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A comparative study of legitimation strategies in hybrid regimes

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing body of research on ‘hybrid regimes’, few studies address the issue of their domestic legitimacy. Targeting this gap in the literature, this article explores the legitimation strategies of three hybrid regimes around the globe: Russia, Venezuela, and Seychelles. Although these countries differ markedly in almost every aspect that can be thought of, the political systems of all three cases combine formally democratic institutions with authoritarian political dynamics. The qualitative, comparative analysis presented in this article uncovers a number of remarkable similarities between the regimes’ respective legitimization strategies. However, while the *strategies* for engendering legitimacy are similar across the cases, the *content* of these strategies is different: the Russian leadership mainly relies on preserving order and nationalism, the Venezuelan regime employs a more populist strategy, and the Seychellois regime uses a more personal and particularistic approach. Our findings not only provide insights into the mechanisms hybrid regimes use to consolidate their authority, but also highlight important differences and similarities between hybrid regimes around the world.

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Introduction

No political regime or authority wishes to appear illegitimate. As noted by Dogan (1992, 116), ‘Even the most tyrannic rulers try to justify their reign’. Nevertheless, Dogan believed that legitimacy is especially important for democracies, whereas dictatorships secure their existence mainly with force. As the expected democratic transition of many third wave-countries around the world did not materialize, these countries remained trapped in what Carothers referred to as the ‘grey zone’ between democracy and authoritarianism (O’Donnell 1996; Carothers 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). While academic research on these ‘hybrid regimes’ has been growing over the last decade, few studies address the important yet often neglected issue of domestic legitimacy of these regimes.

This article analyzes the legitimation strategies of three hybrid regimes in different regions of the world, namely Russia, Venezuela, and Seychelles.

The aim of our article is to highlight the similarities and differences between the legitimation strategies of the three cases, and in this sense contribute to the existing literature on the consolidation of authority in contemporary hybrid regimes. Because hybrid regimes operate in the grey zone between democracy and authoritarianism, by analyzing their legitimation strategies we can discern how they combine democratic and authoritarian claims to legitimacy in practice. On the basis of these observations, this article seeks to address the question: *how have strongly dissimilar hybrid regimes sought to engender domestic legitimacy?* Our ‘most different’ case selection enables us not only to zoom in on the considerations, motivations, and strategies on the basis of which hybrid regimes develop their legitimation strategies, but also to highlight variation in the legitimation strategies that hybrid regimes around the world have employed.

The three cases were selected to ensure maximum variance along relevant dimensions of analysis, in order to examine the differences between hybrid regimes when it comes to legitimation strategies. Our key criterion for this case selection is ideology; we have selected one post-communist country that has made the transition to a capitalist system (Russia), one country that moved from a neoliberal system to a socialist-populist regime (Venezuela), and a country that transformed from a socialist single-party state to a social-democratic republic in which the same party is however still in power (Seychelles). As a microstate, Seychelles is excluded from most aggregate indices of democracy, but the Freedom House data set classifies it as a ‘partly free’ electoral democracy (2014). A similar classification is made for Venezuela; the Russian Federation, however, is categorized as ‘not free’. In most other classifications, Venezuela and Russia are categorized as hybrid regimes (Ekman 2009; Gilbert and Mohseni 2011; Marshall and Jagers 2011).

Despite their common hybrid status, the political systems of the cases are vastly different. While the rule of Vladimir Putin in Russia (since 2000), Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1999–2013), and France-Albert René in Seychelles (1977–2004) could be considered personalistic, these leaders emphasize(d) different issues in their legitimation rhetoric. The Seychellois and Venezuelan regimes are at least rhetorically and symbolically socialist or left-wing in orientation, whereas no clear ideological foundation can be discerned in the Russian case. In terms of their origins and historical development, a noteworthy difference between the cases is that the Seychellois regime came to power by means of a *coup d'état* and subsequently established a single-party Marxist state, whereas both Chávez and Putin gained power through relatively competitive elections. While Venezuela and Russia gradually became less democratic as Putin and Chávez consolidated their domestic powers, in 1993 the Seychellois regime transformed from a Marxist single-party government into a multiparty system, in which the ruling party has stayed in power by winning all subsequent elections.

In our qualitative analysis, for the cases of Russia and Venezuela secondary literature, existing reports and documents, and public opinion surveys are examined. Since such information is mostly not available for the case of Seychelles, the analysis of this regime is chiefly based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with Seychellois respondents that were conducted during field research by one of the authors in February–March 2011. Several interviews with civil society actors were conducted also in Russia in February–March 2012. Our analysis will focus simultaneously on two elements of legitimacy

that are related but also distinct from each other. First, we examine the *strategy* (i.e. tactics) of legitimation that the three regimes employ, which we conceptualize as the type of actions they utilize to foster their political legitimacy. Second, we look at the *content* of this legitimation strategy, which we understand as narratives by means of which this strategy is justified and sustained. Since we have selected our cases in order to ensure maximum variation in political ideology among hybrid regimes, our expectation is that the legitimation strategy of the cases we analyze is more or less similar, while the content of this strategy is expected to diverge, based on the different ideological foundations of the regimes.

In the following section, we first define the concepts of political legitimacy and political legitimation strategy, after which we discuss the significance of popular legitimacy in hybrid regimes. Subsequently, we analyze the political legitimation in contemporary Russia, Venezuela, and Seychelles. Each case study follows the same logic: firstly, we discuss the initial legitimation strategy of the regime; secondly, we focus on the narrative used by the authorities to legitimize their right to rule, thirdly, we elaborate on what groups the authorities rely on in building their support base, that is, who is considered a friend and who an enemy of the state. The comparison of the three cases constitutes the concluding section.

Understanding regime legitimation in hybrid regimes

Machiavelli emphasized the need for political legitimacy of a government because of the ‘impotence of pure power’ (in Zelditch 2001, 36–37, 42–43). While scholars continue to disagree about the usefulness of the concept of legitimacy (Hyde 1983; Huntington 1991, 46; Przeworski 1991), it has a strong (implicit and explicit) presence in both theoretical and empirical debates in political science. Legitimacy is often associated with regime survival because it functions as an alternative resource of support for authorities in times of crisis (Tyler 2006, 377). According to Huntington (1991, 46–58), the survival and legitimacy of authoritarian regimes depends heavily on their economic performance, that is, their output. The legitimacy of democracies, by contrast, is based mainly on input: shared ideas about what the political system represents and relatively durable electoral procedures that assure the representation of citizens’ interests (Easton 1975, 447). Hybrid regimes aspire to achieve a balance between output and input elements of legitimacy, but ‘the coexistence of democratic rules and autocratic methods aimed at keeping incumbents in power creates an inherent source of instability’ (Levitsky and Way 2002, 59).

The term hybrid regime refers to *diverse political regimes that ‘combine some democratic and some autocratic elements in significant measure’* (Hale 2011, 34). In the last two decades, hybrid regimes became the subject of many studies in comparative politics (e.g. Diamond 2002; Wigell 2008; Bogaards 2009; Morlino 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010; Gilbert and Mohseni 2011). The categorization of regimes as hybrids, however, remains problematic and the extent to which these ‘in-between’ cases actually maintain similar regimes remains unclear. Unlike classic authoritarian regimes, hybrids do not legitimize their rule through the will of gods or dynastic roots, and they do not use coercion to retain power to the same extent as classical authoritarian regimes. Instead, hybrids seek confirmation of their right to rule through the institution of elections, which are usually

seen as the defining attribute of democratic systems (Gerschewski 2013), but these elections are characterized by controlled competition and manipulation. Moreover, rulers in hybrid regimes often adjust to external circumstances and adapt their legitimation patterns to various democratization pressures, for example, popular demands or external events (Finkel and Brudny 2012). For some hybrid regimes, this dynamic strategy and adaptability to external conditions causes discrepancies in regime scores and frequently leads to the assignment of one case to different categories (compare, e.g. The Economist Intelligence Unit 2011; Marshall and Jagers 2011; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014). Hale (2011, 35) illustrated this debate about categorization with a ‘demonstratively awkward acronym’ to refer to all types of hybrid regimes collectively: SCEAOMIDD (semi-/competitive/electoral authoritarianism or managed/illiberal/delegative democracy).

In this article, we specifically address legitimacy of these ambiguous regimes. We follow a descriptive approach to legitimacy based on Weber’s ideas about the belief in authorities right to rule (1964, 382). In line with this approach, Gilley (2006, 502) wrote that legitimacy is achieved when citizens transfer power to authorities not because of fear or personal stakes, but because of the moral qualities of authorities who secure some kind of common good: they ‘govern for the people’. Citizens grant the right to rule to authorities on the basis of a sense of normative appropriateness of these authorities, and/or because of their performance. Hence, citizens’ perceptions and evaluations of the authorities and political system form the basis of subjective legitimacy.

Treated as a type of social perception, legitimacy represents a ‘manipulable resource’ (Suchman 1995, 574). Therefore, within this understanding of legitimacy, any political authority (democratic or not) has the possibility to influence and engender legitimacy beliefs. Political authorities, institutions, and organizations can use diverse legitimation strategies to gain, maintain, and repair domestic legitimacy. We explicitly emphasize the validity of the micro level perspective in analyzing hybrid regimes (Weatherford 1992), and accordingly we treat legitimacy as a ‘manipulable resource’.

The legitimacy of hybrids is not only achieved by means of elections. In fact, some argue that the role of elections in supplying legitimacy might be less important for domestic legitimacy than other factors – elections might be used merely to signal ‘that alternatives are unlikely’ (Marquez 2015). According to Kailitz (2013, 46) the diminished quality of elections distinguishes hybrid regimes (electoral autocracies) from liberal democracies. Although this article exclusively aims to compare hybrid regimes, it seeks to establish empirically to what extent a coherent pattern of legitimation, different from elections (used by democracies) and hard repression (used more frequently by authoritarian regimes; see Grauvogel and von Soest 2014, 637–639) is present in different hybrid regimes.

The relation between legitimation and repression is not clear-cut, especially if we deal with subjective legitimacy. For example, the limitations on pluralism can be seen as a protection of certain traditional values or a safe-guard against extremism by certain groups and would be classified as a legitimacy-engendering strategy. However, the groups upon which the limitations are imposed would see this strategy as repression. This issue is discussed by Gerschewski (2013, 23), who shows that legitimation refers to the relation between the regime elite and population, whereas repression refers mainly to the relation between the regime elite and potential opposition.

In this article, legitimation strategies are understood as *authorities' attempts to promote their vision of what is right for the country and, in principle, are aimed at producing voluntary transfer of power to the authorities*. The justifications of their rule are framed either in the form of rhetorical claims (e.g. propaganda, and justificatory narratives) or specific actions (e.g. mobilization, institutional reform, or distribution of goods and services). It is important to distinguish between the strategies that pertain to subjective legitimacy and the strategies that simply produce support, which can result from many different motives such as fear of coercion or personal gain. Clientelism is a good example of the latter strategy as it can unquestionably mobilize support (Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011), but it is based on the provision of 'material resources as quid pro quo for political support' (Stokes 2007) accompanied by threats of defection. By this logic, following Gilley (2006, 502), a citizen who supports the regimes 'because it is doing well in creating jobs' is expressing views of legitimacy. A citizen who supports the regimes 'because I have a job' is not'.

Russia: order, Putin, and 'the special path'

Initial legitimation

Legitimation strategies in Putin's Russia evolved throughout the years of his rule. They can only be understood, however, in the context of two previous regimes that legitimized their rule in opposing ways, namely the regime of the Soviet Union and the transition regime after its dissolution. The initial legitimation of the Soviet regime was grounded in communist ideology, but in its post-totalitarian form (after the death of Stalin), the Communist Party legitimized itself on the basis of performance through self-proclaimed 'economic superiority' over the West, prosperity, and improving living standards (Saxonberg 2013, 59–60).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the evaporation of ideology as a source of legitimacy constituted a great challenge for the new regime of the Russian Federation. Initially, Western style multi-party elections were supposed to legitimize the system. Although the elections had a larger degree of competition in the 1990s than in the 2000s, they did not seem to provide a sufficient basis for legitimacy because of unsatisfactory economic outputs of the system and lack of coherent ideology. The reforms of the first half of the 1990s caused a massive decline of the GDP and living standards of Russians (Gerber and Hout 1998; Hanson 1999).

The experience of this turbulent period helped Putin to gain power and mobilize support among Russians. Putin took an intransigent position on the conflict in Chechnya in the name of national unity at the time of high public support for this action (Knight 2000). Most importantly, the recovery of the GDP caused by the increase of oil prices improved popular perceptions of the direction in which the country was moving (Levada Center 2014a). The increase in oil-based revenues led to the rise in living standards and the subordination of oligarchs to the Kremlin signaled Putin's commitment to re-distribution of wealth. In practice, a group of oligarchs and Putin's protégés from various networks (KGB/FSB, military, United Russia (UR) and friends from St. Petersburg) formed clans with control over resources and legislation, making them the main beneficiaries of the regime (e.g. Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005; Remington 2008).

Nevertheless, Putin was able to use the discourse of order (*poryadok*) and stability (*stabil'nost'*) as legitimation, which for the majority of Russians became the appreciated synonym of Putin's rule (Anderson 2013, 133), despite the widespread high-level corruption (Dawisha 2014) and the construction of a patronage-based 'single-pyramid system' with Putin as the chief patron (Hale 2010).

Legitimation narrative

In addition to the rhetoric of order supported by the growth of the GDP, a personalistic legitimation strategy, which included both charismatic and technocratic aspects, became more prominent in Russia. Putin was depicted by the media as a strong and competent leader, who understood and represented the needs of ordinary Russians. Initially, Russians valued Putin because he appeared to be completely different from Yeltsin: disciplined, energetic, sober, and a former spy and holder of a judo black belt (Treisman 2011, 593). Subsequently, the mass media created an image of an ideal man, whom every Russian woman dreams of and every Russian man should emulate. This strategy of glorification has been possible because of the lack of a specific political orientation of Putin. Putin became a catch-all national leader – the president of everybody – and, as Levada observed, 'his policies combine liberal changes, great-power logic with its rhetoric, appeals for social justice, and the robust defense of national interests' (in White and Mcallister 2008, 615). Similar things could be said about UR, which became a party to realize 'Putin's programme' and at the same time a 'patronage machine' to control federal and regional politics and weaken opposition (Remington 2008).

Since 2000, Putin's popularity rose to reach a peak at 89%, and never, until the wave of protests in 2011, fell below 60% (Treisman 2011, 590). According to most Russia scholars (White and Mcallister 2008; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011), economic performance is the most important factor contributing to the regime support. Nevertheless, the image created by the media and the personal appeal of Putin played a big role in people's decisions at the ballot box (Colton and Hale 2009; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011). In 2014, Putin in a way initiated a test of loyalty of Russians by imposing counter-sanctions banning the import of goods from countries that disapproved of the violation of the Budapest memorandum, the annexation of Crimea, and Russian intervention in the eastern regions of Ukraine. Although a majority of Russians declared that they agree with Putin's response to the Western sanctions, at the same time they admit that the prices have increased and the standards of living of the Russian population will decrease (Levada Center 2014b).

Friends and enemies

In addition to personalistic strategies, Putin's regime legitimizes itself by stressing its cultural coherence with the Russian national identity. This nationalist strategy became more pronounced after the wave of color revolutions, upon which various counter-revolutionary strategies were implemented in Russia to 'insulate it from the orange virus' (Ambrosio 2007). The notion of sovereign democracy (Surkov 2008; March 2012, 408–410) – democracy designed to fit Russia's distinct civilization – and statements like 'true sovereignty for Russia is absolutely necessary for survival' (Putin 2014), as well as the emphasis on resistance to Western democracy and values took a more central place in Putin's policies and

rhetoric over time. Pro-regime nationalist groups were favored and rewarded, while critics were targeted and besmirched as foes of the state. With time, the right-oriented supporters' base of Putin (Colton and Hale 2009) was placed more explicitly in the center of his legitimation.

The Russian regime aims to gain input legitimacy, convincing citizens about the cohesion of the values represented by authorities with the values represented by society, by assuming the role of the guardian of the tradition, history and the common values of Russian society with a mission to 'save the people' (in De Lazari 2014; Torbakov 2014). Moreover, recently intensified rhetoric of 'the enemy at the gate' seems to be effective in mobilizing the support for Putin. According to survey data from January 2011, 67% of Russians believed that internal and external enemies surround Russia. In March 2014, these numbers increased to 76% (Gudkov 2014a). In particular, the media campaign accompanying the annexation of Crimea, which presented the West as supposedly supporting neo-Nazis and fascists in Ukraine (De Waal 2014), has led to an increase in anti-American and anti-European sentiments. The approval ratings of Putin reached 83% at the end of May 2014, approaching the zenith of 88% that was reached during the 2008 Georgian War (Asmolov, Levinson, and Prokhorova 2014). The wish to recover Russia's lost great power glory seems to unite Russians in their support for interventions like those in Ukraine in 2014 and in Georgia in 2008 (Gudkov 2014b).

In line with the Kremlin's rhetoric, the foes of Russia are not only abroad. The strengthening of anti-Western and anti-liberal rhetoric had serious consequences for Russian opposition parties and organizations (Henderson 2011). After the Orange Revolution, the State Duma took legal measures against opposition parties and restricted international funding for NGOs. According to Putin, these measures were necessary to protect society against organizations that do not serve the Russian people, but the interests of other states (Putin 2004) – organizations and individuals often referred to as the 'fifth column'.

In Russia, a distinction exists between human rights defenders known as *pravozashchitniki* and other organizations that cohabit the civic space with the authorities and act in the sphere of social security (Petroni 2011, 178; Mazepus 2012a; Volkov 2011). At the beginning of Putin's third presidential term, many of the *pravozashchitniki* received the label of 'foreign agent', which has a strong pejorative association among the Russian public. A vague definition of who qualifies as a 'foreign agent' allowed the Ministry of Justice to declare grass-root organizations like Golos (elections monitoring), Memorial (human rights) and even the Levada-Center (a public opinion center) as foreign agents, and courts fined them for refusing to register as such.

Moreover, the media launched a campaign to sully the reputation of these NGOs. For example, Golos was attacked in 2011/2012 with a series of pseudo-documentaries aired on NTV portraying the organization as an enemy of the state. Mazepus (2012b; own interview), the head of Golos, commented a day after the broadcast of one of these films, that this strategy was reminiscent of Belarus and methods of manipulation used by Stalin to eliminate opponents in 1937. A new law on 'undesirable organizations' signed by Putin in May 2015 is another tool to control Russian civil society and its contacts with international organizations.

The Russian authorities often justify the functioning of the political system on the basis of Russia's exceptionality and special path, which also calls for a special kind of democracy as opposed to Western democracy. What they mean by this is not clear, but it resonates

well with the majority of population. In their quest to make Russia a great power, the Russian authorities strive towards a convergence of people's views and beliefs about the world with the vision offered by the state. This vision involves a rejection of the Western 'rotten' values (and anybody who supports them) and an emphasis on Russia's exceptionalism and morality of its political system. The distinction between the justificatory rhetoric (protection of loyal Russians against the enemies) and actions (legal restrictions on opposition, public discrediting of liberal NGOs, and rewards for loyalty) reflects how legitimization in terms of values and national identity is accompanied by the application of repressive and co-opting strategies (Gerschewski 2013, 21).

Venezuela: a populist legitimization strategy

Initial legitimization

Venezuela's transition to democracy began in 1958 with the creation of the *Punto Fijo* Pact, a power-sharing agreement between the main political parties (Myers 2004). Despite Venezuela's accomplishments including the creation of a framework of democratic structures and processes, democracy in Venezuela did not progress towards a more inclusive mode involving a fuller range of democratic rights and practices (Ellner 2008). Power remained under elite control and essentially excluded sectors of the population from the general decision-making process. Political parties operated through a strong network of patronage stretching down and outwards from elite sections of Venezuelan society in the military, business and land sectors (Crisp and Levine 1998, 31).

So, while the input legitimacy through institutional representation was largely limited, the regime sought to employ other methods to enhance its legitimacy. Prevailing societal interests translated into the formulation of a distributive resource policy model, based on oil revenues, aimed at appeasing specific needs of dominant societal groups (Ortiz 2004). However, the elites' overbearing role eventually contributed to the demise of the *Punto Fijo* model of democracy. During the 1980s, the culmination of devaluing the currency, declining wages and the introduction of a punitive austerity package that triggered civil unrest were direct causes of the end of *Punto Fijo* democracy (Crisp and Levine 1998). This period of economic, political and civil unrest laid the ground for the entrance of Hugo Chávez and the introduction of Bolivarianism to the modern Venezuelan political scene. In essence, modern Bolivarianism refers to Chávez's interpretation and implementation of ideas originally espoused by Simón Bolívar. During the late 1990s, in an attempt to gain almost instantaneous political legitimacy, Chávez directly linked 'the liberator' with his own goals of patriotism, liberation and independence. These became the main tenets of the ideological foundation and political platform that propelled Chávez to the presidency in 1998. Moreover, Chávez as an individual with his Bolivarian ideals could achieve, what Weber (1978, 215) called, charismatic legitimization understood as 'devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person'.

Legitimation narrative

In 1999, Chávez inherited a nation beleaguered with problems of poverty, inequality, corruption and general public mistrust of the traditional mode of governance that had defined

Venezuela's democratic experience (Weisbrot 2008). In an attempt to build a legitimate political brand that clearly departed from the *Punto Fijo* tradition, Chávez implemented a series of institutional and policy changes designed to create a new style of politics and governance in Venezuela based on a series of input legitimacy tactics. These included drafting a new constitution concentrating power within the presidency, moving from a bicameral to a unicameral parliament, the introduction and implementation of the principles of the Bolivarian revolution and its model of participatory democracy, and finally, holding new elections for seats in the unicameral parliament as well as for the office of President (Coppedge 2002; Lieslesley 2005, 12).

The incremental introduction of a series of social policies known as 'missions' became the flagship of the Bolivarian revolution's populist approach to a variety of problems linked to social inequality (Weisbrot 2008). These state missions delivered to the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population a range of services, including: free basic health care, adult literacy programs, subsidized basic food stuffs, free public housing and free tertiary education. Corrales and Penfold-Becerra (2012, 44) point out that the missions helped Chávez to symbolically include the people that were excluded at the end of the *Punto Fijo* regime. Moreover, the missions led to an increase in public spending, which gave Chávez a competitive advantage over opposition parties during elections. Although the missions were used as a legitimization strategy and promoted as an example of the government fulfilling its constitutional commitments in relation to human security (e.g. see Article 305 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 1999), the support for Chávez cannot be equated with legitimacy. The support resulted from a combination of the belief in the contribution of his policies to the common good of the nation (output legitimacy) and favorable attitudes toward the symbolic representation of the regime (input legitimacy) (Mills 2013), as well as from the expectation of rewards, and fear of being excluded from the list of beneficiaries (instrumental motives).

However, for several years now, the missions have not provided the same level of output legitimacy as they once did. Since 2007 the number of Venezuelans accessing the services of the missions has continued to decline, reaching new lows under the Maduro government and reducing its capacity to draw upon the traditional centerpiece of its legitimization narrative.

Friends and enemies

The regime's narrative became embedded and inextricably linked to the populist policies that appealed to the majority of the population. However, other sectors of society, mainly in private business, began to voice concerns over Chávez's leadership and management of the nation. These concerns translated into a series of challenges that included an attempted coup d'état, a national strike in the oil industry and a referendum to recall him from the office of president. Ironically, these events proved to be critical to Chávez's capacity to further consolidate his power and legitimacy among a broad spectrum of the population. After almost 10 years in power, Chávez's performance was rated as good or very good by 50% of population (The Americas Barometer).

During his tenure as president Chávez successfully instilled a divisive political discourse that played on the simplistic dichotomy of 'us versus them'. Moreover, due to Chávez's

increasing domestic consolidation of power it was no longer necessary to solely draw on the legacy of Bolívar to legitimate his government's policies. Chávez had become a legitimate political brand in his own right under the new ideological banner of Chavismo and enjoyed some of the highest approval ratings in Venezuela's political history. According to *Datanalisis*, Chávez reached the peak of his popularity in 2007 with more than 70% approval rating, and he was never supported by less than 47% of Venezuelans (in Martínez 2011).

The loyal Chavistas have been relentlessly promoted as the champions of the poor and disenfranchised, who have been engaged in a bitter battle against a malignant opposition with nefarious motives. Anybody who expressed criticism of Chávez's government could be considered a part of this opposition and pronounced a traitor. One famous example is the case of General Raúl Baduel – former Defense Minister under Chávez and the commander that saved Chávez during the coup d'état in 2002. When Baduel became too critical of Chávez's increasingly authoritarian policies, Chávez accused him of treason and in 2009 Baduel was sentenced to seven years in a military prison on corruption charges. The use of discursive tactics (Angosto-Ferrandez 2013) that placed Chávez and his supporters squarely on the side of 'good' in matters of domestic or foreign politics, proved to be a largely successful strategy for domestic legitimation during his time in power (Chaplin 2014, 36).

However, these tactics could only work so long as Chávez remained a vibrant and visible leader. In mid-2011, Chávez revealed that he had undergone surgery to remove a cancerous tumour. From this point on, the Venezuelan government went to great lengths to conceal the exact nature of Chávez's health issues in the lead up to the 2012 presidential elections, and on several occasions in 2011 and 2012 Chávez publically declared himself free of cancer (BBC 2012). In July 2012, Chávez launched his final campaign for re-election. During his speech, and although visibly ill, Chávez regaled the sprawling crowds with a mixture of amusing anecdotes, songs and political statements about the future of a socialist Venezuela. During these hours, Chávez's intermittent references to Simón Bolívar appeared to be superficial at best. Towards the end of his speech, Chávez declared to the crowd 'I am Chávez, you are Chávez, we are all Chávez' (Chávez 2012). When Chávez died on 5 March 2013, his supporters took to the streets and social media proclaiming '*Todos somos Chávez*' ('we are all Chávez').

It is clear that by the end of his life Chávez had moved well beyond his initial objectives of gaining political legitimacy through a series of traditional input and output tactics. In death, it seems that Chávez is being afforded an almost mythological place in Venezuelan history similar to, and perhaps even more salient than Bolívar himself. However, President Nicolas Maduro's current inclination to strengthen his administration's legitimacy through the use of hagiographic references to Chávez appears to be creating a further dissonance between government and the populace. The results of the 2013 presidential election demonstrated that many from the traditional Chavista support base had either not been mobilized or failed to vote in comparison to previous elections when Chávez was the candidate. The December 2015 elections for the National Assembly further demonstrate this point, whereby the opposition coalition for the first time in 16 years won a super majority and now control the unicameral parliament. Despite these recent events, it is clear that Chávez left such an indelible mark on Venezuelan politics that any successor would face similar legitimation challenges to the ones Maduro is currently facing. As the

Venezuelan case shows, political legitimacy that is exclusively derived from an individual can prove to be problematic and potentially damaging for the continuation of a regime during periods of transition.

Seychelles: a personal legitimization strategy

Initial legitimization

With a population size of approximately 90.000, the Republic of Seychelles is the smallest state of Africa, and the world's smallest hybrid regime. Within one year after attaining independence from the UK in 1976, the democratically elected pro-Western government of the archipelago was overthrown in a *coup d'état* that installed a single-party Marxist regime. With the aid of the Soviet Union and socialist African states like Libya and Tanzania, under the leadership of France-Albert René Seychelles transformed into a full-blown authoritarian regime in which opposition parties were banned, opposition supporters harassed, jailed, or even tortured, and in which institutions like the media and the judiciary were curtailed or forced to toe the party line (Hatchard 1993, 601–602; Van Nieuwkerk and Bell 2007, 148, Baker 2008, 279). Political patronage and nepotism were the main instruments of political control, but even as corruption flourished, tourism continued to generate vast economic development, and Seychelles became one of the most prosperous states of Africa (Campling and Rosalie 2006, 119–121; Yoon 2011, 101). Economic growth underpinned the political legitimacy of this authoritarian regime.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the 1991 Harare Declaration proved to be watershed moments for Seychelles, and the sudden disappearance of many socialist allies forced the regime to start a process of political liberalization. In 1993 multiparty-elections were organized, but the main opposition party (the Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP)) failed to defeat the incumbent Seychelles Peoples Patriotic Front (SPPF). As a result, the SPPF and President René remained in power, and managed to win all subsequent elections, meaning that no alternation in office has occurred since the 1970s. With the same party and people remaining in power, critics assert that very little has changed in post-1993 Seychelles except for some institutional and cosmetic changes (Baker 2008, 280–281). At present, the available literature on Seychelles and the Freedom House (2014) index primarily emphasize the democratic shortcomings of the Seychellois regime, and point to excessive government influence on the media, discrimination and harassment of opposition supporters, and corruption and embezzlement by the government. The most recent parliamentary elections were boycotted by the main opposition party because of the government's refusal to revise existing laws on campaign financing.

Legitimation narrative

The collapse of communism and the increase in international pressure forced the SPPF to reform the Seychellois system, but elections – the new source of input legitimacy – remain controlled by the incumbent regime. Despite the low competitiveness of elections, in the international arena the mere organization of regular elections allows the regime to maintain a democratic image. Domestically, the value of legitimization through democratic

elections is underscored as important by most interviewed respondents affiliated with the government. In addition to these elections, the SPPF continues to emphasize the redistributive nature of its policies, and its goal of realizing greater socio-economic equality and the emancipation of the working classes. As one minister in the government remarked:

This government still has a very strong core social policy within its manifesto and within its governance policy, where we maintain things like free education, free healthcare, subsidized housing, free access to specialist medical care, overseas if needed. (...) We are firmly implanted as believers in the democratic system. We firmly believe in transparency and good governance, but we maintain this social element within our policies.

While the SPPF originated as a Soviet-style socialist party, after the fall of the Berlin Wall it managed to transform itself into a social-democratic party that subscribes to free market policies and free and fair elections. As a result, the party made a relatively successful ideological transition, which to a large extent was facilitated by its capacity to live up to the socio-economic expectations of its supporters. Massive tourism revenues have allowed the SPPF to realize much of its left-wing program, and to fulfill its electoral promises and sustain its base of support. As the following quote of a ruling party politician illustrates, according to the Seychellois political elite the shift in the legitimation narrative of the regime has already provided most of the necessary political changes, as a result of which alternation in office has become largely obsolete:

Change for the sake of change is meaningless, unless the change comes to complement or to be better than what is being done for the country. In Seychelles, the same party over the thirty years has transformed itself – if I may use the term – from a caterpillar to a butterfly. We were a caterpillar once, a caterpillar that moved slowly because the focus was to breach the wide gap that existed between the richest elites and the poorest majority.

Whereas the political opposition of Seychelles (the SNP) continues to criticize the ruling party's democratic credentials and its track record of human rights violations, censorship of the press, and intimidation of opposition supporters, these issues do not seem to be considered as important by the majority of the people, as a representative of the Seychellois legal sector explained:

I think that the average person is more concerned with what immediate benefits they can derive, rather than whether someone they don't know is being treated well in prison.

In short, while the SPPF surely emphasizes democracy and human rights as part of its legitimation narrative, the party elites seem to be aware that direct economic benefits are more important in sustaining their legitimacy than these intangible factors. The social policies of the SPPF have primarily translated into patron-client relations, which can be seen as performing a redistributive function of social welfare in the country. According to a number of scholars, after over 35 years in power the state and the ruling party have merged in the minds of many ordinary Seychellois (Yoon 2011, 101; Veenendaal 2014), meaning that analogous to larger, continental African countries, the Seychellois system can increasingly be regarded as neo-patrimonial (Bratton and Van de Walle 1994).

In part, the blurred boundaries between ruling party and state are buttressed by the actions of the regime, which recurrently recognizes accomplishments of the nation as accomplishments of the party, and vice versa. For example, the country's first (and, so far, only) university was established in September 2009, and this was strongly depicted

as an achievement of the SPPF. Since the SNP has never been in power and therefore did not have a chance to attain these kind of successes, the ruling party constantly brands itself as a supporter of the interests of the ‘true Seychellois’, whereas the opposition are branded as outsiders. This was for example unmistakably clear during the 2011 election campaign, when the SPPF distributed covers for car mirrors in the colors of the flag of Seychelles, thereby signaling that everyone who supports the ruling party in fact supports the interests of the nation as a whole.

Friends and enemies

Contra to the received wisdom that small states are, as a rule, more democratic (Diamond and Tsalik 1999, 119–120; Anckar 2010), the proximity between Seychellois citizens and politicians provides the regime with a number of tools to raise support and sustain its legitimacy, despite its authoritarian tendencies. In the first place, due to the social intimacy that results from the smallness of the country, political affiliations are broadly known in Seychelles, and it can be extremely difficult for individual citizens to maintain their political anonymity. This broad awareness about political affiliations allows the ruling party to identify both its own supporters and the supporters of the opposition, which increases incentives to treat people differently depending on their political allegiance. As one interviewed public official explains:

If you are campaigning during a year, you visit every family at least four times in that year. You can do that, so this gives you the possibility of knowing exactly who supports you, and who does not support you. When the ruling party identifies you as somebody who is not supporting the government, they will exert pressure. And this is one of the weaknesses of a small country with a constituency of 2.000–4.000 voters, compared to constituencies of 100.000 where you just got to deliver your message and sometimes hope that people understand it.

In practice, the broad awareness about individual citizens’ political affiliations means that patronage, clientelism, and nepotism are often-employed strategies to satisfy supporters and attract new ones, whereas opposition supporters are likely to be socially excluded, economically deprived, and even harassed and victimized (Veenendaal 2014). In addition to clientelism, government patronage is ubiquitous in Seychelles. According to many sources, the ruling party distributes civil service-jobs as a means to reward supporters and to attract new ones (Baker 2008, 289; Yoon 2011, 101). Since the government employs more than 20% of the Seychellois workforce, and indirectly controls close to 70% of the economy, this also means that many citizens are economically and financially dependent on their government (Van Nieuwkerk and Bell 2007, 146).

Evidently, these circumstances allow the SPPF to directly target its legitimization narrative towards its (anticipated) base of supporters, and to strategically use whatever resources it has at its disposal to attract new ones. In general, voting behavior in Seychelles is based on family traditions and personal connections rather than ideologies, and in this sense the regime’s legitimization narrative is not aimed at specific socio-economic groups or classes within society, but rather focuses on personal relations. Since political anonymity is restricted in Seychelles, and the ruling party commonly seeks to economically marginalize the opposition and its supporters, all Seychellois citizens have strong incentives to openly

express their support for the SPPF. Some are motivated by a combination of rewards, belief in the rightfulness of the rules, and the patriotic feeling of loyalty to their country, whereas others choose to support the dominant party because of the fear of coercion. Hence, depending on the group to which the citizens belong (friends or enemies), they perceive the strategy of the regime as a valid legitimation or as repression.

Conclusion

The worldwide proliferation of diminished democracies and autocracies from the 1990s onwards has resulted in the clustering of a very diverse group of cases under the label of ‘hybrid regimes’. However, the mere construction of a singular category of ‘in-between’ regimes obfuscates the many differences that may exist within this group, and between regimes that may be considered ‘hybrid’. Cross-regional comparisons like those that were made in this article can contribute to a more nuanced identification of differences and similarities between countries belonging to this category. Domestic legitimation strategies in particular represent an under-researched element in the academic study of hybrid regimes, and the present article has sought to address this gap in the literature. Employing both democratic and antidemocratic strategies, and necessarily focusing both on the input and the output dimensions of legitimacy, legitimation strategies of hybrid regimes hence maintain a careful balance between various sources of legitimacy and other tactics.

This article has primarily aimed to highlight the similarities and differences between the three hybrid regimes under scrutiny. [Table 1](#) shows an overview of these similarities and differences. As the table demonstrates, the legitimation strategies of the three regimes are rather similar. In the first place, in all cases a fusion between the leadership and the state was observed, and in all cases state institutions and resources were used by the ruling party to sustain its grip on power. Secondly, all three regimes make a rhetorical distinction between the friends (in-group) and the enemies (out-group), and try to portray the opposition and its supporters as outsiders, representatives of foreign interests, or even as enemies of the state. Finally, in all three cases clientelism and patronage were used as political strategies to engender support among potential voters. When it comes to identified

Table 1. Overview of similarities and differences in the legitimation strategies.

	Russia	Venezuela	Seychelles
<i>Similarities:</i>			
Fusion between ruling party and state (interests)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Opposition branded as enemies and outsiders	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clientelism and patronage	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dynamic legitimation narrative	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Differences:</i>			
Content of narrative	Order, stability, nationalism, conservatism, anti-Western, Putin	Socialism, rejection of capitalism, anti-Western, Chávez	Social-democracy, redistribution of welfare
Personalistic/charismatic	Yes	Yes	No

legitimation strategies, the content differed slightly as to who exactly is the enemy and who is rewarded by the patronage.

Perhaps most conspicuously, the comparison between these regimes reveals that in each case an evolution and adaptation of the legitimation strategy took place, and that the legitimation strategies are dynamic and adaptable in this respect. This is most clearly the case in Seychelles, where the collapse of communism and the demise of the Soviet Union resulted in a transformation of the regime's rhetoric from Marxist and anti-democratic to essentially social-democratic and liberal. In Russia, the regime's initial focus on order and stability gradually gave way to the more nationalistic and anti-Western discourse that prevails today. In Venezuela the initial focus on the ideas of Bolivarianism was progressively replaced by the 'new' narrative of *Chavismo*, which is more populist and personalistic in nature. The adaptability of these legitimation narratives reveals that while ideological positions of regimes can change, their legitimation strategies are often more robust and remain relatively similar over time. The key takeaway of this article is that it is possible to discern similarities in legitimation strategies in different hybrid regimes, despite the differences in the content of justificatory narratives and leadership styles.

As the bottom rows of the table demonstrate, related to their different ideological foundations, the most important dissimilarity between our cases can be found in their legitimation narratives. After the experience with communism and the failed experiment with liberal democracy under Yeltsin, the contemporary Russian regime strongly focuses on order, stability, nationalism, and conservatism. By contrast, the populist and socialist legitimation narrative of the current Venezuelan regime can be seen as a response to the failure of the foregoing elitist and neoliberal *Punto Fijo*-regime. Emerging out of Western colonialism, the Seychellois regime's initial focus on Marxism, and later focus on social-democracy and social equality can also be seen as a reaction to the preceding political order. In this sense, while the legitimation narratives themselves are different, a similarity between the cases is that each regime strongly expresses a break with the recent past.

A second difference relates to the focus on the regime's respective leaders. Whereas both Russia and Venezuela's regimes became more personalistic over time, this cannot to a similar extent be said of the Seychellois regime. In Venezuela the death of Chávez resulted in the arrival of a decidedly less charismatic leader, but the regime's narrative has remained focused on the person of Chávez, and it is an open question to what extent this legitimation pattern can be successful in the future. Another difference can be noted regarding the attitude of the regime towards economic elites; whereas Putin's Russia has largely successfully attempted to silence the oligarchy by making it dependent on the regime, the Venezuelan regime strongly opposes the economic elite, arguing that it operates against the interests of the Venezuelan people. As a very small state with a blurred boundary between the public and private sectors, the economic and political elites of Seychelles are largely similar.

In light of our 'most diverse' selection of cases, the similarities of the hybrid regimes in terms of their legitimation strategies are remarkable. As hybrid regimes, all three cases rely on a combination of democratic and authoritarian tactics and actions to stimulate and maintain their domestic legitimacy. Although all hybrid regimes require a legitimation pattern to justify their right to rule, notable differences may exist between the contents of the strategies that individual hybrids employ to achieve it. In the absence of free and

fair elections, each hybrid appeals to different values and norms in its justifying narrative: order and traditional values in Russia, the emancipation of the working class in Venezuela, or social equality and the distribution of national income in Seychelles.

Our case selection has enabled us to observe these similarities and differences, on the basis of which we draw the conclusion that while the *strategies* for engendering legitimacy are similar across hybrid regimes, the *content* of these strategies is different. Whereas politicians and journalists, but also academics, tend to focus primarily on the content of legitimation narratives, the findings of this article suggest that this content is often merely a façade beyond which a more robust and durable legitimation strategy can be discerned. As a consequence, while some commentators assume that hybrid regimes are inherently unstable (see Levitsky and Way 2002), this article proposes that their legitimation strategies might remain intact even in the face of ideological shifts or leadership changes, thereby making them more stable than they appear to be.

An avenue for future research on legitimacy in hybrid regimes would be to explore if the similarities in used strategies and differences in narratives as well as leadership style hold in other cases. More comparative research (including comparisons with democratic and authoritarian regimes) can lead to the discovery of further possible patterns in legitimation strategies. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, another under-researched topic is the effectiveness of justifying narratives in convincing citizens to approve the regime vis-à-vis the other strategies.

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