

# EU IS IDLE ONLOOKER TO BULGARIAN SLEAZE

---

Published at: 28-08-2006

Source: [EUobserver](#)

---



## **Julian Popov**

Corruption and institutional incompetence are making Bulgarians more and more suspicious of Bulgarian political parties, parliament, government, the judicial system and the police.

The Bulgarian presidency alone was held in high regard, but with the latest revelations that president Georgi Parvanov used to work for the Communist state security service, the reputation of this institution is likely to collapse. And the European Commission appears as an idle and occasionally grumpy onlooker.

Bulgarians are voting with their feet. Cynical about the prospects for the fledgling regulatory authorities or the European Commission to have the ability or inclination to tackle corruption seriously they are studying in France and Germany, working in Madrid and London and holidaying in Greece and Austria. People wonder where the European Commission was when in the last days of 2004 when a 35-year concession for one of the country's main highways was given away without a public tender; when successive privatisation transactions in power generation, tobacco and telecoms were blocked or delayed by government intrigue and when the courts, on the basis of a dubious procedural point, blocked the contracts for the key concession for the Bourgas and Varna airports first with Copenhagen Airports last year and now the contract with Fraport - essential infrastructure to support the development of tourism on which so many hopes are pinned.

From time to time, an outspoken ambassador to Bulgaria shakes things up a bit with refreshingly strong statements. Shamefully for the EU, this tends to be the US ambassador.

### **Brussels - watching, nodding and frowning**

At last, Kauko Jamsen, the Finnish ambassador, has been widely quoted in the press complaining in July that corruption is on the rise. Transparency International now ranks Bulgaria on a level with Colombia. The European Commission, however, is satisfied with its "monitoring" - a ritual that combines watching, nodding and frowning.

This is a good environment for Bulgarian ministries and regulators to try to play Robin Hood and to launch occasional anti-corruption and anti-monopoly campaigns. They want to be seen as wise and just defenders of the people - punishing the rich to give to the poor. Sadly, in the Bulgarian case, the "poor" seems to mean public officials dividing the spoils amongst themselves.

The Index of Economic Freedom for 2006 by the Heritage Foundation ranks Bulgaria in 64th position,

## EU IS IDLE ONLOOKER TO BULGARIAN SLEAZE

---

behind any EU member state, new or old. With an overall score of 2.88 (1 is best, 5 is worst), the country makes it into the "mostly free" box. This is thanks to foreign investment, banking and finance and wages and prices - all scoring 2.0. Had it been down to property rights and regulation (score 4.0), Bulgaria's economic freedom rating would have been labelled "repressed."

The prospects for the rule of law in Bulgaria are improving. The new prosecutor general is ambitious about repairing the damage to the system of law and order caused by the seven-year mandate of his erratic predecessor, who has mercifully been exported as ambassador to Kazakhstan.

Regulation, however, might prove harder to deal with. Quoting the US Department of Commerce, the Index of Economic Freedom survey explains the reason for the low rating as "an abundance of licensing and regulatory regimes, their sometimes arbitrary interpretation and enforcement by the bureaucracy, and the incentives thus created for corruption, (that) have long been seen as an impediment to investment."

### **Corruption a significant problem**

The Economist Intelligence Unit adds that "corruption remains a problem in the state bureaucracy and is a serious impediment to business opportunities". A poll, completed in January 2006, by MBMD, a leading Bulgarian marketing survey agency, concluded that 60 percent of the Bulgarian civil servants say that corruption presents a significant problem in their work and 37 percent say that corruption is a problem in some degree. In 2000, these figures were 48 and 39 percent respectively.

Trust in European institutions is also evaporating. Bulgaria's press portrays the European Commission mainly as the institution which will impose preposterous taxes on homemade brandy and add to the volume of silly rules and regulations, while leaving enforcement in the hands of mistrusted domestic authorities. And that means more brown envelopes will change hands.

The commission is not doing much to change this image. It just waits at the final station, like the Fat Controller in Thomas the Tank Engine, to see if the Bulgarian train is on time.

*Julian Popov is a Bulgarian journalist and political commentator; he has been living in the UK since 1994 and is one of the founders of the New Bulgarian University. He is actively involved in charity work for advancement of education and the author of the book "English Bulgaria".*