

BULGARIA AND ROMANIA "PLAGUED BY CORRUPTION"

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By Jennifer Rankin in Brussels and Claire Soares, THE INDEPENDENT, Published: 28 June 2007.

Romania and Bulgaria are fighting alarming levels of lawlessness with contract killings, criminal mafias and corruption still plaguing the eastern European members of the European Union.

That was the verdict yesterday of a six-month progress report from the European Commission, raising doubts about how qualified the two newest EU members are to belong to the continental club.

The EU singled out Bulgaria for its worryingly high number of hit-man assassinations. "Contract killings continue to be of great concern, and in particular most recent killings of local politicians since January. To date no prosecution and conviction had taken place," the report said.

Romania and Bulgaria escaped sanctions from Brussels. But they were both criticised for failing to tackle high-level corruption and enact promised judicial reforms since they joined the Union in January.

"High-level corruption is still one point of weakness and both the governments are aware of this," said Franco Frattini, the European Commission's vice-president. Too few results are shown concerning practical results ... too many indictments still need to be translated into a final decision of a court, that's why we say, very frankly, progress made in this field is still insufficient."

The final version of the reports on the two newcomers omitted a warning that there "was no room for complacency" in either country and Mr Frattini was forced to defend the report from accusations it had been watered down.

Bulgaria and Romania had been threatened with bureaucratic sanctions that would have in effect stopped them participating in joint justice and interior decisions until they had met EU standards.

Now they have until June 2008 to get their houses in order although critics doubt how much incentive there is for Sofia and Bucharest to act now they have been accepted into the EU fold.

The Bulgarian President, Georgi Parvanov, was defiant. "We are already a member of the bloc, a member who strictly and correctly implements its commitments," he told national radio, according to Reuters. "I hope Brussels will look at this behaviour of ours in a more responsible manner."

Victor Alistar, executive director at Transparency International in Romania, said the EU verdict was more positive than the reality, with less judicial progress made in either country than the reports implied. In Transparency International's world rankings, which measure perceptions of corruption, Bulgaria languishes in 57th place and Romania 84th, making it the most corrupt country in the EU.

Bulgaria has Europe's highest per-capita rate of organised crime killings, with some 150 people murdered in connection with organised crime between 2000 and 2006.

As if to emphasise the scale of the corruption plaguing Sofia, the country's top investigator resigned yesterday following a corruption scandal which allegedly involved the energy minister, blackmail

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and embezzlement.

Prosecutors have said that they lack the evidence to bring charges but are still investigating whether there has been an obstruction of justice.

And things are no better across the border in Romania. The former prime minister Adrian Nastase is accused of blackmail and taking bribes worth millions of euros although he denies all accusations. With hearings suspended for three months on Monday, the EU report specifically questioned the willingness of the judiciary to prosecute cases into former politicians that are currently in limbo.