

## Populism in Policymaking: A Threat to Democracy?

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**ABSTRACT:** This case study examines the elements found in populist governance and the impact these have on controlling and use of divisive and non-participatory approaches in policymaking process. The research measures the degree to which efforts were made by the government or ruling regime to consider minority or opposition interests and actively engage a representative proportion of the population in the policymaking aspect of the democratic process. In this regard, the case of the Republic of Armenia (RA) is used to analyze the current regime's governance and policymaking approaches and to identify major deviations, if any, from democratic principles and standards. Through the analysis of speeches and data collected from interviews, the case study identifies and explains the populist characteristics of the policymaking process practiced by the current regime, from agenda setting to implementation and evaluation.

**KEYWORDS:** Policymaking, populism, agenda-setting, alternative, clientelism, public discourse

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This is a case study that examines the policy components of populism and the impact of controlling and use of divisive versus constructive approaches in interactions with state and non-governmental institutions and the citizenry in that process. In other words, the degree to which efforts are made by the government or ruling regime to consider minority or opposition interests and actively engage representative proportions of the population in the policymaking aspect of the democratic process. Adding onto existing studies on populism, this research focuses more specifically on the policymaking practices of a populist regime. In this regard, the case of the Republic of Armenia (RA) is used to analyze the current governance and policymaking approaches and to identify major deviations, if any, from democratic principles and standards in this domain. Thus, the case study aims to identify and explain the populist characteristics of the policymaking process practiced by the current regime, from agenda setting to implementation and evaluation.

A quick review of the April 2018 'Velvet Revolution' street protests that gradually grew in a snowball progression taking to the streets thousands in Yerevan and other major cities of Armenia explains, in part, how the wave of populism grew and brought to power the leader of the revolution Nikol Pashinyan in a 59-42 vote of the Republic of Armenia (RA) National Assembly (parliament) on May 8, 2018. On the surface, the protests promoted new ideas and policies that appeared to hold promise of a democratic renewal. Notwithstanding the existing polarization and disbelief (as well as mistrust) in the incumbent (then candidate) by a silent segment of the population, support for change grew to a sufficient level that garnered enough votes to subsequently guarantee for Pashinyan a parliamentary majority in the snap parliamentary elections of December 2018.<sup>1</sup>

In the initial period of his premiership, Pashinyan supported, albeit mainly in speech, social policies that focused on strengthening civil society (including law and order), citizen rights (especially those of women), public funding for education, poverty reduction, and other social programs that would address the most urgent public needs. In his first press conference of May 9, one day after his election to the premiership, Pashinyan spoke about various domestic policy matters of high importance to his government placing emphasis on the implementation of an economic, national security and development agenda and proudly vowing to involve all segments of the Armenian population when considering different policy options (primeminister.am). But recent activities have shown that his populist political rhetoric has barely led to actual policy actions and implementation of solutions that benefit the entire population. Therefore, this research examines the populist elements underlying the promises that brought him to power and the extent to which they were realized, albeit maintaining focus on the policymaking practices that Pashinyan employed without delving into the actual intent or content of the policies.

<sup>1</sup> The snap parliamentary elections of December 9, 2018, brought 48.62% of the registered voters to cast their ballots, of which 70.44% or 88 of the 101 seats in the National Assembly (parliament) went to the My Step Alliance comprising for the most part Civil Contract party candidates headed by Nikol Pashinyan.

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### 2. UNDERSTANDING POPULISM AND POPULIST POLICYMAKING

Populism is one of the most researched concepts in various disciplines and from different political perspectives, some focusing on its practice in different parts of the world and others interpreting manifestations of the notion, yet no common definition or understanding of the term has been universally adopted. As Urbinati (2019: 111) describes, “*Populism is the name of a global phenomenon whose definitional precariousness is proverbial. It resists generalizations and makes scholars of politics comparativist by necessity, as its language and content are imbued with the political culture of the society in which it arises.*” In some countries populism is explained as an incentive for (re)gaining power and, therefore, an instrument that could play an indispensable role in succeeding agenda setting and policymaking processes and actions. However, empirical studies about the relationship between populism and policymaking are scarce and warrant more attention.

In political science, populism is defined as a political thought or simply a tool in the hands of political leaders who build mass support of the ‘unaffiliated’ masses to reach and retain power (Weyland, 2001; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Kenny, 2021). These and many other authors hold the same viewpoint and discuss the importance of an unmediated connection between a charismatic political leader and the public emphasizing the necessity of growing people’s direct and immediate support in that relationship. Expanding on this general definition, Papas (2014) argues that populism is a rather broad term that contains rhetorical and procedural characteristics potentially used in policymaking primarily to embellish the majoritarian political reasoning through detrimental and divisive narratives that could pose a threat to liberal democracy.

There are different approaches that populist leaders utilize to except sharing power with any other person(s), even with people in their immediate circle. The central element in such a state of mind is the thought “*if not I, then no one.*” Pursuant to that belief, one approach used extensively by most populists is to have anti-elitist solo discourses (without engaging others) providing the masses with formal policy proposals or action plans, blatantly intended to advance their own political position and personal stature through unmediated or direct communication with the public (Jansen, 2011; Weyland, 2017). Though exhibiting plurality on the surface, these dialogues are often monotonous and not geared to engaging the public in policy examination. The semblance of public discourse does not truly scrutinize the differences among policy alternatives for effectively gauging how citizens would react to different provisions that could influence their lives.

Examining this through the lens of different policymaking streams (Kingdon, 2010), it becomes evident that populists create the impression of being directly accountable to the people without (what they characterize as unnecessary) mediation by the legislative and judicial branches of government. Thus, instead of following representative policymaking processes and alternatively other relevant models of democratic governance, populists model a semblance of ‘open’ public discourse, both oral and written, to shape public opinion and mobilize support through persuasion, inspiration, and influence (Schmidt, 2008; Jansen, 2011). “*This shields them from any criticisms and allows them to develop a series of policymaking strategies that differ, significantly and systematically, from the technical rationality, evidence-informed, and pluralistic standards commonly associated with policymaking in democratic regimes. Along the way, populists fulfill some of their promises*” (Dussauge-Laguna, 2022), often by chance or simply as a result of working civil servants’ continued efforts.

Moreover, several authors have raised concern that populists are critical of and tend to push out actors outside their immediate entourage, including non-governmental civil society organizations and other private interest groups that are advocating for policies of importance to certain segments of society (Hajnal, 2021). In contrast, populists are prone to growing clientelism for support of their actions, in lieu of promoting policy debate, evaluation, analysis, scientific evidence, alternative solutions, and relevant expertise (De la Torre, 2017; Borins, 2018; Head & Banerjee, 2020). Clientelism and associated quid-pro-quo arrangements may also grow into rendering favors that are not legal and less visible.

More about populist behavior, Korkut (2015) explains that such leaders use various narratives, leitmotifs, metaphors and common themes to communicate popular and appealing notions and ideas that are pleasing and gratifying to the masses and would gain increasing support for them personally. More specifically, the weight that populist discourses carry in policymaking is measured by the quality of the rhetoric and, ultimately, by the policy results realized and actual changes that are implemented (Walgrave & Jagers, 2007; Schmidt, 2008; Aslanidis, 2016). To gather maximum support and build a favorable collective backing, populist leaders propagate their ideas and beliefs speaking at mass public gatherings and via social media to reach considerably larger segments of the populace than would be possible through individual contact. The latter is a means that provides populist leaders with the desired unmediated link with the people. In the latter situation, the more people turn to social media for news, the less their reliance on political institutions. In fact, recent politics exercised in different countries have shown that populist leaders act as political entrepreneurs who establish direct communication with the people and make deals with the select few (Korkut & Eslen-Ziya, 2016).

Thus, an essential element of success for populist leaders is to maintain active communication with the public by articulating inspiring positions and intently aspiring strategies, while using slogans as critical tools to build public support (Searl, 2010). Politicians generally pursue support to bolster their cause and to mobilize the public to be able to control and advance their political agenda as existential issues, which are often incoherent to the majority of their audiences (Yishai, 1993; Mehta, 2010). Despite communicating rational explanations in public discussions, they undermine norms and democratic institutions and build

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support for political action without the use of formal policymaking processes and legislative routes. Through discursive governance populist leaders exploit their followers and audiences aiming to grow support for self alone through links with constituents. Particularly in setting policy, populists appear to introduce important changes in the policymaking stages considerably affecting the democratic processes and institutionalizing or committing mostly unacceptable distortions.

### 3. THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

The research uses the multiple streams methodology proposed by John Kingdon (2010) to analyze the policymaking process of the Pashinyan regime. Thus, public policymaking is considered from all three streams of activity: the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream that would ultimately align in the *window of opportunity* to create new policy. In the initial problem stream, the research investigates if issues of public concern were fairly, participatorily, and correctly identified and subsequently placed on the policy agenda. Where did the policy originate or what were the underlying public needs that required such a policy response. Next, the study examines the policy stream to establish if ideas and solutions were adequately explored and studied to put forth policy proposals that closely and effectively address the problems identified in the earlier stage. In the third stream of the policy process, the research gauges the extent to which there were discussions and debates, in support or in opposition of the proposed policies, compromises, alternatives, and/or amendments considered before enactment — deliberations that manifest cognizance and use of democratic principles.

And finally, the study examines if the multiple streams in the policymaking process come together to lead to actual policy change getting appropriate attention and effort for implementation. Elaborating on the streams, Kingdon (1984: 90) writes: “... *decision structures are four separate streams: problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities. Each of the streams has a life of its own, largely unrelated to the others. Thus, people generate and debate solutions because they have some self-interest in doing so ... not because the solutions are generated in response to a problem or in anticipation of a particular upcoming choice.*”

The analysis in all four streams focuses on the essential characterizations of a leader: responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability. In this context, the leader and followers are connected in a circular process that involves exchanges of ideas, constructive influence, encouragement, appraisal and support (Wildavsky, 2006). Moreover, the relationship between a political or state leader and the public (followers) revolves around tasks and policy decisions that must be accomplished through adaptation to specific institutional and cultural frameworks (Masciulli et al., 2009; Nye, 2008). Thus, responsibility involves the assigned duty leaders have vis-a-vis the people they are elected to govern, including the obligation to fulfill adopted decisions and binding agreements, whereas responsiveness is more about the policy actions that meet expressed public needs (Linde & Peters, 2020). And lastly, accountability is the democratic governance requisite to install and encourage the use of formal and informal mechanisms and processes that allow citizens to hold government to account, including elections, parliamentary oversight, state auditor, ombudsman, and other national bodies.

### 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODOLOGY

The principal research question involves identifying the characteristics of policymaking of the Pashinyan regime following the 2018 parliamentary elections. The research first examines the campaign rhetoric used in the three months prior to the 2018 parliamentary elections in relation to engaging larger masses for decision making in the public sphere. This phase is completed through an analysis of five pre-campaign speeches by Pashinyan in the months preceding the elections of December 9, 2018, particularly to identify the principal populist policy reforms he had pledged to accomplish and whether or not there was any reference to process or basis.

Next, through the qualitative analysis of data collected from nine in-depth interviews, the research seeks to answer the following questions: Were the issues identified by Pashinyan before the elections formulated fairly and duly represented key public concerns? Were the issues placed on the policy agenda after his election adequately analyzed for optimal solutions and policy proposals that would effectively address the problems identified? Were there discussions and debates of the proposed policies that also engaged opposition groups and larger segments of society? Were there opposition alternatives and/or amendments considered by the RA National Assembly before approval and enactment of various policies? Did the subsequent procedural actions lead to actual policy change and implementation? These questions will address the Kingdon policy streams formulated above.

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of the nine interviewees. This ensured maximum variation of ideologies among them and diverse perspectives in response to the research questions enabling analysis of the research questions from different angles. Special attention was paid to engaging individuals from the ruling as well as opposition parties, while also engaging males and females from different age groups enabling a tangential analysis of differences that could be attributed to level of education, interest in politics, and awareness of policymaking and governance processes.

Pattern-matching was applied to identify and analyze the differences between observed and expected patterns (Yin, 1984) to answer the research questions from above. The observed patterns were drawn from the data collected from the analysis of pre-election Pashinyan speeches and in-depth interviews, then compared against the expected patterns consistent with the Kingdon model of analysis. Considering that the primary objective of this study is to identify and explain the characteristics of populist policymaking employed by the Pashinyan government (and, subsequently, to determine the extent to which the populist promises

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that brought him to power were realized), the observed patterns were created using key descriptors dominant in each of the problem stream, policy stream, political stream, and creation of policy and compared with the respective streams put forth by Kingdon (1990).

### 5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Five public speeches delivered by Pashinyan were analyzed in the current research: those of October 24, November 1, 13, 25, 26, 2018, first to establish if the issues raised were derived from dominant public concerns. The analysis revealed that the most dominant assertion in the speeches was his pledge (even assurance) to fight against corruption, duly reflecting what the vast majority of the population has persistently raised. Whereas, generally speaking, well-formulated anti-corruption strategies could serve as powerful tools for moving forward and are rather common in many countries, Pashinyan expressly referred to eliminating certain types of corruption: shadow economy, monopolies, political bribery, and the system of elections vowing to amend the tax and electoral codes of the Republic of Armenia.

The interpretation of Pashinyan's constant rhetoric about tax reform reveals the absence of a coherent program in this domain and the lack of a clearly mapped out policy he would implement if elected. A quick review of world politics shows that democratic policymakers normally focus on boosting the productive capacity of the local economy through policy reforms; one such reform is changing the tax code to promote economic growth and opportunity. Moreover, with respect to taxing businesses, reforms in this domain are generally geared to encouraging investment, innovation, and competitiveness that would lead to more jobs. Conversely, adopting a policy that favors "*Doubling, tripling, quadrupling the number of major taxpayers*" or "*exempting taxi drivers from license fees or income tax obligations*"<sup>2</sup> would surely not lead to prosperity and economic growth, but would precisely secure votes for Pashinyan.

Closely related to this topic is Pashinyan's populist claim that "*The most important condition for employment encouragement is freeing microbusinesses from taxes, which will give people the opportunity to work and earn money with dignity and independence and serve as a tool for poverty reduction.*"<sup>3</sup> Again, more populist than pragmatic. Though conceptually correct, exempting microbusinesses from income taxes alone would not generate measurable impact absent other key policy instruments, employment triggers and ancillary support programs specifically designed to create jobs and reduce poverty. Moreover, simply pontificating "*We will encourage employment,*"<sup>4</sup> is not indicative of having developed a full-fledged action plan particularly designed to increase employment.

Another dominant campaign rhetoric was Pashinyan's strong assurance to eliminate corruption. Earlier attempts and experiences by other countries have shown that addressing corruption is not always straightforward. The connection between corruption management and democratic compromise is rather complex and requires research into the prevalent circumstances and underlying behaviors. Again, Pashinyan failed to articulate potential policy actions in his speeches. "*The Government is firmly determined to implement its anticorruption campaign* (with no mention of what the campaign entailed). ... *But the fight against corruption is not a one-sided effort,*" said Pashinyan, clearly passing the buck or assigning responsibility for fighting against corruption to the people. Regrettably, many leaders who have come to power with a genuine interest in controlling corruption, as he appeared to have, have ended up nurturing cronyism and further damaging democratic processes instead. Pashinyan is no exception.

And, lastly, his rhetoric about starting an "economic revolution" that would set the stage for Armenian industry to flourish exponentially was hailed by his supporters (and all those individuals who believed him) but questioned by his opponents. Among the pledges made by Pashinyan were reforms that others have also hailed in the past: promotion of investments; elimination of monopolies; reconstruction of infrastructure; and reduction of income tax rates. No so-called revolutionary program was evident in his campaign or subsequent performance in office. "*Whatever Pashinyan meant by the term economic revolution, it is difficult to imagine how it would be attained. Throwing words in the air is not enough to bring about a significant transformation in the economy, if that's what he meant by revolution*" maintained one of the experts interviewed. "*Beyond the expressed willpower, an economic 'revolution' would firstly require fully restructuring the Armenian economy based on the factors of production,*" asserted another. Particularly for a country with limited natural resources, creating the necessary infrastructure is rather crucial, but this does not only point to simply renovating roads, instead, "*Infrastructure improvements require expert study to map out the works by order of their criticality and intended use, then patterning the trading arteries accordingly so as to obtain significant impact in terms of facilitating the movement of goods and promoting new trade. There is no evidence of a study that would back this government's activities in that domain,*" as explained by another expert interviewed.

Thus, the analysis scrutinized the policy stream to establish if ideas and solutions were explored, researched and deliberated before putting forth reform ideas for addressing the problems identified. The verbiage used in the Pashinyan speeches and assertions by interviewees (discussed below) did not reflect the prevalence of any scientific or evidence-based examination, analysis and

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<sup>2</sup> Extracted from Pashinyan's speech on November 13, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Extracted from Pashinyan's speech on November 25, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Extracted from Pashinyan's speech on November 26, 2018.

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substantiation of claims. In spite of those blatant deficiencies and his continued manifestation of populism, there remains a segment of the population (supposedly a declining percentage, as claimed by the majority of the interviewees) that endorses him and gives credence to assertions of accomplishments without validation of the data. What one of those interviewed stated appropriately captures the position of his supporters: *“Pashinyan has stated everything that must be said and will undo everything that the former regime had put in place. That’s what our country needs,”* without further elaborating the statement, even when probed.

In contrast, another interviewee asserts, *“The country is so politicized, that those in power are adopting policies that only serve those segments of the population that brought them in, and this is done openly without fear of reprisal,”* sarcastically referring to the Pashinyan regime as ‘politically correct’. In policy debates, political correctness is hailed in the context of attention to abstention from speech that uses offensive jargon. However, formal policy discussions, in parliament or elsewhere, must contain articulation of options and alternatives that express divergent views or reveal positions that are characterized by opposite ends of the policy continuum. Some scholars view this stage in policymaking as ideation or the thought cycle — understood as the creative thinking step for generating new or alternative ideas to solve the issues under consideration. As another interviewee posits, *“I would have thought that a ‘bastion of democracy’ (as Pashinyan describes Armenia) should, at the minimum, promote an involved policymaking process that engages experts, various segments of society, and major opposition parties, at least.”*

However, beyond considering various options or alternative solutions, selection of the best policy requires thorough advance research and analysis of the options identified to determine the respective pluses and minuses and, most importantly, their relevance and potential impact on Armenia. This practice considers the required harmonization of any new policy in order to avoid potential contradictions with current policies within the system. In the words of an interviewee, *“For instance, duplicating a policy that is working well in neighboring Georgia does not necessarily guarantee its functional efficacy for Armenia. Though there are many similarities between our two cultures, but we are a different people, have a different way of life, different goals, and a different system of government that require commensurate measures of success.”* She went on citing more differences that require different policy solutions to make a difference in the lives of the Armenian people. Her extensive monologue ended with *“I wonder if Pashinyan even understands these nuances or has any knowledge of or idea about how to run a government.”*

Besides identifying existing public needs, the policymaking process requires validating that those needs are real, duly reflect prevailing public issues and are not limited to satisfying a ‘favored’ segment of the population to get the government’s priority attention. Particularly for countries with limited budgetary resources, such as Armenia, *“the bundle of issues that undergoes the procedural process to end up on the government agenda is but a fraction of prevailing public concerns and is largely driven by the political benefits of the ruling party or coalition, as opposed to the weight of interest groups,”* explains an opposition member of the RA National Assembly interviewed. Consequently, the party in power formulates or shapes the issues that it wants to address in language most convenient for its own priorities. Beyond language twisting, government pays attention only to issues held or pursued by its closeknit circle and support groups, disregarding other segments of the population to the detriment of the nation as a whole. *“Such dominance is threatening the core principles of participatory policymaking. If we want to advance our democracy, it is critical to ensure that the agenda-setting process is fully transparent to all groups and allows interested stakeholders to participate and provide input as they deem appropriate,”* adds another.

Moreover, in the agenda-setting phase, the procedural tools employed by the Pashinyan government have also affected how policy was formulated (and subsequently implemented). For instance, in cases that involved the appointment of expert commissions or advisory committees to review and report on required revisions or policy alternatives, albeit rare in this regime, seeking diversity of opinion or involving individuals with opposing views are not evident. *“Engaging experienced or expert citizen panels are critical for informing and deliberating policy options,”* argued an expert interviewed. He then added, *“Agenda-setting in the policymaking process is a crucial phase that ... should not be controlled by party politics or fear from conflicting views. The broader the range of policy options considered, the more the likelihood of formulating the most fitting policy response.”*

Involving multiple (if not all) stakeholders in the early phase of policymaking is not optional, rather a prerequisite to ensure that the problem identification has considered the different causes and/or triggers of the issue requiring a solution, as well as the layers and dimensions of its impact. The more thorough this stage, the more fitting and propitious could be the ensuing solutions, provided the right implementation design and performance follow. But, this is easier said than done, posits one of the interviewees, adding *“The resources available to the Government or to the regulatory branch are not even enough to allow sufficient study or deliberation of an issue. But, beyond that, there is always a certain rush to get policies through probably to show ‘good performance’ and thereby increase the likelihood of re-electability. Besides, honestly, I am not sure that the Pashinyan government even possesses the intellectual capacity to delve into such matters of importance to policymaking.”*

Similar explanations were heard from five other interviewees who disapproved or were critical of the manner in which the current government handles policymaking. Some viewed the process as requiring more visibility and dynamism and, as one of them elaborated *“not limited to government-set actions behind the curtain that lead to a certain policy, but an opportunity to create coalitions around the underlying process and principles or participation beyond party politics. Essentially, the policymaking process must involve as many different factions of the population as possible, regardless of their inclinations or preferred solutions and approaches. It is through such discussions of alternatives and consideration of opposing positions that policies bring to the*

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*table the different needs of the population that could otherwise go unnoticed,*" she explained. In the absence or active involvement of interest groups in many important policy areas, most problems prevalent among the poor and underprivileged segments of the Armenia population are overlooked and remain unanswered.

The analysis of interviews also points to a relatively dominant fraction of the population that does not even give credence to what Pashinyan claims to be doing or to have achieved. *"Among my circle of friends and relatives, we don't feel any improvement in our quality of life. We hear about impressive growth in the media and wonder where these numbers come from or how they are calculated and/or justify the increase of prices,"* stated another interviewee. But there are also those that blatantly rejoice simply for the fact that the preceding administration is no longer in power. Words, such as *former, previous, and earlier,* appear to have received new meaning and popularity to mean *old, worn-out, and stale.* Even if some don't feel the policy differences brought into their lives, Pashinyan seems to be more acceptable because he is from a different party with a different past, therefore, the policies incorporated into his agenda are or "must be" good, as many citizens say. A female interviewee in her sixties explains: *"I hear the term 'must be good' from different people and mostly from my age group —not necessarily to voice a sense of optimism or trust in the administration and the prime minister, rather to mean 'no comment'. It's a way of saying that they are sort of tired and have no expectations that there will be positive policy changes in the near future."*

And lastly, in analyzing the post agenda-setting politics stream of the policymaking process, the research gauges the extent to which the subsequent procedural actions have led to actual policy change visible to the population. Beyond ratification by the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, there may have been new opportunities for making tweaks via policy implementing language that would somewhat consider minor alternatives the opposition finds meaningful and important. *"Of course, such engagement becomes only possible when the ruling party adopts a participatory policymaking process, which has been missing in this regime. Before, during, and after, Pashinyan only pushes his own, or more blatantly put, the agenda that he has come to power to accomplish. Unfortunately, that policymaking process is grey, not visible to people beyond his immediate circle, and not at all serving our nation,"* explained an interviewee. But, there were two interviewees who strongly defended the ruling majority claiming that *"... there is no need to bring every little issue for discussion by the lawmakers. There are standard procedures that a democracy, any democracy, follows, including ours."*

However, democratic governance, particularly pertaining to the processes and procedures of policy adoption, must also strive for progress by way of improvements even in the choice of rulemaking (words and order), measures, and collaborative activity in policy implementation. Only extreme populism preempts such unified activity (even if not intended to engage opposition segments of the population). When probed for clear descriptions of this phase of Pashinyan's policymaking, none of the nine interviewees were able to actually illustrate how this is occurring beyond sketching the implementation in general terms. *"Sadly, I often wonder who our government is serving and what types of quid-pro-quo arrangements there are that the public cannot see but doubt that there are external pressures or personal favors that are not acceptable in a democracy,"* elaborated one of the interviewees.

Beyond implementation, the study found no signals of independent or government-led evaluation to assess if any of the new policies are truly achieving or have started to make a difference, as originally intended (beyond the immediate circle of people mentioned earlier). In fledgling democracies, it is even more important to take the steps necessary to adopt evaluation as a requirement of the policymaking process. Such assessments serve as practical and substantive tools to identify weaknesses or flaws and allow subsequent adoption of procedural or process improvements. Naturally, populism stands against adopting or incorporating such approaches or tools in the policymaking process.

## 6. CLOSING REMARKS

The study found that the issues identified by Pashinyan in the pre-election period were self-sponsored and did not originate from discussions with various segments of the population, including opposition groups and, as such, were not formulated to specifically address dominant public concerns. Contrary to Kingdon's formula for sound policymaking, the issues placed on the policy agenda by the Pashinyan regime were not adequately analyzed for optimal solutions and policy proposals that could have more effectively addressed the problems identified. Even more discouraging is the populist policymaking found by the current research that the ruling power excluded discussions and debates with opposition groups, non-governmental organizations, or community groups that could have proposed preferred alternatives, whether in discussions at the RA National Assembly or beyond. The subsequent actions for implementation of policy changes were isolated and consumed by a narrow segment of the populace. The processes used exhibit populist policymaking processes that stand in contrast to the democratic model.

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