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Introduction

Legitimacy: concept and relevance

If politics is about ‘who gets what, when, and how’ (Lasswell 1950), then legitimacy is about the transfer of power from citizens to those who get to decide about politics. In other words, legitimacy is a characteristic of authorities who have the right to make decisions. Why are citizens more willing to accept some people as political authorities over others? What contributes to their evaluations of political authorities? And do people in different countries have different ideas about who should rule over them and why? The conditions that authorities need to fulfil so that citizens voluntarily transfer power to them and recognize their legitimacy are the subject of this thesis.

Legitimacy is an intangible quality and a complex concept and it is used and interpreted in many different ways. A search for publications containing the term ‘legitimacy’ in a media database returns over 73,000 results just for the period of one year. Even more results are returned for the search of the word ‘legitimate’—over 280,000¹. The list of results illustrates the scope of uses and understandings of the term. An article in *The Nation* identified the delivery of better lives to Chinese people as the basis of the Communist Party’s legitimacy (‘Economic miracle built on pollution’ 2015). The author of a *Daily Star* article recognized the need of the UN Security Council backing for military action against ISIS being legitimate (Sachs 2015). *The Independent Online* pointed to the use of a humanitarian crisis in Eastern Ukraine by the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics to pressure the UN to recognize their legitimacy (Losh 2015). An article in *The East African* linked the stalemate of the Doha Round of negotiations with the decrease of the World Trade Organization’s legitimacy (Mehta 2015). *The Toronto Star* questioned the legitimacy of charges brought against a Canadian journalist arrested in India (Welsh 2015). *The Federal Register* (2015) reported the revision of standards of gift acceptance by Federal employees in the United States, which ‘affect the perceived integrity of the

¹ The searches were completed on 29 November 2015 using Factiva database and they included the mentions of legitimacy and legitimate in all publications (including additional blogs and boards) between 1 November 2014 and 29 November 2015.

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employee or the credibility and legitimacy of the agency's program'. *The Wall Street Journal* published an article by the president of Sierra Leone who emphasised the need to increase the legitimacy of Sierra Leone's government after the Ebola outbreak (Koroma 2015). An article in *The Irish Times* reported the undermining of legitimacy of the courts by the new Polish government and president (Scally 2015). *Metro Canada* informed about 'the recognition of the legitimacy of the use of cannabis as a medicine' in Ontario (Service Torstar News 2015). Finally, *The Times* discussed Daniel Radcliffe's legitimacy as an actor (Turner 2015).

These are only a few examples of publications from the last days of November 2015 but each of them carries a different meaning of the word 'legitimacy': the source of power, the right to military intervention, the recognition as a state, a justification of arrest, the effectiveness of an international organization, the approval of actions, trust in a government, the validity of institution's decisions, the legality of products, and the characteristics that make a person suitable for a certain role (even not a political one).

These examples illustrate the plethora of interpretations of legitimacy used in the public debate and the prevalence of the concept in contemporary commentaries on social and political reality. Moreover, the examples show that the different uses point to different objects of legitimacy (policies, laws, actions, institutions), different actors that can grant legitimacy to these objects (population within a country, the UN, courts), and different functions of legitimacy (power to carry out actions, and recognition of decisions). Finally, these examples show that there are various criteria for achieving legitimacy (economic prosperity, effectiveness, trustworthiness, certain other personal characteristics).

Furthermore, legitimacy seems relevant for the relations between citizens and their governments. For example, the two waves of protests in Ukraine starting in 2004 and 2013 show that issues related to legitimacy are important to citizens and can affect power relations between the state and citizens. These protests illustrate that citizens may desire that authorities acquire power in a way that is perceived as legitimate; e.g. via free and fair elections, the violation of which was the main concern of the Orange Revolution in 2004-2005. These protests also show that citizens may desire that

authorities exercise their power in a way that is perceived as legitimate; Ukrainians disappointed with the conduct of President Yanukovich mobilized and protested against the abuse of power and corruption in 2013-2014. These examples suggest that perceived legitimacy can influence the stability of political authorities and their ability to exercise power.

Therefore, this thesis focuses on the various criteria that political authorities need to fulfil to be perceived as legitimate by citizens. By concentrating on citizens perceptions of political authorities, this thesis investigates perceived legitimacy. For the purpose of this investigation, I have defined perceived legitimacy as an attribute ascribed to a political authority by individuals on the basis of evaluating the authority's normative qualities, which results in a willingness to voluntarily transfer political power to this authority. This thesis aims to (1) *establish what are the normative criteria on the basis of which citizens ascribe legitimacy to political authorities*, and (2) *explore the differences and similarities of these criteria across regimes types*.

Comparing perceived legitimacy in different regimes

This research project began with a set of questions regarding legitimacy of hybrid regimes—regimes that combine elements of democratic and autocratic rule. There is a growing body of research trying to find out what kind of legitimation strategies are used by leaders and elites in hybrid regimes to stay in power and engender legitimacy (Holbig and Gilley 2010; Gerschewski 2013; Grauvogel and Von Soest 2014; Sandby-Thomas 2014; Von Soest and Grauvogel 2015; Mazepus *et al.* 2016; Morgenbesser 2016). It is assumed that political authorities in democracies draw their legitimacy mainly from the electoral procedures through which they are designated to rule by the population, whereas legitimacy of hybrid and authoritarian regimes is believed to be based prevalingly on the delivery of good living standards and goal-achievement in general (e.g. Rigby and Fehér 1982, pp.10–11; White 1986; Palma 1991, p.57; Holmes 1993). Another related issue that research of hybrid regimes explores is the contribution of these strategies to the regimes' stability and the extent to which these strategies differ from the ones used by other political regimes (Gerschewski 2013; Kailitz 2013).

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Building on the literature analysing legitimation strategies used by elites in non-democracies, this thesis investigates the differences in political legitimacy between hybrid regimes and democracies from the perspective of citizens. Instead of focusing on the claims to legitimacy and the strategies used by authorities to convince citizens of their right to rule, it investigates perceived legitimacy, i.e., how citizens in these regimes evaluate and perceive the authorities. If one assumes that hybrid regimes use different strategies than democratic (and authoritarian) regimes to obtain legitimacy, one may also assume that citizens socialized in these different political systems use different criteria to evaluate political authorities' legitimacy and, as a consequence, are convinced by different arguments and characteristics of political authorities when voluntarily delegating power to them. If they are not, that would mean that either the strategies used by the authorities do not resonate with the citizens, that the criteria for legitimacy do not differ much across regime types, or that these strategies are to achieve goals different than legitimacy (e.g. increase support). To what extent do individuals living in different political regimes differ when it comes to the expectations they have from political authorities? Compared with citizens socialized in democracies such as the Netherlands, do citizens socialized in non-democracies such as Russia require other qualities to perceive their rulers as legitimate?

Socialization can affect peoples' eating habits, behaviour in public, and dress-codes, which differ across societies and cultural groups. In other words, growing up in a certain environment influences to some degree preferences for things as diverse as diet, personal space, and clothing style. Similarly, political socialization is believed to shape the scope of political orientations that a young person could acquire within a given society. Knowledge about political institutions and their designated authority and duties, about the way citizens and the state institutions interact, and about the formal and informal procedures guiding the behaviour of political authorities and citizens is passed on by teachers and parents, and is shaped by early experiences of political life. While '(...) what makes power legitimate in one society may differ from others, and that the criteria in one may be rejected by another (Beetham 1991, p.6), it is not clear to what extent the ideas about how a political system ought to function (i.e., ideas about an ideal political system) differ across countries and what might cause these differences.

Contrary to the assumption about large differences between values of people in different societies, there is evidence, for example, that a common belief in the uniqueness of Russian character—which is used often by Russian political elites to justify non-democratic institutions—is not in line with evidence from cross-cultural research into personality traits (Allik *et al.* 2011). Although Russians may believe that they have exceptional personalities and that because of that their nation ‘cannot be understood by reason’², Russians do not differ substantially from global averages when it comes to personality.

Following from this debate about socialization and from the research on legitimation strategies of non-democratic regimes, the two aims of this project mentioned above can be phrased as questions: (1) *What makes political authorities legitimate in the eyes of citizens?* and (2) *Do people socialized in different political regimes have different expectations about political authorities that rule over them?* Therefore, the three studies included in this thesis examine whether citizens in different regimes use similar or different criteria to judge political authorities’ legitimacy.

Perceived legitimacy, trust, or support?

Some scholars are sceptical about the usefulness of the concept of legitimacy (Hyde 1983; Przeworski 1991) and have argued that the concept adds little or no explanatory value to political science research. However, in my view, when defined precisely, legitimacy can be a useful tool for analysing people’s attitudes towards authorities. It seems to me that legitimacy is not the same as support, because support for political authorities can be based on instrumental motives (e.g. “This government benefits me materially, so I support it”), whereas legitimacy appears to be based on normative grounds. For example, Abulof (2015) argued that one cannot “buy” legitimacy. Trust, on the other hand, although perhaps closer to the meaning of perceived legitimacy, does not encompass all aspects of legitimacy. Especially the willingness to transfer power to the authorities and their right to take decisions and rule are the aspects of legitimacy that go beyond trust. Even if one trusts another person, it does not mean that

² Fyodor Tyutchev (1803-1873): Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone./No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness:/She stands alone, unique –/In Russia, one can only believe.’

he or she considers that person legitimate and having the right to make political decisions in their name. Other aspects of legitimacy that relate to the transfer of power are at play here too, for example, the way the power is obtained, its legality, and the scope of competences. Therefore, the concept of legitimacy has a distinct meaning and might add to the explanation of the evaluations of political authorities and the expectations that people have from them.

Finding the right definition and operationalization of political legitimacy is not straightforward. Especially because perceived legitimacy is at the centre of much current research, it is not easy to identify a consensual, suitable operationalization that will go beyond trust or support for political institutions. Trust and support are usually the variables used in empirical studies to measure (perceived) legitimacy. In this thesis, the variables used to measure perceived legitimacy include questions similar to often-used questions about trust and support and additional questions asking directly about legitimacy, the right of authorities to take decisions, willingness to protest against these decisions, and willingness to transfer power to the authorities.

A possible way to investigate whether perceived legitimacy is reflected in the evaluation criteria of citizens is by testing in the same study several different factors that can influence citizens' judgments of authorities—i.e., including both instrumental (e.g. material gains) and normative factors (e.g. justice) in one model. If in such a study only instrumental motives would play a role in the evaluations of political authorities, then this would suggest that legitimacy (defined as an attribute based on normative qualities) actually does not exist. However, if normative factors would affect evaluations of political authorities, then this would be an indication that legitimacy (defined as an attribute based on normative qualities) is present in citizens' judgments of political authorities. All three empirical studies presented in this thesis show that citizens evaluating political authorities are not only concerned with instrumental gains and outputs delivered by the authorities, but also take into account the fairness and justice of these authorities. The results suggest that there exists something like legitimacy that can be studied empirically and that legitimacy and the factors influencing judgments about it are distinct from related concepts such as support or trust.

Three ways to explore factors influencing perceived legitimacy

The three empirical studies presented in this thesis explore criteria used by citizens to judge legitimacy of political authorities. The data for all three studies come from one survey conducted in five countries. Each of these studies tries to answer the research questions (*What makes political authorities legitimate in the eyes of citizens?* and *Do people socialized in different political regimes have different expectations about political authorities that rule over them?*) in a different way and explores different aspects of perceived legitimacy.

The first study evaluates the effects of theoretically identified factors on the perceived legitimacy of a hypothetical government in a vignette experiment. It aims to be a test of the causal effects of two normative factors (distributive justice and procedural justice), an instrumental factor (personal outcome), and dependence on perceived legitimacy. To assess the effects of the theoretically identified factors across political regimes, the same vignette experiment was conducted in five countries: the Netherlands and France (two old democracies), Poland (a new post-communist democracy), and Ukraine and Russia (two post-communist hybrid regimes). In the study, the effects of the factors and their interactions were compared across countries to test hypotheses about differences between citizens in different regimes.

The second study examines perceived legitimacy in a different way. While the first study examines theoretically identified factors, the second study aims to identify other criteria used by citizens for evaluating political authorities' legitimacy. The second study does so through the analysis of answers to an open question about the most important characteristics of legitimate political authorities. This study thus provides an opportunity to identify other (additional) criteria used by citizens for evaluating legitimacy than those included in the first study. Moreover, it allows for a comparison of conceptions of legitimacy held by citizens socialized in democratic and hybrid regimes and a search for differences in their criteria for evaluating political authorities. Are elections the most important criterion of legitimacy in democracies? Are elections also deemed important in hybrid regimes? Is it enough to win elections to be considered legitimate or does the right conduct of authorities constitute a more

important dimension of legitimacy according to citizens? Can elected leaders lose legitimacy ‘through illegal and/or unconstitutional actions’ (Niland 2015)?

The third study, in contrast to the first and second, focuses not on perceived legitimacy of hypothetical authorities, but on the perceived legitimacy of real and current political institutions. The third study investigates to what extent evaluations of current political authorities are based on general ideas about how the political system ought to function (what principles the system should be based on) and to what extent they are based on evaluations of the functioning of the current institutions. These two categories of variables might be used by citizens to assess the legitimacy of political authorities. Depending on consensus about either the general ideas regarding the preferred regime type or the performance of institutions, either set of variables might explain more variance in perceived legitimacy in different political regimes. In other words, this study examines whether a possibly weaker consensus about the superiority of a democratic system contributes to the explanation of perceived legitimacy of hybrid regimes.

Summary

This project contributes to the research of legitimacy by exploring citizens’ (rather than elites’ and scholars’) conceptions of legitimacy. Moreover, it contributes to theory building by testing how several factors influence perceived legitimacy in diverse political contexts (i.e., different regimes types). Finally, this research informs about the similarities and differences in the mechanisms of evaluating political authorities between citizens socialized in democracies and hybrid regimes.