

## Bulgaria: the mafia's dance to Europe

**Ilija Trojanow**

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*A close look at Bulgaria's political institutions casts doubt on the country's fitness to join the European Union in January 2007, says Ilija Trojanow.*

Bulgaria is on course to become the twenty-sixth member-state of the European Union on 1 January 2007, when it is scheduled to join along with its northern neighbour Romania. But the current behaviour of its leading power-centres suggests that this southeast European state of 7.7 million people is very far from reaching the EU's institutional norms.

Four elements of Bulgaria's current reality illuminate this predicament: business, organised crime, the legal system, and the police service.

### The businessman

Puppets can become dangerous once they start imagining they're pulling the strings and that the money they manage actually belongs to them – when they speak as though they had their own voices and their own brains. Ilya Pavlov was such a puppet.

Pavlov, whose private wealth amounted to an estimated \$1.5 billion, was the eighth richest man in eastern Europe. Yet he began his professional life as a wrestler, and a mediocre one at that. A few years later – by riding on the back of the Russian-Bulgarian mafia – he was the proprietor of Multigrup (later MG Corporation), one of Bulgaria's largest corporate

groups. Pavlov received decorations from Russia and Israel, and was a frequent guest of former kings and presidents.

At some point, he actually began to believe the role he was playing. He even wanted – he, a puppet! – to act the part of patron. He began appointing Germans, British and Americans to the supervisory board, gradually investing the group's capital in the United States. He detached himself from the mafia networks which had created him in the first place. This, however, was impermissible, for no mafia can tolerate being abandoned by one of its own.

It seems that Ilya Pavlov received signals indicating he was on a hit-list. His fraught position became evident during a state visit to Sofia by Vladimir Putin, when Pavlov managed to force his way into a reception at the Russian embassy with the help of a forged invitation. He took the opportunity to suddenly approach the Russian president, who declined to give him a hearing.

Several days later, when leaving his office surrounded by ten bodyguards, a bullet pierced Ilya Pavlov's heart. That was on 7 March 2003. The country's entire elite was in attendance at the funeral service, the final honour – photographs of the event bear an astonishing

resemblance to a scene from a Francis Ford Coppola film. And when he was buried in his home village of Arbanasi in northern Bulgaria, seven bishops – the majority of the nation's holy synod – stood at his graveside. No other Bulgarian had ever been sent off with such fanfare.

### The mafia

This contract killing, like all others, remained unpunished. Small wonder, for as Zviatko Zvetkov, the former acting chief of the political police, explained to a Bulgarian newspaper: "Contract murder is impossible without the acquiescence or cooperation of the police. As an emanation of the state, the police force is a fixed component of organised crime."

Year after year in Bulgaria, war is declared on the mafia – against its corruption, against weapons – and drug-trafficking, against protection rackets, false credit and fraud of every stripe. And each time, the "war" turns out to be ineffective.

The Bulgarian mafia is a product of the country's totalitarian past. In Sicily, the mafia was formed when the Habsburg imperial powers withdrew and the majority of those previously employed by the army and police became unemployed. In the ensuing period, the mafia became an annex of the state. In countries such as Bulgaria or Russia, by contrast, the power of the mafia was based on the ubiquitous power of the Communist Party and its state security services.

The *nomenklatura* created a parallel shadow economy in order to deal in weapons, drugs and all manner of wares – and most importantly, to earn foreign exchange. With the fall of communism in 1989-90, these structures turned out to be quite useful in converting the nation's misappropriated communal wealth into private capital via a multiplicity of metamorphoses and mutations.

If Lenin's proverb that dictatorship is power unchecked by any law is recalled, then it is possible to grasp just how small the *Cosa Nostra* is compared to the many-tentacled Russian mafia. The latter has infiltrated its own society, and is in a position to infect the "old" EU countries as well. The hierarchical structure of Russia's ancient empire, with its centre in Moscow, is mirrored in today's mafia networks – for the umbilical cord has yet to be severed.

### The chief prosecutor

Nikola Filchev, like most high-ranking representatives of the Bulgarian state, was an employee of the state security services before 1989 – and probably of the KGB as well. After the failure of communism, he began by styling himself as an oppositionist; but after the fall of the conservative government of Ivan Kostov in 2001, he began travelling regularly to Moscow.

His stays there were so successful that before long, Putin awarded him a high decoration for special services to the Russian state and presented him with an illustrated and gilded history weighing fifteen kilogrammes, entitled *Russia: Glorious Destiny*.

The ceremony took place in the Russian embassy in Sofia. A somewhat inebriated Filchev rose to recite a poem: "No other country on earth is as powerful as Russia; it is our rock, it is our paragon." Then, with tears in his eyes, he spoke of the common destiny of Russia and Bulgaria, while the numerous uniformed personages in attendance nodded in agreement.

For seven years, from 1999 to 2006, Filchev was responsible for combating crime. During this period, there were hundreds of contract killings, and thousands of dead among the lower ranks of the business community (whether black, grey or white). And how many of these murders did his office solve? None! Not a single mafia boss was ever indicted.

Nikola Filchev deliberately hindered any investigation that implicated the Russian mafia. After his tenure in office, the opposition demanded his indictment for a variety of crimes. Instead, for his own protection, he was sent as Bulgaria's ambassador to Kazakhstan.

### The police service

Bulgaria's conditions for joining the European Union are likely to include more hedge clauses than in the marriage contract between a millionaire and a professional gold-digger. In recent weeks, Europe's governing elites have been tripping over themselves to certify progress in the Balkans. And this despite the fact that the specialists they recently dispatched have returned bearing grave warnings.

In March 2006, Klaus Jansen, chairman of Germany's federation of criminal investigators (BDK) was in Bulgaria. He told an interviewer with *24 Tschasa*:

*The power of the mafia was based on the ubiquitous power of the Communist Party and its state security services.*

"I asked about the numbers of officers in terms of age and rank. This tells you whether there are officers working there who have been trained according to up-to-date democratic standards, and how many were already professionally active under the socialist system. This information was classified as secret. All you can do is laugh. I was there in order to carry out an inspection, and I repeatedly received the reply: that

would endanger national security interests. If the EU conveys confidential information to Bulgaria, it will wind up in the hands of criminal organisations".

How are we to explain the sanitised image of Bulgaria that has recently been put on display? For as Klaus Jansen pointedly states: "Beginning in 2007, Bulgaria's problems are going to be my problems."

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*Ilija Trojanow is a writer who regards himself as a "traveller between worlds". He was born in Bulgaria in 1965, and found political asylum in Germany after fleeing the country. He is the author of *Along the Ganges* (Haus Publishing, 2005).*

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