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Romania and Bulgaria appear on track to join the European Union next year, although there are concerns over Bulgaria's failure to tackle crime.

European enlargement commissioner Olli Rehn said his goal was that both countries should join by next January.

Mr Rehn is due to present a key report on whether the admission of the two countries should be delayed by a year in three weeks' time.

Both missed the EU's big expansion into the former communist bloc in 2004.

But it seems the laggards of eastern Europe are about to catch up - or at least, Romania is.

The country is cracking down on corruption like never before, with a raft of criminal investigations against senior lawmakers, judges and officials.

Olli Rehn praised this as significant progress.

But he told Bulgaria that urgent action was needed to deal with organised crime and high-level corruption.

Dozens of contract killings apparently linked to the Bulgarian mafia remain unpunished, and European law experts have warned that EU police information shared with Sofia could end up in the hands of organised crime.

Officials close to Mr Rehn do not rule out that next month, he could recommend delaying Bulgaria's admission by a year.

But the move would have to get the green light from all the 25 EU governments, which is very unlikely.

Tough welcome

Fifteen countries have already ratified the accession treaty with Bulgaria and Romania, while key nations like Germany and France are in the process of doing so.

Yet to ease widespread public fears about enlargement, the European Commission is expected to continue its scrutiny of both countries for three years even after they join.

Mr Rehn has already made clear he could temporarily exclude them from EU judicial or police cooperation or ban some of their food exports if they fail to meet the required standards.

This will be tougher than the unreserved welcome received by Poland and the other former communist countries in 2004.

It is also meant as a clear message to Turkey and other candidates in the Balkans that they cannot expect an easy ride.