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## Cuba Comparative Transitions Roundtable Summary

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### Executive Summary

This memorandum summarizes the principal findings of the *Cuba Comparative Transitions Roundtable* convened by the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at Florida International University's Washington Office on June 29, 2026. The discussion examined how the democratic transitions of Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of communist regimes may inform analysis and planning for a potential democratic transition in Cuba.

### Background

The roundtable brought together historians, economists, regional specialists, and policy practitioners to examine the comparative experiences of post-communist democratic transitions. Rather than identifying a single model for Cuba, participants sought to determine which lessons from Eastern Europe are transferable and which are unique to their historical contexts.

Participants agreed that comparative analysis is valuable because it highlights recurring patterns in democratic transitions while recognizing that every transition is shaped by its own political, economic, and social conditions. Cuba's institutions, security apparatus, and geopolitical environment differ substantially from those of post-communist Europe. Nevertheless, the experiences of Eastern European states provide useful insights into how authoritarian systems adapt during periods of political change, how institutional reforms should be

sequenced, and how domestic and international actors influence democratic consolidation. The objective was not to prescribe a blueprint for Cuba, but to identify enduring principles that can inform U.S. understanding of the opportunities and risks associated with a potential future transition.

### Key Findings

#### ***Finding 1: Initial conditions shape the trajectory of democratic transition***

Participants emphasized that democratic transitions are path dependent. The manner in which an authoritarian regime ends, whether through negotiated settlement, elite fragmentation, regime collapse, or external intervention, largely determines the institutions, incentives, and political actors that shape the transition.

Among the comparative cases examined, Albania and Romania are particularly relevant cautionary examples because they demonstrate the long-term consequences of entrenched security institutions, delayed reform, weak civil society, and elite capture of political and economic systems. Conversely, Poland, Estonia, and Bulgaria illustrate broader principles of successful democratic consolidation rather than models to be replicated.

Across all cases, participants agreed that the first months following regime change are decisive. Delays in establishing democratic institutions, strengthening the rule of law, implementing transitional justice, and initiating market reforms create opportunities for authoritarian elites and patronage networks to adapt to new political

conditions while preserving their influence.

***Finding 2: Democratic institutions must be established rapidly and credibly.***

Successful transitions combined political legitimacy with institutional speed. While negotiated transitions may require temporary accommodations with former regime officials, participants cautioned that such compromises should not become permanent mechanisms for preserving authoritarian influence.

Romania demonstrates the risks associated with leaving coercive institutions largely intact, while Russia illustrates how incomplete institutional reform can coexist with elections yet ultimately produce state capture and democratic erosion. Poland's experience further illustrates that transitional justice—including lustration—is most effective when understood as democratic accountability rather than political retribution.

Participants stressed that elections alone are insufficient to consolidate democracy. Electoral legitimacy, the rule of law, independent courts, political pluralism, and an organized civil society are equally important. Free media, freedom of assembly, and unrestricted internet access should therefore be established as early priorities because they strengthen transparency, accountability, and public confidence.

Finally, participants agreed that a democratic transition must ultimately be Cuban-led. International partners can provide technical expertise, resources, and institutional support, but political legitimacy depends upon a reform agenda developed and owned by Cubans on the island working alongside the Cuban diaspora.

***Finding 3: Security sector reform is essential to democratic consolidation.***

Participants identified security sector reform as one of the most important determinants of long-term democratic success. Democratic consolidation is unlikely if intelligence

services, internal security organizations, or military patronage networks remain politically autonomous following regime change.

Romania demonstrates how unreformed security institutions can preserve political influence long after democratization begins, while Albania illustrates that removing authoritarian leadership without dismantling surrounding patronage structures allows authoritarian practices to persist.

Participants concluded that Cuba will require effective civilian control of the armed forces, professionalization of security institutions, and transitional justice mechanisms that distinguish accountability for serious abuses from the practical need to maintain governmental continuity.

At the same time, participants cautioned against indiscriminate purges. The experience of de-Ba'athification in Iraq demonstrates that sweeping removal of military and civil service personnel can weaken state capacity, increase instability, and ultimately undermine democratic transition. Successful reform requires balancing accountability with institutional continuity.

***Finding 4: Economic reform should be rapid, transparent, and carefully sequenced.***

Participants agreed that macroeconomic stabilization should precede large-scale privatization. Inflation, fiscal instability, and monetary collapse undermine public confidence and discourage domestic and foreign investment.

Participants observed that Cuba already exhibits many of the shortages and structural distortions that Eastern European countries confronted only after communist governments collapsed, making early economic stabilization particularly urgent.

Secure property rights should be restored through transparent legal mechanisms that establish confidence among citizens and investors. However, privatization must avoid repeating the Russian experience of insider asset transfers that concentrated economic power among politically connected elites.

Transparent regulation, competitive bidding, and effective anti-monopoly safeguards are essential. Comparative experience further suggests that citizens must experience tangible improvements in their daily economic conditions within approximately the first year if democratic legitimacy is to survive the inevitable costs of economic adjustment. Participants emphasized that foreign investment should complement—not replace—domestic entrepreneurship, with the Cuban diaspora serving as an important source of capital, technical expertise, and international business networks.

***Finding 5: External partnerships strengthen – but cannot substitute – domestic leadership.***

Participants noted that the most successful post-communist transitions benefited from credible external democratic anchors. In Central and Eastern Europe, prospective accession to NATO and the European Union provided strategic direction, institutional incentives, political conditionality, and international credibility. International financial institutions supported economic stabilization while integration into Western markets reinforced domestic reform.

Although no equivalent institutional framework exists for Cuba, participants suggested that a close strategic partnership with the United States, together with engagement with international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank, could provide many of the same stabilizing functions. Such partnerships should emphasize investment, market access, technical assistance, institutional development, and democratic conditionality rather than long-term dependence on foreign assistance.

Participants also identified the Cuban diaspora as a significant strategic asset whose financial resources, technical expertise, political influence, and international networks could play a role comparable to that of the Polish and Baltic diasporas during their democratic transitions.

At the same time, participants consistently emphasized that external assistance can reinforce—but never replace—domestic political leadership. Successful democratic transitions derive their legitimacy from nationally owned reform agendas rather than externally imposed programs.

## **Conclusion**

Participants concluded that the post-communist transitions of Central and Eastern Europe provide principles, not templates, for understanding a future democratic transition in Cuba. While Cuba’s historical trajectory, institutional landscape, and geopolitical environment are unique, comparative experience consistently demonstrates that democratic success depends less on replicating another country’s model than on the speed, credibility, and coherence of reforms undertaken during the initial transition period.

Five overarching principles emerged from the discussion. First, democratic institutions and the rule of law should be established rapidly to prevent authoritarian elites from adapting to new political conditions while preserving their influence. Second, security institutions must be placed under effective civilian control while balancing accountability with institutional continuity. Third, economic reform should stabilize the economy, restore property rights, and prevent insider privatization that concentrates political and economic power. Fourth, credible international partnerships should provide incentives for reform while reinforcing domestic ownership of the transition. Finally, sustained investment in civil society, independent media, and democratic institutions is indispensable because democratic resilience depends upon organized citizens as much as competitive elections.

The comparative record suggests that the greatest long-term risk is not reform that proceeds too quickly, but reform that remains incomplete, allowing authoritarian institutions and patronage networks to adapt and persist within new democratic structures.

For Cuba, the principal lesson from Eastern Europe's post-communist experience is that the success of any democratic transition will ultimately depend upon how effectively political leadership, institutional sequencing, and domestic legitimacy converge during the critical opening months following the end of authoritarian rule.