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**Emigration and Regime Stability:  
Explaining the Persistence of Cuban Socialism**

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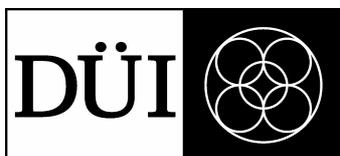
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# **Emigration and Regime Stability: Explaining the Persistence of Cuban Socialism**

## **Abstract**

The 'Cuban safety-valve theory' explains sustained survival of Cuban socialism in part through the high levels of emigration, following Hirschman's model of 'exit' undermining 'voice'. The article argues that this remains insufficient in two important ways. Taking a closer look at the crisis years since 1989, at least as important as the opening of exit options was the Cuban state's capacity to rein in uncontrolled emigration and to reassure its 'gatekeeper role'. In addition, the transnationalization of voice and exit must be taken into account as a crucial factor, as much in feeding the regime's anti-imperialist discourse as, paradoxically, by generating sustained economic support from the emigrants.

Key Words: Emigration, Regime Stability, Transnational Networks, Cuba, USA

JEL Classification: D31, H5, 015

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Zusammenfassung

### **Emigration und Regimestabilität:**

#### **Zur Erklärung der Langlebigkeit des kubanischen Sozialismus**

Als ein Element zur Erklärung der Langlebigkeit des kubanischen Sozialismus verweist die gängige Literatur – entsprechend des Hirschman'schen Exit-and-Voice-Modells – auf die politische Ventilfunktion hoher Emigration. Dies bleibt jedoch in zweierlei Hinsicht unzureichend. Ein näherer Blick auf die Krisenjahre nach 1989 zeigt, dass wesentlich für die Regimestabilität nicht nur das Öffnen von exit-Optionen ist, sondern gerade auch die Fähigkeit des kubanischen Staates, in diesem Bereich seine „gatekeeper“-Rolle zu bewahren und unkontrollierte Emigration auf ein Minimum zu reduzieren. Hinzu kommt die Transnationalisierung von ‚voice‘ und ‚exit‘, die zum einen dem anti-imperialistischen Diskurs der Regierung Nahrung gibt, zum anderen aber über die transnationalen Migrantennetzwerke und den massiven Fluss von Rücküberweisungen auch das ökonomische Überleben des kubanischen Sozialismus sichert.

Resumen en español

### **Emigración y estabilidad de régimen:**

#### **Explicando la persistencia del socialismo cubano**

La longevidad del socialismo cubano se ha explicado en parte al alto nivel de emigración, el cual – de acuerdo al esquema de Albert O. Hirschman sobre la interacción de “salida” y “voz” – sirve como válvula de escape para el descontento social y político. No obstante, el análisis empírico de la crisis de los 1990 demuestra que la cuestión crucial acerca de “salida” es menos cuánto emigran, sino bajo qué modalidades políticas y sociales lo hacen. Además, proponemos que emigración no sólo se traduce en la pérdida de voz doméstica, si non que de ella también puede emerger una voz internacionalizada. Ésta sirve de alimentación para el discurso anti-imperialista del gobierno, mientras al mismo tiempo las redes transnacionales de los emigrantes han generado una fuente de apoyo económico de suma importancia para la isla.

## **Article Outline**

1. Introduction
2. The Cuban Safety-Valve Theory: Exit, Voice, and the Longevity of the Castro Government
3. The Modalities of Exit: Preserving the Gatekeeper State
4. 'We are flooding now!': Contrasting Cuban Regime Survival with the GDR's Demise
5. Displaying the Gatekeeper State: Turning Private Emigration into a Public Affair
6. The 'Boomerang Effect': Exit as Internationalization of Voice
7. Questioning the Dichotomy of Exit: Emigration and Transnational Communities
8. Conclusions

Bibliography

## 1. Introduction

After the fall of Cuba's socialist allies in 1989-91, few would have dared to prophecy Fidel Castro's still being at the helm of one-party Communist rule a decade and a half later. Cuba's sustained regime survival in face of severe crisis has been explained from a variety of angles and viewpoints.

Economically, after a dramatic fall in the early 1990s limited reform measures allowed a certain recovery, converting the regime into a 'gatekeeper state' (Corrales 2004) with extraordinary political leverage based on its monopoly position in controlling access to the dynamic dollarized sectors, while restraining domestic market mechanisms to limited, largely informal and legally insecure activities (Domínguez et al. 2004; Ritter 2004; Dirmoser/Estay 1997; Hoffmann 2001).

Politically, the personalist nature of Fidel Castro's rule and elite cohesion have been pointed out to be crucial (Pérez-Stable 2003; del Aguila 1999; Domínguez 1994b; Rojas 1997), combined with the state's ability to mobilize society and keep internal dissent at bay – with some authors emphasizing the regime's still relevant sources of legitimacy (Roman 2003; Bengelsdorf 1994; Kapcia 2000), others its mechanisms of repression and control (Gonzalez/McCarthy 2004; Aguirre 2002). Socially, regime survival has been traced in every-day behavior and its multiple, though often informal influences on politics (Eckstein 2003; Kummels 1995; Rosendahl 1997); moreover, analysis has focused on the emergence of a more autonomous 'civil society within socialism' in the first half of the 1990s, and the closure of many of these spaces in a sustained campaign of re-centralization and re-ideologization of society and media since 1996 (Dilla 1996; Dilla/Oxhorn 2002; Giuliano 1998; Azcuy Henríquez 1995; Hernández 2002).

Regarding the international context, the Cold War like Cuba policy of the U.S. government has been pointed to as a central hindrance to reform, since it provides crucial support for the government's nationalist claims and its 'besieged fortress' argumentation (Gratius 2003; Domínguez 1997). Finally, following theories of cumulative causation and path dependence, Cuba's unique political history is highlighted as important for explaining its ongoing political exceptionalism (Whitehead 2002).

While these aspects of a surely incomplete list combine to a multi-causal explanation of the survival of one-party rule in Cuba, the explanatory puzzle lacks an indispensable element if it doesn't adequately take into account the link between emigration and regime stability.

After the 1959 Revolution, Cuba, much in contrast to the state-socialist regimes of Eastern Europe, kept the doors wide open to emigration of the discontent, converting the country into an ideal type example of Hirschman's famous thesis of 'exit' undermining 'voice' (Hirschman 1970). However, taking a closer empirical look at crisis-ridden Cuba since 1989, the article shows the need to modify our understanding of the political implications of emigration in two important ways: To focus less on the numbers, but on the *modalities* of exit, with the Cuban state politically capitalizing on its gatekeeper role regarding emigration; and to address the *transnationalization* of voice and exit, which significantly counters the assumed see-saw mechanism between both and challenges conventional wisdom of exit being a clear-cut dichotomous variable. Expanding the concept in these ways, the analysis takes us a long way in explaining the puzzle of Cuban regime survival.

The article unfolds as follows: Following the introduction, the first section sketches what I call the Cuban safety-valve theory; it provides a concise overview of Cuban emigration to the USA since 1959, and how it can be read along the lines of the Hirschmanian model. The third section argues that survival of Cuban socialism in the 1990s was based not only on a gatekeeper state in economic matters, as Corrales (2004) argues, but also – and crucially so – regarding emigration. The analysis shows how the most serious moment of crisis, the exodus of more than 30,000 Cuban rafters in the summer of 1994, served less to decompress potential political unrest, but rather to restore state control over emigration. The following section underscores the political importance of these findings by contrasting the Cuban case with the demise of the GDR, in which uncontrolled mass exit played a catalyzing role for protest, and, ultimately, regime collapse. Section 5 stresses the gatekeeper state's need to publicly display its gatekeeping capacity, explaining why the Cuban government time and again deliberately turns the emigration of its citizens into public events, even at the cost of a severe negative impact on its public image at home and abroad. Section 6 argues that exit not only reduces oppositional voice, as the Hirschmanian model suggests, but that it also produces an internationalization of voice. The Cuban exile community and its strong leverage on U.S. Cuba policy is a prime example for this, and the article shows how the Cuban government in turn exploits this internationalized voice to delegitimize dissenting domestic voice. The following section analyzes how emigration helped sustain Cuban socialism in still another way: by creating such strong transnational ties that remittances from emigrants have become a backbone of economic recovery indispensable for regime survival. Finally, the conclusions present a balance of the merits and of the limits of the safety-valve theory in explaining the Cuban case.

## **2. The Cuban Safety-Valve Theory: Exit, Voice, and the Longevity of the Castro Government**

It is a standard interpretation of the Cuban Revolution that the emigration of its opponents served as a political safety-valve for the Castro government (e.g. Domínguez 1978; 1989; 1994a). Considering the depth of the socio-economic and political upheaval, the Revolution encountered relatively little open opposition, not least because so many of those whose political, economic and social interests were most adversely affected made use of an easily available emigration option. With the exodus of the old elites in the early years, and later of dissatisfied people from diverse social backgrounds, over the years close to a million Cubans emigrated to the United States.

As a consequence, Cuba is seen as a model case for the exit and voice scheme developed by Albert O. Hirschman in 1970. This concept – claiming validity as much for economic market behavior as for organizations, social institutions or national governments – assumes an essentially dualist structure of two contrasting reactions of consumers, members, or citizens to what they sense as a decline in the provision of services or goods. Exit typically means buying a product from a competing firm, leaving an organization, or, in the case of nations, deciding to emigrate. Voice typically is the act of complaining or protesting, with the intention of achieving a change in the behavior of the firm, organization or government, which leads to a recuperation of the quality of the product or service. The concept postulates an essentially ‘hydraulic relation’ or ‘seesaw pattern’ between both: the easier available the exit, the less likely is voice (Hirschman 1970).<sup>1</sup>

The concept’s initial formulation gave rise to a wealth of studies in economic, social and behavioral sciences.<sup>2</sup> As Dowding et al. (2000) show in their review of recent literature on ‘exit and voice’, it still marks contemporary research in a wide variety of fields. One area in which Hirschman’s scheme proved particularly fruitful were issues of migration. In this regard, Hirschman (1970: 106-19) illustrates his argument of exit undermining voice with what he calls the ‘American safety-valve theory’, which explains the absence of a strong workers’ movement in the United States in part as a consequence of the existing

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, Hirschman introduces a third category, loyalty, which essentially delays exit as well as voice. In the academic career of the concept, this third category, however, never received the same prominence as exit and voice; Hirschman himself gives it a secondary role in his later works (Hirschman 1986; 1993; 1981c).

<sup>2</sup> On a number of occasions Hirschman himself presents overviews of ‘the expanding sphere of influence’ that his concept rapidly became, revising the growing exit and voice literature and refining his own concepts (Hirschman 1981b; 1981a; 1981c; 1981d; 1986).

‘open frontier’: the possibility of exiting by ‘going West’ instead of articulating voice ‘at home’.

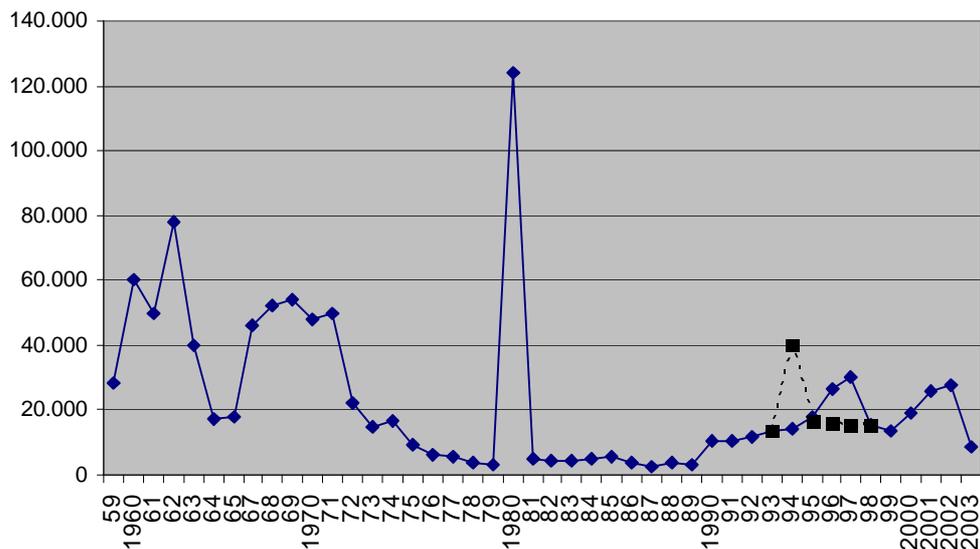
While this migration consisted of rather uncoordinated movements ‘from below’, Hirschman saw the Castro government as a prime example of a state deliberately using emigration as a management tool ‘from the top’: ‘At times, the voice-weakening effect of exit is consciously utilized by the authorities: permitting, favoring, or even ordering the exit of enemies or dissidents has long been one – comparatively civilized – means for autocratic rulers to rid themselves of their critics, a practice revived on large scale by Castro’s Cuba’ (Hirschman 1986: 91).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 shows four clearly distinguishable peaks, corresponding to four different waves of Cuban emigration.<sup>4</sup> Between 1959 and 1962 no less than 230,000 Cubans, mostly from the upper and middle class, left the island by plane or boat. The second wave between 1965 and 1973 brought another 330,000 Cubans to the United States, again mostly from the formerly well-off sectors of society, leaving their country through an airlift established between Cuba and the USA. It was the USA, not Cuba that closed this emigration arrangement in 1973.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Hirschman (1981b: 227-28); of the scholars who have explicitly applied the exit and voice model to the Cuban case particular mention deserve Colomer (2000), who uses the concept in a game-theoretic model focussing on the interaction of the U.S. and the Cuban government, and Pedraza (2002) who asks if recent Cuban emigration fosters the development of civil society on the island.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Cuban emigration to the USA since 1959 see Masud-Piloto (1996), Pérez (1999), and Grenier et al. (2003), for recent trends see Henken (2004), M. Castro (2002), and Masud-Piloto (2004). For a perspective from scholars from the island, see Aja Díaz (2000) and Rodríguez Chávez (1997), the latter including an annex with official documents on U.S.-Cuban migration.

**Figure 1: Cuban emigration to the USA, 1959-2000**

Sources: For 1959-1989: Pérez (1999: 20); for 1990-2003: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2004: 12-15).

Note: The data of U.S. immigration statistics refer to legalization in the USA. However, in the 1994 *balsero* crisis thousands of Cuban emigrants were temporarily interned in the U.S. base of Guantánamo, formally entering the United States only in the following years. The dotted line for 1993-1998 therefore are estimates made by the author to adjust emigration data to its actual 1994 peak.

If the number of emigrants fell sharply after 1973, however latent emigration pressure accumulated up to 1980 when it came to a head in the so-called Mariel exodus. Faced with a major crisis – more than 15,000 Cuban asylum-seekers stormed the grounds of the Peruvian embassy in Havana – the Cuban government reverted to opening the exit option, this time without waiting for the U.S. government to resume a migration accord. It unilaterally opened the port of Mariel for mass emigration by boat, calling on the emigrants in South Florida to evacuate their relatives. The exile Cubans did so in great numbers, providing the transportation for this unique boatlift, effectively cooperating with the Cuban government against the will of the U.S. government. The result was the third emigration peak with more than 120,000 Cubans leaving the island within five months.

The fourth wave of Cuban emigration to the USA is associated with the profound economic and social crisis after 1989. With the numbers of clandestine boat-people (the so-called *balseros*, from *balsa* = raft) steadily rising in the early 1990s, the Cuban government once again opened the flood-gates in a spectacular form (Mesa-Lago 1995). In August 1994 Fidel Castro declared the maritime borders open for anyone leaving the island by his own means. In the following weeks more than 30,000 *balseros* on makeshift-rafts left the island,

most of them being picked up by the U.S. Coast Guard and transferred to refugee camps in the U.S. naval base of Guantánamo, from where they were gradually admitted to the United States in the following years. Again, this wave of emigration was read – by politicians and academics alike – along the lines of what we call the ‘Cuban safety-valve theory’, with exit undermining voice (e.g. Henken 2004: 6, 30).

### 3. The Modalities of Exit: Preserving the Gatekeeper State

While the Castro government has been rather favorable to the exit option, it has always dispensed great efforts on guaranteeing what I will call the ‘gatekeeper state’ in emigration matters: maintaining firm state control over the access gates to emigration, and defining the modalities under which it takes place. Most importantly the government has insisted on the so-called *salida definitiva* (definite exit) as indispensable condition for leaving the island, making emigration very much a once and for all-decision, accompanied by the confiscation of property before leaving and with any re-entry dependent upon a *permiso de entrada* (entry permit) to be issued by Cuban authorities (Blanco 2004). Emigration involves costly bureaucratic procedures, often accompanied by social marginalization or chicanery once the desire to leave is formally stated. In addition, there are restrictions on those eligible for emigration, particularly in regard to children, certain professional groups such as medical doctors deemed vital for socialist development goals, as well as army officials and people holding public or party offices (ibid).

If the state’s capacity to enforce these conditions rests on its monopoly control over access to any means of international transportation,<sup>5</sup> in the early 1990s the onset of crisis and an ever-increasing number of boat-people leaving the island in clandestine ways seriously challenged this position. Corrales (2004) has argued that regime survival was largely possible due to an economic reform process which converted the Cuban regime into a ‘gatekeeper state’: while dollarization indeed undermined the traditional concept of a socialist economy, by preserving the state’s monopoly on access to the emerging dollarized sectors with their far superior income possibilities, the state eventually strengthened its power over society. The challenge concerning emigration was not all that different: Facing enormous emigration pressure and a sharp increase in illegal departures the state had to find

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<sup>5</sup> This was true even for the case of the Mariel boat-lift: While the means of transportation were the yachts of Cuban exiles from Florida, the Cuban government fully controlled access to the point of embarkation, the port of Mariel, thus being able to terminate the exodus at any time.

ways to reassure its gatekeeper capacity in order not to lose authority over emigration. The way in which it did so we will now explore.

Availability and form of exit options are not merely domestic decisions. Not the Cuban state's restrictions on emigration, but the United States' restrictions on immigration are the biggest obstacles for Cubans desiring to leave the island in direction of the number one destination of Cuban emigration. Washington's 'open arms' policy after 1959 came to an end in the 1980 Mariel crisis, giving way to a highly ambivalent attitude still in place today. This is reflected in the terms used for Cubans leaving the island: If they are 'refugees', the implication is that they should not be sent back to their home country due to its political conditions; if in contrast they are 'immigrants', this implies that the Cubans are part of the inflow of poor people from the South, who are to be kept at bay by restrictive laws and border patrols.<sup>6</sup>

At the onset of crisis in the 1990s, there was a bilateral migration accord in place, signed in 1984 by the Reagan administration and granting 'up to 20,000' U.S. immigration visas to Cubans annually. However, actual figures remained very much below this. In the early 1990s, legally issued immigration visas to Cubans averaged less than 1,000 annually. At the same time the so-called 'Cuban Adjustment Act' of 1966 was still in place, by which all Cuban nationals who reached the United States – if legally or not – almost automatically obtained lawful permanent residence (U.S. Congress 1966).

As a consequence, out of the 47,500 Cubans who entered the USA between 1990 and 1993, only 10.9% did so with a legitimate immigration visa (see figure 2).<sup>7</sup> Almost twice that number, 20.4%, were admitted with a refugee visa, issued under a broad interpretation of the category of former political prisoners and their families. Another 16.9% came through third countries under the legal protection of the 'Exodus Program', jointly organized by the Cuban exiles' most potent lobby organization, the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

More than half of the Cuban immigrants, however, came without the required legal documents. About 31.7% entered with visitors' visas, which they overstayed. Finally, a steadily increasing number – 20.1% for the whole period – entered the United States by

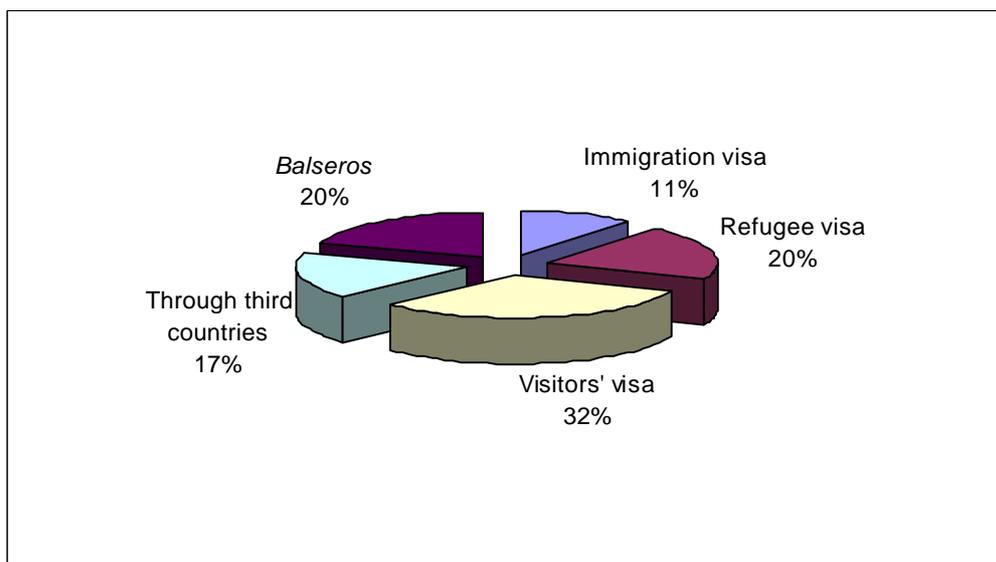
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<sup>6</sup> This difference is not so much a partisan issue in U.S. politics as might be expected: It was the staunchly anti-communist Reagan administration that first departed from automatically giving Cubans the 'refugees' status, inventing instead for the 1980 wave of immigrants the vague in-between label of 'entrants' (Henken 2004: 6).

<sup>7</sup> For this and the following data: Rodríguez Chávez (1997: 93), who draws on official data from Cuban and U.S. authorities.

what became the emblematic form of Cuban emigration in the first half of the 1990s: as *balseros* who, leaving the island illegally, set out to reach U.S. shores on makeshift-rafts. While they risked their lives in the 90-mile crossing, once these rafters made landfall or were intercepted at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard, they (just as those Cubans overstaying their visitors' visa) enjoyed full protection of the 'Cuban Adjustment Act', de facto leading to their ex-post legalization as immigrants.

**Figure 2: Cuban Immigration to the USA 1990-1993 by form of arrival**



Source: Rodríguez Chávez (1997: 93) (based on official data from Cuban and U.S. authorities).

For media worldwide the *balseros* became the landmark illustration of the desperate living conditions in Cuba. For the island's government, however, the crucial problem was not their negative impact on Cuba's international image, but the fear that this type of ongoing illegal emigration would create a precedent for authority loss. Stepping up Cuban border guard patrols to intercept *balseros* proved futile. Although the number of interceptions rose significantly, so did the number of total intents, from 2,000 in 1990 to 15,000 in only the first 7 months of 1994, according to official Cuban data (see table 1). With proportions remaining stable at roughly three intercepted *balseros* for each one making it to the USA, the dimension of the problem steadily increased.

**Table 1: U.S. Immigration Visas for Cubans and Number of Cuban *Balseros*, intercepted and successful (1990-1994)<sup>8</sup>**

Year	U.S. Immigration Visas issued to Cubans	<i>Balseros</i> intercepted by Cuban border guard	<i>Balseros</i> that reached the USA
1990	1,098	1,593	467
1991	1,376	6,596	1,997
1992	910	7,073	2,511
1993	964	11,564	4,208
1994	544	10,975*	4,092*
<b>Total 1990-1994</b>	<b>4,892</b>	<b>37,801**</b>	<b>13,275**</b>

\* only Jan – July 1994

\*\* Jan 1990 – July 1994

Sources: For U.S. Immigration Visas: Masud-Piloto (1996, 135); for data on *balseros*: Fidel Castro, in: Granma Internacional (7 Sept 1994: 6).

In fact, it was uncontrolled exit that sparked the most massive articulation of oppositional voice in Cuba during the 1990s: the open riots on August 5, 1994, in which hundreds of mostly young Cubans gathered on the *malecón*, Havana's broad coastline avenue, chanting anti-government slogans and breaking the windows of dollar shops and tourist hotels. This outbreak of voice was resolutely subdued, dispersed within a few hours without bloodshed, with the evening news being able to show Fidel Castro at the helm of the government's counter-mobilization. It was only after this resounding reaffirmation of the state's willingness and capacity to repress voice that the government turned to what seemed a daring move: to declare the borders open for a mass exodus of *balseros*, now at

<sup>8</sup> These data lack a category: that of those who died in the intent. The author personally witnessed a dead *balsero* being washed ashore in 1994, and there is no reason to doubt that numerous others shared his fate. However, there are no formal data available, and estimates not only differ widely but are subject to misinterpretation not free from political bias. An example is Ackerman (1996: 173) who writes that 'both Cuban and U.S. estimates point to a death rate as high as 75 percent'. While the U.S. estimate cited – Juan Clark – remains highly speculative, as evidence for the Cuban side she refers to a Fidel Castro speech in which he gives exactly the data presented in table 1; in this, however, the roughly 75 percent 'not making it' to the USA, is not a 'death rate', but refers to those being intercepted and returned to Cuba.

plain daylight and with publicly displayed state tolerance. In this political framing, the tense weeks of the *balse* crisis showed the depth of the country's social crisis and implied high political costs for the government in terms of image loss, but they were not perceived as a loss of authority nor did they ignite public protest. The state opened the gates, but it did so in a way that ascertained, not eroded his gatekeeper function.

If for the Cuban government the *balse*'s exodus had an escape-valve function, as a first interpretation along Hirschmanian lines suggests, I argue that a more important objective was the regaining of control over emigration by forcing Washington to the negotiating table. In fact, in the United States, the arrival of hundreds of Cuban boat people daily had an immediate political impact. While there was broad public outrage against the Castro government, at the same time the U.S. government came under strong pressure to stop this mass inflow of poor Cubans. Soon, the increasing uneasiness (to say the least) about receiving a seemingly endless flow of Cuban boat people led the U.S. Coast Guard to bring the *balse*s picked up at sea not to Florida but to the U.S. base of Guantánamo Bay, where they were accommodated in rapidly built refugee camps and left in a legal limbo (Mesa-Lago 1995).

At the same time the U.S. administration began secret negotiations with the Cuban government. In September 1994, a new migration accord was reached which marked a turning-point in two regards: For one, the U.S. government accepted the commitment to issue a *minimum* of 20,000 immigration visas per year to Cubans, instead of the previous 'up to 20,000' which allowed to issue much less; and second, it declared that from then on boat people picked up at sea would not be granted entry to the United States.<sup>9</sup> The ink on the September 1994 accord was not yet dry, when the Castro government once again declared the maritime borders closed for any undocumented emigration.

For the Cuban government the *balse* crisis was a risky, but eventually highly successful gamble. It obtained a major change in U.S. policy from what prior to the crisis seemed a very poor bargaining position. While the first part – turning what was the ceiling of annual immigration visas into the floor – plays well to the safety-valve theory, the second part of the migration accord was crucial for restoring the Cuban 'gatekeeper state'. It

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<sup>9</sup> The September 1994 document speaks of transferring *balse*s picked up at sea to 'safe havens' outside of the United States (e.g. the U.S. base of Guantánamo Bay). However, in a follow-up agreement on May 2, 1995, this was changed to sending them back to Cuba (with the Cuban authorities guaranteeing that they would suffer no reprisals). The refugees transferred to the U.S. base at Guantánamo during the 1994 *balse* crisis were gradually admitted to the United States in the following years as part of the 20,000 contingent of legal Cuban immigrants.

greatly decreased the likelihood of successfully emigrating the *balseero* way, resulting in a massive decline in the number of Cubans illegally leaving the island by sea.

Despite these concessions, the migration accords left a loophole for U.S. special treatment of Cuban emigrants, since only those apprehended at sea are returned to the island, while those making landfall continue to benefit from the Cuban Adjustment Act. This so-called 'wet-foot, dry-foot' policy has led to absurd scenes of Cuban boat-people desperately trying to escape capture by the U.S. Coast Guard, rewarding those who fight their way to shore with privileged legal status while castigating those who turn themselves in with returning them to Cuba (Henken 2004). More importantly, it has led to an increase in costly speed-boat emigration arranged for by professional smugglers, which have much higher chances of making it to U.S. territory than rafters on precarious vessels. The Cuban government repeatedly bashed these 'dry-foot' loopholes by organizing mass demonstrations against the '*Ley Asesina*' ('the Murderous Law'), as it refers to the Cuban Adjustment Act, for inciting illegal emigration. However, between 1997 and 2004 the number of maritime Cuban migrants apprehended by U.S. authorities on land ranged from 400 to 2,400 annually (Henken 2004: 15); numbers which pale compared to the *balseero* migration of the early 1990s. With the persistence of economic and social crisis the Cuban emigration potential remains high; in 1998 no less than half a million Cubans formally applied for U.S. immigration visas<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, ten years after the *balseeros* crisis uncontrolled exit has become much less of a problem; the Cuban 'gatekeeper state' has prevailed.

#### **4. 'We are flooding now!': Contrasting Cuban Regime Survival with the GDR's Demise**

In comparative terms, the Cuban government's proclivity to facilitate exit options stands out against the much more restrictive attitude that characterized its socialist allies overseas. The state has one option that is not available to other organizations or to firms, as Hirschman noted: 'By virtue of its territorial authority and by using its monopoly of force, it can lock up its members within its own borders' (Hirschman 1986: 93). The state which made use of this lock-up option in the most symbolic form was the German Democratic Republic. The contrast to Cuba could hardly be more striking: At the very time the Cuban Revolution's leadership was eager to hold the exit option wide open for tens of thousands of its citizens, in the GDR, the Politburo ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall.

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<sup>10</sup> Henken (2004: 13); there are no more recent data available, since no new visa lottery was held since then.

The importance of preserving the state's gatekeeper role for regime survival is forcefully illustrated when comparing both cases. In the GDR, uncontrolled mass emigration became the crucial catalyst for regime collapse in 1989. This led to a wealth of literature explaining the course of events using the exit and voice scheme, including a landmark essay by Hirschman (1993) himself.<sup>11</sup>

Cuba and the GDR both share the geographic vicinity to a wealthy neighbor of the ideologically opposing camp that serves as the 'natural' destination for emigration, offering privileged legal status and a relatively easy social integration. Historically, however, the GDR more than any other state turned the closing of the exit option into its martial symbol of authority by building the Wall in 1961. As Hirschman notes: 'The decision to tear the city of Berlin asunder with a 165-kilometer-long wall, turning it into two non-communicating halves, was an extraordinary affirmation of state power that signaled the GDR's general readiness to be more aggressive against 'state enemies'. In other words, not only did the building of the Wall restrain exit, but it also projected an enhanced willingness to rein in voice' (Hirschman 1993: 186).

If this linking of exit-restraint and re-affirmation of state authority successfully forestalled the articulation of voice after 1961, 28 years later the reverse occurred: When Hungary and Czechoslovakia renounced socialist solidarity and allowed East Germans to travel to the West through their territory, the East German government was utterly helpless against this uncontrolled drain of its citizens, and the loss of authority proved irretrievable. 'The inability of the GDR (...) to prevent a large-scale flight of its citizens to West Germany (...) signaled a novel, serious, and *general* decline in state authority. It was thus taken to imply a similar decline in the ability and readiness to repress voice' (Hirschman 1993: 187)

At first, however, the possibility of illegal and clandestine emigration via Hungary mobilized citizens in the GDR to publicly raise their voice not to demand political change in their country, but to demand legal emigration possibilities. It was this emerging pro-exit voice, the demonstrations of the so-called '*Ausreiser*' (literally: 'outward-bound travelers'), which in turn sparked the mobilization of pro-change voice by the so-called '*Bleiber*'

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<sup>11</sup> This article was first published in German in 1992, winning that year's Thyssen Foundation prize for the best article published by a German-language social science journal. Other scholars who applied the Hirschmanian categories to the case of the GDR are Pollack (1990), Brubaker (1990), Offe (1994), and Torpey (1995). In 1991, the German Research Foundation (DFG) officially listed the application of the exit and voice approach to the defunct GDR in its call for research proposals eligible for its grants (Hirschman 1993: 175).

(‘those staying’). Exit and voice in this case did not work against each other but rather as ‘confederates’, reinforcing one another (Hirschman 1993: 186). At this point, a vital difference to the Cuban case comes into play: In contrast to elite cohesion and the rapid repression of the 5 August 1994 riots in Havana, the question of repressing the ‘Monday demonstrations’ in Leipzig led to profound frictions in the GDR’s governing elite, highlighted by the forced resignation of Honecker (Hertle/Stephan 1997: 49-58). The result was comparatively timid repression and eventually tolerance towards the demonstrations. (For a graphic presentation comparing the events in Cuba and the GDR see figure 3.)

However, it is not only the repression of voice that stands in contrast, but also the modalities of the exit option. Whereas in the *balseiro* crisis of August 1994 it was the Cuban government that opened the border (and that closed it again when convenient), in the GDR the exit option was opened up by the former ‘brother states’ very much against the will of the East-Berlin leadership. The loss of the GDR’s gatekeeper capacity went so far that, as incredible as it seems, even the actual opening the Wall on 9 November was *not* an intentional act by the Politburo.

The precise chronology of events is worth recounting:<sup>12</sup> Effectively, the government’s televised press declaration of 9 November only announced plans for a new travel law and interim regulations for the process of applying for emigration. These declarations, however, were highly inconsistent, and their interpretation was effectively left to the people on the streets and Western media; as a result, growing crowds gathered at the border’s checkpoints in East-Berlin, demanding to pass without any further formalities, claiming that this now had become legal. The besieged commanders of the checkpoints desperately sought for instructions from their superiors. However, Honecker and other top party leaders could not be contacted; the more immediate superiors hesitated to decide either way and only took ad hoc-decisions aimed at playing for time. Pressure steadily increased, and shortly before midnight, the officer in charge of the checkpoint at Bornholmer Straße finally saw no other alternative than to open the border turnpikes, informing his superiors with words that became emblematic: ‘*Wir fluten jetzt!*’ (‘We are flooding now!’) (cited in Hertle 1998: 187).

While in Cuba it was clear to everybody that the decision ‘to open the flood-gates’ in the 1994 *balseiro* crisis was a decision deliberately taken by the highest political authority, in the GDR the ‘flooding’ came as an emergency measure from a subordinate position. The

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<sup>12</sup> The events are described in detail and with fascinating documentation in Hertle (1998) and in Hertle/Stephan (1997).

chain of command had broken – not by disloyalty from below, but because the top did not respond. The Politburo leaders learned of the fall of the Wall when they awoke the next morning: ‘All of us were aware that something had happened which was not intended’, Politburo member Hans Modrow recalls (cited in Hertle/Stephan 1997: 7).

The story, however, does not end here. In Hirschman’s original design both forms of reaction, exit as much as voice, are seen primarily as mechanisms of alert for the management of a company (or the leadership of an organization), indicating a need to change in order to improve the product or service offered. In the GDR, the Honecker government entrenched itself all too long in a ‘We do not shed a single tear over those who leave’ position; initiatives for a process of controlled reform from above came ‘too late and too little’. In this situation, the loss of state control over the exit option was merely the prelude to the regime’s collapse. The articulations of both the *Ausreiser* and the *Bleiber*, though seemingly antagonistic, eventually merged under the slogan ‘Wir sind das Volk!’ (We are the people!), which, with its accentuation of the first word, was an outright denial of the government’s claim to speak in the name of the people. Within weeks of the fall of the Wall, a little twist in the slogan – the turn from ‘We are the people!’ to ‘We are *one* people!’ – signaled the change of focus away from political change in the GDR to the quest for German unification.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, the Cuban government was not only able to enforce the closure of the maritime borders once negotiations with the USA had concluded with advantageous results. After repressing voice, then opening exit, it took a third step: an economic reform measure addressing a key problem of the socio-economic situation. Within one week after declaring the borders closed, Fidel Castro’s brother and head of the Armed Forces, Raúl Castro, announced the re-opening of food markets.

Those who expected this step to be the start of a coherent process of gradual reform towards more market dynamics soon were to be disappointed. Nevertheless, at its moment this was a highly symbolic reform step, particularly because Fidel Castro had personally rejected such a measure ever since he ordered the then existing peasant markets to be closed in 1986, arguing that they foster the emergence of bourgeois mentality (Mesa-Lago

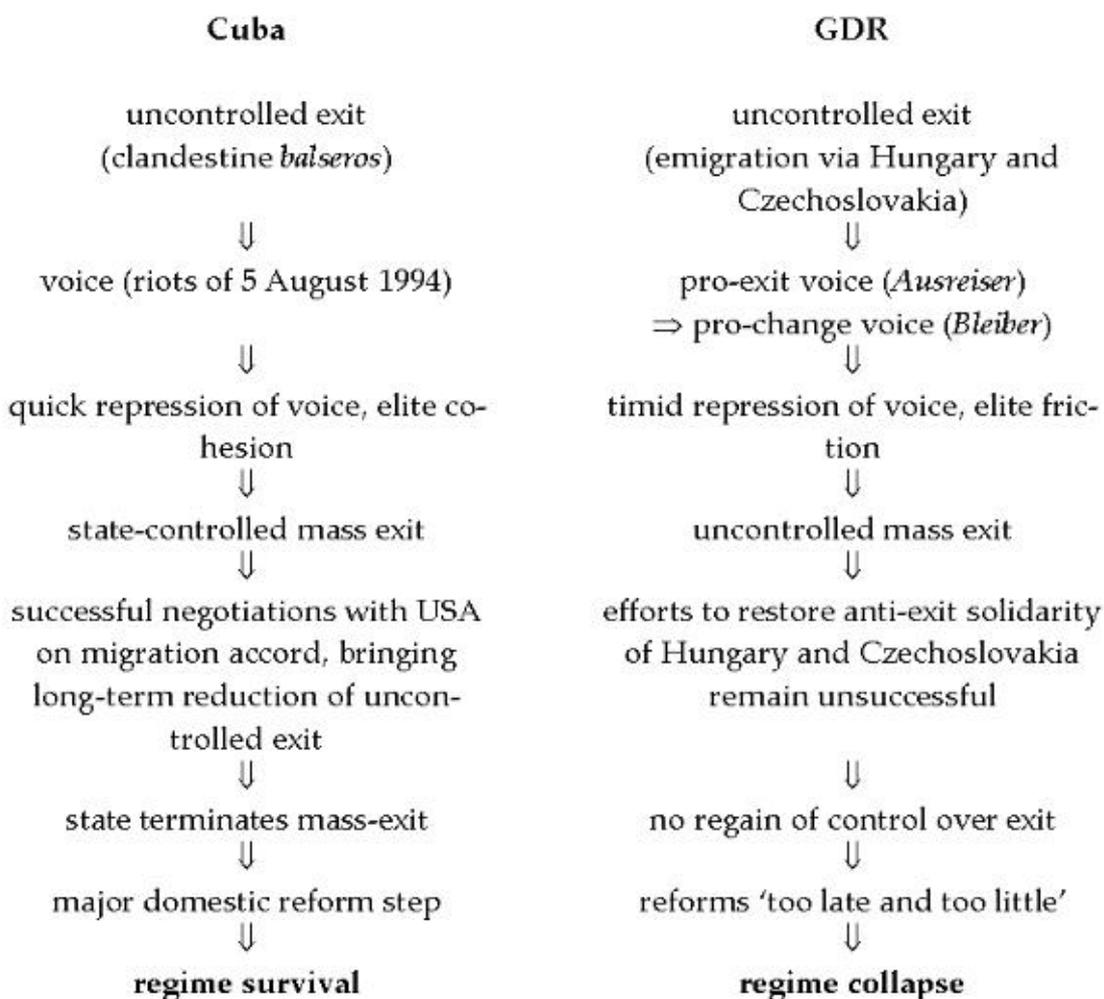
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<sup>13</sup> While Hirschman underscores the symbolism of this evolution, a popular slogan at a later stage of events passes unnoticed, although it seems as if made for him. It says: ‘*Kommt die D-Mark, bleib’n wir hier – kommt sie nicht, geh’n wir zu ihr!*’ - ‘If the (West German) Deutsch-Mark comes [i.e. is introduced in the East], we will stay; if it does not, we will go to where it is.’ Here, voice is raised to threaten exit in order to demand a precise political decision in the unification process.

1989). Now, Raúl Castro founded this step explicitly on the premise that the provision of food was the country's highest 'economic, political and military priority' (Granma Internacional, September 28, 1995).

While the Cuban government stubbornly holds on to authoritarian one-party socialism, it proved able to read the signals of exit and voice as alert mechanisms. Faced with acute crisis, it did not hesitate to turn to reform policies it ideologically disliked in order to preserve the system.

**Figure 3: Schematic representation of exit and voice in the GDR and in Cuba**



### 5. Displaying the Gatekeeper State: Turning Private Emigration into a Public Affair

For a state to politically capitalize on its gatekeeper function, it must not only have the capacity to control exit, but it must also convincingly display this capacity. However, whereas voice is typically a collective and public activity, exit typically is individual, private and silent, as Hirschman (1970: 15-16) noted. The GDR publicly displayed its gate-

keeper capacity with the building of the Wall. However, even after 1961 the number of refugees and authorized emigrants combined never fell below 10,000 annually, with figures reaching as high as 40,000 in 1984 and 36,000 in 1988. But the GDR government was successful in having this emigration take place largely without public visibility<sup>14</sup>, not affecting the Wall's symbolic message of resolute exit repression.

In 1989, however, what was intended as a private activity – the effort of individuals to move from East to West Germany – became public. At first, the pictures of the first East Germans leaving via Hungary and Czechoslovakia flooded West German TV news, which were broadly watched by the East German population. Later, the *Ausreiser*, gathering on key points such as border crossings, railroad stations and embassies, became aware of their common goal and went public, effectively turning into a single-issue movement around the chant of '*Wir wollen raus!*' (We want to leave!) (Hirschman 1993: 199). Hirschman saw this transformation from private to public activity as 'the real mystery of the 1989 events' (Hirschman 1993: 198).

In Cuba, once again things are very different. Here, it was the state itself that repeatedly turned private emigration into public events. After 1959, official news broadcasts showed upper and middle class Cubans boarding planes as welcome illustrations of the defeat of the old elites. A particularly striking example is the 1980 exodus. While it started as a typically private migration intent, the Cuban leadership underscored the political character of the decision to emigrate ('traitors'). It thus explicitly and publicly interpreted exit as a manifestation of voice, calling on all 'revolutionary Cubans' to demonstrate their loyalty in acts of repulse. Still today, Havana's '*Museo del Pueblo Combatiente*' (Museum of the Combative People) celebrates these mobilizations, that made the emigrants run the gauntlet, as a pride of the Revolution.

Again in 1994, the Cuban leadership opted to pull what had been clandestine emigration out into the open. Fully tolerated by the authorities, groups of *balseros* transported their makeshift rafts through Havana at plain daylight with dozens of youths cheering behind them. Albeit this time there were no repulse demonstrations, mass emigration was deliberately turned into a public event. The weather report of the state TV's evening news even included storm warnings for precarious embarkations<sup>15</sup>, publicly displaying the gate-

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<sup>14</sup> The major exception was the expulsion of critical song-writer Wolf Biermann in 1976. This public act caused considerable unrest in the intellectual community, and in a rare act of civil disobedience dozens of writers and artists signed a protest note against the government's action.

<sup>15</sup> Author's personal observation in Havana at the time of events.

keeper state's watchful eye. The emigration crisis turned into a show of force, demonstrating the regime's capacity to endure this kind of pressure over prolonged periods of time without backing down. If this carried a domestic message, it also was the Castro government's trump card in forcing the U.S. government to negotiate a new migration accord.

## **6. The 'Boomerang Effect': Exit as Internationalization of Voice**

Emigration holds yet another key for explaining Cuban regime survival which the 'safety-valve theory' doesn't capture adequately. Hirschman's scheme sees the act of emigration as effectively renouncing the possibility to articulate voice (Hirschman 1970: 30). However, emigration can have a 'boomerang effect'. At first, this is the classic idea of exile and re-entry; more importantly, however, exit can lead to the externalization of voice: After leaving their country, people – with no repression to fear – might raise their voice all the louder from the outside.

The Cuban *emigré* community after 1959 is a prime example for the latter. While there were intents to 're-enter' island politics by military means, as in the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, their most sustained political activity was that of raising their voice against the Castro government and exerting influence on the U.S. government's Cuba policy.

In this light, Silvia Pedraza (2002: 254) asks whether for Cuban society 'those who exited became its voice', and whether the *émigrés* and their highly vocal organizations can substitute the independent civil society missing on the island. Her answer is skeptical since, as she writes, all organizations formed by the exile community 'can only be effective to the extent that they are in touch with those inside of Cuba' (ibid) – a condition she sees difficult to fulfill given the Cuban government's capacity to forestall such contacts.

While this is a just observation, putting forward the question in these terms misses a crucial point: the issue is not a substitution of domestic civil society, but the internationalization of voice. The exile's dominant organizations have developed mastership in lobbying Washington's Cuba policy, interacting with and exerting influence on the U.S. government, making U.S. Cuba policy a prime example of what has come to be called an 'intermestic affair', in which international and domestic considerations are inseparably interwoven (Hoffmann 2002). As a consequence, the emigrants' voice may in fact have little effect when directed at Cuba, but is a political factor of greatest weight when articulated via Washington and galvanized in U.S. legislation and U.S. political action towards the island.

While the exile organizations celebrate their continued leverage on U.S. Cuba policy, this also is a boon to the Cuban regime. It serves as ever-renewed evidence for the key nationalist thesis of the government in Havana: to frame any political conflict as part of the polarized confrontation between Cuba and the USA, with no alternative in between.

A prominent example is the Helms-Burton law, lobbied for intensely by the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF) and passed by U.S. Congress in 1996, which not only includes an extra-territorial extension of U. S. sanctions but which also prescribes in detail the conditions for a democratic transition on the island (Hoffmann 1997; Roy 2000). In a typical reaction, the same year Cuba's National Assembly passed a strict new law threatening high penalties for dissidents, naming it 'Reaffirmation of Cuban Dignity and Sovereignty Act' and explaining it as a reaction to the Helms-Burton law (Asamblea Nacional 1996). Thus, exit not only reduces oppositional voice, it also produces an internationalization of voice, which the Cuban government in turn exploits to delegitimize dissenting domestic voice.<sup>16</sup>

## 7. Questioning the Dichotomy of Exit: Emigration and Transnational Communities

In managing economic survival after the demise of its socialist allies in 1989-91, the Cuban government found an unexpected ally: The emigrants, whose remittances to their relatives on the island became a backbone of economic recovery. The legalization of the U.S. dollar, announced by Fidel Castro in the summer of 1993, was designed precisely to foster family remittances which the government could easily siphon off through rapidly opened dollar stores.<sup>17</sup> Since then, remittances to Cuba have grown to an estimated US\$ 1,100 million (MIF 2003), surpassing by far the combined revenues of the island's traditional export products, sugar and tobacco; they are second only to the gross revenues of tourism as the country's principal source of foreign currency.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Comparison to the GDR is difficult in this aspect. Though considerable in numbers, GDR emigrants never constituted a specific community in the West nor did they settle in any particular region. Except for a number of writers and artists, they hardly raised their voice publicly as ex-GDR citizens.

<sup>17</sup> Author's Interview with José Luis Rodríguez, the country's current Minister of Economic Affairs, in Havana; published in: *die tageszeitung* (Berlin), 11 November 1993. As long as no Western currency was allowed, any remittances had to be exchanged at the official rate of 1 U.S. dollar = 1 peso, making sending money extremely unattractive.

<sup>18</sup> In the first year after the legalization of the U.S. dollar, the balance of payments for 1994 showed an entry of US\$ 574.8 million under the heading 'current transfers' which, as is ex-

If this challenges traditional notions of the material base for a socialist state, it also questions two basic assumptions of Hirschman's model regarding the exit category: first, that exit, just as it leads to reduced income for a firm, also represents an economic loss for organizations and states; and second, that, whereas voice 'can be graduated, all the way from faint grumbling to violent protest' (Hirschman 1970: 16), exit is a clear-cut dichotomous category: 'One either exits or one does not' (ibid: 15).

Both of these assumptions lose ground with the emergence of transnational networks, in which emigrants keep far-reaching social and economic ties to their countries of origin (e.g. Portes et al. 1999; Pries 1999; Massey 1998). In the past two decades remittances from emigrants to their relatives at home have increased so greatly that they play a central economic role in a wide array of nations. For Latin America, remittances amounted to no less than US\$ 32 billion in 2002, a higher figure than all international aid and development cooperation for the region and at par with the total amount of foreign direct investment (MIF 2003).

Given these dimensions, many governments tend to see emigration not only as a stability gain by reducing stress in a tense labor market situation (particularly in the case of low-skilled workers), but moreover as a form of generating hard-currency income through future remittances. Taking up Poirine's model of remittances as 'informal intra-family loan arrangements' (Poirine 1997), the Cuban economist Pedro Monreal concludes that the 'export' of emigrants and the 'import' of their remittances effectively became a key element in Cuba's world market integration of the 1990s: 'Even if for some this may be a troublesome idea: The remittances phenomenon can be seen as an expression of the fact (...) that *de facto* a significant part of the Cuban economy's 'modern' sector is located outside of its national boundaries' (Monreal 1999: 73).

While remittances are the most salient aspect of the new transnational migration networks, these carry many more implications for both sides, concerning the transformation of norms, culture, identity, and social and cultural capital, as Eckstein (2004) points out.

Little of this found its way into the general discussion of the exit and voice approach. In their recent appraisal of the Hirschmanian concept and its extensions, Dowding et al. (2000: 471), while being quite critical, fully endorse the dichotomy of the exit category: 'Exit is a fairly crude, binary response. (...) Operationally, exit is a dichotomous, voice a

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pressly explained, is 'mainly due to the income from donations and remittances' (Banco Nacional de Cuba 1995: 20f). For a discussion of different estimates and their methodology, see Monreal (1999: 74).

continuous variable'. When applied to migration, this understanding seems hardly adequate in today's globalized world. The particularity of the Cuban case is that these remittances not only cross national boundaries, but also a profound political and ideological abyss. It were precisely those who chose the exit option, whose loyalty to their relatives on the island generated a source of income that was decisive for regime survival.<sup>19</sup>

In the run-up to the U.S. 2004 Presidential election this paradox led the exile's hard-line leaders to lobby for increased restrictions on remittances, in order to tighten economic pressure on the Castro government. This led to severe frictions within the Cuban-American community. While the earliest cohorts of post-1959 emigrants, who maintain few personal ties to the island, backed this measure, it was widely rejected by the more recently arrived. Despite these cleavages, Bush adopted the anti-remittances measures at limited risk of electoral backfiring, since the share of those and registered to vote is much smaller in the group of recent immigrants than in the earlier cohorts. Similar to the case of the Helms-Burton law, here too, the Cuban government took the tightening of U.S. policy as a welcome legitimizing pretext for a more restrictive domestic course, undoing one of the economic reform steps it had taken in the mid-1990s by banning the circulation of the U.S. dollar on the island (Castro 2004).

## 8. Conclusions

The safety-valve theory fails to fully explain the implications of emigration on Cuban regime survival. If the political impact of voice is not a mere function of the number of protesters,<sup>20</sup> also regarding exit the crucial question is less that of how many leave, but rather under what conditions they do so. Faced with a severe economic crisis and high emigration pressure after 1989, the Cuban state willingly opened the exit option for tens of thou-

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<sup>19</sup> Again, comparison to the GDR is problematic. Transnational social ties between East and West were not created by emigration, but much rather the division of Germany cut through existing social ties. Contacts between West and East were not dominated by emigrants from the GDR, but rather by family links existing prior to the creation of the GDR. Since Western currency was forbidden, monetary remittances made little sense; remittances in kind during visits and in the form of packages were common, but did not play a major role in the GDR's national economy.

<sup>20</sup> Against the mechanistic notion that mass political action is a matter of sheer 'power in numbers', as the title of De Nardo (1985) postulates, the study of Lohmann (1994) on the dynamics of informational cascades in the 'Monday Demonstrations' in Leipzig convincingly argues that not size, but political momentum and context were crucial for their political impact.

sands of its citizens, but it fiercely defended its gatekeeper role as the hard-handed guardian of access to these exit possibilities.

In the *balsero* crisis of 1994, the Cuban gatekeeper state opened the floodgates as a show of force demonstrating precisely that only the state has the power to open – and close – these gates. Moreover, the Cuban government used mass emigration not merely for decompressing social tensions, but rather to pressure the U.S. government. It achieved its aim: Control over emigration was regained by negotiating a new bilateral agreement that would structurally discourage illegal departures from the island. While the images of desperate people on makeshift-rafts seemed to many observers as a prelude to imminent regime collapse, the opposite was true: it marked a turning point in favor of regime stability.

The thesis of exit undermining voice also falls short of adequately explaining the Cuban case if it doesn't take into account the increasingly transnational character of emigration. From such a perspective, exit is not necessarily the antipode of voice. Instead, exit can lead to an internationalization of voice, with emigrants not only raising their voice from the outside, but also by exerting influence on third party actors. In this sense the Cuban emigrant community in the USA provides an outstanding example in efficiently lobbying the U.S. government's policy towards their country of origin. As a consequence, the importance of exit for Cuban regime stability not only consists of getting rid of the discontent; moreover, the exit-turned-voice of the Cuban exile and its close association with Washington policies continuously nourish the nationalist trump card of the Cuban regime: Its legitimizing construction according to which any domestic political conflict is part of the overarching confrontation with the USA, with the current leadership acting as the indispensable defendant of the Cuban nation.

In addition, exit is no clear-cut antipode of loyalty either. Today's migration movements are increasingly marked by the persistence of transnational ties to the country of origin; as a consequence, exit is not as much a dichotomous 'either you leave or you don't' issue as the Hirschmanian concept suggests. Despite its extraordinary political polarization Cuba is no exception to this. Those who exit maintain strong bonds of loyalty to their relatives on the island, and their remittances have been a key to making Cuban socialism economically viable after the demise of its overseas allies.

Finally, a caveat is in place. Migration research has shown a large number of factors inducing migration other than the repression of voice. Beyond the incentives represented by the enormous global income disparities, patterns of human migration are also shaped

through linkages established by political domination and by global flows of capital, goods, and services (e.g. Sassen 1988; 1998). Particularly important are the dynamics of chain migration in which transnational networks from past migration build up social capital that serves as catalyst for future migration, independently of the initial causes of emigration (Arango 2003: 15-16; Massey 1998). While it is a plausible (albeit insufficient) argument that the availability of exit options undermines the articulation of domestic voice in Cuba, warning lights should be on against any interpretation suggesting too strongly the reverse. The structural socio-economic discrepancies between Cuba and the USA, the tradition of political influence and economic dependency, and the strong transnational ties to the large Cuban-American community are unlikely to wither away. Under these circumstances, whatever post-Castro scenario and whatever liberties for voice the future might hold, it is highly unlikely that Cuban migration to the USA will fall to significantly lower levels than at present if not forcefully restricted by administrative means.

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