

We should stop trying to intervene in Serbia's elections (EU Observer)

Пише: Peter Sain ley Berry
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Proud European though I am I would be sorely tempted to vote for Mr Kostunica's alliance of anti-EU radicals and nationalists were I Serbian and eligible to vote in their Parliamentary elections on 11 May.

For with indelicate haste earlier this week the European Council agreed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement for Serbia which the pro-European Serbian President, Boris Tadic, was summoned to Luxembourg by telephone to receive. For him, of course, and his pro-European Parliamentary party that is facing Mr Kostunica in the 11 May elections, the SAA - the first step to joining the EU - is good news; something in fact that Mr Tadic has been long expecting, but of which he has been baulked by the International Criminal Tribunal, who judge that the Serbs have been lax about rounding up their indicted war criminals and delivering them to justice.

The Tribunal's views have hitherto been a stumbling block, especially for the Netherlands, where the Tribunal is based, and for Belgium; but under pressure from the rest of the EU and relying on weasel words about not implementing the Agreement until the Tribunal is satisfied, the two countries have given in. Suddenly, the SAA is on the table.

The purpose, of course, is to help Mr Tadic's election campaign. For all that, this is blatant interference in the internal electoral affairs of an independent state. It is bribery, there is no other word for it, and it is reprehensible. Not for nothing was Mr Kostunica moved, reportedly, to describe this as 'an act against the state.'

The EU has form in this. Two months ago in an attempt to ensure Mr Tadic won Serbia's Presidential election, it promised just such an agreement. I wrote then that this sort of behaviour was wrong. It continues to be wrong.

The EU prides itself on its practice of democracy. Whether this pride is deserved is another matter, but it remains the case that people and parties in many states whose position in the democratic pecking order is a lot lower than ours, look to the EU as some sort of model.

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How can we look these states in the eye, while acting in a manner that, were they do do the same, we should disapprove of?

It is not even as if the outcome of the Serbian election really matters. Whether and when Serbia joins the EU will depend at least as much on internal EU politics and the public's appetite for another large round of enlargement, as on what happens in Serbia itself. Besides, the time scale is likely to be far longer than a single Parliamentary term. The interests of Serbia and of the other Balkan states lie so obviously with a European future that we shall not find any lack of Serbian response once we ourselves are genuinely in a position to make them an offer.

Even if we lay aside the malpractice of interfering in other people's elections, it was still inadvisable to drop the condition of compliance with the Tribunal's demands before signing the SAA. The EU has an altogether unfortunate tendency of rushing into agreements with a kind of Panglossian optimism. The condition of re-unification before accession was dropped to accommodate Cyprus; Bulgaria was allowed to complete its reforms after accession and so on. In both these cases we are still waiting.

Moreover, the rushed imbroglio has upset that most upstart of Balkan countries: Bosnia-Herzegovina, still waiting to sign its own SAA, which been delayed for 'technical reasons,' of a non-Bosnian variety. The country had every reason - and right - to have expected to be signing its own SAA before Serbia. Bosnia now feels snubbed. It is out of such snubs that distrust grows.

The European Council seeks to influence voters elsewhere too. Ireland will vote on the Lisbon Treaty on 12 June. In this case their perhaps more legitimate intervention is not by making agreements but by avoiding discussion of anything that might antagonise the Treaty's dwindling band of supporters.

Various initiatives - including the important discussion of the job description for the new European President and a single method for taxing companies across the EU (but not of course aligning tax rates), have been put on hold until after the referendum lest they scare Irish voters. This pussy-footing may end up being counterproductive. What is being hidden, voters may ask?

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Ireland seems equally split on the Treaty into a 'yes' camp, a 'no' camp and a camp that couldn't care less, with the 'yeses' just managing to keep their noses in front, despite the political shenanigans that have assailed the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and which will see his departure from office before the vote takes place. As with the first and second Nice referenda, the result will depend on turnout.

In this febrile atmosphere, the European stage is left to lesser players. High politics gives way to unseemly name-calling - or rather name not-calling. In vetoing its application to join NATO until it stops calling itself the Republic of Macedonia, Greece has taken the 17 year battle over the name of its Northern neighbour into new territory.

Most of those (and there can't be many) who might have had some sympathy for the Greek case - that the Republic's name might otherwise serve as a catalyst for Macedonian nationalism - must nevertheless have thought that the Greek government was being excessively precious, especially when they repeatedly call Alexander the Great as a witness.

Why the Greeks do this I have no idea. He may have been a military genius, but otherwise he was a cruel and evil barbarian who murdered his best friend in a drunken brawl, burnt Persepolis, jewel of the ancient world, and abandoned his loyal army in India, like a child becoming bored with a toy.

Now comes the news that some Greeks are trying to take legal action against those with Sapphic tendencies. They want to reserve to the inhabitants of Lesbos alone, the right to call themselves Lesbians. This really is nomenclature silliness of the first order; enough to make Irish, Serbs and Macedonians of all persuasions run for cover as far from the EU as they can get. The poetess Sappho (who treated her best friends rather differently) must be rolling in her grave with laughter.

The author is editor of EuropaWorld