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## **Introduction**

In its foreign policy, Cuba has given high priority to relations with the European Union (EU) and historical evidence suggests that the Italian Republic is among the states given highest priority.

However, academic work on Cuba–Italy bilateral relations has been lacking, with the exception of minimal contributions focusing on past decades. This chapter aims to explain the development of Cuba–Italy bilateral ties within the context established since the signing of the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), the global COVID-19 pandemic and the changes on the international scene and in the balances of power, using a critical International Relations perspective.

The chapter will be structured into three main sections. The first briefly addresses the background to Cuba–EU relations in order help understand the state of these connections. The second section gives a historical overview of Cuba–Italy relations from the 1990s onwards. Finally, in order to achieve the chapter's overall objective the third section addresses the key strands of work within the countries' relations, which will be defined and expanded within the sub-sections: Cooperation, Solidarity, Economy (divided into Trade, Investments and Tourism) and Political Relations.

## **1. Development**

### **1.1. Essential background to Cuba–EU relations**

Cuba–western Europe relations have always been triangular, with the United States (US) at the apex (Perera Gómez, 1997; 2006; 2017; Gratius, 2009; 2010; Pellón Azopardo, 2015), and in Cuba–EU ties changes and continuities have emerged over time. Among the variables that have influenced them are the nature of the political forces within the governments, the historical conjuncture (in the Braudelian sense,

1. Historical conjunctures and the political forces present in the government are closely connected and are essential to the configuration of Cuba–EU ties and those between Cuba and certain member states. This was evident around 2003 when several highly conservative administrations emerged onto the transatlantic electoral landscape at around the same time (George W. Bush in the US, Aznar in Spain and Berlusconi in Italy). Along with the events of Cuba’s so-called “Black Spring”, this led relations to deteriorate. The form the links took was also related to EU policy decisions (the application of sanctions with reference to the political conditionality imposed for cooperation, the suspension of exchanges at the highest level, the priority given to relations with opposition groups and the return of the old practice of inviting them to the celebrations of national holidays, which became known as the “Cocktail Wars”) and to Cuba’s reaction (mass protests at the embassies of the countries in question and an understandably reluctant attitude to dialogue, given the conditionalities whose spearhead was respect for human rights and democracy).
2. The “events” category includes events and one-off incidents and is one of the variables that conditions the development of a state’s foreign policy, its activity towards another state and the behaviour of a relationship between various subjects and actors from the international community (Rodríguez Hernández, 2017).
3. For two decades this was the framework for Cuba–EU relations: conditionality when it came to development cooperation and exceptionality, in the sense of making Cuba, in formal terms, the only country in the region without a cooperation agreement with the EU. The Common Position was signed at a time when the US blockade against Cuba was tightening and was a clear attempt to take advantage of the collapse of Soviet socialism and the close alliance between the US government and the conservative leadership of the Spanish People’s Party, led by José María Aznar when it reached power. It should, nevertheless, be recalled that relations between Spain and Cuba had been deteriorating for years, even during the mandate of Felipe González’s Spanish Socialist Workers Party, which had shifted to the right

understood as the state of the societies in question, meaning domestic and foreign policy and the effects of global affairs on the countries in the medium term – in other words, a period of decades that contain a number of profound changes) and, above all, the interactions between the two actors. These interactions go hand in hand with mutual perceptions, which can contribute to modifying interests, actions and outreach towards the counterpart (Perera Gómez, 2017; Alzugaray, 2015 in Perera Gómez, 2017: 72; Navas Morata, 2015 in Perera Gómez 2017: 72; Portocarero, 2015, in Perera Gómez, 2017: 72; Mujica Cantelar, 2015 in Perera Gómez, 2017: 94).<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, certain events<sup>2</sup> and their consequences in the short and medium term conditioned the ups and downs of the ties and established certain patterns. Among them were the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9th 1989), the creation of the EU with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (February 7th 1992), the shooting down of the Brothers to the Rescue planes (February 24th 1996), the adoption of the Common Position (December 2nd 1996),<sup>3</sup> the events that became known as the “Black Spring” (March–April 2003), the various Congresses of the Communist Party of Cuba,<sup>4</sup> the changes in the presidency of the Cuban government,<sup>5</sup> elections on both sides of the Atlantic (Pérez Benítez, 2017; Perera Gómez, 2017; Mujica Cantelar, 2015 in Perera Gómez, 2017: 125; Fiffe Cabreja, 2018) and, more recently, the events that occurred in Cuba on July 11th 2021.

However, the most important event was the announcement on December 17th 2014 that diplomatic relations would be re-established between Cuba and the United States. And, despite subsequent changes like the rightward shift on both sides of the Atlantic, Cuba–EU relations have since reached unprecedented levels. The maturing of the ties is palpable, with old quarrels being gradually overcome and conciliation in spite of the differences that remain. The most visible signs of this were the repealing of the Common Position on December 12th 2016 and the signing of the PDCA, which entered into provisional force on November 1st 2017. The great triumph of the negotiations over a new stage of bilateral relations was to remove the political conditionalities on cooperation and instead reach an agreement that facilitates dialogue and joint work to achieve the foreign policy goals each holds towards the other.

The advent of a left-wing decade in Latin America saw Cuba’s regional involvement rise – in contrast to the isolation others had attempted to force on it. Meanwhile, a number of EU countries decided to increase trade and bilateral cooperation, as awareness grew among the European establishment that their hostility and the Common Position were nonsensical, both for achieving the goals set out and for their own foreign policy interests. Combined, all of these factors led relations to thaw and the commitment to dialogue and negotiation to emerge (Gratius, 1998; Roy, 2015; Perera Gómez, 2017; Allende Karam, 2015, in Perera Gómez, 2017: 211; Tvevad, 2015: 27, in Perera Gómez, 2017: 210; Alzugaray, 2015, in Perera Gómez, 2017: 211, Portocarero, 2015, in Perera Gómez, 2017: 181, Ayuso & Gratius, 2017, Ayuso, Gratius & Pellón Azopardo, 2017). As Gratius (2016: 2) has pointed out, “change for trade” – the European foreign policy tradition which was resumed and which the Obama administration later assimilated – tends to be the most effective way to use such tools, as was later generally accepted.<sup>6</sup>

Analysing contributions made by the most prominent authors on the subject (Eduardo Perera Gómez, Anna Ayuso, Susanne Gratius, Raynier Pellón Azopardo and Joaquín Roy)<sup>7</sup> shows a level of consensus about the characterisation of these links and their historical development. In short, Cuba–EU relations have been difficult, controversial, vulnerable and highly conditioned by a third actor (the US). They have undergone multiple realignments, due to the clear and obvious inconsistencies, uncertainties, biases and above all whims of both sides.

## 2. Overview of Cuba–Italy relations

When discussing its relations with Cuba, Italy's consideration as an individual state comes after its position as an EU member state, as the configuration of its links with Cuba have been determined by its central place in the bloc in general. It is not the EU state with the largest role in Cuban and Latin American politics, but it is among the most important.<sup>8</sup> Above all, this is due to the significant role Italy played in redirecting the Cuban economy in the 1990s and its longstanding and continuing importance in the fields of trade, investment and tourism, as well as other sectors (Roque Valdés, 1997; Perera Gómez, 2017; Allende Karam, 2008; 2015; 2017). Over the past 30 years, Italy has been Cuba's eighth-largest trading partner worldwide and second of EU member states (*Prensa Latina*, 2021a) (although occasionally it ranks third, as in 2017) (Ayuso, Gratius & Pellón Azopardo, 2017). From 1995 to 2019, exports from Italy to Cuba grew at an annual rate of 5.97%, from \$81.3 m in 1995 to \$327 m in 2019 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2020).<sup>9</sup> Since 2014 it has been the ninth-largest source of tourists to Cuba, with numbers increasing more or less steadily until the pandemic (reaching a high of 227,829 visitors in 2017) (ONEI, 2019).<sup>10</sup> These facts have shaped their links.

It should be clarified that addressing relations between Cuba and Italy covers more than just bilateral ties at governmental level and traditional diplomacy as the only infallible tool. The widest possible links are included – between government agencies at all rungs of the political hierarchy, and between them and non-state actors.

Of course, bilateral interests have never been equal in proportion (Perera Gómez, 2017). While Cuba has not been a priority for European or Italian foreign policy, the Caribbean country has attributed great importance to the EU and specific countries, including Italy (Hernández, 2015; Pérez Benítez, 2017). Nevertheless, Cuba–EU and Cuba–Italy ties have clearly strengthened as mutual interest has grown.

Until the 1990s the bilateral relationship between Cuba and Italy was modest. The pattern of exchange was imbalanced and, despite Cuba's gradually more active role, this has remained the case. When Cuban trade and foreign policy was reoriented, which inevitably translated into an opening up to trade, foreign investment, tourism and the resumption of ties with its emigrants, Italy was among the European states most involved in the range of opportunities offered. Cuba's need for cooperation with these developed countries was undeniably felt more than ever and it was logical that the first steps were taken by those

(Pellón Azopardo, 2009; Allende Karam, 2017; Moré, 2018). Given the leading role Spain had always played in European positions on Cuba and the difficult circumstances on the island, there was consensus over the Common Position, even if certain states, including Italy, had reservations or more nuanced views (IRELA, 1996; Perera Gómez, 2017).

4. The PCC Congresses that drew interest for the clues they provided to Cuba's future prospects were those from the fourth Congress onwards, as this was the first to be held in the post–Cold War period (1991). The 5th to the 8th congresses took place on the following dates: October 8–10th 1997; April 16–19th 2011; April 16–19th 2016; April 16–19th 2021.
5. The handover of power from Fidel Castro Ruz to Raúl Castro Ruz was announced on February 24th 2008 and from the latter to Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez on April 19th 2018.
6. It is worth noting the release of those arrested during the events of March 2003 and the reaction to it. This step taken or concession made by Cuba led to the adoption of diplomatic measures, which shows that certain specific decisions made by both parties, both in practical terms and in terms of the image projected, can contribute to making advances (Perera Gómez, 2017: 185).
7. The contribution should be recalled of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (1981) on the foreign policy Cuba should follow with the countries of the European Community and his accurate vision of the need to develop these links and the risks Cuba ran of lapsing into “infantilism” due to ideological mediation, ignorance and ideas about Europe copied automatically from opinions of the United States.
8. Italy is among the European countries with significant interest in the Latin American and Caribbean region. However, Spain constitutes the historical bridge par excellence, as by general consensus it is seen as its natural space. European countries follow unwritten rules that divide up their spheres of influence and interest in the region (Pellón Azopardo, 2009; Karam, 2017). For Italy, the area above all comprises the large South American countries (Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay) (Allende Karam, 2017; Roy, 2006; Ayuso, 2019). However, Cuba's dual political and cultural importance, both for the project of rescuing *Latindad* (consider the internationally certified Italian language and culture teaching centres and complementary study programmes such as the

Dante Alighieri Society and the Academia Leonardo da Vinci) and as the region's leading anti-hegemonic and unifying country, aroused Italian interest in rapprochement with the Caribbean island for a number of years. To this must be added Italy's importance as one of the main destinations for Cuban migrants, another factor that raises the bilateral interest, especially for Cuba.

9. Import statistics justify the importance Cuba assigns to Italy, with the European country the third-largest source of goods to the Caribbean island (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2020).

10. With the pandemic, it moved to seventh place (ONEI, 2021).

11. Zealous defence of its sovereignty is of paramount importance to Cuba, as is international recognition of that fact. In foreign policy terms it is the source of its greatest pride, as recognised by figures working in the field from or for Cuba, and by scholars (Hernández, 2015; Declercq, 2016: 127, in Perera 2017; Pérez Benítez, 2017; Allende Karam, 2017; Perera Gómez, 2017).

Meanwhile, much of western Europe's activity reproduces the role of the old metropole. Logically, following the loss of its colonial spaces and its place as the main centre of global accumulation its myths and pride began to consist of flaunting the potential for new ways of inserting itself and gaining presence in former colonial spaces – its own or those of others. The interconnections entailed by modern globalisation have only strengthened this.

12. By 1995, it was third in the list of countries by number of economic partnerships, behind Spain and Canada. These countries worked in strategic sectors such as telecommunications, light industry, the food industry and tourism. In turn, the various economic reforms carried out in Cuba since 1993 and the investment protection and promotion agreement signed that same year with Italy – the first of its kind between Cuba and another state – undoubtedly contributed to Italian investors' growing interest in Cuba and the increase of economic partnerships seen from that year onwards. The largest investment at the time was that of STET (part of the IRI public industrial group), which owned 49% of the mixed company ETECSA, alongside a Mexican co-investor (Roque Valdés, 1997: 78).

13. These shows of solidarity with Cuba continue to this day, as

that had most interest in Cuba (Roque Valdés, 1997; Gratius, 1998; IRELA, 1997; 1998).

In the 1990s, Italy–Cuba relations began to acquire the shape they have today, being characterised by respect, cordiality and discretion despite the political differences. According to Roque Valdés (1997: 88), Italy has managed to maintain a respectful distance, avoiding the extreme and variable positions typical of other deeper historical and cultural linkages, where passion generates conflicting attitudes. Roque Valdés adds another essential element for good relations with Cuba, given its foreign policy principles and certain crystallised characteristics of greater importance even than “high politics”: respect for sovereignty and non-interference in its internal affairs.<sup>11</sup> In fact, although relations at this stage were fundamentally conditioned by economic interests (promotion of Italian investments, tourism, renegotiation of Cuban debt),<sup>12</sup> the significant state presence in both nations' economies made fluid political relations a necessary condition for the functioning of economic ties (Roque Valdés, 1997: 88–89). Comparatively low levels of intolerance and aggression – a feature of Italian foreign policy (Norman, 1963) – explain why it has become one of Cuba's main economic partners and one of the EU countries with the best bilateral relations portfolio.

At this stage areas of common interest also began to be identified and trade, investment and cooperation agreements were signed that remain in effect today. These years represented a milestone and sustainable guidelines for bilateral ties were put in place that have endured. One successful and necessary practice Cuba established with Europe in general – and with prioritised countries in particular – was to further increase its ties with local governments, parties, unions, associations, organisations and artists, as well as other groups, to provide stability against any electoral ups and downs in Europe that could risk the achievements made, because, ultimately, a country transcends a government (Hernández, 2015; Pérez Benítez, 2017). So, whenever a social group, a set of emigrants or a party, for example, showed sympathy for Cuba, it presented an opportunity for solidarity, cooperation or trade, or to pressure their governments to support Cuba's battles, especially the end of the blockade.<sup>13</sup>

The groups that traditionally promoted solidarity with Cuba in Italy followed this line and began to promote decentralised solidarity. This envisaged a more direct link between regions and provinces in Italy and provinces and localities in Cuba in order to achieve specific cooperation goals agreed between both parties, taking into account the needs and priorities of the different Cuban areas (Roque Valdés, 1997: 87).

Hence, during the hard years of the Common Position, the 2003 sanctions and the thawing process, Italy was one of the countries leading the calls for a good relationship with Cuba.<sup>14</sup> Susanne Gratius (2018: 6) lists France, Italy and Portugal as the countries that most clearly support constructive engagement with Cuba. Their approach and opposition to unilateral sanctions are related to their more distant relationship with the US and the low level of importance given to promoting democracy in their foreign policy, which tends to favour

cooperation, dialogue and economic relations. That the influential High Representative of the EU, Federica Mogherini, comes from a country that has traditionally looked more favourably upon constructive commitment without political conditions should come as no surprise.

Another specialist on the subject, Ambassador Isabel Allende Karam (2015) argues that the European Union still tends to see Cuba above all as “Latin”, adding that it is no coincidence that the first attempt at dialogue with the EU occurred when the troika was formed of Spain, France and Italy (Perera Gómez 2017: 86). Added to this is the fact that Italy has always been resistant to US diplomatic interference aimed at halting the agreement with Cuba (Perera Gómez, 2017).

Thus, despite the contradictions it contains, the Cuba–Italy bilateral plan has become among the most favourable, stable and balanced.

### 3. Bilateral relations in the post-PDCA landscape and the context of COVID-19

#### 3.1. Cooperation

Within the bilateral cooperation framework, the three priority sectors for intervention have been: 1) culture, heritage and the creative economies; 2) sustainable agriculture, natural resource management and agri-food systems; and 3) local development and territorial innovation (AICSA). At the start of 2020, the recorded budget was €21 million and there were 11 engagements in projects in Cuba, some of which remain ongoing (AICS, 2019).<sup>15</sup> The Italian cooperation strategy prioritises support for small farmers and their organisations, promoting the sustainable intensification of agricultural practices, and gives particular attention to applied research and technical dissemination to achieve higher production targets in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Italian activity also prioritises the connection between local food production and consumption, supporting the municipal self-sufficiency strategy (AICSA).

One of the major interventions carried out in the area of cultural heritage conservation – and a way of renewing mutual collaborative relations – was the support programme for the comprehensive restoration of Old Havana’s “Plaza del Cristo”, launched via an operational alliance between the Office of the Historian of Havana/OHCH and the IILA (AICSb).

Where development cooperation takes place, opportunities for future joint ventures may emerge, and vice versa. The two nations have been working since 2019 to promote sectors such as agriculture through the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS, 2019). One example was the participation of three farmers in the “Macfrut 2021” fair in Italy in September of that year, which was presented as an opportunity for Cuban exports. Participation in the event was one of the “CubaFruta” development cooperation initiatives, and was supported by the Italian trade promotion agency (ICE) and the AICS office in Havana (La Demajagua, 2021).

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each year several groups in Italy (Organizzazione internazionale italo-latino americana [IILA]; Agency for Cultural and Social interchange with Cuba [AICEC]; Cuba Va; Coordinadora Nacional de Cubanos Residentes en Italia [CONACI]; Asociación Nacional de Amistad Italia–Cuba [ANAIC]; Italian General Confederation of Labour [CGIL] speak out against the blockade and above all call for an end to the sanctions that most affect Cuban citizens, such as the restrictions on remittances, travel and consular procedures (La Demajagua, 2016; 2020; Cubaminrex–EmbaCubaltalia, 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b).

14. While it backed the Common Position, Italy was one of the countries that fought most for the more “gradual” version of the first Spanish draft (Perera Gómez, 2017:108). Consulting it was therefore a priority for aligning Washington’s and Brussels’ interests on Cuba (Roy, 2002: 50).

15. A figure of €7,013,699 was allocated to the field of “Culture and Heritage”, with around six projects. Meanwhile, “Sustainable Agriculture and the Environment”, the highest priority area, included another six projects and €9,085,830. For its part, “Territorial Development” was allocated €3,400,000 and two projects (AICS, 2019: 15).



Various exchanges have taken place at government level to confirm ongoing projects or cooperation opportunities in the mentioned areas or other new ones.

Meanwhile, the Plataforma Articulada para el Desarrollo Integral Territorial (PADIT), co-financed by the Italian government and managed on the Cuban side by the Ministry of Economy and Planning, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment (MINCEX) and by ten provincial governments, has been active in Cuba since 2014. It aims to strengthen local skills in planning and managing integrated territorial economic development in line with the aims of the country's National Plan for Economic and Social Development (PNDES), the 2030 Agenda, and seeks to strengthen Italy's contribution to localising the SDGs (MAECI, 2020a).

In fact, going back to 2017, when the approval and implementation of the PDCA were in the air, an agreement for a Livestock Cooperatives Development Project in the Central-Eastern Region (PRODEGAN) was signed in Rome by Alba Soto Pimentel, then Cuban Ambassador to Italy and Permanent Representative of the Rome-based United Nations agencies, and the President of IFAD, Kanayo F. Nwanze. This was the second project launched since Cuba rejoined IFAD in 2014 and succeeded PRODECOR, which also sought to complement government efforts in the field of developing the Cuban agricultural sector (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2017). Similarly, in 2018, Cuba's Ministry of Energy and Mines (MINEN) and the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea signed a memorandum of understanding to promote the use of safe and clean energies, in response to the commitment to reduce fossil fuel dependence and the increased importance of environmental sustainability (La Demajagua, 2018).

Various exchanges have taken place at government level to confirm ongoing projects or cooperation opportunities in the mentioned areas or other new ones and, alongside them, requalification, technical and professional advice and the granting of scholarships to Cubans to study in Italy (La Demajagua, 2021). One project the Cuban foreign minister discussed with members of the IILA was "Ciudades verdes" (Green Cities), an initiative to support cities' transition towards a circular economy, with sustainable tourism and agriculture (ACN, 2020a).

More recently, and of a different nature, was the signing of a memorandum of understanding on April 12th 2021 by the Italian Ambassador to Cuba, José Carlos Rodríguez Ruiz, between the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT) and the Italian public broadcaster Radiotelevisione italiana (RAI). The agreement aims to promote and develop cooperation in the media sector and will be in effect for three years from its signing and may be renewed based on written agreements (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2021c).

Meanwhile, the Cuban Ambassador to Italy thanked the Director General for Cooperation at the Italian foreign ministry for giving approval in March 2021 to the HAB.AMA programme for food self-sufficiency and the development of sustainable economic initiatives in Havana. Aided by Italian government contributions, it aims to strengthen local food self-sufficiency capacity in five selected municipalities in Havana province. The HAB.AMA programme figures among the lines approved by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for working with Cuba (*Prensa Latina*, 2021a).

### 3.2. Political relations, trade, investment and tourism

Cuba and Italy have confirmed the good state of their bilateral ties, as well as the shared desire to strengthen their economic, financial, commercial and cooperative relations. In general terms, a fundamental factor has been the mutual aid that both countries provided in 2020 and 2021, during their respective COVID-19 peaks. What is more, multiple meetings and exchanges have taken place to identify opportunities for cooperation, trade and relaunching tourism (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020a; 2020c; 2020d; 2020e; 2021b; 2021d; 2021e; 2021f; MAECI, 2020b).

Added to this are the calls for the end of the blockade and internal interference in Cuba. The clearest expression of which was motion 238 of April 14th 2021 in favour of lifting the blockade, which was approved by the Senate of the Italian Republic after being presented by senators Paola Nugnes and Loredana de Petris, both from the Mixed Group - Free and Equal Party (LeU) (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2021g).<sup>16</sup> Closely related to this, the Center for Research and Elaboration for Democracy/ International Legal Intervention Group (CRED/GIGI in its Italian acronym) criticised the debates on Cuba in the European Parliament that ultimately resulted in a resolution being approved, with certain positions appearing to favour a regression in EU–Cuba relations, including the suspension of the PDCA (*Prensa Latina*, 2021b). Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio made certain clarifications that turned out to be important on the non-acceptance of a resolution presented by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) calling for the removal of the use of sanctions as a tool (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020f). Di Maio said that they were not intended to target Cuba and reiterated his traditional stance against the US blockade, while nevertheless insisting that they were necessary. While this constituted a point of political dissent, it was not compromising.

The Italian government also contributed €120,000 in August 2021 to support the World Food Programme's (WFP) food assistance work in Cuba. The funding turned out to be considerable, as it began a process that led to the purchase of 50 metric tons of beans and oil intended to bolster the diet of some 2,300 people in hospitals in Havana and Matanzas (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2021h).

Another example that shows the level of bilateral relations and their good state was the hosting of the Cuban Ambassador to Italy by the new President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Piero Fassino. The Cuban diplomat expressed the desire of Cuba's legislative body (the National Assembly of People's Power [ANPP]) to promote inter-parliamentary relations and cooperation with the Italian parliament in various fields, as a way to contribute to developing ties between the two countries and for the benefit of both peoples (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020a).

The virtual exchanges with migrants should not be overlooked, and neither should the statements about the new opportunities the approval of SMEs and the continuing development of the Mariel Special Development Zone offer to both migrants and Italian investors, or the updating of draft laws to combine renewing the economic model with

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16. However, at the same time a second agenda was approved whose first signatory was the leader of the Brothers of Italy, Luca Ciriani. It called instead for selective sanctions against Cuban political leaders and a general review of the sanctions system to better protect the activity of Italian companies in international markets (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2021i).

projecting an image of a country in the process of adapting to global trends. The same applies to the face-to-face and individual exchanges conducted by both Cuba's foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, and its Ambassador to Italy. The latter has worked unstintingly to promote "*Producto Cuba*", particularly in the light of the 2030 Agenda and the favourable current circumstances for rapprochement with Cuba (Cubaminrex- EmbaCubaltalia, 2020d; 2020e; 2021b).

There is no doubt that the prestige earned from the medical collaboration in Italy opened the doors for Cuba to engage in other projects, not only in terms of cooperation and solidarity, but also trade, investment and exchange. Indeed, meetings have been held between the Piedmontese authorities and the Cuban Embassy in Italy with the aim of promoting business connections between Cuba and the Piedmont region – especially the provinces of Matanzas, Cienfuegos and Villa Clara. This is part of a business offensive towards various Italian regions undertaken by the Cuban Embassy in coordination with Cuban organisations such as MINCEX, the Chamber of Commerce of the Republic of Cuba and ProCuba (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020e). As part of this strategy, the Cuban Ambassador was hosted on May 25th 2021 by the Mayor of Florence, Dario Nardella, at the city's emblematic town hall, the Palazzo Vecchio (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2021e).<sup>17</sup>

17. Among the resolutions reached at the meeting, the City of Florence promised to support the sending of a Florentine trade mission to Cuba by the end of 2021 to be organised by the business and investment-promotion body "Emprendedores por Cuba", which is led by businessman Claudio Cardini. Florence's chamber of commerce will support the trade mission.

18. At the meeting held on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2020, Cuba's attractiveness to the Italian market was recognised, and it was clarified that Italian travellers favour tour routes. Both parties confirmed their desire to continue promoting tourism to Cuba, recognising its multiple values – historical, heritage, cultural, natural and social – its safety as a destination and its health security, as reflected by the successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cuba itself and the fact that over 60 countries received the cooperation of Cuban medical personnel, including Italy (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020g).

19. The Binational Committees met to approve the associated internal regulations and establish the mechanisms for accessing the counterpart funds and the criteria for defining the eligible projects for the committees. In particular, in accordance with the provisions of the debt management agreements, the counterpart fund resources (in the commercial and cooperation areas) may be used to subsidise (in local currency) expenditure made in Cuba on investment and industrial or development projects approved by the two respective committees (MAECI, 2020b).

Tourism is a key sector for the bilateral relationship, with both countries participating in international tourism fairs to promote new modalities in the sector and travel to Cuba (Prensa Latina, 2019). The pandemic caused tourism to fall but, given the success of its vaccination programme, Cuba is at the threshold of the post-COVID era and the Cuban Ambassador has been engaging with Italian tour operators since 2020 over the island's relaunch as a destination and the projections for Italian tourism in Cuba (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020g).<sup>18</sup>

The Binational Committee meetings should also be mentioned. Italy was called upon to manage the counterpart funds provided for in the bilateral debt management agreement, and the committees provide a support tool for Italian companies interested in investments and projects with local counterparts in Cuba. The Cuban government undertook to convert some commercial debts (€88.6 million) into a fund in local currency to be allocated to financing strategic projects for the country's development in which Italian companies participate – by preference small and medium-sized companies, and Italian–Cuban joint ventures (MAECI, 2020b).<sup>19</sup>

### 3.3. Solidarity

Lastly, there is the mutual solidarity the two nations have shown over the past two years of COVID-19. This has undoubtedly shaped the current ties and will condition those of the future. From April to November 2020, the active participation of the members of Cuba's Henry Reeve Emergency Medical Contingent was notable, as they provided emergency health assistance in Turin (Piedmont) and Crema (Lombardy). Based on the positive experiences, the first Italy–Cuba Medical Symposium: "Exchange on Covid-19" was held in Turin



in June 2020. From that event a generalised proposal emerged to maintain medical and scientific collaboration between Piedmont and Cuba, with future exchanges between professionals in the sector (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020h).

On July 21st 2020, in an initiative called “Una Luz Por Cuba” (ACN, 2020b) La Mole Antonelliana, symbol of Turin and one of Italy’s most emblematic buildings, was illuminated with the colours of the Cuban flag in a show of gratitude to Cuba and the medical brigade that collaborated in the fight against COVID-19 in Piedmont.

Similarly, La Villetta per Cuba, a Rome-based group promoting solidarity with the Cuban people, organised medical supplies to be collected and sent to Cuba in response to the United States’ blockade, which has been tightened during the pandemic and has even prevented the arrival of emergency medical supplies and equipment to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020b).

Similarly, the Associazione Italia-Cuba-Salerno sent a donation for primary school children (41kg) to the province of Santiago de Cuba as a gesture of gratitude for the presence of the two Cuban medical brigades of the Henry Reeve Contingent (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2020b).<sup>20</sup>

In August 2021, the pandemic’s peak in the country, Cuba benefited from several donations from Italy. Among them, the shipment of medical supplies coordinated by the youth section of the Italian Association of Private Hospitality (AIOP) in the Lombardy region, which arrived on August 9th and was followed by another on the 23rd. Both were aided by logistical support from the international freight forwarding company Vector and the airline Neos,<sup>21</sup> as well as the business groups in the health sector San Donato, Gheron and Mantova Salus. On the 26th of the same month, a medical donation arrived coordinated by the CGIL, AICEC, CONACI, ANAIC, the regional government of Piedmont, the Community of Sant’Egidio and La Villetta per Cuba. They were joined by the UNDP’s Articulated Platform for Integral Territorial Development, the Italian Recreational and Cultural Association of Umbria, Our America-Italian Chapter of the Network in Defense of Humanity and the Cambiando de Ruta youth organisation (€280,000, 150 respirators and medical supplies) (Fuentes Puebla, 2021). It should be added that since the pandemic began ANAIC has gathered over €144,000 to support the Cuban health system, research, the development of vaccines against COVID-19, protective equipment for the Pedro Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine and the acquisition of cancer drugs for paediatric patients (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2021a).

The Cuba–Italy Business Committee (CICI), meanwhile, sent a container full of donations “for our Cuban brothers” to support the COVID-19 prevention and control plan (Cubaminrex-EmbaCubaltalia, 2021f). ANAIC went on to show its firm rejection of the European Parliament’s resolutions against Cuba approved on June 10th and September 16th 2021, respectively. Voices from Italian society, Cubans residing in that country, the Communist Refoundation Party and other groups expressed support for Cuba in the difficult period when the epidemiological

**20.** In 2004 Emilio Lambiasi proposed the twinning of the Province of Salerno and Santiago de Cuba from which multiple cultural, economic and social exchanges have resulted.

**21.** The airline has been highly active in these donations, with further services on October 4th.

situation was worsening, the blockade was tightened and defamatory campaigns were being generated with the help of social network algorithms (Puccio, 2021). In sum, then, Italian solidarity towards Cuba, which was always active, grew during the pandemic.

The PDCA frameworks provided a positive framework for Cuba–Italy ties to grow from their usually favourable state to higher levels of consolidation and rapprochement.

## Conclusions

Historically, the framework of Cuba–Italy bilateral relations has shown the importance of the political will to achieve dialogue and of cordiality and mutual respect. It provides a good example of positive outcomes being achieved in spite of political systems.

The Cuba–Italy pairing – always bearing in mind the latter’s membership of the European Union – demonstrates the need for and effectiveness of placing common interests before differences and, above all, of opting for a foreign policy characterised by political non-conditionality towards counterparts. The principles of non-interference in internal affairs, of true respect for the self-determination of peoples and the avoidance of seeking to bring about changes in counterparts’ political systems are the keys to success, as Cuba–Italy relations have shown.

The links between the two states are extensive and demonstrate that countries transcend governments and ideologies, as broad swathes of the population, as well as various non-governmental or decentralised entities, provide niches of opportunity for states to increase their presence in their counterparts’ countries and benefit from formal or informal exchange with them. Hence, extending political horizons towards other areas of power and groups of people, using public and traditional diplomacy, are good practices for one state to achieve its foreign policy goals with regard to another.

The PDCA frameworks and the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, provided a positive framework for Cuba–Italy ties to grow from their usually favourable state to higher levels of consolidation and rapprochement.

Over the period analysed, the differences between the countries’ priorities remain clear. Looking beyond the good state of bilateral relations, from a governmental point of view Cuba’s more proactive stance is noticeable, as is the greater involvement of Cuban high politics, using diplomacy as its key foreign policy instrument, which contrasts with its Italian counterpart. The central role in Italy’s outreach towards Cuba is played by solidarity groups and regional governments, above all in areas where the Cuban medical brigades provided their services. This is a clear sign of the success of the Cuba’s diplomatic strategy of expansion and rapprochement with all locations and levels of power and beyond to achieve its objectives towards Italy.

The development of Cuba’s ties with Italy shows how, depending on the circumstances, cooperation and solidarity can be as important as high politics or more so in its relations with EU states, especially given the risks posed by the electoral and political fluctuations in these countries.

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