

FRIDE
A EUROPEAN
THINK TANK FOR GLOBAL ACTION

New Europe content partner

Desperately seeking an EU policy towards Venezuela

By **Susanne Gratius**



Every year, the EU debates about its Common Position on Cuba, a small island with hardly any strategic importance for Europe. In contrast, Brussels has not yet developed any policy towards the world's seventh oil producer and the third Latin American economy, Venezuela. Development cooperation is insignificant, there is no political dialogue, the country has not been

included in the upcoming EU association agreements with other Andean countries, and economic relations concentrate on energy interests. The absence of an EU policy towards Venezuela is more the result of neglect than a response to the country's increasing authoritarianism.

Hugo Chavez's view of centralised democracy is far from European standards of rule of law and respect for human rights. Since his coming to power in 1999, Venezuela has experienced a gradual transition to a highly personalised regime, where elections are the main link between democracy and dictatorship. Today, virtually all institutions are controlled by the government and opposition members are threatened, imprisoned or simply disqualified. Economic chaos, weak institutions and widespread violence give evidence of a failed state with an uncertain future.

Why does the EU turn a blind eye to Venezuela but intently looks towards Cuba? The main reason is Spain. To help Venezuela reverse its drift into authoritarianism, a more systematic "Europeanised" engagement is overdue.

While Spain's relations with its last colony Cuba are highly emotional and are part of its domestic debate, energy-interests are the centrepiece of its close relations with the Chavez government. Currently, there are 117 Spanish companies operating in Venezuela, including major energy firms such as Iberdrola and Repsol. The latter's recent gas discoveries in the Andean country have the potential to meet Spanish energy demands for the next seven years.

The protection of Spanish investments in Venezuela is the main objective of a foreign policy guided by the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. The pro-government approach is in line with Spain's bilateral alliance with Venezuela and their membership in the Ibero-American Community, based in Madrid. Also, the historic debt of colonialism weighs heavy. Chavez does not miss any occasion to use oil interests as a weapon and to blame Spain for its colonial past. He has recently announced a new era of independence and "socialism" that will end with his power projection until 2030.

Spain's pro-government approach contrasts with Washington's "honeymoon" with the opposition. Both are part of the problem and not the solution. Critical voices from Europe are rare and often too silent. The EU plays the Spanish game, but is it really a common European interest to be identified with national agendas? Spain's relations with Venezuela highlight certain issues that need to be addressed: the dominance of member states' interests in the EU's "common" foreign policy (or, in this case, the absence of), the power relationship between government and the private sector, and the trade-off between interests and values in countries with a negative democracy and human rights record.

A blind eye towards Venezuela and strong attention to Cuba do not help to up-grade the EU's image in the world, but underlines its low credibility as a democracy promoter and its limited influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Castro and Chavez follow the same "fatherland, socialism or death" slogan, yet the EU responds differently in each case. Such double standards are against the Lisbon Treaty's commitment to develop a coherent Common Security and Foreign policy. The bicentenary, the upcoming EU-LAC summit in May in Madrid and parliamentary elections in Venezuela offer a new opportunity for a values-oriented European policy towards Chavez, who self-servingly manipulates Venezuela's external relations and history.

Susanne Gratius is senior researcher at FRIDE.