

CONTEMPORARY POPULISM: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BELARUS AND VENEZUELA

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ABSTRACT

The rise of populist politics in both Latin America and Eastern Europe at the end of XX – beginning of XXI centuries is evident; however, researchers did not do much comparative analysis of the two continents in general and specific states in particular focusing mainly on Latin America or one-country study. This paper aims at comparing populism in Belarus and Venezuela and investigating whether two states experience similar populist policies. For the purpose of this research populism is defined in political terms, nevertheless, socioeconomic dimension is also analyzed. Based on the results of the analysis, the paper concludes that Belarusian and Venezuelan presidents employ the same populist strategies to come and remain in power, and that the theory of populism can be applied to different states in different parts of the world.

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INTRODUCTION

Populism is a very ambiguous concept. Different scholars at different times applied the term to different phenomena ranging from rhetorical style to a specific stage in the process of modernization of a state. In this paper the term “populism” is used as a definition of a particular political strategy when charismatic personalistic leader directly appeals to masses available for mobilization and thus bypasses mediating political institutions. Populists especially disregard political parties and usually do not rely on any of them; if they create one it fully serves personal needs of the leader. This understanding of populism was thoroughly elaborated by contemporary theorists Kurt Weyland and Kenneth Roberts and is applied to case studies looked at in the paper.

It should be noted that there is a link between a populist regime and a presidential form of government. As Linz (1990, 56) argues, presidentialism is a system that produces a “winner-take-all” result. It means that a president has the power to form and control the cabinet of ministers, is directly elected by people for a fixed term and the only possibility to end his office in between the elections is impeachment. In such a system there is always a danger that “the conviction that he possesses independent authority and a popular mandate is likely to imbue a president with a sense of power and mission, even of the plurality that elected him is a slender one” (Linz 1990, 56). As long as in presidential system the executive is elected directly by people a political outsider has more chances to win the office and is less dependent on political parties than in parliamentary system. The feeling of full power and of being the embodiment of

the people can provoke populist tendencies of the rule. However, this paper will not discuss this issue as far as it has different aims.

Contemporary students of populism usually apply their theories to Latin American countries. This is not a surprise because traditionally populism was closely associated with this continent. The first wave of populism took shape between 1930's and 1960's; and political strategies of Lazaro Cardenas in Mexico, Victor Raul Haya de la Torre in Peru, Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Peron in Argentina have been studied as examples of classical populism by researchers. However, the rise of populist politics in the end of the twentieth century was noticeable not only in Latin America but in Eastern Europe as well. Nonetheless, the theorists of populism seem unwilling to apply the theory to this region and to compare Latin American examples of populist politics with Eastern European.

Nevertheless, the comparison of populist regimes in different parts of the world seems interesting and deserves attention because Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka are both labeled as "populist". However, political histories of these two countries are very different; yet neither could escape the same fate and are experiencing the rise of populist regimes.

During the second half of the twentieth century it was generally accepted that Venezuela, a country rich in oil, managed to establish and consolidate liberal democratic regime based on strong two-party system. The Pact of Punto Fijo made two main political parties - Democratic Action (*Accion Democratica*, AD) and Social Christian Party (*Partido Social Cristiano*, COPEI)

– the main political actors in the country and guaranteed both their share of power. In words of Michael Coppedge (2002, 9), the political regime existed in Venezuela was a “partyarchy”¹; it was very stable and one of the least likely to collapse and give the rise to a populist leader in Latin America.

However, the victory of Hugo Chavez Frias, a military man who personified the opposition to the system, in 1998 presidential elections signified that the previous liberal democratic regime was not able to sustain itself. Political parties went into the demise and lost their credibility due to some factors that will be discussed in this paper. Hugo Chavez is concentrating power in his hands and is not relying on any organized institution. Venezuela is experiencing the transition from liberal democracy to highly personalistic, populist regime with autocratic tendencies.

Belarus is a state that became independent only in 1991 after being one of the republics of the Soviet Union. It is often called “the last dictatorship in Europe”. The regime is personified by its leader, Alexander Lukashenka, who after coming to power in 1994 through relatively free and fair elections usurped power leaving no space for civil and political freedoms, independent media and opposition parties. Since then he conducted a referendum in 1996 that gave him almost absolute power, was reelected for a second term in 2001, amended the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus ending the limitation of the presidential terms which was legitimized via popular referendum in 2004 (before the amendment president could be elected for five years for no more than two terms) and was reelected for his third term in March 2006.

¹ The term, translated from *partidocracia*, the combination of *partido* (party) and *democracia* (democracy) and used by many Venezuelans (Coppedge 2002, 9).

Western governments and international observers repeatedly have not recognized the results of presidential elections and referenda revealing all sorts of fraud during campaigns. From the other side, observers from the Commonwealth of Independent States produced alternative reports and expressed their support to the regime (probably because these people represented political regimes that used the same techniques to stay in power). Interesting fact to be mentioned in case of Belarus is that according to independent surveys conducted before every electoral event President Lukashenka enjoyed support of the population that allowed him to get positive for him results without employing any fraud, however to a lesser degree that was officially announced.

This paper evaluates the developments in two states – Belarus and Venezuela – through the prism of the theory of populism. These two states are different on many dimensions: historical background, international environment, culture. However, the choice of states is not random. The last years have witnessed the rise of autocratic rule in different parts of the world as well as the rise of populist politics. Belarus and Venezuela present two cases that have been experiencing the establishment of authoritarian rule based on populism (moreover two states are establishing close political and economic relationship with each other). The aim of this paper is to apply the theory of populism to East European and Latin American cases and see whether there are some differences and/or similarities between them.

The previous research on the issues of populist politics has not dealt much with comparison between Latin American and East European cases in general and between Venezuela and Belarus in particular. However, this issue seems interesting; and my hypothesis is that the two states under analysis are very similar with respect to populist policies and the theory of populism that is

usually applied to Latin American cases is not continent-specific but is valid to conceptualize the processes in other parts of the world.

Methodology

In applying the theory, the study demands the collection, collation and critical examination of the primary and secondary literature in the relevant fields, analysis of different theoretical approaches to the notions of populism, its definitions, the causes and conditions of its emergence and existence.

The theoretical background will be tested on two case studies. Theory of populism will be applied to political regimes of Belarus and Venezuela to compare policies of two states that represent Eastern Europe and Latin America and to define which type of populism each country experiences. The research will involve comparative elements. Focusing on the developments in theory of populism, it will parallel and compare the developments in political and socioeconomic spheres in Belarus and Venezuela during the last decade (in Belarus after 1994 when Lukashenka came to power and in Venezuela after 1998 when Chavez won office). The objective is to reveal similarities and differences in the processes of two states under research.

Some parts of the project consist of library-based research. Key elements of the information required for the empirical component are also available from published sources. The country-specific documentary evidence is also available through Internet resources such as on-line journals, newspapers, web sites of research groups and institutions. The fieldwork component of

the research primarily entails archival and documentary research in the national collections of states under analysis.

Structure

The work will consist of three chapters. In the first one theories of populism will be presented, described and analyzed. First, cumulative, radial and classical concepts of populism will be discussed; their strengths and weaknesses will be evaluated as well as their employment in analysis of different waves of populist politics. Secondly, this chapter will focus on causes of emergence of populism, circumstances of its development and tactics employed by populist leaders to consolidate power. This chapter will analyze the social and political correlates of populism such as weakness or absence of political parties and other intermediate institutions, the implementation of social policies and focus on lower classes, mobilization of masses, role of plebiscitary politics and mass media propaganda. The role of economic factors in the rise of populism cannot be ignored and will be investigated.

The second and the third chapters will be devoted to case studies. Political and socioeconomic policies in Belarus and Venezuela will be analyzed according to the theory of populism. The main objective of these chapters is to highlight differences and similarities in developments in mentioned spheres in these two states and to reveal whether these states experience the same type of populism or not. The case analysis will start with a historical overview of the political, economic and social developments in Belarus and Venezuela as far as it will help to identify causes that made possible the populist regimes to be established in these states. But the main focus of study will be on the very recent period in history of these states. The main analysis of

policies in Belarus will start with the year of 1994 when President Alexander Lukashenka came to power; and the Venezuela's developments will be more closely investigated since 1998 when Hugo Chavez won elections and became the President of this state. Chapter 2 will deal with the causes that made populist regimes possible in two states and Chapter 3 will compare some basic aspects of populist politics in Belarus and Venezuela.

CHAPTER 1: ON THEORY OF POPULISM

In this chapter I review the approaches to the definition of such an ambiguous term as populism and look closer at the most recent developments in the theory of populism elaborated by Kurt Weyland and Kenneth Roberts. I also discuss the link between the rise of populism and the role of mass media, especially television as far as many theorists underline the importance of mass media as a mediating tool between the leader and the electorate.

1.1 Ambiguity of the term

Populism had become a very fashionable concept applicable to many Latin American states in the middle of the twentieth century. At that time the rise of populism was associated with nationalist, inward-looking economic policies at the early stages of industrialization and personalistic authority that was especially appealing to urban workers and labor unions. However, this period was followed by changes in economic and political sphere that brought new realities to the continent and it was generally accepted that the era of populism was over in Latin America.

The third wave of democratization (according to Samuel Huntington's terminology) started in 1974 with Southern Europe and then spread over Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and Africa with its promotion of neoliberal reforms. This process brought the understanding that the resurgence of populism is impossible in democracies as far as this kind of politics seemed incompatible with market-oriented economies. However, in the 1990's scholars had to recognize the appearance of new populist leaders that launched and promoted neoliberal reforms. "Populist

leadership, it was argued, might help to secure lower class acceptance of economic measures that might otherwise provoke a political backlash” (Roberts 2000, 2). The examples here are the governments of Menem in Argentina, Collor in Brazil, Fujimory in Peru and Perez in Venezuela (Weyland 1999, 381). The same process that was observed in Latin America became common for Central and Eastern European countries. Boris Yeltsin in Russia, Lech Walesa in Poland and to some extent Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine used populist tactics while launching market-oriented reforms (Weyland 1999, 381). This co-existence of populist policies and market-oriented economies challenged the existing theory of populism and new theory of neopopulism was adopted.

However, the history of populism did not end with the emergence of neopopulist theory. President Evo Morales in Bolivia is actively nationalizing natural resources (the country owns the second largest natural gas field in Latin America). Hugo Chavez came to power in Venezuela in 1998 and since then the country has been experiencing a turn to the left – Chavez is reestablishing state property on factories and agricultural lands by expropriating them as unprofitable. He is spending money that was earned from selling oil on different social programs and is sponsoring radical movement in Latin America (Llosa 2006). These examples show that classic concept of populism is not dead and is still important in understanding the history of Latin America.

Carlos de la Torre in his book “Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience” (2000, 2-3) analyzes different approaches to the definition of the term “populism” in the existing literature. Thus, Gino Germani applies the term to the forms of sociopolitical

mobilization when masses are influenced and manipulated by charismatic leaders. Torcuato di Tella and Octavio Ianni define populism as a multiclass social movement led by upper classes but based on the working class and peasants. Populism is also defined as a historical stage in the process of modernization (Gino Germani, Octavio Ianni, James Malloy, Guillermo O'Donnell, Carlos Vilas) or is applied to the redistributive, nationalist, inclusionary policies that imply state intervention into the economy but undermine the risk of inflation and external restraints (Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards). Alan Angell defines the term as a type of political party that uses nationalistic rhetoric with charismatic leadership from middle or upper class and strong popular base, and lacks well-defined ideology. Ernesto Laclau points out that populism is a political discourse that counters the people and the oligarchy. Alain Touraine applies the term to the efforts of a state to be a protector of national identity and promoter of integration through economic development during the process of foreign-led modernization. And finally, Alan Knight says that populism is a political style that presupposes the close link between the ruler and the people and can be employed during the times of crisis and rapid mobilization².

Carlos de la Torre himself defines populism as a style of political mobilization, which uses direct appeals to the masses and supporters' action in the name of a leader. He underlines the importance of populist rhetoric which divides the society on "the people" and "the oligarchy". Politics becomes the arena of struggle for moral values, and these in power do not agree to any compromise with the opposition. It is based on clientalism and involves "forms of political participation in which public and massive demonstrations, the acclamation of leaders, and the occupation of public spaces in the name of a leader are perceived as more important than citizenship rights and the respect for liberal democratic procedures" (de la Torre 2000, 4).

² The scholars' examples all come from de la Torre (2000, 2-3).

As we see from the presented analysis populism is a very vague concept that is used by different authors in different meanings to serve the purpose of a particular research. In this paper I will use the definition elaborated by contemporary students of populism Kurt Weyland and Kenneth Roberts.

1.2 Contemporary reading of populism

Weyland (2001, 2) in his article “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics” states that there are three strategies for defining such unclear concepts as populism: cumulation, addition and redefinition. Cumulation means the definition that combines different domains stressed by different scholars through logical “and”, so only cases that reflect all characteristics can be classified as examples of the concept. Under addition researchers understand the definition that combines different domains through a logical “or”, and cases that reflect only some characteristics can be classified as “diminished subtypes” of the concept; so addition presents radial concepts. When theorists speak about redefinition they find the main domain stressed by different scholars and disregard other domains; so redefinition presents classical concepts.

Up to the 1980's most scholars adopted cumulative concepts in studying Latin American populism. This tendency was inspired by modernization and dependency theories (theories of development and underdevelopment) that had a clear economic-structuralist focus. As a result populism encompassed multidimensional attributes. From the point of view of political domain it meant personalistic charismatic leadership that relied on plebiscitarian style of politics. Populist

leaders traditionally disregarded any mediating institutions and established direct contact with mostly unorganized masses of supporters. In defining the social roots of populism it was argued that the mass of followers was heterogeneous and included different urban classes. The vital element in securing this multiclass support was the provision of different social and material benefits. From the economic point of view populism was seen as a specific stage in the process of transition from traditional to modern society attributed to import-substitution industrialization. This phase was characterized by inward-looking nationalistic economies (Weyland 2001, 5).

This multidimensional approach to populism reflected development theories that supposed close interconnection of politics and economics. Basically adherents of these theories argued that politics is dependent on and shaped by socioeconomic conditions of the state. Thus, populism was an outcome of the modernization of the state which resulted in industrialization, urbanization and education of the population. This process led to the rise of mass participation, “undermined traditional political authority, hindered the gradual establishment of institutionalized new regimes, and thus produced unstable types of rule, including populism” (Weyland 2001, 5). Similarly, dependency theory explained the rise of this kind of regimes in a way that incorporation of previously peripheral states of Latin America into world capitalist system provoked the perversion of social and economic structure and hampered the emergence of a strong ruling class. At the same time, popular classes were fragmented and this situation “led to the formation of tension-filled, temporary class alliances held together by personalistic leaders, that is, populism” (Weyland 2001, 5).

However in the 1970's the theories of modernization and development lost their significance. Moreover, as it was mentioned above populist politics reemerged in the 1980s and 1990s in absolutely different socio-economic environment from that envisioned by classical populism; but at the same time leaders adopted political strategies that reflected those used by populist leaders from 1930s to 1960's. As a result, the cumulative concepts of classical populism had become too exclusionary. Scholars had "faced a double challenge: the resurgence of populist political strategies outside the socio-economic context of classical populism and the theoretical questioning of socio-economic structuralism" (Weyland 2001, 9). As a result the opinions on the concept of populism between scholars were divided. Some researches kept on insisting on the cumulative definition of populism, some of them offered to abandon this concept in social science (like Ian Roxborough and Rafael Quintero³); others supported the idea of articulating the concept in radical definition (Kenneth Roberts, 1995); and some argued for the redefinition of populism in purely political terms locating it outside any socioeconomic model, that is to use it as a classical concept (Kenneth Roberts, 2000; Carlos de la Torre 2000; Kurt Weyland, 1999, 2001, 2003).

The main problem arising here is how to name those leaders that enjoy mass support and pursue neoliberal reforms in the economic sphere. Many theorists, especially influenced by the ideas of Marxism, would argue that the market economy is unpopular as long as it undermines people's interests. Consequently, they refrain from classifying Latin American leaders that came to power with massive popular support but introduced neoliberal reforms in their states as populist. However, other scholars stress this popular dimension as the key element in the definition of populism and still argue that these new leaders are populists (Weyland 2001, 9).

³ Scholars examples come from de la Torre (2000, 3).

The solution to the problem may come from accepting the radial concept of populism that also employs different domains (political, social, economic) but does not automatically disqualify cases if they lack some characteristics. Radial concept allows some compromise between scholars: those who insist on the cumulative definition of populism may use the term to apply to the policies that fit into the multidimensional approach to this phenomenon; others can apply the term to a wider set of cases that present only some dimensions listed above and miss the others and thus exemplify some diminished subtypes of the concept. However, radial multidimensional definition may evoke confusion. Researches using the same term may give completely different meaning to it (Weyland 2001, 10).

Weyland argues that in defining populism cumulative and radial concepts that employ characteristics from different domains suffer from theoretical and empirical problems as they tend to focus on socioeconomic structuralism and have difficulties in demarcating the extension of populism. The redefinition centers on single domain that is politics. It leaves the possibility of involving socioeconomic factors in research but does not require and presume them a priori. Weyland concludes that in studies of populism redefinition or classical concept is more preferable also because it minimizes border conflicts, helps in delimitating the extension of populism and “situates populism in a hierarchical system of concepts, facilitating comparison and contrast” (Weyland 2001, 18).

Thus, populism is understood as a political strategy⁴. It is characterized by three notions.

A personal leader appeals to a heterogeneous mass of followers who feel left out and are available for mobilization; the leader reaches the followers in a direct, quasi-personal manner

⁴ “Political strategies are characterized by the power capability that types of rulers use to sustain themselves politically” (Weyland 2001, 18).

that bypasses established intermediary organizations, especially parties; if the leader builds a new or revives an old populist party, it remains a personal vehicle with a low level of institutionalization. (Weyland 1999, 381)

Kenneth Roberts (2000) also states that during the first wave of populism in Latin America this phenomenon was treated as multi-dimensional and incorporated the style of leadership (usually personalistic and charismatic), direct appeal to masses (usually subordinate heterogeneous social classes) and specific form of economic development (“import substitution industrialization characterized by economic nationalism, extensive state intervention and widespread distributive or redistributive measures” (Roberts 2000, 3)). However, recently, political definition of populism has come into use that lacks any ties with specific economic models of development. For Roberts, populism now “entails the political mobilization of largely unorganized masses by personalistic leaders who typically bypass or subordinate institutionalized forms of representation and challenge established political or economic elites” (Roberts 2000, 4). This definition of populism does not specify a particular economic program and can be applied in different economic frameworks.

Roberts makes two main arguments in his paper. The first is that populism can be established in a state where masses available for mobilization (that usually involve sizeable sectors of lower classes of a society) are not properly represented by political institutions such as political parties and do not have organized forms to express their voice in political arena. The second is that populism has embedded double-sided relations with political democracy. On the one hand, as it was stated above, populism emerges as a reaction to the demands of lower classes for political inclusion and can be established via the democratic or at least electoral procedures. On the other hand, populism flourishes under and often enhances the situation of institutional weakness and

leaders have tendency to use non-democratic and plebiscitary methods that do not correspond with such important democratic institutions as checks and balances, the rule of law and political pluralism (Roberts 2000, 2-3).

In identification of social and political correlates of populism Roberts underlines that populist leaders usually legitimize their power through popular support that may take the form of street demonstrations or popular elections. People usually vote for a person himself, his leadership qualities, not his institutional position or specific program. Mass mobilization is a top-down process and happens through direct relations between a leader and usually unorganized population. Consequently, populism has more chances to emerge in countries where there are no strong parties and civil society is absent or weakly organized. In ones with well developed functioning parties and active civil society populist politicians are unlikely to win the office (Roberts 2000, 6-7).

Roberts points out the difference between the first and the second wave of populism in Latin America. He states that new generation of populist leaders is disregarding political organizations and trying to establish so called “direct democracy” whereas previous generation tended to organize population through different institutions even if those institutions were subordinated to the populist leaders’ personal interests. With the development of mass media technologies contemporary populist leaders do not need parties for mobilization and communication with the electorate and see these political institutions as a limitation to their personal autonomy. Followers of the contemporary populists are not expected to be active members of a party or

other organization. Their main role is to show their support via regular vote of confidence (Roberts 2000, 10-12).

As was mentioned above, populist leaders have tendency to autocratic exercise of their power which presents a threat to democracy. On the one hand they widen participation of masses that were previously excluded from political process, giving them the sense of possession and exercising political and social rights. Populists come to power through democratic procedures (such as elections) and often seek support of masses for major decisions via popular referenda. Their victories in elections signify the people's disappointment with previous regimes and aspiration for political change. Usually populist politicians use the image of the 'one coming from the people' and claim to give power back to them. On the other hand, populist's rule is highly personalistic and consequently tends to be undemocratic, does not welcome political pluralism, disregards the rule of law and undermines democratic institutions (Roberts 2000, 13-14).

The most vulnerable of these is the system of democratic checks and balances. Leaders who were elected with the mass support are inclined to view themselves as "the embodiment of 'the people' and the incarnation of the popular will" (Roberts 2000, 14). They consider democratic institutions that impose limitations on leaders' political autonomy as an obstacle on the way of implementation of people's will. The rule of law, an independent judiciary and parliamentary opposition is viewed as "discredited political establishment" that must be neutralized "in the name of political change". Legislature presents the most common problem for populist leaders. As far as populists are not backed up by a strong party they cannot secure pro-presidential

majority in parliament; and as a result conflicts arise when parliamentary opposition prevents the president from the exercise of people's will (Roberts 2000, 14-15).

To overcome these difficulties populist leaders look for ways out that can help to bypass democratic institutions and implement their decisions without approval of the legislature. One of the solutions is found in the form of the rule by decree; another might be an attempt to adjust to the existing realities (for example to fill the parliament with sympathizers or to amend the constitution to have more power or as it was mentioned above to use popular referenda to justify their decisions). Regardless of the techniques populists use, they are considered threatening for democracy (Roberts 2000, 15-16).

1.3 Populism and mass media

The link between the mass media politics and the rise of new wave of populism is discussed by many scholars today. Thus, Kurt Weyland (2001, 14) points out the role of television in creating face-to-face contact of a leader with masses which populists use to show their closeness to common people. Silvio Waisbord underlines that Latin American neopopulism "cannot be understood without an examination of contemporary media politics". Ben Ross Schneider describes the strategy of some leaders such as Fernando Collor in Brazil to come to power with the use of electronic media as "telepopulism"⁵.

Two components of populism make mass media politics a very effective tactic to reach the goals of populist leaders. First, this type of leader does not rely on mediating political institutions and tries to bypass them in contacting the masses. In this case television appears to be the perfect tool

⁵ The scholars examples all come from Boas (2005, 28).

as it allows messages to be delivered to the majority of electorate immediately and simultaneously. For the person who does not have any association with a political party, labor union or business corporation television provides the only possibility to promote ideas. On the other hand, TV promotion does not necessarily guarantee the candidate's success. Second, populist leaders orient their campaigns to largely unorganized poor. Visual picture in this case can play a very effective role. Populist politicians often use the tactic focused on 'low' politics, that is their images and discourse seek to find response of the masses, not the elites. "By speaking in the vernacular, dressing casually, espousing an affinity for popular styles of music or sports, and engaging in showy, spectacle-filled campaigns that emphasize their charismatic qualities, neopopulist candidates make the large masses of poor voters more likely to identify with and support them" (Boas 2005, 30-31).

Mass media in general has the effect on politics. Politicians may use news papers, journals, magazines and other kinds of media where they can publish different materials to familiarize public with their personalities and political programs. However, television has the greater influence on electorate than printed mass media when it comes to populist politicians. The target audience of such candidates is the poorest classes of society. In Latin American context these masses are often semi-literate or with low level of education. They lack alternative sources of information and the only provider of news for them is television (Boas 2005, 32). Television is more effective in delivering information than radio as well. Doris A. Graber (1996) argues that human brain is more easily accepts the information from audiovisual source than from purely verbal. When people read or hear the information they process one verbal unit at a time whereas during watching and hearing people receive some units simultaneously. She underlines that "one

quick glance at complex visual scenes suffices to identify situations that words would describe with far less fidelity in information transmission” (Graber 1996, 86).

One more point that should be mentioned with regards to elections is the problem of bias in television presentation of electoral campaign. As was mentioned above poor electorate does not have many alternatives in getting information on current political issues from and mostly receives it from television. If there is a bias in TV reporting of the campaign to benefit some particular candidate it is most likely that this candidate has more chances to get majority of votes. If the mass media corporations are controlled by rich individuals they can support particular candidates providing them most of the air devoted to politics. Or if a populist leader is already in power, he can use his authority to influence mass media in his support (Boas 2005, 32).

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented different approaches to the understanding of the term “populism”. The main focus was on the theories of two contemporary students of populism Kurt Weyland and Kenneth Roberts. I also discussed the correlation between the development of mass media technologies, especially television, and the rise of populist politics as far as television now plays the role of mediating tool between the leader and the masses.

Weyland and Roberts define populism as a political strategy that has the following characteristics: charismatic personalistic leadership, direct appeal to unorganized masses and disregard of mediating institutions. Populist politicians do not rely on any political party or if

they establish one it serves personal needs of the leader. Populist regimes emerge in the conditions of weak political parties and leaders win the office via democratic procedures. The approach of these scholars does not indicate any specific socioeconomic factors for emergence and existence of populist regimes but leaves the possibility to involve them into research. In the next two chapters I will apply this theory of populism to two case studies of populist regimes – Hugo Chavez’s in Venezuela and Alexander Lukashenka’s in Belarus. In the second chapter I will analyze the conditions that allowed these two leaders to come to power and in the third chapter I will compare some aspects of these two regimes based on Weyland’s and Roberts’s elaborations.

CHAPTER II:

BELARUS AND VENEZUELA: THE PATHS TO POPULIST REGIMES

In the first part of this chapter I look at the essence of the change in Venezuelan politics after Hugo Chavez came to power in 1998 and investigate the reasons of democratic decline in the country. To address this issue I first discuss the theory of democratization from the point of view of importance of political parties in the process. Secondly, I describe the political regime that existed from 1958 to 1998, and then changes made by Chavez. Finally, I analyze the factors that had led to the downfall of the two-party system and created possibilities for the populist leader to come to power. The second part of the chapter I devote to the analysis of the political situation in Belarus: I look at the policies implemented by Alexander Lukashenka and present arguments explaining his popularity and rise to power. As it was underlined in Chapter I populist regimes emerge in the countries with weak political parties. I analyze Venezuela first because it is a good example of how strong two-party system collapse created the possibilities of the populist to come to power; while Belarus is an example of the populist regime that emerged in a state where party system was not even established.

2.1 Why parties are important for democracy

Scholars who have attempted to explain the reasons of democratic decline in Venezuela underline the importance of viable parties for sustaining democratic regime. Javier Corrales in his article “Strong Societies, Weak Parties: Regime Change in Cuba and Venezuela in the 1950s and Today” argues that the rise of competitive political parties is the variable that mutually

reinforces two domains during the process of democratization: societal power to negotiate with the state and elite's understanding that securing the right of opposition is beneficial for them. Thus, political parties are an essential element in democracy. "Specifically, competitive political parties enhance the political capacity of civil society to undermine authoritarianism and the propensity of the elites to deem political liberalization rational" (Corrales 2001, 82).

Comparing two Latin American states, Cuba and Venezuela, Corrales argues that prosperous societies with strong political parties are much more prone to democratization than societies with weak political parties. In the middle of the twentieth century Cuba had party deficit and experienced transition from semisultanistic authoritarianism to "mobilizational authoritarianism"; whereas Venezuela with strong competitive political parties managed to transform semisultanistic authoritarian regime to a consolidated liberal democracy. The different outcomes come from the fact that strong competitive political parties can prevent the opposition to use violence and collaborate with paramilitary forces. Political parties give guarantees of security to opposition and make impetus for elites to comply with the rules of competition. To sum up, "parties enhance society's bargaining leverage with the state and simultaneously create incentives for elites to prefer competitive politics" (Corrales 2001, 82).

2.2 Venezuela: Puntofijismo Era, its demise and rise of Hugo Chavez

"Puntofijismo" is the name of the political regime that existed from 1958 to 1998 in Venezuela. It has its name from the name of the place where the pact between three major political parties was signed. The roots of the pact go back to the ideas of Romulo Betancourt, who was Venezuelan president twice: 1945-1948 and 1959-1964 (with a period of military dictatorship in

between). His strategy was to invest the capital from oil export rents in the project of modernization of the country. Betancourt thought that in the modern state with mass, universal suffrage the government would have the will to resist the foreign oil companies and return the control of the resources, and then utilize earned money for the benefit of the entire population, not just the elite. So the aim was not only more just distribution of oil revenues between different strata of population, but “to invest in the projects to enhance human capital and infrastructure of the country” (Hellinger 2006, 5).

Betancourt tried to implement his ideas during his first presidential term (1945-1948), however without any success of consolidating the regime. After the years of military dictatorship the project got its second chance. In 1958 three major Venezuelan political parties - the Democratic Action (AD), the Democratic Republican Union and Social Christian Party (COPEI) – signed the pact of Punto Fijo by which they agreed to establish a modern state based on universal suffrage and which gave each important bureaucratic positions and a place in the leadership of each major interest group organization (such as Labor Confederation, the Peasant Federation, professional associations). Later on the Democratic Republican Union suffered from internal cleavages and went into demise, so the power was shared between two parties – AD and COPEI. Thus the political system was created in Venezuela based on oil nationalism, modernization and democracy (Hellinger 2006, 5).

The system reached its culmination in 1976 when oil companies were nationalized (with mutually agreed upon compensations to foreign companies). President Carlos Andres Perez made an attempt to implement the plan of industrialization overnight (“*manos a la obra*”).

However, even despite of the increase in oil prices on the world markets which Perez and his successors could not use the benefits of, the project fell into disaster with the first sign of the economic crises in 1983 – the devaluation of *bolivar* (national currency). Now corruption and inequality was associated not with military dictatorship but with democracy and the majority of the population felt on the periphery of the world, not in the core. In 1989 during his second presidential term President Perez decided to implement neo-liberal reforms with the aim to improve the situation (so called “the Great Turnaround”) with their macroeconomic stabilization, trade liberalization, privatization and deregulation programs. During the short period after the start of the reform Venezuela showed high economic growth rates and was among the leading growing economies in the world. However, after the first successful stage the reforms turned out to be unsuccessful and led to a severe economic crisis. The population was highly disappointed with the situation and blamed the existing system in incapacity to deal with the problems. As the main exemplification of the system, the main political parties had lost their credibility (see Hellinger 2006, 5-6; Myers 2007, 280-285).

Economic crises affected not only civilian population but created tensions in military circles. Before the 1980’s a strong rivalry existed within officer corps; and those who were unable to win the battle of promotion usually got middle-level executive positions in one of many state enterprises. However, the crisis hampered these possibilities. Moreover budget deficit brought the reduction of daily supplies for soldiers and junior officers. This contributed to the feeling of discontent towards the senior officers who were viewed as only preoccupied with personal promotion. Another point to mention is the fact of differentiation in military education between junior and senior officers as far as the former had received the possibilities for military training

at home and abroad. Thus the gap between two generations in the army was widening that led to the loss of credibility of armed forces in supporting the political regime (Myers 2007, 282-283).

On February 4, 1992 a group of junior military officers made an attempt of *coup d'etat*. The group called itself the Bolivarian Military Movement and was led by lieutenant colonel Hugo Chavez Frias. Later the same year, in November, a second attempt was conducted by the navy, air force and marines. Despite the fact that the coup was unsuccessful and Chavez was imprisoned, the event stimulated the opposition to the system, President Perez and his economic reforms (Myers 2007, 283).

The above situation basically explains the reasons why in presidential elections of 1998 Hugo Chavez won with 57 percent of votes. Chavez personalized the opposition to post-1958 liberal democracy, was not a member of any of the main political parties and came to power with the support of the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) (created and led by him). The main slogan of his electoral campaign was to replace the existing “moribund” and “unjust” order with a new responsive democracy. Right after the victory he managed to organize elections to a Constituent Assembly (where Chavez’s supporters got 122 of the 131 seats) whose members were assigned to draft a new constitution. The new constitution was approved by 72 percent of the population on December 15, 1999 and gave more power to the President (who can be elected for six years, for two terms) and took it from the parliament (Myers 2007, 285).

2000 was the year of mega elections in Venezuela. The President, all governors, members of new unicameral National Assembly were elected in accordance with the new constitution. In those

elections Chavez got support of 60 percent of voters and his supporters and collaborators secured majority of offices all around the country. However, opposition was always quite strong in Venezuela. In April 2002 it attempted a *coup d'etat*. For two days Chavez was out of power; nevertheless, his supporters managed to conduct a counter-coup and Chavez resumed the office. Since then Chavez has not trusted the military.

After the failure of the coup opposition did not give up the attempts to dismiss Chavez and in 2003 tried to do it legally using the possibility of recall fixed in the constitution. The President replied by organizing the referendum during which 59 percent of the population said “no” to the recall. During the presidential elections of 2006 Chavez won his second term with 63 percent of votes. Opposition made an attempt to claim that the elections were fraudulent; however international observers said that the process was fair. On this wave of popularity Chavez decided to amend the Constitution to abolish presidential term limits to have the possibility for reelection in 2012. The amendments were approved by the National Assembly. The last stage of the process required popular support through the referendum which was scheduled for December 2007 (Ratliff, 2007). The opposition employed all possible means to mobilize support against these amendments and was successful: 51 percent of voters said “no” to amendments. Hugo Chavez accepted the results⁶.

From the very beginning of his office Chavez started to implement social and economic reforms. He renationalized oil industry and is using revenues for social programs aimed to benefit the least advanced members of society (poor, workers, indigenous population). And these policies, as it was shown above, have their recognition in the masses of population which is expressed

⁶ See David J. Myers, (2007, 287-289); materials from the website www.venezuelaanalysis.com.

during elections. However, as far as the presidency of Chavez is characterized by disregard of political institutions and limitation of freedom of mass media, the state experiences democratic decline: according to Freedom House in 1998 the regime was classified as free⁷; in 2007 it was classified as partly free⁸.

2.2.1 Party system demise

As it was stated in Chapter I students of populism underline the existence of correlation between the weakening of common representative institutions and appearance of populist leaders. Populists are usually characterized by the undermining of mediating institutions and use direct appeal to masses. Venezuela represents the example of such political process. President Hugo Chavez is recognized to be “a master of ‘the politics of antipolitics’” (Roberts 2003, 36).

The question is how the populist leader could come to power in a society which was characterized by strong party system and was widely considered a liberal democracy for a long period of time. Democratic Action (AD), established in the 1940's, was the first mass political party in Venezuela that represented interests of organized working class and peasantry. Its main opponent was the Christian Democratic Party (COPEI) which was the representative institution of middle class businessmen. These parties were hierarchically organized, internally disciplined and deeply penetrated in civil society. The regime based on two-party system seemed stable and predictable. However, the recent political history of Venezuela proved that image to be wrong with the demise of both parties in the 1990s. The causes of this demise can be found in two critical variables: “the design of political institutions, and the impact of oil on the country's economic

⁷ Political rights – 2, civil liberties – 3 (see www.freedomhouse.org).

⁸ Political rights – 4, civil liberties – 4 (see www.freedomhouse.org).

development, political culture, and the patterns of political representation” (Roberts 2003, 39-41).

As for institutional explanations of the crises in party system, Michael Coppedge argues that overinstitutionalization of Venezuelan party system undermined democracy: strong political parties dominated the whole sphere of political life that led to the blocking of all informal ways for citizens to make their voice heard. Other authors (Javier Corrales, Steven Levitski, Brian Crisp) underline the fact of bureaucratization of parties that led to organizational rigidity and hampered the process of adaptation to new social and economic context⁹.

The impact of oil on political and economic development is thoroughly studied by Terry Karl. She argues that export commodities play crucial role in the shaping and constraining modes of political representation in developing states. Karl emphasizes that “the availability of extraordinary oil revenues engendered a highly interventionist but grossly inefficient state, erratic economic performance, and a patronage-ridden party system that entered into crisis as it progressively lost its capacity to provide public services and distribute benefits to a broad range of clients”. Scholars of political culture, such as Anibal Romero, also underline the “rentier mentality” of Venezuelan establishment and citizens created by the accessibility of vast amount of oil (Roberts 2003, 42).

Traditionally, linkages between political parties and society in Latin America are characterized by patron-clientelism and corporatism. Patron-clientelist relationship involves individual support for a party in exchange for different benefits such as public employment, favorable government

⁹ Scholars’ examples all come from Roberts (2003, 41-42).

contracts for business and political favors. Corporatism also envisages mobilization of mass support in exchange for benefits; however it is based not on individual bonds to party but on group constituencies such as labor unions, peasant organizations “giving parties a horizontally organized, grassroots base of mass support that purely clientelistic machine parties generally lack” (Roberts 2003, 44). Venezuelan political parties used both mechanisms of mobilizing popular support using vast oil revenues.

It is argued that the states that managed to create a strong labor-mobilizing party that used both clientelist and corporatist mechanism of linkage and adopted highly interventionist policy in economic sector suffered the harshest economic crisis during the transition from import substitution industrialization to market economies; whereas in states with elite-based party systems labor organizations were not that powerful, state intervention in economy was less extensive and economic crises during transition period was less severe. The transition to neoliberalism also influenced the traditional linkage mechanisms in Latin America. During crises times, even when there is scarcity of resources that hampers wide-scale social programs, clientelistic relations are more stable than corporatist. Increasingly individualized electorate disconnects itself from organizations that previously linked it to parties and stability of party system becomes highly dependent on the ability of parties to produce “instrumental support through performance in office” (Roberts 2003, 45-46).

As it was mentioned above, Venezuela represented a country with an influential labor-mobilizing party. Both AD and COPEI used clientelistic and corporatist linkages to social constituencies. Venezuelan labor movement was considered the most powerful in Latin America and was

closely connected to AD. Though on the one hand it might seem that this close relation of labor with AD limited the autonomy of the former, on the other hand, Venezuelan workers enjoyed considerable benefits from the system. The labor market was one of the most protected on the continent, the wages were the highest and members of the labor union had access to government subsidized social welfare system (Roberts 2003, 47).

In comparison to other Latin America states Venezuela during Puntifijismo era was in a more favorable position with regards to resources that parties could use to establish these clientelistic and corporatist ties. Oil gave money for this kind of politics and probably allowed to expand the range of actors involved in the system (workers, middle class, capitalists). However, the economic crises of the 1980s' that caused balance and payment problems undermined the linkages and corporatist bonds were weakened. Labor unions lost almost half of their members, workers employment shifted to informal sectors of economy which were much less unionized. The process went even deeper with the introduction of neoliberal reforms. Even organized labor lost its ability to correspond increasing resistance to economic changes. Protest movements emerged throughout the country and growing civil society found itself largely outside the traditional corporatist institutions. Main parties of Venezuelan political systems did not manage to cope with the situation. In the context of severe economic hardship parties had to stop distribution of benefits "making it incapable of mobilizing support on instrumental performance criteria". Public opinion surveys show political parties were the least trusted and leadership was blamed by citizens for creation of economic crisis in oil rich state (Roberts 2003, 47-51).

From 1950's to 1990's Venezuela was a strong partyarchy, a system where parties were the most important political actors that in the 1990's underwent transition to highly personalistic populist regime with weak party organizations. Venezuelan politics had not experienced this new type of regime ever before. There were some attempts to bring a personalistic leader to power through creating political movements but none survived more than one electoral round. Hugo Chavez and his supporters were the first who managed to create a successful, military, left-wing and anti-party movement in Venezuelan history. During partyarchy every political party was created by union leaders, intellectuals and other civilians. The movement led by Chavez absorbed retired military officers. In sum, "it has been both the first victorious military-led movement and the first winning radical left-wing party" (Angel E. Alvarez 2006, 21-22).

2.3 Belarus: Lukashenka's rise to power¹⁰

The role of strong political parties for stable democracy and their demise as the underlying cause for emerging populist regime is well illustrated by Venezuelan political process. In Belarus the situation has been slightly different. Lukashenka's populist regime also emerged in the environment of weak political parties, but unlike in Venezuela Belarusian political arena had never experienced the presence of strong democratic political institutions. Up to the 1990's Belarus was one of the republics of the Soviet Union with the dominance of a single authoritarian Communist Party. After the independence in 1991 the transition started in the country with liberalization of economic and political life. The Communist Party continued its existence; however other political institutions started gaining public support such as Belarusian Popular

¹⁰ Being a citizen of the Republic of Belarus, I present many examples on Belarus in this chapter and chapter 3 based on my personal experience. For more information on recent developments in the country check Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh (2003); Marples (1999); Daneiko (2003); Garnett and Legvold (1999); Balmaceda, Clem and Tarlow (2002).

Front (BPF) – a pro-democratic, nationalist party. The 1990 parliamentary elections secured the BPF some share of seats and allowed it to call for the democratic coalition in the Parliament. One hundred deputies (out of 360) formed the coalition including 25 members of BPF and independent pro-democratic MP's; one of those was Alexander Lukashenka (Korosteleva 2003, 70). By the time of the 1994 presidential elections all political parties in Belarus were still underdeveloped and weak and could not gain support of the majority of population.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought the disintegration of common economic system. During Soviet times Belarus was an “assembly state” which specialized in high technological industries. It was one of the most prosperous republics with population benefiting from this status. In the early 1990's the situation critically changed and the state faced severe economic crises: large factories of huge production capacities that a republic of ten million people did not need remained mostly unused, highly qualified specialists became unemployed and lack of natural resources made the state dependent on Russia. The government made an attempt to deal with the situation and implemented some neoliberal reforms that could not bring immediate result and release social tensions. The population blamed governmental officials for inefficiency and corruption.

Among the 1994 presidential candidates there were then Prime Minister Kebich, leader of BPF Pozdnjak, chairman of the Parliament Shushkevich, leader of Belarusian Agrarian Party Dubko and people's deputy, chairman of the parliamentary commission “on the investigation of the participation of state officials in commercial activities”, non-partisan Alexander Lukashenka. As it is seen from the list, candidates represented either political parties or were men in power.

Population trusted neither of them. The only alternative candidate in that campaign was Lukashenka, a political outsider who promised to “restore the order”. Taking into account the facts described above and some explanations following, the victory of Lukashenka is understandable.

Researchers studying Belarusian regime present some factors explaining its unique experience. The first factor is the deep roots of authoritarianism in Belarusian political culture of the population which is identified by the notion of “Soviet Belarusian patriotism”. The second important factor is the fact that Lukashenka manages to preclude any challenges to his power at the very starting stage, tactic which Silitski calls “authoritarian pre-emption”. The third factor is Belarus-Russia relations that secure the external support for Lukashenka. The fourth, the durability of economic model implemented in Belarus. (Silitski 2006) The first three factors will be analyzed in this chapter whereas the fourth will be discussed in the next chapter.

With regards to the first characteristic, Silitski argues that culture and identity issues are the main in explaining the victory of Lukashenka in democratic elections of 1994. This argument corresponds with the theoretical findings on democratization and consolidation of democracy. Thus Philippe Schmitter presenting his nine “generic reflections” on transitology and consolidology underlines the uncertainty of transition period and unexpectedness of outcomes in terms of the regime type that can evolve in the result. While discussing the issue of sequencing in reforms that is what should come first: political liberalization or economic reforms that can lead to democratization, he comes to the conclusion that the common solution on this issue can hardly be reached among the students of transitions. However, he states that there is one point of

agreement among scholars: “it is preferable, if not indispensable, that national identity and territorial limits be established before introducing reforms in political (or economic) institutions” (Schmitter 1995, 29).

Belarus is a state where nationalism was never flourishing due to the historical facts. In 1991 Belarusian state got its independence for the first time in history (except a short period of the existence of Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918). Belarusian people lack their national identity due to the long lasting domination by external powers and policies of Polonization and Russification. During Soviet times new ideology was propagated that mixed communism with appraisal of partisan resistance during World War II. As a result, “Soviet Belarusian patriotism” emerged and was fixed in minds of Belarusian people and accelerated by quite high standard of living that were produced during the rule of highly popular leader Piotr Masherov, “whose leadership style has become a model of paternalistic relations between the state and society in the public consciousness” (Silitski, 2006).

When liberalization started, nationalist movements in many states of the Soviet block became popular driving political forces that fought for independence, de-Sovetization and democratization. However in Belarus nationalism was promoted by a small group of intelligencia that appealed to the times of Grand Duchy of Lithuania and did not get support from vast masses of the population. As a result the collapse of the Soviet Union, with all difficulties it was accompanied with, was seen as the end of stability and prosperity. In this context the rise of Alexander Lukashenka with his populist slogan “Back to the USSR” was not surprising. As Silitski argues, “while popular support for democracy and democrats in Belarus has been equal

to, if not greater than, that in many other former Soviet states, the opposition has not mobilized that public support because there is no popular national idea that creates a moral alternative to Soviet totalitarianism, and, by extension, Lukashenka's dictatorship" (Silitski, 2006).

Another important point to mention with regard to the national identity problem is the issue of language. Language is considered a central domain of national self-identification. The Belarusian language was acknowledged the official language of the state after independence. Nevertheless, when Lukashenka came to power he reintroduced Russian language as the official one as well, and two languages got equal status. The vast majority of the electorate (83.1 percent) supported this initiative in the referendum in May 1995. These results are explained by the fact that Belarusian language was never popular among the population and was viewed as "a relic of a pre-industrial, rural existence". Since the "language referendum" the number of Belarusian language schools had reduced and finally came to zero. The country has been experiencing re-Russification which actually goes along with the will of the majority of population (Eke and Kuzio 2000, 534-535).

The second argument that explains durability of the regime is the ability of Lukashenka to eliminate any threat to his authority at the very beginning stages. He started to accelerate power in his hands already during the first years of the presidency. Just after his victory in 1994 and throughout of 1995 he took under control mass media leaving no possibilities for alternative sources of information. For example: in August, 1994 Belarusian Publishing House came under the Department of President's Affairs; in the end of 1994 many Belarusian newspapers were issued with blank spaces where the speech of oppositional member of parliament revealing

Lukashenka's abuses was planned to be published and which was prohibited just the night before. In January 1995 Belarusian Information Agency came under the President's Administration. Throughout 1995 the editors-in-chief of all main national newspapers were fired, broadcasting of independent "8 Chanel" was stopped, independent newspapers were closed, journalists jailed for any anti-president materials. On 9 September, 2001, the day of presidential elections in Belarus, websites of independent newspapers and some NGOs were blocked for the first time and since then it has become the regular practice of the government (alternative information websites are blocked during every politically sensitive event)¹¹. These examples show that Lukashenka is aware of the power of mass media and its importance for building a democratic state. Trying to usurp power he eliminates any alternative sources of information that could challenge his authority and threaten personalistic rule.

In 1996 President Lukashenka conducted the referendum that gave him absolute power. The electoral revolutions that started in Serbia in 2000 and then spread out to former Soviet Union republics – 2003 in Georgia, 2004 in Ukraine and 2005 in Kyrgyzstan – proved his intuition that any loosening of power can lead to disastrous results for the regime. As it was argued by Michael McFaul with regard to Ukrainian "Orange revolution" the authoritarian regimes that allow a certain degree of political competition and autonomy for political institutions and organizations (so called "competitive authoritarian" regimes) are more prone to democratization than full-scale dictatorships. Kuchma's regime presented the example of competitive authoritarianism where opposition was never fully blocked out of power (Victor Yushenko and his supporters got almost 25 percent of votes in Parliamentary elections in 2002). (McFaul 2007)

¹¹ This information comes from various pages of Zavadsky Foundation at www.zavadsky.org.

Lukashenka learned the lesson and has successfully managed to prevent any sign of liberalism in the country. Opposition political parties are illegal actors in Belarus and can exist only underground. He eliminates any possible strong competitor before presidential elections; for example, before the 2006 elections when Mikhail Marinich, former Minister of External Economic Relations and Ambassador to Latvia who then became one of leaders of the opposition and declared that he would go for presidency, was sentenced to five years for misappropriation of office equipment which was granted by US Embassy to the “Business initiative” headed by Marinich. And he tolerates only the candidates that cannot compete with Lukashenka on equal basis. Foreign NGO are not allowed to be established in the country and he closed down even those that existed before 1994, such as the Soros Foundation and the British Council. Domestic civil society organizations could hardly survive under the pressure of the regime.

After the revolutionary events in Kiev, Lukashenka gave a direct order to Belarusian security forces to take any possible action against the opposition. In 2005 new amendments to the Belarusian Criminal Court were approved by the Parliament “imposing lengthy prison services for participating in unregistered non-governmental organizations, teaching techniques of civil disobedience, and ‘defaming Belarus in the international arena’” (Silitski, 2006). As a result, Belarusian political society lives in an atmosphere of fear.

The third argument basically explains why Russia’s elites supported Lukashenka even though it was costly for them. The Belarusian President had the image of the closest ally of Russia. He was considered as the main promoter of the Russian-Belarusian union and always supported the illusion among Russian establishment that Belarus soon would be integrated into Russia.

However, in domestic politics Lukashenka was seen as a guarantor of national sovereignty and manifested that Belarus would be united with Russia into one state only on equal bases. He signed a number of agreements with then President of Russia Boris Yeltsin on the union; the last of them proclaimed the creation of “Union State” (Silitski, 2006).

By playing the union card Lukashenka enjoyed all the benefits he could get from this situation: cheap gas and oil and less international isolation that western states imposed on the autocratic regime. On the other hand, the Belarusian economy had remained closed to Russian capital and the idea of the Union State was only exploited on paper. However, the situation change with new Russian President Vladimir Putin. He had less intention to support Belarusian regime as far as he initially aimed at establishing good relations with the European Union and the United States. He forced Lukashenka to let Russian capital into the country and first threatened with and then implemented an increase in prices for energy resources (Silitski, 2006).

Conclusion

As this chapter showed populist regimes can appear in absolutely different backgrounds: in previously democratic societies that enjoyed independence for a long time and in newly independent states that were never familiar with democratic institutions. The factors that led to the emergence of these regimes can be multiple and vary. However, one aspect is common for both states, Belarus and Venezuela – the weakness of political parties. Another supportive factor for the theory of populism described in Chapter I, presented by two cases studies, is that populist regimes tend to be undemocratic. Hugo Chavez and Alexander Lukashenka came to power via

more or less free and fair elections but both tend to authoritarian rule undermining democratic institutions and procedures (though Chavez to much less degree than Lukashenka).

In the next chapter I will look at some aspects of these two regimes that the theory of populism underline as indicative, such as charismatic personalistic leadership, undermining of mediating political institutions, nationalistic economic and social programs to benefit the least advanced classes of society.

CHAPTER III:

TWO POPULIST REGIMES: SOME COMMON CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

In this chapter I present a comparative analysis of some characteristic features of populism in Belarus and Venezuela. I argue that leaders of both states employ similar populist strategies. In this chapter I look at these cases from both political and socioeconomic dimensions. Political dimension is analyzed from the point of view personalistic charismatic leadership and undermining mediating institutions. Socioeconomic dimension is compared through the prism of nationalistic economies and social policies aimed at benefiting the least advanced members of society.

3.1 Political dimension of populism in Belarus and Venezuela

3.1.1 Charismatic leader

As it was underlined in Chapter I, a populist leader is charismatic. He attracts supporters because of his personal qualities, not because of political program or some affiliation (though these facts are also important). With regards to the Venezuelan President, Chavez beyond doubts possesses charisma. Not only have his followers admitted this fact but even people who are not his supporters. For example, in the interview he gave in 1999 Douglas Bravo, who cooperated with Chavez in the MBR 200 and belongs to the former camp, says: “I know Chavez pretty well. I’ve known him since 1982, him and other officers that were part of the [conspiratorial] organization... Chavez is a man who is intelligent, bold, communicative, charismatic. A natural leader. With a gift of command.” (Garrido 1999, 21 in Hawkins 2003, 1146).

Not only Chavez supporters admit his ability to gain attention. According to the thoughts of Venezuelan economist Moises Naim, who does not belong to the Chavez admirers, that were expressed following the failed *coup d'etat* and Chavez's appearance on the TV in 1992

Chavez... was a compelling and uncommon sight for television viewers accustomed to the verbal and political maneuverings of traditional politicians: a public figure who acknowledged that he personally had failed while others had done a great job; who maintained an unfaltering position even after failure and defeat; who faced responsibility and did not try to evade the repercussions of his actions. His televised image conveyed the possibility of change, a break from the political and economic schemes usually blamed for the countries problems. A new face unrelated to the traditional power structures and offering to guide the nation back to prosperity, equality, and integrity was an item that, regardless of its packaging, was bound to appeal to a mass audience. That the item was, in fact, a primitive army tyrant was easily concealed by the illusion that any change meant progress. (1993, 101-102 quoted in Hawkins 2003, 1148)

These quotations from both sides, followers and opposition, support the thesis about Chavez ability to gain attention and win the hearts of masses. His voice is heard, his image is different from other politicians and consequently attractive to electorate. He promises changes and people believe that these changes are positive. The ability to recognize his failures and accept unsatisfying results (as it was with the acceptance of the negative results of 2007 referendum on the amendment of the Constitution to end presidential term limits) shows Chavez a strong man with moral principles and respect to people's will in the eyes of electorate.

Chavez's charisma is recognized not only nationally. International community had many chances to witness the power of his personality. It is needless to mention Chavez's speeches in international meetings such as UN General Assembly where he blames the United States for their imperialist politics. He speaks simple language understandable for common people and sometimes uses poetic expressions that make his speeches colorful. He runs a daily radio show

“Alo, Presidente!” which accepts calls from common people complaining about unemployment or complicated bureaucratic procedures to get some benefits. (Hellinger 2006, 9) He appreciates sports and emphasizes his links with common people. In return people support him during elections.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka is hardly less charismatic than his colleague and friend Hugo Chavez. As it was already mentioned before, he gained his popularity during his service as people’s deputy using the discourse of fight with the corruption, though at those times he did not have administrative resources to do that. He built his presidential campaign around the populist slogan “Back to the USSR!” and people believed him. During the whole period of his presidency people have been constantly impressed by his rhetoric skills – he was the first leader of the country who has been able to give speeches for hours without reading the text and answer any question immediately and explanatory.

Lukashenka’s televised image is highly sympathetic to common people. If he is shown in some governmental meetings he always blames ministers for their failures; if he visits regions he always visits factories or collective farms and talks to workers and peasants, listens to their problems and gives orders to administration to solve issues on spot. He has gained the image of a sportsman: he plays ice hockey, goes skiing and appreciates court tennis. The President positions himself as a common man who has devoted his life to serve his people and protect them from corrupt bureaucrats. His commonness with ordinary people has been emphasized by his use of so called “trasjanka”, a specific language, a mixture of Russian and Belarusian used by rural population and poorly educated people in cities. This ungrammatical lower-class way of

speaking signals the electorate: “I am one of you!”. However, the most telling example of Lukashenka’s charisma is the name given to him by people and widely used by mass media, which is “Bat’ka”¹².

3.1.2. Undermining mediating institutions

As it was mentioned in Chapter I, populist leaders usually disregard political mediating institutions, do not rely on any political party, or if they create some organization, it fully serves personal needs of the leader. They see political parties and other democratic mediating institutions as a limitation of their power and an obstacle on the way of implementation of people’s will. Evidences from the political regimes of both Hugo Chavez and Alexander Lukashenka support this thesis.

Chavez came to power on the wave of anti-party sentiments in Venezuelan society. As it was discussed in Chapter II, two main political parties AD and COPEI lost their credibility among electorate. Chavez was an outsider, did not belong to any of these parties and that secured him a great deal of support during electoral campaign. For his electoral purposes Chavez used Movement of the Fifth Republic (Movimiento Quinta Republica, MVR). Its predecessors Bolivarian Revolutionary Army 200 (EBR-200) and Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200 (MBR-200), was founded in the early 1980’s. It led underground activities against the current party democracy. As it was mentioned above in 1992 the leaders of the movement attempted a *coup d’etat* and were imprisoned. In 1994 they were given the amnesty by then President Rafael Caldera, and in the following years Chavez mobilized support for his movement around the

¹² “Bat’ka” (Belarus. – father). However, bat’ka is more than father; it is a very familiar way of addressing a father, someone whom you trust and respect.

country. In 1997 MVR was officially registered as a candidate for the 1998 national elections (Angel E. Alvarez 2006, 22).

MBR incorporates different groups, associations, parties and individuals and lacks any particular ideology. Initially it included parties that emerged as a result of internal cleavages in AD in 1960's (such as MEP), Bandera Roja (a radical leftist organization with a strong base in the universities), the PPT (that left New Left La Causa Radical), Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and some businessmen. The movement has always lacked any institutionalization. (Hawkins 2003, 1149-1150) It remains its name as a "movement" and Chavez tries to preclude establishing a permanent political structure. For every electoral or political event he creates some informal organizations (that are called "command groups") that are superimposed on formal authorities. Chavez controls all these establishments that can be quickly assembled and dismissed, does not tolerate any factionalism and appoints all members of groups personally, uses media such as TV, radio, Internet to communicate with these informal organizations and claims that this is implementation of direct or electronic democracy. "The MVR organization is a nation-wide amalgam of grassroots groups, tactical "commands", and official and informal means of communication, all acting in response to the direct authority of the president" (Angel E. Alvarez 2006, 22).

Kirk Hawkins (2003) admits that the movement lacks its identity. It is closely associated with the figure of Hugo Chavez and was supported during election only because of its leader. In street interviews that the author conducted during 1999 and 2000 people hardly knew the location of the headquarters of the movement, while the addresses of the main offices of previously ruling parties, AD and COPEI, were familiar to the majority of population. The main symbols of the

movement have been a red paratrooper's beret and a silhouette of a soldier's face, which also had direct connection to the figure of Hugo Chavez – he was a paratrooper during the military coup in 1992 (Hawkins 2003, 1150).

With regards to the rule basis, according to the foundation documents MVR is organized very similarly to AD and COPEI. It has national, regional (state), municipal levels. Documents assign particular tasks to each administrative level and present the movement as quite democratic traditional party. However, in reality the situation is somewhat different. Interviewees acknowledged that documentary fixed democratic procedures of decision-making, selecting movement leadership and candidates for elections are undermined and usually all these issues are decided on national level by top leadership. The movement existence is based on the presence of Chavez and he has a decisive voice in any issue-solving process (Hawkins 2003, 1150-1151).

Alexander Lukashenka came to power as an independent candidate without affiliation with any political party. During the whole period of his presidency he has remained non-partisan. In general his attitude to political parties and non-governmental organizations proves his dictatorial features. Despite of the fact that these institutions are officially allowed in Belarus any oppositional agency is constantly under the threat of disappearance from legal political arena: it can be banned or simply not to pass the procedure of registration or re-registration. Those political parties and NGO's that exist legally are not numerous and supportive to the president¹³.

However, 2007 was remarkable in a sense that a new non-governmental organization was registered in Belarus. A group of politicians, famous sportsmen, musicians and other members of

¹³ For more information on closure of political parties and NGOs in Belarus read Chausov (6 February, 2008).

initiative group gathered in Minsk and agreed to create the organization called “Belaya Rus””. The project of the program of this NGO states that organization fully supports President Alexander Lukashenka, his directions of socio-economic and political developments of the state. The aim of the organization is wide-scale assistance in implementation of strategic tasks defined by the head of state (*Narodnaja Gazeta* [Minsk], 8 April 2008). The head of “Belaya Rus”” is current minister of education Alexander Rad’kov who promised to make this organization the largest in the country. This promise is actively being implemented: the local branches of the NGO are already created throughout of the Republic, in every university, school and state enterprise. Employees, especially those occupying some managerial positions, are made to become a member of the organization under the threat of losing position (“Pod Bely Ruki v “Beluju Rus””, 2008). By 15 March 50 thousand members were already registered in “Belaya Rus”” (“Chislennost Chlenov “Belaya Rus”” Prevysila 50 Tysjach”, 2008).

Though President Lukashenka very firmly stated that he would never become the head or a member of “Belaya Rus”” even if it later turns to political party (“Lukashenka ne Nameren Vozglavljat’ “Belaya Rus””, 2008), common people and political experts are very much confident that this organization was created in coordination with the head of state. According to the data, almost all governmental officials and 40 percent of members of parliament entered the organization by 1 April, 2008 (Ilyicheva 2008). An organization of this kind is necessary for the regime to show its legitimacy and popularity among masses to the Western world: even in times of economic difficulties people support their president and policies he is implementing. Another reason for creating “Belaya Rus”” is forthcoming parliamentary elections in Belarus. The head of

“Belaya Rus” already said that the organization is planning to take part in the elections to back up its members.

It is difficult to say now how NGO “Belaya Rus” will be developing in the future. Political observers believe that it will be reorganized into a political party to serve the electoral purposes of the son of Lukashenka who might “inherit” the presidency. The most important thing to note is the fact that Chavez and Lukashenka have never been striving for membership in any political party and both came to power as non-partisans, which gave them additional points in electoral campaign. These leaders disregard political parties and try to establish direct communication with the electorate. Even those organizations that already exist in both states (MVR in Venezuela and “Belaya Rus” in Belarus) have vague structure, lack of identity and serve the personal needs of populist leaders.

Other examples of the disregard for mediating institutions in both countries are the rule by decree in Belarus and missions in Venezuela. The Belarusian Constitution contains the possibility of direct presidential rule via two types of presidential decrees: *dekrety* and *ukazy*. *Dekrety* are the analogy of a law, have the same legal status and can be applied to absolutely all spheres of state development. *Ukazy* “concern less important matters, such as the president’s purely managerial or ritual functions” (Matsuzato 2004, 245). Both *dekrety* and *ukazy* are issued by the President and do not need approval by the parliament or people via referendum.

Specific characteristic of Chavez government in introducing and implementing social and economic campaigns is the fact that they are done through so called “missions”. Mission

Robinson got funds to give basic reading, writing and maths skills to uneducated adult people who by 1999 elections accounted 1.5 million. Mission Guaicaipuro was established to secure cultural and property rights of indigenous peoples in Venezuela. Others provide services to slums and distribute food to the poor (Llosa, 2008). The Missions were established to bypass the respected ministries as President Chavez sees all bureaucracy highly corrupted. Funding for Missions goes via the president's office from the state petroleum company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and is thoroughly controlled (Myers 2007, 294).

Both, rule by decree of the Belarusian President and Missions of the Venezuelan show ways of bypassing national parliaments and ministries in implementation of different policies. Lukashenka and Chavez distrust democratic institutions and consider bureaucrats all corrupt and dishonest. This tendency to control personally the process of decision-making and decision-implementation support the thesis mentioned in Chapter I that populist politicians tend to personalistic style of leadership.

3.2 Socioeconomic dimension

3.2.1 Nationalistic economies

Let us look now at the economic factor in sustaining Lukashenka's regime. The Belarusian economy is characterized by large percentage of state-owned enterprises (almost 80 percent). Even that small private sector that exists in Belarus is highly controlled by the government. Very recently Lukashenka abandoned so called "golden share" rule that existed in the country for many years (since 1997). "Golden share" rule allowed the government to interfere with the management of any enterprise that was created during the process of denationalization and

privatization. Thus it could be applied even to entities where there was no state share. Application of this rule used to be in cases when enterprise failed to pay wages for three successive months or had poor bookkeeping balance for six month. It was justified by the desire to protect interests of employees and the state itself. However, this rule prevented potential investors to invest money in Belarusian enterprises (“Belarus’ Lukashenko abolishes “golden share” rule”, 2008).

Despite the generally accepted perception that the market economy grows faster than other forms of economic organization, the Belarusian command economy has performed quite impressively. By 1998 the economy grew by 11 percent per year; after 1998 there was some decline and in 2001 Belarus showed the lowest growth rates among other former Soviet Union republics. However, by 2004 growth again reached 11 percent (Silitski, 2006). These figures actually show the dependency of Belarusian economy on its main economic partner – Russia. Growth is explained by the provision of cheap energy supplies, and decrease in growth of Belarusian economy coincided with 1998 Russian economic default. Russia’s subsidies to Belarusian economy allowed Lukashenko to preserve those huge enterprises that were left out from Soviet times. The common customs area of the two states creates more possibilities for Belarusian exporters after Russia introduced limits on export from other CIS states (Silitski, 2006).

The state-run economy is beneficial for the regime for two reasons. First, as far as there was never wide-scale privatization, like in Russia or Ukraine, there is no powerful class of oligarchs that can alter the authority of the President. Second, as far as the state controls nearly all enterprises, which employ majority of the population, it uses public employment to guarantee

electorate's loyalty. For many people it resembles the Soviet tactic of an "implicit social contract" when you get prosperity in exchange for loyalty (Silitski, 2006).

Russian subsidies of the Belarusian economy, that is of providing cheap gas and oil, which the government uses for internal market as well as resells it at high prices to the European states and uses revenues for to sustain the regime, evokes in mind the rentier state paradigm. The rentier state was originally defined by Hossein Mahdavy as "a state that receives substantial rents from foreign individuals, concerns or governments" (1970, 428). Later on Hazem Belbawi gave a more profound definition, stating that it is "one where the rents are paid by foreign actors, where they accrue directly to the state, and where only a few are engaged in the generation of this rent, the majority being only involved in the distribution or utilization of it" (1987, 51). What should be underlined here is that a rentier state does not need to tax or imposes low taxes on the population; and the main function of the government is allocation resources that come from abroad. Thus the state is independent financially from the society and does not need to be accountable. Usually allocation of resources goes through various programs that buy loyalty of the electorate (Luciani 2005, 91-92). Belarus (at least till Russia raised energy resources prices) could be classified as a rentier state. It took money it received from reselling gas and oil and invested it in different social programs that benefited lower and least protected classes of the population. It is widely known that the main support for Lukashenka regime comes from peasants, workers and pensioners. Thus, the rentier state theory can be applied to Belarus.

Venezuela is a classical example of a pure rentier state. The country is rich in oil; it is among the top five exporters of this natural resource in the world and the top ten in reserves. Its economy is

built on revenues from selling oil (which amount 80 percent of total export revenues) and dependent on world market prices of the mineral (Cesar J. Alvarez 2006). For example, when in 2002 the workers of the state-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)* organized a strike to protest Chavez's decision to fire three members of the board of the company and stopped oil shipment ("Venezuela's General Strike Extended", 2002), and Chavez responded by firing around 17,000 PDVSA workers, the GDP dropped in 2002 and 2003 (Cesar J. Alvarez 2006, Weisbrot and Sandoval 2007, 8). However, in 2004 with the international rise of oil prices Venezuelan economy started recovering and in 2005 and 2006 the annual GDP growth was 10.3 percent (World Bank data).

PDVSA is a state-owned oil company that after nationalization of oil in 1976 acted as "a state within a state". It supplied the government with necessary resources for policies' implementation and in return was left with free hands to shape national oil policy. Some sectors of Venezuelan society were anxious about their activities. They thought that the company could contribute more to the national wealth and spend less on its own bureaucracy and international ventures: in the state so rich in natural resources majority of population still was living in poverty, while those associated with oil industry enjoyed all benefits from this treasure (Tinker-Salas 2005).

In these conditions the promise of the presidential candidate Chavez in 1998 to use oil money for new social programs found response among common people and lower-middle class whose economic situation was worsening for the previous two decades. After being elected Chavez increased control over PDVSA and forced the management of the company to undertake obligation to invest minimum 10 percent of the company's income in governmental social

programs. (Cesar J. Alvarez, 2006). The Venezuelan Constitution fixes the ban on privatization of PDVSA but does not prohibit privatization of subsidiaries. In November 2001 Chavez issued a decree that guaranteed the state the minimum of 51 percent of the shares of the subsidiaries of the company. (Hellinger 2006, 7)

Apart from strengthening control over the state's main guarantor of income and thus sustainability of the regime, that is oil industry, Chavez stopped privatization of national social security system and aluminum industry planned by previous neoliberal government; created "Intervention Commission" to review the contracts on the allocation of agricultural lands that could lead to the loss of possessions by landowners (Ellner 2005), nationalized Venezuelan main telecommunication company (Sabino 2007). The reason for these policies may be equivalent to the reasons to keep large state sector in the Belarusian economy: to control oligarchs and to secure loyalty of the common people via investing money in social programs.

The analysis of economic policies of two states shows many similarities between them. Both states try to keep state ownership on industries to have control over them. Belarus and Venezuela can be both called rentier states as long as they use revenues from selling energy resources (oil and gas) to support the regimes (though in this case Venezuela is in much more beneficial position as it uses its own natural resource whereas Belarus is dependent on the favor of its rich neighbor Russia). Both states invest money gained from revenues into social programs to guarantee loyalty of the least advanced classes of population that constitute the majority of the electorate.

3.2.2 Redistributive policies – social programs

From the very beginning of his presidency Chavez began implementing various programs aimed at improving social welfare of population. Thus Plan Bolivar 2000 appeared that envisioned the construction of the roads, residential building and widespread immunization of the population (Wilpert, 2003). He introduced a number of reforms to improve social welfare system such as aimed at lowering infant mortality rate, free government-funded health care system, and free education up to the university level. These reforms proved to be successful, statistics shows increase in primary school enrolment by 1 million students, infant mortality rate fell down by 20 percent by the year 2006 (Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, Venezuela).

These are only some examples of the social reforms implemented by Chavez. However, what should be mentioned is the fact that reforms touched and brought benefits to all previously impoverished parts of population: landless poor, peasants, indigenous groups, workers. All these reforms are possible in Venezuela due to the enormous amount of oil and high prices of this natural resource in the world market. And these policies, as it was shown above, have their recognition in the masses of population which is expressed during elections.

The Belarusian social welfare system still looks very much the same as it was during Soviet times. The population enjoys free health care system, free school education and possibility of free university education dependent on merit. Secondary school level education is obligatory for all children. Residential rental prices are subsidized by the government; moreover, there are many groups of population, such as veterans of World War II, Afghan War, Chernobyl nuclear accident liquidators, large families who get discounts for these rentals. These groups of

population and some others (students, pensioners) enjoy many other social benefits, for example 50 percent discount travel on city transport and intercity trains and buses within republic. Large families can use the opportunity of social housing program that allows getting new housing for discount prices or even free if the family has five children and more.

Like in Venezuela, these programs are possible because of the subsidies of Belarusian economy by Russia that provides cheap energy resources and redistributive policies of Belarusian government. Some of the programs are not aimed at exactly the least advantaged classes of the population and reach the whole society; however the poorest population benefits most from the policies as far as these are the only possibilities for the poor to survive (whereas other classes have the alternative of commercial services).

Conclusion

In this chapter I tried to show that the strategies employed by two populist leaders in different countries and even different continents are basically the same. Both Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Alexander Lukashenka in Belarus are charismatic leaders who do not rely on political parties and disregard democratic mediating institutions. They both explain their hostility to them in terms of corrupted bureaucracy that only seeks advantages for itself. In terms of socioeconomic policies the two regimes also look alike: in both economies there is quite large state-owned sector, both economies are highly dependent on oil (though Venezuela uses its own resource whereas Belarus enjoys subsidized oil from Russia) which can allow us to classify both countries as rentier states; and both states use revenues for different social programs that guarantee loyalty of the electorate.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I applied the theory of populism to very different states, Belarus and Venezuela, and found that they are experiencing very similar populist policies regimes. For the purpose of this paper I used the definition of populism elaborated by two contemporary scholars Kurt Weyland and Kenneth Roberts who understand this phenomenon as a specific political strategy.

Populist regimes usually emerge when political parties are weak. Venezuela before Chavez was a liberal democracy with a strong two-party system. Since 1958 the political life of the state was marked by the agreement signed by two main political parties, AD and COPEI, according to which they shared power. Vast oil revenues gave the establishment necessary resources to sustain the system. The regime was considered one of the most stable on the continent and seemed unlikely to collapse. However, the economic crises of 1980's and 1990's proved to be devastating not only for economy but for political system as well. Both political parties were blamed for corruption and inability to deal with difficulties and lost their credibility among the electorate. As a result two-party system went into demise and this gave the possibility to political outsider who was not associated with established political organizations Hugo Chavez to win 1998 presidential elections.

In Belarus situation was slightly different. By 1994 presidential elections Belarus was an independent state just for three years; before 1991 it was one of the republics of the Soviet Union and did never have experience with democratic political organizations. During this short period of independence political parties just started forming but could not manage to win the popularity

among the electorate. In the situation of the severe economic crisis associated with transition period the old elites and non-established political parties were incapable to secure the trust of the population. Moreover, memories of relatively prosperous and stable times of the Soviet period were quite strong among the Belarusian voters. In these conditions Alexander Lukashenka, a nonpartisan people's deputy, a head of anticorruption committee in the Parliament, proclaiming populist slogans of "Back to the USSR!" and restore order, gained the popularity and won the first presidential elections. This analysis shows that regimes of Chavez and Lukashenka appeared when political parties in both states were weak.

After coming to power via free and fair elections, both Chavez and Lukashenka usurped power. Belarus and Venezuela are experiencing democratic decline (Belarus is called the last dictatorship in Europe and Venezuela is classified as partly free regime by Freedom House). These facts support another theoretical assumption about populism that is tendency of populist leaders to autocratic rule.

The comparison of basic aspects that define a regime as populist shows that Lukashenka and Chavez are very much alike in using populist strategies in their rule. First fact to mention is that they are both very charismatic and personalistic leaders, which contributed to the gaining support of the majority of the population. Both leaders have outstanding rhetoric skills, address people in a very simple manner using simple language understandable to the masses. They try to emphasize their commonness with ordinary people underlining it by the image of a common man who appreciates the same things as the majority (for example, sports) but is able to protect the population against the corrupt elites.

Both leaders disregard mediating institutions and especially political parties. Chavez came to power with the help of the Movement of the Fifth Republic (created and led by him), which has been never reorganized into a political party, has vague structure and lacks its own identity. Movement is used mostly for electoral purposes and serves the needs of its leader. Lukashenka has never been a member of any political party and proclaims no intention to become in the future. He disproves the association with the newly established NGO “Belaya Rus” that incorporates the majority of governmental officials, many celebrities and people’s deputies and declares the full support to the policies of the current president.

Both presidents try to bypass other democratic institutions. Lukashenka uses the rule by decree, which allows him to avoid the procedure of approving his decisions by the Parliament. Chavez in implementing his policies uses such an instrument as “Missions”. Each mission is established for specific purpose and allows bypassing a respected ministry. Both these instruments show disregard to democratic procedures.

In economic sphere two states are (re)establishing state ownership on industries. The Belarusian economy has 80 percent of state-owned enterprises and the rest is firmly controlled private sector. Chavez strengthened control over nationalized oil industry and stopped privatization of some other sectors of the economy. Belarus and Venezuela can be both classified as rentier states as long as both use the revenues from selling natural resources to sustain the regimes. In this respect Venezuela is a classic example of a rentier state as far as it uses its own oil for these purposes. Belarus is in much weaker position because it uses subsidized gas from Russia and is

highly dependent on her good will. These revenues are mostly invested into different social programs that benefit the least advanced classes of the society and guarantee the loyalty of the electorate. Thus, populist regimes of Belarus and Venezuela are characterized by nationalist economies and redistributive social policies.

It is difficult to predict now whether the populist regimes in Belarus and Venezuela will come to the same end and what kind of regimes will be established after Chavez and Lukashenka. However, the research showed that the populist leaders in different states and continents employ the same strategies to come to and sustain themselves in power. Consequently, the theory of populism can be applied to other cases in both regions to understand the processes in other states.

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