

# Poor physical state of Sofia is symbolic of a deeper malaise, Irish times says

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By Irish Times. **Concern has been expressed at the level of organised crime in Bulgaria, with cause, writes MICHAEL FOLEY**

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FOUR YEARS is a long time in the life of presidents. In 2005 President Georgi Parvanov of Bulgarian visited Dublin, partly to lobby on behalf of his country's entry to the EU as there was a lot of talk at the time that Bulgaria's accession should be delayed. As it was Ireland supported Bulgaria's entry in 2007. There was possibly another reason he came, to find the recipe for Ireland economic success.

Then last week President Mary McAleese repayed the compliment and visited Bulgaria. But instead of being the representative of the EU success story, she was thanking Bulgaria for its support in allaying Irish concerns over the Lisbon Treaty. She even pointed out, when opening an academic conference in Sofia University, that she had taken a voluntary 10 per cent pay cut, reflecting the economic disaster that is Ireland today.

It was not long ago the Bulgarians looked to Ireland as a role model; and why not? Ireland, like Bulgaria, was a small country on Europe's periphery. Both were former colonies, Ireland colonised by England and Bulgaria by the Ottoman Turks. Ireland had been EU's poorest member and had become an economic miracle, and a recipient of all those structural funds.

Once it was known you were from Ireland, Bulgarians would ask how the economic boom happened and what were the chance of it happening in Bulgaria. In fact there was no doubt at all, it was going to happen, Bulgaria would simply replicate Ireland.

So how has Bulgaria fared? Well, Sofia itself has not changed much and in terms of its appearance might have got worse since it joined the EU.

The designer shops are still on Vitosha Boulevard, though there are possibly less of them. There are cool bars and restaurants but there are also the peeling walls, buildings being propped up by temporary and very dodgy looking scaffolding, pavements that are a jigsaw of cracked and broken paving that click and shift underfoot as you walk.

Street furniture such as traffic lights, traffic signs and bollards are broken and rusty. Manholes and other coverings are lethal. The roads are a mess of huge potholes that fill with ice, water or mud, depending on the season. Old apartment blocks have water stains and often missing balconies.

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There are inexplicable lumps of metal sticking out of the pavements that once presumably held up signs or had some other function, but are now waiting to impale the unwary. money paid in.

President McAleese probably did not notice from her car, but there is a huge amount of rubbish around the streets, a symbol, one might have thought, of the failure of the high profile mayor of Sofia, Boiko Borisov, whose new right wing party, the Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria, or Gerb in its Bulgarian acronym, is, inexplicably, expected to do well in forthcoming elections.

But the physical state of Sofia is probably just symbolic of a deeper malaise, which it has not, or has been unable, to address: corruption and mafia-based crime.

When it was an accession country, Bulgaria was warned that measures had to be taken to address corruption within the public service and especially the judiciary as well bring mafia to justice. According to EU monitoring, that has not happened and now the country is facing EU sanctions, with EU funds being withheld.

This has led to farmers's demonstrations and the sight of unfinished EU projects, including a prestige motorway that was to link Sofia to the Black Sea coast. That motorway lies unfinished.

In the bars of Sofia frequented by the expat community, business people talk of the amount of money paid in bribes, while, at the same time, the number of people convicted of taking bribes is low.

Meanwhile Transparency International, the anti-corruption NGO, ranks Bulgaria as the most corrupt country in Europe and says it is concerned at the level of organised crime, with cause. Gang killings and assassinations go undetected, while criminals are seen driving around Sofia in 4X4s with tinted windows. But Brussels's decision to withhold funds has hardly diminished the Bulgarian enthusiasm for Europe. One seasoned observer suggested the Bulgarian people know that if anything is to be done, it will be due to pressure from Brussels.

But the other question being asked is: was it a mistake to take Bulgaria into membership? When Bulgaria was an accession country and its crime and corruption was leading some to question whether it would ever be ready for membership, one political scientist in Sofia suggested Bulgaria could become a "mafocracy", a society where crime rather than government rules. That is still a long way off.

But there is another argument being suggested. The West owes Bulgaria. Bulgarian was one of the few Balkan countries not to lapse into war with the collapse of communism. Despite its current state, it was a centre of stability in a region with little of that. Its support of western policies towards the countries of former Yugoslavia, especially sanctions against its neighbour Serbia, was no doubt a contributory factor in the growth of the Bulgarian mafia.

How Bulgaria develops will impact on the European ambitions of other countries of eastern and South-eastern countries. If we don't get Bulgaria right, the future of eastern and South-eastern Europe looks grim. The consequences of a mafocracy on the EU's border are equally appalling for us.