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By David Charter in Brussels, THE TIMES.

The gangland murder of Jordanka Zapryanova shocked police hardened to underworld violence and showed the mountain that Bulgaria still has to climb to combat the mafia and purge its judicial system of corruption.

Mrs Zapryanova, the mother of a murdered mobster, was shot dead the day before she was due to give evidence in court against one of her son's former associates.

Details of her whereabouts had been leaked to the mob in a sign of worsening corruption and in spite of Bulgaria's promise when it joined the European Union to clean up its police and prosecution services.

Even the chief prosecutor Boris Velchev called the murder unprecedented and voiced his concerns that it might scare away other witnesses. "We should have been more careful and made sure our witnesses are secure," he said on the day after the killing.

The European Commission had high hopes of Mr Velchev, but yesterday it published a damning assessment of Bulgaria's attempts to crack down on organised crime and corruption. "Contract killings continue to be of great concern and in particular the most recent killings of local politicians. To date, no prosecution and conviction has taken place," the report concluded.

Two local politicians have been murdered in the past six weeks, including Dimitar Yankov, the head of the city council in the resort town of Nessebar and a major hotel owner in the Black Sea resort of Sunny Beach, a place popular with British tourists and investors. More than a hundred high-profile contract killings have been carried out in the last three years and although the pace has slowed, it has been due to a gangland truce rather than the efforts of the prosecution system, analysts say.

While the mafia godfathers remain untouched, those with the knowledge to put them behind bars are the most at risk. Among the victims were three presidents of the football club Lokomotiv Plovdiv.

Alexander Tasev became the third holder of the post to be murdered in three years when he was killed at the wheel of his Mercedes in May.

His predecessor Georgi Iliev, a member of a mafia family, was struck down by a sniper's bullet to the chest while talking on his mobile phone in a Black Sea resort in 2005. That was just six months after his forerunner, Mikolai Popov, was murdered in Sofia.

Mr Tasev had been under investigation, but in 2001 inquiries were dropped suddenly when the party he supported came to power, according to Bulgarian media reports.

The failure to tackle underworld crime is the most visible end of the battle to clean up politics and the judicial system in Bulgaria and Romania, which also joined the EU in January under orders to reform. Some MEPs believe that the countries were admitted prematurely, before they had their houses in order.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, joint leader of the Greens in the European Parliament, said: "We decided to let them in too early. We said yes before the reforms were implemented."

EU'S NEWEST STATES STILL PLAGUED BY GRAFT AND VIOLENCE

Both countries continue to suffer from high-level corruption according to assessments published yesterday which call for further efforts in the next six months.

Romania is criticised because its courts continue to hand out trivial sentences for corruption and take too long to bring suspects to trial. Bulgaria comes under fire for failing to secure a successful prosecution in any high-profile corruption case.

The problem for the European Commission is that in Sofia and Bucharest, the really big corruption scandals are interwoven with party political rivalries which could threaten the stability of government. Ongoing rows over privatising Bulgartabac, the state tobacco company, and the Sofia District Heating company, have this year claimed the jobs of Roumen Ovcharov, the Minister for Economy and Energy, as well as Angel Alexandrov, the prosecutor investigating him, and two junior ministers.

The potential for further political instability led the Commission yesterday to decide against imposing any penalties on either Bulgaria or Romania.

The two nations will instead remain under strict monitoring because privately officials in Brussels fear a backlash against reformers. If they are replaced with a less savoury regime in either country, the decision to admit them to the European Union will seem too hasty.

Gun law

- Running a Bulgarian football club is probably the most dangerous job in European sport
- Over the past two years three of Lokomotiv Plovdiv FC's presidents have been murdered
- Crime experts in Bulgaria consider sports clubs to be useful for laundering money
- Bulgaria's richest man, Iliya Pavlov, who also owned a football club, was shot dead in 2003
- In 2004 three other rich football bosses were killed: one blown up in a lift, one killed by masked men dressed as police and the third shot in the heart
- Killings have become increasingly audacious. The murder of Emil Kyulev two years ago, who was an economic advisor to the President and worth over J250 million, was particularly sensational, as he was not believed to be associated with the criminal underworld. He was assassinated while being driven to work, shot by a man hiding in bushes
- With prosecutions for contract killings rare, gangs are becoming increasingly audacious - police believe some killings are even inspired by films
- Two years ago three men were murdered in a caf   by gunmen disguised as Orthodox monks.