

The legacy of Hugo Chávez has lessons for how the EU and its institutions can engage with populist leaders.

by Blog Admin

*What can the rise and success of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez tell us about populism? **Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser** takes an in-depth look at the lessons the EU's leaders can draw from Chávez to deal with the recent rise of populist movements in Europe. He argues that opponents to populism must understand that populists are not only representing real constituencies of society, but that opposition to them can be a source of further reinforcement and radicalisation.*



With the death of Hugo Chávez at the beginning of March, the battle for the interpretation of his legacy has begun. On the one hand, his followers will spare no effort in depicting him not only as Venezuela's saviour, but also as a role model for the left in Latin America and elsewhere. On the other hand, his detractors will portray him as an authoritarian leader, who was able to win elections thanks to the development of extensive networks of clientelism and the closure of independent media.

Given that there is some truth in each of these interpretations, the question about the legacy of Hugo Chávez will most probably involve a heated debate. Any discussion about the socio-economic and socio-political heritage of Chávez's government should try to put the figure of Hugo Chávez into context. To do this, it is crucial to analyse the political evolution that he experienced from his coming to power in 1999 to his death in 2013: something which the EU's governments and institutions would do well to examine as they face the rise of populists such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and Italy's Beppe Grillo.

Like most countries of the Andean region, Venezuela experienced a serious crisis of democratic representation during the 1990s. Many reasons have been given for this, including insufficient economic growth, rising poverty, increasing income inequality, and last but not least, corruption. The 'success' of Venezuelan democracy from the 1960s to the 1980s relied on the consolidation of a two-party system, which in the long run ended up cementing the power of a cartel of elites that was much more interested in preserving its own interests and wealth than in economic redistribution



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and in improving the quality of the democratic regime. When Hugo Chávez organised a coup d'état in 1992, he was mounting a rebellion against this cartel of elites, which was seen as highly illegitimate by a majority of the Venezuelan population. After his release from jail in 1994, Chávez travelled across the country and started to build a loose network of sympathisers, intellectuals and political activists. With their help, he was able to construct a political platform centred on a simple but powerful message: 'The people of our country have been robbed of their rightful sovereignty by a corrupt establishment! The time has come to rise up and regain it'. This populist message proved to be the key to his electoral success. Otherwise stated, the coming into power of Chávez was not only related to his charisma, but also – and mainly – to the fact that large sections of the Venezuelan population had and continue to have emotional and rational motives for

adhering to the Manichean distinction between 'the people versus the elite' inherent to populism.

Oddly enough, many analysts forget that when Chávez won the presidential elections in 1998, his populist discourse neither contained references to anti-neoliberalism, nor radical socialism. Instead, the role model that he had in mind was that of UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's 'Third Way'. Chávez wanted to rebuild the economy by finding a new balance between the state and the free market. How can we explain that his government departed from the idea of the Third Way and moved towards the ideology of the so-called 'Socialism of the 21st century'? Three drivers of radicalisation help to answer this question.

First, given that Chávez did not have a political party behind him, the main basis of support for his regime relied on the mobilisation of grassroots constituencies. The latter were mainly poor people, who profited from the social policies that Chávez began to implement once he came to power. Assisted by the strong rise in the international oil price, Chávez was indeed able to implement a broad array of social policies that contributed to organise the grassroots level as a political counterweight to entrenched power structures. There was a political logic behind the social policies implemented by Chávez: the more poor constituencies backed the regime, the easier it was to mobilise them to push for the realisation of reforms that could reduce the power of the cartel of elites, which had dominated Venezuelan politics in the recent past.

Second, although there was no consensus within the opposition regarding how to deal with Chávez coming to power, radical factions predominated and advocated different strategies that sought to destabilise the regime. Two of these strategies are worth mentioning: the support for the coup attempt against Chávez in 2002, and the organisation of not only a general strike, but also a takeover of the state-owned oil company PDVSA in 2003. Both strategies were extremely counterproductive. While the coup d'état failed and led to a purge of the armed forces, the general strike and takeover of PDVSA paved the way for a massive replacement of oil sector workers with loyalist supporters.

Third, with the election of President George W. Bush in 2000, the relations between the US and Venezuela suffered an abrupt deterioration. In fact, few question that President Bush's administration was involved in the coup attempt against Chávez in 2002. Furthermore, when Venezuela's regime was depicted as part of the so-called 'axis of evil', Chávez had a fruitful opportunity to portray his political project as the battle of David against Goliath. The formation of a 'Chavista' diplomacy interested in fostering the coming into power of leftist populist forces across Latin America was therefore directly related to the way in which the United States dealt with Chávez. Chávez's famous 2006 [speech at the United Nations](#) general assembly, in which he described George W. Bush as the incarnation of the devil, must be understood against this background. The rest of the story is well-known. The more Chávez was attacked, from inside the country and from outside, the more radical his populist discourse became. In addition, he used the oil economy to give money and dignity not only to the poor in Venezuela, but also to international actors who were in favour of his political approach.

What lessons can be drawn from this for the analysis of populism in general? First and foremost, the political evolution of Chávez reveals that the radicalisation of a populist movement is closely linked to the behaviour of its opponents. Just as the pejorative response of many liberal elites has nurtured the extremist rhetoric of the populist Tea Party movement in the U.S., the undemocratic means used by sectors of the old Venezuelan establishment and the government of George W. Bush to fight against Chávez were anything but beneficial. This is not a trivial point. Many well-intentioned activists and scholars tend to forget that the rise of populist forces has less to do with the emergence of a charismatic snake charmer, and more to do with social grievances that make the populist discourse appealing to large sectors of the population. Strategies seeking to deal with populism that do not put the populist forces into context are destined to fail.

Secondly, and related to the previous point, activists and scholars should be very careful when it comes to promoting policies regarding how to cope with populist forces. Whether we like it or not, populist leaders and parties do represent certain constituencies and sometimes they are able to obtain an important amount of votes. As a consequence, we should acknowledge not only that the claims made by populist forces have a certain degree of legitimacy, but also that more often than not those who vote for populist

leaders and parties have sensible reasons for doing this. As a matter of fact, before the rise of populist radical parties in Europe, many mainstream parties spared little effort in thinking about immigration, although this topic is seen as an important problem for a significant part of the population. At the same time, those who feel represented by the [Five Star Movement](#) in Italy, and other European populist forces in the making, have good reasons for being fed up with the political establishment.

Third and finally, the rise and fall of Hugo Chávez reveals that international institutions are particularly ill-prepared for coping with populism. This applies to the [Organization of American States](#) as much as to the European Union, which has increasing problems dealing with Eastern European governments that are controlled by populist forces (such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary). As Jan-Werner Müller has indicated in a [recent working paper](#), it is now a matter of urgency to rethink the toolkit that national governments and international institutions should advance to protect liberal democracy from populists-in-power, whose actions can lead to deteriorations in the rule of law, and thus a process of de-democratisation.

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