

EU eyes a fresh start in Cuba relations

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Body

While US-Cuba ties have continued to deteriorate, the EU has stressed a new beginning in relations. Now the bloc's foreign policy chief is visiting the island nation. DW's Andreas Knobloch reports from Havana.

Relations between the European Union and Cuba have not exactly been characterized by fast-paced progress over the years. Now, though, Brussels has declared its desire to implement its Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA) with Cuba in "ambitious and swift fashion." And it is exactly for that reason that the bloc's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, arrived in Cuba on Wednesday.

The EU's new partnership agreement entered into force provisionally in November last year. Prior to that, Cuba had been the only Latin American country with which Brussels had no association or cooperation agreement. Nevertheless, the ratification of all 28 EU member state parliaments is required before the agreement can be fully enacted. That process is currently ongoing.

Mogherini began her visit by meeting with Cuban Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz, where the two discussed plans to deepen economic ties between Brussels and Havana.

Among others, Mogherini will later meet with Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla. Ahead of the trip, a spokesperson for Mogherini's office announced that the two would prepare the first minister-level talks for the joint EU-Cuba Committee.

Shifting relations

Mogherini last visited Cuba in March 2016 as part of an effort to advance political dialogue. That trip was preceded by two years of complex negotiations, during which the EU and Cuba agreed to a treaty subdivided into three chapters: cooperation, political dialogue, and economic relations. The agreement put bilateral ties on new footing. The previous 20 years had been characterized by a so-called common standpoint. That status was adopted in 1996, under Spain's then-conservative government led by Jose Maria Aznar, and it made normalized relations contingent upon democratic and human rights advances in Cuba — a stance consistently rejected by Havana.

In practice, the EU's rigid posture turned out to be counterproductive and was ultimately proven to be outmoded when relations between Cuba and the United States began to thaw in 2014. Furthermore, they were seen as hypocritical in light of the fact that 19 EU member states had entered into bilateral agreements with Cuba. Above all, countries like Spain, France and Italy had been pushing for a new EU policy vis-a-vis Cuba, whereas countries such as Germany and a number of Eastern European states were dragging their feet.

EU as biggest investor

EU eyes a fresh start in Cuba relations

While relations between Cuba and the US have regressed since President Donald Trump took office, the EU has attempted to push forward on its own. As a result of Washington's return to Cold War-style rhetoric, the EU now enjoys a privileged position in terms of Cuba's new open door policy. Thus, Cuba could be much more interested in winning European investments in the future. The EU is already Cuba's biggest investor, as well as being its second-largest trading partner. Roughly one-third of all tourists in Cuba come from EU countries.

As of late, the Caribbean country has also attempted to diversify its foreign trade. Cuba's closest ally, Venezuela, has drastically reduced oil exports to the island due to its own political and economic crisis. As a result, Cuba's economy fell into recession for the first time in two decades. Although Cuba's economy grew by 1.6 percent last year according to its Finance Ministry, it remains far behind the projected \$2.5 billion (€2.1 billion) that the government needs to achieve its growth objectives. Beyond Cuba's most important trading partners like Venezuela and China, countries such as Russia as well as the Netherlands and France have drastically increased investments on the island.

Currently, EU cooperation has materialized, above all, in development projects. The EU has made €50 million available for three main areas between now and 2020: agriculture and food security, aid in the improved use of natural resources as a key to sustainable development, and support for economic and social modernization. The declared aim of Mogherini's trip is to further expand cooperation to other sectors.

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