EU-Cuba agreement: A window of opportunity

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The agreement between the EU and Cuba has struck a balance between strengthened human rights and trade, and policymakers must use this momentum to push through reforms, writes Reimer Böge.

It is no exaggeration that with the EU-Cuba political dialogue and cooperation agreement (PDCA), history will be written. It is the first bilateral agreement between the EU and Cuba. You could say the negotiations are a ‘normalisation’ of EU-Cuba relations.

Europe finds itself, after a long period of national unilateralism and various political experiments concerning external relations with the insular state, back to a joint approach with Havana. A new status, which indeed makes sense for both sides.

For Cuba, because it is strongly dependent on new international partners. Venezuela, its most
important partner and economic sponsor, has gotten lost in a chaos of hunger, inflation, violence, crime and economic downfall. US President Donald Trump has openly declared he was dropping his predecessor's rapprochement policy with Havana. Cuba, poor in resources, needs new partners.

A new status quo also makes sense for the EU, because the diplomatic silence of these past years has meant that neither the citizens of Cuba nor Europe were able to make any substantial progress. Instead, the numerous bilateral agreements and treaties between individual member states and Cuba did not paint a big picture of strong political union and stringency in terms of EU external action.

It is now time for a fresh start. The geopolitical status quo is an opportunity for Cuba and the EU to set their relations on new footing and reorient together in terms of economic and trade policies.

More and more successful initiatives stemming from private investment or, for example, the high production rates of 'cuentapropistas' (self-employed, or entrepreneurship) show that economic reforms in Cuba must be further supported and maintained.

Trade policy reforms, such as the ones laid out in the PDCA regarding customs duties and standardisation, are part of that.

At the same time Cuba is a country where the opposition is suppressed and human rights are not guaranteed.

Cuban workers are in a difficult situation - take for example those in the tourism industry, who can only work for a foreign employer via a public employment agency. This is dangerous for the profitability of firms, and under ILO factors, is highly problematic for Cuban employees.

Because Cuba has two currencies, the lion's share of wages paid by foreign employers is retained by the public employment agency (often about 90 per cent). An open critique of these grievances was included in my report.

Additionally, a majority of Parliament's international trade committee supported a roadmap regarding human rights - a binding plan by the Cuban government on how it will enforce further reforms in this important area.

The EU-Cuba high-level discussion on human rights, which is already taking place in the framework of the PCDA, could be an important practice in the direction of the human rights dialogue, which is enshrined in the PDCA.

Overall, the vote on PDCA in the international trade committee accommodates the changed situation between the EU and Cuba.

We have found a good balance between our calls for reforms in terms of human and employment rights on the one hand, and more effective and intensified political trade and economic cooperation on the other hand.

About the author

Reimer Böge (EPP, DE) is the INTA committee opinion rapporteur on the political dialogue and cooperation agreement between the EU and Cuba

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