Exporting the Chavista Model: The Venezuelan Case for Autocracy Promotion in the Region

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President Hugo Chávez strove to change the socio-political and economic system of his country, Venezuela. His revolutionary mission implied a strong regional projection and was intended to disseminate his transformative project in the wider region. This article focuses on the outward-directed efforts of Chávez to shape his regional environment and examines the active and intended promotion of the Chavista model. The analysis shows that Chávez’s mission was guided by four objectives: gaining ideological protagonism, facilitating the installation of like-minded leaders, bolstering their persistence in power, and exporting his ‘alternative’ model of rule.

Keywords: autocracy promotion, Bolivarian revolution, democratic erosion, regional integration, Venezuela, Venezuelan foreign relations.

The Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez not only strove to change the socio-political and economic system of Venezuela under the umbrella of the Bolivarian Revolution (henceforth: 21st Century Socialism) but also intended to disseminate his transformative project of regime change in the wider region. As Chávez’s goal was a ‘direct and indisputable zone of Venezuelan revolutionary hegemony in the region’ (Gerbasi, 2010: 572) serving at the same time as a counter-hegemonic bloc against the US, one essential foreign policy goal was to reach a convergence of like-minded allies. Although during the so-called ‘pink tide’ in Latin America, many leftist leaders came into office, only Chávez displayed the ambition as well as the disposition (not to forget: the material resources) to implement what he called an ‘alternative model’ of rule and to export this model. Moreover, Chávez was the first of these leftist presidents in office, which makes it easier to trace the ‘export chain’ of his ideas and his actions to other countries.

Although there is a consensus on Chávez’s influence in his proximity, there is scant systematic analysis on how the dissemination took place and what exactly was disseminated. One explanation points to diffusion effects and mechanisms such as emulation or demonstration that played a role especially in Ecuador and Bolivia in the 2000s (de la Torre, 2017; Weyland, 2017; Kneuer, 2020). Another explanation is the active and intentional promotion of the Chavista model, making Venezuela a push factor for dissemination. This mechanism so far remains under-researched with regard to Venezuela (as an exception: Vanderhill, 2012). Therefore, this study sets out to contribute to the knowledge of the active export of the Chavista model, which is here understood as
Chávez’s revolutionary and autocratic package, including the Bolivarian ideological mission, the anti-liberal and anti-representative political model, and the economically statist and self-declared socialist model. Based on a liberal argument, it is claimed that Chávez intended to export this model to other countries in the region. Hence, the revolutionary mission implied a close connection between its national evolution and its international projection.

Following Kneuer and Demmelhuber’s’ model, Venezuela is here conceived as an authoritarian gravity centre (AGC) defined as an autocratic regional player that has the willingness and capacity (material and immaterial) to disseminate autocratic ideas, norms, values, institutional patterns and techniques in the geopolitical proximity (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2020). This definition applies to Venezuela under Chávez because he displayed the willingness to influence his proximity and, at the same time, disposed of the material (the financial lever provided by Venezuela’s oil) and immaterial capacity (the ideological mission and the networks) for doing so.

This article asks how this autocracy promotion by Chávez was implemented and what concrete elements were exported. Autocracy promotion is defined as all activities of an external actor pursuing the mission of promoting an alternative rule to liberal democracy. A threefold typology of autocracy promotion strategies is suggested here: (a) empowerment of an aspiring autocratic leader not yet in office, (b) strengthening autocratic elements in a hybrid regime to push it towards autocratization, or (c) contributing to the consolidation of an autocratic incumbent. The analysis shows that Chávez used each of the three strategies. In doing so, his mission was guided by four objectives: to gain ideological protagonism with the model of the Bolivarian Revolution and the 21st Century Socialism, to facilitate the installation of like-minded leaders, to export his ‘alternative’ model of political rule, and to support the persistence of like-minded leaders in power.

This analysis is based on qualitative methods and is limited to the cases of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Indeed, Chávez’s mission went beyond these countries, focusing on Mexico and Peru, Central America as well as the Southern Cone. The remainder of this article develops as follows: The next section will concentrate on the conceptual basis – autocracy promotion by authoritarian gravity centres – and present the scholarly debate so far. On this basis, the third section will analyse Chávez’s autocracy promotion. The article concludes by discussing the results and identifying fields for future research.

Taking Stock: The Debate on Autocracy Promotion

Autocracy promotion is a rather new research topic. The debate is embedded into the overall evolving literature on the international dimension of autocracy (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Burnell, 2011; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2020; Tansey, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015; Vanderhill, 2012; Whitehead, 2014). While there has been some theoretical and empirical work on autocratic diffusion (Ambrosio, 2010; de la Torre, 2017; Weyland, 2017), systematic empirical accounts on autocracy promotion are relatively scarce. The same applies to the theoretical dimension where systematic conceptualisation remains rare (exceptions again are: Vanderhill, 2012; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016; Tansey, 2016; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2020 ). Even if the conditions and features of autocracy promotion are not identical with democracy promotion, two central theoretical and
empirical findings from the debate on the international dimension of democratisation can be transferred to autocracy promotion: actorness and intentionality.

So far, the empirical work on autocracy promotion focuses on the elites, with regard to the external actor as well as the target states. Vanderhill argues that external actors strive to change the strategies and capabilities of domestic elites (Vanderhill, 2012: 13–21). One the one hand, external pressure or incentives can alter the strategies of illiberal elites by influencing the cost–benefit-calculations. Accordingly, there needs to be a ‘change agent’ who actively disseminates his ideas and strategies on authoritarian reconfiguration. On the other hand, external actors can enhance the resources of the domestic government, thus increasing their chances of maintaining power, for example, by supporting relevant domestic groups and strengthening the position of the government or other illiberal elites. Such resources can help to engender economic stability in the target state and patronage networks, which are both important prerequisites for the performance of a country in the process of autocratisation. Contributing to the output legitimacy of the target state is highly relevant, because – as the literature on legitimation strategies in autocracies shows (Kneuer, 2017) – output legitimation is one source (within others) of engendering loyalty and allegiance of the public.

How can these change agents be identified? The concept of authoritarian gravity centres (AGC) implies an external actor who has the willingness and the material and immaterial capacity to disseminate autocratic ideas, norms, institutional elements and techniques (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2020). Such an AGC displays a strong will to be the dominant player vis-à-vis its geographic proximity. The willingness to influence the neighbours in the region is reflected in taking a protagonist position in nurturing ideological discourses and exporting illiberal mindsets as well as non-democratic institutional settings and administrative techniques. Thus, the willingness and the capacity are conditions for an authoritarian government to exert a role as an AGC constituting a push-and-pull factor for the regional environment.

What mostly characterises the current debate is the uncertainty on how to define and conceptualise autocracy promotion. As one central problem, several scholars identify the motives behind promotion measures (Burnell, 2011). A pivotal aspect is the normative or symbolic attraction of an autocracy promoter based on the degree of its ideological appeal. Thus, the question is whether autocratic regimes ‘embody, pursue, and propagate an attractive idea or mission that [….] can count on international resonance’ (Weyland, 2017: 1236) and advocate regime principles that deviate from liberal representative democracy or whether they display a defensive self-depiction, shamefully hiding their authoritarian core behind the formerly democratic façade.

The motives then have to be related to specific strategies of autocracy promotion. Slightly modifying Kneuer and Demmelhuber’s (2020: 28) suggestion, three strategies are considered here. If the AGC targets illiberal oppositional forces in a still democratic country, the strategy corresponds to the empowerment of those like-minded forces. The intention here is to support morally and financially potential future leaders and parties to come to power so that they can implement a regime transformation towards autocratisation. If the AGC targets a deficient democratic or a hybrid regime, the strategy consists of pushing towards autocratisation by strengthening or exporting autocratic elements, providing advice or resources for introducing such elements – be they institutional, policy-oriented, administrative techniques, etc. Finally, if the autocracy
The following analysis will, firstly, examine if Chávez fulfills the criterion of disseminating an ideological mission and, secondly, verify if the above exposed three strategies of autocracy promotion can be found in Chávez’s foreign policy. The period of investigation embraces Chávez’s terms in power (1999–2013). The analysis is based on qualitative methods: (a) analysis of primary sources (constitutions), programmatic texts, and interviews by Chávez; (b) thirty-one interviews; and (c) content analysis.
Figure 2. Liberal Democracy in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.

Note: y-axis: Liberal Democracy Index. V-Dem distinguishes between full democracy (1–0.75), electoral democracy (0.75–0.5), electoral autocracy (0.5–0.25) and full autocracy (<0.25). x-axis: Years from 1995 to 2019.
Source: Liberal Democracy Index, Varieties of Democracy. URL https://www.v-dem.net.

of twenty-seven selected speeches done with Max QDA. The interviewees remain anonymous for this publication.

Chávez’s Ideological Mission: Converging Domestic and Regional Goals

Chávez’s aim – which he already communicated before and during his presidential campaign in 1998 – was to refound the country and install a new system comprising a ‘new democracy, a new republic, a new economy, a new society’ (Chávez, 1996). His agenda for radical change was strongly associated with refoundational and revolutionary narratives and the polarisation into an in-group and an out-group, be it domestically or internationally. In his first public document, Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana dating from 1996, he already exposed his core mission:

Thus, the Bolivarian strategy is not only based on the restructuring of the state, but the whole political system, from its philosophical fundaments to its components and the relations regulating them. Therefore, we talk about the necessary process of reconstruction and refoundation of the National Power [capitals in original] in all its facets [...]. As the constituent power so far does not have the minimal capacity of doing that, it is necessary that we turn to the Constituent Power in order to install the Fifth Republic, the Bolivarian Republic. (Chávez, 1996: 5)

The new Bolivarian and socialist model comprised several frames. The first frame was symbolically breaking with the past by renaming the state (‘Bolivarian Republic of
Venezuela’) and introducing the attribute of ‘Bolivarian’ wherever possible. Second, Chávez called for transforming the old political and economic order; that is, change representative democracy and (neo-)liberal market economy into a ‘participative and protagonist democracy’ and a ‘socialist’ hybrid economic model (Gobierno de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (GBRV), Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela), 2008: 31, 43). While Chávez used the term ‘democratic’, he clearly rejected the model of representative democracy, which he qualified as ‘artifice from which our peoples have been dominated’ (Chávez, 2014: 76) and as a charade that has to be broken. Equally, he disdained the principle of division of power as ‘ballast’ and ‘disastrous legacy’, which should be overcome in Venezuela as well as in ‘Our America’ (Chávez, 2009). Third, Chávez’s ambition clearly pointed beyond the national realm. The Bolivarian Revolution was thought to be the mission for the whole continent, thus the national and the regional mission were closely linked:

And it [the Agenda] is Bolivarian not only because it is linked to the national future to be constructed but also because it focuses on the international reality and because it signs up to a new continental awaking. (Chávez, 1996: 5)

Moreover, Chávez strove for a ‘multipolar world’, implying ‘the creation of new power poles that constitute a break with the North American hegemony’ (GBRV, 2008: 89). Revitalising Bolívar’s idea of regional integration, Chávez aimed at constructing the continental ‘great fatherland’ and at a ‘second independence’. None of these ideational elements was new. They rather belonged to a Latin American idearium nurtured not only by Bolívar but also by José Martí and other thinkers. However, what Chávez successfully achieved was to transfer these common intellectual – and continentally well-established – reference frames into an attractive revolutionary mission that appealed to large numbers of frustrated citizens and oppositional forces abroad.

Chávez already started in the 1990s, after leaving prison in 1994, to travel throughout the continent to present his Bolivarian Revolution and gain allies. He describes how he and his team strategically went to congresses, planned meetings, activities, and fora: ‘Beneath other goals, I wanted to build a continental structure of our Bolivarian movement in Latin America’ (Chávez, 2014: 522). The most important visit undoubtedly took place in 1994 in Cuba, where Chávez got Castro’s imprimatur, which was well observed by other leftist forces on the continent. Cuba remained an important reference for the design of the Bolivarian Revolution, yet Castro himself in a certain way handed over the protagonist role to Venezuela (Interview 31, Corrales, 2006).

Chávez could only start to unfold his outward-directed mission in 2004/2005 after consolidating his power position, which had been challenged by the coup in 2002 and the recall referendum in 2004. After these incidents, Chávez resumed his efforts of concretising the project of the regional expansion of the Bolivarian Revolution, which represented the epicentre of his geopolitical strategy (Angosto-Ferrández, 2014; McCarthy-Jones, 2014). For this purpose, the creation of the regional organisation, Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA, Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our America) – together with Cuba – played an eminent role. While establishing regional organisations on the continent was nothing new, the innovative character of ALBA was that it deliberately went beyond the economic dimension, including strong ideological, political, and military aspects, ‘promoting a new multilateralism of illiberal orientation’ (Romero, 2016: 197). Chávez considered ALBA not only a ‘political project’, a ‘strategic project’, and a ‘power project’ but...
also a ‘project of political ideas’, an ‘anti-neoliberal project’, and an ‘anti-imperialist project’ (Chávez, 2007). Moreover, ALBA served as a ‘transmission belt’ and a ‘learning room’ for the Chavista model (Kneuer et al., 2019). Chávez’s ideological protagonism crystallised many ALBA principles and goals. The most prominent example is his approach of communication hegemony resulting in the establishment of the media outlet, TeleSUR (Television of the South), which became an ALBA project mainly sponsored by Venezuela. Moreover, in 2010, ALBA’s objectives were partly modified and centred upon Venezuela’s Socialism of the 21st Century. This shows that ALBA functioned as a platform for disseminating policy elements of the Chavista model. Within ALBA, Venezuela was ‘the leading imperial nation guiding ALBA along its path’ (Hirst, 2012: 179). Interviewees report that Chávez was the tone giver, that what he said counted and was applied; and that within the ALBA members, there was no negotiating, but an asymmetrical relationship (Interviews 5, 21, 24, 28). Eventually, it has to be emphasised that Chávez pushed Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua to become members of ALBA.

Thus, ALBA can be understood as the externalisation of Chávez’s domestic goals into the regional realm. This interconnectedness between domestic and regional political goals proves that Chavez’s strategy was not limited to the national level, but displayed a transnational dimension. Chávez tried to export the Venezuelan model (Interviews 5, 6, 7, 8), considering the country as ‘promotor’ (‘impulsor’) and as a ‘moral, ideological, political motor’ (Chávez, 2004: 32). The aim of externalising the Bolivarian Revolution in the regional proximity as well as ALBA as a region-building project, however, implied the need for like-minded allies.

**Empowering Like-Minded Aspirants**

One crucial element in Chávez’s strategy consisted of identifying, advising and bolstering possible candidates for establishing regimes convergent with his mission. In this sense, Chávez was addressing promising political leaders in the opposition who shared his mindset and who were campaigning for the presidency. Examples were Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2005, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico in 2006, Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2006, Ollanta Humala in Peru in 2006, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua in 2006, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina in 2006 (Interviews 13, 16, 17, 27, 18; de la Torre, 2017: 1274).

In Bolivia, there is clear evidence of Chávez’s financial support for Morales and his party (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS). In 2006, Chávez lent Morales an aeroplane and two helicopters to use during his campaign, financed the broadcasting rights for the Soccer World Cup in Bolivia, and offered Morales consultancy for the nationalisation of the country’s gas industry (Behrens, 2006, Interview 18). Interviewees also pointed to the fact that Morales’s security personnel during his electoral campaign were provided by Chávez (Interviews 18, 20). Chávez himself did not hide his support for Morales during the campaign (Weymouth, 2005). Apart from providing material support, Chávez at the same time advised the presidential candidate. While Morales denied having received any financial support for his campaign, he admitted the ‘political support’:

> Chávez definitely provides us with political support. He has taught us how to fight the American empire and how to turn the ruling elite into opposition, and for that we admire him, but he does not support us economically. (Morales cit. in Daniels, 2005)
Thus, officials of MAS declared that during a personal encounter in December 2004, Chávez advised Morales to change his strategy and become more radical and to control the constituent assembly in order to have a new constitution like Venezuela’s (Daniels, 2005). And it certainly was not accidental that one month after his election, Morales visited Chávez on 3 January 2006, in order to prepare a couple of agreements. During this visit, Chávez repeatedly emphasised that he would support Bolivia ‘with all we can’ (Chávez and Morales, 2006a). At the same time, Chávez underlined that:

the Revolutionary Government of Venezuela offers its experience […] for supporting the aspirations of the people of Bolivia and expresses its highest commitment for its President Evo Morales in order to refound the Republic of Bolivia by a national constituent assembly […]. In this project and this effort, Evo can count with all our support for this refoundation of Bolivia […]. (Chávez and Morales, 2006a)

Thus, Chávez did not hesitate to offer incentives to Morales regarding two main goals: the nationalisation of hydrocarbons and the constituent assembly as a means for the regime transformation. Moreover, Chávez won him as a member of ALBA. In sum, only six months after Morales’s election, Chávez’s most important goals materialised: not only was Morales was elected, but he also set out to implement those projects Chávez had been promulgating.

Nevertheless, the cases of Humala in Peru and López Obrador in Mexico show that Chávez’s investment did not always pay off. Concerning his strong support to Humala, the drastic verbal insults against his opponent Alan García (as ‘bandit’, ‘cheater’, and ‘corrupt’) stood out. Similarly, during the Mexican electoral campaign, Chávez clearly and repeatedly voiced his support for López Obrador. There are indications that in both cases, Chávez also sponsored the campaigns (Fleischman, 2013: 72). Humala was accused in 2017 of having received state-owned money from Chávez for his electoral campaign based on the evidence of a letter in which Chávez speaks of US$ 600,000 and another US$ two million diverted to the electoral campaign (Hidalgo, 2017).

After the experience with the Peruvian and Mexican candidate – also labelled as ‘Chávez effect’, namely, scaring away voters from the preferred candidates as being too near to the Venezuelan President (Tisdall, 2006) – Chávez modified his behaviour. He attenuated the public intensity of his endorsement of Correa in the second round of the elections in Ecuador. This is not to say that he decreased his overall assistance; instead, he practised a less public show of it. Several interviewees assume that Chávez financially supported Correa during his campaigning (Interviews 4, 27, 29). There is also evidence for consultancy between Chávez and Correa as several meetings between them took place in 2005 and 2006. Likewise in Ecuador, ‘it was no secret that the Venezuelans were looking for a “Bolivarian candidate” in Ecuador in order to support him in the elections’ (Almeida and López, 2017: 179). Following the same pattern as the Bolivian case, less than one month after his election, Correa came to Caracas to prepare a couple of agreements with Chávez, including the exchange of Venezuela’s experience in hydrocarbons and the training of specialists in the context of production, processing, etc. of oil and gas. On this occasion, Chávez stated that the ‘revolutionary government of Venezuela applauds the decision of the people of Ecuador to transform their political system’, while Correa acknowledged that Venezuela gives orientation and that he has been ‘nurtured by the Venezuelan experience’ (Chávez and Correa, 2006).
Finally, the pattern of offering support in energy policy during the electoral campaign, and directly afterwards, also applies to Nicaragua. On his inauguration, Ortega describes the contribution by the ‘Venezuelan brothers of the Bolivarian Revolution’:

Then tomorrow […] we will adhere to ALBA […] it is because ALBA and its solidarity moves quickly; you don’t have to wait to negotiate with organs. Imagine, I came to Venezuela, talked to President Chávez about the energy problem and immediately he issued an order for some new energy plants […] to be sent to Nicaragua. (Ortega, 2007)

Another measure of empowering Bolivarian candidates was social power as a foreign policy tool (Corrales, 2011: 33). Hence, Chávez developed a new export model based on social policy which has clear advantages for the AGC: it shields against international criticism and it exports corruption. ‘The blank checks are billed as payments for social service, but in fact they represent unaccountable financing of corruption, campaigns, political movements, and governments’ (Corrales, 2011: 35). This was the case with the Bolivian social and infrastructural programme, ‘Bolivia Cambia, Evo Cumple’. The money provided by Venezuela was not registered and went directly to the Ministry of the President and supported projects that enhanced Morales’s image. The Morales government used these funds in a discreptional and clientelist manner, namely, targeting projects of persons who supported the government course of transformation (Interviews 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22).

**Pushing Towards Autocratisation**

After having facilitated a like-minded aspirant to come to power, as a next step, the leader of an AGC strives to export his model of rule to the new government. As the previous section showed, Chávez’s logic of action when empowering Bolivarian candidates is based on a blend of financial and moral support and concrete policy recommendations. Once in office, the Bolivarian candidate continued to be the target of this blend. It is not always possible to prove the leverage of the external financial flows and their impact in terms of domestic output, such as the transformation of the domestic political regime, since the agreements were not made public or did not openly link the financial flows to certain expected steps in the target country. At the same time, however, Chávez himself was so outspoken about his ideas and his advice that his public statements can be taken as strong evidence. Chávez’s advice often assumed the form of instruction or guidance.

In this section, two especially notable examples for promoting autocratic best practice models are presented: (a) the constitutional rewriting according to the Venezuelan example and (b) media policy (Kneuer, 2020).

Regarding the constitutional reform, the Constituent Assembly (CA) was the centrepiece of the transformation towards an ‘alternative’ model of rule. Chávez himself provided the best practice model with a process based on these steps: the convocation of a CA (legitimated by a referendum), elections to a CA while assuring the majority of followers in the CA, neutralisation of the elected parliament and handing over all powers to the CA, and finally the editing of a new constitution by the CA. The new Bolivarian Constitution reconfigured the power division in the state in multiple ways: firstly, the classic three powers were expanded to five, including the popular power and the electoral power; second, plebiscitary elements were integrated (such as recall referendum
for all officials); and thirdly, executive powers were significantly strengthened. This is also reflected in the relaxation of presidential term limits; in contrast to the previous constitution, Article 230 provides a six (instead of five) years term and one immediate re-election. Although Chávez’s plan for constitutional reform to expand the terms to seven years with the possibility of indefinite re-election was rejected by the Venezuelan population in 2007, he succeeded with a constitutional amendment two years later which allowed for unlimited re-election. Power relations were also restructured in terms of economy, mainly through the prohibition of privatisations. Article 12 of the Venezuelan constitution (GBRV, 2009a) claims that ‘ore and hydrocarbon deposits […] belong to the Republic, are goods of public dominion and therefore inalienable’. Hence, the government’s control of the economy was reinforced.

Chávez tried to export these aspects – the refoundational project, the constitutional reform via a CA, the relaxation of presidential term limits, and the prohibition of privatisation – by giving concrete and also public advice to Morales and Correa on several occasions after resuming power. Publicly and in strikingly suggestive words, Chávez formulated concrete aspects encouraging Morales to incorporate them into the writing of the new Bolivian constitution under way at that time. On his travel to Bolivia in May 2006, Chávez repeatedly and expressly encouraged the establishment of a CA following the Venezuelan example:

The strategy heading towards a Constituent Assembly that we are sharing with you is something central. Something strategic I could contribute modestly is the Venezuelan experience. […] The Venezuelan case could serve for something in regard to the constituent and constitutional project in Bolivia. (Chávez and Morales, 2006b)

Another occasion was Chávez’s TV show, Aló Presidente, exceptionally held in Bolivia during this visit where he said:

[…] the old political system collapsed and it’s necessary to create a new democracy, a new republic, a new economy, and a new society. And that can be achieved only by a Constituent Assembly. […] From Venezuela we will watch very carefully what happens in these days of electoral campaign, every time with the intention to cooperate in the debate. (Chávez, 2006)

During the same broadcast, Chávez also very bluntly recommended the prohibition of privatisations:

The new constitution that will be developed by the Bolivian Constituent (Assembly) should prohibit the privatisation of hydrocarbons in my opinion, just as in Venezuela where it is written in the Bolivarian constitution. One should definitely close off the possibility of that, prohibit it constitutionally. (Chávez, 2006)

Indeed, the Morales government has put into practice all the central elements of the Chavista model: the refoundational project, the CA, and the new constitution anchoring alternative forms of democracy and economy. Most strikingly, the new constitution reflects the Venezuelan model of five powers with the same incorporation of an electoral and a popular power (in Bolivia: ‘social control and participation’). According to Chávez’s recommendation, Article 298 of the new Bolivian constitution (GBRV, 2009a) states that hydrocarbons are an ‘exclusive competence’ of the central state.
Concerning presidential term limits and re-election, Chávez also made this an issue for public recommendations to Morales. Chávez’s argument for lifting the term limits was that one term is not sufficient to push forward the revolutionary process (Interview 2) and to implement the intended changes of the system (Interview 9). He clearly encouraged Morales to institute the constitutional anchoring of (unlimited) presidential re-election:

Yes, this is a perfectly valid thing, even in Venezuela there is a debate right now, Evo, about the re-election. Why do we have to limit it [presidential terms] to two terms, some say in Venezuela, it’s the people who decide. (Chávez, 2006)

Article 168 of the Bolivian constitution (GBRV, 2009a), in fact, lifts the ban on direct presidential re-election and allows for an automatic second term. Chávez’s active influencing in Bolivia corresponds to autocracy promotion. It can be proved that: (a) there was an exchange between Chávez and Morales, (b) Chávez initiated the talks about the CA, (c) he openly recommended to Morales the three above-mentioned steps for constitutional power concentration, and (d) he offered the Venezuelan experience as a blueprint for the Bolivian constitutional project.

This also applies to Ecuador. On his inauguration, Correa signed the decree for a referendum on a CA and – tellingly – in his inaugural speech, announced the institution of the Council of Civil Participation and Social Control (following the Chavista model of the popular power). The content analysis likewise showed that Correa likewise strongly relied on the refoundational narrative and referred to the idea of a CA. The congruence between Correa’s and Chávez’s framing and the measures taken in the constitutional process points to Venezuela’s influence; the leverage is however less accentuated than in Bolivia.

The other example of exporting autocratic elements refers to media policy. After the media sector sided with Chávez’s opponents during the coup d’état of 2002, Chávez systematically started curtailing media freedom and initiated the transformation of the communicational landscape (for details, see Silva-Ferrer, 2014: 197–237), striving to attain what he called a ‘communicational hegemony’ within the battle to boost socialism (Correo del Orinoco, 2010).

Besides legal measures, Chávez mainly used two other instruments for gaining media control: the construction of a net of public ‘communitarian’ (in fact, governmental) media and the purchase of oppositional media. These measures were also extended to Chávez’s partners in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, which opened for them the avenue of achieving control over media. In Ecuador, the Correa government also strove for the construction of a public communications (counter-)hegemony to constrain the relevance of private media (Interview 26). Hence, the government launched and financed a public TV station named ‘Ecuador TV’ (ECTV). In fact, ECTV is primarily a governmental media rather than a public one (Interviews 25, 27, 28, 30).

The importance of Venezuela stems from the fact that the ‘Venezuelan government donated US$ five million for equipment to help get the station started’ (Mills and Hoyer, 2012: 24). Moreover, through this funding, ECTV was encouraged to cooperate with TeleSUR (Interviews 4, 29), a Venezuelan-launched ‘regional news network conceived of as both a vehicle for Latin American integration and a weapon against US-based information dominance’ (Kitzberger, 2010: 18). Finally, there was an intense exchange (and thus Venezuelan influence) between personnel in TeleSUR and ECTV (Interview 29).
Similarly, the Bolivian government under Morales very soon clashed with the private and generally oppositional media. Here, the Chávez government helped to finance a communitarian radio network (Red Nacional de Radios de los Pueblos Indígenas y Originarios, National Network of Radios of Indigenous and Native Peoples) (Kitzberger, 2010: 22; Peñaranda, 2014: 47). Whereas in theory this network was established to democratise the media system; in practice, it ‘is a top-down-controlled network’ (Kitzberger, 2010: 23) supporting the government (Interview 19) and helping Morales to tighten his grip on power.

Consolidating Existing Autocracies

Unlike Bolivia and Ecuador, Nicaragua disposed of a revolutionary past (the Sandinist Revolution) in which Ortega already had assumed a leading role. Hence, in contrast to Morales and Correa, Ortega was experienced and, when he came back to power in 2007, well equipped with his own patterns of autocratic rule. Consequently, the autocracy promotion measures introduced by Chávez focused less on institutional issues as in Bolivia and Ecuador, but on those areas which could secure Ortega’s power and thus gain a further ally, also in ALBA. Three measures stand out: firstly, the already analysed social policy as Venezuela’s new export model; secondly, enabling media control by providing the means for purchasing media outlets; and thirdly, Chávez’s policy of ‘exempting’ his allies – and so Nicaragua – from the Western conditionality.

After Ortega obtained office, the social policy programmes sponsored by Venezuela were facilitated to sustain power in two ways. On the one hand, the programmes boosted the output legitimacy as Ortega was able to promise and implement a more abundant social policy which was prone to bolster the popular support, through ALBA financed programmes like Hambre Cero (Zero Hunger), Usura Cero (Zero Usury) or Casas para el Pueblo (Houses for the People). With this money, Ortega was able to expand his social expenses far beyond his fiscal possibilities (Jarquín, 2016: 34–36; Interviews 10, 11, 12). On the other hand, the money was used for co-opting traditional economic elites in the sectors of production, housing, alimentation, etc., establishing clientelist networks and thus consolidating power (Martí i Puig, 2016: 30). Most tellingly, as an interviewee stated, Ortega was forced to manipulate the 2008 municipal elections because the effect of the Venezuelan money flows had not yet produced the desired impact at that time (Interview 10). Moreover, with the Venezuelan financial flows, measures of (open) repression could be mostly disregarded for regime stabilisation and instead co-optation and ‘appeasement’ of the public could be achieved. The incidents of popular protest and uprising against the Ortega regime in 2018 underpin this logic: as Ortega suffered most from the crisis in Venezuela under President Maduro and the receding financial flows, he consequently had to modify the pension policy (increasing the contribution by employees and workers). When this provoked a popular uprising, the government answered with highly repressive intervention causing hundreds of deaths.

Chávez also provided the money for purchasing private (and oppositional) media in Nicaragua; slightly different as in the other already described cases. In Nicaragua, the media structure is characterised by a duopoly between President Ortega’s family on the one side and Mexican businessman Remigio González on the other side (Rothschild Villanueva, 2016: 207–208; Interview 10). However, in the process of creating this duopoly, the purchase of TV stations (Televisora Nicaraguense S.A., Telenica Canal 8) became public in 2010. This is of special relevance insofar as the purchase was managed through ALBA and the firm ALBANISA forms a part of ALBA, being a private
firm, owned partly with a majority share of 51 percent by Venezuelan state-owned oil giant Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA) and by Nicaraguan semi-private oil company Petronic (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2010). The purchase of the independent and private TV-station Telenica Canal 8 in 2010 clearly shows the method applied: the general manager of ALBANISA at that time, Venezuelan Rafael Paniagua, confirmed in an interview that ALBANISA had purchased Telenica Canal 8 and claimed that ‘ALBA is here to stay because ours is a nation-building project’ (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2010, Interview 10).

A further important impact of the money flows was that Venezuela ‘liberated’ the ALBA-allies from the Western conditionality (Jarquín, 2016: 34). Thus, when the US and EU threatened Nicaragua with suspending cooperation programmes as a consequence of the electoral fraud in the municipal elections in 2008, Nicaragua was able to disregard this conditionality due to the alternative source of financial support from Venezuela. In return, this was compensated by Nicaragua, when Venezuela needed favourable votes and support in international organizations like the OAS.

Conclusion

The article introduced an innovative model breaking down autocracy promotion into three strategies: empowering like-minded forces, pushing incumbents towards autocratisation, and contributing to the consolidation of existing autocracies. The analysis confirmed these strategies in relation to Venezuela’s efforts to disseminate autocratic elements under the government of Hugo Chávez. Moreover, the distinction of three strategies proved to be meaningful as they are prone to identifying the strategies and measures of autocracy promotion related to different stages of autocratisation. This leads to the insight that autocracy promotion may not be understood as a static and ‘one-fits-all’ approach, but rather it has to be taken into account that autocracy promoters might adjust to the domestic situation (including potential changes) in the targeted country.

Chávez engaged heavily in empowering promising illiberal candidates. When exporting his alternative model of rule, he targeted those elements that were prone to achieving and safeguarding the authoritarian grip on power: the recalibration of the balance of power in favour of the executive and the elimination of the presidential term limit. This is supplemented by neutralising the media as a control instance. Of course, these were not the only elements of autocracy promotion during Chávez’s terms of office, but they were especially weighty and illustrative ones. More examples might augment the evidence. Finally, Chávez not only directly promoted autocratic elements. Sometimes, as the Nicaraguan case shows, it was sufficient to widen the room for manoeuvre for the target state’s government, thus enabling the persistence of autocratic power.

With ALBA, Chávez added an innovative, multipurpose element to the toolkit of autocracy promotion: building a regime identity, providing a platform of like-minded allies, emplacing a geostrategic bloc against the declared enemy, the US, as well as achieving leverage. Eventually, Chávez masterfully established exchange channels with Venezuelan officials (party, but also security and military) and networks in the respective countries, which functioned like soft-power tools for promulgating the Chavista ideological mission and also the corresponding techniques. The Venezuelan case reveals that Chávez not only promoted an autocratic governance model but also exported – as one high ranking Bolivian political actor (Interview 18) put it – the technology of how to manage the state and maintain power.

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The analysis evinces that the favourable conditions for autocracy promotion rely mostly on material resources. Equally influential was the ideological mission of achieving and stimulating clout, not only for forging coalitions with foreign like-minded leaders but also for mobilising followers in their countries. One aspect that could not be covered in this article, but which also constitutes an important factor, is the interaction between the autocracy promoter and the recipient. While this analysis only focused on Chávez’s intention and actions, a more complete picture would include the target states, their motivations of accepting moral, technical or financial support, and their response to the measures of autocracy promotion. This would also be the point of departure for explaining why some countries (Peru and Mexico) proved to be immune to Chávez’s export.

Finally, this study underlined the relevance of the role of the leader in the AGC for the promotion of autocracy, therefore offering an actor-centred explanation. Future studies may delve deeper into the role of such political protagonists and what other factors (commodities, international politics) might intervene. In this sense, the case of Venezuela also offers first evidence about why and when the AGC and its autocracy promotion lose attraction. Although Chávez’s successor, President Nicolás Maduro, pursues the Chavista model, it has ceased to be an export success. This goes together with the significant loss of Venezuela’s regional influence and of ALBA. The two facilitating conditions of Chávez’s successful autocracy promotion are lacking: the leverage provided by the oil revenues and the ideological protagonism. Maduro’s domestic legitimacy and political credibility depend on demonstrating that he does not depart from the goals of chavismo including the foreign policy approach (Mijares, 2015; Romero, 2016). In reality, however, the Chavista model remains reduced to its domestic legitimatory functions. Thus, future studies may address the domestic and regional conditions of the decline of authoritarian gravity centres.

Acknowledgements

I thank the guest editors for the fruitful exchange on the topic and the reviewers for their helpful comments. The interviews and the content analysis used in this article have been conducted in the context of a research project financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) between 2015 and 2018. I thank R. Peresson who supported in the interviews and A. Grebenstein for her support in the content analysis.

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