

## Bulgaria's red mafia on Europe's trail

**Ilija Trojanow**

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*The experience of the veteran dissident and lawyer Yanko Yankov shows that Bulgaria's communist inheritance is still damaging the country, writes Ilija Trojanow.*

There is a growing concern in western Europe over Bulgaria's forthcoming entry into the European Union, scheduled for 1 January 2007. Fingers are pointed at the massive trafficking with drugs and prostitutes, at the growing number of execution-style killings in broad daylight, at police brutality and the prevalent corruption in customs and courts.

But even the most critical reports ignore the fact that such problems reach deep into the very fabric of Bulgarian society. The rot is so profound that it is impossible to distinguish between state institutions and the mafia, between the totalitarian past of the former secret service and its current omnipotence. To accept Bulgaria into the European Union at this stage would be to condone a failed state lacking even the basic structures of the rule of law and the most minimal exigencies of social justice.

A particular, individual case is often the best evidence of a general truth. In Bulgaria, the personal fate of Yanko Yankov, a 61-year-old professor of law, is such an example – and it is not without irony that his experience is itself proof of the criticism he has levelled against the state.

In some countries this courageous man would have been honoured as a hero after the fall of communism

in the country in 1989-90. In Bulgaria he is still harassed, vilified and isolated, and most recently has been deprived of his livelihood.

Yanko Yankov's predicament is rooted in a decades-long struggle for justice. As a law student in the 1970s, Yankov wrote a manifesto suggesting ways of legally resisting the communist system that had ruled Bulgaria since 1944. He was accepted into the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) as a research fellow in 1975, but his readiness to draft petitions defending the rights of persecuted citizens soon made him an object of surveillance by the secret service. On 18 March 1982, Yankov was expelled from the academy.

Yankov was undeterred, and started to pass on documents on human-rights abuses in Bulgaria to the embassies of Britain, the United States, France and Germany in Bulgaria's capital, Sofia. In summer 1983, he founded a group in the northwest town of Montana that distributed pamphlets critical of the state. This illegal act led him to be banned from Sofia and sent into "internal exile" to work in a chemical factory in the provinces.

When this measure too failed to silence him, he was arrested. On 24 December 1984, Yankov was

sentenced to twelve years in jail for establishing and leading an anti-state organisation and for anti-state propaganda (the sentence was reduced on appeal to six-and-a-half years). Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch declared him Bulgaria's foremost political prisoner.

Yankov was released on 31 October 1989 into Bulgaria's rapidly evolving "perestroika", the local equivalent of the Mikhail Gorbachev-era transformations in the Soviet Union that would soon topple Bulgaria's homegrown communist leader, Todor Zhivkov. The American ambassador ignored his request for a visa, comforting Yankov with the advice that he was needed in Bulgaria, for great changes were about to happen. "We are relying on you", he said.

Indeed, Yankov's democratic career in the new conditions of open politics made a promising start. In the "roundtable talks" designed to plan the post-communist system, he represented the social democrats. But after protesting once too often against the numerous compromises between the communists and the opposition, he was excluded from the proceedings.

He was elected to parliament as a member of the "great national assembly" in the free elections of 1990, and became head of the parliamentary human-rights commission, but he resigned before the end of his mandate, protesting that not a single person responsible for the crimes of the state during the forty-five years of totalitarian rule had even been charged. In 1991 the academy of sciences reinstated him. He founded the tiny Liberal Congress Party and edited its weekly newspaper for several years. Yanko Yankov continues to be an active member of the Society of Democratic Lawyers in Bulgaria.

### Against the current

The career is one thing, its inner meaning another. Today as in the past, Yankov's is a lonely voice of truth in a public landscape that consists of pits and even larger pits. In one of his books he has written:

"Bulgaria is in a huge political crisis determined by the fact that the former secret service, a sub-division of the KGB, has transformed itself into a subsidiary of the Russian red mafia, whose genesis and method of work profoundly differ from all previously known mafia networks. Today, the state and organisations like parties and trade unions, are controlled by the mafia, and are thus part of its structure on a higher level than

the trafficking with drugs or weapons. The mafia decides who is to be president, prime minister, high court judge or director of a public institution. In other words, while in most states the mafia is within the state, in Russia and Bulgaria the state is part of the mafia."

Bulgaria's elites do not take kindly to such criticism. Yankov has been intimidated by strangers on the street; his offices have been ransacked or bolted (a devious strategy perfected in democratic Bulgaria, where party members decide to "break away" and requisition the offices by means of a locksmith). Most recently, after he was nominated for the post of prosecutor-general by a group of independent lawyers, an anonymous phone call threatened the life of his family. Now, he has lost his job.

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What inspires such fear, such menace? Among Yankov's campaigning activities, the most provocative seems to be his agitation over the treatment of Bulgaria's Turkish minority (of around 800,000 people, or 9% of the population). As a legal consultant, he was the moving force in the campaign of Bulgarian Turks to seek justice and recompense for the

cultural assaults, expropriation of property and expulsion to Turkey they suffered in the mid-1980s (effectively "ethnic cleansing", although this term acquired its contemporary usage only with the wars of ex-Yugoslavia in the early 1990s).

In a project given the cynical title "renaissance" by Todor Zhivkov's regime, the Bulgarian state forced the country's Turks to change their names to Slavic ones, destroyed Muslim graveyards, prohibited the usage of Turkish in schools, and arrested and tortured those who opposed these measures. The "rebirth" of the Turkish minority culminated in the expulsion of 300,000 people in 1989.

Yankov convinced a number of victims to lay charges against the perpetrators and to sign a petition that is to be deposited with the Bulgarian president and the EU. It is unlikely that the current minister of justice, Georgi Petkanov, welcomes this effort to redress old injustice – for as a public prosecutor in a small town in the Rhodope mountains, he was one of the midwives of this "renaissance".

### Power and dissent

The backlash was swift and brutal. On 5 December 2005, Yankov was once again expelled from the

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences – and granted only fifteen days' severance pay – by the director of its Institute of Legal Studies, Tsvetana Kamenova. No reasons were stated.

It might come as a surprise that a professor of law disregards the stipulations of her own institution, for only the BA's academic council has the authority to exclude a scholar. But this is Bulgaria. Yanko Yankov knows Tsvetana Kamenova from his student days. A daughter of the *nomenklatura* (her father was a high-ranking secret service officer), she worked as a "specialist" for many years in several major western European cities; in other words, as an agent of the two principal departments of the service, dealing respectively with foreign espionage and counter-espionage.

Kamenova herself confessed this in a personal conversation with Yankov after the 1997 elections, when a leading newspaper published the rumour that she was being considered for the post of interior minister. More recently, she was nominated as a judge to the International Court of Justice in The Hague (and has even claimed that she not only holds the trust of

the "west", but that all her actions are on behalf of the "west").

Her deputy at the academy, Vesselin Zankov, is an old secret-service colleague; another esteemed professor there, Vassil Mrachkov, was the last prosecutor-general of the Todor Zhivkov era. During the brief period when the service's dossiers were partly accessible to its former victims (1997-2001), Yankov furthermore discovered that two of his fellow-students had assisted the secret service to prepare its legal case against him: none other than Georgi Petkanov, and Nikola Filchev (Bulgaria's former prosecutor-general, replaced by Boris Velchev on 19 January 2006 after being criticised for his failure to tackle corruption).

From the inside it makes sense: Yanko Yankov is a democrat among "ex"-communists who still inhabit the system's political and moral mindset, and as such one too many. The red mafia cannot tolerate even a single voice of dissent. They deride Yankov as a madman. This too is in line with tradition, an even older one. The greatest Bulgarian poet, Hristo Botev, once wrote: "The worthy ones are regarded as mad, the stupid ones respected throughout."

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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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