

State of the Union / *By T.K. Vogel*

Knock, Knock, Knocking on Brussels's Door

The accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union on Jan. 1, 2007, is unlikely to rouse much enthusiasm on the part of the union's 25 current members. In fact, the two Balkan republics will be lucky to make their date with history: A safeguard clause in their accession treaties allows the EU to postpone their entry by one year if preaccession reform is deemed insufficient. This possibility has just been brought a step closer by recent developments in Bucharest and Sofia—developments that may yet turn the EU's generic enlargement fatigue into all-out exasperation with the two would-be members.

Bulgaria got a new coalition government on Tuesday, a full seven weeks after an inconclusive general election. The new cabinet was sworn in just in time to greet EU monitors who will arrive in Sofia at the end of the month to assess the state of judicial reform. Headed by 39-year-old, Moscow-educated Sergei Stanishev of the ex-communist Socialist Party (BSP), it also includes members of the defeated center-right movement of outgoing Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg. Neither party had been able to form a government on its own or with the support of the Movement for Rights and Freedom alone, which represents the country's Turkish minority and now has three ministers. A few weeks ago, Mr. Stanishev tried nonetheless and failed miserably: Reported attempts by the Socialists to buy votes from across the aisle with appointments to public-sector positions or parliamentary committees came to naught when party whips forced deputies to cast their ballots in the open. Mr. Stanishev's proposed cabinet was promptly voted down on July 27—just hours after the very same parliament approved him as prime minister-designate. This followed weeks of negotiations between the BSP and Mr. Saxe-Coburg's movement, which col-

lapsed when the former king refused to drop his demand to keep the top job.

The prospect of a snap poll persuaded Bulgaria's powerbrokers of the need to compromise. But it is unclear whether the government will be able to hold on to its majority once it enacts difficult re-

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but not quite there yet.*

forms needed to enter the EU, including a new penal code. Having to rely on an erratic and ambitious politician of Mr. Saxe-Coburg's caliber at such a crucial moment cannot be reassuring for Mr. Stanishev, but it is preferable to having him as an opponent.

Implementing reforms to ensure the independence of the judiciary, a key EU demand, also tops Romania's to-do list. Prime Minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu said on July 7 that he would resign after the constitutional court struck down parts of a judicial reform package. Romania's coalition government had uncertain chances of survival from the get-go: Cobbled together by charismatic Bucharest mayor Traian Basescu after he won last December's presidential poll, it is as much about keeping the former communists out of power as about getting things done. The popular Mr. Basescu has been pushing for a snap poll ever since he became president, as he expects his coalition's majority, and his party's majority within the coalition, to grow in any election. With the prime minister's resignation, just such a possibility was dangling in front of the president's face. But then Mr. Tariceanu returned from a meeting with EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn in Brussels and announced on July 19 that he wouldn't resign after all, and a furious Mr. Basescu has spent the last month sniping at his prime minister.

It is this sort of tomfoolery that has put many Europeans off the notion that their union has to keep growing if it wants to fulfill its historical mission of bringing peace to all corners of Europe. In past weeks, Bulgaria and Romania have been doing their utmost to confirm Western European stereotypes about Balkan corruption and political immaturity and to feed lingering doubts inside the union about their pro-American leanings in divisive issues (read: Iraq).

But Romania and Bulgaria are knocking at Brussels's door with signed accession treaties in their pockets, unlike Croatia and Turkey. For Sofia and Bucharest, accession has become a largely technical matter of bringing their legislation in line with EU law.

While much remains to be crossed off the checklist, few doubt that this bureaucratic procedure will eventually be completed. Accession is pre-ordained whether it happens in 2007 or in 2008.

And, in any case, should Western Europeans be rolling out the stereotypes? Can similar political posturing not be found in many mature democracies? Double standards are no doubt at work here; but many a club operates on the principle that aspiring members must live up to much higher expectations than the curmudgeonly cynics who warm its worn-out leather chairs.

The real problem is that politicians in both Romania and Bulgaria have not tried hard enough to meet those standards, double or otherwise. They have squandered a golden opportunity to use the accession requirements to push an agenda of genuine domestic reform. Mr. Rehn said as much when he warned in mid-July, "We still have problems with corruption and reform of the judiciary in Bulgaria and Romania. So let's focus less on commitment and more on delivery."

Should the EU have been even more demanding? Sorin Ionita, who monitors EU integration at a Bucharest think tank, the Romanian Academic Society, told me that he sympathized with the EU's policy of focusing on technical compliance issues alone: "Brussels is interested and prepared to deal just with the...adoption and enforcement of the *acquis*, and it would be unfair to ask more from them." But Mr. Ionita also noted that Romania was in the midst of a process of democratization and establishing the rule of law. "The current political travails are...the last stage of the revolution [that] started in 1989," he said. "We Romanians are interested in both processes, and have a slightly more complex agenda beyond technical Europeanization." A similar point could be made about Romania's neighbor to the south.

What better moment, then, to push that agenda? The incentive is there—full membership in the exclusive Brussels club, far more than Turkey may ever be offered, despite impressive reforms in recent years. The tools are there, too, in the form of the various membership requirements. What these countries lack are politicians who understand how to forge a social consensus around painful reform by using these tools and incentives. As strong as the logic behind such an approach might be, don't bet your money that politicians in the two countries will adopt it—not quite yet.

Mr. Vogel is an editor with Transitions Online (www.tol.org).

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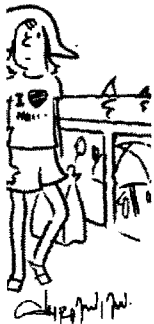


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