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The US as the enemy of the Venezuelan people? Perceived threats abroad converted into support at home.

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The US as the enemy of the Venezuelan people?

Perceived threats abroad converted into support at home.

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Literature Review.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Theoretical Framework</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Theoretical Expectation.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Case Selection</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Research Design and Method.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Source Selection</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>The Coding Frame</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Research Results</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Domestic Threats and Blame Attribution.....</i>	<i>16</i>
Opponents within the state and state-owned companies	16
Scapegoating of business elites	16
The opposition.....	17
<i>External Threats and Blame Attribution</i>	<i>17</i>
Ideological threats.....	17
Interference in domestic affairs	18
Interference into democracy	19
Economic hardships	20
<i>Discussion of the findings</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Conclusion and Limitations.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Appendix A.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>References.....</i>	<i>26</i>

Abstract

This thesis investigates how Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro employs the populist strategy of external othering to consolidate his power. By analysing transcriptions of Maduro's speeches, the research identifies patterns in his rhetoric, focusing on how he portrays external threats, particularly from the United States, as key adversaries to Venezuelan interests. The strategy of external othering unites the population against a common enemy, justifying Maduro's consolidation of power. The study employs qualitative content analysis, categorising threats and proposed solutions to demonstrate how Maduro's discourse shifts blame for internal issues to external actors. The findings reveal that Maduro's rhetoric consistently frames the U.S. as an imperialist threat, using this narrative to legitimise his autocratic governance and rally domestic support. The thesis highlights the strategic use of populism in maintaining Maduro's regime despite internal challenges and declining popularity.

Introduction

Populism has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent decades and many attempts have been made to define a concept that contains a wide variety of different ideological movements from very left-wing to very right-wing. Among the oldest populist strongholds is Latin America, a continent that has experienced various left-wing populist movements since the 1930s (de la Torre, 2017b). While the ideological strands attached to the respective movements have altered, the very nature of populism has stayed the same: a division of society into two irreconcilable camps: the united “people” against an evil and irreconcilable “other” (de la Torre, 2017b, pp. 196-197). The following thesis will attempt a deeper dive into the notion of “other” which populist literature has so far mostly confined to the domestic sphere involving the demonisation of elites, the state apparatus or a minority (de la Torre, 2017a).

What most researchers overlook is that the perceived “enemies of the people” are not always exclusively found domestically but also on the international level (Wojczewski, 2018; Imdat, 2021). There has been limited scholarly inquiry into exploring this external dimension of the "other," despite compelling reasons to assume the presence of such a perceived external adversary, particularly in the context of Latin American radical populism and the case study of Venezuela (Imdat, 2021). Venezuela's historical dynamics with the United States have often positioned the latter unfavourably within the region. Therefore, this paper aims to address this research gap by examining how the external othering of the US is used in the populist discourse of Venezuela's President Maduro to consolidate his power. Investigating external othering in the Venezuelan context is of societal relevance as it reveals how populist leaders in Venezuela construct narratives of threat and opposition from external sources against the interests of the Venezuelan people. This sheds light on power dynamics and how leaders seek to consolidate their power by framing themselves as defenders against external threats. This paper will first start with a review of the literature followed by a theoretical framework around the key concepts and a methodology section. Finally, the main findings regarding external othering in Venezuelan populist discourse will be presented and conclusions drawn.

Literature Review

Over the past decades, academia has outlined numerous strategies for leaders to consolidate their power, both domestically and internationally. According to Linz and Stepan (1996), democratic power consolidation involves competitive elections enabling fair power acquisitions backed by the rule of law (p. 14). Ultimately, democratic power consolidation not only grants legitimacy at home but also abroad. However, when leaders are faced with a struggling economy, high crime rates and the erosion of popular support, it becomes increasingly common to seek consolidation by violating the tenets established by Linz and Stepan (1996). Authoritarian power consolidation can involve manipulating elections, exerting control over the judiciary, harassing opposition parties, and suppressing the freedom of the press (Göbel, 2010; Farioli, 2023, p. 4). With the salience of populism, a new strategy of power consolidation has become mainstream: the polarisation of society into two irreconcilable camps - “the united people” against the evil “others” responsible for all the ills of a nation (de la Torre, 2017b, p. 187). While populist movements in theory promise the promotion of “superior forms of democracy,” in practice, they have shown tendencies to undermine democracy through power centralisation in the hands of the executive and the weakening of the principle of checks and balances (de la Torre, 2017b; Ellner, 2012; Farioli, 2023).

When in the 1980s Europe and North America witnessed a surge in so-called populist movements, Latin American countries could already look back upon a long history of populism that started in the 1930s (Weyland 2012, p. 201; Mudde, 2004, p. 541). Important movements such as the one by Juan Perón in Argentina, Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuela or José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador were widely seen as synonymous with classical left-wing populism (Ellner, 2012, pp. 132-133; Roberts, 2012, p. 136). Those early classical populists had proven successful given their appeal to include the previously unrepresented parts of the population in politics such as workers, students and peasants, and not just a small elite that was considered corrupt and foreign-oriented (Ellner, 2012, p. 132; de la Torre, 2017a, p. 196).

However, as economic crises hit Latin America in the 1980s, scholars expected populist domination to fade away as the funds required for financial support-driven classical populism to a large followership were drying up (Weyland, 2012, p. 201). Against these odds, a new generation of neoliberal populists emerged and consolidated their influence by implementing dramatic economic restructuring policies (Weyland, 2012, p. 201; de la Torre, 2017, p. 199).

Neoliberal populists were often political outsiders who scapegoated the former elites for the economic havoc created under import substitution industrialisation (de la Torre, 2017a, p. 198). They abandoned nationalism, opened markets to the international and gave up on their anti-foreign elite sentiments that were common under classical populism (de la Torre, 2017, p. 210). Yet, despite their electoral success and high approval ratings, neoliberal populists faced a paradox: while their policies effectively addressed inflation, they seemed to contradict the essence of populism: to make policy that benefits the common people (Weyland, 1999, p. 188; Weyland, 2017, p. 202). They faced growing distrust from the people who criticised them for prioritising neoliberalism to the detriment of the common people (de la Torre, 2017, p. 200; Roberts, 2012, p. 136). Socioeconomic disparities exacerbated this discontent, fueling widespread revolts such as the Caracazo riot in Venezuela, where protesters took to the streets to oppose rising fuel prices (de la Torre, 2017, p. 200, Roberts, 2012, p. 139). Moreover, there was a perception that national sovereignty was being undermined by international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, as well as by the influence of the US government (de la Torre, 2017, p. 201).

In the wake of growing inequalities, the literature has identified a new tide of radical left-wing populists who found appeal by tapping into the popular grievances caused by neoliberalism and promising the revival of traditional leftist ideals of nationalism, socialism and revolution (de la Torre, 2017, p. 200). They benefited from the perception among citizens that they were not adequately represented, their resistance to neoliberalism and that their country had relinquished sovereignty to liberal international institutions and foreign governments (de la Torre, 2017a, pp. 200-201; Ellner, 2012, p. 153). After the turn of the 21st century, radical populists in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela reversed most of their predecessors' neoliberal policies, centralised the leader's power and gave up on liberal democratic institutional arrangements (Ellner, 2012, p. 153).

In the radical populist movement led by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, the rejection of the neoliberal model was particularly pronounced most notably because Hugo Chávez could afford a tough stance against neoliberalism given the country's richness in hydrocarbons (de la Torre, 2017; Roberts, 2012, p. 137). They ensured stable state revenues and funded his ambitious distributional policies to the poor and the nationalisation of industries (Hawkins, 2016, p. 244). The Chavismo movement embraced socialism and initiated the nationalisation of foreign oil companies in 2007 (Reuters, 2012). His interventionist policies and anti-elite discourse found

appeal with a majority of the population and led to numerous electoral victories (Ellner, 2012, p. 154).

Under Chávez, a new constitution was drafted that consolidated the power in the hands of the president and as long as oil revenues were high, socioeconomic inequality was low (Hawkins, 2016, p. 244). However, as oil prices dropped by the year 2014, inflation increased and so did inequality (Posado, 2022). After Chávez's death in 2013, Nicolás Maduro took office and pursued a more authoritarian approach than his predecessor, tightening the grip on power while weakening the judiciary, legislature, the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech (Posado, 2022, p. 76).

Some scholars called Maduro's nature as a populist in question, given he does not bolster the same legitimacy as his predecessor, reduces political participation and passes laws to the detriment of the people (Posado, 2022; Lopez Maya, 2018, p. 60). Scholars questioning whether Maduro is a populist make the normative argument that leaders should only be called populist if they are popular among the people and act on behalf of the people. However, it is contended that neither of these conditions is met within Maduro's regime (Arenas, 2023, p. 160).

Despite the dissenting voices, this paper argues Maduro's regime is populist. First of all, the increased authoritarianism and policies against the people under Maduro's reign simply highlight the tendencies of populist regimes to undermine democracy instead of disproving the regime's populist nature (Inglehart & Norris, 2019; de la Torre, 2017b). The appeal to the people is often nothing more than a strategy or tool to concentrate power in the executive branch by undermining checks and balances, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and opposition voices (de la Torre, 2017b, p. 187).

Furthermore, Maduro meets another significant trait of populism by framing the country's struggle as a divide between "the people" and the evil elites (Imdat, 2021). On the one hand, he frames "the people" as the united carriers of the Bolivarian revolution and the legacy of Hugo Chávez (Imdat, 2021). On the other hand, he contrasts the people with an evil "other" referring to the opposition, and the elites in general that are framed as immoral and corrupt (Mueller, 2013). This divide is not only essential to the populist discourse, but it implies populists' beliefs that they are the only legitimate voice of the people and any opposition to the

populist movement is relegated to the “other” and framed as illegitimate and not representing the voice of the people (Mueller, 2013).

Within the realm of populist discourse, leaders typically consolidate their power by identifying an enemy of the people. This scapegoat is often portrayed as immoral, corrupt, and working against the people's interests who are to be held accountable for the nation's failures (de la Torre, 2017a; Mueller, 2013). Most scholars assume this enemy to be confined within the boundaries of the Venezuelan state, especially among elite and opposition circles (de la Torre, 2017b). While scholars have broadly examined the antagonism and discourse of populists against domestic others, less attention has been given to populist leaders who use “othering” in the context of an external enemy to the people. Although the concept of external othering is acknowledged among students of populism, only a little research is available on how populist leaders use external othering in their discourse to consolidate power. The available research on external othering primarily focuses on the US context of populism, with less attention being given to the Latin American context, particularly the Venezuelan case (Wojczewski, 2020, p. 21). Despite an apparent lack of research on the topic, there are valid reasons to assume an effect of external othering on power consolidation, especially in the Venezuelan context. As noted earlier, radical left-wing populists are recognised for their antagonistic stance against neoliberalism and the architects of the liberal international order, namely the United States (de la Torre, 2017b). Additionally, it is a common strategy among leaders to shift the blame of domestic hardships away from themselves onto external factors (Imdat, 2021). After oil prices plummeted in 2014, inflation and inequalities rose in Venezuela burdening the people and the legitimacy of the regime (Imdat, 2021). Additionally, the United States put sanctions on Maduro's regime under the administrations of Obama and Trump to pressure it into loosening its grip on power (Imdat, 2021). Given those circumstances, it is necessary to investigate whether Maduro uses external othering in his rhetoric as a justification for the precarious economic situation of the country and the expansion of executive control and as a way to create unity among the Venezuelan people. Given the above, the following article attempts to answer the following research question: *How does Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro use the populist discourse of external othering to consolidate his power?*

Theoretical Framework

In what follows, three key concepts need to be clarified: populism, power consolidation and external othering. As populist movements surged, scholars struggled to agree on a common general notion of populism given those vastly discrepant ideological stands. This part aims at conceptualising populism generally, before refining its definition to align itself with Latin American radical left-wing populism present in Venezuela more specifically.

An influential general definition of populism established by Mudde (2004) argues populism is a “thin-centred ideology” simplifying society into two distinct and opposing groups: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (p. 543). This perspective assumes the moral claim that politics should reflect the general will of the people. (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). The problem that some scholars have identified with that definition is that the various populist movements ranging from very left-wing to very right-wing have very few ideological overlappings making a definition of populism centred around ideology only of little conceptual utility (Stravarakakis, 2017; Moffitt & Tormey, 2013, p. 384). In other words, the understanding of populism as a “thin-centred ideology” implies such a thin-centred understanding of ideology that it makes little sense to conceptualise populism as such given they usually align themselves with broader ideologies like socialism and nationalism in the case of Latin America (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013, p. 384, de la Torre, 2017; Aslanidis, 2016). Other scholars have diagnosed populism with a complete lack of ideology (De la Torre, 2017) or argued the concept is missing a “clear core” (van de Wetering, 2020, p. 90).

Given the reduced utility of considering populism as an ideology, it might be useful to analyse populism as a strategy (Weyland, 2001). According to Weyland (2001), populism is conceptualised as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers” (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). In this context, “strategy” refers to the “methods and instruments of winning and exercising power” (Weyland, 2017, p. 55). Weyland (2017) identifies two key elements of populism as a strategy: the type of leader striving to build and sustain a base of supporters, and the “principal power capability” being the vehicles used by the leader to achieve and maintain support (p. 55).

The following paragraph demonstrates why this definition of populism is particularly useful in the context of Venezuela and how the two key elements of populism as a strategy apply to Maduro's rule.

Radical populist leaders strategically use populism as an opportunity to gain and consolidate power retrieving it from popular support (Weyland, 2017). In Venezuela, Maduro's populist discourse portrays him as a strong defender of the country's interests, aiming to rally people behind his leadership (de la Torre, 2017). Drawing from Weyland's (2001) classification of ruler type, Maduro can be considered an individual and personalistic leader. He views himself as the direct successor of Chavez, legitimising his rule and carrying forward the Bolivarian revolution and Venezuela's socialist project (Imdat, 2021; Posado, 2022). This reflects a cult of personality centred around his leadership. The other aspect of Weyland's (2001) definition, the "principle power capability" is the people Maduro wants to address: "large numbers of mostly unorganised followers." As noted earlier, some researchers have questioned whether Maduro can still be considered a populist due to his declining support base (Posado, 2022; Lopez Maya, 2018). However, he initially employed populism as a strategy to win office and continues to legitimise his rule by portraying the people as united and transcending class divisions in opposition to perceived domestic and international adversaries. Given Maduro uses populism as a strategy to consolidate power, portraying himself as a personalistic leader and legitimising his actions by framing the population as united, Weyland's (2001) definition of populism will be applied in this thesis.

The second concept to be clarified is external othering. It can be understood as the projection of internal othering onto non-domestic entities seen as a threat to the democratic aspirations and economic prosperity of the Venezuelan people, as well as to the foundational narrative of the Bolivarian revolution (de la Torre, 2017, p. 204). Similar to domestic othering, external others are equally to blame for the economic and political hardships of Venezuela in the minds of the ruling class.

The final concept to be clarified is power consolidation. A common distinction that is being made is democratic and autocratic power consolidation. Given Venezuela's Freedom House Rating has been deteriorating since 1999 and its rating as "not free", this article will employ a conceptualisation of autocratic power consolidation (Göbel, 2010). According to his definition, autocratic power consolidation is defined as a "deliberate project of the ruling elite to enhance

its capacities to govern society (p. 177).” Three forms of power are distinguished: the ability to impose one's will on the population through force (despotic power), the power embedded in governing society through institutions and organisations (infrastructural power), and the ability to shape people's desires to align with the government's objectives (discursive power) (Göbel, 2010, p. 177).

Theoretical Expectation

Based on the review of the literature, the clarification of key concepts and the identification of a research gap, the following expectation will be formulated: Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro utilises significant degrees of external othering in his populist discourse strategically to consolidate the power of his regime under his person. This expectation is likely since he does not bolster the same recognition as his predecessor, the economy is struggling and he is faced with the constant need to keep his support base of direct and unorganised followers loyal to him (Imdat, 2021; Weyland, 2017). Accordingly, it is highly likely for a leader such as Maduro to frame foreign entities, particularly the United States, as antagonistic forces threatening the interests and sovereignty of the Venezuelan people. It enables Maduro to build legitimacy among his supporters, shift the blame for economic hardships to an external enemy and legitimise authoritarian measures to solidify his grip on power.

Case Selection

Venezuela and the leadership of Maduro will be treated as a typical case study of Left-Wing populism when treating populism as a strategy. First of all, Venezuela is considered a typical case of radical populism, the dominant sub-type of populism in Latin America in the late 20th and early 21st century. Maduro's populism is often linked with comparable movements in Bolivia under Morales and Ecuador under Correa characterised by the implementation of socialist left-wing policies, strong constituents, and the weakening of liberal democratic institutions (de la Torre, 2017, p. 201). Furthermore, Venezuelan populism can to a lesser degree also be connected to a broader left-wing populist movement outside Latin America, suggesting parallels with European movements like those in Spain or Greece, for instance. These comparisons highlight conceptual similarities when considering populism as a strategy (Weyland, 2017, p. 62). According to Weyland (2017), cross-regional similarities include the potential for a mass movement of people, a lack of party institutionalisation and a personalistic and opportunistic leader (p. 64).

A single case study will be employed in this thesis to enable an in-depth investigation of the Venezuelan case and Maduro's discourse more specifically. Focusing on just one single case enables a greater understanding of the mechanisms through which personalistic leaders use populism strategically to establish a link between the people and justify power consolidation based on perceived broad popular support (Weyland, 2017).

Research Design and Method

To analyse the connection between external othering and power consolidation in Maduro's populist discourse, qualitative content analysis is used. It enables one to identify how an individual personalistic political leader builds support and maintains the support of the population (Weyland, 2001). This research method involves the systematic analysis of transcribed versions of Maduro's speeches seeking to identify patterns within Maduro's discourse and to answer the research question of whether external othering is used to consolidate power. The following section covers source selection, coding techniques and a justification for the main decisions made in the coding frame.

Source Selection

The source selection criteria are based on three factors: the speeches must have been made during Maduro's presidency, addressed to domestic audiences, and transcribed into English for analysis. The chosen speeches primarily target domestic audiences, including the national assembly or direct addresses to the people. Maduro's speeches on the international stage are excluded as they are not directly aimed at a domestic audience, thus not establishing a direct link between the leader and the people. A total of sixteen speeches meeting the established criteria have been identified, spanning from 2015 to 2023 during Maduro's ongoing presidency, being transcribed to English and addressing a domestic audience. Out of these sixteen speeches, eight have been discarded as they address a broader “Bolivarian population” from various Latin American countries which might impact Maduro’s discourse. The speeches analysed will be eight in total with two speeches selected per year with the exception of 2015 and 2016 due to a gap in the speech transcripts provided by the Venezuelan government.

The Coding Frame

Based on patterns present in Maduro’s discourse, the coding frame in this thesis will adopt an adapted problem-cause-solution approach to investigate Maduro's discourse. Linking it to the concept of populism as a strategy, a personalistic leader identifies a problem or threat to the people. Second, a cause for the problem is identified and blame is placed on an actor for this threat. Finally, the leader proposes a solution that involves consolidating support from the people for the leader. The first category of the coding frame is “threat perception” investigating what threats Maduro identifies to the Venezuelan people or his rule in his discourse. A distinction will be made between “internal threat perception” and “external threat perception” assessing in a nuanced way whether the perceived threat comes from within Venezuela or from an external actor such as another state, an international company, or an institution. If, for instance, Maduro diagnoses foreign electoral interference, this statement would be coded as “external threat perception.” If Maduro suspects corruption in a government institution, such a statement would be coded as “internal threat perception.”

A second category of the coding frame is “blame attribution.” This section of the coding frame operationalises the variable of external othering by investigating who Maduro blames for the

previously identified internal or external threat. Again, a subdivision is made between “internal blame attribution” and “external blame attribution.” When Maduro blames the corrupt bureaucrats for an issue, the statement would be coded as “internal blame attribution.” In case Maduro blames the United States for interfering in national elections, such a statement would be coded as “external blame attribution” and qualify as a case of external othering. While this study is primarily interested in external othering and thus, in whether non-domestic actors are blamed, it also codes for domestic threat perception and domestic blame attribution. This approach is necessary to assess the proportions of blame assigned to external versus internal actors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the significance of external othering in Maduro's rhetoric. For example, if there is only one instance of external othering compared to twenty instances of domestic othering, it is inconclusive to assume that external othering holds significant prominence in Maduro's discourse. Accordingly, the proportional aspect of external othering is taken into account.

The final component of the coding framework involves examining the “proposed solutions” that Maduro suggests addressing the threats he mentions. Maduro may advocate for general popular unity as a means to overcome these challenges, or he may propose specific policies that concentrate power in the executive branch. Both instances would qualify as power consolidation and therefore establish a relationship between external othering and the consolidation of power. For instance, when Maduro identifies an external threat, an external actor is blamed and he proposes a solution that consolidates his power, we can establish a link between external othering and power consolidation within Maduro's discourse.

The coding units for analysis will consist of sentences or parts of sentences, depending on their length and relevance to the research objectives, to facilitate a comprehensive qualitative content analysis of Maduro's rhetoric. An overview of the coding frame is provided below. The nuanced categorisations established in the coding frame increase the generalisability, replicability, and reliability of the findings (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 331).

Category	Description	Indicators	Code
Domestic Threat Perception	Maduro identifies a domestic threat to his rule,	corrupt, evil, interference, fascist	DT

	the country, and/or his people. (e.g. corrupt bureaucrats, the opposition, ...)		
External Threat Perception	Maduro identifies a threat to his rule, the country, and/or his people emanating from abroad.	foreign interference, imperialist, sanctions	ET
Domestic Blame Attribution	A domestic actor is blamed for being the cause of the internal/external threat.	opposition, bureaucrats,...	DB
External Blame Attribution	An external actor is blamed for being the cause of the internal/external threat (e.g. an international company, institution, state, ...).	the US, the Imperialists, Colombia, the oligarchy, the Global North, ...	EB
Proposed Solution	Mentions of proposed solutions by Maduro to tackle the threat and perceived perpetrator (e. g. mentions of collective response by the people, policy suggestions, ...)	unity, collective action, hard work, policy, ...	PS

Research Results

The research findings will be organised into three main sections. Firstly, domestic threats and their attributed sources of blame will be discussed, along with the solutions proposed by Maduro to address these threats. Second, the focus will shift to external threats, where identified adversaries will be outlined and Maduro's solutions addressed. The third section will draw a comparative analysis of both domestic and external threats, examining their relative frequency and the nuances that sometimes blur the distinction between them. The in-depth coding table on which the results are based is contained in a separate document referred to as Appendix A.

Domestic Threats and Blame Attribution

In his discourse, Maduro identifies several perceived domestic threats to the population of Venezuela and his leadership. Among domestic threats, accusations of corruption and mismanagement within the bureaucracy and the national oil company are highlighted. Additionally, Maduro points to political ideologies, including extreme-right fascism and violence framed as hostile to the people of Venezuela and his regime.

Opponents within the state and state-owned companies

In Maduro's discourse, there is a perception of threat directed towards bureaucrats of the national oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, whom Maduro blames for being part of a mafia intending to destroy the company (2018A). Additionally, Maduro identified traitors within the National Armed Forces who he claims have attempted to undermine the state.

The issue is portrayed by Maduro as being settled through his assertion of authority and strength. He presents himself as a strong leader who has taken decisive action by imprisoning two former presidents who are allegedly responsible for dismantling the state oil company. Additionally, Maduro praises the Armed Forces for their unity and ability to uncover and neutralise traitors within their ranks (Maduro, 2018B).

Scapegoating of business elites

In Maduro's discourse regarding threat perception, businesspeople are accused of engaging in "mafia deals" by artificially inflating prices, manufacturing products for low costs and trying to sell them at exorbitant prices (Maduro, 2018A). Essentially, Maduro places blame on businessmen and market sellers for causing hyperinflation in the country.

By using businesspeople as scapegoats for inflation, the Venezuelan state conceals the true causes of high prices, which include excessive money printing to address budget deficits stemming from declining oil revenues, exacerbated by the impact of sanctions that drive up prices even for basic goods.

Maduro proposes a solution by calling on law enforcement and the people to collectively challenge the “mafia's” control over the prices of essential goods.

The opposition

In Maduro's discourse, opposition leaders are criticised for promoting "extreme right-wing" and "fascist" ideologies, aiming to take power through force rather than dialogue (Maduro, 2018B; Maduro, 2020). They are accused of undermining democratic elections by withdrawing from previously established electoral agreements with the government and refusing to negotiate a new election date (Maduro, 2018B; Maduro, 2019A). Additionally, the opposition is alleged to have engaged in criminal activities, including inciting riots and committing political crimes. In two speeches, opposition leader Julio Borges is specifically accused of being a fugitive of justice (Maduro, 2018A; Maduro, 2018B). Finally, Maduro contends that the opposition is not acting in the interests of the people, as they allegedly encourage the US government to impose sanctions on Venezuela (Maduro, 2018A).

In response to these issues, Maduro portrays himself as a merciful and conciliatory leader who offers opposition wrongdoers a chance at national reconciliation, with exceptions for those who have committed serious crimes or murder. Furthermore, he emphasises that he has always kept communication channels open and promoted democratic elections (Maduro, 2018A; Maduro, 2018B).

External Threats and Blame Attribution

Proportionately much more pronounced are the external threats Maduro identifies in his more diverse speeches and he dedicates proportionally more time to these perceived external threats which he identifies in ideology, foreign interference, attempts to undermine democracy and economic hardships.

Ideological threats

Maduro's discourse identifies the primary threat as the ideological clash between Left-Wing Bolivarianism and neoliberalism in Europe and the US. According to Maduro, neoliberalism

aims to dismantle the welfare state, and he argues that the liberal democracy promoted in the West does not constitute true democracy; instead, he champions participatory democracy as the “real” form of democracy (Maduro, 2015; Maduro, 2020).

Maduro frames the US as a threat to the Venezuelan Left-wing movement, portraying the US as an empire seeking global domination and aiming to exploit Venezuela's oil and gas reserves (Maduro, 2015). He characterises US elites as racist and supremacist in his narrative (Maduro, 2018A).

In response to these perceived threats, Maduro proposes a collective resistance by the Venezuelan people and the military to resist US attempts to "dominate," "kneel," and "humiliate" Venezuela (Maduro, 2015).

Interference in domestic affairs

They [the United States] do it against history, against our people. But indeed, everything is part of a provocation plan, which has the decided support, the financing of oil transnationals such as the Exxon Mobil, and has the decided support of important power lobbies in Washington and in US power agencies, including the Pentagon. A provocation plan, brothers and sisters, has been activated against Venezuela, and it is our duty to show the strongest union of the Venezuelan nation to send a clear message that allows us to overcome these scenarios of violence, confrontation, conflict that have been activated against our country, from abroad. (Maduro, 2015)

For decades, Venezuela has repeatedly asserted its claim of sovereignty over the Essequibo region and its associated territorial waters, which, according to international law, are recognised as belonging to Guyana (Goitom, 2024). The excerpt above demonstrates the structure of Maduro's speeches: he identifies a threat: the “provocation plan” surrounding Essequibo. Then he identifies an actor to blame: the US, its agencies and Exxon Mobil. Finally, he finds a solution to the perceived external threat by asking for the “strongest union” of the Venezuelan people to send a “clear message” to the perceived foreign wrongdoers in the Essequibo conflict.

In other speeches Maduro elaborates more on his blame attribution claims. The historical British Empire is blamed for incorporating Essequibo into British Guyana instead of making it part of Venezuela. The United States is further accused of imperialist practices under the Monroe Doctrine, reinforcing the status quo of Essequibo being part of Guyana (Maduro, 2015). Additionally, Maduro establishes a link between the US government and its multinational Exxon Mobil, arguing that the US hired Exxon Mobil to allegedly exploit Essequibo resources through illegal excursions into Venezuelan territorial waters (Maduro, 2019A). Maduro also implicates Guyanan state elites as complicit in attacks, portraying them as puppets of the US and its imperial plan to exploit Essequibo's resources (Maduro, 2019).

Maduro proposes solutions to address the Essequibo dispute: He calls for the Venezuelan people to demonstrate the "strongest union" to send a message to all involved actors that Venezuela is committed to reclaiming Essequibo (Maduro, 2015). Maduro advocates for reinforcing the Venezuelan perspective on Essequibo's history in schools and the media (Maduro, 2015). Furthermore, he asks the military to avoid future incursions into the perceived territorial waters of Venezuela. In response to provocations over Essequibo, Maduro signed an enabling law granting him authority over border matters for the defence of the country, justifying it as necessary given the ongoing disputes (2015). It clearly demonstrates the personality aspect of Maduro's rule. He frames himself as the defender of Venezuela especially through the enabling law he signed aimed at concentrating power over defence matters in his hands and away from the legislature. The justification for the enabling law can be seen as Maduro's heroic mission to defend the country against foreign adversaries.

Interference into democracy

During the last two months we have faced conspiracy and we have caught the responsible ones – convicted and confessed –. They have confessed all their plot to prevent the elections of last May 20th, they have confessed who financed them, an alliance between the U.S Embassy in Venezuela and the Colombian government, financing conspiracies to incite military violence and by doing so they thought they were going to prevent the democratic elections and the people's election. I call for the defense of Venezuela by all those who feel patriotic. (Maduro, 2018A)

In Maduro's discourse, US interference into Venezuelan elections is a strong point of contention (Maduro, 2018B). The opposition is accused of "stabbing the electoral process" and being a puppet of the US government without its own voice or political claims (Maduro, 2018B). Maduro claims that the opposition boycotts elections on Washington's order and avoids democratic dialogue out of fear (Maduro, 2018B). The alleged ultimate goal of the opposition is to prevent democratic elections from being held. The elections are framed as being stolen from the Venezuelan people. Maduro calls for "the defense of Venezuela by all those who feel patriotic" placing the people into two camps: the foreign driven opposition and its alleged attempt to undermine democratic elections versus the patriotic people who defend elections perceived as democratic against foreign interference.

Furthermore, Maduro also accuses the US, Colombian, national elites, and the Global North in general of plotting against his regime, allegedly with intentions to destroy Venezuelan democracy, provoke a civil war, and take advantage of the instability to exploit Venezuelan resources (Maduro, 2018A; Maduro, 2022). Actors blamed for these actions include the US and its embassy in Caracas, as well as the Colombian government for causing military clashes at the border (Maduro, 2018A).

In response to these perceived threats, Maduro proposes defying international conspiracies against Venezuela by holding free and transparent elections against all odds, despite alleged US attempts to prevent democratic elections (Maduro, 2018A). It is part of Maduro's strategy to constantly shift blame on the opposition and international actors backing it since he needs to constantly secure the support of the people given their uninstitutionalised and unorganised nature necessitating constant efforts from the leader to mobilise and reinforce their supporters' commitment and loyalty (Weyland, 2001).

Economic hardships

"(...) the double blockade to which we are sometimes subjected, the economic, technological and commercial blockade of US imperialism, and the blockade, the bureaucratic, indolent officials and the corruption that has taken over important areas of institutions that have to respond with public services to the country; And I am not lying, I put my finger on the sore spot, I put my finger where it must be put so that the pain of

the needy, of the oppressed, of those who groan, of those who suffer, of those who cry, of those who scream, may be felt.” (Maduro, 2022)

In Maduro's discourse, perceived threats include sanctions that the United States has imposed on Venezuela. Maduro acknowledges deep consequences of the sanctions for the people, citing limitations on access to money and imports into the country (Maduro, 2018A; Maduro, 2020). Yet, he considers the sanctions as the “sore spot” in which he must put his finger. He argues that only by putting his finger at this “sore spot,” so the sufferance of the people can be acknowledged. Maduro portrays himself as the leader who amplifies the voices of the suffering Venezuelans to have their voices heard.

Beyond the excerpt, Maduro compares the impact of sanctions to nuclear bombs aimed at destroying the Venezuelan currency, oil revenues, gold production, and foreign trade (Maduro, 2022). Additionally, during the pandemic, Maduro blamed the US for denying Venezuela's access to Covid-19 vaccines (Maduro, 2020).

Maduro proposes a solution by highlighting the collective resistance of the Venezuelan people against the sanctions, emphasising the economic support received from China, Russia, and Iran, which provide goods and vaccines to the regime despite severe limitations in the country's financial sector (Maduro, 2022). This collective resilience, combined with external support, is presented as a strategy to counteract the effects of US sanctions (Maduro, 2022).

Discussion of the findings

Summarising the findings above, Maduro uses the narrative of external threats and blame attribution to consolidate power by fostering national unity against perceived foreign interference, framing his regime as the defender of Venezuelan sovereignty, democracy, and economic stability amidst external challenges. He usually identifies a problem, then he identifies who is to blame. Finally, he offers vague solutions on how to overcome the challenge. A significant problem he identifies is the lack of legitimacy of his rule, the opposition boycotting elections and other states imposing sanctions on the regime. He blames the US, Colombia and the opposition for sabotaging elections and their attempts to circumvent the perceived popular demands. He then taps into the people's suffering under sanctions arguing that the best way to face this harassment is to continue the election holding efforts and to show unity to the perceived enemies of the people. This strategy of unity does not only rally domestic support but also justifies authoritarian measures to combat perceived threats and maintain regime control. For instance, in the Essequibo territorial dispute, Maduro used this as a reason to pass a law granting himself more authority to protect Venezuela's sovereignty and peace (Maduro, 2015). Both the rallying of domestic support and authoritarian measures qualify as power consolidation when conceptualised as a "deliberate project of the ruling elite to enhance its capacities to govern society" (Göbel, 2010, p. 177).

The section above also illustrates how the Venezuelan president uses both domestic and external scapegoats for the hardships of his regime and the Venezuelan people. The presence of both elements is substantial and characteristic of Maduro's discourse. The main external other identified in the discourse is the United States accused of "imperialist persecution" through the interference in elections, the imposition of sanctions, instigating assassination attempts against Maduro and encouraging US companies to extract raw materials from territory Venezuela claims to be its own. The opposition is also frequently blamed for instigating violence and divisions, for not acting on behalf of the people and for hindering the process of democratic election. The blame attribution to the opposition is also tied to the United States arguing that it is just a puppet of US interests therefore reinforcing the assertion that the opposition acts against the interests of regular Venezuelans. By framing the US as the formidable enemy of the people and asking the people for unity against this collective threat, Maduro tries to achieve unity among the Venezuelans. By framing external opponents, Maduro

does not only shift blame away from his regime, but it also enables him to establish himself as the heroic leader who defends his country against those external threats. Given the populism strategy assumption that his rule is based on unorganised supporters, constant seeking for new and old enemies is vital to maintain direct support at home, give legitimacy to his rule and to his policies concentrating power in his hands.

Conclusion and Limitations

This thesis explored how Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro employs a populist discourse of external othering to consolidate his grip on power. Addressing a gap in populist literature on the use and underlying motives of external othering in Venezuela, the main finding is that Maduro uses this discourse as a deliberate strategy to consolidate power within Venezuela, particularly by framing the US as an external enemy. By portraying himself as a defender against external threats, Maduro seeks to unite the population under a narrative of defending the country's sovereignty and socialist project. This involves identifying external adversaries, predominantly the United States, and blaming them for a range of issues, including economic hardships and democratic challenges. Such external othering deflects blame and justifies authoritarian measures as necessary responses to perceived threats. By fostering a sense of national unity against these external forces, Maduro legitimizes his rule and seeks to strengthen his abilities to govern society, aligning with Göbel's conceptualization of autocratic power consolidation. Despite questions about Maduro's declining domestic support base, his strategic use of populist rhetoric demonstrates its enduring utility in maintaining power and control.

While this paper has established a clear link between the external othering of the United States and power consolidation in Maduro's discourse, further research could explore how Maduro's discourse has evolved over time and whether key events such as the alleged assassination attempt on himself might have altered and possibly radicalized his views further. Future research could also make a comparative analysis of Maduro's discourse with that of another leader, such as his predecessor Hugo Chavez or US President Donald Trump, who also uses external othering in his populist discourse (Wojczewski, 2020, p. 41).

There are limitations to this study. The sample size is too small to diagnose clear shifts in Maduro's discourse over time. While sufficient to investigate the prominence of external

othering relative to domestic othering, the limited number of sources available in English and addressed to domestic audiences prevents any conclusions beyond the scope of the research question. Another potential weakness is the inability to completely rule out sampling bias. Given that the source selection was constrained by the English language requirement, the reasons behind the regime's decision to translate some speeches but not others are unclear. If the regime translated speeches with more external othering, the findings might overestimate this aspect in Maduro's discourse. Therefore, a quantitative or qualitative approach with a larger sample, including Spanish speeches, would be necessary to back up the findings in this thesis.

Appendix A

The Appendix A has been submitted in a separate document.

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