

Recommendations for European Union's policy towards Cuba

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This paper is comprised of recommendations for the mid-term strategy of the European Union towards Cuba. It was prepared by European NGOs that carry out projects in Cuba in support of independent civil society and is thus based on their research on the island and interviews with civil society representatives. The paper aims to contribute to the discussion on EU policy towards Cuba and enhance the dialogue on Cuban policy between EU Member States, EU institutions, NGOs, and other relevant actors on the occasion of the upcoming reevaluation of the Common Position of the EU towards Cuba.

Introduction

In the last revision of the Common Position of 1996, the European Council confirmed the further deterioration of the human rights situation in Cuba and decided to start working on a mid-term and long-term strategy. The presenters of this paper welcome this decision and believe that a reasonable strategy will enable the EU to assist Cuba in a peaceful transition towards democracy and a free society.

In its Common Position the EU pledges to facilitate peaceful change in Cuba and promote respect for human rights by intensifying the dialogue with the government and "all sectors of Cuban society."¹ The process of reflection over the EU policy towards Cuba has not brought any visible results so far. Since the last revision of the Common Position in June 2006 there were attempts by the two presidency countries to propose new strategies with more concrete measures to

¹ 96/697/CFSP: Common Position of 2 December 1996 defined by the Council on the basis of Article J.2 of the Treaty on European Union, on Cuba, <http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31996E0697:EN:HTML>

be taken by the EU member states with the aim of supporting democratic forces in Cuba. However, not all EU member states are open to discussion over common EU policy because it interferes with their bilateral relations with Cuba and with their economic interests.

New developments on the island with the succession of power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl, show that the regime is ready to hold on to its power even after the demise of Fidel. This would most probably preserve the totalitarian regime, and for Cubans, a life without respect for their basic rights and freedoms. The European Union should, through its re-defined Common Position, send clear signals to the political, military and economic elites in Havana that it will not tolerate the continuance of this oppressive regime and it will not engage in cooperation until the Cuban regime makes significant changes towards democracy and rule of law.

Recommendations

The European NGOs submitting this paper would like to offer their experience of working with Cuban independent civil society and monitoring the situation on the island, and thus suggest that the future EU strategy should be based on the following areas:

(1) MEASURES TOWARDS THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT

The EU should:

a) Maintain pressure regarding the release of political prisoners and respect for human rights

The Cuban government has not respected any demands for the release of political prisoners and respect for human rights set as conditions by the EU for further negotiations concerning EU-Cuba relations. The overall human rights situation has worsened over the past year as reported by many international organizations. Any further cooperation with future Cuban leaders must be only entered into with the pre-condition of the release of political prisoners.

b) Insist on a visit of Javier Solana's Special Representatives for Human Rights

This visit should be made with the goal of meeting the representatives of civil society, as well as raising human rights concerns with the Cuban government.

c) Demand that the new heads of the regime organize free and fair elections with the presence of international observers

As recent developments on the island show, the succession of power from Fidel Castro to his brother and Minister of Defense Raúl Castro is the scenario the regime is slowly pushing through. There is no doubt that this succession would preserve the totalitarian nature of the regime and oppression against the Cuban people who have had no possibility to decide if this is the fate they want for their country.

d) Targeted visa ban applied to Cuban officials directly responsible for human rights violations

Pressure on the government to respect human rights should be complemented by targeted measures. In particular, they should be considered with regard to top Cuban officials, for example judges and prosecutors involved in the trials of human rights activists and members of State security apparatus.

(2) SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT CIVIL SOCIETY IN CUBA

The EU should:

e) Support independent civil society by providing funding for their projects and organizations

Emerging civil society movements exist in Cuba that are able to partly evade the omnipresent state imposed control and survive its repressions. These movements are key to peaceful changes in Cuba. They cannot survive without support from the international democratic community.

f) Appoint an EU Special Envoy for Transition and Democracy

The EU should appoint a Special Envoy on Cuba who, with the help of an advisory body comprised of experts on Cuba and

transition to democracy in communist and totalitarian regimes, would assess the key actors in transformation, design different alternatives for the strategy based on similar experiences in other regions and propose specific steps to be taken to implement this strategy.

g) Encourage the dissemination in Cuba of information on the experience of transition to democracy from EU member states

Many EU member states have gone through successful transitions from totalitarian regimes to democracy; they are willing to share their experiences with Cubans. There are numerous publications on European transitions to democracy that analyze the different aspects of transitions and compare the steps taken in each country. The EU should encourage the dissemination of such information through their missions.

h) Provide increased access for the free flow of information

Every mission in Cuba of an EU Member State should be encouraged to have computers with internet connection accessible for members of civil society. A selection of European newspapers, magazines and recently published books should also be made available. At least some of these publications should be available in Spanish.

i) Take a more active role, through the European Commission (EC) Delegation in Havana, to further develop civil society

As the representative of the European Union, the EC Delegation should take a leading role in promoting human rights, including through the support of projects, and intensify its contacts with independent civil society. It should be actively involved in the above-mentioned recommendations e, g, and h.

j) Ensure the full implementation by all EU representations, including member state missions and the EC Delegation, of the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders report that different member states' missions implement the guidelines to varying degrees. This has led to confusion among the human rights community in Cuba about EU policy regarding human rights defenders, as well as to

a decreased level of protection. The EU representation should take a proactive role in ensuring that Cuban human rights community is aware of the guidelines through dissemination and capacity building.

k) Emphasize Symbolic Elements of EU Policy towards Cuba

The opposition and Cuban citizens should know that they are internationally supported and that they are not alone. New symbolic measures should be implemented by EU diplomats in Havana – for example, personal visits to the families that have been subjected to an act of repudiation and to the leaders of the independent civil society movements. They should also invite civil society representatives to all public events organized by EU Embassies.

(3) WORKING IN INTERNATIONAL ARENA

The EU should:

l) Work towards a common approach on Cuba with other international actors

If European policy is to be effective, it is important to find common ground with other relevant international actors, such as the US, UN and the countries of Latin America.

Despite apparent differences in their policies, there are already many shared elements. Common ground is a necessity for a peaceful transition and there are many similarities in the policies.

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