

AN EXAMINATION OF THE INTERSECTION OF POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF ARMENIA¹

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ABSTRACT

The highly contested construct of populism continues to be under the close investigation of scholars around the world. Its potential positive as well as negative impacts on democracy and democratic institutions are regarded as tenuous and difficult to generalize. However, despite the prime focus of studies on Western (right) and Latin American (left) variations, empirical studies are sparse, and little is analyzed about the populist challenge to democracies, particularly on transitioning democracies that have not attained political resilience against shocks or complex challenges to the system.

The aim of the present research is a) to analyze the impact populism may or may not have had on the nascent democratic system of government in the Republic of Armenia, taking into account the time frame of April/May 2018 up until November 2020; and b) to analyze the populist challenge to democratic institutions and governance under the complex challenges created by the new Coronavirus pandemic and the war in Artsakh. The research adds new knowledge to academia by way of demonstrating the changes in populist manifestation in election campaigns as opposed to in government, also focusing on and analyzing changing patterns of populist impact on key components of the local democratic (unconsolidated) regime, under the unforeseen influence of unexpected and unprecedented challenges.

BACKGROUND

Social science scholars have long considered various aspects of populism,

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This research would have not been completed without the thorough supervision of Dr. Arpie G. Balian. I would also like to express my gratitude to my family, classmates and closest friends, who were exceptionally encouraging and understanding at difficult times of developing this study.

but the topic gained more resonance and was widely discussed in the past decades, gradually inciting growing debate on perceptions, meanings, implications, and diverse features of the construct (Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Stavrakakis and Jäger, 2008). In its early manifestation, populism conjectured demagogic leaders who came on stage making popular promises to the people and building political support by invoking the power of the people (de la Torre, 2015; Mudde, 2004). Gradually, populist movements have emerged in different parts of the world, mobilizing segments of the populace under the guise of achieving improved governance and democratization or other contrasting and divergent notions of practices aimed at influencing the political landscape (Ristov, 2017; Urbinati, 2018).

In retrospect, the resurgence of populism in the 19th century American and Russian movements points to the birth of egalitarian struggle against the elite (Urbinati, 1998; Yaman, 2009; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Woods, 2014). Whether through a coalition of agrarian activists or the mass political awakening of peasants, these movements were organized and also perceived as intended for corrective reform measures (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Kudors and Pabriks, 2017; de Vresse et al., 2018; Urbinati, 2018) and demands for restraining the elite from realizing their planned modernization pursuits (Urbinati, 2018; Viviani, 2018).

However, parallel to the gradual transformation of the socio-economic and geopolitical environment in different regions, populism has also taken on different forms and pursued diverse schemas, portraying similar or contrasting articulations of the phenomenon (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013).

THE CASE OF ARMENIA

Considering that no standard definition has emerged, except for a few prevalent explanations, the concept of populism merits further attention to recognize the potential challenges it poses to democracy and the unique differences among the triggers of history, culture, and sociopolitical position of the country where it sprouts.

The paper is a study of populism in the Republic of Armenia (RA), as manifested in the period of 2018 to November 2020, a time period during which Armenia had just moved to the parliamentary system of government, was challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Artsakh war, and faced ensuing social, political, and economic challenges. It is important to investigate whether or not populism was uniformly manifested during that period (pre-election, rise to power, COVID-19, wartime, and afterwards) and what were the most marked triggers and conceptual underpinnings of those changes, if any.

In April-May 2018, mass protests in major cities across the country grabbed

the attention of the global media and increased interest in studying the dynamics of populist politics and shedding further light on the characteristics and constructs of the phenomenon. The movement, branded the ‘Velvet Revolution’, was generally peaceful and brought to power its initiator Nikol Pashinyan, the leader of the Civil Contract opposition party. The rhetoric that brought thousands of young and old to assemble in his support was a vivid expression that *“Armenians had grown tired of broken promises, endemic corruption, and the widening gap between the country’s haves and have-nots”* as one global reporter wrote in *The Atlantic* on April 24, 2018 in an article titled “Armenian Democratic Triumph”.² Similar content dominated the local and international media.

An examination of the populist movement in Armenia, before and after the 2018 snap parliamentary elections, will add new insight into the evolving understanding and triggers of the populist phenomenon and lay out its potential influence on the process of democratization. *“The danger in post-revolutionary Armenia was always that Pashinyan, lacking the ability to transform the country quickly or sustainably, would fall back on the populism that got him into power”* wrote a Freedom House expert months after Pashinyan was victorious in the elections.³ But, not all populism is damaging or counterproductive vis-à-vis the state, which is what the current study examines. Particularly the concepts of power, pluralism, polyarchy, and the democratization process embedded in democratic theory are examined within the populist framework exercised by Pashinyan at different stages of the period considered, before and after the 2018 elections and up to the present.

POPULISM AS AN IDEOLOGY

The construct put forth by Mudde (2004) reflects a dominant theme in the literature on populism that captures the essence of the concept, beyond the characteristics of populist rhetoric, demagoguery, and power-striving discourse, within the discordant relationship between the ‘elite’ and the ‘people’. Thus, populism is

“A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (the general will) of the people. Populism, so defined, has two opposites: elitism and pluralism” (Mudde, 2004: 543).

The characterization of populism as a “thin-centered” ideology separates it from genuine political ideologies, inferring the absence or deficiencies vis-à-vis

² Ironically, on the date of commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

³ A tweet by Nate Schenkkan of Freedom House on 20/5/2019.

clear principles and directions (Abromeit, 2017: 3; Woods, 2014: 11).

Moreover, although the Manichean distinction between the people and the elite describes the very essence of populism, it is manifested in different regions and states based on different criteria (Cannovan, 1999: 3-4). Hence, populism *“resists generalizations and makes scholars of politics comparative by necessity”* (Urbinati, 2018: 111).

Despite its thinness, populism (as an ideology) contains several components to establish itself as a unique, internally coherent map of political principles that a populist uses to attain power (Stanley, 2008: 102). The author expounds on the four components necessary for production of a populist ideology,

“The assumption of the existence of two homogeneous units: the elite and the people; the position of the postulation of an antagonistic relationship between these two entities; the celebration of the idea of popular sovereignty; the positive moral valorization of the people and denigration of the elite” (Stanley, 2008: 111).

POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY

Populism at Odds with Liberal Democracy

Within the context of this paper, the term democracy is understood as a system which promotes creating the necessary conditions to protect fundamental rights, including those of minorities. In essence, respect for diverse positions and groups through the advancement of plurality is embedded in liberal democracies, unlike democracies *sans* adjectives, which would essentially mean ‘rule by the people’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). The populist challenge to pluralism as the cornerstone tenet of a liberal democratic regime threatens the regime’s gradual reversal to authoritarianism, in which top-down politics eliminates the possibility of exercising evidence-based dialogue among multiple actors and undermines the performance of good governance.

The question whether populism is at odds with democracy *per se* has been rejected by many scholars who conjecture that populism could bolster political participation of the unheard segments of society and rejuvenate democracy (Urbinati, 2018; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Laclau, 2005; Kazin, 1995; Taggart, 2016). Moreover, some argue that *“Populism per se is neither good nor bad for the democratic system”* (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 79).

Questions arise, however, when one attempts to separate democracy (as a political regime) from liberal democracy (as a political system), examining the relevant constructs, such as the people, compromise, consensus, sovereignty, etc. (Rostbøll, 2000: 1; 2002: 34). Aside from majority rule and popular sovereignty, democratic institutions are specially designed to protect individual rights and freedoms, and to serve the interests of minorities of different types,

thereby assuring the inclusion of every citizen (de Wagt, 2016).

However, the global changes of 21st century liberal democracies not only serve as reasons for more people to isolate themselves from active political participation, but also underscore the differences among representative institutions and populist forces (Viviani, 2018; de Wagt, 2016). For a populist, these institutions are no longer capable of addressing the ever-changing issues of the people and leave them on the sideline, alienated and unnoticed. Hence, not only populists reject the democratic elements of pluralism (considering all interests of different segments of society), but they also reject a whole segment of society representing the elite and the institutions that pursue its policy agenda (Mueller, 2019; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016, Urbinati, 1998).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The case study builds upon the theory of polyarchy by Dahl (1997: 112-14) to investigate the intersection of populism and key tenets of democratic theory as they relate to the concepts of power, pluralism, and the democratization process in a polyarchy. Whether understood as a regime, a democratization engine, a democratic process, or a system of rights and control by competition, most characteristics of a polyarchy are applicable to the Republic of Armenia, considering that it is neither a developed democracy nor at the starting point in the democratization process of shaping the political order and incrementally strengthening its political institutions.

For the sake of clarity of the term polyarchy, the current research uses it to describe the conjectured form of government that Pashinyan best described as the power vested in the people.

The case study builds upon Dahl's theory within the frame of examining the influence of populism on the democratization process in a polyarchy. In Dahl's theory, polyarchy is understood as the passage to full democracy through the transformation of governance institutions and processes (Bailey and Braybrooke, 2003; Dahl, 1997). Yet, considering the deficiencies and inadequacies associated with ensuring plurality and a gradually maturing democratic process, democracy often remains more of an ideal than an actual functioning system of government, especially given the degree of availability of resources in developing countries. Thus, polyarchy serves as a placeholder or transformative mechanism to stimulate multiplicity of opinion, governance transparency and accountability, citizen participation, and other such democratic practices that prevent regression to tyranny or other forms of oppressive leadership.

Armenia's historical backdrop as well as socio-economic conditions and political-cultural perceptions of the population are considered, albeit narrowly,

in the examination of the triggers that fueled the ‘Velvet Revolution’ in 2018. The manifestation of populism and the promotion of a populist agenda appear to take on different meanings and direction, and may shift course through changing public discourse in the pre-election period vs. post-election, when the key actors assume new roles, i.e., revolution leader vs. statesman, election campaign technologist vs. parliament member, etc.

Thus, aside from investigating the intersection of populism and democracy in Armenia, the case study uses a comparative lens to add new knowledge about how the concepts of power, plurality and process were applied in the pre-election populist movement vs. post-election populist governance and in wartime. The research questions are:

Q1: How has populism influenced the exercise of power? A comparative lens that examines the power to win elections, power to rule, power to maintain legitimacy and popularity in face of multiple unprecedented challenges is used.

Q2: Did the changing circumstances require the government to exercise plurality and/or more consolidation among political parties?

Q3: How did the parliamentary regime employ the “polyarchy” system as a platform to maintain a majority or to foster political competition for electoral support?

Q4: How has the democratic process developed or advanced to integrate more responsibility and responsiveness to the people?

These research questions were used as the basis for developing the data collection instruments used in the case study.⁴

The hypotheses tested are:

H1: The exercise of populist power in the period examined changed from pre-election to post-election, COVID-19, and the Artsakh war.

H2: The arising new circumstances required the government to exercise more plurality and seek more consolidation with political parties.

H3: The government employed the system, “the polyarchy”, as an advantageous platform to foster political competition.

H4: The populist government increased responsibility and responsiveness to the people to combat the unprecedented challenges imposed by COVID-19 and the Artsakh war.

To answer the research questions posed and to test the hypotheses stated above, the study uses a causal-comparative design to analyze the relationships among the concepts embedded in democratic theory within a populist context. The research methodology is mixed and employs both qualitative and quantitative data in a transformative sequence fitting to the time constraints of the current research. The qualitative data included speeches by Nikol

⁴ For these and similar details, kindly refer to the original thesis.

Pashinyan ($n = 14$), followed by in-depth interviews ($n = 12$) with scholars with a background in political science ($n = 6$) and politicians from different political parties, ruling as well as opposition ($n = 6$).

To further support the data obtained in the earlier qualitative phases, an online survey was conducted in the months of April-May 2021 among students and alumni enrolled in master's programs in political science/international relations in Armenia ($N = 153$). This particular survey population was purposively determined so as to ensure that respondents possessed the theoretical background of the topic examined, particularly as it pertained to the fundamental tenets of democracy examined through the lens of populism.⁵

DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

a) Content Analysis of Speeches

In this phase, the target population comprised the public addresses by Nikol Pashinyan delivered in the months before and after his election as prime minister. Thus, the periods considered for the selection of his speeches included the campaign election period (March 2018 – December 2018); the period after his election up to the month when the first confirmed COVID-19 case was recorded (January 2019 – March 2020); and the period between COVID-19 and the second Artsakh war. The different periods were established for comparison of data, as articulated in the research questions and hypotheses set.

As Exhibit 1 shows, selection of the sample of speeches from each of the time periods used a critical case strategy to ensure that the content provides compelling insight into the phenomenon of populism and the comparative use of power, adoption of pluralism, and advancement of democratic process in the context of polyarchy. The number of speeches selected in each segment of the time periods established for comparison also paid attention to maintaining a reasonable balance relative to the length of each respective period. The analysis has shown that in the pre-election period Pashinyan employed his charisma as an opposition leader as the primary source of power exercised to invigorate a popular uprising, which he branded as the Velvet Revolution.⁶ Focusing on expanding support and consolidating power, Pashinyan made promises of sweeping reforms to maximize the span of his influence and increase the response from different segments of society. The goal was to increase support

⁵ For further details, see the original thesis.

⁶ The emphasis is on the word 'velvet', closely in line with color revolutions elsewhere in the world where, instead of using traditional dismantling tools to realize regime change, soft instruments are employed that combine "*power methods of influence with technologies of manipulative control of mass consciousness and mass behavior of the broad masses of the civilian population*" (Karpovich and Manoilo, 2015: v).

which would translate into votes that would bring him to power. His speech at the National Assembly on May 8, 2018 demonstrated those drivers of power through the use of specific repetitive words and expressions, such as *nationwide awakening*, *New Armenia*, and *revolutionary steps*, aimed at gathering mass support for him as the choice leader.

Exhibit 1.- Timeline of Pashinyan Speeches Analyzed													
Pre-election: May-December 2018			Post-election/pre-COVID-19: January 2019-March 2020							COVID-19 & War: April-November 2020			
5-8	6-7	8-17	2-6	2-15	5-8	8-5	9-16	9-21	3-16	4-17	9-27	10-27	11-26
Address at the National Assembly	Presenting the government plan to the National Assembly	Address dedicated to the 100 days in office	Address at the extraordinary session of the National Assembly	Address at the Munich Security Conference	100 Facts about new Armenia	Public Address in the Republic of Artsakh	100 Facts about new Armenia	On the 2050 transformation strategy	On declaring a state of emergency - COVID-19	Address to the nation	Address at the National Assembly	Address to the nation	Address during a government meeting

With poignant labels of criticism and huge reform promises, Pashinyan showed a determination and powerful oratory to boost his base and increase potential voter support. Vowing responsiveness and responsibility to the people, his appeals were emphatically critical of the ruling elite and presented himself as the ultimate defender of the people with such assertive expressions as *solidarity*, *pride*, *unity*, *cooperation*, *tolerance*, *mutual understanding*. Such defense is evident in the following — one among many — claim, “*My appointment as Prime Minister automatically denotes the elimination of all obstacles and illegalities known to you*”⁷ (May 8, 2018).

Having assumed power in the transitional government, Pashinyan presented

⁷ «Իմ վարչապետ ընտրուելն ինքնաբերաբար կը նշանակի ձեզ յայտնի բոլոր տեսակի խոչընդոտների ու ապօրինությունների վերացում» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Մայիսի 8, 2018, «Նիկոլ Փաշինեանի ելոյթը ազգային ժողովում» [Nikol Pashinyan's speech delivered at the National Assembly]), armenpress.am , accessed in January 2021]. All translations are made by the author).

the government plan to the National Assembly with an emphasis on policy priorities that would “*serve as a foundational basis in order to elevate Armenia to a new stage of development*”⁸ (June 7, 2018). The most striking changes he emphasized in this period were the urgency of changing the electoral code before the parliamentary elections and overtly fighting corruption.

Moreover, the speech delivered at the National Assembly on June 7, 2018 was constructed on the rhetoric of separation and segmentation, not necessarily proposing what policy actions his government would take, rather consistently criticizing what the prior government had not done to ensure political inclusiveness. Such criticisms dominated his public rally dedicated to the first 100 days in office as prime minister of the provisional government preceding the snap elections of December 2018. “*They mistake others for themselves, ... [who are] country burglars, army burglars, robbers of our soldiers, and seed-stealing mice*”⁹ (August 17, 2018).

After securing the majority of seats in the December 2018 snap elections¹⁰ and being elected as Prime Minister, Pashinyan shifted attention to the judicial branch. In a speech made on February 6, 2019, he addressed the significance of reforming the provisions of the constitution vis-à-vis the constitutional court, again referring to the “*former corrupt regime*” and emphasizing the importance of terminating the illegitimate election of the court’s president. The tone and diction of that address at the extraordinary session at the National Assembly signals a shift from his pre-election people-centric emphasis to a focus on his inner circle preferences, a change in the use of power in a way

⁸ «Մենք համոզված ենք, որ հենց այս [ծրագրային] թեգերով է պարփակվում այն բովանդակային տարածքը, որն անհրաժեշտ է Հայաստանը զարգացման նոր աստիճանի բարձրացնելու համար» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Յունիսի 7, 2018), «Վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինեանի ելոյթը ազգային ժողովում կառավարութեան ծրագիրը ներկայացնելիս» [Speech delivered by Nikol Pashinyan while introducing the government plan to the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021).

⁹ «Իրենք իրենց հետ են համեմատում, որ, բացի հող յանձնելուց, ուրիշ ոչ մի բանի մասինչէն բանակցել ... այ երկիր թալանածներ, այ բանակ թալանածներ, այ զինուորին թալանածներ, այ սերմացու գողացող մկներ...» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Օգոստոսի 17, հանրահաւաքին) («Վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինեանի ելոյթը պաշտօնավարման 100 օրուան նուիրուած հանրահաւաքին» [Nikol Pashinyan’s Speech at rally dedicated to 100 days in office], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021).

¹⁰ Official results reported by the Central Election Commission revealed that the voter turnout was 48.66% (1,261,105 voters), of which *My Step* received 70.16% (884,864 votes), *Prosperous Armenia* 8.23% (103,801 votes), and *Bright Armenia* 6.34% (80,047 votes), (<https://res.elections.am/images/doc/09.12.18v.pdf>, accessed in January, 2021).

that deepens segmentation among parties and the populace. The dominant expressions were *blacks and whites, revolutionary government and corrupt elite, proud citizens of Armenia and the Diaspora*, noticeably departing from his pre-election pledges and rhetoric.

Early in his tenure as prime minister, Pashinyan's address at the Munich Security Conference panel discussion on February 15, 2019 depicted what he called his proposed *micro-revolution* in the peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict. He avowed, that "*any resolution to the Karabagh conflict should be acceptable to the people of Armenia, the people of Karabakh, and the people of Azerbaijan*"¹¹ (February 15, 2019). In other references to the Karabakh conflict, Pashinyan explicitly declared that he was not authorized to speak on behalf of the people of Karabakh and, therefore, any solution would be brought to the people for deliberation before the adoption of a resolution.

In a speech on May 8, 2019, Pashinyan shared 100 facts about the key actions and successes achieved during what he termed *New Armenia*, referring to his term in office. In his words, "*corruption in the country has been overcome*" and "*the principle of independence of the judiciary has led the government to ensure the elimination of any mechanism or manifestation of (in)direct influence*"¹² (May 8, 2019). Despite these announcements of success, albeit unsubstantiated, there was no mention of other pre-election promises in the 100 facts, nor was there a frame of reference that would authenticate the accuracy of those facts. The same approach was repeated in September 2019, when Pashinyan presented data mainly about short and mid-term reforms in the economy and the military. Focusing particularly on numbers, Pashinyan interpreted the increase in the number of tourists visiting Armenia, as well as

¹¹ «Լեոնային Ղարաբաղի հակամարտության ցանկացած լուծում պետք է ընդունելի լինի Հայաստանի ժողովրդի, Ղարաբաղի ժողովրդի եւ Ադրբեջանի ժողովրդի համար» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Միմխէն, Փետրուարի 15, 2019, «Հայաստանը եւ Լեոնային Ղարաբաղը պատրաստ են իրական ջանք գործադրել կոնֆլիկտի լուծման ուղղութեամբ. Նիկոլ Փաշինեանը Միմխէնի անվտանգութեան համաժողովի շրջանակում մասնակցել է ԼՂՀ հիմնահարցի վերաբերեալ քննարկմանը» [“Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh are ready to make real efforts to resolve the conflict. Nikol Pashinyan attends panel discussion on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021).

¹² «Կառավարութիւնն առաջնորդուել է դատական համակարգի անկախութեան սկզբունքով՝ բացառելով հրահանգատրման որեւէ մեխանիզմի կամ դրսեւորման գոյութեանը» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Մայիսի 8, 2019, «100 փաստ նոր Հայաստանի մասին. ՀՀ վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինեանի ներածական խօսքը մամուլի ասուլիսի ժամանակ» [100 Facts about New Armenia – Introductory remarks by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, delivered at the press conference], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021).

money spent by them, as an indicator of development and as part of the developing economy. There was a *promise* of an increase of salaries and pensions, preceded by a 114% increase in military industry funding (September 16, 2019).

In a speech delivered at Renaissance Square, Republic of Artsakh, Pashinyan claimed that “*Artsakh is Armenia*” (August 5, 2019), reaffirming the practice of appealing to the masses through populist rhetoric. Despite the positive national reaction, this claim was contrary to the existing decades-long declaration by the Republic of Armenia of its being the guarantor of the Republic of Artsakh.¹³

The continued manifestation of populist rhetoric is evident in other speeches delivered by Pashinyan as PM, albeit in a different tonality of expression and content. Pre-election promises evolved to strategic goals, and set targets lacked any evidence supporting their viability or feasibility, but were consistent with how populists use speech as a channel to reflect power, to communicate persuasive action plans, and to create optimism. In the August 5, 2019 speech, Pashinyan set forth sixteen *mega-goals* for 2050 that reflected far-reaching goals thirty years on, rather lofty and far-reaching, but targets for which he would not be held accountable. Moreover, these 2050 goals did not establish direct linkages to the approved government plan Pashinyan had presented earlier in his term. Particularly, an emphasis was placed on the concept of “*educated and skillful citizen/nation*”,¹⁴ which would later be combined with “*efficient and accountable governance*”,¹⁵ creating a “*promising environment for businessmen*”.¹⁶ Such changes were planned to be achieved “*through daily strategy-backed work, and any decision of any government institution should be in accordance with this strategy*”¹⁷ (September 21, 2019).

¹³ By respecting the right of self-determination of an Armenian community within the Republic of Azerbaijan and by considering the existential threat it is facing, the Republic of Armenia, in agreement with parties involved in peaceful resolution of the Karabakh conflict, provides human and financial resources for maintaining the security and economic autonomy of Karabakh.

¹⁴ «Կիրթ եւ կարողունակ քաղաքացի/ժողովուրդ» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Սեպտեմբերի 21, 2019, «Հայաստանի վերափոխման ռազմավարութեան մշակումը եւ իրագործումը պատկերացնում ենք որպէս համազգային շարժում՝ հիմնուած մեր ազգային արժէքների եւ նպատակների վրայ. վարչապետ» [“PM: We perceive the development and implementation of Armenia’s transformation strategy as a pan-national movement based on our national values and goals”], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021]

¹⁵ «Արդիւնաւէտ եւ հաշուետու կառավարում», նոյն:

¹⁶ «Գործարարների համար գրաւիչ Հայաստան», նոյն:

¹⁷ «Հիմա մենք ռազմավարական կառավարում պէտք է իրականցնենք մեր ամենօրեայ աշխատանքով, եւ որեւէ պետական մարմնի որեւէ որոշում պէտք է տրա-

Moving on to speeches made since the early cases of COVID-19 in the country, Pashinyan manifested populist power through extreme optimism. Though early on he had snubbed the gravity of the virus, he now presented the COVID-19 challenges as opportunities, while instituting strict control on information disseminated by the news media. In his March 16, 2020 speech, Pashinyan asserted: *“our strategic approach is that we must come out of the crisis stronger in terms of the economy, public life and health.”*¹⁸ The speech also established restrictions on the media stating that *“intended restrictions apply only to the process of disseminating information related to the evolving situation related to COVID-19, and the information spread must be consistent with official updates”*¹⁹ (March 16, 2020).

The next public addresses on March 24 and April 17 reaffirmed the populist optimism while advocating that this was *“the most appropriate time for self-reflection, since it is in such fatal times that we realize the challenges of an unhealthy lifestyle, unhealthy diet, sedentary lifestyle, obesity, smoking, alcohol abuse”* (March 24, 2020).²⁰ Similar intense exhortations dealt with economic resurgence in the context that *“the world will experience a 3 trillion dollar drop in GDP ... and, starting from today, we must be prepared for Armenia to take on a share of at least 30 billion dollars.”*²¹ Weeks later, on April 17, 2020,

մաքանական եւ գործնական կապ ունենայ այս ռազմավարութեան հետ», նոյն:

¹⁸ «Բայց ցանկանում եմ ասել, որ մեր ռազմավարական մօտեցումը հետեւեալն է. մենք այս ճգնաժամից պէտք է դուրս գանք անելի ուժեղացած՝ ե՛ւ տնտեսական, ե՛ւ հանրային, ե՛ւ առողջապահական իմաստներով» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Մարտի 16, 2020, «Վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինեանի՝ ելոյթը ազգային ժողովում՝ Հայաստանի Հանրապետութիւնում արտակարգ դրութեան կապակցութեամբ հրաւիրուած յատուկ նիստում» [Remarks delivered by PM Nikol Pashinyan at the National Assembly debate on declaring a state of emergency in the Republic of Armenia], primeminister.am, accessed in January, 2021).

¹⁹ «Նախատեսուած է [սահմանափակում] միայն կորոնավիրուսի հետ կապուած զարգացումների վերաբերեալ տեղեկութիւններ տարածելուն, եւ այդ տեղեկութիւնները պէտք է համապատասխանեն պաշտօնական տեղեկութիւններին», նոյն:

²⁰ «Սա ինքնահայեցման, վատ սովորութիւններից ազատուելու համար ամենայարմար ժամանակն է, որովհետեւ հենց նման պահերին ենք հասկանում ... թէ նման օրհասական պահերին մեզ ինչպիսի մարտահրաւերների առաջ է կանգնեցնում անառողջ ապրելակերպը՝ անառողջ սննդակարգը, նստակեաց կեանքը, անելորդ քաշը, ծխելը, ալկոհոլի չարաշահումը» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, մարտի 24, 2020, «Վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինեանը ուղերձով դիմել է ժողովրդին» [PM addresses the nation on Covid-19], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021).

²¹ «Աշխարհում համախառն ներքին արդիւնքի 3 տրիլիոն դոլարանոց անկում է լինելու ... Եւ մենք պէտք է այսօրուանից մեզ տրամադրենք, որ այդ ազատուած տեղի առնուազն 30 միլիարդ դոլարանոց հատուածը հենց Հայաստանը պէտք է

Pashinyan spoke about the negligible relief assistance measures ratified by the government, but also exhorted the populace to take more responsibility upon themselves. *“Our strategic objective is to live alongside the coronavirus, as needed, but also to utilize the initial emergency situation to acquire the skills necessary for that.”*²²

The Artsakh war broke out in the midst of the challenging circumstances of the pandemic. As the challenges the country was facing were topped by the war, Pashinyan periodically addressed the nation as commander-in-chief, with a consistent message that whatever the outcome of the war, Armenia would be deemed victorious. Overly optimistic and encouraging, in spite of the occasional blame and criticism of the low response to calls for volunteer troops, the dominant expressions in this period were rhetorical phrases related to wartime, such as *nationwide mobilization, unconditional compliance to wartime rules, sacrificing life for the homeland, absence of alternatives to victory*, etc. In the effort to maintain full control of the situation, Pashinyan established strict control of the media, banning the use and dissemination of any information other than from the Defense Ministry official source and state briefings. His winning disposition was reflected in official daily updates from the frontline repeatedly asserting the impending victory of the Armenian armed forces.

Particularly, in his speech of September 27, 2020, Pashinyan asserted that *“now there is no soldier, no general, no member of parliament, no individual citizen. We all are the soldiers of our nation,”*²³ implying nationwide acquiescence and responsibility. In the speeches of both April 27 and October 27 the basis of Pashinyan’s power was perceived to be his unequivocal authority as commander-in-chief, signaling a complete departure from his pre-election stance regarding the requisite of bringing to the public for deliberation any key decision regarding the Karabakh conflict, whilst pushing onto the population the importance of assuming responsibility for the war. In his words, *“the war must become an absolute and supreme priority for each of us, and we will*

գբաղեցնի», նոյն:

²² «Մեր ռազմավարական խնդիրն է ապրել կորոնավիրուսին զուգահեռ, ըստ անհրաժեշտության, նրա հետ համատեղ եւ արտակարգ դրութեան առաջին ժամանակաշրջանը մենք պէտք է օգտագործենք սրա համար անհրաժեշտ հմտութիւններ ձեռք բերելու նպատակով», նոյն:

²³ «Եւ այսօր չկայ զինուոր, չկայ գեներալ, չկայ պատգամաւոր, չկայ շարքային: Մենք բոլորս մեր ժողովրդի զինուորներն ենք» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Սեպտեմբերի 27, 2020, «Վարչապետի ելոյթը ազգային ժողովում՝ Հայաստանում ռազմական դրութիւն յայտարարելու որոշման վերաբերեալ» [Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s speech in the National Assembly], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021).

win.²⁴

But the psychological maneuvers he aimed to realize through his commanding use of power and control of independent media reporting ultimately crumbled with the signing of the agreement of November 9, 2020. The agreement exposed the dreadful surrender of Armenian territories and the horrific outcome of the Artsakh war. Contrary to his expressed posture with respect to making binding decisions only by the consent of the people, Pashinyan had signed the capitulation document without prior discussion with the people or the legislature representing the people. Yet, in his November 26 speech, Pashinyan repeated his pre-election rhetoric using populist expressions that were contrary to the truths of what had transpired since, such as *citizens being masters of a situation, moving forward after the crisis, strengthening confidence*, etc. His actions had moved farther away from democratic governance principles, yet his diction was still advocating the power of the people.

b) Content Analysis of Interviews

In the period between February and April 2021, twelve interviews were conducted with six scholars and six politicians ($n = 12$), to collect data on their individual assessments of the exercise of power, plurality, and the democratic process of governance in the period from April-May 2018 to April 2021. Politicians were selected purposively to ensure a balanced participation by individuals from different political factions represented in the National Assembly, and to produce variation by hearing from politicians from five parties, including the Republican Party of Armenia, the former leading faction. The analysis synthesizes the responses received, grouped by the elements established in the theoretical framework of the current study and reflecting the arguments made and underscoring the recognized differences and associated contrasts in opinion.

The analysis of responses received about Pashinyan's exercise of power in different time periods reveals several dominant themes, albeit along different constructs. In the unanimous opinion of the scholars interviewed, a dominant theme in the pre-election exercise of power was Pashinyan's prior experience in street politics and his ability to voice the dominant grievances of the people

²⁴ «Այս պատերազմը մեզնից իրաքանչիւրի համար պիտի դառնայ բացարձակ եւ անփոխարինելի առաջնահերթութիւն, ու մենք կը յաղթենք» (Նիկոլ Փաշինեան, Երեւան, Հոկտեմբերի 27, 2020, «Բոլորս յանուն Արցախի, ամէն ինչ յանուն Արցախի, ու մենք կը յաղթենք. վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինեանի ուղերձը ժողովրդին») [Everyone – for the Sake of Artsakh, Everything – for Artsakh, and We Will Win – PM Nikol Pashinyan's Address to the Nation"], primeminister.am, accessed in January 2021).

(particularly regarding systemic corruption and injustice). His intense oratorical public speaking skills, as argued by four scholars, brought him and his team unprecedented public support. As noted by one, *“in contrast to the previous regime, he was perceived as a clean person with good intentions”* (I-1).²⁵ Along the same line, another scholar portrayed him thus: *“Though he was not a total outsider, having served in the National Assembly as an opposition delegate, Pashinyan presented himself as an outsider, portraying himself as fundamentally different from ‘politics as usual’”* (I-4).

The politicians as well as the scholars interviewed claimed that populist rhetoric was the lead conduit of influence Pashinyan used to mobilize the masses. More specifically, four (of six) scholars elucidated that the rhetoric mostly evolved around segmentation (‘us vs. them’, ‘the pure people vs. the corrupt elite’, etc.), which helped gain broader public support and a strong push for urgent change. Particularly, such rhetoric, combined with Pashinyan’s personal appeal to ‘the people’ by self-identification with them, developed the popular narrative of choosing Pashinyan so as to dismiss the former elite. One scholar elaborated further that his rhetoric *“drove high and irrationally extreme hopes among the masses, which later turned into disappointment”* (I-2). But another scholar explained that *“Such rhetoric was favored by the marginalized segment of the populace, which felt empowered by the populist rhetoric Pashinyan exercised”* (I-3).

Similar arguments were expressed by the politicians interviewed, of whom three (of six) emphasized the manipulative rhetoric of self-identification with the masses through constant derogatory remarks about the former elite and total condemnation of past realizations. Particularly, a parliamentary opposition party representative noted, *“With such manipulative rhetoric and touting his belonging to the people, Nikol Pashinyan succeeded in inspiring and empowering larger segments of the populace with low educational attainment”* (I-8).

The second dominant theme the scholars interviewed discussed was the populist demeanor of Pashinyan following his victory in the elections, particularly regarding his ability and the extent to which he was able to successfully evolve from a populist opposition leader to a statesman. The majority of those interviewed (8/12) stated that Pashinyan continued with the same deportment unlike that of a statesman. As one scholar explained, *“Pashinyan continued to behave as a populist in the post-election phase, although then exercising administrative power essentially through self-confidence derived from his legitimacy and the trust vested in him by the people*

²⁵ Throughout the discussion, quotations from different interviewees are denoted as I-#.

in the elections” (I-4). Viewing Pashinyan’s deportment in a broader context, another noted, *“Such a high level of legitimacy, essentially viewed as a cornerstone of democracy, may provide ground for bypassing government accountability to the people”* (I-6).

The interviewees were unanimous in their assessment of Pashinyan’s use of power in the post-elections period (particularly in crisis situations) noting the lack of direction and strategy in the policy agenda, some specifically noting divergence from the priorities touted in the pre-election period. A politician from My Step metaphorically noted that *“If one were ever to write a book on the ‘Velvet Revolution’ and its aftermath, then it would definitely be titled ‘How to waste a revolution’”* (I-7). The dominant opinions were variants of the notion that, aside from the impulsiveness of behavior, the continued populist rhetoric was devoid of any supporting evidence of program accomplishments for the good of the people.

The positions of interviewees were similar on the notion that a statesman is expected to improve the lives of people through policy reforms and good governance, implementing results-driven policies and programs, and not simply seeking approval of his performance through populist rhetoric. As one noted *“populism is best exercised in public squares, but not in public office”* (I-3). Yet, a different explanation by a My Step politician was that *“the challenges the underdeveloped political system posed for the new government made the pre-election promises hard to implement”* (I-10). In a similar vein, another My Step delegate claimed that *“the pandemic and the war changed the policy priorities, thus changing the balance between pre-election promises and their implementation”* (I-12).

When specifically opining about government action vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviewees (9/12) suggested that there was an underestimation of the risks associated with the pandemic, including the potential economic consequences, and a lack of systematically coordinated action to manage the situation. Even under these unexpected challenges, the manifestation of populism continued. As one scholar argued, *“He vacillated between powerful dictates of emergency measures imposed on the population and, in contrast, shifting responsibility onto the ‘people’ for the government’s handling of the pandemic and its own underperformance”* (I-4). The contrary position was a justification of the lack of uniform action and of flawed government intervention because there was insufficient knowledge about the virus and its treatment and failure to consider alternative solutions from the parliamentary opposition (I-11).

As to the boundaries of populism in the period of the Artsakh war, the majority of respondents characterized the government’s exercise of power as covert and its communication with the population as an extreme manifestation

of populism. Focusing on the latter, the overwhelming majority of scholars and politicians interviewed (10/12) argued that official communication was excessively fueled by false or fake information built around populist slogans of nationwide consolidation and ultimate victory. As one scholar noted, *“The importance of framing communication strategically is understandable, but there should have been a healthy balance between populist propaganda and reality”* (I-1). A similar argument was made by another scholar asserting that *“Pashinyan used his ultimate administrative power to deflect public attention from the reality in the war theater ... by controlling the media ... deliberate populist effort to exercise power for sustained regime control”* (I-4).

The policymaking of Pashinyan as prime minister was devoid of pluralism, asserted the majority of the interviewees (10/12). They explain that his legitimacy was justification for excessive use of executive power, which was further invigorated by legislative control through his party’s substantial parliamentary majority. Thus, Pashinyan pushed forth a policy agenda rather incongruent with the pre-election reform pledges that had brought him to power. Of those interviewed, eleven believed that pluralism or minimal deliberation of alternative views with opposition parties in the process of framing policy solutions further decreased in the period of the pandemic and war. As one scholar elaborated, *“Beyond fostering tolerance and public understanding, plurality necessitates creating the opportunities and platforms for participation in shaping opinion and influencing the conduct and decisions of government”* (I- 4). But, buttressed with an unprecedented parliamentary majority, explained another scholar, *“the exercise of plurality within or outside the parliament was deemed unimportant for the ruling party, and also pointless to some extent”* (I-6).

The overriding argument surrounding the absence or disintegration of pluralism was challenged by one of the My Step delegates interviewed, who attributed the decrease of plurality on the prevailing political culture and limited political pursuit or engagement by the polity (I-10). Others offered various explanations for the blatant decline of plurality in a climate of populism: lack of political will or absence of the motive to generate alternative solutions; inadequate understanding or a low level of maturity of the political institutions (meant in the sense of the degree of development of government institutions, as well as political parties); lack of government attention or effort for institutional development; and lack of appreciation for how having a strong opposition would advance democracy and foster political competition.

Aside from those explanations of underlying causes for the lack of plurality, including attribution of such a gap in governance to the inexperience of the government or ruling party, one interviewee from My Step added that *“considering the threat of the ‘return’ of the old regime, the overall political*

system was consolidated, increasingly becoming intolerant of any alternative opinions, including those of its own members” (I-7). Such fears became more evident in the times of the pandemic and the war, when rallying restrictions were imposed on the public and more controls were placed on the media, further weakening the advancement of democratic governance and limiting opposing or challenging discourse. Constraints imposed by the government, emphasized several scholars, hampered the expression of diverse opinions and true competition, which are pivotal to shaping a democratic political culture in Armenia. Also, underscored one scholar, political competition is necessary to control the excessive manipulation of populist power such that competition is driven by *“the ideologies and policy preferences of the respective political parties and not simply aimed at building voter support, and therefore tailored to please the public” (I-4).*

As an integral part of the examination of the intersection of populism and democracy, the interviewees were also asked to comment on the progress or retreat in the democratization process, particularly considering the constitutional referendum that changed the state system to a parliamentary democracy, effective April 2018. All the interviewees (12/12) opined that the political institutions still are poorly developed and the electoral code or political culture, in general, has not evolved to fully unleash the advantages of a parliamentary system. A few also referred to the need for changes in the statutory provisions to restrain super premiership coupled with precluding such a parliamentary majority. Considerable emphasis was placed by some interviewees on the need for constitutional amendments so as to cultivate healthy political competition among parties to advance democracy. One-party dominance by a populist government, argued one scholar, can lead to the deterioration of democracy, because *“when populism influences governance or the polyarchy itself, tolerance for opposition deteriorates and ... government gradually slides into autocracy” (I-4).*

In the responses to the question pertaining to the ‘ism’ that is central to the current government, particularly from the standpoint of its responsiveness to the emergent needs of the public, the characterizations varied, though overwhelmingly expressing variants of reactionary politics, mostly driven by the lack of expertise and organization. Specific examples touched upon the poor response by government to public needs, especially to those citizens directly affected by the pandemic and the war.

From the standpoint of typifying the ideology of the current government, opinions were cynical. The labels that best described, the “ism” of Pashinyan’s exercise of power, ranged from ‘populism’ and ‘dilettantism’ to ‘unprofessionalism’ and ‘egocentrism’. Some of the brewing political dynamics may have been there and overlooked or not addressed by previous elites, which

is at least part of the reason why Pashinyan rose to power with a populist and ostensibly unsuspicious ideology. But the opinion voiced by two My Step delegates explained that there are no ‘isms’ in Pashinyan’s pre-election declaration platform. As stated by one, *“any ‘ism’ would limit the government to coming up with flexible solutions to a wide range of public needs”* (I-10).

Irrespective of the ‘ism’ he may have portrayed, the citizens who voted to bring Pashinyan to power, albeit with a low percentage of the voter population participating in the elections, did so for a few reasons, including endorsement of the issues he raised in the pre-election rhetoric, genuine affection for his populist persona but, most importantly, acute disenchantment with or strong opposition to the ruling elite. All these are genuine drivers of voter behavior. But, noted one interviewee, *“the same dynamics that enabled the populist Pashinyan to rise to power, which later drove his tone of governance, could also be harnessed by leading opposition coalitions if strategically managed to achieve their respective objectives in the future”* (I-4).

Overall, using different arguments to opine on Pashinyan’s populism, the scholars interviewed were unanimous in their position that democracy has regressed in this period of time. Considering the fact that populism snowballed from an ‘against something’ starting point, which has been the case in most populist movements elsewhere in the world, it did not evolve into action that would translate into support ‘for something’. Such a condemnatory stance could not have furthered democracy. More specifically, speaking to the contrast between populism and democracy, though both are people-directed the interviewees posit, one scholar explained further that the Pashinyan populism is more a top-down, command and control tactic plus spontaneous decision-making in the absence of a clearly articulated policy agenda. *“Such a top-down approach could have been justified as rational if supported by comprehensive planning for policy reforms and results”* (I-4).

Exhibit 2 sums up the key changes observed in the exercise of power, process, and plurality of the polyarchy as influenced by populism in the periods under examination.

Exhibit 2.- Changes in the Exercise of Power, Process, and Plurality		
Pre-election: May-December 2018	Post-election/pre-COVID-19: January 2019-March 2020	COVID-19 & War: April-November 2020
Power		

Personal appeal Experience in street politics Populist rhetoric that empowers the people Voicing prevalent concerns Capitalizing on citizen disenchantment with the elite Polarizing society through anti-elite diction	Legitimate authority Power vested in him by the people through elections Exercised as ultimate authority to make policy decisions unquestioned Controlling the legislature through party influence Unpredictable and reactionary reform agenda Uncorroborated claims Deluge of controversial tweets and live broadcasts	Increasingly more top-down, overbearing command and control Hampering free expression and functioning of the media Controlling the flow of news and information Disseminating fake news and unsubstantiated reports
Process of democratization		
Emphasis on people empowerment Promises for reforms to advance democracy Promises stressing rule by the people Assurances related to development (human, political, and economic) Not politics as usual	Shift in policy priorities gaining attention for reform Absence of a predictable and consistent policy agenda Shift from people-centric approach to inner circle preferences Gradually increasing control over media and flow of information Exercise of populist rhetoric to conceal the loopholes in executive performance and actions	Authoritarian management style Reduced level of responsibility and responsiveness to the people Limited free expression Limited discussions of policy agenda and governance priorities
Plurality		
Pledges regarding outreach and open discussion of alternatives Shared power with different political actors Decision making privileges for wider segments of the populace	Increasing segmentation and limited political inclusiveness Increased focus on personal authority Populist rhetoric in self-defense and blaming existing political environment on former elites Lack of equity in outreach for proper political participation in a parliamentary system	Gradual deterioration of inclusive decision making Visible manifestation of autocratic governance Blatant control or criticism of alternative opinions

Findings and Interpretation

Triangulating the key findings from the content analysis of Pashinyan's speeches and the interviews with scholars and politicians, it becomes evident that since April-May 2018, populism during the time period observed has evidently influenced the exercise of power, process of democratization and

plurality. In the pre-election period, the foundational differences between democracy and populism were not clearly discernible, for Pashinyan had empowered the marginalized segments of the populace to be heard, to voice their discontent through protests, and to participate in domestic politics.

Yet, despite his people-centric approach and the promise of change, the rhetoric employed was expressively populist, a combination of simplistically formulated anti-elite (the corrupt elite) and pro-people (the proud citizens) messages, as already mentioned. In established democracies, political competition for power often implies the magnification of loopholes in policies and government performance, allowing political groups to capitalize on voter support for their respective promises of change. However, building power on personal appeal and experience in street politics, Pashinyan channeled his populist power through generating a manipulative discourse of segmentation and a division of the population into 'blacks and whites' in order to gain maximum voter support.

In other words, despite its resemblance to advancing the democratic process, the pre-election period signaled the emergence of populist politics with key reform promises by Pashinyan that spoke to the brewing bitterness in the population against the ruling elite and gained him public trust and the rise to power. Thus, in order to achieve that goal, he employed populist strategies to magnify anti-elite sentiments and to increase mass support for him as the only leader of choice for the premiership. Based on the theoretical explanation by Laclau (2005), Pashinyan's populism is best characterized by its deep-rooted antagonism to the former regime, the mistrust of traditional politicians in power, his claimed identity of belonging to the common people, and its anti-intellectual disposition, which rejects alternative deliberations.

The victory of Pashinyan's My Step alliance in the snap elections ensured him the premiership. But the findings of this study have shown that, once in power, his populist behavior took on a different style vis-à-vis engaging broader segments of society, plurality declined, and the low responsiveness to the people led him closer to negative populism in terms of having an adverse impact on the political system and causing democratic erosion. As Dahl (1998, 1999, 2000) posits, democratic governance requires fair and unbiased responsiveness to the citizens, which gradually diminished here.

Furthermore, the polity requires transparency and accountability from the ruling elite, which is a fundamental prerequisite to preventing corruption (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2009) and maintaining or augmenting the legitimacy of government, a framework necessary for advancing a sustainable democracy (Tilly, 2007). However, the unpredictable and manipulative post-election comportment and policy agenda demonstrate the exercise of populism by spontaneous action or an aggressive political strategy. With regard to the

failure to implement the promises Pashinyan had made in the pre-election period, particularly with respect to addressing the issues of corruption and economic growth that would eliminate inequalities and uphold fair competition and human development, the findings show a clear demarcation between Pashinyan supporters and all others interviewed. Moreover, with such a distorted power balance and control of government, the necessary checks and balances of democratic process have been undermined, if not eliminated, for the majority possesses a wide set of instruments to exploit governance with total disregard to opposition views and the democratic concept of rule by the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Moreover, the findings have shown that the crisis situation created by the pandemic, and subsequently by the Artsakh war, exposed the incapacity of the underdeveloped democratic institutions, further fueling Pashinyan's top-down governance and manipulation of information communicated to the populace. If the democratic institutions²⁶ had been firmly established in the country, they would have had the resilience to also make a constructive impact in unprecedented situations and would have had the capacity of coping with a multitude of problems and unexpected challenges (Dahl, 1998: 188). In effect, the limitations of the institutions allowed Pashinyan's negative populism to grow unchallenged and his covert decisions to go undetected.

The importance of collaboration inside government, as well as interparty negotiations, discussions across aisles, and deliberations on alternative policy solutions cannot be stressed enough in the process of reaching common-ground solutions and facilitating democratic policy reforms. Contrary to the imperative for a democracy to have a clear and ideologically comprehensible political agenda, the findings from the interviews show Pashinyan's populism to be spontaneous and unpredictable while having insubstantial and volatile goals and an incomprehensible ideology, rather congruent with the conceptual analysis offered by several scholars. Canovan (1981) labels this as reactionary populism, which works contrary to the processes of developing the political institutions and structures; it is hostile to representative politics and exploits the existing political environment for its own survival.

Though populism is potentially ubiquitous in many parts of the world and has grown exponentially in recent decades as a political style, *"it is only under the conditions created by representative politics that it can become a political force or that we can talk about it as a set of ideas"* (Taggart, 2004: 273). This

²⁶ Democratic institutions include all branches of government, political parties, non-governmental pressure and interest groups, as well as other institutions, including the electoral commission, state inspectorates, and such other special commissions established with specific mandates.

characterization of representative politics or its lack is relevant here when explaining the difference between Pashinyan's pre-election populism, hypothetically presenting a political force with a set of actions against the former regime but appealing to different factions, and his post-election populism, which fell short of growing into constructivist populism, which would have assembled a high level of political participation rather than continuing to place blame on the former regime or even the people for his own policy breakdowns and adverse outcomes.

The findings also show that Pashinyan's failure to increase plurality is also attributable, at least in part, to the drawbacks of the political parties in terms of their respective ideologies and political agendas (or absence thereof), drawbacks that have contributed to the malfunctioning of the still young parliamentary system of government.

Parliamentary systems require a certain degree of political strength and capacity, which help frame relations among different power groups; define the necessary mechanisms for appropriate checks and balances; set limitations on the exercise of power; and ensure plurality of dialogue among various political parties as integral to the democratic process of governance. The nucleus of a parliamentary system of government, the parliament, is the product of centuries-long political and constitutional evolution that excludes the concentration of power in the hands of a single political entity, either executive or legislative, but rather fuses their powers through checks and balances to ensure the balanced exercise of power between the two (Puig, 2002).

In the same context, Dahl (1961) has argued about the necessity of a well-organized and empowered parliamentary opposition in holding the government accountable and, by necessity, appealing for dissent against the government. As most interviewees have argued, the underdevelopment of political parties goes against the logic of emergence of parliamentarianism as an enduring system of government and is likely to lead to the further deterioration of a malfunctioning government system. The malfunctioning system itself leads to poor performance of core governance functions. The disproportionate exercise of plurality of opinions between the majority in the National Assembly and the opposition parties can be assumed to be a diversion from Pashinyan's pre-election promises of democratization advancement, which requires, at the minimum, working across aisles. Theoretically, as Fabbrini (2003) has observed, poor exercise of pluralism does not necessarily imply its elimination, but rather balances the inequality between less organized and well organized and potentially more resourceful segments of the populace.

In this case, Pashinyan failed to integrate public opinion into the policy reform process and, by exercising exclusionary populist rhetoric, gradually further marginalized larger segments of the population from participation in

politics. This pattern became more pervasive during the pandemic and especially during the war such that the once-promised pluralism, among his own alliance members, as well as cooperation with opposition factions and their respective voters, was replaced with his autocratic power. This regression alone is diametrically opposite to the Dahlean interpretation of polyarchy, in the sense of being integral to the process of transitioning to full democracy.

In other words, Pashinyan's populist power is a byproduct of the poorly developed political system, in which the parliamentary system did not contribute to transforming political culture and government practice but underscored its drawbacks vis-à-vis the prerequisites of a healthy system of government. The underdeveloped political culture itself lacked the ingredients of rational choice, which brought Pashinyan to power without stipulating a clearly articulated long-term strategy. This overall voter debility allowed him to covertly, and sometimes overtly, defy the democratic institutions in order to push forth the policy preferences (or interests) of his super-majority in the legislative and executive branches, thus further minimizing the system's capacity to adequately respond to unexpected challenges. Thus, through his regression to a gradually more radical, authoritarian populist leader, Pashinyan used his executive power to downgrade responsiveness to the people. This, as Lauth (2011) explains, is one important measure of the quality of a democracy, the lack of which makes the government more vulnerable to sliding into autocracy. Under such circumstances contrary to creating the right environment for evolving the polyarchy, neither power nor the process of democratization and plurality can be considered effective and vital for advancing the state.

SURVEY RESULTS

Regardless of what the respondents' party affiliation may have been, approximately 81% of the survey respondents did not identify themselves as having an affiliation with any specific political party, possibly positioning themselves as politically neutral and unbiased in expressing their views of the populist challenge to power, process, and plurality. Thus, the responses varied with respect to what influenced the voters to bring Pashinyan to power. The majority of respondents (62.7%) thought that his populist oratory skills were the leading influence, followed by his experience in street politics (56.4%), populist rhetoric of segmentation of the population (52.7%), and the promise of making systemic changes after coming to power (41.8%). In this phase, the persona of Pashinyan appears to have built the voter support that successfully brought him to power.

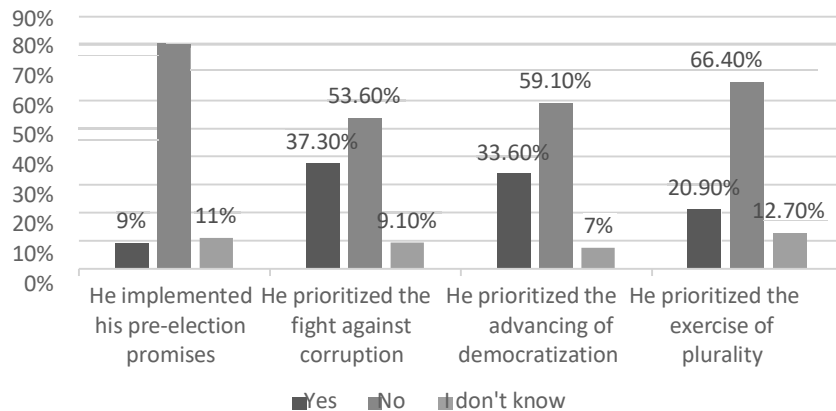
Following that phase, the respondents expressed their position relative to Pashinyan's performance as a statesman, with respect to issues related to the

implementation of pre-election pledges, fighting against corruption, advancing the polyarchy or furthering the process of democratization, and exercising plurality, shown in Table 1.

Particularly, in terms of realizing a policy agenda that focused on implementing his pre-election promises, 80% of the respondents were negative on this issue. Similarly, the respondents were negative on the question of furthering the democratization process (59.1%) and failing to focus on creating platforms to exercise plurality (66.4%). In other words, according to the majority of survey respondents (89.1%), Pashinyan tapped into public grievances and generated increased hostility against the previous elite, without really having a long-term strategy.

Survey respondents also raised another factor that may have contributed to the survival of Pashinyan's negative populism. Indeed, 78.1% of respondents attributed the strength of his populist power as a statesman in part to the super-premiership, which Pashinyan himself had opposed earlier, and the importance of growing strengthening the democratic institutions of checks and balances. Besides, the nascent parliamentary system of government that came into effect in April 2018 was rather too young and undeveloped to sustain the unilateral exercise of power in government, especially with a majority party dominance in the legislature.

Table 1 .- Questions pertaining to Pashinyan's implementation of his pre-election promises



A moderate negative correlation of $-.387^{**}$ was found between Pashinyan's pre-election exercise of anti-establishment rhetoric and his capacity for or focus on advancing the polyarchy and moving the country forward in the democratization process, as he had pledged in various settings. The exercise of adversarial rhetoric continued even after the attainment of the premiership, which further increased the segmentation of the populace and antagonism with opposition parties, within or outside the legislature. This wave of adversity further shrunk democratic governance by failure to engage multiple opinions or alternative solutions in the policy making process, thereby diminishing

Table 2.- Correlation Between Use of Anti-Establishment Rhetoric & Advancing Democratization

		His win in the elections was primarily driven by an anti-establishment rhetoric	After coming to power, he was able to advance the democratization of Armenia
His win in the elections was primarily driven by an anti-establishment rhetoric	Pearson Correlation	1	$-.387^{**}$
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	110	110
After coming to power, he was able to advance the democratization of Armenia	Pearson Correlation	$-.387^{**}$	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	110	110

plurality and attention to people preferences. Thus, as inferred by the correlation shown in the above table, survey respondents who believe that Pashinyan won the elections primarily driven by his populist rhetoric also believe that he failed to advance the democratization process in Armenia.

A positive correlation was also found between the impact of populist rhetoric distorting the government's response or performance in various situations and the use of autocratic power to sustain personal popularity and support. As shown in Table 3, a significant Pearson's r of $.506^{**}$ was found between those two factors, inferring that respondents who believe Pashinyan used populist rhetoric to downplay the serious impact of the pandemic and the Artsakh war also believe that his adoption of strict control of the media signals autocratic governance.

Table 3.- Correlation Between Populist Rhetoric Downplaying Pandemic and Artsakh War Impact & Autocratic Control of Media

		Populist rhetoric downplayed the pandemic and the war	Control of the media reveals autocratic exercise of power
Populist rhetoric	Pearson	1	$.506^{**}$

downplayed the impact of the pandemic and the war	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	110	110
Control of the media revealing the autocratic essence of power	Pearson Correlation	.506**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	110	110

Table 4.- Correlation Between Populist Rhetoric & Intolerance toward Opposition Views

		Populist rhetoric in communication with public	Intolerance toward opposition groups/views
During the war, the top- down communication was predominantly built on populist rhetoric	Pearson Correlation	1	.663**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	110	110
The government showed intolerance to cooperation with opposition groups (inside or outside the parliament)	Pearson Correlation	.663**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	110	110

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

During the war, stronger correlation is evident between visibly populist-fueled, top-down rhetoric a Pashinyan's management style as commander-in-chief. A significant Pearson's r .663** correlation was found depicting the relationship between populist rhetoric and actions dismissing the important impact of plurality, especially in challenging times imposed by war. All the more, crisis management requires collective action based on shared power by all political actors, including the opposition.

However, Pashinyan opted to more intensely exclude participation, further widening the existing segmentation and also blaming the opposition or the former elites for making the war inevitable. In other words, negative populism has a strong adverse impact on the exercise of plurality, even in times of crisis.

Table 5.- Populism Denoting Democracy (count)					
	As a statesman, he prioritized the exercise of plurality				
He implemented his pre-election promises		Don't know	No	Yes	Total
	Don't know	6	3	3	12
	No	8	67	13	88

	Yes	0	3	7	10
	Total	14	73	23	110

To further support the triangulation of correlations, the cross-tabulation of nominal data also shows the decline of plurality in Pashinyan's populist governance, despite the populist rhetoric in his pre-election campaign that the preferences of the people would be of primary importance. Table 5 shows that 67 of the 110 respondents neither agree that he made deliberate and planned efforts in exercising plurality, nor do they agree that he made an effort to implement his pre-election promises.

Table 6.- Cross-tabulation of Objectivity & Evidence-Based Communication v. Prioritization of Fight Against Corruption (count)

		<i>As a statesman, he prioritized the fight against corruption</i>			
		Don't know	No	Yes	Total
<i>As a statesman, his communication with the public was objective and evidence-based</i>	Don't know	5	2	7	14
	No	4	55	21	80
	Yes	1	2	13	16
	Total	0	59	41	110

Similarly, as Table 6 displays, his populist rhetoric, particularly pertaining to his repeatedly promised determination to fight against corruption, changed in the populist statesman, as confirmed by 50% of those surveyed. The cross-tabulation shows that the majority of survey respondents also attest to the lack of evidence-based objectivity in communicating with the populace in speeches.

The findings from the statistical analysis of survey data presented in this section are fully congruent with the patterns found in the qualitative phase, as shown in the preceding section. Strong alignment supports the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses, as explained in the section that follows.

CONCLUSION

Based on Dahl's democratic theory, the research has shown that populism can have a positive or negative impact on advancing democracy through the effective use of power toward that goal and exercising plurality and responsiveness to people's preferences. Thus, in the pre-election period, populism increased trust and belief in the promised advancement of the polyarchy and adoption of pro-people policies. The populist government of Pashinyan, however, manifested reactionary populism, rather negative, that led the polyarchy closer to autocracy. Through a growing command-and-control, top-down, unilateral governance, Pashinyan gradually moved away from the promises to the people and closer to false superiority designed primarily for self-aggrandizement and a constant effort to prevent exposure of the government's mal performance and his personal fallacies. Therefore, based on collected data and thorough analysis, it becomes evident that the exercise of

populist power in the period examined changed from pre-election to post-election, COVID-19, and Artsakh war. Besides, the pandemic and the Artsakh war did not encourage the political forces, particularly the government, or the opposition to exercise more plurality and seek more consolidation. By its unilateral, top-down governance, the government failed to employ the polyarchic system to foster political competition. Further, it increased responsibility and responsiveness to the people to combat the unprecedented challenges imposed by COVID-19 and the Artsakh war.

More specifically, the study has shown that in the pre-election period Pashinyan demonstrated a declarative determination to advance democratization in Armenia, in which prime importance was placed on equality, equal consideration of alternative opinions and due consideration of opinions in the process of policy development, ratification, and execution. However, after attaining power, Pashinyan appeared to have set aside the pre-election policy priorities, further increasing the segmentation in the population, and focusing on self-serving power. Populism, which served as a tool for mobilizing the masses and gaining public support, was transformed into a shield for justifying the poor quality of governance and creating a diversion from pre-election policy priorities. In this context, populism is duly regarded in its negative variation, since Pashinyan exhibited a rather self-justifying management style that constantly pushed the blame onto previous regimes, and even onto the people at times.

The government's responsiveness to COVID-19 saw a transformation of populism. This was a byproduct of its rhetoric of justification and an authoritarian tool to limit information dissemination by the media and independent discourse. This is akin to counter-democratic practice and has a destabilizing effect on the population for the sake of control and electoral support.

In March 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Armenia, the autocratic penchant of Pashinyan's power - backed by the super-majority of his alliance in the parliament, along with covert exercise of power to control the other branches of government - showed increasing intolerance of alternative opinions or solutions or party competitiveness, consistently reverting to a complete denial of past achievements and potential solutions. Populist rhetoric fueled an unprecedented degree of intolerance and was manipulatively exploited by the ruling inner group in order to silence any public or opposition criticism and maintain the desired level of public support. Moreover, the existing flaws in the constitution and absence of preventive provisions that could potentially increase representation in the parliament and preclude disproportionate representation contributed to Pashinyan's claims of superiority and exclusion of public preferences.

In summing up, it is important to restate that populism can have both positive and negative effects on democratic governance or the polyarchic system. On the positive side, a populist leader may enhance democracy by successfully influencing government and other political actors to become more responsive to the people. However, as the study has shown, for a country such as Armenia with weak institutions and an underdeveloped political culture, a populist government can be more negative and harm the democratization process when the pre-election responsiveness to the people is not sustained and plurality or consideration of alternative preferences of the people are neglected.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The primary limitations of the study arise from the timing of the research to coincide with COVID-19 and the more serious challenges ensuing from the Artsakh war. The data collection, especially the in-depth interviewing in the months of January-March, 2021, faced a number of limitations caused by the political turmoil and devastating impact of the Artsakh war, combined with the COVID-19-imposed restrictions, affecting the disposition of individuals to devote attention to topics outside the immediate realm of prevailing critical issues. This limited the author's research capacity, at times, and may also have caused some lack of trust on the part of interviewees, taking into consideration that a prevailing high level of polarization leads to a higher risk of bias.

It is also noted that this research focused on the populist impact on democracy and did not delve into issues related to the worsening of the economy or foreign affairs, as could ensue from reactionary populism. Such important issues could be dealt with in separate research. Also, the study of the challenges and impact of the Artsakh war deserves attention and would require commensurate expertise and collection of relevant data.

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ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՊԱՐԱԳԱՆ

(Ամփոփում)

ՍԱՄՈՒԷԼ ԽԱՀԱՏՐԵԱՆ

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Ուսումնասիրությունը կ'անդրադառնայ Հայաստանի Հանրապետության ժողովրդավարական վարչաձևի վրայ ժողովրդահաճութեան թողած հնարաւոր ազդեցությունը՝ 2018 Ապրիլ-2020 Նոյեմբեր ժամանակահատուածի տեսողութեան: Յօդուածը կը ջանայ պարզել, թէ ի՞նչ ազդեցություն կրնայ ունենալ ժողովրդահաճութեանը հայաստանեան ժողովրդավարական կառավարման ու հաստատություններու, ինչպէս նաեւ ժողովրդավարութեանը սահմանող հասկացություններու ու զայն բնութագրող բաղկացուցիչներու վրայ, եթէ հաշուի առնենք այն անախաղէպ իրադարձութիւններու, մասնատրապէս՝ համավարակի (Քովիտ-19) եւ 2020ի արցախեան պատերազմի, բերած բարդութիւնները, որոնք աւելի մեծ ճնշման տակ դրին հայաստանեան ժողովրդավարութեան զարգացումը:

Հետազօտութեանը հիմնած է Ռոպրթ Տալի polyarchy տեսութեան վրայ, որու լոյսին տակ կը ներկայացուի ժողովրդավարացման գործընթացին մէջ ժողովրդահաճութեան ունեցած ազդեցությունը: Տալի polyarchy-ն կը սահմանէ իբրեւ անցում դէպի ամբողջական ժողովրդավարութիւն՝ կառավարման հիմնարկներու եւ յարակից գործընթացներու ժողովրդավարացման միջոցով: Ըստ հետազօտողին, այս տեսութեանը կենսունակ է Հայաստանի Հանրապետութեան պարագային, քանի որ ՀՀ-ն ո՛չ իր ժողովրդավարացման սաղմնային վիճակի, ոչ ալ ամբողջովին զարգացած վիճակի մէջ կը գտնուի:

Որակական եւ քանակական վերլուծութեան մեթոդներու օգտագործմամբ – քաղաքագէտներու եւ ՀՀ քաղաքական տարբեր ուժերու ներկայացուցիչներու հետ խորքային հարցազրոյցներ կայացնելով, ՀՀ վարչապետ Նիկոլ Փաշինեանի՝ վերոյիշեալ ժամանակաշրջանի առանցքային տասը հանրային ելոյթներու բովանդակային ուսումնասիրութեամբ, ՀՀ բուհերու քաղաքագիտութիւն/միջազգային յարաբերութիւններու հետեւող մագիստրական ուսանողներու հետ հարցազրոյցներով – հետազօտողը հիմնատրած է իր հարցադրած խնդիրներուն պատասխանները: