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Kyran Schnur  
kdschnur@umass.edu

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# PUTIN EL CAUDILLO

KYRAN DOYLE SCHNUR

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the historical development of the relationship between the Putin regime in Russia and the Chávez and Maduro regimes in Venezuela. Key differences and similarities in their foreign and domestic policies are explored, as well as how they interact with each other on the world stage. It makes the case that *chavismo* in Venezuela has led to increasingly autocratic policies as oil prices have declined and leadership has changed hands, changing the character of Venezuela and Russia's relationship into one that closely resembles the patron-client relationships of Latin American *caudillismo*.

## I. INTRODUCING THE REGIMES

When Hugo Chávez became President of Venezuela in 1999, he declared his victory to be the beginning of a Bolivarian revolution. In doing so he invoked Simón Bolívar, a 19th century Venezuelan general who had defeated the forces of the Spanish Empire and for a time ruled a vast South American confederation encompassing Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. Despite Bolívar's charismatic leadership, the confederation of Gran Colombia collapsed and formed five different nations. Before his death, Bolívar placed the blame for his failure squarely on the shoulders of *caudillismo*, a form of government dominated by mutually beneficial but inherently unequal patron-client relationships that confounded attempts at South American unification. *Caudillismo* gets its name from the *caudillos* (military strongmen) that created these patron-client relationships between themselves and local leaders. Ironically, in 2015, almost two decades after Chávez declared himself Bolívar's heir, Chávez's appointed successor Nicolás Maduro would lead Venezuela into a patron-client relationship with one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most dangerous *caudillos*: Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Putin and Chávez regimes were initially drawn together as allies through shared geopolitical interests and ideological opposition to the United States. Chavismo (the style of government employed by Chávez and his followers) was uniquely well suited for an alliance with the Putin regime. This relationship changed radically in 2014 when Venezuela's leadership crisis was compounded with a sharp downturn in oil prices. Unable to recover from either crisis, Maduro's regime now has a patron-client relationship with Vladimir Putin. This mutually beneficial, yet inherently unequal, relationship has solidified Putin as Maduro's most important ally and indeed one of his only allies. Russian support is sustaining the Maduro regime, and

influencing how Venezuelan governance is shifting toward a more autocratic model. In this paper I will explore what Chavismo is, why the chavista system made Venezuela an ideal ally for Russia, and what characterizes the new patron-client relationship between the Putin and Maduro regimes.

## II. NATURAL ALLIES

Chavismo is a complicated ideology and form of government, but one of its most basic principles is aggressive and public opposition to the extension of U.S. influence on the world stage. This explicit rejection of a U.S.-dominated global system carried a great deal of risk, but it served to ingratiate first the Chávez and then the Maduro regime with President Putin. One of the cardinal rules of operating within Putin's system was that a threat must always originate, "from an external or foreign source."<sup>1</sup> The chavista regimes have operated much the same way, perpetually linking the members of the Venezuelan opposition to the U.S. and accusing them of not being true Venezuelans, but rather professional protesters being funded by foreign interests in order to wage, "economic war".<sup>2</sup> This determination to blame the U.S. and its allies for all internal problems, of course, limited Russia and Venezuela's options for international cooperation. In 2004, in the midst of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, Chávez visited the Kremlin and cemented a close alliance with Moscow. After some expertly crafted anti-U.S. speeches and denunciations of NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe, Chávez had impressed Putin enough to conclude several landmark deals. The entire Venezuelan military was converted to Russian technology, a massive undertaking and a very profitable one for Putin. Russian energy companies were also invited to invest heavily in Venezuela.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maxim Trudolyubov. "A Guide to Getting Along in Putin's Russia." *The New York Times*, Apr 16, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> David Smilde, "The End of Chavismo?" *Current History* 114 (769)(2015): 50.

<sup>3</sup>Mark N. Katz, "The Putin-Chavez Partnership." *Problems of Post-Communism* 53 (4)(2006): 5.

While the Chávez and Putin regimes were closely aligned in terms of foreign policy, they differed greatly in governing strategies and styles. Where Russian elections were reserved and formulaic affairs designed to emphasize stability and continuity, those organized by Chávez were bombastic, populist affairs aimed at whipping his political base into a frenzy. Where political opposition parties in Russia were tightly controlled in by Putin, the Venezuelan opposition was able to oppose Chávez and Maduro openly and loudly and even to win electoral victories. Despite this difference, the structure and methods of Chavismo actually contributed to the strength of Russia and Venezuela's current relationship. Chávez's fourteen years in power laid the groundwork for a crisis, forcing the Venezuelan government to choose either serious concessions to the opposition or a Putinesque campaign of repression if it was to survive.

Putin's domestic policy was calculated to discourage high levels of mass mobilization and political action.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Chavismo demanded constant mass mobilization for elections that were given a great deal of fanfare and news coverage. These elections, presented as free and fair, were seen as constant referenda on the Chávez presidency.<sup>5</sup> Large-scale poverty-reducing social programs sustained by state oil profits were the foundation of Chavismo and that could be relied upon to produce an outpouring of enthusiastic support come election day.<sup>6</sup> These populist policies were augmented with an extensive state propaganda apparatus that included, "five television channels, dozens of radio stations, electronic networks and websites, and massive propaganda on the streets..."<sup>7</sup> Chávez was a perpetual guest in every Venezuelan home. His

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<sup>4</sup>Allen C. Lynch, "The Influence of Regime Type on Russian Foreign Policy Toward "the West," 1992–2015." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49(2016): 106-107

<sup>5</sup>Margarita López Maya. 2014. "Venezuela: The Political Crisis of Post-Chavismo." *Social Justice* (4)(2014): 70.

<sup>6</sup>Smilde, "The End?", 49.

<sup>7</sup> Maya, "Post-Chavismo", 70.

message was consistently for them to mobilize in support of his government agenda. Where Putin relied on large scale repression of the opposition, Chávez relied on drowning them out.

Despite differences in electoral strategy, in hindsight the system Chávez built now seems designed to fall back on a Putin-style autocracy as soon as the charismatic leadership and/or the vast oil wealth of the chavistas faltered. Shortly after his rise to power, in a move reminiscent of Putin's cronyism Russia, Chávez took over most independently organized community councils and projects in Venezuela. These groups were integrated into a vast system of state patronage, so that even local fundraisers and environmental projects owed their funding and organization to the president himself.<sup>8</sup> At the national level, Chávez took advantage of majorities in the legislature and friendly members of the judiciary eroded the powers of both branches, making it very difficult for them to enact substantial checks on the president's power.<sup>9</sup> Chávez also considerably weakened the opposition media by either buying up unfriendly outlets or simply imprisoning opposition journalists, courses of action that would be utilized even more liberally under Maduro.<sup>10</sup> This undermining of the competitive political sphere so deeply entrenched the chavistas and so intensely alienated the opposition, that any peaceful transfer of power would have been extremely difficult to achieve.

Difficult though a transfer of power would be, Chávez left Maduro with few options. In addition to leaving him a government structure that could not easily be converted to genuinely competitive politics, Chávez also left him with a brewing crisis that obliterated the widespread popularity of Chavismo. Under Chavez the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A* (PDVSA) was the key to maintaining popular support. As long as oil profits sustained social

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<sup>8</sup> Maya, "Post-Chavismo", 71.

<sup>9</sup> Maya, "Post Chavismo", 79.

<sup>10</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press: Venezuela.", 2015.

programs, Chavismo remained ascendent. Yet despite PDVSA's central position in Chávez's grand strategy, he left it in complete disarray after years of mismanagement. After countering a 2005 strike with mass layoffs in middle and upper management positions, Chávez never invested sufficient resources to train replacement managers.<sup>11</sup> The state oil company was also saddled with many other state projects such as food distribution and housing construction. These extra responsibilities forced it to put off important repairs and updates that were needed to keep the oil projects safe and running at full capacity. Extraction facilities became so overworked and inefficient that PDVSA would often buy oil on the world market just to fill their customer's orders on time.<sup>12</sup> Maduro is left unwilling to sacrifice the concentration of power left to him by Chávez and unable to recover from the 2015 drop in oil prices with PDVSA in shambles. The failure of state programs and the government's harsh crackdown on protesters left Maduro profoundly unpopular, failing to live up to the landslide victories Chávez regularly achieved during his lifetime.<sup>13</sup>

Chavismo's initial success and anti-U.S. politics made a Venezuela-Russia alliance initially viable. The failure of Chavismo served to bring them even closer together. Legitimizing elections, expansive state programs funded by oil profits, and the appearance of a level political playing field were all vital aspects of Chavismo. Those cornerstones crumbled, and Maduro's solution was a campaign of nationwide repression reminiscent of Putin's consolidation of power. A key difference is that Putin's consolidation occurred when oil prices were going up and the national mood was at least somewhat hopeful. Maduro's increasingly repressive behavior bred only resentment and economic uncertainty. Such repression served to further isolate Venezuela

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<sup>11</sup> Maya, "Post-Chavismo" 74-75.

<sup>12</sup> Maya, "Post-Chavismo" 74-75.

<sup>13</sup> DatinCorp. 2018. *Cohesión-País Venezuela*; Caracas, V.



on the world stage, dramatically increased civil unrest, and made Putin's support all the more vital to Maduro's survival.

### III. PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

There is a distinction between the patron-client relationships that typify *caudillismo* and the concept of "client states." In the language of Latin American politics, a patron-client relationship simply means an alliance that benefits both sides, but with the two clearly not on equal footing. The Putin and Maduro regimes are part of an inherently unequal patron-client relationship, but this does not make Venezuela a client state. This unequal partnership was not the result of threats or domineering policies on the part of Putin. Rather, it was a result of the extreme crisis that Venezuela is embroiled in and the resources Putin was willing to expend to sustain his ally.

In the aftermath of Chávez's death in 2013 and the drop in oil prices in 2014, the far less charismatic Maduro has been taking steps to solidify his position. 57% of the population reported in 2018 that if given the chance they would flee the country. Maduro could not rely on the old populist strategies of Chávez.<sup>14</sup> As discussed earlier, Putin and Maduro both justified their more autocratic actions by blaming the imperialistic designs of the United States, subverting them from within and following the opposition. Despite the similarity in rhetoric, Maduro watched his popularity evaporate while Putin's position became increasingly secure. In these differing levels of danger from the general public we can see one of the key differences between Putin and Maduro's situations, and one of the main reasons their relationship developed as an unequal one.

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<sup>14</sup> DatinCorp, *Cohesión-País Venezuela*.

Putin was far more successful in silencing or co-opting the Russian opposition than Maduro was with its Venezuelan equivalent.

A critical chavista strategy for undermining Venezuela's political opposition has been to portray opposition groups as out of touch and elitist. When oil prices were high and Chávez made regular speeches this was highly effective. When Maduro found himself isolated from the populace however, the danger an organized opposition coalition posed to his regime became more apparent. Accusing his critics of being agents of Washington was not been sufficient to silence their campaigns against the regime. Indeed, many opposition leaders regularly traveled to the U.S. to speak out against the Maduro regime and request aid before returning to run for office.<sup>15</sup> Such a strategy is hard to imagine for members of the Russian opposition who do not want to campaign in exile. Even with all the consolidation of power the chavistas achieved at the national level, Maduro is to this day “protested loudly” when he visits the National Assembly to support legislation.<sup>16</sup> The idea of Putin being “protested loudly” in any Russian government building when “periodic murder” of opposition journalists in Russia is common seems far fetched indeed.<sup>17</sup> The chavista regime could afford to allow for many public freedoms when it was popular, but the structure of Chavismo ensured that those freedoms could not survive the decrease in chavista popularity that would accompany an economic downturn. Putin, on the other hand, never needed solely rely on his own popularity to keep his position secure. As long as this is true, Maduro will always be playing second fiddle to Putin.

The benefits of stalwart Russian financial support induced Maduro to accept the position of unequal partner. In 2017 alone Maduro’s regime was saved from defaulting on its debt three

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<sup>15</sup> Smilde, “The End?”, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Maya, “Post-Chavismo”, 79.

<sup>17</sup> Lynch, “Regime Type”. 107.

separate times by last minute Russian loans. Beyond extending critical loans, Putin allowed Caracas to put off paying back large Russian loans during times of crisis. Because Venezuela pays these loans back in oil reserves, temporary leniency allowed more Venezuelan crude to be sold for a profit on the world market.<sup>18</sup> Krauss observed, "Russia is effectively taking China's place as Venezuela's principal banker. While President Hugo Chávez was in power, China lent Venezuela tens of billions of dollars for projects to be paid for with oil. But China quietly stopped making new loans [after 2015], leaving Russia to fill the void."<sup>19</sup> The benefits to each side are clear. Putin expects that once Maduro's regime stabilizes he will have access to extensive Venezuelan oil reserves that he has now essentially purchased at a bargain price. For his part, Maduro needs a lenient financial backer if he is going to have any chance of consolidating power.

An additional benefit for Maduro was having the international propaganda apparatus of the Russian state, which had already gained some legitimacy among disaffected U.S. Americans, mobilized on his behalf. One of the most successful branches of this machinery is Russia Today, an English language news network that claims to present a legitimate alternative to U.S. news sources. In reality, Russia Today is completely controlled by the Kremlin and organizes its reporting around advancing Putin's political aims.<sup>20</sup> Evidently, the Kremlin is more than happy to report Maduro's propaganda as fact. A popular news segment done in the vein of *The Daily Show* called *Redacted Tonight with Lee Camp* dedicated a segment in 2018 to "Why the U.S. wants Venezuela to collapse." During this time slot one of Chávez's old advisers, Eva Golinger,

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<sup>18</sup> Clifford Krauss, "Russia Says it Will Ease the Debt Burden on Venezuela." *The New York Times (Online)*, Nov, 2017

<sup>19</sup> Krauss, "Rosneft".

<sup>20</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, . 2014. *Nothing is true and everything is possible : the surreal heart of the new Russia*. n.p.: New York : PublicAffairs, [2014], 42.

came on the program to decry U.S. subversion of Venezuelan prosperity, defending election fraud and violent suppression of protesters through her insistence that the U.S. does the same thing and therefore cannot criticize Maduro for protecting himself.<sup>21</sup> A written article also produced by Russia Today and also written in English entitled “Can Russia & China Rescue Venezuela?” included false information intended to portray Maduro as more secure than he actually was at the time of the article. The article claimed that China was working together with Russia and against the U.S. to ensure Maduro’s regime does not collapse. According to the article, China was too invested in Maduro to allow him to fall, when in fact China refused to continue dealing financially with Maduro long before the article was released, as shown earlier in this paper.<sup>22</sup> Given that U.S. sanctions continued to hamper Venezuela’s economic recovery, it is not hard to imagine why Maduro would want to see Russia Today’s audience take up the cause of his government.

Venezuela also has a wide array of state controlled media outlets. One of Maduro’s key mouthpieces has become the newspaper *El Universal*, which was an opposition newspaper until a group of anonymous investors purchased it.<sup>23</sup> After being acquired by its new owners, *El Universal* became a staunch friend to Putin. The two incidents that cast a shadow over Putin’s 2018 reelection, the tragic fire in a Kemerovo mall and the poisoning of ex-Russian spy Serguéi Skripal, were both reported on by *El Universal*. The articles could have been dictated by the Kremlin’s chief spin artists, portraying Putin as every bit the stable, determined, all powerful man he wishes people to see him as. An article about the fire paints Putin as an enraged champion of the people descending on Kemerovo demanding an explanation

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<sup>21</sup> *Why the US Wants Venezuela to Collapse*. Redacted Tonight, Moscow, Russia: Russia Today, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Carlos Garcia Rawlings, "Can Russia & China Rescue Venezuela?" *Russia Today*, Mar 28, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Freedom House 2015. "Freedom of the Press: Venezuela."

and promising an investigation while local officials quail and beg for forgiveness.<sup>24</sup> An article on the poisoning follows a similar formula, giving minimal information on Skripal and instead focusing on how calm and ministerial Putin looked when facing down accusations from British Prime Minister Theresa May, whom the article portrays as out of control and hysterical.<sup>25</sup> While Putin surely appreciated this, it is unlikely that he requested it. Integrated as he now was to the chavista ideology, protecting his image was a priority for the Venezuelan state media.

This illuminates another aspect of the patron-client relationship. It became unequal in part because Putin simply had more to offer in some areas. Having an influential English-Language news station reporting favorably on Maduro within a country that is aligned against him was undeniably a bigger boon than the Venezuelan press agreeing to follow the Kremlin line.

#### IV. WHERE MADURO IS HEADED

There was a time when Venezuela seemed ascendent and the wealth generated from oil made many things seem possible. Chief among them was exporting the Bolivarian revolution abroad. This vision of a new multipolar world led Venezuela to be explicitly anti-U.S. while still seeking to be accepted as a modern state by the international community. This led to a Venezuelan bid for a seat on the UN Security Council and at least nominal concern for being seen as protecting human rights.<sup>26</sup> As has already been seen, a vital part of Chávez's strategy was

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<sup>24</sup> "Putin Promete Castigo a Culpables Del Trágico Incendio En Un Centro Comercial Siberiano." *El Universal*, Mar 27, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> "Presidente Ruso Vladimir Putin Mantiene La Calma Ante Acusaciones Sobre El Envenenamiento Del Ex Espía." *El Universal*, Mar 25, 2018

<sup>26</sup> Ralph S. Clem and Anthony P. Maingot. 2011. *Venezuela's Petro-Diplomacy : Hugo Chávez's Foreign Policy* Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 2011, 11-17.

winning what appeared to be free and fair elections consistently. The dream of a global Bolivarian revolution required that Venezuela be seen as a stable alternative to U.S. dominance.

This practice however, has been shown to have been considered luxury by the chavista regime. Like many other luxuries, it was discarded as soon as Venezuela's one major export was not bringing in funds as it once had. Economic crisis has led Chavismo to fall back on its basic structures, which are now revealed to be steeped in tactics of repression and patronage. With much of its leverage with the international community slipping away along with its control over its own oil, the Maduro regime is less concerned each day with foreign affairs and more with how to protect itself at home.

As discussed above, Maduro has become more authoritarian as his popularity has slipped. His tactics have become more violent, including a call to his supporters to arm themselves and attack opposition protesters.<sup>27</sup> Supporting Maduro through all of this is his patron: Vladimir Putin, who has already invested billions in propping up the regime.

When we consider the implications of Putin's growing influence in Venezuela, it should not be seen in the context of some sort of domino effect. Venezuela is not Putin's beachhead in Latin America upon which he will build an empire. He did not seek to destabilize Venezuela, but rather made an investment that he is willing to see through for geopolitical reasons. To understand the situation, it must be examined in an international context free of the regional restrictions utilized by many during the Cold War. Maduro and Putin's relationship makes much more sense in this international context. The Maduro regime benefits the Russian president as an ideological and economic ally in a geopolitical campaign to lessen U.S. dominance abroad. Putin

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<sup>27</sup> Smilde, "The End?", 54.

is willing to gamble a great deal of Russian capital to keep a stalwart, anti-U.S. leader afloat, and that leader has become demonstrably more autocratic the more reliant he becomes his patron. This is a patron he knows will not desert him no matter what sorts of atrocities he might commit domestically. By examining the underlying structures and rhetoric of other seemingly stable or democratic nations, we can anticipate which would be prime new clients for Venezuela's new *caudillo* should their system fail as well.

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