
Published at: 20-03-2009

Economist.com

The Economist

The Bulgarians want European help running their government

BULGARIA'S entry into the European Union was delayed by worries over corruption, organised crime and slow judicial reform. When it and Romania joined in 2007, the European Commission was given a "mechanism for co-operation and verification" that lets it monitor reforms and impose sanctions. It duly withheld €220m (\$320m) of EU money from Bulgaria in 2008. The Socialist-led government responded crossly, accusing the commission of double standards and of using its monitoring mechanism as a political tool.

In February advisers to the prime minister, Sergei Stanishev, hatched an extraordinary new plan. Under this the commission and other EU members would get more power to intervene where "weaknesses may be qualified as structural and persistent and...cannot be resolved by the Bulgarian government alone". The plan proposes that European officials and diplomats should be involved in monitoring implementation of laws, managing EU funds and supervising courts, prosecutors and investigators. They would follow cases of political corruption and organised crime that the judicial system has been slow to tackle. The suggestion is that such a "partnership" would be better than the commission's mechanism-although that may reflect the fact that it would be directed from Sofia, not Brussels. Mr Stanishev presented this secret plan to the commission's president, Jos  Manuel Barroso, in early March. The response was cool. A spokesman says that Mr Barroso rejects the notion of a parallel structure to the current mechanism. EU ambassadors to Sofia, who have just been told of the plan, are also sceptical. One senior diplomat says it would be wrong to wrest the carrot and stick away from the commission, which has both political independence and the trust of EU members-unlike the Bulgarian government. Indeed, some ambassadors detect a wheeze by Bulgaria's Socialists to tell voters that the EU has "newly regained trust" in the government before an election in June. Putting the commission and EU members in charge of reforms might also inhibit future criticism.

Despite this negative response, the government is pushing ahead with its idea. It has set the end of March as a target date. The foreign minister, Ivaylo Kalfin, has even suggested a similar scheme for all EU members.

A mechanism for joint government of a country may be a first for the EU, but it is not for Bulgaria. Soviet advisers arrived in force after 1944 to make sure that the newly communist country did not stray from the course of nationalisation, industrialisation and building socialism. Yet most Bulgarians would welcome a wider role for EU officials. In one poll, over 80% of respondents said they did not trust the government, parliament and courts. Almost 75% trust the EU, especially the commission, according to Eurobarometer. A bigger European presence in the government may play well with Bulgarians, even if it makes less difference than they would like.