

[Comment] Strange bedfellows - EU Socialists and Yanukovich

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The Socialist group in the European Parliament has signed a new co-operation agreement with the Party of Regions in Ukraine that looks as if its sole purpose is to derail criticism of Ukraine's new leader in Brussels.

October was an unusual month for the European Parliament's relationship with Ukraine.

A draft statement was prepared ahead of Ukraine's 31 October local elections that was highly critical of campaign irregularities and how these point to the strong likelihood that the elections would be not free, for the first since 2004. That year, mass election fraud sparked the Orange Revolution that brought millions of Ukrainians on to the streets of Kiev.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's ruling Party of Regions and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats, the second largest group in the parliament, signed a new co-operation agreement. In an editorial entitled "Socialist Tycoons" in the Kiev Post, the newspaper writes: "The marriage between the Party of Regions and the Party of Europe's Socialists isn't a match made in heaven."

It quotes an unnamed EU official as asking "Is the Party of European Socialists so blind not to see" that the Yanukovich party's main backers, who include billionaires, "are not socialists by nature?"

This is surprising, as the leader of the European Socialist group, Martin Schulz, is set to become the next president of the European Parliament. A deal with a Ukrainian political party strongly involved in election fraud and corruption could badly dent his reputation and de-rail his election if the European Peoples Party (EPP) decline to support him in the EU assembly.

So far, the Party of Regions had only two international political allies - the first is a six-year co-operation agreement with Vladimir Putin's United Russia, the ruling party in Russia's authoritarian regime, and the second, more recent, with China's Communist Party.

In the late 1990s, Europe's Socialists turned down a relationship with the corrupt and oligarch-controlled Ukrainian United Social Democratic Party. Two Ukrainian parties were welcomed into the Socialist International – the Socialist Party and Social Democratic Party, both of whom supported the Orange Revolution and have exemplary democratic records. The same cannot be said of the Party of Regions.

Today, in a u-turn, Europe's Socialists have established links to a party implicated in mass election fraud in 2004, when its leader - Viktor Yanukovich - who was then prime minister and the regime's presidential candidate, tried to use mass fraud in order to win. Today, Mr Yanukovich is Ukraine's president and remains publicly unrepentant of his "free election" in 2004, saying allegations of fraud were the product of an "American conspiracy" against him pursued by the Bush administration.

The European Socialists' new ally is also a party dominated by billionaires, many of whom spend more of their time in their second homes in Nice and Monaco than in the Ukrainian parliament. Party of Regions deputy and oligarch Rinat Akhmetov is Europe's wealthiest person, with a net worth valued in 2008 at \$31 billion.

The Party of Regions sought a new relationship with European Socialists not out of ideological affinity, which does not exist, or a desire to establish close ties to the European Parliament.

Its objective was simple: to de-rail the adoption of a critical European Parliament resolution ahead of Ukraine's local elections. Something which they succeeded in accomplishing.

The European Parliament has missed an important opportunity to warn Ukraine's leaders to desist from returning to their bad old practices of election fraud. Some opportunities to correct the mistake remain, however.

First, the European Parliament should issue the delayed statement after the elections and, together with the OSCE and Council of Europe, condemn in the strongest possible manner any election fraud as being incompatible with President Yanukovich's numerous commitments to democratic freedoms made to Ukrainian citizens and the international community.

Second, in the event of election fraud, the Socialist Group should annul its co-operation with the ruling Party of Regions. A failure to do so should be a signal to the EPP that they should withdraw their support for Mr Schulz to become president of the European Parliament.

Third, the EU should warn Kiev at its summit with Ukraine in November that democratic backsliding, attacks on the media and election fraud could postpone the signing of a deep free trade agreement and therefore of an Association Agreement.

European Socialists still have an opportunity to back out of their bizarre relationship with the Party of Regions. The next few weeks will tell if they will take this step or if they will become accomplices in the dismantling of democracy in Ukraine.

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