing populist strategies like his predecessors. However, there is no study in the literature on the populist strategies during the Pashinyan era. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

Why Pashinyan's Populism is Different?

In academic studies conducted in Western Europe, North America and Latin America, populism has been interpreted in different ways. The concept of populism, which is criticized for its ambiguity, is also used by politicians to accuse each other (Mudde, 2019, pp. 11-12). Its negative meaning causes it to be unaccepted by anyone and causes ambiguity in meaning. The acceptance of populism is facilitated by many different reasons such as increasing inequalities in the background, globalization, a certain segment of society feeling unrepresented, the existence of social favoritism, rapid and destructive changes (Angelis, 2017: 10). The fact that it emerges differently in different geographies is one of the factors that deepen the ambiguity of meaning. Populism, which emerges as a tool of an anti-Muslim politician in one place, may also manifest itself with a Muslim politician in another place. In order to understand populism within this complexity of meaning, it is useful to look at its key concepts: General will, the people and elites.

The public is limited to the mass that elects the populist leader (Mudde, 2019, p. 16). The politician chooses his/her own people and represents only the people he/she chooses. The elites are the political opponents of populist leaders and argue that the people have no say in governance. The populist politician, on the other hand, has assumed the role of the voice of the people with the general will of the people and is in power as one of the people. This is a victory of the people over their enemies. Before the populist politician becomes the voice of the people, elites are the rulers and the people are the ruled. The elites are not only political enemies,

but sometimes they also exist in the economic sphere, and sometimes political and economic enemies act together. It is democratic populist politicians who stand by the people against the elites who defend the rights of foreigners and immigrants (Mudde, 2019, p. 29). However, it is debatable whether they are democratic or not, as there is no full representation with the limited public they have formed (Mudde, 2019: 32). They use direct democracy as a tool for their goals by eliminating political parties.

Populism existed as a pre-populist movement during the period of fascism. As a regime, it emerged with the fall of fascism. The ideology, which is similar to fascism in terms of representing the voice of the people, differs from fascism by accepting the existence of democracy and elections (Finchelstein, 2019, p.142). Post-1945 modern populism has been analyzed in four phases:

1. Classical populism is the first emergence of populism. In Argentina, Juan Peron and his wife Eva Peron were the pioneers.
2. Neoliberal populism consists of a group of elitists or economically comfortable masses. It is a group of political elites who are ready to spend their own money for the people, even though they have no vested interest. Examples are Berlusconi in Italy, Cem Uzan in Turkey and Trump in the US.
3. Neoclassical left populism, also called left populism. It is anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela is an example.
4. Right and Extreme Right Neoclassical Populism is known for being anti-immigrant. (Finchelstein, 2019, p. 144) Racism, xenophobia, opposition to multiculturalism, ethnic and religious centrism are observed.

Populism has a broad base of supporters who are less educated, fearful of globalization and change, conservative, anti-elite, including young people, adults, retired, unemployed and blue-collar workers (Angelis, 2017, p.10). The populist leader, in his desire to appear as one of the people, determines his own constituency (Müller, 2016, p. 42). The elitist group, which is characterized as the enemy by populists, is seen as a class that lies, risks everything for its own interests, does not think about the people, has no idea whether the people can adapt to change or not, and looks down on them, and the public is made to see them that way.

At the same time, there are important studies in the literature on the contextual relationship between populism and political discourse. Howard and Torfing (2004) situate discourse theory within the realm of European politics, emphasizing how discourses shape identity, governance, and policy. Their study examines discourse as a mechanism through which political actors articulate grievances and build collective identities. In the case of populism, this is particularly evident in the construction of a dichotomy between "the people" and "the elite." Their reliance on Laclau and Mouffe's ideas ties populism to the broader dynamics of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Ghergina, Mişcoiu and Soare (2013) address the diverse manifestations of populism and the controversies surrounding its conceptualization. This study emphasizes that populism is not a monolithic phenomenon but adapts its discourse to different socio-political contexts. This adaptability underlines the centrality of discourse in shaping populist rhetoric. It highlights how populists utilize discourse to appeal to marginalized groups, presenting themselves as the sole representatives of "the people" against corrupt elites. Accordng to Mişcoiu, Craciun and Colopelnic (2008), populist leaders often employ interventionist discourses to present themselves as decisive actors who can resolve societal issues. Like Howarth and Torfing, this study builds on Laclau's framework, underscoring the pivotal role of "empty signifiers" (e.g., "the people") in populist discourse.

This is where Pashinyan differs from other populist leaders. Pashinyan, who does not fit into any of the ideological classifications in the historical process, has also never been portrayed as a populist leader by the Western world. However, his successful implementation of the basic strategies of populism mentioned above challenges this situation. The main purpose of this study is to explore this phenomenon through Pashinyan's biography, leadership figure and political discourse.

Pashinyan's Journey From Journalism to Politics

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was born in Ijevan on June 1, 1975. He was named after his grandfather who passed away during the World War II. His father, Vova Pashinyan, was a physical education teacher but also worked as a football and volleyball coach. His mother died in 1987 and, therefore, Nikol Pashinyan was mostly raised by his step-mother (Kshetri, 2021, pp. 112-113). Having completed his primary and secondary education in Ijevan, he was admitted to Yerevan State University where he studied journalism. As a student, Nikol Pashinyan organized demonstrations due to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War between 1998 and 1994. Since his two elder brothers served in the military, he did not do his service as there was no legal obligation (Iskandaryan, 2018: 475).

While a student, he worked as an internee at Dprutyun, Hayastan, Lragir and Molorak newspapers. He published news in printed media. He was already famous as a skilled journalist when he graduated from university in 1995. He also went into politics at 23, and coordinated the presidency campaign of one the candidates during the 1998 elections (Iskandaryan, 2018, pp. 475-476). In 1998, he became an editor-in-chief after founding his daily newspaper "Oragir". The newspaper was aligned with the policies of the opposition party "Nor Ughi" which was led by Ashot Bleyan, then Minister of Culture. Throughout the elections, the newspaper published 281 news about the political parties that took part in the elections. 11 of these formed a positive view on them. All these positive news were about the Pan-Armenian National Movement, the political party led by Levon Ter-Petrosyan, former President the newspaper favored (Grigorian, 1999). Moreover, as a journalist, Nikol Pashinyan played a significant role in various scandals and cases that criticized many public officials. It is a difficult job to separate one's journalism from political activism. Therefore, he became known as an fierce critic of the regime.

As of 2000, he was the editor-in-chief of the Haykakan Jamanak newspaper where he exhibited a quite critical approach towards President Robert Kocharyan and his administration. In 2007, he founded the "Impeachment Block" which called on President Robrt Kocharyan and Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan on the grounds of "treason" and "other grave offenses". In the 2007 elections, the bloc received the votes of around 17,000 voters which equaled to 1,3%. However, there were allegations of fraud and 400,000 faggot votes (Iskandaryan, 2018: 476). Later on, the bloc joined with the "Armenian National Assembly" which was founded by the Pan-Armenian National Movement as against the Karabakh Clan, led by former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan and consisted of various opposing parties. Thus, while he was 33, Nikol Pashinyan took part in the election crew of Levon Ter-Petrosyan. In 2008, he became one of the notable speakers in the post-election meetings. In the same year, a police search was carried out against him due to his fierce criticisms against President Serzh Sargsyan and his administration. He surrendered in 2009 and was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment but was pardoned in 2011 (Ishkanian, 2018: 271). Pashinyan continued his career at the Armenian National Assembly and was elected as a Member of the Parliament. In 2012, he left the crew of former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan. He created a non-governmental organization named "Civil Contract" which became a political

party in 2015. After a rapid rise in the party, he led the anti-government protests in 2018 when he was 43. The protests paved the way for the elections. As the leader of Civil Contract, Nikol Pashinyan thus came to power with the 2018 elections and became the new prime minister of Armenia (Miarka, 2019, pp. 42-45).

All his life prior to 2018 was a struggle against the Armenian government. He started his career as a critical, dissident journalist and achieved a popular position among the young masses by separating himself from the traditional opposition. He was not one of the former politicians in many aspects, including his age. He was one generation younger than the politicians that emerged in 1980s and came to power with the independence struggles and the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Holding that the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was not a part of their individual history anymore, the younger generation believed the former political generation was out of date, therefore feeling closer to now Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan owing to his style, paradigm and even appearance. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, on the other hand, took lessons from the 2008 protests and realized the necessity that he had to follow a populist line in politics (Iskandaryan, 2018, p. 476).

The Rise of Populism in Armenia

Were it not for his populist political stance, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan would not be able to carry out the 2018 protests successfully. Such that, as a former newspaper editor, Nikol Pashinyan gained recognition during President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's campaign to return to the office in the 2008 presidency elections. He became one of the notable speakers especially in the meetings. He was accused of provoking "mass disorder" by criticizing President Serzh Sargsyan and his administration during the post-election meetings. He surrendered in 2009 and started to serve his sentence. However, he was released with general amnesty in 2011 (Ishkanian, 2018, p.271). One year later, he was elected to the National Council of Armenia as a member of the Armenian National Assembly but soon left it to found his own party. During the six years he was at the Assembly, he criticized President Serzh Sargsyan and his administration, and many times condemned the corruption of and power attained by the oligarchs who emerged as part of the privatization process in the post-USSR period (Atanesyan, 2018, pp. 81-95). The oligarchs in Armenia were in control of key industries such as mining, telecommunication, agriculture and accommodation. Some of them were members of the National Assembly who benefited from the immunity granted to the members of the parliament (Ishkanian, 2018, p. 272).

Nikol Pashinyan was backed by supporters during the 2018 anti-government protests. The demands especially for Serzh Sargsyan's resignation and for a punishment imposed on the oligarchs due to corruption received support from the people who were fed up with the status quo (Lanskoy and Suthers, 2019). Leading the protests, Nikol Pashinyan applied to new organization and mobility methods that used populism and had not been experienced in Armenia before. In this sense, the protests were not held as meetings in a single square but as non-violent civil disobedience acts by blocking the streets, hindering the traffic and causing noise before state agencies. Having adopted noise-making strategies of football fans around the world (such as South African vuvuzelas and Icelandic Viking thunder clap), the protesters created a carnival-like atmosphere during the day demonstrations. At 11 P.M. every night, the protesters made noise by clashing pots and pans for 15 minutes (Ishkanian, 2018, p. 272).

Social movement specialists asserted that emotions were of importance at every stage and field of the protests and that they may prove helpful for the success of mobility efforts and strategies and, finally, of political movements. From hope to joy and anger, positive and negative emotions encouraged the people to revolt in

Armenia and played a key role in enhancing it. Making it to the streets in Yerevan, Gyumri and Vanadzor as well as towns and villages, the people pronounced their anger towards and disapproval of Serzh Sargsyan's administration. Previously considered as an indifferent, fatalist and dejected, they came to hope and believe that they could spark change through the protests.

During the 2018 protests, Nikol Pashinyan was likened to Nelson Mandela, former President of the Republic of South Africa. Calls were even made to nominate him to Nobel Peace Prize. As of the revolution, a series of songs were written in honor of Nikol Pashinyan. Maxims, t-shirts, hats and various kinds of souvenirs adorned the streets. The ample acclamation would later lead to doubts with regard to concerns of power concentration and the rise of a populist culture around the new leader.

The Logic of Pashinyan's Populist Strategies

The most basic populist strategy Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan applied was polarization of Armenian society. Hayk Marutyan, former Mayor of Yerevan and a supporter of Nikol Pashinyan, revealed his polarizing policy during the 2018 local elections by expressing the following: "The situation in Armenia is quite clear: There are the white powers and then there are the black powers, period. I want to express this officially: We are the white powers and there are those, that is, the black powers, who don't want our success! (Armenpress, 2018)" When Hayk Marutyan uttered these words, nobody could have anticipated that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan would borrow them as a slogan to shape his political mindset and behavior. Indeed, no one thought that these words could serve as a new propaganda tool to justify a lack of vision and strategy as well as bad performance. While "the whites" were determined to represent the leading force of the 2018 protests and meet the demands of the people, "the blacks" symbolized the former elites that were bound to face the new government. Here, anti-elitism is of great significance as one of the most basic strategies of populism.

According to political scientists, Armenia became a chessboard due to the confrontation between "the blacks" and "the whites" that were led by Nikol Pashinyan. Contrary to chess masters, Nikol Pashinyan applied neither to strategy nor to tactics. As a politician, his faculties were limited with calculating only a couple of moves ahead and were sufficient only to deal with impending difficulties. Therefore, Pashinyan's statements were mostly contradictory. His decisions were based on present situations and, therefore, could only help to save the day by luck. This administrative approach intended to focus on the mistakes of opponents rather than wisdom and a strategy of achievement. It resembled a kind of a gamble as a dangerous and adventurous path. It was also similar to playing chess where a risky opening move may be the first sacrifice for a disastrous checkmate. When he started a marching in 2018 with his team going from Gyumri to Yerevan, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan embarked on a risky, unpredictable affair (Abadjian, 2020: 143). Until 2020, "success" was on his side. Although the game he had set up earlier seemed to be promising, it ended up otherwise later on and especially in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

In order to understand the political character of Nikol Pashinyan, it is necessary to consider once more the nature of power. The facts and analyses clearly point out to his populist stance. Nevertheless, his populism has a set of distinct features that distinguish him as a unique politician among other renowned populists. For example; Nikol Pashinyan does not follow a nationalistic policy which is the case with other populist politicians. Indeed, the Civil Contract in power had previously rejected any ideological label claiming that it had no ideology whatsoever. Pashinyan stressed the following during the Fifth Conference of his party in June 2019: "We are neither liberal nor

centrists. We are not social democrats either. We are a party of citizens. That is, we place ourselves beyond the ideological standardization (Pashinyan, 2019).” Interpreted as the lack of a practical vision or a conceptual approach, this absence of ideology leads to failures in enforcing real political and legal reforms or long-term socioeconomic development programs. A policy without an ideology cannot offer valuable solutions to the issues of peoples as it is reactive to situations and produces only inefficient decisions.

Another paradoxical quality of Pashinyan’s populism is the pursuit of full support by civil society which prevails in liberal democratic states. Although modern populism is regarded as a challenge against liberal democracy, the “Open Society Institute” and various other non-governmental organizations in Armenia supported Nikol Pashinyan (Müller, 2014). In particular, the “Soros society”, known in Armenia as “Sorosakan”, received “Soros grants” from the Open Society Institute and supported Nikol Pashinyan and his government (Abadjian, 2020, p. 144). The Open Society Institute has a considerable effect on the decision-making processes of Nikol Pashinyan.

In Armenia, both the opposition and the other segments of the society criticize the Soros-backed Open Society Institute and other non-governmental organizations with allegations that they scupper the national traditions and the Christian morals. They reject the idea that lack of an original ideology can be compensated by an “imported” one and that the principles of liberal democracy are the norms in the formation of democratic societies (Abadjian, 2020, p. 144). The opposition, in particular, suggested that the Open Society Institute and various non-governmental organizations were “agents of influence” assigned by the “Western powers” so as to do away with President Serzh Sargsyan, who had been loyal to the interests of the Russian Federation (RF) as already proved. At this point, it is assumed that the 2018 protests were not triggered by external factors but by the inconsistent policies of the three and especially the last of these presidents (Arzumanyan, 2019). External factors may attempt to influence and thus avail themselves of the conditions in Armenia or elsewhere; however, these initiatives only play a complementary role to internal factors and developments. The “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine and the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia are examples to such events. Since these protests broke out as large scale movements against the traditional regimes of the post-USSR period, it is not sufficient to point out to external factors alone as a “conspiracy theory” to explain the motivations. If we think, on the other hand, that Soros and similar other figures are mainly targeted by populist politicians, Nikol Pashinyan’s populism offers an obvious paradox.

Considering the escalating conflicts between the Western countries and the Russian Federation, it is possible to assert that the Western countries are partly responsible for the developments in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia as claimed by Russia; this is because certain foreign powers seek out ways to work the developments to their favor or organizations like the Open Society Institute pave the way for revolts by disseminating ideas of liberal democracy (Abadjian, 2020: 144). The main difference between Armenia and the aforementioned countries is that external factors play a minor role compared to internal ones depending on not only geopolitical situation, but also historical and cultural drivers (Shirinyan, 2018, pp. 146-149).

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s populism is also characterized with a lack of personal integrity. He exhibits a wide range of behaviors from contradictory statements to excellent selfies, never-ending livestreams on Facebook, exaggeration of small achievements as if big successes and a record of suspicious socioeconomic progress. It is almost impossible to spot another

populist leader who has excelled hate speech “culture” like Nikol Pashinyan. During a livestream, he publicly revealed this hate speech with expressions such as “Supreme Court of Coronavirus”, “crying judges”, “lynch on the streets” and “kill the descendants of Serge”. (Abadjian, 2020, p. 145). Nikol Pashinyan’s populism also incorporates the glorification of the concept of public as one of the most fundamental arguments of populism. Finishing one of his speeches with praises towards the public, Pashinyan said “Public is our honor, ruler, king and the greatest power in Armenia.” (Pashinyan, 2020).

Another populist strategy Nikol Pashinyan implemented was to devise policies against the perception of an imaginary enemy in cases of possible extraordinary conditions or social crises rather than trying to solve the problem. He especially tried to apply this strategy during the Covid-19 period. However, the protests that came out as a result of inefficient management of the pandemic once more revealed his weak bonds with democratic norms. On 17 February 2020, Pashinyan started his campaign for the April 5 referendum campaign in Yerevan by distributing the “Passport of the Proud Citizen” leaflets that elucidated the historical significance of a positive voting and suggested that the judges against it should be removed from the Supreme Court (Abadjian, 2020, p. 140). His speeches were rarely about the referendum. They focused on the “offenses and betrayals” of former leaders on their perception as enemies rather than dwelling on the performance and achievements of the present government.

Covid-19 had already spread to the whole world when Armenia was experiencing only a few cases. Despite this, Pashinyan continued his referendum campaign unabated. Together with the Minister of Health, he claimed that the virus was overestimated and that the opposition was making calls to take immediate precautions in order to sabotage the referendum. While there were many question marks about the new virus, the opposition observed that precautions could help to slow down the spread of the disease (Ozinian, 2020).

Two weeks after the first Covid-19 case, the government declared a state of emergency on 16 March 2020, halted the referendum preparations and issued a restrictive decree-law for the media broadcasts. The government responded to criticisms from media representatives and non-governmental organizations with immediate and oppressive measures. Furthermore, a debated resolution was offered to the Armenian National Assembly which suggested the identification and quarantine of Covid-19 contacts using the data from smart phones as part of the Electronic Communication Law. After being rejected during the first session of the assembly, the proposed law was adopted during the second session where only the members of the ruling party were present (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2020). Although the government may have been right to take immediate action, the opposition also had a legitimate aim to protect personal rights and liberties through alternative measures. The increase of the Covid-19 cases from 532 at the outbreak to 18.033 in just two months showed that the measures of the government were ineffective and imposed with ulterior motives (Abadjian, 2020, p. 141).

The negotiations at the National Assembly revealed that no heed was taken of democratic procedures and norms. The members of the ruling party, in particular, defined the criticisms of the opposition as manipulation and its boycott of the ballot as a disrespect towards the public. The government accused the opposition of not complying with the state of emergency and of seeking political gain on state interests (Abadjian, 2020, p. 142). These allegations were a part of the attempts to scapegoat the former administration in line with Nikol Pashinyan’s populist strategies. The ineffective management of the pandemic,

worsening socioeconomic conditions and growing hostility significantly escalated the conflicts between the government and the opposition. Gagik Tsarukyan, the leader of the opposing party "Prosperous Armenia", harshly criticized the poor performance of the government in realizing the promised "revolutionary" reforms and managing the Covid-19 process (Azatutyun, 2020). He called for a complete change of the government so as to prevent economic downfall. It was, in fact, a call to take down Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

Having established his own cadre to the government, Nikol Pashinyan's response was very harsh (Haberbin, 2020). He accused Gagik Tsarukyan of causing a damage of tens of millions of dollars to the state and of buying mass votes. Thereafter, Gagik Tsarukyan and his supporters walked to the National Security Service building and demonstrated despite the state of emergency. The police force brutally responded to the protests and arrested hundreds of protesters including women. Before long, the immunity of Gagik Tsarukyan, a Member of the Parliament, was abolished (Abadjian, 2020, p. 142). The government charged the opposition with applying to illegal ways so as to take down Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The opposition, on the other hand, blamed him for using the state of emergency as a pretext for oppressing the opposition and restricting fundamental human rights. Pashinyan's government followed a trajectory in the domestic politics with populist policies as of 2018. However, the foreign policy took a very different turn with the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The indistinct nationalist ideology before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War gained strength with Pashinyan's populist policies and acquired an irreversible state. The offensives against Azerbaijan and the subsequent war produced disastrous consequences in the international politics for Armenia. It is possible to assert that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's populism had a non-negligible influence in this disaster.

This study analyses Pashinyan's populist strategies in the context of domestic political dynamics from 2018 to the Nagorno-Karabakh war. However, especially after the war, there are developments in the foreign policy axis that prove Pashinyan's populist line. Following Armenia's military defeat, Pashinyan emerged as a pragmatic nationalist. Between 2020 and 2023, he gradually came to terms with the loss of territory, including Karabakh in 2023, and demonstrated a willingness to pursue a peace treaty with Azerbaijan. However, Pashinyan's populism is evident in the contradiction between his stated commitment to European integration and Armenia's deepening ties with Russia. He has yet to clarify how Armenia might withdraw from the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and the Eurasian Economic Union—moves that would likely face significant resistance from Vladimir Putin. Moreover, Armenia cannot join two customs unions simultaneously, meaning it cannot sign an Association Agreement with the EU while remaining a member of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Although Pashinyan has claimed Armenia is "suspending" its CSTO membership, this declaration carries little weight, as the CSTO has always been more symbolic than functional. More critically, since 2022, Armenia—alongside Georgia and Kyrgyzstan—has played a significant role in helping Russia circumvent Western sanctions. The dramatic increase in Armenian-Russian trade reflects Armenia's role in re-exporting goods to Russia, further entrenching their economic ties and undermining rhetoric about European integration. While Pashinyan positions himself as an opponent of the pro-Russian elite (represented by figures like Sargsyan, Kocharyan, and Ter-Petrosyan), his actions align with their approach. This inconsistency highlights the populist nature of his leadership.

Conclusion

Like every populist politician, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan also claimed that the source of his power was the people and that he and his party were supported by the vast majority of the public. Indeed, his party proved it by taking 70.4% of all the votes during the 2018 elections. During the following process, he could not maintain his popularity after failing to realize a significant part of the "revolutionary" promises in the domestic politics and receiving a defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Despite this, his party remained in power by receiving 54% of all the votes during the 2021 elections. In this sense, it is possible to suggest that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who met a serious loss of votes, could preserve his popularity before the people owing to his strategies.

According to political scientists, populists rely on a familiar rationalization to legitimize lack of progress. That is, the impute their failures to former governments by dividing people as "the whites" and "the blacks". They come up with "revolutionist" and "anti-revolutionist" powers in order to polarize people and maintain their administration on these polarized groups. The policies of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan accord remarkably with such formula. Even more, Nikol Pashinyan took a step further by changing the whole administration, so that he could acquire absolute power. If we also consider the enforcement of certain restrictive laws, it is possible to suggest that the revolution in Armenia became an illiberal democracy.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's populism mainly differs from traditional populism in one aspect. In traditional populism, the directions of leaders' policies are clear and comprehensible. It is an approach with its own rules and rationale. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's approach, on the other hand, does not conform to the rules or rationale of any ideology or vision. Indeed, the Civil Contract is devoid of an ideology and even of supporting grassroots among the public. This is because "public" is a very wide concept that cannot be associated with a separate political power. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's party, however, came to power without clearly expressed vision or goals and, therefore, without a program that defined the concrete steps to achieve such goals. That is, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan achieved the power as a result of the public fury against the former government.

Nikol Pashinyan's party, Civil Contract, was neither a institutionalized nor a systematic movement unlike those of established democracies. In this sense, Nikol Pashinyan's personality compensates the absence of his party's vision and a party program in Armenia. As is the case in many authoritarian states, this party continues to take office in Armenia as the "personal tool of a charismatic leader" in a "fluid or poorly institutionalized" system. This study attempts to discover how populist strategies governed the Armenian politics by analyzing the political journey of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who appeared as a charismatic leader but tried to maintain his administration with populist strategies. This research claims that populism involves the mobilization of the 'common people' against the 'elite', and Pashinyan's rise to power through mass protests against corruption could be seen as a populist movement.

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