

12-3-1999

Shocked, Shocked in Serbia: Fundamental Attribution Errors

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>



Part of the [Other Political Science Commons](#), and the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1999) "Shocked, Shocked in Serbia: Fundamental Attribution Errors," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 20 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol7/iss20/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

Title: Shocked, Shocked in Serbia: Fundamental Attribution Errors

Author: Editor

Volume: 7

Issue: 20

Date: 1999-12-03

Keywords: Cognitive Bias, European Union, Fundamental Attribution Error, Milosevic, Serbia, Yugoslavia

Abstract. This article describes many of the conflicting causal attributions bearing on the European Union's attempts to provide heating fuel to Serbian towns controlled by political parties in opposition to the ruling Serbian coalition supporting the President of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic.

Recently, Serbian customs officials held up European Union (EU) efforts to donate heating fuel to Serbian towns controlled by the Serbian political opposition. Why was the EU engaged in such efforts? First, a humanitarian reason: heating fuel would ease the energy crisis in Serbia and related human anguish. Second, a political reason: the heating fuel would support the EU contention that the EU was not against the Serbian people, but only the Serbian regime controlled by Slobodan Milosevic. Third, another political reason: the heating fuel would suggest to the Serbian opposition and other Serbians with the potential to become and join the opposition to increase political pressures on Milosevic, his supporters, and the like-minded to cede political control of Serbia. These pressures might then lead to the legal and, perhaps, the extra-legal removal of those currently in power.

Thus, the EU attributions are egoistic and were intended to help achieve EU political objectives--viz., strategic calculations, reinforcing ethical and moral values, and even catering to many domestic political constituents and interest groups. Why then would the head of the EU's delegation in Belgrade, Michael Graham, state [as attributed in *The New York Times*] that "'I can only express surprise and disappointment...I see no reason why anybody should wish to delay heating fuel for the citizens of Nis and Pirot'"?

Certainly, the above quote may be no more than political rhetoric--e.g., boilerplate or propaganda. However, assuming the quote is at least partially more than that, one might make the following observations. Surely the Serbian power structure is not in the business of helping the EU achieve the latter's political objectives--unless achieving these objectives is intermediate to achieving more significant ones of the Serbian power structure. Thus, the holding up of the heating fuel can be viewed as an impediment to achieving EU objectives.

However, the Serbs may engage in a sequence of temporary hold-ups followed by the removal of barriers. This tension-on/tension-off technique may be intended to encourage the EU to provide heating fuel to the Serb political opposition. Here the Serbs might have concluded that even providing heating fuel to the opposition defuses that opposition's sense of outrage, deprivation, and need to pressure the existing power structure.

What to make of all of this? Political psychologists are well aware of the fundamental attribution error that denotes actors who often overemphasize situational factors as causal agents of their own behavior, while observers of these actors often overemphasize factors within these actors as causally related to the same behavior. In the case of the EU, Serbs, and heating fuel, the fundamental attribution error may be operative if the two sides agree as to the import of the heating fuel, and non-operative if the two sides disagree. In the former case, EU decision makers might be employing situational causal attributions as an intermediary step to attributing a putative causal effect to the heating fuel among

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Serbs. In the latter case, the Serbs may be employing factors within the EU decision makers as intermediary causal attributions that then impact on the putative causal effects of the heating fuel.

In any event, a more fundamental attribution error made by all causal attributors may be the hubris of asserting enough certainty to assert that there are adequate causal foundations for political violence. This hubris is too common, not only with regards to Serbia, but also other locales that are being bathed or risk being bathed in blood. (See Alicke, M.D., Zerbst, J.I., & LoSchiavo, F.M. (1996). Personal attitudes, constraint magnitude, and correspondence bias. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 18, 211-228; Forgas, J.P. (1998). On being happy and mistaken: Mood effects on the fundamental attribution error. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 318-331; Gall, C. (November 25, 1999). Serbia holds up fuel sent to help opposition. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Gifford, R., & Hine, D.W. (1997). "I'm cooperative, but you're greedy": Some cognitive tendencies in a common dilemma. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 29, 257-265; Krull, D.S., et al. (1999). The fundamental attribution error: Correspondence bias in individualist and collectivist cultures. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 1208-1219.) (Keywords: Cognitive Bias, European Union, Fundamental Attribution Error, Milosevic, Serbia, Yugoslavia.)