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Frontispiece: A group of migrants entered the U.S. from Mexico through a hole in the border fence near Sasabe, Arizona in July 2023, and turned themselves in to a waiting CBP agent.
Photo: shutterstock.com

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The Direct Impact of Trump's Re-election on Cuban Migration Trends

by Jerez Michel Navarro and Róbert Gönczi

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Cuban migration after Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025, focusing on how tightening U.S. immigration policy has reshaped the geography and legal pathways of the Cuban exodus. Against the backdrop of Cuba's deepening demographic, economic, and political crisis, the study argues that restrictive U.S. measures have not ended Cuban emigration but have redirected and diversified it. The suspension of humanitarian parole programmes, increased deportations, restrictions on visa issuance, and the erosion of Cuba's long-standing exceptional position within U.S. immigration policy have substantially reduced access to the United States. Drawing on migration, asylum, residence, and population data, the article traces the resulting expansion of alternative destinations and routes across Latin America and Europe. The article pays particular attention to Mexico, Brazil, and Uruguay, which have emerged as increasingly important destinations, as well as to Spain, whose historical ties, citizenship legislation, and established Cuban diaspora make it the principal European alternative. The article demonstrates how Cuban migrants adapt to changing immigration regimes through transnational networks, alternative legal statuses, citizenship pathways, and shifting transit routes. It concludes that the post-2025 period represents not the end of Cuba's contemporary exodus, but a structural reorientation from a predominantly U.S.-centred migration system towards a more geographically diversified pattern.

Keywords: Cuban migration; United States immigration policy; Donald Trump; Latin America; Cuban diaspora

Cuba is losing people at a pace that is reshaping the country's social, political and economic foundations. Between 2021 and 2024, more than 2.3 million people

left the island, according to Cuban academic Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos.[1] This figure may represent the largest demographic exodus in Cuba's modern history, a form of collective exit often described as "voting with their feet." The authorities, however, acknowledged the departure of just over one million people.[2] Albizu-Campos argues that official statistics have systematically understated emigration, concealing the depth of a multidimensional crisis confronting a communist regime that has governed the island for 67 years. Whatever the actual figure may be, the majority of this migratory flow was headed for the United States.

However, in 2025 Donald Trump returned to the White House promising to close the border and carry out the most extensive deportation campaign in United States history. His victory also drew strong support from the Cuban American community. The Florida International University Cuba Poll found that a record 68 per cent of likely Cuban American voters in Miami-Dade intended to vote for Trump.[3] That political choice soon had consequences for the diaspora itself. Once in office, Trump began dismantling the migration channels that had made the United States the principal destination for successive generations of Cuban emigrants.

The result was not the end of the outflow, but its reorganisation. From 2025 onwards, the exodus entered a new phase of adaptation as access to the United States was restricted. Overall, departures slowed for reasons that extended beyond the measures adopted by Trump. By this stage, many Cubans with the financial resources, family networks and physical capacity to migrate had already left during the previous wave. Those who stayed behind are still looking for viable ways to leave the island. Increasingly, they redirected their journeys towards Latin America and, to a lesser extent, Europe.

[1] Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos Espiñeira, "Cuba: ¿Crisis demográfica o sistémica?" ["Cuba: Demographic or Systemic Crisis?"], *Centro Cristiano de Reflexión y Diálogo*, September 2025, https://horizontecubano.law.columbia.edu/sites/horizontecubano.law.columbia.edu/files/content/docs/JCAC%20Poblaci%C3%B3n%20y%20Migraci%C3%B3n%20(largo)%20(ed).pdf.

[2] Yuniel Labacena Romero, "Cuba Cerró 2024 con una Población Efectiva de 9 748 532 Habitantes" ["Cuba Ended 2024 with an Effective Population of 9,748,532 Inhabitants"], *Granma*, February 21, 2025, https://www.granma.cu/cuba/2025-02-21/cuba-cerro-2024-con-una-poblacion-efectiva-de-9-748-532-habitantes-21-02-2025-21-02-54.

[3] Madeline Baro, "FIU Cuba Poll 2024: Cuban American Voters' Support for Trump at an All-Time High," *FIU News*, October 23, 2024, https://news.fiu.edu/2024/fiu-cuba-poll-2024-cuban-american-voters-support-for-trump-at-an-all-time-high.

What Trump Changed after 2025

For decades, Washington granted Cuban nationals a form of legal exceptionalism unavailable to most other Latin American migrants. The Cuban Adjustment Act formed the foundation of this system, allowing Cubans who were admitted or paroled into the United States to apply for permanent residence after one year of physical presence and, later, for US citizenship. These privileges gradually narrowed over time. In the final days of his presidency, Barack Obama ended the "wet foot, dry foot" policy, which had allowed Cubans who reached US territory to remain. Yet Cubans continued to benefit from other legal mechanisms, while deportations remained difficult because the Cuban government frequently refused to readmit its nationals.

This exceptionalism coexisted with internal restrictions imposed by an authoritarian state that had long treated emigration as political disloyalty.[4] Cubans who left could lose their property, inheritance rights and residency status, effectively becoming foreigners in their country of birth. They also needed an exit permit from the Ministry of the Interior. For US$150, the permit remained beyond the reach of much of the population and allowed the authorities to decide who could leave the island. The 2013 migration reform abolished the exit permit, but it did not, in practice, establish freedom of movement. Cubans still had to obtain a passport, secure a visa, purchase an increasingly expensive flight and gain access to foreign currency. In 2026, Cuban passport holders could enter only 57 countries without obtaining a visa in advance, giving Cuba the second weakest passport in the Americas after Haiti. Fewer than ten of these destinations were located in the Americas. Those countries therefore became essential entry points into longer migration routes towards the United States.

By the early 2020s, US policy had introduced new administrative channels to manage the pressure created by migrant caravans at the southern border. The Biden administration introduced a separate humanitarian parole process for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans, allowing eligible applicants with a US-based sponsor to seek advance authorisation to travel to the United States. It also used the CBP One mobile application to schedule appointments for migrants seeking to present themselves at official ports of entry. These measures sought to replace irregular crossings with controlled admission. They also became the first targets of Donald Trump's second administration.

[4] *Diario de Cuba*, "Los Cubanos, los Emigrados que Más se Acogen a la Nacionalidad en Ecuador en 2021" ["Cubans Are the Migrants Most Likely to Obtain Ecuadorian Nationality in 2021"], December 27, 2021, https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1640560282_36423.html.

This policy shift can be outlined in four key actions, each of which weakens Cuban exceptionalism and integrates them into the broader immigration enforcement framework. A major change was the suspension and near-termination of the CHNV humanitarian parole program, which allowed them to legally enter the U.S. with sponsor support and receive temporary work permits. Over 530,000 people, including roughly 110,900 Cubans, were affected.[5] Another significant development was expanding deportability after losing legal status – migrants with revoked parole or work authorisation became more vulnerable to detention and removal unless they had another valid immigration status. This suggests an effective "de-legalisation" of individuals who were previously able to remain in the U.S. lawfully.[6] Additional restrictions included delaying or suspending immigration applications by nationals of certain countries, such as Cuba, thereby impacting access to work permits, permanent residence, family immigration benefits, naturalisation, asylum, and withholding of removal. Although courts later ruled that these policies exceeded USCIS's authority and unfairly penalised applicants based on nationality, they caused legal uncertainty for applicants.[7] Lastly, the administration aimed to boost detention and deportation efforts through policies such as "catch-and-detain," expanded expedited removal, increased ICE operations, and significant increases in DHS and ICE funding.[8]

Deportation statistics serve as a vital empirical foundation for assessing the decline of Cuban exceptionalism, illustrating how Cuban nationals are increasingly affected by the enforcement priorities and removal strategies of current U.S. immigration policy. The data clearly demonstrate this policy evolution, with the Trump administration deporting significantly more Cuban nationals during the first seventeen months of its second term than in the entire first term. Nearly 8,000 Cuban migrants were deported after Trump's return to office, compared to 3,385 deportations from 2017 to 2021. Of these, 1,668 were sent directly to Cuba during the second term, bringing the total Cuban deportations under both Trump

[5] U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "DHS Implements New Processes for Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans and Eliminates Cap for Venezuelans," January 6, 2023, https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/alerts/dhs-implements-new-processes-for-cubans-haitians-and-nicaraguans-and-eliminates-cap-for-venezuelans.

[6] U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Humanitarian or Significant Public Benefit Parole for Aliens Outside the United States," accessed July 1, 2026, https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian_parole.

[7] Justice Action Center, "Svitlana Doe v. Noem (Humanitarian Parole Termination)," case page, accessed July 1, 2026, https://justiceactioncenter.org/case/svitlana-doe-v-noem/.

[8] The White House, "Protecting the American People against Invasion," presidential action, January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-american-people-against-invasion/.

administrations to 5,053.[9] Interestingly, while Cuban Americans in Florida became one of Trump's strongest electoral groups in the 2024 election, Cuban nationals themselves face increased immigration enforcement and deportation activities by the administration.[10]

Deportation doesn't always mean a direct return to Cuba. Many Cubans are sent to Mexico, where they often face poor living conditions, legal issues, and increased risks from criminal groups. Others are transferred to third countries; in 2025, at least 3,757 Cubans deported from the U.S. were moved to countries such as Mexico and Eswatini.[11] This shows the growing international scope of U.S. deportation practices. A significant event occurred on 9 February 2026, when an ICE flight deported 170 Cuban nationals with criminal records to Havana, reportedly the first large-scale acceptance of such deportees by Cuba in decades.[12] By April, this number had risen to nearly 8,000 Cuban nationals.

Once parole and irregular border entry ceased to offer a route to regularisation, the Cuban Adjustment Act remained most accessible to two groups: Cubans admitted with visas and dual nationals who entered on a second passport, most notably members of the sizeable Cuban-Spanish community. The latter route had already been severely restricted after Washington redesignated Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism on 12 January 2021. Cuban dual nationals could no longer use the Visa Waiver Programme and enter with an ESTA, even when travelling on the passport of a participating country such as Spain. They instead need to apply for a formal US visa at an embassy or consulate in their country of residence. This subjected them to a slower, more discretionary process, with limited prospects for approval. The designation therefore closed one of the few remaining indirect routes to eventual regularisation.

The administration then restricted the remaining legal routes available to Cubans travelling directly from the island. A presidential proclamation issued on 4 June

[9] Joseph Contreras, "Living in Fear of a Knock at the Door: The Cubans Being Deported under Trump," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jun/14/trump-administration-cuban-deportations.

[10] Florida International University, Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, Institute for Cuban Studies, "FIU Cuba Poll," accessed July 1, 2026, https://ics.fiu.edu/research/fiu-cuba-poll/.

[11] Carla Gloria Colomé, "Trump's Plans for Cubans in the US: 'Maybe They Want to Go Back. They're Going to Have That Choice,'" *EL PAÍS English*, February 25, 2026, https://english.elpais.com/international/2026-02-25/trumps-plans-for-cubans-in-the-us-maybe-they-want-to-go-back-theyre-going-to-have-that-choice.html.

[12] Hannah Aguilar, "170 Cubans Sent Back in First Deportation Flight of the Year from the U.S.," *CubaHeadlines*, February 10, 2026, https://cubaheadlines.com/articles/320528.

2025 suspended the entry of Cuban nationals under immigrant visas and several non-immigrant categories, including B-1, B-2, F, M and J visas, subject to specific exemptions. The White House justified the measure partly by citing Cuba's limited cooperation in accepting nationals ordered to leave the United States. At the end of 2025, the administration closed another established channel by terminating the family reunification parole processes, including the remaining programme for Cubans. By this point, the government had weakened almost every major route through which Cubans could enter legally, request admission at the border or regularise their status after arrival.

The effect was immediate. According to the International Organisation for Migration's 2025 bulletin for Mexico, encounters at the southern border of the United States fell from 1,646,242 in 2024 to 179,828 in 2025, a decline of 89 per cent. Encounters involving Cuban nationals declined even more sharply, from 131,491 to 7,195.

At the same time, the administration responded to a long-standing demand within parts of the established Cuban exile community by targeting individuals linked to the regime's elite and repressive institutions. Community representatives had repeatedly called for tighter scrutiny of recent arrivals, citing cases involving relatives of senior officials, former state employees associated with the apparatus of repression and individuals who continued to defend the regime after settling in the United States. [13] [14] Over time, these concerns created a widespread perception that official indifference had allowed the Cuban state to penetrate exile spaces.

The case of Jorge Luis Vega García illustrates the underlying concern. Vega García, a former lieutenant colonel in Cuba's Ministry of the Interior, entered the United States legally through humanitarian parole in January 2024. Former political prisoners identified him as a senior official at the Agüica and Canaleta prisons and accused him of overseeing beatings, prolonged punishment and the persecution of political detainees. Their denunciations led to public pressure, an immigration investigation and his arrest in August 2025. US authorities deported him to Cuba on 6 November.

[13] *14ymedio*, "Un ex alto cargo del PCC, que llegó a EE UU con el 'parole', se autodeporta a Cuba" ["A Former Senior PCC Official Who Arrived in the United States through Parole Self-Deports to Cuba"], April 3, 2025, https://www.14ymedio.com/cuba/ex-alto-cargo-pcc-llego_1_1112706.html.

[14] *Diario de Cuba*, "Llega a Miami por Reunificación Familiar un Exmiembro del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba" ["A Former Member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba Arrives in Miami through Family Reunification"], August 16, 2024, https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1723799770_56622.html.

Yet the resulting policies extended far beyond people with documented links to the regime. The policy restrictions soon exposed the vulnerability of prominent figures in the new exile. In April 2025, US authorities denied permanent residence to Eliécer Márquez Duany, known as El Funky, one of the artists behind Patria y Vida. This song became an anthem of Cuba's 2021 protest movement. He was ordered to leave the United States within 33 days. Journalist and former political prisoner Lázaro Yuri Valle Roca, along with human rights activist Eralidis Frómeta, received similar notices after the administration terminated the CHNV parole programme.

Two features of the current dynamic deserve particular attention. First, the regime's willingness to accept deportees reflects a strategy of concession designed to ease wider diplomatic, economic and political pressure from Washington and, ultimately, to preserve its own survival. Second, although recent measures have substantially dismantled Cuban legal exceptionalism in the United States, the core Cuban-American electorate in Florida remains predominantly Republican and continues to support Trump's wider agenda, particularly his strategy of increasing pressure on Havana in the hope of provoking political change on the island.

The Exodus towards Latin America

Cuban migration to Latin America is not new. After the communist regime took power in 1959, Mexico and Venezuela became two of the main destinations for Cubans seeking refuge outside the island.[15] Another major movement came in 2008, when Ecuador, under President Rafael Correa, adopted a visa-free policy that included Cuban citizens.[16] An estimated 100,000 to 120,000 Cubans[17] entered the country, and many obtained residence there. Yet the later trajectory of that Cuban community in Ecuador reveals a persistent feature of Cuban migration in Latin America. When conditions allowed it, most Cubans eventually moved towards the United States, often crossing the Darién Gap and continuing northwards, making

[15] Jorge Duany, "Cuban Migration: A Postrevolution Exodus Ebbs and Flows," *Migration Information Source*, Migration Policy Institute, July 6, 2017, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-migration-postrevolution-exodus-ebbs-and-flows. (migrationpolicy.org)

[16] Luisa Eline Freier, Ahmed Correa Álvarez, and Valeria Arón, "El sufrimiento del migrante: la migración cubana en el sueño ecuatoriano de la libre movilidad" ["Migrant Suffering: Cuban Migration in the Ecuadorian Dream of Free Mobility"], *Apuntes: Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 46, no. 84 (April 2019): 95–125, https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=684078237004.

[17] Diario de Cuba, "Los Cubanos, los Emigrados que Más se Acogen a la Nacionalidad en Ecuador en 2021."

Latin America the first leg of a long and dangerous journey that ended on the banks of the Rio Grande.

At present, three factors make this South-South migration a more attractive option– first, the role played by the community already established there. Over the past 25 years, thousands of doctors, professionals and technicians have worked across the region through contracts managed by the Cuban state. Many deserted those missions, settled in host countries and later brought relatives.[18] Over time, they created family and social networks that eased the arrival and integration of new Cuban migrants.

Second, the importance of 'accessibility' when citizens hold a low-ranked passport. Obtaining a visa for a Latin American country is slightly easier than securing entry to the European Union or any other developed country. Yet, it can still be bureaucratic, costly and uncertain. Visa-free access to countries such as Guyana and Nicaragua created cheaper alternative routes for leaving the island. Many of these routes became linked to smuggling networks that, for a fee, moved migrants towards their preferred destination.

Third, the most important driving force remains the diaspora itself. As the Cuban population abroad grew, especially in the United States, more families gained the resources to finance departures from the island. The deepening social, political and economic crisis in Cuba gave that support greater urgency. Relatives abroad became willing to pay the sums required by smugglers so their families and friends could leave.

Since 2025, Mexico, Brazil and Uruguay have emerged as the principal destinations for Cuban migrants. Mexico has undergone the clearest transformation: once the penultimate stage of a route that began in Nicaragua, it has become a destination in its own right. In 2025, 99,697 Cuban nationals entered Mexico by air; 2,229 obtained temporary residence, 5,469 obtained permanent residence, and 3,870 obtained a Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons (TVRH). That same year, the Mexican authorities registered a further 12,971 people in an irregular migration situation in the country. These figures reflect Mexico's growing role as both a settlement hub and a practical base for Cubans who use Mexican residence documents to travel, reunite with relatives and purchase goods that remain scarce or unaffordable on the island.

[18] Marcelo Silva de Sousa, "Médicos cubanos desertan y deciden quedarse en Brasil" ["Cuban Doctors Desert and Decide to Remain in Brazil"], *AP News*, November 26, 2018, https://apnews.com/article/fd029f2c953a49e3af67a3e2bc37abff.

Migration to Brazil is more recent than the Cuban movement towards Mexico and remains closely linked to the presence of Cuban doctors who worked there under the Mais Médicos programme. During Trump's first administration, Brazil also emerged as an alternative destination for Cubans unable to reach the United States, often using visa-free Guyana as a gateway into South America. The true size of the Cuban population in Brazil remains difficult to establish. Complex regularisation procedures have left a significant proportion of migrants without stable legal status, making official residence figures an incomplete measure of the community's size. Asylum applications nevertheless offer an indication of the scale of the movement. Between the beginning of the current migration crisis in 2021 and May 2026, 99,779 Cubans applied for asylum in Brazil.[19] Of these applications, 22,288 were submitted in 2024, 41,919 in 2025 and 16,982 during the first five months of 2026. Together, the applications lodged since January 2025 account for 59 per cent of all Cuban asylum claims filed in Brazil since 2021. Available reporting suggests that only a limited proportion of Cuban applicants obtain refugee status.[20] This equates to a maximum rate of just 0.009 per cent, or approximately one grant for every 10,700 applications. For many, asylum therefore functions as a temporary legal shield while they seek another route to regularisation.

Cuban migration to Uruguay initially resembled the Brazilian pattern, with the first major wave emerging during Trump's first administration and many migrants entering irregularly through land borders. For instance, in 2019 alone, 10,853 Cubans applied for asylum.[21] However, Uruguay's comparatively accessible regularisation system soon changed the nature of the movement. For 2025, official data show that 14,959 Cuban nationals had entered the country without a registered departure. Of them, 13,852 were issued a Uruguayan identity card for the first time,[22] as the law allows applicants to obtain one while a residence

[19] Observatório das Migrações Internacionais (OBMigra), *Solicitações de Refúgio: Sisconare–CG-CONARE* [*Asylum Applications: Sisconare–CGCONARE*], interactive database, accessed June 30, 2026, https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMjZlNDFiZjgtOTJhYS00ZWNjLTg3MzMtN-TNiN2YyYTczNmM2IiwidCI6ImVjMzU5YmExLTYzMGItNGQyYi1iODMzLWM4ZTZkN DhmODA1OSJ9&pageName=2a555d64be07f5353cb1

[20] DDC, "Los cubanos presentaron casi el 60% de las solicitudes de refugio registradas en Brasil en cuatro meses" ["Cubans Submitted Nearly 60 Percent of Refugee Applications Registered in Brazil over Four Months"], *Diario de Cuba*, June 4, 2026, https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1780573827_67283.html.

[21] Observatorio de Movilidad, Infancia y Familia (OMIF), Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de la República, *Observatorio de Movilidad, Infancia y Familia: Registros Administrativos* [*Observatory of Mobility, Childhood and Family: Administrative Records*], interactive database, accessed June 30, 2026, https://bancodedatos-fcs.shinyapps.io/OMIF-UNICEF/.

[22] Tomer Urwicz, "La escasez y los apagones en la isla llevan a que Uruguay esté recibiendo la mayor cantidad de cubanos de la historia" ["Shortages and Power Outages on the Island Lead Uruguay

application is pending or under certain asylum-related statuses. Within this broader group, 6,219 Cubans were granted permanent residence,[23] while a further 4,617 permanent-residence applications were initiated,[24] mainly through employment-based and family reunification pathways.

The Cuban diaspora has established itself rapidly in Uruguay, attracted by the country's security, political and economic stability, and comparatively accessible routes to regularisation.[25] A study published by Uruguay's Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of the Republic found that within the Cuban diaspora, 91 per cent of men and 68 per cent of women were employed.[26] This degree of labour-market participation has helped consolidate a community that is both economically active and increasingly visible in public life.

The concentration of Cubans in and around Montevideo has facilitated the development of a politically active community committed to democratic change in Cuba. This mobilisation intensified in 2019, when local activists established closer links with the Cuban diaspora in Miami and became more exposed to its media networks and political environment. As Lidier Hernández, a human rights activist and prominent member of the community, observed, these connections gave greater impetus to existing activism. For him, this process culminated in

to Receive the Largest Number of Cubans in Its History"], *El Observador*, February 7, 2026, https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nacional/la-escasez-y-los-apagones-la-isla-llevan-que-uruguay-este-recibiendo-la-mayor-cantidad-cubanos-la-historia-n6033685.

[23] Uruguay, Ministerio del Interior, *Residencias concedidas 2025* [*Residences Granted, 2025*], cuadro 9.01, "Residencias permanentes concedidas por nacionalidad" ["Permanent Residences Granted by Nationality"], published May 2026, https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-interior/sites/ministerio-interior/files/2026-05/Residencias%20concedidas%202025.pdf.

[24] Uruguay, Ministerio del Interior, *Residencias iniciadas 2025* [*Residences Initiated, 2025*], cuadro 8.13, "Residencias permanentes por arraigo laboral iniciadas por nacionalidad" ["Permanent Residences Initiated through Employment-Based Rootedness, by Nationality"], published June 2026, https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-interior/sites/ministerio-interior/files/2026-06/Residencias%20Iniciadas%202025.pdf.

[25] Alejo Savio, "Uruguay, el destino elegido por los cubanos que huyen de los apagones y la crisis alimentaria" ["Uruguay, the Destination Chosen by Cubans Fleeing Power Outages and the Food Crisis"], *Refugio Latinoamericano*, March 31, 2026, https://refugiolatinoamericano.com/informes-uruguay-el-destino-elegido-por-los-cubanos-31032026/.

[26] Sabrina Ferrando, Mariana Ferrer, Gonzalo Garrido, Clara Márquez, and Victoria Prieto, *Inmigración reciente en Uruguay 2022–2024* [*Recent Immigration in Uruguay, 2022–2024*] (Montevideo: Unidad Estadística del Trabajo y la Seguridad Social, Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, and Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de la República, February 2026), https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-trabajo-seguridad-social/sites/ministerio-trabajo-seguridad-social/files/documentos/noticias/_%20%284%29.pdf.

the creation of Free Cubans in Uruguay (Cubanos Libres en Uruguay), founded by Elianis Rodríguez and Alicia Alonso together with other members of the community. Through the association, Cuban activists have lobbied the Uruguayan government to denounce human rights violations and repression on the island.

Two additional factors can also explain the community's political activism. First, several well-known Cuban YouTubers and online commentators who had publicly criticised the regime chose Uruguay as a temporary destination after the repression that followed the mass protests of July 2021. Figures such as Frank Junior Díaz Chávez (known as Frank el Makina) and Magdiel Jorge Castro, both of whom command large followings on social media, helped bring the political concerns of the Cuban diaspora into the public sphere. Second, the community benefited for much of this period from the political openness and institutional support it received under Luis Lacalle Pou's government, which provided a more favourable environment for civic organisation and public criticism of the Cuban regime.

Viewed together in 2025 alone, Mexico, Brazil and Uruguay accounted for at least 100,000 new Cuban migrants. Once arrivals in other expanding destinations,[27] including the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Costa Rica, are considered, a regional total of around 120,000 would be realistic. Such a figure would amount to roughly 1.6 per cent of Cuba's estimated population of 8.7 million, underscoring the scale of a movement that has continued even after access to the United States narrowed. The trend is likely to persist in 2026, although at a slower pace. Reduced air connectivity, tighter sanctions and Nicaragua's renewed visa requirement have made departure more difficult and closed routes that previously sustained the flow.

The European Route

Compared with Latin America, Europe offers a narrower and more difficult route. It attracts a smaller group of Cubans with the resources to finance travel, secure visas, draw on family networks or obtain European citizenship. These barriers help explain why the Cuban diaspora in Europe remains smaller than the Colombian, Argentine, Brazilian or Ecuadorian communities.

[27] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Cuban Migration Dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Regional Snapshot (January 2025–February 2026)* (IOM, Latin America and the Caribbean, March 18, 2026), https://dtm.iom.int/reports/cuban-migration-dynamics-latin-america-and-caribbean-regional-snapshot-january-2025.

Spain is the centre of Cuban migration to Europe for clear historical, cultural and linguistic reasons. An estimated 250,000 Cubans live there, making it by far the largest Cuban community on the continent. Yet Cuban migration to Spain follows two distinct paths. The first remains largely invisible in migration statistics. Spain's 2007 Historical Memory Law opened a route to citizenship for certain descendants of Spaniards. Around 150,000 Cubans acquired Spanish nationality through that process. However, the law excluded some descendants, including children of Spanish women who had lost their nationality after marrying foreign nationals.

The 2022 Law of Democratic Memory expanded access through what became widely known as the Ley de Nietos. More than 600,000 Cubans[28] have submitted applications under the new framework, while more than 240,000 naturalisation cases have been approved worldwide.[29] Available data do not provide a complete figure for the number of Cubans who have acquired Spanish citizenship through this process. This creates a significant statistical blind spot. Once applicants obtain Spanish nationality, Spanish migration statistics record them as Spanish citizens rather than Cuban nationals. Yet the flow is substantial. Between 2021 and 2024, the Estadística de Migraciones y Cambios de Residencia recorded 40,370 arrivals in Spain by Spanish citizens coming from Cuba.[30] These movements took place while Cuban-born Spanish citizens could still travel to the United States and adjust their status there. The tightening of US migration policy after 2025 may increase the number who choose Spain instead.

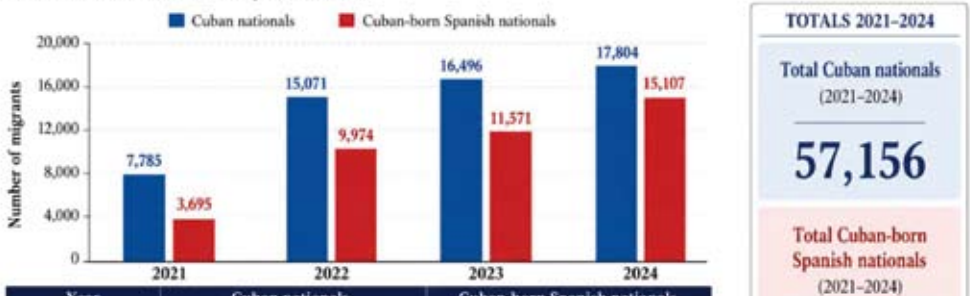
[28] *14ymedio*, "Los datos definitivos indican que más de 600.000 cubanos han solicitado la nacionalidad española" ["Final Figures Indicate That More Than 600,000 Cubans Have Applied for Spanish Nationality"], December 2, 2025, 07:34, https://www.14ymedio.com/cuba/datos-definitivos-indican-600-000_1_1121166.html.

[29] Government of Spain, "El Gobierno concede 240.000 nacionalidades a descendientes de exiliados en virtud de la Ley de Memoria Democrática" ["The Government Grants 240,000 Nationalities to Descendants of Exiles under the Democratic Memory Law"], *La Moncloa*, September 19, 2025, https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/serviciosdeprensa/notasprensa/politica-territorial-memoria-democratica/Paginas/2025/190925-nacionalidades-ley-memoria-democratica.aspx.

[30] Data sources for Cuban migration balances, by reference year: 2021: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Cifras de Población at 1 July 2022 and Migration Statistics: First Half of 2022*, November 18, 2022, https://www.ine.es/prensa/cp_j2022_p.pdf. 2022: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Estadística de Migraciones y Cambios de Residencia (EMCR): Año 2022* [*Migration and Changes of Residence Statistics: Year 2022*], December 20, 2023, https://www.ine.es/prensa/emcr_2022.pdf. 2023: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Estadística de Migraciones y Cambios de Residencia (EMCR): Año 2023* [*Migration and Changes of Residence Statistics: Year 2023*], December 12, 2024, https://www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/EMCR2023.htm. 2024: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Estadística de Migraciones y Cambios de Residencia (EMCR): Año 2024* [*Migration and Changes of Residence Statistics: Year 2024*], December 11, 2025, https://www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/es/EMCR2024.htm.

The second group arrives with Cuban passports. Some enter as students, visitors, workers or family members and later remain through employment, family reunification, residence permits or protection claims. Between 2021 and 2024, Spain recorded a cumulative positive net migration balance of 57,156 Cuban nationals, with a median annual balance of 15,784.[31] Data for 2025 remain incomplete, but more than 5,800 Cuban nationals recorded a positive net migration balance during a single trimester of the year,[32] broadly following the trend of previous years. When combined with the first group, the final 2025 figure may exceed 30,000 Cuban-born arrivals. Full-year data will determine the scale of this movement, but the available figures already point to Spain's growing role within the post-2025 Cuban exodus.

Graph 1.
Cuban Migration Balances and Cuban-born Spanish Nationals Migrating to Spain, 2021–2024
Cuban nationals and Cuban-born Spanish nationals



Year	Cuban nationals	Cuban-born Spanish nationals
2021	7,785	3,695
2022	15,071	9,974
2023	16,496	11,571
2024	17,804	15,107
Total	57,156	40,347

TOTALS 2021–2024

Total Cuban nationals (2021–2024)
57,156

Total Cuban-born Spanish nationals (2021–2024)
40,347

Source: Author's calculations based on Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Saldos migratorios: Resultados nacionales. Saldo migratorio exterior e interior*, "Saldos por año, sexo, nacionalidad y tipo de saldo"; and INE data on Cuban-born Spanish nationals migrating to Spain, 2021–2024.

Cuban communities in other European countries have also grown, although their scale remains modest. After Spain, Italy, France, and Germany host the largest Cuban populations, with roughly 60,000 to 30,000 people. Since 2021, these

[31] Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Saldos migratorios: Resultados nacionales. Saldo migratorio exterior e interior* [*Migration Balances: National Results. External and Internal Migration Balance*], "Saldos por año, sexo, nacionalidad y tipo de saldo" ["Balances by Year, Sex, Nationality, and Type of Balance"], interactive statistical table, accessed July 1, 2026, https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Datos.htm?t=69758.

[32] Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Estadística Continua de Población: Migraciones. Resultados nacionales* [*Continuous Population Statistics: Migration. National Results*], "Inmigración procedente del extranjero, por trimestre y nacionalidad (10 principales países)" ["Immigration from Abroad, by Quarter and Nationality (Ten Main Countries)"], interactive statistical table, accessed July 1, 2026, https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Datos.htm?t=59011.

communities have expanded by around 1,000 to 2,000 people each year. Their growth confirms a wider diversification of Cuban migration across Europe, but it remains too limited to alter Spain's overwhelming position as the principal European destination.

A more precarious route has emerged for Cubans without Spanish citizenship or a Schengen visa. Russia, Belarus and, until recently, Serbia offered easier access than the EU itself. Migrants could enter these countries legally before attempting to continue through the European Union's eastern border or the Western Balkans.

This created a mixed migration strategy: legal entry into a transit country followed by irregular onward movement. The Western Balkan corridor became especially relevant in 2022 and 2023, as reflected in Cuban asylum claims in Slovenia, Croatia, Greece and Italy. The Baltic route appears more limited, as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia registered only small numbers of Cuban applicants.

These asylum figures capture only those who reached the authorities and lodged a claim. They cannot measure all Cubans who used these routes, crossed undetected, continued towards Spain, or regularised through other means. They nevertheless show how Cuban migration adapted to restrictive visa systems and shifting border controls.

Europe has therefore become part of the post-2025 Cuban migration landscape, but on a far smaller scale than Latin America. It remains a selective destination shaped by ancestry, documentation, financial resources and access to transnational networks.

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