

European Commission Warns Romania and Bulgaria

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Q1: Why has the European Commission issued a report criticizing the European Union's two newest members, Romania and Bulgaria?

A1: The two interim European Commission reports, issued on February 4, have concluded that Romania and Bulgaria have fallen short in registering “convincing results” in the field of justice and home affairs, especially in their policies toward combating high-level corruption. Sofia has also been criticized by the commission for insufficient progress in eradicating organized crime. The European Union has closely monitored patterns of official corruption in both countries and concluded that Romania in particular has conducted insufficient judicial reform and failed to prosecute government officials at local and central levels who have been charged with corrupt practices.

Q2: What is the purpose of the EU's “safeguard clause,” which can be imposed on new members?

A2: According to the EU accession treaties signed by Romania and Bulgaria before their entry into the European Union on January 1, 2007, both countries will be closely assessed according to several benchmarks of expected progress. If they do not meet EU standards in areas such as judicial reform or in eliminating official corruption, then the European Union can impose specific sanctions against them. For example, it could suspend either country's participation in the EU's justice and interior policies and it could refuse to recognize decisions made by Romanian or Bulgarian courts. The safeguard clause represents the closest monitoring that the European Union has imposed on any new members to make sure that they are fulfilling EU norms.

Q3: What next steps will the European Commission take?

A3: The European Commission has not imposed any sanctions on either country. However, it has warned Bucharest and Sofia that it expects to see more effective anticorruption measures implemented before it issues its comprehensive annual report in July 2008. At that point, if either country shows insufficient progress, Justice and Home Affairs Commissioner Franco Frattini could recommend a series of sanctions. If the problems persist, additional measures could entail restrictions in access to EU funds. Any sanctions would, of course, seriously damage Romania's or Bulgaria's reputations as profitable destinations for foreign investment. In response to the interim reports, the governments in Bucharest and Sofia have recommitted themselves to fulfilling the EU conditions and to redoubling their efforts before the commission's July report. The results will be closely monitored in all EU capitals.

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