

# Fidel Castro as a leader, revolution manager, and marketer

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**Abstract** The article is devoted to the contemporary problems of political leadership. Nowadays, many heads of states in Europe, Asia and America claim to be true leaders, however not all of them succeed in reaching this goal. The authors attempt to determine the characteristics and parameters of a successful political manager of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. They chose a rarely studied example - the “Comandante en Jefe” Fidel Castro, a Cuban patriot, but by no means a democrat.

Our paper shows how this politician achieved complete independence for his small and weak country, using bold management decisions and marketing technologies. It considers the influence of Fidel Castro’s personality on historical and political processes in Latin America and the system of relations between socialist countries. It also outlines the stages of building socialism in Cuba and Castro’s successful steps to defend its achievements after the collapse of the world socialist system.

## 1 Introduction

Socialism on Cuba was not brought in by the armed force unlike in some European countries. On the contrary, it was a conscious and free choice of the Cuban people. The creative methods used by Castro to recover from the crisis of the early 1990s, such as rectification and the philosophy of a special period, are evaluated, and their results in some sectors of the national economy (pharmaceuticals, medicine, tourism) presented. It is argued that the transfer of power to Raul Castro proved the viability of “Fidelism” as a political system. On the other hand, Castro’s serious miscalculations in management which carried a high cost in human lives and international prestige, such as the policy of export of revolution and involvement in drug trafficking, are discussed.

It becomes apparent that Fidel Castro did not understand the patterns of social development and the inevitability of democracy. He was only interested in the market due to the fact that Cuba’s material and human resources are very limited and before the revolution the country’s economic activity was restricted to sugar production and export. Having adopted the Soviet methods of governing the country (long-term plans, socialist competition, the celebration of numerous anniversaries), Castro did not take into account that they were not close to the Cuban mentality.

Fidel Castro Ruz, the leader of the revolution that brought Cuba national liberation and the immovable leader of a socialist country, entered the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as one of the most controversial political figures. To some, he is a fearless romantic hero, to others - the last communist dinosaur. However, after his death none of his ideological opponents could deny his brilliant managerial abilities (he studied the fundamentals of marketing at a prestigious Jesuit college, where he was sent to study by his father, a middle landowner of Spanish origin). It is beyond the scope of the present article to give an exhaustive characterisation of the merits and flaws of Castro as a leader. The purpose of these notes is much more modest: to make a case for creativity and

innovation in Fidelist technologies of public management and political marketing. The task is facilitated by the fact that one of the authors worked in Cuba in the late 1970s and witnessed Fidel's revolutionary pragmatics.

On January 8, 1959, Fidel triumphantly entered Havana with the words: "*Cubans, I have brought you freedom*". Residents of the capital carried Fidel on their hands through the main entrance to the fortress, where Batista had a stake only a week before that. From generation to generation, the Cubans pass on a beautiful legend that a flock of white doves appeared in the sky above the fortress during Castro's speech on the day of his arrival in the capital. Unexpectedly, one of the feathered "symbols of the world" sat on Fidel's shoulder. All those present perceived this as a happy sign that confirmed the right choice of a new path for Cuba. The followers of Santería, a popular religion in the country, still understand this episode as a sign from above.

## 2 Castro and political marketing

The greatness and nobility of Castro (as well as his skilful use of political marketing) became evident from the very beginning. In his victory speech, he did not say a single bad word addressed to those who were defeated, not a single phrase that could offend the defeated soldiers and officers or humiliate their dignity. After congratulating his compatriots on the long-awaited and hard-won victory, he called them to the world and pointed out that the complexity of tasks facing the revolution leaves Cubans no choice but to work tirelessly. At the end of his speech, Castro asked the audience if he should take the post of commander-in-chief of all the revolutionary forces, and after receiving an affirmative answer said: "*I think, if the army was formed by 12 fighters and now these 12 persons are military leaders, if the army was taught that a wounded man couldn't be left to the mercy of fate, that prisoners couldn't be beaten, then all the armed forces of the republic can be taught what the army was taught. Moreover, we can become a bridge between revolutionaries and honest military men who have not robbed and killed, as these soldiers will have the right to serve in the armed forces. But, at the same time, I assure you that nothing will save from the execution those who killed people*" (Makarychev 2017, p. 237).

The trial of the former accomplices of the dictatorial regime was to be the first serious test for the nascent revolutionary government. Nearly five hundred major war criminals were shot in January-March 1959. The shooting of Batista's henchmen cannot be understood as a repression for political convictions. It was a fair retribution of the Cuban people that lost 20 thousand of their best sons during the years of the dictatorship. According to the data of opinion polls, conducted in Cuba in January 1959, 93% of the Cuban population argued for the punishment and execution of Batista accomplices.

Fidel Castro adopted the marketing and propaganda strategy of asking consent for his decisions from thousands of his fellow citizens in the first days of the revolution and continued to use it frequently and effectively for decades. For example, at one of the meetings he suggested "to appoint Comrade Raul Castro, in view of his revolutionary achievements, to be a deputy head of the Movement" (Makarychev 2017, p. 240).

This method drew sharp objections from Castro's opponents. "At first, Castro from the podium exposes the next enemy of the revolution, and after that all his propaganda apparatus is mobilized to discredit the victim completely. In the end, the Cuban leader arranges a gigantic street manifestation aimed at stigmatizing the enemy. Hundreds of thousands, and sometimes millions of people are pulled from their places of study or work, they walk in columns, waving flags, shouting slogans and demonstrating revolutionary enthusiasm," wrote Carlos Montaner, a former colleague of the leader (Makarychev 2017, p. 239). In fact, Castro in this case actually used non-marketing methods of communication. "It comes from the essence of the marketing concept that this is a kind of two-way ... communication, as each political step is preceded by an analysis of the needs and demands of potential supporters. This distinguishes significantly a marketing approach in politics from one-sided influences, such as propaganda, but does not exclude at all the use of propaganda methods and technologies in practical activities" (Gugnin et al. 2012, p.14; Rutovic, 2016, p. 234; Jankurová et al. 2017).

In his speeches to the public, Castro used simple language, understandable to the worker and the peasant, and for persuasiveness he inserted quotations from the Bible from time to time. He explained without unnecessary complications of speech that the new government wanted everyone to have food, shoes, drugs, and to leave behind the hell of old.

After taking the position of prime minister in January, Castro began to create governmental bodies and already in early February 1959, the Council of Ministers adopted the so-called Main Law, which determined the structure and functions of the provisional state bodies of the Republic of Cuba. According to the Main Law, the highest legislative body of Cuba was no longer the Congress but the Council of Ministers.

From that moment executive power lay with the President of the Republic, who was appointed by the Council of Ministers on the proposal of the Prime Minister. According to Makarychev, the author of the fundamental work *Fidel Castro*, it became obvious "that the full extent and concentration of power in Cuba was vested in the Council of Ministers, and, especially, the Prime Minister, which position was occupied by Fidel Castro" (Makarychev 2017, p. 243).

The Soviet intelligence residency in Havana portrayed this period as follows: "*the main feature of the Cuban government is that it is completely supported by people, by all segments of population, starting even from*

*many rich landowners and ending with the workers and peasants of Cuba...*" (GARF 2019). Fidel got the following detailed description: *"young, capable chairman of the government, ardent anti-imperialist and anti-American, Catholic, but not convinced, believer rather out of habit. Anti-Communist, but he respects the Communists of Cuba for the contribution they made to the defeat of Batista. One big positive quality of Castro is his courage, energy and that he does not shy away from solving difficult issues"* (GARF 2019).

It was also noted that Fidel never raised his voice in rage against those found guilty and avoided mass purges and dismissals in the ranks of the right-wing political parties; he always eliminated objectionable elements one-by-one and, as a rule, under a specious excuse. Not trusting the officials of the former ministries, the Castro government began to create its own, completely new government bodies for Cuba which bore the name of national institutions and councils.

### **3 Policy-making and geopolitics**

Starting with the triumphal ward of revolutionaries in Havana, Castro showed constant readiness for agreement with Washington. Many rational arguments spoke in favour of such a pragmatic approach. Cuba's economic dependence on the United States was too great to be immediately broken off. Nevertheless, as it was noted by Volker Skierka, Fidel's German biographer, emotionally Castro was inclined to get rid of such dependence. At the turn of 1959-1960, the first official contact with the USSR took place, when Castro met A. Alekseev, the correspondent of the Soviet news agency TASS and an undercover intelligence officer, who conveyed to him cordial greetings from the Soviet government. In February 1960, a Soviet trade exhibition was organized in Cuba. The exhibition was previously held in Mexico and New York. Its opening was a pretext for Anastas Mikoyan, Deputy Prime Minister of USSR, to visit the island. In February 1960, Mikoyan and Castro signed the first trade agreement between the two countries, in which the Soviet Union pledged to buy in Cuba one million tons of sugar annually over the next five years (Pérez and González 1978: 23). In return, the "sugar island" received oil and oil products, steel, paper, grain, mineral fertilizers and equipment. All these products were brought under a \$100 million loan repayable at a 2.5% annual interest rate over 12 years. Diplomatic relations between the USSR and Cuba, severed by Batista, were restored in May 1960.

In June 1960, Raul Castro visited the Soviet Union and a broad program of military assistance was adopted at a meeting with Nikita Khrushchev. On July 9, Khrushchev issued a warning to the United States in response to the increasing incidence of sabotage from Florida and rumours of an impending attack on Cuba: *"the Soviet Union ... has extended a helping hand to the Cuban people ... If necessary, Soviet troops can support the Cuban people with missiles..."* (Szulc 1986; Skierka 2007, p. 91).

Two weeks later, another socialist state joined the game - the People's Republic of China. On the basis of a trade agreement with Cuba, Beijing pledged to purchase within five years 500,000 tons of Cuban sugar at world market prices. In response, under pressure from the United States, the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted a declaration accusing Chinese-Soviet forces of trying to exploit the political, economic or social situation in American countries for their own interests. However, that time the United States failed to get the conviction of Cuba.

In August 1960, being a consistent revolutionary manager, Castro decided to nationalize the agricultural and industrial enterprises owned by U.S. citizens. In September came the turn of all branches of American banks. In October, after Castro's return from the United Nations session, the remaining 550 foreign and Cuban large industrial and commercial enterprises together with all foreign banks, except Canadian ones, were nationalized. On October 15, Fidel Castro solemnly declared on television the implementation of revolutionary program, which he had proclaimed in his defensive speech at the trial for attacking the barracks of Moncada: *"History will justify me"*. That was a very thoughtful and successful PR step. Within two years after the revolution, capitalism practically ceased to exist in Cuba. Big American enterprises, firms and consortia lost investments worth about one billion dollars. According to the American media, the American mafia alone lost about 100 million dollars from funds placed in the tourism industry.

The 1962 nuclear crisis was a serious challenge for Castro as the manager. After its happy resolution, as written by Volker Skierka in his works, Khrushchev began to doubt Fidel's political talent due to several aspects and his personal impressions made during working with Castro during the crisis. He used to say on some occasions: *"his behavior in the missile crisis was just screamingly stupid"* (Gort and Madan 1990, p. 16; Skierka 2007).

The Soviet leader also expressed some doubts about the expediency of the USSR alliance with Cuba in the light of recent serious events. Allegedly, he used to say: *"either we will cooperate now, or we will take all our people off the island"*. Khrushchev instructed Mikoyan to make it clear to the Cubans that Moscow is disappointed with the partnership: *"Cuba ... does not want to listen to us, it looks only at how we can be used, and hopes that its actions will plunge us into war with America. We do not want to go in that direction"* (see Makarychev 2017, p. 257).

## 4 Cuban revolution and real socialism

In the early 1960s, understanding the unique significance of his revolution for the world of real socialism, the Cuban leader realized that it was possible to lead a comfortable existence at Moscow's expense and did not fail to take advantage of the situation. In May 1962, the "benevolent" Soviet Union wrote off the accumulated Cuban debts for the first time. Such a step will become common practice later. The Soviet Union also committed to supplying weapons and ammunition for the Cuban army free of charge for two years, as well as providing assistance with irrigation (Makarychev 2017, p. 397).

According to the Western estimates, the value of the aid provided to Cuba by the USSR from the early 1960s until its collapse averaged six billion dollars a year (Skierka 2007, p. 219). Back in the early 1960s, hundreds of Soviet specialists were delegated to Cuba to transfer experience in many sectors of the national economy. With the help of the Soviet Union, new higher education institutions and technical schools for training qualified specialists were established in Cuba (Mamedov and Dalmau 2013, p. 218).

After the Cuban crisis, the initially warm relations between Moscow and Havana cooled and now resembled a marriage of convenience. It should be noted here that the mutual relations were built on an "idyllic basis" due to the fact that both sides nurtured illusions regarding each other, supported by sympathy (Mamedov and Dalmau 2013, p. 218). In many ways, the charismatic image of Fidel and his tough anti-American attitude was the reason for such an attitude of the Soviet leadership.

Later came the transfer of relations on a real basis – with a clear delimitation definition of what was allowed and what was not. In late January 1968, Castro again provoked the Soviet side. He ordered the arrest of 37 members of the "sectarian micro-fraction" active within the framework of the Communist Party and accused them of secretly conspiring with Moscow to overthrow him.

Following the adopted marketing strategy, Castro kept his distance from Moscow and in February did not send his delegation to the International Conference of Communist Parties in Budapest, whose program included a discussion of the consequences of the ideological confrontation with China. The Kremlin's response was to increase the economic pressure: in March 1968, it was decided that the volume of trade exchange in the current year should increase not by 25%, but only by 1%, while Cuba would be obliged to export 5 million tons of sugar, even though forecasts had predicted that the harvest of 1968 would not be too abundant.

It should be noted that the outbreak of anti-Moscow sentiment in 1968 was caused not only by the "micro-fraction" affair, but also by a number of less obvious circumstances. As Makarychev has pointed out, some Soviet leaders "treated Fidel arrogantly and did not take into account or specifically did not want to take into account the specific traits of his character, that he was a quick-tempered person, touchy and extremely vulnerable" (Makarychev 2017, p. 447). However, history gave Castro another chance, which he used successfully. The Czechoslovak crisis in August 1968 gave him the opportunity to break out of the impasse, into which he had driven himself, with honor. Being an experienced marketer, he understood the significance of the huge Soviet market for profitable export and cheap import. In the end, after some hesitation, the Cuban government supported the entry of the intervention troops into Czechoslovakia, regarding it as evidence of the victory of a firm line in the Soviet leadership. The actions against Czechoslovakia inspired the Cuban leadership and convinced it that the Soviet Union will also strongly support the socialist gains in Cuba in the event of a threat.

After Fidel Castro made it clear that he was ready to develop cooperation with the Soviet Union, Cubans opened up contacts with Soviet people again in all areas of public and economic life. This showed the world once again that Cuban international politics is still concentrated in the hands of Castro. After his visit to the USSR, where he was met again as the dearest guest, the Cubans "sang with love" for the Soviet Union.

By 1989, the revolutionary Cuba reached the highest level of development in its thirty-year history. It led the world in the number of doctors per inhabitant. Life expectancy was 74 years, child mortality had decreased significantly. Up until 1990, the USSR and other communist countries accounted for 80% of Cuban trade. At that point, Fidel, as a manager-analyst, began to prepare the population of the country for the difficult times approaching. On July 26, 1989, Fidel stated in his speech that "on the day when the Soviet Union disappears, the Cuban revolution will live on" (Makarychev 2017, p. 509). The annual assistance of the Soviet Union, worth \$6 billion as already mentioned, made up 35% of the Cuban GDP. And it all collapsed before their eyes. "We never thought the sun would stop shining" - in Fidel's famous phrase (SSSR-Kuba 1990, p. 612).

In the first half of the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR and at the suggestion of Washington, the "democratic" Russian authorities began to denounce Cuba persistently for violating human rights and, unlike most countries of the world, actively supported the American blockade of the island. This blow was even more painful for Castro than the perestroika or the behavior of N. Khrushchev during the Caribbean crisis. Most of all Castro hated betrayal, not so much even in relation to himself but to the ideals of the revolution (SSSR-Kuba 1990, p. 296).

Fidel Castro repeatedly stressed that Cuba, in responding to the challenges brought by the world changes, would not repeat the Eastern European experience of destructive reforms. Speaking at the Sixth Congress of the

Communist Party of Cuba, he said: "We will go our own way. We will not copy anyone. Here, in the tropics, on this Caribbean island, everything is seen differently" (Borodaev and Leonov 2005, p. 378). An analysis of the situation conducted by Comandante en Jefe showed that the economic collapse and the subsequent loss of all social gains in most socialist countries were caused by the loss of governmental regulatory functions in the economy. This happened due to the thoughtless adoption of the neo-liberal economic model. From this analysis Fidel concluded that reforms should be carried out in a manageable manner together with the saving state's commanding heights.

But, as Cooper reported, at that moment every Cuban was worried about the big question: what was the future of Cuba in that new world, where all its allies had fallen one after another like dominoes? After another live communication with the leader, the American journalist was forced to admit: "*Fidel, who has been in power for 31 years, is still resourceful and quick in his judgments, he is threateningly unpredictable in the political game. To reduce the personality of Fidel Castro to the tropical version of the Romanian dictator means to misunderstand either the Cuban leader himself or his revolution. Because Fidel is the Cuban revolution*" (Borodaev and Leonov 2005, p. 378).

In the early 1990s, Washington lost its most important political trump cards which it had used earlier in its fight against Cuba. The "Soviet bloc" ceased to exist and so was the frame in which America kept placing the island for three decades. Havana normalized interstate relations with the majority of Latin American countries, supported the peace process in Central America and withdrew its troops from Africa. Thus, the accusation of "exporting the revolution" lost its basis.

## 5 Perestroika and the era of changes

Since the onset of Perestroika in the USSR, and especially after Gorbachev's visit to Cuba, all Western media strove to convince their audiences that so long as Fidel Castro was at the head of the country, no reforms would ever begin on the island. And yet he launched them. According to Borodaev and Leonov (2005), the authors of the monograph "Fidel Castro. Political biography", "*that made the ruling circles of the United States furious*" (Borodaev and Leonov 2005, p. 378). Moreover, he managed to resist the temptation to conduct a "shock therapy" of the kind applied by the former socialist countries in those years. The rallying of the Cuban people at a difficult moment around the country's leadership happened largely due to the vision of Fidel as a manager, to his ability to recognize at first glance the essence and characteristics of the necessary changes. He looked for new forms and methods, by which it would be possible to eliminate the shortcomings that were visible in the political and economic elements of the system. "Rectification" and the proclamation of a "special period in peacetime" were the first steps on this path (Józefowicz 1998, p. 84). Rectification was intended to eliminate the evils of the European model of socialism, acquired by Cuba, which put it on the path of a range-bureaucratic rebirth. As for the "special period," it represented a policy aimed directly at the mobilization of domestic reserves and the adaptation of the country's political and especially economic mechanisms to sharply deteriorated external conditions. In other words, a responsible manager that he was, Fidel prepared his fellow citizens for tightening their belts. However, he did not intend to abandon his socialist ideas and Marxist convictions. According to his words, "*not a single hospital, not a single school, not a single kindergarten was closed on the island, while in the countries of the former Soviet Union, despite the richest resources, reigns devastation*" (Miroshnikova and Miroshnikova 2004, p. 194). But along with the introduction of austerity policies and a reduction in the distribution of vital products, Castro was forced to resort to economic liberalization: parallel trade in dollars and individual labour activity were allowed, agrarian state-owned enterprises were reformed into cooperatives.

Having outlined the characteristics of Castro's management activities, it is necessary to assess the feasibility and quality of the changes they produced. In 1994, the Cubans managed to stop the general economic downturn and achieve a minor rate of GDP growth at 0.7%. In 1995, this figure increased to 2.5%, and in 1996, already to 7.8%. Even more impressive were the indicators for a number of the most important qualitative parameters. Thus, labour productivity in 1996 increased by 8.5%, investment by 54%, exports by 33% and imports by 33.3%. The national currency strengthened significantly. If in 1993, 1 U.S. dollar cost 150 Cuban pesos, then in 1996 the ratio was already different - 1 to 19. Cuba achieved impressive successes in a number of important sectors of the national economy, primarily in tourism, sugar and nickel industries, tobacco and citrus production, and oil production (Borodaev and Leonov 2005, p. 217). In foreign policy, Cuba forgave its "senior comrade" and restored relations with Moscow. Normalization of relations between the two countries was facilitated by the visit of Russian Foreign Minister E. Primakov to Cuba in 1996, during which declarations on the development of economic ties between states and condemnation of US policy towards Cuba were signed.

The gradual process of rapprochement between the island's communists and the clergy made possible the visit of Pope John Paul II in January 1998. Fidel Castro greeted the patriarch of the Roman church on the red carpet at José Martí Airport. This time, he stepped away from his usual image (military uniform in a protective colour) and looked like the managers from the highest echelons of power all over the world: wearing an elegant suit, a white shirt with French cuffs and an expensive fashionable tie. The visit of the Pope to Cuba was of

historical significance. So far, the patriarch has visited 120 countries of the world, and this was the last state in Latin America he had not been to yet. During his five-day pilgrimage, John Paul II travelled around the island of 11 million people, which enjoyed social security unprecedented in the third world, but which was practically deprived of political and religious freedoms. On the day of his arrival, John-Paul II celebrated a mass in Santa Clara, the city of Ernesto Che Guevara, the “martyr of the revolution”. Behind the closed doors of the Palace of Revolution, a confidential conversation took place between the Cuban leader and the Pope, during which the latter raised the issue of political prisoners and called for the release of most of them. After the meeting, a private audience for Fidel’s brothers Raul and Ramon and his sisters Angela and Augustine took place. Accompanying the guest, Castro slowed down, adjusting to his guest in ill health who walked with a cane. “*You see, as it happens after 70 years*”, the 77-year-old patriarch addressed the 71-year-old Comandante, who next to him looked like a strong young man.

It cannot be denied that in his long and successful managerial practice Fidel also made tragic mistakes, especially when dubious political technologies took the upper hand in his revolutionary pragmatics. According to Miroshnikova and Miroshnikova, during the reign of Castro, “*Cuba became a transit point for drug trafficking to the USA*” (Miroshnikova and Miroshnikova 2004, p. 195). Norberto Fuentes, a Cuban émigré writer, recounted Raul Castro’s words that participation in drug trafficking was a conscious and deliberate choice of Fidel. The Comandante explained: “*In the end, all the colonial countries financed their gains in Asia from the opium trade. So, our response is fully justified: it is the historical revenge of the peoples on imperialism...*” (Miroshnikova and Miroshnikova 2004, p. 195). However, when the Americans gathered and presented at the meeting of the UN General Assembly the evidence of Cuba’s participation in the drug business to the world community, Castro was not able to give convincing arguments in favour of his activities. Fast-track trial proceedings against several members of his closest circle followed. These generals, who took part in the famous storming of Moncada, and who were not always involved in the drug business, obediently confessed their guilt and asked for leniency. But they were shot despite the promise to spare their lives.

## 6 Concluding remarks

Castro was considered one of the most highly protected politicians in the world. It is well-known that the United States made numerous attempts to overthrow Castro; the Cuban special services announced the disclosure of 637 such assassinations. However, Fidel himself said that one must fear not death, but empty life. Makarychev writes that Castro “*lived so many lives that all that was said and done by him would be enough for historians to analyze for next several generations*” (Makarychev 2017, p. 613). He did not cling to life, trying to win some moments from death, but, like a seer, waited calmly to leave the scene. He said this in April 2016, made it possible for the country and numerous foreign friends to celebrate his ninetieth anniversary and passed away soon.

Of course, both the long farewell ceremony and the burial itself were the embodiment of Fidel’s marketing plan. People passed through the small hall of farewell to pay homage and tribute to “Comandante en Jefe” at the urn with his cremated remains. Unlike the Kremlin leaders, he did not want his embalmed body to lie for several days under the gaze of the thousands of citizens passing in front of the coffin. He wanted to be remembered as a revolutionary.

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