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SIPPING whisky for breakfast on his gilded throne, Tsar Kiro, the leader of Bulgaria's gypsy community, sees a crime wave engulfing Britain and the rest of Europe when his country joins the European Union next year.

"Crime and corruption in Bulgaria are huge problems and once the borders open up the country will be exporting both to the EU," predicted Kiro as an armed female bodyguard paced outside his marble mansion in Plovdiv, the country's second largest city, 100 miles east of Sofia, the capital.

"EU membership will provide criminals with many new opportunities. They will expand their empires while corrupt bureaucrats who have been stealing from their people and the EU will have a chance to siphon off even more when billions of dollars in subsidies start flowing in."

A well-known figure in Bulgaria who made a fortune in the alcohol trade, Kiro, 64, has dabbled in politics and posed for photographs with the likes of King Simeon of Bulgaria and George Soros, the billionaire American philanthropist.

But in May he was furious when his portrait appeared in less respectable company. Italian police placed it at the top of a pyramid of mugshots of more than 100 alleged criminals from Bulgaria accused of involvement in an international child smuggling ring.

Kiro vehemently denied any involvement and Italian police have since ruled out investigating him further. Police in Bulgaria, however, are looking into allegations that Kiro threatened a local journalist who published a photo of the pyramid, portraying him as one of two bosses running the crime syndicate.

"I had a mild heart attack because of this whole affair, which is the result of discrimination against the gypsies," said Kiro, who served five years in jail for gold trading more than a decade ago when private business was forbidden under communist rule.

Some 41 members of the alleged crime syndicate, mostly gypsies, were arrested in raids across Europe on charges of buying or "renting" out children as young as nine and smuggling them to Italy where they were enslaved and forced to pick pockets.

The children were threatened and beaten if they failed to bring in their daily quota of loot and were also forced to work as drug couriers. Italian police, who conducted the two-year investigation codenamed "Elvis Bulgaria", said they also found evidence of sexual exploitation. One 14-year-old girl they found

was eight months pregnant.

"If we failed to bring back enough money they would first starve us of food and then beat us," an 11-year-old girl told police. "They beat some of the kids so hard they couldn't walk for days. They told me that they would torture me to death if I tried to run away."

Commenting on the arrests, Kiro said: "I believe most of those arrested by the Italians are innocent, but I won't deny there is a problem with crime in the gypsy community. And once Bulgaria joins the EU of course criminals from Plovdiv and across Bulgaria will head for Britain, Germany and the other countries."

In May Klaus Jansen, a German police investigator sent to assess Sofia's battle against crime, warned of contract killings spreading to other EU states once Bulgaria joins.

A small country of only 7.3m people, Bulgaria has been the scene of more than 150 assassinations in mafia turf wars and business disputes in the past five years. None has been solved.

Jansen, who declared that "as far as police and law enforcement are concerned, Bulgaria is definitely not ready for EU membership", surprised few with his damning verdict.

One of Bulgaria's most high-profile contract killings was the shooting in February of cigarette smuggling boss Ivan "the Doctor" Todorov, which took place in broad daylight during one of Jansen's visits. He is also unlikely to have been very impressed by learning about the murder before the head of intelligence at Bulgaria's organised crime fighting unit.

Amid mounting suspicion of links between crime gangs and political figures, the EU has expressed concern about the Bulgarian authorities' failure to combat money laundering and the drugs trade, and curtail rampant corruption.

Up to 110 billion of EU money is earmarked for the country over the next seven years, a fund Brussels experts fear will be a target for criminals and corrupt politicians.

Such are the concerns that Bulgaria's EU membership is in danger of being delayed by a year. A decision on whether it will be allowed to join on January 1 next year will be made in October.

Under pressure, the authorities have made a few high-profile arrests, charging the Marinovi brothers, two alleged crime bosses, with the hit on "the Doctor" and two other murders. Since then a truce has been called between the capital's two other main gangs, stopping the killings, according to sources in Sofia's underworld. But they warn the pact is unlikely to hold after Bulgaria joins the EU.

"For organised crime it won't make much difference," said one Bulgarian criminal. "They are already well established, especially in Germany, Italy and Spain.

"But for the smaller guys, especially gypsy criminals who before found it difficult to travel easily across Europe, the opening of borders will present a world of opportunities.

"It's like leaving your house unlocked and hoping thieves won't come to help themselves. Why shouldn't they?"