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REPORT FROM THE ROUNDTABLE ON CUBA: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE END OF COMMUNISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

October 15, 1999
Ottawa

On the 15th of October, 1999, Cuba and Eastern Europe experts met in Ottawa to reflect on the 10th year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The focus of the discussion was the lessons of the decade-long transformation in Eastern Europe for a potential post-communist Cuba. The roundtable was organised by the Centre for Foreign Policy Development.

1. Transition Theory

Can the experiences of Eastern Europe in transformation from Communism to a market-based economy and Western style democracy relate to a potential post-communist future in Cuba? Are there grounds for comparison? Does a framework for analysing transitions exist? The main themes within such a framework could include issues related to transition to democracy and consolidation of democracy. How compatible are reforms aimed at building a market economy and those meant to promote the growth of a liberal democracy? Can these reforms be implemented simultaneously?

Three sets of variables to look for when analysing a transition were explored. The first set of variables includes factors such as the cohesion of the nation state, political culture, and the role of the external environment (i.e., the role of international organisations). The second set focuses on a country's starting conditions including popular perceptions about what is beneficial, the nature of the previous regime and its institutions, location of the elites and social structures (stratification) generated by the previous system. The third set of variables is based on elite analysis. For instance, whether elite pacts between exiting and ascending leadership facilitate a peaceful transition. It also includes rational actor analysis.

While most participants agreed that there is ground for comparing a possible post-communist Cuba to Eastern Europe, others were not as enthusiastic. The former group argued that, after all, Cuba adopted the Soviet political and economic system and was a member of Communist alliances. The latter group argued that the particularities of the Cuban experience make such comparison impossible. These particularities include the indigenous Cuban roots of the socialist revolution, the longevity of Castro's leadership, the strength of Cuban nationalism, proximity to the U.S.A. and more generally, the Latin American context. Others noted that

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