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Different faces of populism in Venezuela. Comparison of governing styles and media image of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro

SUMMARY The aim of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of the discourses and rhetoric in the public speeches of two consecutive Venezuelan presidents – Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. Although both politicians have been identified in the literature as representatives of Latin American populism, their media activities, campaign styles, and governing methods differ significantly, as do their perceptions by the public and the international community. This analysis also takes into account the evolution of both presidents' images during their respective terms in office, against the backdrop of the ongoing political-economic crisis. The presence of Chávez and Maduro in the media – both traditional, such as radio and television, and new (especially on social media platforms) – as well as their narrative-building techniques are of particular importance in this context. The reflection also includes the manipulations used by both politicians and the symbolic sphere to which they referred in their speeches. Such a comparison allows us to recognize that Latin American populism, which belongs to the so-called “third wave,” is a uniquely complex and internally diverse phenomenon, even within one country and successive presidential terms.

KEYWORDS populism, Latin America, Venezuela, media, Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro

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Introduction

Latin American populism in the 21st century is a phenomenon that definitely has multiple and very different faces. The political ambitions and goals of Néstor Kirchner and later Cristina Fernández de Kircher in Argentina are difficult to compare with the strategies of leaders from the northern parts of the continent, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez or Ecuador's Rafael Correa. Nevertheless, at the very beginning of the second decade, a pan-regional trend could be observed that is now known as the pink tide (Spronk, 2008, pp. 173–186) or the turn to the left (*giro a la izquierda*) (Santander, 2009, pp. 17–38).

After many long years under the rule of military juntas, most of which relinquished power in the 1980s, the vast majority of Latin American countries faced a profound economic crisis that plunged millions of people into poverty. In order to receive international aid and loans from institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, local governments had to fulfill several conditions – the main tenets of the program being collectively known as the Washington Consensus, developed by American economist John Williamson. The neoliberal approach included the privatization of state enterprises, the establishment of a free market, the reduction of taxes and duties, and the redirection of public spending from subsidies to the broad-based provision of key growth-enhancing services (Williamson, 1996, pp. 13–15). The unsatisfactory results of the recovery plan and numerous negative long-term consequences, particularly severe for the poorest citizens (in Peru, the term *Fujishock* was coined to describe the intensity of the impact of President Alberto Fujimori's neoliberal turn), undermined the credibility of the reforms (Moreno-Brid et al., 2004, pp. 149–168). Societies, exhausted by the constant cuts in spending on social services, gradually began to turn to the left, and a large part of the continent was covered by the third wave of populism.

Developing a precise and functional definition of populism is not easy and causes various controversies. According to the authors of *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, depending on the context, populism can be interpreted as an ideology, a movement, or a syndrome (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2). They underlined that this term is described and perceived very differently depending on the geographical region – in Europe, for example, this phenomenon is usually associated with anti-immigrant or xenophobic discourses. In Latin America, on the other hand, it is more often associated with patronage and lack of transparency in the economic sphere (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2).

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser emphasize that regardless of the definition used, populism in most cases has negative connotations. Moreover, they speculate whether populism itself even exists, given that “it truly is an essentially contested concept” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2). Although this question is obviously just a rhetorical device on their part, it is meant to emphasize that almost none of the politicians or parties define themselves as inherently populist.

In this article, we have decided to follow the interpretation of Kurt Weyland, who, embracing conceptual pragmatism, defined populism as a political strategy that allows this approach to be applied to the analysis of each of the three waves of populism in Latin America. As he justified his argument:

Political strategies are characterized by the power capability that types of rulers use to sustain themselves politically. Under populism, the ruler is an individual, a personalistic leader, not a group or organization. Populism rests on the power capability of numbers, not special weight. Populism emerges when personalistic leaders base their rule on massive yet mostly uninstitutionalized support from large number of people. [...] It leaves the association of the populist politics with specific social constituencies, economic settings, and socioeconomic policies (Weyland, 2001, p. 18).

Hugo Chávez – TV star, Bolívar’s successor or an autocrat?

Undoubtedly, one of the most characteristic, controversial, and charismatic representatives of this trend was Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who came from the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement-200 (*Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200*) and represented a leftist coalition called the Patriotic Pole (*Polo Patriótico*), which later evolved into the Great Patriotic Pole (*Gran Polo Patriótico, GPP*). In his program, Chávez promised to dissolve the Punto Fijo Pact—a formal agreement made in 1958 between representatives of Venezuela’s three main political parties that lasted almost until the end of the 20th century (Hidalgo Trenado, 2007, pp. 13–35) – and to launch several programs aimed at developing society and reducing poverty and inequality (Chávez, 2012). *Plan Bolívar 2000* was officially launched on February 27, 1999, exactly 10 years after the famous *Caracazo* (protests and riots in the cities against inflation and increases in the prices of basic products and services, such as gasoline and public transportation). The name of his main program, along with the names of specific missions (*Misiones* – projects of unconditional social assistance, such as *Misión*

Sucre and *Misión Ribas*), openly referred to *Libertadores* and national heroes of Venezuela (García Montesdeoca, 2015). Although Chávez described himself as a Marxist on several occasions (Valery, 2010), his connection to this movement is very complex, and the political doctrine of Venezuela during his tenure cannot be perceived as another attempt to fully implement communist rule.

The example of *Plan Bolívar 2000* proves that the nationalist component in Chávez's ideology (often called *chavismo*) was as important as a traditional leftist approach. The president defined his program as the socialism of the 21st century, in which he intended to combine freedom, equality, social justice, and solidarity with "traditional Venezuelan values" (Duarte, 2013, pp. 57–78), thus distinguishing his doctrine from the state socialism implemented in the People's Republic of China and previously in the Soviet Union (Wilpert, 2007). The strong attachment to local history (mostly its heroic episodes) and traditions was often displayed not only in state ceremonies and celebrations of national holidays but also in everyday life and public space (Erlach, 2005, pp. 287–302). In contrast to Soviet social strategies, the Venezuelan government did not have the ambition to create a new citizen but emphasized that Latin America's heritage was something to be proud of. The implementation of new values was not the goal of Chávez, who preferred to manifest his patriotism by posing for pictures in front of national flags or portraits of Bolívar (Duarte, 2013, pp. 57–78).

However, it is also worth mentioning what exactly the term *national heritage* means in this particular context, as in the case of the entire Latin American region, its understanding can change significantly. In this particular example, *Venezuelan heritage* refers mainly to the country's colonial past, its struggle for independence, and the first decades of the young republic. Since half of the population is mestizo and 43% is described as white (Gerencia General de Estadísticas Demográficas, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012), the indigenous aspect of the country's history is not generally present or visible. Nevertheless, equality as one of the goals of 21st century socialism aimed to provide greater rights to ethnic minorities (not only Indians but also Afro-Venezuelans – descendants of African slaves). This fusion of left-wing economics and nationalism is more reminiscent of another Latin American phenomenon – Peronism (also known as Justicialism)² – than of Soviet or Chinese socialism. Among the many sim-

² In this particular context, we refer to the so-called 1st Peronism – the period between the first presidential election of Juan Domingo Perón in 1946 and his fall during *Revolución Libertadora* led by General Eduardo Lonardi in 1955.

ilarities between *chavismo* and the iconic movement of the first wave of Latin American populism are a similar attitude toward national values, economic solutions (social assistance programs, state control of strategic sectors of the local economy, exports as a crucial source of national income), and a strong leader (Weyland, 2003, pp. 822–848). The importance of the president's position was unquestionable; he was perceived as the country's first citizen and, in a sense, a role model. Although the power of the first secretaries of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or the Communist Party of China is undeniable, an illusion of equality was created with no president, prime minister, or emperor (also to break with Western political systems). In the case of Latin America and its presidential system, strongly inspired by the constitution of the United States, the central figure of an official leader is the foundation of the political life of the country (Carpizo, 2006, pp. 57–91).

Apart from the political doctrine, the analysis of any populist leader should not miss the specific style of campaigning and rhetoric, which are often very similar among different populist politicians, regardless of whether they represent the left or the right wing. These analogies can be easily noticed when comparing the so-called second and third waves of populism in Latin America (Varentsowa, 2014, pp. 153–160) – to convince society of two opposite solutions (in the 1990s – neoliberal reforms, in the early 21st century – broad social programs), most leaders used almost the same arguments, among which the national interest and the will of the people (*pueblo*) were particularly common (Retamozo, 2017, p. 142). Despite the differences between individual politicians, most populists share some characteristics that are visible, for example, in their argumentation (the mentioned use of the word *pueblo* and the reference to the will of the people as if it were homogeneous and coherent) and in their self-presentation (independent candidate and strong leader willing to confront corrupt elites in order to represent the interests of ordinary people).

Although it is quite obvious that this type of governance usually requires a high level of personal charisma and developed communication skills to create a bond with society (or at least with supporters), its meaning and significance can be seen even more clearly by comparing two successive presidents of Venezuela – Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. While Chávez was known for his skills in public speaking and his proactive attitude (Erlich, 2005, pp. 287–302), Maduro does not have these skills, which is especially evident when comparing their media activities. For thirteen years, the Venezuelan television channel Venezolana de Televisión ran a talk show, *Aló Presidente* (Hello, Mr. President),

hosted by Chávez himself, on Sunday prime time (starting at 11 a.m. and ending around 5 p.m.). The idea of the program was for the president to interview members of the government and comment on the current situation in the country and abroad (the main point of reference was usually the United States, whose decisions and influence were widely criticized). In total, the program had more than 350 episodes (Nolan, 2012). Chávez's initiative was certainly inspiring and found some followers within the Latin American region (Ecuador's *Enlace Ciudadano* of Rafael Correa, Bolivia's *Democracia Directa* of Evo Morales). However, it should also be mentioned that *Aló Presidente* surpassed even the Russian ideas (despite the long tradition of local propaganda) seen in *The Direct Line with Vladimir Putin* (Russian: Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным), a TV program based on Q&A with the Russian president, which was launched in 2001 (moreover, there have been only 20 episodes so far).

Nicolás Maduro – bus driver, Youtuber, or unyielding usurper?

After Chávez's death, the presidency was "inherited" by his vice president, Nicolás Maduro, who later won the election and tried to continue his predecessor's legacy. He created his television program *Diálogo Bolivariano* (Bolivarian Dialogue) (BBC Mundo, 2013), which has the same formula as *Aló Presidente*. The innovation surprisingly appeared on the radio, where Maduro launched an audition called *La Hora de la Salsa* (The Hour of Salsa), which was an interesting mix of politics and entertainment represented by the favorite music and dance genre of the vast majority of Venezuelans (especially the poorest) – salsa (Bellaviti, 2021, pp. 373–396). In addition to following in the footsteps of Chávez, Maduro also had his own initiatives that went beyond the boundaries of traditional politics – the best example of these avant-garde activities is his YouTube channel.³ The clear intention of opening a presidential account on one of the most popular Internet platforms was to reach the youngest citizens and create the image of a modern leader, open to innovation and in direct contact with the dynamic changes of the world. However, not only has this plan not been fulfilled but the whole idea can be considered a failure – the total number of views (of the whole profile) is less than 3.5 million, and the most popular movie has been viewed only 47 thousand times (the current population of Venezuela is over 28 million people). The vast majority of the content

³ <https://www.youtube.com/c/Nicol%C3%A1sMaduroM/featured>

is quite homogeneous – there are numerous clips with presidential speeches of long duration (1 hour or more) recorded in different places, such as different rooms of the presidential palace and gardens, or public meetings with various professional groups. He often presents himself surrounded by national symbols such as flags or portraits of Bolívar, his audience is undoubtedly well prepared in advance, even if his visit is described as unexpected or spontaneous (Álvarez Riccio, 2016, pp. 153–160). At the same time, he uploads videos that are meant to present him as an ordinary citizen, similar to millions of Venezuelans, and highlight his working-class past as a bus driver in Caracas. This makes the videos similar to typical propaganda campaigns known from leftist regimes such as the Soviet Union (and its allies), China, or North Korea (Lascurain Fernández, 2022, pp. 13–30). Similarly to these countries, Maduro also takes advantage of the opportunity to highlight successes in sports and culture, presenting athletes and artists as the common good of the nation and, in a sense, taking credit for their outstanding work. Although his strategy is not mere “sportswashing,” the presence of athletes (especially juniors, who symbolize the future of the nation) and celebrities from the field (such as the controversial FIFA president, Gianni Infantino) is definitely outstanding compared to other disciplines.

Using such events to promote himself is not the only dimension of his populist rhetoric – as the president is well aware of the difficult situation in his country, he is constantly trying to improve his image. One of the most unexpected and controversial ways to do this was to upload a video in which Maduro and his wife turn on Christmas lights in the garden, announce the start of preparations for the holiday, and wish the people all the best on this important occasion. In general, this type of clip would not be a surprise but in this particular case, what was most shocking was the time of creation and publication of this content – the first half of October. The video caught the attention of the international media (*Cadena SER*, 2021; *El Periódico*, 2021) because it was a rather desperate method to distract people from the poverty and crisis that surround them, especially since every year the “Christmas season” comes a little earlier to “cheer up the Venezuelan people” – in recent years these events took place in November (Colussi, 2013). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that imaginative lighting and flashing decorations do not seem to be the best idea in a country that, despite its rich oil reserves, suffers from regular power cuts.

The ongoing Venezuelan crisis – apart from its economic dimension – is clearly visible in the political life of the country, and the best example is the “dual presidency”: since the widely disputed presidential elections of May 20, 2018, Nicolás

Maduro has continued his rule with the recognition of Russia, China, the Middle East, and Mexico, while the United States, the European Union, Brazil, and Colombia support his opponent Juan Guaidó (Malamud & Núñez, 2019, pp. 1–10). After boycotting several previous elections (due to lack of transparency, fraud, and manipulation), opposition parties finally participated in the 2021 municipal elections. Despite international criticism of the voting procedures and electoral justice (Herrera & Kurmanaev, 2021), Maduro sought to legitimize the process and its results from the very beginning, not only through online activity on his YouTube account but also on Facebook, where he regularly publishes various videos, images, and posts. In this particular case, he shared a clip titled *Esperando resultados irreversibles* (Waiting for irreversible results).⁴ Emphasizing the crucial importance of rigged elections is certainly a unifying element of the vast majority of authoritarian regimes that use populism as one of their main political strategies. This is particularly evident when comparing the content published by Maduro with that of Guaidó, who in general successfully avoids primitive manipulations that are easily verifiable. Although his discourse appeals to emotions in the same way as many populist leaders before him (including Maduro himself), the significant difference is that he tries to create a positive environment instead of using fear or threats as his main arguments (Puertas-Hidalgo & Romero-Mora, 2019, pp. 47–64).

Conclusions and final remarks

Considering the examples given, it can be observed that although both Chávez and Maduro are populists: the effectiveness of their rhetoric and the general perception of them in Venezuelan society and in the international context are profoundly different. After Chávez's death in 2013, Maduro – as vice president – automatically became his successor but since 2014 he has faced constant and intensifying social protests that have brought the country to the brink of civil war. The violent response of the new government (Vivanco, 2016) and the ongoing presidential crisis that began in 2019 (Peterssen, 2022)⁵ illustrate Maduro's weakness as a political leader. The assessment of his rule is even more negative

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=157169213161045>

⁵ It should be mentioned that since 2019 such countries as the USA, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, and the European Union have recognized Juan Guaidó as a legitimate president of Venezuela, contrary to China, Russia, Turkey, Bolivia, and Cuba supporting Maduro's second term (Emmott & de Carbone, 2020; Vasilyeva, 2019).

when compared to the popularity of Chávez not only during his presidency but even today, a decade after his death, as his tomb is a destination of pilgrimages and murals depicting the late politician (in some versions – together with Che Guevara or Jesus Christ) can be seen in the streets of Caracas. Although it was mainly Maduro who had to face the negative consequences of the social reforms of the beginning of the 21st century (such as inflation and loss of purchasing power) and the advancing economic crisis, his personal decisions contributed to the worsening of the situation. At this point, it should be emphasized that the protests in Venezuela are not only against specific problems (corruption, insecurity, violence, blackouts) but against all authorities. Although Maduro is trying to copy Chávez's style, even including pieces of clothing such as red jackets and tracksuits in the colors of the national flag, he is much less charismatic, which can be observed especially in his long speeches. Moreover, similar to Chávez, he presents himself as the natural heir of Simón Bolívar's thoughts and ideas (see the portraits of *El Libertador* that often serve as the backdrop for his videos) and as an enemy of the so-called *elites*. However, unlike his predecessor, Maduro does not present himself as an outsider and a completely new political force – instead, he describes his presidency as a continuation of Chávez's reforms on the road to *21st century socialism*. He uses the figure of the late leader of the Bolivarian Revolution and his constant popularity as a tool to legitimize his own rule and gain political capital, as can be seen in the example of a new talk show on VTV *Con Maduro +*, inaugurated on the 10th anniversary of Maduro's presidency, where he constantly referred to the legacy of *Comandante Eterno* and “his values, his words, his image, his smile and his truth” (Melean, 2023).

In various studies of Latin American politics, this general tendency of successive waves of populism is called “the return of the leader” (Zeremeño, 1989, pp. 115–150), which reveals the general need of local societies to be governed by a strong and charismatic figure. This need has its roots in the history of the region – after declaring independence from the Spanish Empire, a common feature of the young republics was that *caudillos* (both at the state and national levels) held military and political power (Rodríguez Martínez, 2021, pp. 219–246). Although the contribution of this phenomenon to the future development of a large group of populist politicians is undeniable, Latin American charismatic leaders of the 20th and 21st centuries are part of a global trend. In this particular case, the post-colonial legacy of the region is not very different from the post-socialist legacy of Eastern Europe (Koobak, Tlostanova & Thapar-Björkert, 2021). However, it is also worth noting that in addition to the influence of the political

style of the Soviet Union, China, and their allies, for example in Venezuela, there were also numerous right-wing and neoliberal populists (such as Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru) who openly declared their support for the United States of America, especially when governed by a representative of the Republican Party. This illustrates the variety of faces and dimensions of populism, which can be represented by very different approaches not only within a country but also within a single career of a particular politician, developing their style over the years measured by consecutive terms in office.

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Różne oblicza populizmu w Wenezueli. Porównanie stylów rządzenia i wizerunku medialnego Hugo Cháveza i Nicolásu Maduro

STRESZCZENIE Celem artykułu jest dokonanie porównawczej analizy dyskursów i retoryki wystąpień publicznych dwóch kolejnych prezydentów Wenezueli – Hugo Cháveza i Nicolásu Maduro. Choć obaj politycy identyfikowani są w literaturze przedmiotu jako przedstawiciele latynoamerykańskiego populizmu, ich aktywność medialna, styl prowadzenia kampanii oraz sposób rządzenia znacząco się różnią, podobnie jak sposób ich postrzegania przez opinię publiczną i społeczność międzynarodową. Niniejsza analiza uwzględnia także ewolucję wizerunków obu prezydentów w trakcie kolejnych kadencji, również na tle postępującego kryzysu polityczno-ekonomicznego. Szczególnie istotna była w tym kontekście obecność Cháveza i Maduro w mediach – zarówno tradycyjnych, jak radio i telewizja, oraz nowych (zwłaszcza na portalach społecznościowych) oraz sposób budowania narracji. Przedmiotem refleksji były również stosowane przez obu polityków manipulacje oraz sfera symboliczna, do której odwoływali się podczas swoich wystąpień. Takie zestawienie pozwala na dostrzeżenie tego, jak specyficznym i zróżnicowanym wewnątrznie zjawiskiem jest latynoamerykański populizm wpisujący się w nurt „trzeciej fali”, gdyż stopień jego złożoności jest widoczny nawet na przykładzie jednego kraju i kolejnych kadencji prezydenckich.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE populizm, Ameryka Łacińska, Wenezuela, media, Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro

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