

SILENCE OVER CORRUPTION AND KILLING IS HELPING NOBODY

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The Times.

How many murders of Bulgarian politicians would it take to get the European Commission to publish a truly critical report?

Yesterday's "progress statement" on Bulgaria and Romania - which reveals just how little progress they have made on corruption and criminality - is remarkable for its deliberate mildness. Franco Frattini, Justice and Security Commissioner, while noting "high-level corruption" in both countries, said that it was not a "blaming and shaming exercise". The Commission had made a political decision to strike a balance between citing problems and encouraging the pair, he said.

This is an astounding statement, given the catalogue of criminality, particularly in Bulgaria's case. It shows the European Union's dilemma at its most stark. The EU admitted the two countries, the poorest in the Union, and the most troubled by their legacy of Communism, before they were ready in any ordinary sense of the word. Now that they are in, and inching forward (if at all) towards the standards the EU requires of its members, what can it do about it?

Not much, is the answer. It is threatening to withhold money, which would certainly sting, but would make reforms even slower. But the possible sanction of putting the courts outside the EU system seems toothless, given how small a part they play in national life.

Romania is the more cheery case, if you reckon that mere corruption is preferable to Bulgaria's ceaseless saga of murders of prominent figures. Its judges are paid too little to be deaf to bribery, and its courts "prevaricate" in prosecuting the powerful. The Commission spots some progress, such as a constitutional amendment on judicial independence. But Romania has not implemented this yet and at this point, the Commission's tone of deliberate patience becomes incredible. Where does it find its indulgence for Romania's "National Integrity Agency"? Throughout membership talks, Romania said the right things, but did very few, and that is still the case.

But Bulgaria is the shocker: more than 155 contract killings in public since 2000, according to interior ministry figures. To be rich, to be in politics, to be president of the Lokomotiv Plovdiv football club - all these have been repeatedly shown to be lethal. The Commission expresses "great concern" over the killing of local politicians this year, and the lack of prosecution or conviction.

Indeed. In muting its own criticism, it has done Bulgaria, and the EU, no favours.