

'I won't naturalize foreigners like crazy': The Naturalization Campaign in Venezuela, 2004-2006

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Abstract:

Between 2004 and 2006, more than 420,000 foreigners, many of them formerly undocumented immigrants, were granted Venezuelan nationality. This article presents the (historical) context, the Venezuelan immigration and nationality policies, and the three core elements of the naturalization campaign. It was integrated into a programme to distribute identity documents to the population (the *Misión Identidad*), had a specific legal and administrative foundation (a presidential decree), and was carried out by way of large-scale naturalization ceremonies. Criticisms of the campaign included the allegation that naturalizing hundreds of thousands of formerly undocumented immigrants tampered with the foundation of political representation. In order to scrutinize this claim, the article describes the government's reasons for implementing the naturalization scheme, as well as the criticisms expressed by the political opposition and civil society, as reported in Venezuelan print media, and relates this to how the naturalization campaign has been implemented in practice. *Keywords:* nationality, naturalization, citizenship, migration, identification, Venezuela

Resumen: 'No voy a naturalizar extranjeros a lo loco': La campaña de naturalización en Venezuela, 2004-2006

De 2004 a 2006, más que 420.000 extranjeros, muchos de ellos anteriormente inmigrantes indocumentados, consiguieron la nacionalidad venezolana. Este trabajo presenta las políticas de inmigración y de nacionalidad venezolana. Además, se enfoca en los tres elementos centrales de la campaña de naturalización: Su integración a un programa de distribución de documentos de identidad a la población (la Misión Identidad), su fundamento jurídico y administrativo (un decreto presidencial), y las ceremonias de naturalización a gran escala. Las críticas a esta campaña postularon que la naturalización de cientos de miles de inmigrantes anteriormente indocumentados habría falsificado el número de población venezolana. Con el fin de examinar esta crítica, el texto describe las razones del gobierno para aplicar éste régimen de naturalización, así como los reclamos formulados por la oposición política y la sociedad civil, mostrados en la prensa venezolana. Esto se relaciona al modo en que la campaña de naturalización se ha implementado en práctica. *Palabras clave:* nacionalidad, naturalización, ciudadanía, migración, identificación, Venezuela

‘When this process is over, we will have 250 thousand new Venezuelans who will also be inscribed in the electoral register. With this we will definitely say No to the disgrace of the past’
Vice President of Venezuela José Vicente Rangel, 2004¹

In the course of three months during 2004, more than 230,000 foreigners, many of them formerly undocumented immigrants, received the Venezuelan nationality due to a large-scale naturalization campaign. This campaign was integrated into a programme to distribute identity documents to the population, called *Misión Identidad* (Mission Identity), and relied on a number of large-scale events through which up to 30,000 recently naturalized persons were issued Venezuelan ID cards and included in the electoral registry within one or two days.

Campaigns to normalize the formal status of undocumented immigrants are known beyond Venezuela,² but there, one fact stands out: in the course of the same administrative process, foreign immigrants were granted Venezuelan nationality, and hence became equal citizens with full voting rights. Unlike nationality from birth, naturalizations do not happen ‘automatically’, but have to be brought about deliberately. Therefore, the qualifications required by law, as much as the practical way naturalizations are organized, allow scrutinizing the understanding of who should belong, and who should be excluded from the political community – the state capacity termed ‘morphing the demos’ by Bauböck (2015). During the past decade, nationality policies in many countries (most visibly perhaps in Western Europe) have attempted to make it more demanding to become a new citizen by imposing naturalization tests (Goodman, 2011). But nationality can also be granted more easily to certain groups, for instance to co-ethnics, or to those foreigners assumed to be more supportive of the current government.³

At first glance, the situation in Venezuela appears to be comparable with respect to both aspects. The mass naturalizations there started a few months before a revocatory referendum against the residing president, Hugo Chávez, took place that could have forced him to lose his position in August 2004. Criticisms of the creation of more Venezuelans – who most likely were pro-Chavez voters, as will be explained later – were thus backed by the political opposition to the government who protested against what they saw as a fraudulent fabrication of votes in favour of the opposing camp.

A brief history of immigration to Venezuela

According to the latest population census taken in 2011, 1.156 million inhabitants of Venezuela were born abroad; with a total population of just above 27 million, this constitutes 4.26 per cent of the total (INE, 2015). Together with Argentina, Venezuela is one of the Latin American countries that still supports a relatively high number of immigrants today (Freitez & Osorio, 2009, p. 310).

Historically, however, the numbers of immigrants to Venezuela have never been as high as in countries like Argentina or Brazil, which have successfully attracted settlers since the nineteenth century (Durand & Massey, 2010, p. 21). Only after the Second World War did the number of immigrants rise significantly, due to an increasing demand for labour as a result of economic growth and expanding oil production in Venezuela in combination with strong push effects in post-war Europe (Pellegrino, 1989, p. 197). Between 1952 and 1957, the legal requirements for immigration were reduced to a minimum (Berglund, 2004, p. 41). This led to a first wave of immigrants that reached up to 400,000 during the 1950s, a number outmatched in Latin America only by Argentina during that time (Pellegrino, 1989, p. 197).

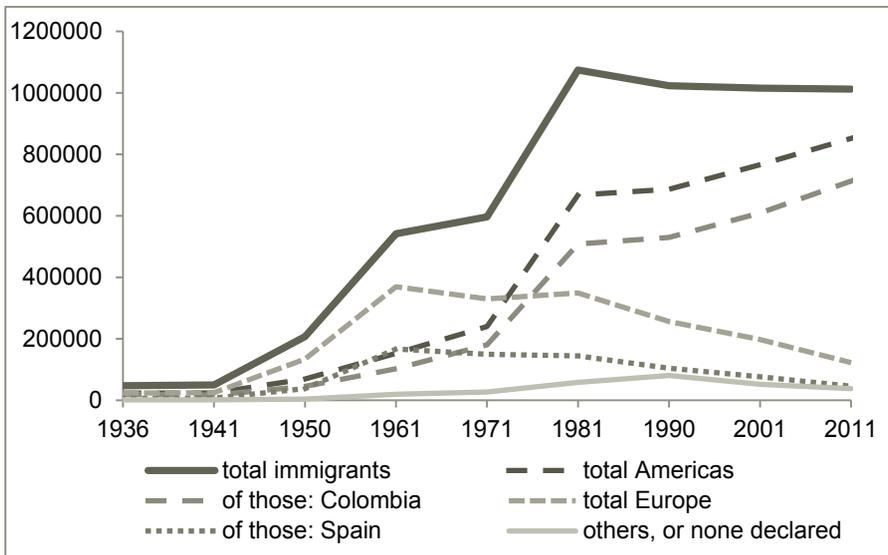
When the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez ended in 1958, the new democratic government reacted to an economic crisis and high unemployment rates by attempting to restrict immigration once more. Hence the 1960s were characterized by a change from legal to undocumented immigration. While figures for new arrivals from Europe by air and sea dropped dramatically, many Colombians crossed the land border into Venezuela without permission. Besides working in service and construction in the big cities, these immigrants from the neighbouring country filled the rural demand for labourers that was caused by rural-urban migration. Estimates put the number of informal immigration from Colombia as high as one million during the 1960s (Torrealba et al., 1983, p. 382). When the price of oil rose in the 1970s, the Venezuelan economy underwent a boom phase, making the country a very attractive destination once again. During this period immigration from Colombia was mainly of an economic nature, of cross border merchants or labourers searching for better living conditions. Frontier zone travel had been regulated in various bilateral treaties since the 1940s (Álvarez de Flores, 2004, p. 195) and later led to free travel within the *Comunidad Andina*. Yet a policy of 'selective immigration', allowing only highly skilled workers to legally settle in Venezuela meant that the undocumented population continued to grow. Alongside the continuing influx from neighbouring Colombia, many political émigrés from the countries in the Southern Cone ravaged by dictatorships chose Venezuela as their refuge. This amounted to a total increase of the population through immigration of over 314,000 between 1971 and 1979 (Torrealba et al., 1983, p. 386). From that period onwards, the government implemented periodic regularizations of undocumented immigrants. Between 1970 and 1979, 240,000 residency permits were issued, and after a renewed legalization initiative in 1980, 266,000 undocumented immigrants applied for regularization of their legal status (Berglund, 2004, p. 44), which was relatively few compared to the high number of undocumented immigrants, estimated by the government at two million prior to the regularization campaign (Rey González, Juan Carlos, 2011, p. 139).

The late 1980s, and especially the decade of the 1990s, were characterized by economic crisis, recession, growing poverty, and public unrest in Venezuela. During this period, many former immigrants and their descendants left the

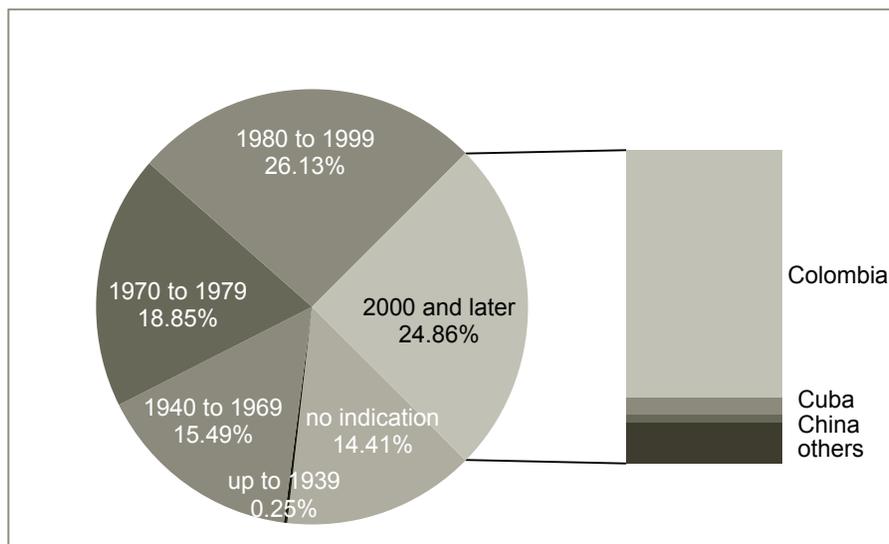
country for good and ‘returned’ to Europe (Freitez & Osorio, 2009, p. 310). At the same time, the guerrilla conflict in Colombia affected the Venezuelan border regions and caused political and military tensions between the two states. Increasingly since the late 1990s, the influx of Colombians grew markedly due to the deterioration of both economic and political stability in Colombia, with even more refugees fleeing from armed conflict after 1999 (Álvarez de Flores, 2004, p. 198).⁴

When comparing the waves of international immigration to Venezuela after the Second World War, the changing importance of two regions of origin catches the eye. The first wave of immigrants, approximately 1948-1958, was dominated by Europeans (Spanish, Portuguese, Italians as the largest groups). Undocumented immigration from Colombia became significant during the 1960s, and the second wave of the 1970s was entirely dominated by immigrants from Latin America, most of them Colombians. This is represented in the data on immigrant stock provided by the population census. Given that the recording of numbers of cross-border entries and exits, provided in the past by the responsible government agency, was discontinued after 1995 (Freitez, 2011, p. 213), the only available data on Venezuela’s foreign population today is drawn from the national population censuses, carried out at ten-year intervals.⁵ In 1961, Spain and Italy were the major countries of origin, and Europe was the main region of origin in the census data on immigrants in Venezuela until 1971 (almost 560,000 compared to 230,000 from Latin America). But after 1981 Colombians alone outnumbered all immigrants from Europe (more

Figure 1: Immigrants in Venezuela by countries/regions of origin 1936-2011



Sources: Pellegrino, 1989, p. 371; Freitez & Osorio, 2009, pp. 308-309; <http://www.ine.gov.ve>

Figure 2: Immigrants in Venezuela by duration of stay in country, 2011

Source: www.redatam.ine.gob.ve

than 500,000 Colombians and less than 350,000 Europeans, out of a total immigrant population of over one million; see figure 1). Today, more than 50 per cent of all immigrants came to the country after 1980, and those with shorter periods of residence are overwhelmingly Colombian, although some are from Cuba, and smaller contingents are from countries recently cooperating economically with the Venezuelan government, such as China (Freitez & Osorio, 2009, p. 304; see figure 2).

A brief history of Venezuelan nationality policies

In the early nineteenth century, independent Venezuela inherited the principle of *jus soli* (nationality through birth in the territory of a state) from the Spanish Empire. To define everyone born in national territory as belonging to the nation suited the project of fostering population growth through the influx of foreign settlers. Today's constitution defines a Venezuelan as 'everyone born in the territory of the Republic' (Asamblea Nacional, 1999, art. 36), and this has not been altered significantly since its introduction in the first constitution of Venezuela as an independent republic in 1830.⁶ The immigrant settlers themselves were also seen as 'nationals' at the very moment they came ashore on Venezuelan soil. To give one example out of many similar laws passed from the 1830s onwards, this is prescribed in the first decree of 1831 to 'foster the immigration of Canarians', which offered them a letter of naturalization (*carta de naturalización* or *naturaleza*) 'as soon as they tread upon Venezuelan territory' (Decreto del 13 de Junio de 1831, art. 2; see Area, et al., 2001, p. 36). According to the first explicit law on naturalization, passed in 1844, if the per-

son concerned was able to maintain himself (women were not mentioned by this law) by a ‘useful profession’ and was of good manners, naturalization would be granted if that person entered the country with the status of immigrant or had been resident within the country for at least one year (Ley de 27 de mayo de 1844, art. 1, see Area et al., 2001, p. 54). This was further simplified by a decree of president Guzman Blanco of 1865, which stated that to receive a *carta de naturaleza*, only residence within the country was required (Decreto del 13 de Junio de 1865, art. 1, see Vetancourt Aristeguieta, 1957, p. 363).

Since the constitution of 1830, and throughout the following decades into the twentieth century, the constitutional clause on naturalization stated simply that naturalization was possible, and that further details of the requirements were determined by law (Congreso Constituyente, 1830, art. 11, 3). Only in 1961 was a preferential clause taken into the constitution for the first time, stating that those ‘who have the nationality of Spain or a Latin American state will enjoy special facilities for obtaining the *carta de naturaleza*’ (Congreso Nacional, 1961, art. 36).

These respective laws continued to require no minimum stay in the country. The very general criteria inherited from nineteenth century laws were enough: a resident of the country and a licit means of subsistence. In 1974, the regulations pertaining to the respective law of 1955 only further specified the need to prove competent Spanish and country knowledge (‘Certificado de aprobación del examen sobre castellano, historia, geografía y formación cívica patrias’, Reglamento 1974, art. 1 b 4, see Area et al., 2001, p. 330). No such *certificado* was required for those either educated in Venezuela, or aged 50-plus, or with a minimum residency of ten years.⁷

For the first time in Venezuelan history, the ‘Bolivarian’⁸ constitution of 1999 mentioned explicit residency requirements of 10 years of ‘uninterrupted’ residence, with a preferential clause of five years for those holding the nationality of ‘Spain, Portugal, Italy, Latin American and Caribbean countries’ (Asamblea Nacional, 1999, art. 33). The explanation of motives for the new wording of the constitutional nationality clause (Brewer Carías, 1999, pp. 44-75) does not shed light on the reasons for the amendment that transformed preferential treatment of those in the country for ten years or more into an exclusionary clause making such a relatively long presence a requirement.⁹ Alternatively, viewing the preferential treatment as an ethnicized assumption of ‘cultural proximity’ can be read as simply catering to the historically largest groups of immigrants and, at the same time, regional integration (by including ‘Latin American and Caribbean countries’). The relevant law on naturalization that was passed in 2004 (overruling that of 1955) did not require any language or knowledge testing (as specified since 1974, and in force through 1999), and made the duration of stay in the country prior to naturalization the only *de facto* requirement from then on, as this was already regulated by the Constitutional clause of 1999 (Asamblea Nacional, 2004b, art. 21; Asamblea Nacional,

1999, art. 33). Additionally in 2004, a newly implemented regulation of the Foreigners Law and the Nationality Law was decreed by the president (Decreto 2823, Presidente de la República [2004a]), which intended to simplify and therefore speed up the administrative process of naturalization.

The new Naturalization Law came into force when this campaign was at its peak in January 2005. This law required markedly fewer documents in the application for naturalization. During the parliamentary process the list of necessary documents had been reduced from ten to four – basically comprising the application itself accompanied by a photocopy of an ID card, and a valid passport containing a valid visa. Before the second reading, the draft of this law had included a list of required documents compiled on the basis of the previous regulation, among them proof of language and country knowledge, economic activities, a certificate of good conduct, and no previous criminal records. All of these were removed from the list because they were described as being 'impossible to comply with' and 'unrealistic', either because the responsible institutions could not certify these requirements, or such examinations 'had never been carried out' in the past (Asamblea Nacional 2004a, p. 59). All further requirements were left to be dealt with in future regulations, and the oath to the national flag, introduced 1974, was also no longer a requirement.

As far as formerly undocumented foreigners have been concerned, the status quo of naturalization requirements since 2005 continues to be a simplified procedure.¹⁰ The presidential decrees of 2004 are *de jure* no longer in force, but the 2004 Naturalization Law is, ruling that the only necessary requirement is a minimum presence in the country of five or ten years.¹¹ However, the Migration and Identification Service (SAIME¹²) has continued to effectively align its administrative procedures with the Decreto 2823, at least until 2014.

The naturalization campaign of 2004-2006

To analyse the Venezuelan naturalization campaign in more detail, its three core elements are now described in turn. It is based upon 1) a vindicatory element (the Misión Identidad), 2) a legal element (the Decreto 2823), and 3) a practical element (the naturalization ceremonies).

- 1) To provide for a strong legitimization for the naturalization campaign, it was incorporated into the Misión Identidad, one of the governmental social programmes.¹³

When popular support of the Chávez government was declining dramatically from 2001 onwards, the Venezuelan president created a new, centralized form of social welfare to consolidate the legitimacy of his government. The so-called social (and later 'Bolivarian') 'missions' were directly managed by the executive branch, funded by oil revenues, and addressed, among other issues, healthcare, education, and food distribution. Their aim was to reduce poverty and inequality, guarantee better living conditions for the poor, and give the

population a sense of empowerment and participation in society.¹⁴ The Misión Identidad was established in this context, and its primary goal was to increase the distribution of ID cards among the population. According to official statements, only one third of the population carried valid identity documents at that time. In the eyes of the government, this constituted a pressing issue of inequality, because the general ‘right to identity’ had been transformed into an ‘exclusive right for the rich’ (CEIMS, 2006). The explicit goal of the Misión Identidad was to provide the most marginalized people of the population with ID cards, in order to make the most basic citizenship rights accessible to them. This not only included economic and social rights, but also explicitly stated that the right to vote was ‘the most clear and tangible expression of a participatory and democratic people’ (CEIMS, 2006). Everyone who complied with the criteria expressed by the Constitution should furthermore have access to Venezuelan nationality – and through that, explicitly, the right to vote. Only in this sense would they ‘exist as citizens’ (SAIME, 2009). To make this possible, mobile registration units were set up throughout the country so that everyone could obtain an ID card (*cédula de identidad*) easily, quickly, and free of charge. The Venezuelan Misión Identidad was started in October 2003 and distributed 8,710,804 ID cards within its first year of its existence.¹⁵

- 2) The legal prerequisite for the campaign is an accelerated procedure, stipulated in the Decreto 2823 of February 2004, titled ‘Rules for the regularization and naturalization of foreigners’ (Presidente de la República, 2004a).

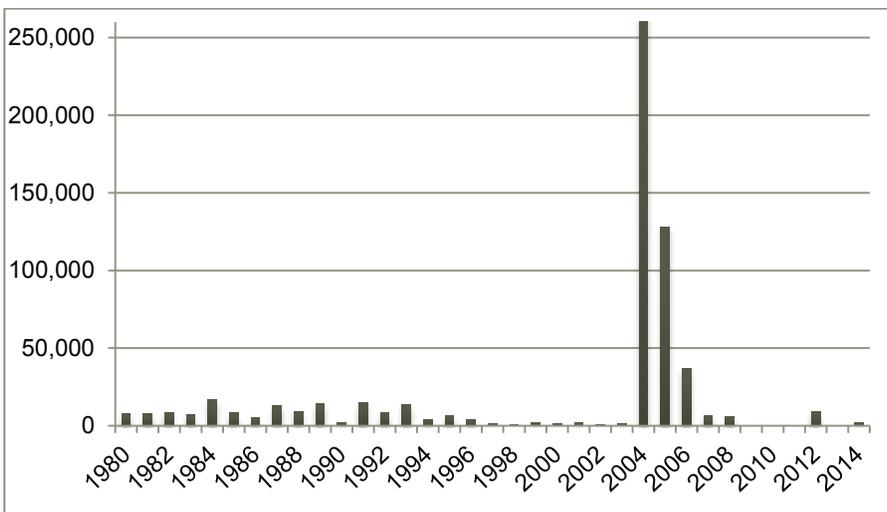
It complemented issuing ID cards through the Misión Identidad with a simplified administrative process of legalization-cum-naturalization for undocumented foreigners. The Decreto came into force for a period of six months, and was extended by another six months in August 2004 (Presidente de la República, 2004b). It offered the legal status of residency to those foreigners who had an irregular status if they registered with the Identification Office and presented some document of identification and proof of economic activities in Venezuela (Presidente de la República, 2004a, art. 7-9). If they declared a desire to become Venezuelan, a simplified procedure of naturalization was also offered, which included an indication of what the missing documents were (art. 13) and a quick decision. The administrative procedure was set up to take no more than six months, or four months for privileged nationals (Art. 14), and was free of charge. Taking an oath, individually or collectively, was also specified as a necessary requirement of the procedure (in art. 16, but soon thereafter discarded by the 2004 Naturalization Law). The Decreto did not touch on the issue of what the stipulated requirements were. But in the preface it referred to art. 14 of the Naturalization Law, which reads: ‘the executive can shorten the period of residency and exempt [the claimant] from having to present documents required for naturalization if special reasons support doing so’. Hence by implication the requirements for naturalization were open to administrative discretion.

- 3) The practical element of the naturalization campaign involved deliberately basing it on naturalization ceremonies.

To increase the numerical output of the naturalization campaign, from March 2004 onwards huge events were organized where thousands of applicants finalized the last steps of the legally required naturalization procedure, received their ID cards, and were inscribed in the electoral registry within one or two days.¹⁶ According to the names published in the *Gaceta Oficial*, they amounted to 231,791 during June, July, and August 2004. Such bulk naturalizations were repeated at least ten times up until mid-2006, so that from the beginning of the campaign in March 2004 to the last big event in 2006, 428,184 foreigners were granted Venezuelan nationality (and 451,760 up to 2014). After 2006, annual nationalizations returned to the low numbers of previous decades (see figure 3). It is unlikely that today's low figures are caused entirely by a reduced number of foreigners eligible for naturalizations; they are more likely the result of less intense state efforts to promote naturalizations.

Although there is no official data on the results of the naturalization policy, an administrative tradition does help to establish the total numbers. Every naturalization has to be declared by the responsible ministry issuing a *carta de naturaleza* (or *naturalización*), and the declaration of the *carta* is done by listing the individual's name in the *Gaceta Oficial*. In the years 2004 to 2006, long lists appeared in special editions of the Gazette that were made public at special help desks at the national library, because each and every new citizen needed a photocopy of his/her listing as proof of naturalization. The numbers presented here stem from my own counts of the individual names published in the Gazette, hence only the total figures can be given, without detailed information about countries of origin and durations of presence in Venezuela at the

Figure 3: Naturalizations in Venezuela, 1980-2014



Sources: Own count of data from the *Gaceta Oficial*; Berglund, 2004, p. 50.

time of naturalization. According to statements of public officials during that time, around 90 per cent of naturalized persons came from Colombia, and most of the remaining 10 per cent were from other Latin American countries, with very small numbers of nationals from Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Belgium, China, Lebanon, Syria and the U.S. (‘Ministro Jesse Chacón’, 2005; ‘Onidex naturaliza’, 2005; PAN 2006).

Through detailed press reports it is possible to reconstruct some of the general elements of these huge naturalization ceremonies, even in the absence of ethnographic studies on the matter (‘Otros 25 mil’, 2004; ‘20 mil’, 2004; ‘20.041 nuevos’, 2004; ‘Realizarán operativo’, 2005; ‘Venezuela naturalizó’, 2004. See also McGrandle, 2004). The ceremonies took place in sports stadiums or other large public arenas, where Onidex (*Oficina Nacional de Identificación y Extranjería*, National Office for Identification and Alien Affairs) set up many mobile workstations equipped with laptops, digital cameras, printers/scanners, and laminators. There, registration could be carried out and the official document printed on the spot. The applicants had to wait their turn in long lines to present the necessary personal documents and have their photograph taken. The necessary documents consisted of an individual’s identification such as a foreign ID document or passport (that could have expired), the regularization certificate previously issued by Onidex that now served as a naturalization application, and a photocopy of the individual’s name in the lists of naturalizations published in the Official Gazette. *De jure* they had been naturalized at the moment their names were published, but *de facto* they could not make use of this due to lack of documentation. After their official ID card was printed declaring their nationality to be Venezuelan, they were also immediately inscribed into the electoral registry.

As mentioned above, before the swearing-in ceremony was discontinued by the law of 2004, the oath to the national flag was an important part of the event. To this end, the stage of the respective arena was decorated with the national flag alongside numerous red posters of the government and its institutions, such as the propaganda for its social missions. Also prominent was the presentation of a banner with the main theme of the Misión Identidad, which read ‘La fortaleza de una nación radica en su identidad’ (The strength of a nation lies in its identity), a quote from Simón Bolívar. On stage the locally responsible mayor, a representative of the registration authority, an army representative, and possibly the minister of interior or the president himself would address the crowd and administer the collective recitation of the oath.

Critical remarks on the naturalization campaign in Venezuelan print media

In order to reconstruct the heightened political confrontation around civic registration, I conducted an analysis of newspaper articles, focusing on the two largest Venezuelan newspapers (*El Nacional* and *El Universal*) with an empha-

sis on the years 2004 to 2006. The criticisms of the naturalization campaign were of particular interest.

The first group of complaints against the governmental practice of large-scale naturalizations took issue with the strategy of incorporating huge numbers of new voters into the electoral registry and thereby influencing the outcome of future elections and, prior to that, the 2004 referendum to displace the president. Those arguments are not primarily concerned with the naturalization campaign itself, but relate to the wider context of the *Misión Identidad*. It is important to highlight them because they were made frequently. To support this line of criticism, two different yet related arguments are discernible. The first denies legitimacy to the electoral victories of the government since 2004 in retrospect, by claiming that votes were 'bought' by providing the social programmes. The bone of contention here is that huge sections of the population were drawn to the side of the ruling president by his generous provision of social assistance. The naturalization scheme was criticized as an additional element that was at the very least responsible for making sure that recently generated support was turned into additional votes.¹⁷ The second argument is that, according to many critics, the crucial problem was not who was naturalized and how, but more basically that the registration of new voters was being made with fraudulent intent.

To understand this argument, the context of widespread accusations of electoral fraud must be taken into account. Opposition members often claimed that the regularizations were but one element within a systematic governmental strategy of electoral fraud that included buying votes, multiple voting and gerrymandering, among others. From this perspective, massive naturalizations were to be added to the fraudulent registration of other names into the register. Press reports frequently mention estimates of wrongful entries in the electoral system that range between 500,000 and 1.5 million ('27.878 votantes', 2005; 'De cuántos votos', 2006). While these numbers may incorporate both autochthonous 'bogus' voters and newly naturalized Venezuelans, the distinction between such arguments is rarely made in media representations ('Unos 400 mil', 2005).

The second group of contentions does not primarily take issue with the manipulation of the electoral database, but rather stresses the assumed threat to national sovereignty that comes with the way the administrative practice of naturalizations was carried out. These arguments relate either to a) those who were naturalized, or b) the way the naturalizations were operationalized, or c) a combination of both.

- a) Immigrants from two countries especially are portrayed as inimical to the security of the Venezuelan state: Cubans and Columbians.

The Colombian *guerrillero* and sometimes the common criminal or drug trafficker from this neighbouring country ('wanted by Interpol') are the prototypical unwanted types of a compatriot-to-be. In light of the sheer numbers of im-

migrants from Colombia and the ongoing armed conflict there, Venezuelan authorities are frequently accused of not successfully keeping out violent and other negative influences from Colombia ('La máquina', 2005; 'Rodrigo Granda', 2005; 'Realizarán operativo', 2005; 'Pérez denuncia', 2006).

Cuban involvement in the Misión Identidad was both denounced as strategic advice and supported as practical, because Cuban personnel and Cuban knowledge was used for the training of Venezuelan staff to run the registration and maintain the databases. This had frequently been criticized in the national press ('Indagan sobre preferencias', 2004; 'Comisión parlamentaria', 2004; 'La máquina', 2005; '400 mil', 2005) and continues to be an issue. In 2011, the national registry of citizens was depicted as the 'backbone of a people', and thus to allow a foreign power to lay hands on it constituted 'high treason' ('Zamuro cuidando carne', 2011).

The media attention paid to Colombians was obviously prompted by their sheer numbers, while Cuba's assumed political alterity fuelled the fear of a loss of national sovereignty. It is striking, however, that no criticism of the naturalization of Peruvians and Ecuadorians has yet been heard, though in a few cases there has been criticism of 'chinos' (Chinese). Because of their ethnic alterity – non-European appearance, non-Spanish-speaking, practising a religion different from mainstream Christianity – this group apparently symbolizes a clearer contrast to the 'proper' Venezuelans than naturalized citizens from neighbouring Latin American countries do. The rejection of 'chinos' as compatriots might possibly be influenced by a rejection of economic cooperation between Venezuela and the totalitarian regime of China. However, in many places in Latin America the term 'chino' is a generic term for Asians, so that the general rejection of 'chinos' – as in 'thousands of *chinos* vote like Venezuelans' ('Realizan operativos', 2012) – can also be interpreted as negating their belonging to Venezuela based on an ethnic construction of difference.

- b) The naturalization procedure is seen as being organized in violation of the law, thereby rendering the resulting registration of new voters unlawful and illegitimate.

According to this view, the regularization/naturalization plan of Decreto 2823 violates both constitutional clauses and simple laws. It neither instructs the administration to closely verify the integrity of all necessary documents, nor requires proof of the minimum presence inside the country, and even allows undocumented immigrants to acquire naturalization with no requirements. ('Comisión parlamentaria', 2004; 'Provocaría el colapso', 2004; 'Asamblea Nacional', 2005). There are media articles that make a well-balanced claim insofar as they argue, for example, that many of the naturalized immigrants had lived and worked in the country for so long that they 'feel Venezuela to be their fatherland' ('sienten a Venezuela como su patria'), while other naturalized immigrants had not fulfilled the minimum criteria for naturalization ('Misión Identidad', 2004). Some media articles make the general assumption that

everyone 'illegal' has been naturalized in violation of existing laws because the examination procedure had been a perfunctory 'express naturalization' ('De cuántos votos', 2006). The term 'express naturalization' (*naturalización express*) quickly became a generally used phrase that connotes a sloppy if not intentionally careless procedure ('En vigencia', 2004; 'Naturalizaciones express', 2004).

- c) An ostensible threat to national sovereignty also surfaces when arguments combine the rejection of unwanted individuals with accusations about the act of sloppy/neglectful examination of applicants (thereby allowing e.g. the inclusion of criminals).

In a letter to the editor of *El Universal*, the government was said to be relinquishing control by not vigorously examining every naturalization, and thereby causing a loss of 'our (territorial) heritage, identity, nationality, and sovereignty' ('nuestro patrimonio [territorial], nuestra identidad, nacionalidad y soberanía', 'Cartas al Editor', 2004). Other contributions speak of a loss of 'security of the state' and 'national sovereignty' if anyone may apply successfully for Venezuelan nationality ('Misión Identidad', 2004; 'Misión Identidad usurpa', 2004). Again, these concerns must be understood as being related to the broader context of how ID cards had been issued through the Misión Identidad. These cards have frequently been criticized as being too easy to fabricate (simple printing on plain paper, laminated without security measures) and their issuing as too careless (registration of an individual in the civil registry without sufficient proof of identity), and both problems equally apply to the naturalized person receiving proof of their Venezuelan nationality through these cards.

Justifications for massive naturalizations as reported by print media

Statements in the public media, both private and state-owned, also show how government representatives and administrative executives reacted to criticisms. In line with the portrayal of the Misión Identidad as a means of overcoming historical injustices, the naturalization campaign was legitimized by referring to the shortcomings of former governments. Naturalizations applied for by thousands of foreigners had allegedly been protracted; examples were given of applicants having lived in Venezuela for 20 or 30 years or more ('Anjá, Chávez', 2005). Some of them were presented as 'de facto Venezuelans' due to their already having had 'children and even grandchildren' in Venezuela ('Garantizan cédula', 2004). The message was that they had acquired both a moral and a formal right to be considered Venezuelan ('Misión Identidad y naturalización', 2004). Those individuals whose applications were delayed were portrayed as 'victims' of 'injustice' and administrative discrimination ('Garantizan cédula', 2004; 'Venezuela naturalizó', 2004). The same argument is also made polemically to counter the rhetoric of 'express' naturalizations implying intentionally perfunctory examination of the required documents. In

2005, Jesse Chacón, the then Minister of Interior and Justice, reacted to the use of the term ‘express naturalizations’ when he declared that more than 90 per cent of the applicants had been living in Venezuela for more than 30 years and ‘to wait 30 years is nothing like express’ (‘Ministro Jesse Chacón’, 2005; ‘Venezuela naturalizó’, 2004). To emphasize the achievements of the Chávez administration, they juxtaposed before-and-after (the Bolivarian revolution) and proudly displayed the high numbers of naturalizations in contrast to the low numbers naturalized annually in former times (‘Prometen naturalizar’, 2004; MINCI, 2005). Accordingly, the naturalization campaign was framed as one element of the government’s attempts to ‘solve a historical’ or ‘social debt’ (‘Con ustedes’, 2005; ‘Los de oposición’, 2004; ‘Onidex naturaliza’, 2005; ‘Venezuela naturalizó’, 2004; MINCI, 2005).

The argument that naturalizations are morally necessary in light of the past is reinforced by the argument that only a fair treatment of immigrants will guarantee social justice in the future. Hence the naturalization campaign was often legitimized by using the vocabulary that applied for the Misión Identidad in general (‘addressing those most excluded by society’); but in some instances their vulnerability as foreigners was highlighted: ‘It is the answer to xenophobia, to marginality, and to the perverse politics used against those who came to this country to work and were in this way exploited indefinitely’ (‘9.261 nuevos’, 2006). The terms used in this context are similar to the official motives given in the presidential decree on regularization and naturalization (Decreto 2823). There, the ‘the obligation of the state to guarantee the human rights, the dignity, the just and equal treatment ...’ is given as the main reason for the need for an ‘effective proceeding that attends to the applications of the foreigners’ (art. 2).

Additionally, to be able to enjoy electoral rights is mentioned frequently as one aspect of combatting social inequality and injustice (‘Garantizan cédula’, 2004). The right to vote, so the argument generally goes, is one of the most prominent fundamental rights of a democratic society and must thus be available to all (‘Cómo les duele’, 2004). The influence that the high numbers of naturalizations had on electoral outcomes was also not neglected, but instead was affirmed as giving the lower strata of society the voice they deserved due to their numbers. This was as much the case in the early phase of the naturalization campaign as it was in later years. In 2004, the former Minister of Defence and then Vice President Rangel was quoted as having said during a naturalization ceremony, ‘When this process is over, we will have 250 thousand new Venezuelans who ... will also be registered in the electoral register. With this we will definitely say No to the disgrace of the past....’ (‘Rangel “Convencido”’, 2004). In 2010, the newspaper *El Nacional* reminded its readers of a statement of another Chavista who had declared in 2009, ‘The revocation referendum we won through two missions: *Barrio Adentro* and *Identidad*, which entered 2 million persons in the RE [electoral registry]’ (‘Las sombras’, 2010). And finally, in some press reports, the 10-year requirement for naturalization

was presented as encompassing a right to Venezuelan nationality – which is legally not the case, as all naturalizations are discretionary decisions of the administration ('Juramentados', 2006).

Governmental officials seldom countered the more concrete accusations of unlawful or at least careless naturalizations. If they did, they insisted that they had everything under control, kept track of all the individuals they had naturalized, ensured proof of the duration of their presence in Venezuela, and examined potential criminal backgrounds via Interpol. To prove this, the government published the results of a study that supposedly showed that 99 per cent of all cases processed had fulfilled all the necessary requirements for naturalization ('Venezuela naturalizó a más 20 mil extranjeros', 2004). Nevertheless, nowhere in the print media output of the years covered for this analysis could I find any precise explanations of when and how the required documentation had been examined during the naturalization procedure.

To further stress that the administration did not 'naturalize like crazy' (a quote accredited to the then director of Onidex), they also stated as an additional reason for the regularization campaign the goal of establishing a 'registro de extranjeros', or registry of foreigners ('No voy', 2004). According to this line of reasoning, the state had to keep track of the immigrant population, hence a regularization of undocumented persons would be to the benefit of the whole society ('Elaborarán proyecto', 2007).

Conclusions

When taking into account the history of immigration and naturalization in Venezuela, with regard to the government's claim of 'redeeming a historical debt', as well as to critics' accusation of a 'loss of national sovereignty' through the 2004-2006 naturalization campaign, the conclusions to be drawn are very ambivalent.

Firstly, it is true that immigrants were included in an exemplary manner. The government acknowledged the social ties those immigrants had established while living in Venezuela, and consequently granted them rights equal to those of other citizens. To accomplish such naturalizations in large numbers, a major logistical effort was required, and this was only possible in the context of the larger campaign of the Misión Identidad, with staff, knowledge and funds allocated to it. But at the same time, those measures increased the power of the state apparatus to register, monitor, and ultimately influence its citizens. The large-scale naturalization ceremonies obviously had a political agenda as they were installed to create publicity for the naturalization campaign and for the social programmes of the government at the same time. They were, in other words, part of an election campaign, and they guaranteed that state institutions had swift and direct access to the newly naturalized citizens. Registering them as voters immediately at the event not only gave these individuals access to citizenship rights, but also made sure the government did not lose valuable vot-

ers in its favour. The ceremonies thus had an inevitable influence on the electorate, whether they intended to or not.

Secondly, there is also, as some critics put it, the danger of inflating votes. It is indeed true that if more people become (new) Venezuelans, the individual (autochthonous) vote becomes less important. The central claim here is, of course, that Chávez only won the revocatory referendum of 2004 because he managed to enlarge – artificially, as the argument goes – the masses that would vote in favour of him with hundreds of thousands of poor and formerly disenfranchised foreigners. As has been pointed out, the accusation of electoral manipulation might not be unfounded, but the naturalization campaign is certainly not the appropriate matter with which to back up this accusation. The numbers simply are not large enough, as nothing indicates a volume beyond the 230,000 before the referendum, or a total of 420,000 through 2004-2006, as delineated above. If anything, Chávez won the referendum of 2004 through the inclusion of the poorer population at large, made possible by the *Misión Identidad*, and the segment of the formerly undocumented immigrants was only one, albeit perhaps not completely insignificant, beneficiary of that campaign.

From my point of view, to understand the fierce public criticism of the naturalization campaign, it is necessary to take into account how the highly symbolic transgression of the national boundary had been merged with the merely administrative practice of regularization of undocumented immigrants. As depicted above, the accelerated naturalization procedure included two formal steps of verification. The first step, according to the immigration law, established whether entry and residency were to be granted so that they could be formalized later. Thereafter, the constitutional review of the criteria for naturalization was undertaken. The second step, naturalization, was highly controversial because it symbolized the political boundary of the nation. But from the technical point of view, it was not problematic, because compliance with the criteria for naturalization, i.e. a sufficient duration of presence inside the country, was clearly verifiable. It furthermore depended on a constitutional norm, which was amended by markedly increased requirements only a few years previously (ten and five years according to the Constitution of 1999, as mentioned above). Far more complex was the decision of the authorities to grant or deny residency. Such status could only derive from a decision of the administration declaring the previously unauthorized stay as lawful in retrospect. To this end, they had to examine whether residency could be granted in the first place. Such administrative actions were based on simple laws or decrees, and they were more easily subjected to political goals than the constitutional clause on nationality. Hence the standards for immigration law shifted with the objectives of the respective governments. In addition, making the requirements for naturalization dependent on administrative discretion was a possibility provided for by the naturalization law even prior to Chávez' presidency. This meant that if the executive decided it was necessary to have an accelerated procedure, they could do so without breaking the law.

Public debates did not reflect this differentiated view of the double act of regularization-cum-naturalization. The layperson's understanding was primarily concerned with naturalization's highly symbolic and material significance, since the acquisition of formal national membership had more far reaching consequences (full political rights), and was the more visible consequence of a complex administrative process. In addition, the practice of *Misión Identidad* condensed the double process into a single instance of contact with the authorities, and thus reduced the distinctness of the two steps. The main objections of the Venezuelan lay public to this procedure were therefore formulated as a critique of naturalization, although they actually took offence to the retrospective legalization of the unlawful presence of foreigners.

* * *

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Notes

1. Author's translation.
2. On regularizations in Argentina, see Castillo and Gurrieri (2012); on Europe, see Chauvin, Garcés-Masareñas, and Kraler (2013).
3. On the extension of voting rights to those who naturalize as Hungarians while living abroad that became law in Hungary in 2013, see Nagy (2014); on regularizations of undocumented immigrants for electoral reasons during the 1990s in Malaysia, see Sadiq (2005). The most widely known example of the direct political utilization of naturalizations stems from U.S. history, where in the late 19th century urban political machines

- provided immigrants ‘fresh off the boat’ with false certificates allowing them to naturalize in return for their vote (Erie, 1988, p. 51).
4. In 2015, the latest tension between Colombia and Venezuela led to the deportation and displacement of various thousands of Colombian nationals from Venezuela. As a reaction to the smuggling of gasoline and basic goods from Venezuela into Colombia, the Venezuelan government in late August 2015 closed the border crossings from the Venezuelan states of Táchira, Zulia y Apure to Colombia, declared State of Emergency there, and deported 1.714 Colombians who were allegedly living in Venezuela without documentation. This caused further 22.024 Colombians to leave the Venezuelan border area and relocate to Colombia, resulting in a humanitarian crisis there (OCHA, 2015).
 5. Limitations apply, as they do to all census data: the information is given verbally and it is impossible to verify whether respondents truly declared their former nationality or their place of birth.
 6. From 1821 to 1830, the ‘República de Colombia’ encompassed the territory of Panama, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. In the constitution of 1830, when slavery was still practised, nationality was reserved for ‘free’ men only (Congreso Constituyente, 1830, art. 10).
 7. The same *Reglamento* also ruled that an ‘oath to the national flag’ (‘juramento a la Bandera Nacional’, art. 6) had to be made.
 8. In 1999, Venezuela was renamed the ‘Bolivarian Republic’ in honour of *el libertador* (the Liberator) Simón Bolívar, military and political leader of the early 19th century independence movement (Carrera Damas, 1987).
 9. In 2014, most countries in Latin America required from 2 to 5 years of residence, Costa Rica requires 7 (Vonk, 2015, p. 388). The first draft by Chávez proposed a minimum stay of 5 years, plus preferential treatment of named regions. Due to the fact that in this draft no consequence of such preference was specified, this was later changed to five years for the preferred groups and ten years for all other nationals (Brewer-Carías, 1999, p. 61).
 10. It is possible, though, that foreigners with permanent residency who apply for Venezuelan nationality are treated differently than undocumented foreigners, as claimed by Brewer Carías (2005, p. 26).
 11. Equally to the preferential treatment of named countries of origin, spouses of Venezuelans, and minor children of naturalized foreigners, have to have been living in Venezuela at least 5 years prior to their naturalization (Asamblea Nacional, 2004b, art. 21, no. 2, 3).
 12. Onidex, the ‘Oficina Nacional de Identificación y Extranjería’, was 2009 renamed ‘Servicio Administrativo de Identificación, Migración y Extranjería’ (SAIME).
 13. To date, scholarly works on the Venezuelan Social Missions only partly mention the *Misión Identidad*, see Penfold-Becerra (2007) and Alvarado Chacín (2009). How elaborately the missions were designed, and how carefully the icons and slogans representing them were arranged, is shown by the discussion of the icon of ‘Negra Hipólita’ by Ochoa (2014, pp. 53–65). The branding of the *Misión Identidad* and its understanding of identity is outlined in Schwarz (2015).
 14. In fact, the share of those defined as poor in Venezuela fell from 49.4 per cent in 1999 to 23.9 per cent in 2012 (CEPAL, 2013). It has been questioned, though, whether this reduction of poverty was due to a real change of the unequal social structure, or merely the result of paternalistic poverty relief provided to the poorest segments of society (Magallanes, 2009).
 15. The *Misión Identidad* continues into 2015; in 2013, more than nine million ID cards were issued still (SAIME, 2014).
 16. In Venezuela, foreigners are allowed to vote in municipal elections only (Asamblea Nacional, 1999, art. 62), while the vote in parliamentary and presidential election (and

by implication, in the presidential referendum) is reserved to Venezuelan nationals. In this text, inscription in the electoral registry hence refers to the admission to the nationwide database only possible after the naturalization procedure is completed.

17. Nevertheless, the mobilizing effect of the missions was never denied by the Chávez administration, because from its point of view this indicated that the social policies actually had the intended positive impact upon the population; see note 14. The strategy of using social programmes as an investment in poor people's electoral support, or, more bluntly, as 'buying votes', is not a specifically Venezuelan phenomenon, but is known from other Latin America countries like Mexico and Peru, where centrally managed social security funds operated 'outside regular administrative structures' and followed a 'political rationale instead of strictly social and economic considerations' (Penfold-Becerra, 2007, p. 66).

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