Shocked, Shocked in Serbia: Fundamental Attribution Errors

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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
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.