

FINANCIAL TIMES: INFORMATION PASSED TO THE BULGARIAN POLICE COULD END UP IN THE HANDS OF THE MAFIA

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"Resisting eastern expansion" by George Parker.

Ivan "the Doctor" Todorov's luck finally ran out. One of Europe's biggest cigarette smugglers, he had been living on borrowed time since surviving a car bomb in downtown Sofia in 2003. But on February 22, gunmen pumped his Porsche Cayenne with bullets in broad daylight in downtown Sofia. Contract killings are not unusual in the Balkan country - the European Commission estimates 173 murders or attempted murders since 1992 - but this one sent ripples around the European Union because with Bulgaria joining the EU on January 1 2007, Bulgaria's problem is set to become Europe's problem. The country will be part of a club promising open borders and a high level of cross-border co-operation, including the sharing of police intelligence.

Klaus Jansen, a veteran German investigator, worries that information passed to the Bulgarian police will end up in the hands of the mafia. He claims the authorities have limited interest in tackling the trafficking of Bulgarian prostitutes and are ineffective in tackling money laundering by the drugs trade. Random raids to seize counterfeit goods were seldom carried out because "they do not know where to store these goods".

In May, Olli Rehn, the EU enlargement commissioner, raised six "red flags" denoting serious concerns about Bulgaria, including its failure to provide tangible results in the fight against organised crime, failing fully to implement laws to tackle corruption, insufficient efforts to tackle money laundering and a failure to exert proper control over EU funds.

Two questions arise: has the club misplayed its negotiating hand with Sofia; and will this painful experience further harden public opinion against future enlargement - with serious consequences for countries in the western Balkans, Turkey and perhaps eventually Ukraine?

The first thing to note is that enlargement is widely seen as one of the EU's greatest successes, helping to entrench democracy and the market economy in countries emerging from years of totalitarian rule, including Greece, Portugal, Spain and Poland. Even France, normally cautious on enlargement, in May described the 2004 expansion - which incorporated eight former Soviet bloc countries - as "a remarkable success".

Bulgaria and Romania, with a combined population of about 30m, are the back markers in the 2004 enlargement. Because of their relative poverty and slow recovery from communism, the countries were

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given more time to prepare for membership.

Much has changed since then. In May, French and Dutch voters rejected the EU constitutional treaty, with politicians claiming that the union's rapid and costly enlargement had been a big factor. Meanwhile fears spread across western Europe that jobs were being "delocalised" to low-cost countries in the east, while low-wage migrant workers are heading west.

Sergey Stanishev, Bulgaria's prime minister, admits the attitude has soured. "Enlargement is a great success story for Europe but very badly communicated," he says. "It would be a mistake to give the impression that Bulgaria and Romania are coming in as a compromise. We are not second-class Europeans. I have every confidence my people will be good Europeans."

Nevertheless, Bulgaria has not helped itself. Parliamentary elections in June 2005 delayed the implementation of legal and police reforms, and political momentum behind the fight against organised crime and corruption stalled.

By contrast, Romania, regarded only two years ago by Brussels as the bigger challenge, has made big strides, particularly in starting to crackdown on corruption.

Bulgaria appears only recently to have woken up to the gravity of the situation. Boris Veltchev, Bulgaria's chief prosecutor, was appointed in March to shake things up. He says the legal system in his country is not intrinsically corrupt, but acknowledges: "Corruption in the judiciary is a hard fact." Mr Veltchev says he is not going to sanction "show trials" to satisfy Brussels but argues that big fish are now being reeled in, including a former mayor of Sofia and a senior official handling EU funds. Mr Rehn is encouraged but wants proof that this trend is "irreversible".

One thing is certain: the European Union will be more cautious in future. Members of the European parliament are using the Bulgarian experience to call for much tougher scrutiny of future members. France tabled a draft communiqué to the June EU summit, calling for public opinion and the ability of the union to "absorb" new members to be considered when assessing future membership bids.

Politicians in some European capitals now fear that promises of eventual membership to the countries of the war-battered western Balkans - Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia - could be watered down.

"People seem to have very short memories," says Olli Rehn. But he is confident that the door will be kept open: the countries are relatively small - they have a combined population of about 25m - and the stakes are high.

Michel Barnier, the former French foreign minister and current policy adviser to presidential hopeful Nicolas Sarkozy, told the Financial Times: "If you don't have a membership perspective for the Balkans, that is very dangerous."

For the time being, at least, membership talks with Turkey will continue. But for countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Georgia, whose membership aspirations have never been recognised, the outlook is bleak. After Bulgaria and Romania, the union will have time to pause and digest the latest enlargement.