

Can the EU Adapt to Cuba's New Wave of Democratic Activism?

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Article

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Cuba is again on the EU's agenda after large-scale protests took place in July 2021 and as activists plan further demonstrations for November. In the wake of the July protests, there has been strong pressure from within the European Parliament for the EU to impose sanctions on Cuban government officials who suppressed the protesters and suspend the main agreement governing the Cuba-EU relationship. Meanwhile, the EU and the governments of multiple EU members have criticized the Cuban regime's harsh response to the protests.

Now EU leaders and officials must decide on a more tangible plan of action. They should devise a more balanced Cuba policy that mixes ongoing engagement with the regime with outreach to the new generation of activists involved in the protests.

The EU's Strong Presence but Weak Influence in Cuba

While the United States' ongoing embargo continues to limit U.S. diplomatic leverage over Cuba, the EU's strong economic presence in the country has left EU leaders well-positioned to exert influence. Yet so far Europeans have not used their trade, investment, and development cooperation with Cuba as tools of democracy support. The EU has also failed to recognize the influence and demands of an emergent wave of digital activism in Cuba or to convince the regime to recognize critical voices within civil society.

A more balanced position between engaging the regime and reaching out to civil society would require the EU to adjust the current EU-Cuba Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), the policy document that sets the parameters for the EU-Cuba relationship. Specifically, this would mean bringing nongovernmental actors, who are mentioned under the terms of this agreement, to the table for the EU-Cuba human rights dialogue in a way that currently does not happen.

The EU's policy toward Cuba has evolved over the years. From 1996 until 2016, the EU held regular debates on the human rights situation in the country under the Common Position on Cuba, which conditioned a cooperation agreement on tangible progress toward a democratic transition. During this period, democracy and human rights had a prominent place in the EU's Cuba policy, and human rights activists and members of civil society factored more heavily into Brussels' policy. In 2016, the EU replaced the Common Position on Cuba with the PDCA, which seeks to promote democracy and human rights through constructive engagement with the regime.

Since 2016, the EU has deepened engagement with the Cuban regime even as Cuban leaders have become weaker and more authoritarian. While Europeans are right to maintain open channels of dialogue, engage with the Cuban government, and condemn the U.S. embargo, they have erred in not paying enough attention to the rapidly changing and more vibrant forms of civil society that have emerged in the country. The EU has overlooked the rise of a new, young, and mostly digital opposition, which helped encourage the July 2021 protests. For many critical voices in Cuba and Europe, the EU's decision to privilege regime engagement over civil society support is damaging the EU's image as a normative power. Its policy on Cuba is also at odds with its stance on Venezuela, where Europeans have engaged the opposition and sanctioned government officials. The EU should continue to criticize the U.S. policy of coercion toward Cuba, but EU leaders need to get better at reading the societal trends in Cuba and use their leverage more astutely to build bridges to support the novel kinds of civic action that are becoming more widespread in the country.

The EU's Missed Opportunity

The spontaneous July protests caught the EU by surprise amid Europe's summer break. In recent years, Europe has declined to support the new, less formally organized but arguably more powerful civic movements that have taken root against the authoritarian regime. As a result, the EU missed a chance to use its strong linkages with Cuba for what could have been a moment of change.

The EU seems trapped in the PDCA framework. In Article 19 of the agreement, which lists the document's "actors of cooperation," the Cuban government comes first and civil society comes last. In a sense, the Cuban people—including dissidents and the youthful, digital-savvy opposition—are victims of the EU's change from a conditional approach under the Common Position on Cuba to an engagement-based approach under the PDCA. In any case, neither strategy has worked: the first seemed too confrontational to gain any traction, while the second practically ignores the voices of civil society and widespread discontent on the island.

The EU clearly has misjudged the situation in Cuba with its risky bet on embracing the regime to try to foster stability and reforms. In the process, EU leaders have ended up sacrificing democracy and human rights to advance development cooperation and regime-controlled economic reforms. This approach inadvertently has legitimized the country's post-Castro dual leadership of President Miguel Díaz-Canel and Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz just when these leaders have been losing legitimacy and support among ordinary Cubans. The coronavirus pandemic has deepened the multidimensional crisis facing Cuba and the economic and social hardships citizens are weathering. Meanwhile, the regime has become more authoritarian in the absence of former leader Fidel Castro's charisma, which had given it some degree of legitimacy. On the one hand, the EU has underestimated the scale of popular discontent and the Cuban people's newfound lack of fear of the regime. On the other hand, it has overestimated the ability of the post-Castro regime to stabilize the country and has ignored its repressive streak and lack of legitimacy.

The EU has not seen Cuba's increasingly dynamic and creative digital forms of civil society as an opportunity for democratic change. These new types of young protesters—including artists, bloggers, and influencers—threaten a regime that can only counter their calls for change through violence and intimidation. These figures include YouTuber Dina Stars, who was arrested during a live interview, and musicians like Yotuel, who subverted a long-standing regime slogan into a rallying cry of protest ("homeland and life"); at the same time, alternative media sources like El Estornudo and 14ymedio have become more influential. Meanwhile, the ugly face of post-Castro, one-party authoritarianism in Cuba was also evident even before the July 2021 protests. Dissidents face the near-constant prospect of arrests, and alternative ways of thinking are repressed, as embodied by the state's crackdown on the San Isidro cultural movement against the Cuban government's restrictions on and censorship of artists. Three government-issued decrees have further restricted freedom of expression and have reinforced the regime's control over the internet.

The EU's Mixed Approaches to Cuba

When it comes to Cuba, the EU is divided between those favoring engagement (who tend to support closer ties with the regime) and those wanting more conditionality (who want Europeans to do more to support the opposition). It took many days for the EU to decide on what was ultimately a tepid reaction to the demonstrations in July. In his statement, High Representative Josep Borrell stated, “addressing the Cuban people’s grievances requires internal economic reforms,” but his criticism of the government’s harsh repression was measured, given that one protester died and more than one hundred individuals were arrested. Similarly, the Council of the EU took a watered-down position that split the differences among EU members’ diverging policies. It has not officially condemned the three highly restrictive decrees the Cuban government has passed. Neither the Council of the EU nor Borrell directly criticized the regime’s move to shut down the internet.

The European Parliament has been by far the most active EU defender of political pluralism and human rights in Cuba. In a June 10 resolution before the protests even unfolded, it denounced “the lack of commitment and willingness of the Cuban regime to endeavor to advance towards even minimal progress towards change,” and mentioned “the right of the Cuban people to demand the democratisation of their country.” In reaction to the protests, a subsequent July 14 press release condemned “the crackdown on the peaceful protests” by “the Cuban dictatorship.” The European Parliament also engages with Cuban dissidents and human rights activists through forums like the September 6, 2021, meeting of the supranational body’s Subcommittee on Human Rights.

In a September 16 resolution, the European Parliament condemned “the extreme violence and repression against protesters, human rights defenders, independent journalists, artists, dissidents and opposition political leaders.” It also demanded the inclusion of civil society organizations in the EU-Cuba human rights dialogue and recommended that the PDCA’s human rights clause be activated and that those responsible for human rights violations be sanctioned.

If it follows these recommendations, the Council of the EU could, for the first time, impose penalties on Cuban officials under its new human rights sanctions regime, which was approved in December 2020. This is something that other countries, including the United States, have already done. In August, Washington imposed sanctions on three officials from Cuba’s Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.

However, a European agreement on sanctions or other restrictive measures seems unlikely. For decades, the EU has opposed the counterproductive U.S. embargo. Spain’s strong preference for maintaining dialogue with the regime is influential in EU debates. In a July 13 statement, the Spanish Foreign Ministry suggested that the pandemic and the resulting economic recession were the major causes of the protests. While Spain asked the Cuban government to respect protesters’ fundamental rights, Madrid offered the regime additional development assistance to confront the pandemic. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s efforts to avoid labeling the government in Havana a dictatorship or an authoritarian regime generated a heated debate in Spain.

The other major EU players did not comment officially on the protests in Cuba. The only reaction from Germany was a tweet on July 14 by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who “condemn[ed the] violence against protesters in Cuba” and asked the Cuban government to seek dialogue and release prisoners. Despite having the strongest ties to Cuban government officials of any European countries besides Spain, France and Italy offered no formal reactions.

By contrast, Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, and Poland have taken positions closer to that of the European Parliament. In July, these countries joined several non-EU countries—including Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Israel, South Korea, Ukraine, and the United States—to issue a statement that “condemn[s] the mass arrests and detentions of protestors in Cuba,” “urge[s] the Cuban government to heed the voices and demands of the Cuban people,” and offers “support of the Cuban people and all those who stand up for the basic freedoms all people deserve.”

The post of the head of the EU's delegation in Cuba also became subject to the Europeans' internal power struggle on Cuba policy. Mere days after the protests, the European External Action Service appointed former Portuguese official Isabel Brilhante Pedrosa to the job, succeeding former Spanish official Alberto Navarro whose support for a letter against the U.S. embargo earlier in 2021 triggered criticism in the European Parliament and led to his premature departure.

Prioritizing Civil Society Engagement

Due in part to the wide range of European reactions to the Cuban protests, the EU has failed to use the PDCA and its dialogue channels to increase pressure on the Cuban government, demand the release of protesters who were arrested, and push for democratic reforms. The linkages of trade, investment, development cooperation, and tourism have not yet provided the leverage for a constructive dialogue with the Cuban authorities, nor has the EU engaged more strongly with the new forms of civic activism sprouting up around the country. The European Parliament's September 2021 resolution has reopened the debate on Cuba and demands a response or at least discussions on how the EU should react to the new situation on the ground.

The EU needs to help civil society organizations and the Cuban people push for more space for cooperation, and it must engage with the new generation of democratic voices in the country. In addition, the EU should use its strong linkages and leverage potential to urge for a dialogue with Cuban officials while trying to use the PDCA as a lever for building bridges between the opposition and the regime. The combination of a weakened regime that remains under pressure and the newfound forcefulness of discontented Cuban citizens has changed the situation in the country. The EU has to adapt its policy accordingly and strike a better balance between government officials and the opposition, including by engaging much more with civil society actors.

After missed opportunities in the past, the EU could link the PDCA and its development funds to stronger demands for an end to government harassment of opposition forces and a dialogue with protesters. If the EU does not change its Cuba policy, its image as a democracy promoter will suffer, and it could be accused of tolerating human rights abuses in exchange for full cooperation and dialogue with an authoritarian regime. The approach proposed here does not mean cutting off relations with Cuban officials, who hold the power for carrying out reforms. But the EU should offer stronger support for the emerging generation of civic activists too.

Perhaps above all, the EU needs to make its Cuba policy less ideological. Many left-leaning Europeans still seem too willing to overlook crushing repression from a socialist regime, while many on the right push for harsher coercion against Cuba than they press for when non-leftist regimes are concerned. A more coherent EU policy would assist Cuba's citizens and political opposition and would help restore Europeans' image as even-handed supporters of the democratic aspirations of people around the world.

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