

Defining EU Policy and Utilizing Experience

Miroslav Ouzký

Here I will talk about current changes that concern the European Union as an institution and the possible impact of those changes on the relationship between the EU and Cuba. On May 1st 2004, the European Union enlarged due to the acceptance of ten European countries as new member states, including the Czech Republic. The current approach of the EU towards the Castro regime lies, if you would allow this simplification, somewhere between the policy of the USA and the policy of Canada.

The manner of the United States towards Cuba is one of absolute intolerance of the Cuban government, a policy of continuing economic sanctions towards Cuba and the support of those Cubans who strive for democratic changes in their country. The USA acted in a very similar way in Central and Eastern Europe before 1989. In the latest official report, written by Michael G. Kozak for the session of Congress held on June 17th 2004, the Cuban regime is violently pursuing its opponents and a large number of people who oppose Castro's regime were condemned to long-term prison sentences in trumped-up law suits for so called "subversive acts".

The position of Canada is, in my point of view, significantly lenient. Canada is one of Cuba's biggest foreign trade partners and in its official reports it details improvements Cuba has made in the fields of education and science. On the other hand, Canada is pushing the Cuban government to achieve similar improvements in the additional areas of civil and political rights.

The common policy of the EU on Cuba was confirmed in June 2004 by the EU's Council for Foreign Affairs. It mainly consists of: no official visits of supreme bodies and officials; the presence of opposition members at the activities of embassies in Havana; and no participation of EU member state representatives at cultural events organized by Cuban institutions.

After several political prisoners were set free by the Cuban authorities, some EU countries (including Spain) signalled the potential softening of common EU policy towards Cuba. For most of EU states, including the Czech Republic, this is unacceptable, and impossible without further and more substantial improvements in the area of civil and political rights in Cuba. However, I agree that common policy should be respected by all EU member states without any exception. Within this common policy it is possible to admit discussion on a limited number of topics, for example the strengthening of cultural interaction.

I am convinced that after its enlargement, the EU must take advantage of the experiences its new members have with the communist regime. We all remember very well the times when any international concession signaling the so called convergence between East and West, and leading to partial exculpation of Breznev's dictatorship, was felt by us as a failure of democracy. Any meeting of supreme officials was always overstated by communist propaganda and fully used to its benefit. On the other hand we really welcomed every meeting of politicians or activists from western countries.

The international community's concern often even opened up the gates of prison. Personal and private contacts with the free world caused enlightenment and was an education in democracy. Therefore, I absolutely agree with the possibility of private activities in Cuba that are often a link to information from behind the iron curtain. However, I would strongly warn against any softening of common EU policies concerning Cuba or attempts at the legitimization of Castro's regime.