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The European Union and Cuba, in the aftermath of Castro's 'fall'

-Joaquín Roy



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**The European Union and Cuba,
in the aftermath of Castro's 'fall'**

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The European Union and Cuba, in the aftermath of Castro's 'fall' *

Background

The announcement made by the Spanish government in September of 2004 to sponsor a new approach of the European Union relations with Cuba raised certain expectations and skepticism from seasoned observers, as well as apprehension in circles close to the dissident movement. After much hesitation in correcting one of the most polemical measures taken by the EU on Cuba in recent years, the Spanish embassy decided to invite again the representatives of the Cuban dissident groups to the reception of the 12 of October. However, the highly political content of the speech given by the new Spanish ambassador, advancing that changes were in the making, produced a visible irritation in the dissident movement and the political opposition in Spain. This was apparently a preview of more conflicts to come, in view of the accidental arrival and expulsion of a Spanish member of Congress and director of international relations of the Partido Popular, in the company of two other Dutch deputies. The protest filed by the Netherlands government and the pressure created in the media made the prospects of a reformatted EU policy towards Cuba even more doubtful. Moreover, with the EU machinery barely recovered after this crisis, pondering about the alternatives, the accident suffered by Fidel Castro, with the potential of affecting his decision-making powers, has made the European future measures even more cautious. In any case, the recent and current state of affairs of EU-Cuba relations, with Spain at the center, is wider in scope and details, filled with complex dimensions and actors.

A year ago, Fidel Castro dramatically selected the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of his failed attack against the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953, for his rejection of any kind of humanitarian assistance, economic

* This paper is a follow-up commentary of an updated, shortened version of a paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) meeting held in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 6-9, 2004. This study reflects updated portions of three successive working papers: "The European Anchoring of Cuba: from Persuasion and Good Intentions to Contradiction and Frustration". Miami European Union Center/Jean Monnet Chair, Vol. 2, No. 6, May 2002. (http://www.miami.edu/EUCenter/royworkingpaper_cuba.pdf); "A Review of the European Perceptions of Cuba", Working Paper No. 12, February 2003, (<http://www.miami.edu/nsc/publications/pubs-WP-pdf/12WP.pdf>).

"The European Perception of Cuba: from Frustration to Irritation", Miami European Union Center/Jean Monnet Chair, Vol 3, No 2, August 2003. (<http://www.miami.edu/eucenter/royfinal.pdf>). Documentary appendixes included in this version apply as a supplement to the present, shortened, and updated format. Research on recent developments has been partially facilitated by grants awarded by the European Commission. A considerable number of Latin American, Caribbean, and European government officials, and EU Commission, Council and Parliament staff members have contributed with details and comments. All of them have elected to remain anonymous. Aimee Kanner and Wendy Grenade have provided partial editing.

cooperation, and political dialogue with the EU and its Member States, within the insertion in the benefits of the Africa, Pacific, Caribbean (ACP) group, through the Cotonou Agreement, successor of the Lomé Convention, signaling one of the lowest points in European-Cuban relations.¹ Just days before the anniversary of the prelude of the Cuban Revolution, the EU had issued a harsh criticism of the regime's latest policies and personal insults against some European leaders (notably, Spain's José María Aznar), in essence freezing all prospects of closer relations. Having survived the end of the Cold War and the perennial U.S. harassment, the Castro regime seemed to have lost its most precious alternative source of international political cooperation, if not economic support. Subtle signals of a rapprochement in 2004 as a result of the change of government in Spain after the March elections and a review of the EU collective attitude had not confirmed a substantial shift in either the European or the Cuban positions, leaving Cuba at the same apparent disadvantageous situation.

This serious setback was the result of the harshness of the reprisals against a number of dissidents and the death sentences imposed on three hijackers of a ferry in April 2003. These developments pushed back a series of rapprochement measures maintained by the EU and most of its Member States with the expectation of contributing to facilitate the political transition. In spite of the fact that the Cuban government justified its actions in view of the perceived threat presented by the increased activity of the internal opposition and the backing provided by the U.S. government to the dissidents, the bluntness of the response (disproportionate imprisonment and summary executions by firing squad) was too much to swallow for Brussels.

The measures taken by Cuba generated an unprecedented worldwide protest not limited to the usual conservative sectors in the United States and the Cuban exile community. Traditionally tamed governments in Europe made explicit complaints. Important individual backers of the Cuban regime abandoned their endorsement, changing it for a straight denunciation. In the wider EU context, once again (as it happened in 1996), a possible cooperative arrangement became doubtful.² After careful consideration, precluded by intended measures to be taken by several Member States, the institutional framework of the EU acted accordingly. The European Parliament passed a Resolution and the Council adopted conclusions condemning Cuba. The Commission announced on May 1, 2003, the freezing of the procedure to consider the admission of Cuba into ACP Cotonou Agreement.³ In essence, this decision pushed back the EU-Cuba relationship to a low level similar to the

¹ See his speech at Santiago de Cuba, on July 26, 2003, "Calumniar y sancionar a Cuba, además de injusto y cobarde, es ridículo," *Granma*, 27 julio 2003.

www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2003/07/27/nacional/articulo24.html.

² AFP, "Prisión a disidentes traba acuerdos con la Unión Europea," *El Nuevo Herald*, 1 abril 2003.

³ For general information, consult the web of the EU Commission:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/development_old/cotonou/index_en.htm

one existing in 1996 when the EU voted a Common Position (CP)⁴ conditioning a full European cooperation package to reforms to be taken by the Cuban regime.⁵ This time it was not the Cuban regime's withdrawal of the application process, as it did in 2000, but the EU's decision not to continue with the negotiations. As expected, however, Cuba decided to withdraw again its application in order to avoid an embarrassing rejection. From a dubious attitude and the absence of a clear single policy on Cuba, now the EU appeared to have confirmed an effective common policy.

On June 5, the Presidency of the EU (held by Greece) issued an unprecedented blistering declaration on Cuba's "deplorable actions" in "violating fundamental freedoms", demanding the immediate release of "all political prisoners," and calling on EU Member States to limit high-level government visits to Cuba, to reduce the profile of participation in cultural events, and to invite dissidents at national day celebrations.⁶ On July 21, the EU Council of Foreign Affairs issued a conclusion using some of the crudest terms labeling Cuba's latest actions, confirming the previously announced sanctions of mostly political nature.⁷ The EU demanded the release of political prisoners, denounced the manipulation of an anti-drug trafficking campaign for internal repression, condemned Cuba's demonstrations against European embassies, and expected a new attitude of the Cuban government, conditioning all future assistance to political and economic reforms.⁸ In sum, from a policy of persuasion, the EU had expressed first frustration in expecting signs of reform from Cuba, and finally issued unequivocal signs of irritation.⁹

⁴ Common Position of December 2, 1996, defined by the Council on the basis of Article J.2 of the Treaty on the European Union on Cuba. Official Journal No. L 322 , 12/12/1996, p. 1.

⁵ For a review of these events, see my book entitled Cuba, the United States and the Helms-Burton Doctrine: International Reactions (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000).

⁶ Declaration, Presidency of the European Union, June 5, 2003. Reuters, "La UE impondrá sanciones diplomáticas a Cuba, June 5, 2003; AFP, "Silencio oficial y satisfacción en disidencia tras medidas de UE contra Cuba," June 5, 2003; Nancy San Martín, "EU set to review relations with Cuba," The Miami Herald, June 6, 2003; Gabriel Cañas, "La UE adopta sanciones diplomáticas contra Cuba," El País, 6 junio 2003; Enrique Serbeto, "La UE reduce al mínimo sus relaciones con Cuba en respuesta a la ola represiva," ABC, 6 junio 2003.

⁷ EFE, "Europa prepara su crítica más dura contra Castro," El Nuevo Herald, 12 julio; AFP, "EU to launch new attack on Cuba," July 17, 2003.

⁸ See my commentaries: "Triste aniversario del Moncada," La Opinión de Los Angeles, 22 julio 2003 (www.laopinion.com/editorial.artopinion.htm.html?rkey=003072213501613982); and "Cuba: un trist aniversario," Avui, 25 julio 2003 (www.avui.es/avui/diari/03/jul/25/100125.htm); "De Bruselas al Moncada", La Clave (Madrid); El Nuevo Herald, 1 agosto 2003 (www.miami.com/mld/elnuevo/news/opinion/6429749.htm)

⁹ See my commentary: "Unión Europea-Cuba: de la frustración a la irritación," La Opinión de Los Angeles, 20 mayo 2003; "La Unión Europea ante Cuba," El Nuevo Herald, 13 mayo 2003.

Cuba's policy towards the EU was seen as one bound to rejection and confrontation. Taking into account that Europe never accepted the terms of the U.S. embargo against Havana, the new landscape left European observers and leaders scratching their heads trying to find a logical explanation. In any event, since the end of the Cold War, this panorama has to be placed within a wider triangular backdrop on both sides of the Atlantic. The official European attitude towards Cuba and its problems with the United States can be illustrated by three fragments of three distinct declarations of the European Union: (1) "The European Union condemns the repeated violations of human rights in Cuba, in particular in the political field. The EU believes that the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba is primarily a matter that has to be resolved bilaterally."¹⁰ (2) "The U.S. has enacted laws that purport to regulate activities of persons under the jurisdiction of the Member States of the European Union; this extra-territorial application violates international law and has adverse effects on the interests of the European Union."¹¹ And (3) "If Cuba wishes to receive a favorable treatment through a cooperation agreement, it must show progress in the democratic process."¹²

In mid 2004, with no improvements in sight, the EU confirmed its attitude towards Cuba with an evaluation of the Common Position. The Council reiterated that the objectives of the EU remained "the encouragement of a process of peaceful transition to a pluralist democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms". Moreover, the Council noted "the disappointing lack of progress by the Cuban government towards the realization of the aims of the Common Position", and "expressed serious concern at the ongoing large-scale violation of human rights in Cuba", condemned the new trials of April and May 2004, and the continuing detention of a large number of prisoners of conscience, and regretted the imposition of new restrictions on private enterprise. At the same time, the EU continued to reject "all unilateral measures against Cuba which are contrary to commonly accepted rules of international trade", in a clear reference to the U.S.-sponsored actions. In sum, as a result of the lack of progress, the EU measures adopted in 2003 would be maintained, including the invitations issued to members of the opposition to national day celebrations, a source of confrontation with the Cuban government.¹³

Reviewing a Failed Policy

With the second part of 2003 confirming the trend of the stormy EU-Cuba relationship, most of 2004 presented the expected combined scenario, composed of the continuation of the stalemate, a repeat of personal verbal confrontations between leaders and formal

¹⁰ European Union, Explanation of Vote, United Nations General Assembly, New York, October 26, 1994.

¹¹ European Council Regulation, November 1996.

¹² European Council Common Position, 1996.

¹³ Council of the European Union. Evaluation of the Common Position, 14 June 2004.

officials, a subtle expectation for an improvement over the friction, and the confirmation of the terms of the Common Position in mid 2004. While the annual UN gathering of its Human Rights Commission in Geneva harvested the usual harvesting of an admonition imposed on Cuba with the explicit endorsing record of all EU Member States, the EU did not see any reason to discontinue the conditions of the Common Position, with the result that the Cuban government reiterated its rejection for a change in the treatment of dissidents.¹⁴

On the Spanish front, the clash between Castro and Aznar continued even after the Spanish Prime Minister left power after the dramatic loss of his party in March 2004 in the aftermath of the Madrid terrorist attacks. Reacting against Aznar's speech to the U.S. Congress, Castro called him a "repugnant character", a "Mussolini-like acolyte", and a "go between for Bush", as a retribution for labeling the Cuban regime as "a historical anomaly".¹⁵ Resisting a fading away from the public limelight, Aznar again reappeared as the target for the Cuban animosity when he acted as a major participant in conferences and symposia held in Madrid and Prague in support of Cuban dissidents.¹⁶ Under the expectations of reaping the benefits, Castro publicly welcomed the election of PSOE candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero as new Prime Minister of Spain. Considering the disastrous state of political relations between the two countries, any sign of a mild improvement, as well as a customary succession of diplomatic staff (such is the case of the new Spanish ambassador Carlos Alonso Zaldívar), was received with anticipation.¹⁷ At the same time, economic interests renewed their critical view of the embargo measures imposed by the U.S. government, combined with the discouraging and confusing policies implemented by the Aznar governments, advocating a more practical attitude towards investments in Cuba, in the eve of an expected political transition.¹⁸ This apparent new

¹⁴ Agence France Press, "candente polémica con la Unión Europea," El Nuevo Herald, 9 febrero 2004; EFE, "La UE renueva las sanciones," El Nuevo Herald, 15 junio 2004; EFE, "Lage lanza ataque a la UE", El Nuevo Herald, 24 junio 2004; Mauricio Vicent, "Cuba no alterará su política", El País, 18 enero 2004.

¹⁵ The Miami Herald, Feb. 8, 2004; Mauricio Vicent, "Castro califica a Aznar de 'personaje repugnante' y 'celestina' de Bush," El País, 8 febrero 2004.

¹⁶ Karel Janicek, "Spain's ex-leader blasts Castro," The Miami Herald, September 18, 2004; EFE, "Manifiesto pide a Castro liberación de presos de conciencia," Diario las Américas, 17 septiembre 2004; Pablo Alfonso, "Plan de apoyo a la libertad de Cuba," El Nuevo Herald, 19 septiembre 2004; Carlos Alberto Montaner, "Praga y el problema cubano," El Nuevo Herald, 19 septiembre 2004; Ariel Ramos, "Cumbre mundial en Praga apoyará oposición en Cuba," Diario las Américas, 16 septiembre 2004.

¹⁷ EFE, "Gobierno español está 'abierto' a normalizar relaciones con Cuba," Diario las Américas, 3 agosto 2004; AFP, "España quiere restablecer 'relaciones de amistad y cooperación con Cuba,'" Diario las Américas, 27 junio 2004; EFE, "Presenta sus carta credenciales el nuevo embajador español", El Nuevo Herald, 17 septiembre 2004; EFE, "Cuba y España buscan nuevas vías de cooperación en enseñanza superior," Diario las Américas, 21 abril 2004.

¹⁸ Aurelio Pedroso, EFE, "España mueva ficha", La Vanguardia, 28 junio 2004.

trend was highlighted by the announcement of the prospective work done by the Spanish oil conglomerate REPSOL in Cuban waters.¹⁹

In this setting, the EU contextual dimension once again revealed the customary and expected Spanish protagonist role. While the new Madrid administration confirmed Spain's commitment to the protection of human rights and the endorsement of measures contributing to the future democratization of Cuba, the government apparently began to lead an effort to review the terms of the EU Common Position and specific measures regarding the Cuban dissidents. In more concrete details, Madrid and Brussels had been asking for a while if the measures implemented in regard to the invitations of dissidents to official functions had delivered in fact the expected results. In fact, this part of the policy was not fully enforced since only 11 of the 25 Member States actually invited dissidents to official functions. Moreover, based on the conclusion that the Cuban regime had not changed its policy and actually had elected a more isolated stance, and taking into account the degree of distance and lack of direct communication with the high levels of the Cuban government, a revision of the conditions was in order when national interests are at stake.²⁰

However, judging from experience, any drastic or noticeable change in a EU policy was going to need some time to be in place and then subsequently implemented.²¹ The transition process in the EU institutions, while facing the twin challenges posed by the approval and ratification of the new Constitution and enlargement (with the incorporation of formerly Soviet-dominated countries), was also going to contribute to a slow down of a rapprochement process. The outcome of the U.S. presidential election had certainly added an additional dimension to what might be a new European position towards Cuba. This entire complex combined panorama coalesced in making a rushed and noticeable change in the collective EU policy a doubtful process.

This fragile situation explains in part the hesitation and contradictory announcements around the most polemic and conflict-prone of the measures the EU crafted in 2003 as a reprisal for the Cuban government's harsh actions against the dissidents. In spite of the fact that 7 of the 75 dissidents jailed had been recently released, the Cuban government had maintained a hard line attitude towards the overall dissident movement. Meanwhile, the whole EU diplomatic corps has found all lines of communication towards the high levels of the Castro regime cut.

¹⁹ Mauricio Vicent, "¿Petróleo en Cuba? Caliente, caliente." El País, 4 julio 2004.

²⁰ VNA, "Spain, Cuba ties improved, says Spanish diplomat", September 28, 2004; Reuters, "Spain says Cuba ties on road to normality", September 24, 2004; El Nuevo Herald, "Zapatero, Castro y la Unión Europea"; 24 setiembre 2004; El Universal (Mexico), "La Unión Europea invita a Cuba al diálogo político", 6 octubre 2004.

²¹ Fernando García, "España defiende una reducción de las sanciones de la UE a Cuba," La Vanguardia, 19 julio 2004.

Then the date of the 12 of October was approaching and the test for the Spanish government had to be faced.²² If the Spanish embassy wanted to show a shift in policy attitude, it would have to violate the agreement made into law as measures to be implemented under the umbrella of the Common Position. By not inviting the dissidents, the Spanish government would drastically lead the dismantling of the thorny policy so detested by the Castro government. This dilemma developed amidst a climate of media pressure, leaks of the projected shift in policy, and direct questioning of the Spanish leadership that made EU and Spanish officials extremely uncomfortable.²³ At the end, in view that the Cuban government was not to release the new expected number of important dissidents as a notable gesture, the Spanish embassy decided to honor the policy, and finally invited the dissidents. However, the tone and the content of the speech offered by the Spanish ambassador was interpreted by the political opposition in Cuba as an announcement of the end of an arrangement that has not, to date, delivered the expected results.²⁴

What was destined to be a fractious semi permanent situation, a sort of continuation of the status quo, was further exacerbated by the arrival of Jorge Moragas, a PP deputy, in Havana, accompanied by two members of the Netherlands Parliament, and two representatives of European NGOs. Detained at the airport, the three were summarily placed on an Air France return flight, with no chances of meeting with dissidents, and offering their support. The Cuban government claimed that the Europeans came on tourist visas but publicly announced the main political purpose of their trip, labeling Moragas as “an enemy of the Cuban Revolution”²⁵. He had recently traveled incognito to

²² Hermann Tertsch, “Sajarov en Cuba,” El País, 12 octubre 2004; Oswaldo Payá, “Declaración sobre la UE y Cuba,” El País, 7 octubre 2004; Mauricio Vicent, “La Embajada de España en Cuba invita a los disidentes,” El País, 9 octubre 2004; Encuentro (Madrid) - Elizardo Sánchez: ‘Cuba se está convirtiendo en un arma arrojadiza entre los partidos españoles’ “ Octubre 11, 2004.

²³ AF, “Piden a Europa más firmeza”, El Nuevo Herald, 7 octubre 2004; Carlos Alberto Montaner, “La peligrosa debilidad de Zapatero,” El Nuevo Herald, 7 octubre 2004; ; Juan Abreu, “Moratinos”, Diario las Américas, 10 octubre 2004.

²⁴ Anthony Boadle, Reuters, “Spain bashes EU-Cuba policy”, October, 2004; EFE, “Spain invites Cuban dissidents to embassy for National Day fete”, October, 11, 2004; EFE, “Discrepancias entre disidencia por política española hacia Cuba”, October 12, 2004; Vanessa Arrington, AP, “Spain wants to lead change in European Union policy toward Cuba, ambassador says”, October 12, 2004; EFE, “España aspira liderar cambio “insatisfactoria” situación UE-Cuba”, October 12, 2004; El Mundo, “La disidencia cubana, molesta”, 13 octubre 2004; Wilfredo Cancio, “Embajador español desconcierta a disidentes,” El Nuevo Herald, 14 octubre 2004; Mar Marín, EFE, “España invitó a disidentes”, Diario las Américas, 14 octubre 2004; AFP, “Pide el PP a Moratinos que pida perdón”, Diario las Américas, 16 octubre 2004 ; Vladimiro Roca, “De La Habana a Madrid”, El Nuevo Herald, 16 octubre 2004; “AFP, “España defiende el cambio de política hacia Cuba,” El Nuevo Herald, 16 octubre 2004.; Joaquim Ibarz, “La nueva política española de impulso al diálogo con Cuba enoja a los disidentes,” La Vanguardia, 14 octubre 2004; Joaquim Ibarz, “Amargura de la disidencia cubana con España,” La Vanguardia, 13 octubre 2004; Almudena Martínez-Fornés, “Vladimiro Roca” ‘En España, hasta ETA es recibida con gusto en la Embajada cubana,’ ABC, 17 octubre 2004;

²⁵ Comunicado del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba, La Habana, 16 octubre 2004.

Havana to personally deliver to Oswaldo Payá the EU Parliament Sajarov Prize that the dissident leader had actually been already given in an official ceremony held in Strasbourg²⁶. He was warned that this procedure was a provocation and that he had exhausted the patience of the Cuban government. Apparently, Moragas had planned his trip in the expectation that the Spanish embassy would decide not to invite the dissidents to the October 12 reception. In view of the late decision, he nonetheless confirmed the original.²⁷

The Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs then summoned the Cuban ambassador to protest for the expulsion of the Spanish parliamentarian, while the Dutch government demanded an apology. The PSOE and the PP entangled themselves in a verbal confrontation, the conservatives blaming the government for the fiasco, and the socialists considering the PP deputy activities as an attempt to derail Spain's foreign policy. In more concrete terms, the spokesman's office of the Prime Minister admonished the PP opposition for not acting "responsibly", using in turn a "parallel diplomacy geared to torpedo the government's actions".²⁸ The bulk of the Spanish press censored the decision made by the Cuban government, casting serious doubts regarding the future evolution of the Castro regime, and any expectations of reforms.

The overall result of the twin sets of actions (reception at the Spanish embassy and the Havana airport incident) was that the prospects of a revision of the EU Common Position measures were cloudier than ever.²⁹ Conscious of this fact, the Spanish government confirmed its commitment of channeling any intention of change in the Cuba policy through the institutional framework of the EU. At the same time, Madrid stated in clear terms that any change in Spain's policy towards Cuba would have to be preceded by "significant steps" taken by the Castro government "indicating to be interested in a political opening".³⁰ Simultaneously, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs proceeded with its standing plans of recommending the inclusion of Cuba in the Cotonou

²⁶ José Ignacio Rasco, "Entrega clandestina en La Habana del Premio Sajarov a Payá," Diario las Américas, 8 octubre 2004.

²⁷ Peru Egurbide, "La 'guerra' de Cuba", El País, 24 octubre 2004.

²⁸ Spokesman's office declarations (October 19, 2004).

²⁹ EFE, "El PSOE acusa al diputado Moragas de 'torpedear' con su expulsión el diálogo de la UE y Cuba," El Mundo, 17 octubre 2004; Europa Press, "El gobierno pide explicaciones a Cuba", La Vanguardia, 16 octubre 2004; La Vanguardia, 17 octubre 2004; AFP, "El ministro holandés de Exteriores, indignado por la expulsión," El Mundo, 16 octubre 2004; EFE, "Pide una rectificación del embajador español", El Mundo, 15 octubre 2004; El Mundo, "Prohíben entrar a un diputado del PP", 16 octubre 2002; L.A., "Castro 'agradece' a Zapatero su vuelta al diálogo," ABC, 17 octubre 2004; Ignacio Camacho, "Más se pierde en Cuba," 17 octubre 2004; J.L. Lorente, "Moragas arremete contra el embajador", ABC, 17 octubre 2004; Ignacio Serbeto, "La 'indignación' de Holanda aborta, por ahora, el cambio de la UE hacia Cuba que pide el PSOE", ABC, 17 octubre 2004.

³⁰ From declarations issued by the spokesman's office of the Spanish Prime Minister (October 18-19, 2004).

Agreement, alleging that the country would be better anchored in the ACP setting “than in a non-negotiated, unilateral common policy”. At the same time the Latin American Committee of the EU Council had instructed the EU ambassadors in Havana to draft a report on the Cuban situation to serve as a base for the revision of the Common Position.³¹

In this uncertain and confrontational setting, on October 20, after the closing of his speech given at the site of the Che Guevara Mausoleum in the city of Santa Clara, Fidel Castro took a misstep, slipped and fell, fracturing his left knee and suffering a bone fissure in his arm.³² Reassuring the audience while sitting on chair that he was basically fine,³³ he was rushed to Havana where he went through a skilful surgical operation, which he himself described in a personal written report.³⁴ Speculation in Cuba³⁵, the exile community,³⁶ the U.S. government (reacting with sarcasm, duly protested by the Cuban diplomats)³⁷ and overseas took a high degree of urgency, in view of his age (78) and the fact that two years ago he fainted of heat exhaustion and rumors are that he suffers from several undisclosed illnesses. The Spanish press of all political leanings used the opportunity to confirm its generally critical attitude towards the immobility of the Cuban regime, making the accidental fall of Castro a metaphor of another hypothetical ‘fall’ in the near future.³⁸ In only an isolated case, the vice-president of the European Commission, Loyola de Palacio, issued a polemical off-the-record remark “wishing Castro to be dead”, a commentary received by criticism in the media³⁹. In any event, the fact that he will have to go through a long period of movement rehabilitation will make

³¹ El Mundo, 19 octubre 2004; EU Business, “EU should relaunch Cotonou”, 22 October.

³² EFE, “Castro se fractura una rodilla y ‘probablemente’ un brazo tras caerse en un mitin”, El País, 21 octubre 2004; Mauricio Vicent, “Castro sufre fractura de rodilla,” El País, 22 octubre; Granma, “Nota informativa, 21 octubre; Andrea Rodríguez, AP, “Castro se cae y se golpea,” El Nuevo Herald, 21 octubre.

³³ Granma, “Estoy entero”, 21 octubre.

³⁴ EFE, “Fidel Castro es intervenido durante tres horas”, El País, 22 octubre; Granma, “Carta de Fidel”, 22 octubre 2004.

³⁵ Eduardo Yero, EFE, “Castro: estoy entero”, Diario las Américas, 22 octubre; Nancy san Martín, “Fallout from the fall,” The Miami Herald, October 22.

³⁶ Rui Ferreira, “Conmociona a Miami la caída de Castro”, El Nuevo Herald, 22 octubre; Randy Nieves Ruiz, “Miami especula”, Diario las Américas, 22 octubre;

³⁷ M.V. “Washington ironiza sobre el incidente”, El País, 22 octubre; AFP, “Cuba: US immoral for reaction to Castro fall,” October 22, 2004.

³⁸ El País, “La caída de Castro”, editorial, 22 octubre; Roger Jiménez, “La caída de Fidel”, La Vanguardia, 22 octubre.

³⁹ DPA, “EU vice-president wishes for Castro’s death,” October 22; Europa Press, “Todos esperamos que Castro se muera cuanto antes,” El Mundo, 21 octubre; EU Business, “EU plays down comments eyeing Castro’s death,” 22 october.

his public appearances rare. While in this physical state, all bets are off as to how many of the urgent political measures will be delegated and what kind of action enemies and oppositors will elect to take.

Before this incident, an assessment balance of the results of the verbal confrontations and frustrated changes in the EU policy towards Cuba reveals a paradoxical picture, which was ironically expected according to a seasoned point of observation. On the one hand, the winner once more had been the Cuban government, who was first self-portrayed as the victim of the EU measures, depicted as neo-imperialist, at the level of the historical demands made by the United States. On the other hand, the hard line attitude of the Cuban government is the root for the timely opportunistic move made by the representatives of the PP, inserted at the worst moment for the ambivalent, controversial, and risky testing of the waters made by the Spanish government. The tentative loser was the Spanish socialist government for choosing such a risky portion of foreign policy to draw a demarking line in Latin America from the previous policy of the Aznar-led PP. Avoided at all costs during the previous PSOE mandate (1982-1996), the Cuban issue has been inserted as a “domestic” topic in the foreign agenda. The novelty now is that a confrontation between the PSOE and the PP over Cuba is doubly installed with the backdrop of the sensitive conflict of Iraq, with the attention span of strategic thinkers more preoccupied with solving the Middle East crisis simultaneously with the U.S. election process. Seasoned cynics also would point out that the “12 of October” crisis seems to be of the same category in the U.S.-Cuba relationship, as other numerous occasions when a relatively calm period is succeeded by a tumultuous incident provoked by one of the sides.

The global picture of EU-Cuba relations also reminds observers that the profile of confrontation is still ostensibly verbal, disproportionate with a certain normalcy in bilateral trade and humanitarian assistance relations. Certain inertia and a business as usual mode has presided the investment and tourism sector, subject only to merely the laws of economics and the limitations of the Cuban market and political system. Cynics will notice that while the most spectacular verbal conflicts were taking place, with Prime Minister Aznar as a favorite target, the same economic sectors that have been the main social backing of the PP mandate have been at the front of the pressure not to discontinue the investment and business relationship with Cuba.⁴⁰ This became evident when the Helms-Burton scandal exploded and the EU simultaneously took a hard-line attitude in the eve of the Brothers to the Rescue massacre in 1996. Business lobbies and trade interests pressured the Aznar government for a return to a certain degree of normalcy. This same sector has been a primary source which questions the effectiveness of the EU’s measures, resulting in a climate of uncertainty and lack of communication. It is doubtful that this kind of social and economic pressure will disappear, as well as the historical linkage between Spain and Cuba that makes drastic confrontations and strangeness between the two peoples, regardless of the nature of the corresponding regimes, a collateral damage that calls for reflections and rapprochement.

⁴⁰ EFE, “Sol Meliá invertirá 41,6 millones de euros en hotel de lujo en Cuba,” Diario las Américas, 5 octubre 2004.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the balance sheet of the experience of the Cuba-European Union relations shows a mixed picture. It is composed of a coherent script of EU measures intended in the first place to maintain the communication lines open, and secondly to contribute to facilitating the conditions for a sort of “soft landing” in the terrain of democracy and market economy in the event of a peaceful transition. This strategy has not come free of charge, as demonstrated by the persistent negative vote on Cuba in the UN Commission for Human Rights, and the maintenance of the Common Position imposed in 1996 conditioning any special cooperation and aid package to the implementation of political reforms.

This institutional framework contrasts, on the one hand, with the apparently uncoordinated policies of the Member States which trade and invest in Cuba according to their individual interests. This has made the Common Position “neither common, nor a policy,” in the words of sarcastic EU insiders.⁴¹ On the other hand, the EU collective strategy still contrasts with the U.S. policy of confrontations and harassment. While the United States has been pursuing a path composed of the embargo and extraterritorial laws such as Helms-Burton, the EU has opted for a “constructive engagement”. While the European pattern has been geared toward preparing for the transition, the United States policy has concentrated on regime change.⁴² Both, however, share one dimension in common – Cuba’s policy has not changed or reformed according to the expected results. The European strategy can be labeled at its initial stages after the end of the Cold War as one based on good intentions and reasonable (if not high) expectations. But at the end of any serious attempt to condition an offer of a special status in the EU structure (bilateral agreement, Lomé, Cotonou), the result has been a high degree of frustration.

For European views, Castro’s priorities place a conditioned relationship with the EU at a lower level than the urgency to maintain a line of internal discipline. At the end of the day, EU’s favors are “demasiado fastidio para tan poca plata” [too big of a nuisance for so little money]. The soft power exerted by the EU and some influential Member States in other settings has apparently not succeeded in seducing the Cuban regime. Moreover, the confrontation with the United States is considered by the Cuban regime as the ultimate *raison d’être* to justify the continuation of the system and the refusal to modify it, or even less to change it. This ever-present theme has been obsessively inserted in all communications and declarations of the Cuban government when dealing in public

⁴¹ From EU Commission and Council sources.

⁴² For a review of the U.S. policy towards Cuba since the end of the Cold War, see Thomas Morley and Chris McGillion, *Unfinished Business: America and Cuba after the Cold War, 1989-2001* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

and in private with EU officials. Cuba has consistently claimed an alleged “aggressive,” “subversive,” irresponsible”, and “provocative,” behavior of U.S. officials in Havana supporting “mercenaries, created, organized, trained and financed”⁴³ by Washington.

Questioning the policy of opposing this pattern, or espousing similar pressure measures in reforming Cuba’s policies, equals to collaboration. Rejecting pressure and conditions, as the Castro’s speech of July 26, 2003, explicitly decreed, has resulted in making any formal cooperation agreement and ACP benefits virtually impossible to obtain. It remains to be seen if new carrot-like proposals emanating from Brussels and Madrid will in the near future deliver substantial results. Evidence shows that the Cuban regime values the confrontation with the EU more than the benefits of a cooperation agreement.

The insertion of Cuban affairs in the domestic arena of Spanish politics, while the EU is in transition, will only contribute to make the EU-Cuba relationship an even murkier scene.⁴⁴ It is extremely doubtful that this deterioration will benefit the fragile and shaky situation of the dissent movement, worried of a negative fall out derived from the internal quarrel between the Spanish government and the opposition. In consequence, the most prudent and effective approach for the EU Member States to take, in expectation of contributing to a peaceful scenario dominating the political transition, is to resort to a behind-the-scene diplomatic policy, distanced from the headline-grabbing incidents that ultimately only produce a hard-line attitude in Havana.

Among the alternative paths is the substitution of a policy based solely on delivering gestures and symbolic moves, for a cohesive, comprehensive, and multilateral approach, heavily anchored on a solid legislation of conditioning developing assistance and closer political linkages to the respect of human rights. This real Common Position would be very difficult to be manipulated and exploited by the Cuban government and domestic interests in Europe. This new scenario would mean the disappearance of a fragile relationship presided by embassy invasion crisis, cocktail wars, personal insults, demeaning references to historical dates, violations of diplomatic traditions, and mass demonstrations led by high government officials. In all, taking into account that certain economic and tourist activities have been proceeding steadily, subject to all limitations derived from the nature of the Cuban regime and world trends, the most sensible way to maintain the communication lines open is the lessening of the sources of friction and obstacles to keep European and Cuban governments in minimum contact and linkages between the respective civil societies increased, in expectation of important political changes to come.

⁴³ Terms used by Cuba’s Foreign Minister Pérez Roque in letter addressed to EU Commissioner Poul Nielson, May 23, 2003, in answering his letter of concern dated April 22.

⁴⁴ See my analysis: “Confrontación, irritación y desilusión: Balance de las relaciones entre la Unión Europea y Cuba”, Correo (Bilbao), 21 octubre 2004, distributed by Inter Press Service IPS).

In the strict Spanish setting, any effective policy with a substantial prospect of success will only be feasible if taken by a solid national consensus (a política de estado, in the Spanish political terminology) between the two main political parties.⁴⁵ Both will have to renounce what is termed as “guerrilla” tactics with short-term gains in sight. In the wider EU context, a more complex reevaluation will eventually have to take into account that the conditions placed on a cooperation agreement with Cuba will contrast with an obvious soft attitude towards regimes in Africa, the Middle East and Asia (most scandalously China) with worse human rights records than the Cuban dictatorship. If this contradictory picture is then compared with the wide array of national policies and arrangements with Cuba maintained by the different Member States, then the global panorama becomes even more confusing and a favorite target for manipulation and opportunistic moves. For the sake of contributing to a peaceful and effective transition in Cuba, this current contradictory approach has to be avoided and replaced by a new vision. The problem is that few statesmen, in dangerous and uncertain times, residing in executive positions, seem to have the magical formula.

The accident suffered by Castro in Santa Clara inserts an additional ingredient of uncertainty that will make the implementation of risky measures in Madrid and Brussels even more difficult.⁴⁶ The most sensible approach seems to be a wait-and-see attitude. Taking into account that in normal circumstances, aggravated by the diplomatic incident in the Havana airport, a wrong turn could have serious consequences, with the Cuban leader partially handicapped, speculation is doubly problematic. In any case, a period of Castro’s convalescence does not seem to be the best moment for drastic changes. However, in the event that Brussels makes an innovative offer to Cuba and then there are some signs of a substantial change in Havana, observers would then interpret that Castro is not in full control and that the moderates have taken charge of the situation, something that the regime will try to masquerade. An even harder attitude from the Cuban government towards the EU would confirm that the situation remains the same and that there is no hope of any reformatting of the relationship with Castro in power. The first news following the surgical operation seemed to be in this direction, confirming his wish to remain at the helm⁴⁷. In view of this, the EU and Spain (with an expected consensus of the Spanish PP opposition) will probably move with extreme caution, something that the Cuban regime will certainly have to appreciate. An opposite behavior by any actor in Europe (especially the PP, with its leadership divided on this issue) will convert the

⁴⁵ El País (editorial), “Repensando Cuba”, 18 octubre 2004.

⁴⁶ See my commentary: “Fidel Castro: Consecuencia de una caída”, La Opinión de los Angeles, 24 octubre 2004. <http://www.laopinion.com/comentarios/?rkey=00041022171959542314> distributed by Inter Press Service (IPS) and available at the web of Nueva Mayoría (Buenos Aires) <http://www.nuevamayoria.com/ES/>

⁴⁷ AP, “Castro says he stayed in charge”, The New York Times, October 23, 2004; Nancy San Martín, “Recuperating Castro expected to maintain political power,” The Miami Herald, October 23; Nancy San Martín, “Castro se aferra al poder”, El Nuevo Herald, 23 octubre.

situation of the Cuban government in a more isolated fashion, something that whoever is in control in Havana can ill afford.

However, the sudden announcement made by Castro on live television on October 25, barely two days after undergoing knee surgery, terminating the free circulation of the dollar in Cuba, adds another ingredient of uncertainty linking originally unconnected issues. Once more, blaming the U.S. measures curtailing the free flow of remittances and travel to Cuba, Castro decreed the use of the convertible peso as the sole form of payment in Cuba, taxing 10% for any exchange of U.S. currency. The use of other currencies (such as the euro, British sterling or Swiss franc will still be allowed).⁴⁸ By subjecting all angles of the current political and economic situation to decisions made by the Cuban government, Castro has tried to increase domestic control, curtail foreign initiatives, and enlarge the sources of income. It remains to be seen what impact all this will have on the relations with the EU.

⁴⁸ EFE, “Castro reaparece en televisión con un brazo en cabestrillo y anuncia la derogación del dólar”, El País, 26 octubre; Nancy San Martín, “Cuba to take 10% of exile’s cash”, The Miami Herald, October 26; Pablo Alfonso, “Castro suprime el dólar”, El Nuevo Herald, 26 octubre.