**European Union’s Ambassador to Cuba: “I don’t think that Cuba is a dictatorship.”**

*“As ambassador, I cannot go around making qualifying statements, least of all about the government before which I am accredited; what I do is verify the steps that are taken,” said Alberto Navarro to CubaNet.*

Camila Acosta | February 26, 2021

 Photo Caption

Alberto Navarro, the European Union’s Ambassador to Cuba. Credit: Cubadebate

HAVANA, Cuba. – CubaNet spoke via telephone with Alberto Navarro, the European Union’s ambassador to Cuba.

**Hello, it’s a pleasure that you agreed to this interview. My name is Camila Acosta, I am a journalist with CubaNet. I would like to ask you several questions about the dialogue that will take place, in fact, that started today, Thursday, and will continue this Friday, February 26 between the European Union and Cuba.**

Of course, with pleasure.

**What subjects will the European Union present at this meeting, at this dialogue that will take place tomorrow between the UE and Cuba?**

Actually, this is the third formal dialogue, but we have held thirteen informal dialogues before, which means there already is a lot of experience. We –each party- always make an introduction; both parties bring large delegations that participate in the discussions. To give you an example, Cuba’s ambassador in Geneva is also there, as well as specialists at the Foreign Ministry (MINREX), from various departments. The first point is to do the introductions, and then the participants are divided into three groups by subject matter: the first, to address political and civil rights; the second to address economic, social and cultural rights; and the third to address the multilateral aspects, let’s say the topic of human rights in the world.

About the first and the second groups, each party proposes way in advance for each dialogue, a specific theme it wants to address; on the European side, when it comes to political and civil rights, we have included freedom of association and expression. On its part, Cuba has proposed the struggle against racism, xenophobia, racial discrimination and hate speech in the public sphere.

Concerning group number two on economic, social and cultural rights, Cuba has requested we address human rights in the context of COVID, the right to health care and social security; the European Union has proposed the promotion of cultural rights, and more specifically, the freedom of scientific research and artistic freedom. Finally, on the multilateral topic, since Cuba is a member of the U.N. Human Rights Council, human rights are addressed in different fora at the U.N., especially at the Human Rights Council. Those are the themes of the agenda for the meeting this Friday which, as I said already, will be the third formal meeting and the sixth we’ve held on this human rights dialogue between the European Union and Cuba.

At the European Union, we hold this type of dialogues or consultations with approximately sixty countries around the world. In the case of Cuba, we have an additional four dialogues: a dialogue on unilateral sanctions which we will hold in March, on the 25th of the month; a dialogue about disarmament of weapons of mass destruction and about small arms trafficking; and lastly, a dialogue about sustainable development, which are the goals of the U.N. 2030 Agenda, the development goals for the millennium. We have those five dialogues: human rights; unilateral coercive measures; sanctions, disarmament; illegal small arms trafficking; and lastly, sustainable development.

Then we have other dialogues by sectors; there’s one for agriculture, another for energy and another about climate change. These are more technical dialogues that are held with the pertinent ministry here in Cuba and the general directorate in Brussels. Agriculture is handled by the DG AGRI; environmental and climate change are handled by environment; and energy is handled by the directorate’s energy group.

**Regarding democracy and human rights, what does the European Union expect from Cuba?**

We start from the premise that no society is perfect, and neither do we want to impart lessons to the rest of the world. We Europeans, who have had enough wars on our continent already, wars we have called “world wars” but which ultimately have been European wars that we have exported to the rest of the world, we could say that what we want is to share experiences, to explore how we can improve in practice, learn from one another about the promotion and respect for human rights, of international covenants, especially those of the United Nations to which we are signatories and have ratified them. That is the spirit of these dialogues.

What we are doing is observing closely how Cuban society and the Cuban government evolve. It is not our role to interfere in Cuba’s politics; it is up to the Cuban people themselves to decide their future; but yes, as partners and friends we are bringing forth the sharing of experiences on all those subjects about which, as I said, we dialogue with sixty other countries (with China we are presently on the 35th dialogue). We have, after all, an agreement called Agreement for Political Dialogue and Cooperation, which we signed in December 2016 and which went into effect on November 1, 2017; we have had this agreement for a little more than three years now.

Our special envoy for human rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore, is the former Foreign Minister of Ireland. Ireland has just renewed the High Representative’s mandate until February 2023; he is the person who will lead the dialogue on the European side. He knows Cuba, he was here as the special envoy for the peace process with Colombia, a post he continues to hold. He knows the FARC peace process very well; he will lead the dialogue this Friday for the European side. For the Cuban side, Maria del Carmen Herrera Caseiro will lead the dialogue; she is acting general director, a position she assumed following the death a few months ago of our good friend, Rodolfo Reyes, who had led all the dialogues up to that point.

**But, tell me, Alberto: what is your opinion of the Cuban government? For example, do you consider that Miguel Díaz-Canel was democratically elected, or that the government respects freedom of expression, freedom of the press, of opinion or association?**

I am not going to make value judgements on this nature because it’s not my place to do so. Besides, as the European Union’s ambassador here, what I am called to do is to promote those values that represent Europe, among them, undoubtedly, is the promotion and respect for democracy and human rights; to encourage dialogues with Cuba in every subject in order to help Cuba, as much as it’s possible, to improve at every level, in all sectors, but I cannot emit value judgements because that would be improper on my part.

I would like to tell you that we follow with great interest, obviously –and we are a good example, the European Union that we are- what we wish to promote all over the world, and that is that there be dialogue, respect and good practices in order to find sustainable policies, to find that societies can become increasingly prosperous and that in them there is respect for democratic principles and human rights, and without a doubt, those societies are more open, more democratic, where human rights are respected and ultimately, are more prosperous.

**You must know of a survey that Civil Rights Defenders conducted in the middle of last year whose results were sent to the European Union. I am talking about a survey pertinent to the Agreement for Political Dialogue and Cooperation that the EU has with Cuba. According to the survey, which interviewed more than 100 individuals both inside Cuba and abroad, the opinion of the majority held that Cuba does not comply with the Agreement of Dialogue and Cooperation. What, then, should the European Union do if it has been demonstrated that Cuba does not comply with this agreement?**

It’s not about saying that it complies or it doesn’t comply. No, the agreements are in effect and what they foresee has to do with a series of consultations and mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. We continue to cooperate with Cuba, and when I say, “with Cuba”, I am not just referring to the Cuban government, but also with civil society. We have projects through European NGOs that collaborate with Cuba, for example, NTBL, a Spanish non-profit, or GNC, an Italian non-profit, collaborating with Cuban epidemiological entities. They are helping tens of thousands of senior citizens here in Havana to have professional attention; they have sought, also, important solutions for people in protection and development, and to avail the best resources to the Institute (…) and to the Pedro Kouri Tropical Medicine Institute (IPK, by its Spanish acronym), beyond resources to combat COVID.

I believe that we, the European Union, have agreements with practically every country in the world. It’s not about denouncing those agreements or telling whether there is compliance or not. What we have to do is search for the best possible way to make sure those agreements can work to the fullest advantage; like, for instance, now that self-employment is growing in Cuba, and if small and medium-size businesses were to be authorized soon, as we wish and hope for, for us to be able to facilitate micro credits and help promote and assist with creating opportunities for wealth and employment in Cuba, like we do in many other countries. That is our task, we are not judges, nor do we impart lessons, nor impose our policies on these countries because, as I already told you, it would not be proper conduct for an organization like the European Union; we have relations with every country in the world, where there are no perfect societies, you could point to one that, as always, will be lacking in this or that, or will have issues that we disagree on, like enforcement of the death penalty in the U.S. or in countries that we do not like, things that we do not mention in the dialogues we hold with them, but at the same time, who are we to sever the connection with them, to end the agreements that we have with, for example, the U.S. because there have been death penalties enforced already, which is contrary to our principles.

**I ask you this question for two reasons: first, the results of the survey and second because last month, Dita Charanzová, the vice president of the European parliament, stated that the European Union should move to suspend the agreement with Cuba on grounds of human rights violations.**

Yes, I know. The European parliament, with its 705 members (a.k.a.MEPs), has no authority when it comes to foreign policy. It pronounces itself, and we listen, Brussels listens, the High Representative –who does have authority- listens. The majority of the MEPs, more than two thirds, supported this agreement and voted favorably about the Agreement for Political Dialogue and Cooperation with Cuba in July 2017, which is what made it possible that it go into effect on November 1 of the same year.

They are a respectable group, we respect the opinions of the MEPs, and the vice president’s opinion; she has also requested my dismissal as the government’s representative here. Like I said before, their opinion is respected, but they do not decide on matters of the EU’s foreign policy.

**When you refer to Cuban civil society, evidently you are referring to organizations such as the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC, by its Spanish acronym) or the Communist Youth Union (UJC, by its Spanish acronym), which are organizations that clearly answer to the Communist Party’s ideology –the sole ideology- and this means that they do not truly represent civil society: they represent the policies of the government. I think that has been clearly demonstrated. Why, then, not…?**

No, no. We have contacts, held meetings and dialogues with very wide sectors of Cuban civil society, not just with what you may consider, let’s say, official civil society, for lack of a better term. No. The EU delegation has held meetings, unfortunately now with the pandemic, most of them take place by phone, like our conversation today. I can tell you that we have held 17 teleconferences with individuals linked to the San Isidro Movement, the Ladies in White, a very long list, Jose Daniel Ferrer, I can mention to you a very long list of people who have had, and still have with the Delegation: that is also part of our tasks and obligations here.

What also does not make sense is that we conduct –and are judged- the EU’s relations with Cuba only through a human rights perspective; although human rights is a very respectable issue that we have to boost and promote, the EU also has other wide interests, it has many citizens here that travel to and from Cuba, who live in Cuba, investments, etc. There are concerns here that span from commercial, financial, and consular matters to those concerning democracy and human rights. However, it is not true that we limit ourselves to dealing with only part of civil society, absolutely not true. As I said, we have held a multitude of meetings, of communications and dialogues with individuals like those I mentioned earlier who are also within our tasks.

We are a very small office, but we are very committed and dedicated, and people know, when they want to call us or give us some complaint, some objection, they know that all they have to do is pick up the phone and we will listen with great interest; we don’t share with Brussels nor with the member States. Just like the EU is more than a Delegation headquartered here on Fifth Avenue (Miramar), the EU is also Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Poland, and so on, with their embassies accredited here. There are more than 17 located here and others are accredited from neighboring countries, and all of them perform tasks and hold meetings and dialogues with other segments of Cuban civil society, which is varied and plentiful, as you have witnessed here, with every country. The same happens in our respective countries where there is diversity of opinions. You will see that people are expressing themselves against COVID-19 measures, that hundreds have been arrested in several European capital cities, and that is because our societies are also very diverse, because no society is perfect and therefore we cannot pretend to teach lessons to one another. What we have to do is learn from each other.

**And in Cuba’s case, of course, you have held and kept up some form of communication with dissidents, with human rights activists here, but: why doesn’t the European Union Delegation here in Cuba invite independent civil society actors to these meetings? Why has it held no open dialogues with members of independent civil society like it holds them, for example, with other countries with which it has relations and agreements similar to those is has with Cuba?**

Well, let me tell you. We have invited organizations of the kind that you would describe as “outside” the ones I mentioned, to participate. What happens is that these meetings are a bit “unnatural”, because we are talking about meetings with civil society actors that the governments organize, i.e., the States, they have to be approved by both parties, and thus we make proposals for inclusion but not all are accepted, and then we can only hold meetings with those organizations that are approved by both parties. This practice is the established methodology that we have to abide by for political dialogue; we continue to push for the opening of these spaces, and of course we hold, in addition to those official meetings, countless other dialogues and reunions. When High Representative Federica Mogherini was here, she met with a lot of people at the European Delegation residence, also when she stayed at the Packard Hotel, where she held a breakfast with them, a very diverse group of people, because it is in our best interest to listen to diverse voices.

As far as a political dialogue or meeting within the framework of the Agreement, participants must be approved by both parties.

**What you are telling me is that you have invited human rights organizations from independent civil society to participate in the dialogues, but the Cuban government has not accepted their participation?**

That is true.

**Give me an example, what organizations?**

For example, I can refer to one called Cuban Rights Defenders, headquartered in Stockholm, and another one called People in Need, headquartered in Prague.

As you already know, there are also differences of opinion at the EU. There are individuals who have requested that this Friday’s meeting not be held, because they do not want us to hold the dialogues the way we held them with the U.S. during the Obama Administration, which was then followed by the policies of Mr. Trump, and we could not hold any additional dialogues on human rights with Cuba or the U.S. Some are giving this as the reason why we should call off the dialogues. We think this would not be right; we think we should continue taking steps and continue to bet on an evaluative, constructive and respectful dialogue, but (…) without several organizations that we have proposed but have not been accepted, and therefore cannot participate (…).

**You have mentioned international human rights organizations, but, for example, have you invited human rights organizations inside Cuba?**

Of course, we have. We have invited European organizations that have a presence inside Cuba, such as Movement for Peace, Disarmament and Freedom, (…) there is the Italian GLC, (…), there is OXFAM, Cuba, and also OXFAM, Brussels. OXFAM is probably the largest organization in the world (…) the organizations have to be relevant to the dialogue that is taking place, they must be able to contribute to the discussion of the issues that are on the table, the topics we aim to discuss.

**How about organizations such as the Ladies in White, UNPACU, or the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights?**

 Of course, no. I have already told you that those organizations would have to be approved by the Cuban government. It’s obvious that such approval will not happen because the government does not consider them [legitimate], they are not legally registered, and the Cuban government does not consider them relevant or representative. That is how we conduct the meetings that we have.

**And do you think this is correct?**

It’s not about being correct or incorrect. Let me explain, we work within an existing legal framework which is the Agreement for Political Dialogue between Cuba and the European Union, and within the framework of this Agreement, both parties must respect it because we have signed it.

What do you want? Do you want us to call off all cooperation, that we close the EU’s Delegation here, and withdraw the EU’s embassies from Cuba?

**No, it’s not about…**

Do you want us to enforce a policy of blockade like the United States? The answer is no.

**Not at all, not at all. It is not my intention, neither is it about what I want.**

It’s what I am telling you. In order to promote policies in Cuba you have to accept the rules of the game as they are: an agreement that both parties have signed and where a work methodology is established. Then, we gradually take steps; I don’t think there is any comparison between what we have done, what we are going at present, and what we were doing three years ago. We have increased the quality of the dialogues, the level of cooperation, we have started a few small projects with many more in progress, and all this for the benefit of Cuban society and of many Cuban students that have adopted European nationalities who have also benefitted from the programs (…). There are those who say that we have to cancel all this because human rights are being violated. Well, no. That is not how the EU thinks, we don’t have to penalize the people simply for these considerations. We keep taking steps, sometimes those steps look very small, but we keep on taking steps, and that is why each dialogue we have undertaken has enabled us to learn from each other. The last dialogue which took place in Brussels, Rodolfo Reyes was still alive, made reference to abuse against women and gender violence, in Brussels, meaning that we learnt from each other. Like I said already, we are not living in a world where Europeans are supposed to impart lessons. Cuba as well has certain themes, like for instance, the solidarity it has shown through its medical brigades; Cuba, for the first time in history, has sent physicians and nurses to take care of our people in Italy, for example, (…) and to French territories in the Caribbean.

**Speaking of the medical brigades: well, you must know that the United Nations has called this practice a form of modern slavery.**

No, it’s been called that by certain people only. The United Nations has not pronounced itself as such, on the contrary. The U.N. Secretary General has requested that the embargo against Cuba be suspended, as well as all unilateral sanctions, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nobody has paid attention, very few people have paid attention (…).

Well, I think we have been talking for more than half an hour now.

**I have one last question, if you allow me.**

Yes, of course, with pleasure, to finish our conversation.

**Recently you joined various figures, artists and intellectuals here in Cuba, requesting in a letter addressed to the U.S. government, specifically to the Biden Administration, to end the embargo.**

Yes.

**Why, then, haven’t you joined similar initiatives from civil society?**

Let’s see. I have not signed that initiative, I don’t know why there are people saying that I did. I have not signed that initiative. That initiative was signed by one hundred plus individuals, among them people whom I know well and who are my friends, like Carlos Alzugaray, like Carolina de la Torre (…) people whom I admire a lot. The group reflected a wide spectrum of individuals representative of Cuban society. During my 40-year career as a Spanish diplomat, I have always, always been against the unilateral U.S. embargo against Cuba. Not only do I think it is contrary to international law because it is applied outside the borders of the U.S., but also because it is applied against us Europeans, our businesses, and our citizens, not just against Cubans, and it is also illegal, contrary to international law. I have always regarded it as immoral.

All I did was write an e-mail saying that I supported the request. And that support –and I have no reservations in telling you- is the same one I have toward everything that will advance democracy, dialogue and respect for human rights in Cuba. These are issues I have been working on here, and I continue to work on. This is my fourth year in Cuba, and I have dedicated much energy and time here working and advancing these principles, to open up more.

However, in this case specifically, there are people who have affirmed that I signed the initiative. I have not signed that letter, I only sent a personal mail that said I supported those ideas because I have always advocated for them. I would say it is far more intelligent to lift the embargo in order to advance democracy in Cuba.

**You are telling me, well, you are giving me your opinion about the U.S. embargo, but you refused to give me your opinion about the Cuban government. Do you think that Cuba is a dictatorship?**

No, I do not consider that Cuba is a dictatorship. Of course not.

**What, then, do you consider is the Cuban government?**

As ambassador, I cannot go around making qualifying statements, least of all about the government before which I am accredited. What I do is verify the steps that are taken, the Constitution that is approved, the measures approved in favor of self-employment which I hope can soon be extended to small and mid-size businesses.

And from our small office, we try to help to the extent possible with everything that can contribute to greater prosperity and a more open Cuban society. That is what we are advancing, that is what we are doing.

**Well, thank you very much.**

It’s been a pleasure talking with you.

**Camila Acosta**

Acosta obtained a degree in journalism from the University of Havana in 2016. She is a researcher, a documentary filmmaker, and a communications specialist at the Association of Writers and Artists of Cuba/*Club de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba* (CEAC, by its Spanish acronym). She resides in Havana.