



EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

Bulgaria 



About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Eastern Europe.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Bulgarian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.



For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ or contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.



We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature

in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.



We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a

society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal



standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to

support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people

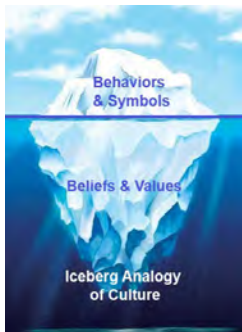
classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and



shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model



for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts.

The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting

others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through Eastern Europe, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

Eastern Europe comprises 10 countries on the eastern side of the European continent: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Archaeological finds suggest people inhabited the region as early as 40,000 BC. From approximately 10,000-3,000 BC, hunter-gatherers formed semi-permanent settlements, sustained by agriculture and cattle herding. Although short-lived, the Roman Empire's incorporation of much of the region's South in the early centuries AD significantly influenced culture in present-day Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. Slavic tribes settled in the plains of present-day Ukraine beginning in the 6th-century AD, eventually moving west and south along the fertile basin of the Danube River.



Over the following centuries, various migratory peoples from elsewhere in Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia continued to settle in the region, expelling, conquering, or mixing with the Slavs and other inhabitants. By the 10th century, loosely aligned settlements coalesced into large, powerful kingdoms, including the Bohemian Empire centered in present-day Czech Republic and the Kingdoms of Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria. In the 14th century, much of the region fell to the Ottoman Empire, based in present-day Turkey, with many of the region's residents experiencing several centuries of Turkish raids.

While present-day Bulgaria and parts of Romania remained under Ottoman rule for over 500 years, in the 16th century, many regions became subject to the rule of the Austrian House of Habsburg – one of Europe’s most influential royal dynasties that later joined Hungary to form the powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire. Meanwhile, Poland formed an independent state, eventually uniting with neighboring Lithuania to control large parts of the region, including Ukraine and Belarus.

Unable to repel persistent attacks from neighbors, the Polish-Lithuanian Empire disintegrated in the late 18th century, with Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus falling under Russian control for the next nearly 120 years. During this time, Russia violently quelled nationalist movements, suppressed regional languages,

and deported thousands of native inhabitants while encouraging Russian immigration into the region.

All 10 Eastern European states experienced substantial conflict during World



War I (WWI). Immediately following the war, most states enjoyed brief periods of independence. By contrast, the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) absorbed Belarus, parts of Moldova, and Ukraine, all of which suffered severely under communist repression. Notably, after its defeat in WWI, the Austro-Hungarian Empire splintered. Hungary consequently lost nearly 2/3 of its territory and 3/5 of its people to neighboring nations.

With the onset of World War II (WWII), all 10 states again became battlegrounds. While some immediately sided with the Axis powers, others were unable to withstand German aggression. All 10 states suffered heavy casualties throughout the war. During its occupation of the region, Nazi Germany murdered, deported, or confined most of the region’s sizeable Jewish population and other “undesirables.”

At war's end, the USSR either absorbed or heavily influenced the political, social, and economic systems of each Eastern European state. Adopting communist tenets, each state nationalized private companies, appropriated private property, and rapidly expanded industrial development. Communist leaders also encouraged Russification in the region, violently repressing national languages, religions, and cultures.

In the late 1980s, democratic movements swept across the Soviet bloc, and within a few years, all 10 states had declared independence from the USSR. Further, they removed communist leaders, transformed their governments, and adopted market capitalism. Since then, all states but Belarus largely pivoted away from Russian influence to pursue political, military, and economic integration with the West.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All 10 Eastern European states are parliamentary republics led by an elected Prime



Minister, President, and legislature. In most states, Presidential powers are largely ceremonial with executive power vested in the Prime Minister, who leads the government together with the support of a Cabinet of Ministers. In most states, political parties typically form coalitions in order to attain and maintain power.

With most having suffered crippling dictatorial rule for much of the late 20th century, each Eastern European state emerged in the 1990s with new political, social, and economic structures. While some states have since created relatively stable, well-run democracies, others face challenges to the democratic process. Corruption is a prevalent problem in the region. In some cases, governments' inability to adequately curb widespread corruption

results in frequent public protests, causes distrust of public officials, and creates an overall skepticism of the democratic process. Moreover, weakened by overly broad and at times differing ideological profiles, ruling political coalitions and parties tend to dissolve frequently, resulting in a political landscape marked by infighting and successive changes of government.

Most states are members of strong regional alliances, such as the European Union (EU) and NATO. Although somewhat fraught with political instability, most states remain committed to improving democratic processes, serving as advocates of a democratic and pro-Western agenda in the region. By contrast, Belarus is politically aligned with Russia, while Ukraine and Bulgaria have historically attempted to balance relations between the West and Russia, at times resulting in internal tension between ideologically opposing political groups.

With the exception of Belarus, the states rely on NATO, the EU, the US, and other international support to defend against



external, state-level threats. Russia's recent aggression in the region, notably its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has significantly heightened regional tensions and consequently dominates the states' security environment.

The region exhibits differing levels of ethnic diversity. Poland, for example, is largely homogenous, with ethnic Poles comprising 99% of the population. By contrast, the native populations of Ukraine and Czech Republic are significantly lower, 78% and 57%, respectively. Notably, the Roma and other ethnic minorities suffer significant social division, discrimination, and stigmatization across Eastern Europe.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also

create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Early residents of Eastern Europe practiced a variety of indigenous religions, venerating multiple deities and spirits who inhabited the natural world. Romans introduced Christianity as early as the 1st century. By the 10th century, many Eastern European kingdoms had adopted Christianity as a state religion. In the early 11th century, theological differences between western and eastern branches of the Christian movement forced a permanent divide between the Roman Catholic Church centered in Rome and the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the Byzantine Empire. Over subsequent centuries, both branches of Christianity flourished in the region. Later, as the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe, some states saw the Catholic



Church reorganize under Lutheran authority. Across the region, Christianity became closely linked to national identity.

In Poland, for example, the Catholic Church became entrenched

in daily life, influencing education, social services, and remaining politically influential even today. Throughout the centuries, Judaism also enjoyed growth in the region, with among others, Polish and Czech Jewish communities growing significantly until their annihilation during WWII.

During their years of occupation and influence, the Soviets suppressed all religious institutions and activities in the states, while simultaneously cultivating atheism and encouraging the devout to abandon long-held religious beliefs. To do so, the states' communist governments carefully regulated religious affairs and deported clergy, while destroying or converting most churches and synagogues for other uses. Consequently, membership in religious organizations decreased significantly over the years. Nevertheless, most states saw a resurgence in

religiosity once religious freedom was restored following the fall of communism.

Today, some of the region's inhabitants are Orthodox Christian, while others – including the majority of Poles (85%), Slovaks (56%), Slovenes (74%), and Hungarians (28%) – are Roman Catholic. Notably, while most Eastern Europeans retain deep religious convictions, others remain religiously unaffiliated. For example, only about 78% of Belarusians claim a religious affiliation – the lowest rate in the region -- while large numbers of Slovenes, Slovaks, and Czechs are atheist. In parts of the region, small Jewish and Muslim communities are experiencing some growth. One notable exception is Bulgaria, where a relatively large Muslim community (11% of the population) traces back to the early 14th century.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are highly valued within Eastern European societies. Residents maintain strong connections with both immediate and extended family



members, supporting them emotionally and financially and providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Most households comprise 2 parents and their children (nuclear family), with many families choosing to have just 1 or 2 children. Nevertheless, extended kin on both sides of the family often live nearby and are significantly influential in family matters.

Rapid urbanization has changed family life in recent years, as urban inhabitants marry later or cohabit (live in long-term, unmarried partnership) and have fewer children. Consequently,

while the traditional family structure remains common in rural areas, it is more diverse in urban centers.

While historically marriage was an arranged union, today Eastern Europeans typically choose their own partners. Couples may spend several years dating, live together, and have children before choosing to marry. In some states, divorce is increasingly prevalent among younger generations, with rates comparable to the US. Still in others, the practice is relatively uncommon and carries social stigma.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Eastern European states' historically patriarchal culture privileged men as leaders and providers. While some of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional values – men as breadwinners and heads of household and women as mothers and wives – gender roles and responsibilities began to transform during the Soviet era and continue to change today, particularly among younger generations.



Although women hold equal rights under the law, political, social, and economic inequalities between the genders remain. For example, women often face discrimination in the hiring and promotion process, routinely

receive lower wages than their male counterparts, and suffer from sexual harassment in the workplace.

Despite these barriers, the number of women serving in the political sector across the region has increased over the past few decades. Eastern European women hold a significant proportion of national and sub-national government positions, with most

states maintaining similar or higher female participation rates in their national legislatures as the US.

Notably, the region's women suffer high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly domestic abuse and rape. Often considered private matters, many incidences of GBV go unreported. If cases are reported, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Although homosexuality is legal throughout the region, same-sex marriage is not legal in most countries in Eastern Europe, except in Slovenia.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. Most of the region's languages

derive from the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family, while Moldovan and Romanian belong to the same family's Eastern Romance branch. A member of the Uralic family, Hungarian is the region's only language



not part of the Indo-European family. Notably, the Bulgarian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian languages are written in the Cyrillic alphabet. By contrast, all other state languages employ the Latin script.

Some states managed to largely avoid harsh Russification policies during the Soviet era. Others suffered years of linguistic repression when Russian became the predominant language in education, the media, and government proceedings. Today, with the exception of Belarus, Russian is no longer the region's main language. Instead, native languages have largely supplanted Russian, though some residents continue to use Russian in business and everyday life. The states are also home to native speakers of other languages, notably Romani (the language of the Roma), Turkish, German, and other regional languages.

English has become increasingly popular over the last several decades and is spoken widely in business and by young, urban residents.

Generally, the region's residents demonstrate respect, privacy, and candor in their communication practices. In some states, communications reflect notable emotion and engagement. By contrast, others typically refrain from displaying strong emotions in public, feel comfortable in silence, and prefer quiet speech. Across the region, residents usually share personal information only with family or close friends and are reserved when interacting with strangers.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized

systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the 14th century, most formal education in the region occurred in religious institutions where clergymen taught



religion and basic literacy. Notably, while Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic had established universities as early as the 14th century, secular centers of higher academic learning were slow to develop elsewhere in the region. Nevertheless, by the late 1800s, extensive public school networks administered both religious and secular curricula to millions of students across the region.

Most Eastern European governments established free and compulsory public education systems in the early 20th century.

The subsequent Soviet occupation and influence brought significant changes to schools and curricula. During that period, the education system promoted Soviet ideology and communist tenets and emphasized Russian culture and language. It also prioritized vocational instruction, while simultaneously suppressing Eastern European languages and culture.

Today, most Eastern European students receive free and compulsory schooling at the primary and secondary levels. School enrollment rates are high, and nearly 100% of Eastern European residents are literate. Challenges to the education systems include low teacher salaries, rural school closures, and disparities in educational attainment between majority groups and linguistic and ethnic minorities.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. As in most Western cultures, Eastern Europeans tend to be preoccupied more with time management than relationship-building. They too value punctuality, a sense of responsibility, and candid professional interactions. Within their personal lives, however, most Eastern Europeans invest significant time into establishing and maintaining relationships.

They also like to build relations before conducting business, which tends to move more slowly in Eastern Europe than in the US. Throughout the region, residents usually begin discussions with light conversation. Most



communication is explicit and direct, with frequent eye contact. Eastern Europeans generally require less personal space when conversing than is common in the US. One exception is in Slovenia, where residents maintain about the same personal distance as in the US.

Eastern European states observe a number of public holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and their respective independence

day. Further, all Eastern European states commemorate both the end of World War II and the Soviet era, as well as unique seasonal or harvest holidays.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most Eastern European forms of artistic expression – including art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect the region's rural peasant past, history of foreign presence, and modern global trends.

Traditional music and dance in Eastern Europe typically promote themes such as nature, the seasons, rural life, and love. Folk songs, festivals, and dance are particularly popular in rural areas, often utilizing traditional instruments. Most common dances are performed in pairs, circles, or lines. Under Russian and Soviet influence, classical ballet became a common form of dance across the region. Classical music and opera remain popular, as well as rock, jazz, and international pop music. Government financing for the arts largely declined after the

Soviet era, yet artistic freedom has increased significantly.



Rural landscapes and geometric designs are common themes in visual arts. Eastern Europeans also practice various traditional handicrafts and folk art

that reflect the region's rich peasant history, along with Christian or ancient pagan motifs. Common handicrafts include pottery, embroidery, and baskets. Soccer is the most widely followed sport in the region, followed by basketball, volleyball, and gymnastics. During the winter, residents also enjoy ice hockey, skiing, and ice skating.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease

and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Eastern European dishes tend to be simple, hearty, and mildly seasoned. Most meals consist of a staple, such as potatoes, oats, or barley served with a meat, fresh salad, and various breads. While beer is the most popular alcoholic beverage, some residents enjoy unique herbal liquors or vodka. Notably, the region also has a rich history of wine production, dating back to the 1st century BC.



Health in Eastern Europe has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents have access to free, state-funded healthcare in modern facilities.

Nevertheless, the region's healthcare systems face several challenges. The quality of care varies significantly between private/public and urban/rural facilities. Generally, public facilities concentrate in cities and are ill-equipped, overcrowded, understaffed, and plagued by corruption. Meanwhile, private facilities offer first-rate care mostly to the wealthy. Finally, a shrinking yet aging population threatens to burden already overloaded national healthcare services in many states.

Non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases such as cardiovascular, cancer, respiratory, liver and diabetes account for the majority of deaths across Eastern Europe. In addition, the region's residents suffer from high rates of suicide and alcohol poisoning. Mostly a result of Soviet-era industrial policies, pollution is a widespread hazard throughout Eastern Europe, causing further health-related issues.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services.

Prior to the 19th century, the Eastern European states maintained largely agrarian economies, with residents engaging in subsistence agriculture or laboring as serfs on large elite landholdings.

During the 1800s, several states began to industrialize, while Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, and Slovenia remained primarily agrarian. Industrialization intensified throughout the region in the Soviet era, when all states followed a centrally-controlled and



planned economic system, establishing large collective farms and developing various heavy industries.

Following the end of communism, the states immediately

sought to decentralize their economies and adopt liberal, free market systems. While the transition initially caused their economies to contract, by the early 2000s, all 10 nations experienced growth. For most states, accession into the EU further spurred economic expansion. In 2008, the global financial crisis slowed investment in the region, reducing demand for exports and causing severe economic contractions in every state except Poland and Belarus.

Some of the states reacted quickly to the crisis with strict internal reforms which allowed their economies to rebound within a few years. Others were slow to respond and suffered a protracted recession. Notably, the crisis in Ukraine has hurt that country's recent economic growth, while Belarus continues to experience economic stagnation.

The economic outlook in the region is varied. Some states such as Romania, Czech Republic, and Slovenia appear poised to maintain stable growth rates. The non-EU member states of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are impacted the most by geopolitical events in Russia. All 10 states are vulnerable to economic fluctuations due to their export-oriented economies. Some common economic challenges include persistent corruption, aging populations, and emigration of skilled workers.

The EU is by far the region's largest trading partner, except for Belarus, which heavily relies on trade with Russia. As EU members, most Eastern European states benefit from a secure business environment and free movement of goods and services.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. All 10 Eastern European states have invested in extensive road networks and efficient public transportation systems, particularly in urban areas. While Slovenia maintains the region's best roads, Ukraine and Romania have some of the world's worst. Rural infrastructure is typically less developed, and corruption often impedes progress on road and rail projects.

Generally in better condition than roads, railways connect major cities throughout the



region, though some services are slow and inefficient. The Black Sea and major rivers, notably the Danube, host important ports. Although modern information technology is available in all states, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania have some of Europe's least developed networks. Internet use also varies widely, with 92% of Belarussians using the Internet at home compared to approximately 64% of Moldovans.

While Poland relies on fossil fuels for 73% of its electricity production, nuclear fuels account for 44% of Hungary's electricity generation. Most Eastern European states depend on imported natural gas and oil from Russia and the Middle East. Governments throughout the region have announced their intention to increase the use of renewable resources such as hydroelectric plants, wind, and other renewables.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Eastern European society at large, we will focus on specific features of Bulgarian society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Tracing its founding to 681, Bulgaria prides itself as the only European nation-state never to have changed its name. The Balkan Peninsula's greatest power in the medieval period, Bulgaria became part of the Ottoman Empire for almost 500 years. After achieving independence in the late 19th century, Bulgaria participated in a series of devastating conflicts. At the end of World War II, Bulgaria's communist leaders closely aligned it with the Soviet Union. Since 1989, Bulgaria has transformed its government into a democracy, adopted market capitalism, and joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

Early History

Archaeological finds indicate early humans settled the region of modern-day Bulgaria as early as 40,000 BC. Between 10,000-3,000 BC,



regional inhabitants formed semi-permanent settlements where they lived as hunters, gatherers, and farmers. Of note, Bulgaria is home to some of the world's oldest buildings. Ruins near Stara Zagora date to about 6,000 BC, while Europe's oldest town, a salt production center located near the modern-day town of Provadia, dates to around 4,000 BC.

The Thracians

Beginning around 2,500 BC, members of nomadic Indo-European tribes from Central Asia began to move into the

region. After mixing with the native inhabitants, these people were known as the Thracians and their land, Thrace.

Famed winemakers and metalworkers, the Thracians were also excellent horsemen and warriors. Beginning in the 7th century BC, Greeks set up trading posts along present-day Bulgaria's Black Sea Coast. In the 6th century BC, Persians from the area of present-day Iran conquered the region. About a century later, several Thracian tribes united to repel the Persians, forming the Odrysian Kingdom. Over the next centuries, the Thracians suffered attack or conquest by various foreign forces, notably Philip II of Macedonia – the father of Alexander the Great – in the 4th century BC and the Celts in 3rd century BC. Nevertheless, the Odrysian Kingdom managed to survive in some form for several centuries.



Roman Control

Meanwhile, the Romans had begun building their empire in central Italy around 500 BC, then pursued rapid expansion eastwards during the 2nd century BC. In 188 BC, they invaded Thrace, and by the 1st century AD controlled the entire Balkan Peninsula. At the crossroads of important trading routes between Asia and Europe, the region prospered, enjoying relative unity and stability under Roman rule.

The Byzantine Empire: In 285, Emperor Diocletian reorganized the Roman Empire, dividing it into western Latin- and eastern Greek-speaking halves. In 330, his successor, Constantine, moved the Empire's capital from Rome to Byzantium, a settlement in the territory of modern-day Turkey. Renamed Constantinople, the city became the capital of the eastern Roman Empire, also known as the Byzantine Empire.

The Slavs and Proto-Bulgars Arrive

While the Byzantines technically ruled the territory of modern-day Bulgaria, their hold on the region was constantly tested by invading tribes, mostly the Alani, Goths, and Huns. Beginning in the 6th century, Slavic tribes from the North moved in. Peaceful farmers rather than fighters, the Slavs were so numerous that they gradually absorbed the Thracians.

Meanwhile, a nomadic people called the Proto-Bulgars had moved into the steppes north of the Black Sea from northern Afghanistan in the 2nd century. Skilled horsemen



and warriors ruled by **khans** (chiefs), the Proto-Bulgars invaded Central and Eastern Europe in the 4th and 5th centuries. Following a military defeat in the mid-7th century, one Proto-Bulgar tribe led by Khan Asparuh moved south into the territory of modern-day Bulgaria and proceeded to conquer, expel, or form alliances with the Slavic tribes.

First Bulgarian Kingdom (681-1018)

In response, the Byzantine Emperor assembled an Army against the Proto-Bulgars but was defeated in 680. A peace treaty negotiated the next year established the First Bulgarian Kingdom under the leadership of Khan Asparuh.

Over the next 2 centuries, relations with the neighboring Byzantine Empire were largely hostile, with the 2 states engaging in ongoing raids and battles. Following a significant military success against the Byzantines in the early 9th century, the Bulgarians expanded their control to modern-day Macedonia and parts of present-day Serbia and Croatia. As the Slavic and Bulgar inhabitants of the Kingdom intermixed, so did their languages and cultures (see *Language and Communication*). Consequently, the Kingdom replaced the old term khan with the Slavic form **tsar**.

In 864, Bulgarian leader Tsar Boris I adopted Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Besides ensuring the Kingdom's legitimacy before its Christian neighbors, the move served to centralize Boris' rule while he suppressed the Bulgar elite who clung to paganism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The adoption of Christianity also served to further unite the Bulgar and Slavic populations into a single Bulgarian people.

Under Boris I's son, Simeon I, the Kingdom reached its greatest size bordering the Black, Aegean, and Adriatic seas while experiencing a Golden Age. Bulgarian monks introduced the Cyrillic alphabet to the Kingdom in the early 10th century (see *Language and Communication*), enabling the Church to use its own Slavo-Bulgarian language rather than Greek (see *Religion and Spirituality*). As a result, literature and art flourished as Bulgarian cities became centers of education and culture.



Following Simeon I's death in 927, the Kingdom experienced significant internal strife caused by the rise of religious cults that threatened the authority of the state (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Further, foreign powers continued to assault the Kingdom, including the Byzantines, the Hungarian Magyars, the Pechenegs (a Turkic people), and the Kievan Rus (the Russians). A 1014 loss to the Byzantines was particularly devastating (see "Myth" below). By 1018, the Kingdom had collapsed, accepting incorporation into the Byzantine Empire.

Return to the Byzantine Fold

For the next 167 years, Bulgaria remained a Byzantine province. During that period, Byzantine leaders attempted to extend their

linguistic and cultural traditions into Bulgarian society but were largely unsuccessful.

Ultimately, the Byzantines were also unable to maintain their political hold in the region due to a new threat from the east: the Muslim Seljuk Turks. Despite tensions with the Roman Catholic Church, the Byzantines requested help from the Pope in 1095, who declared the first in a series of holy crusades against the Muslims. Preoccupied with attacks from the Seljuk Turks as well as the disturbances of the Crusaders, the Byzantines' hold on the region loosened. Meanwhile, Bulgarians' resentment of high taxes and forced conscription periodically flared into revolts.

Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1185-1396)

In 1185, brothers Petur and Asen led the Bulgarians in a successful revolt against the Byzantines, forming the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. The Kingdom reached its height during the reign of Tsar Ivan Asen II (1218-41) when Bulgaria was again the foremost power in the Balkans with borders on 3 seas. Nevertheless, the 2nd Kingdom proved more short-lived than the 1st. Bulgaria continued to suffer attacks from foreign groups such as the Central Asian Tatars. Further, many peasants resisted the central authority of the Kingdom, even revolting in 1277-80.

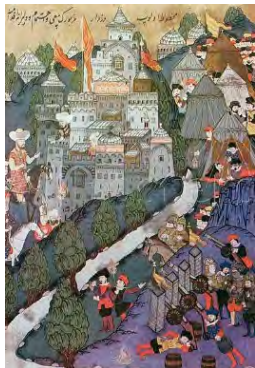


Decline continued in subsequent decades. The Bulgarian Kingdom faced a major battlefield defeat to the Serbs in 1330 and never recovered. Meanwhile, its nobles were splintered by in-fighting and factionalism. The Kingdom was on the verge of disintegration when a new threat emerged: the Muslim Ottoman Turks.

The Ottoman Turkish “Yoke” (1396-1878)

In the late 13th century, a Turkic leader named Osman I took control of a small community in the territory of western modern-day Turkey. He established the Osmanlı or Ottoman principality,

which would become one of the world's greatest empires. At its height in the mid-18th century, the Ottoman Empire effectively controlled the entire Balkans, parts of central and southern Europe, and the Middle East from Egypt to the Persian border. From its capital in Constantinople, which the Turks renamed Istanbul, the Empire's ships ruled the Mediterranean, Black, and Red Seas.



The Ottomans quickly pursued rapid expansion, and by the 1350s, they were invading Bulgarian territory. While the 2nd Bulgarian Kingdom's last tsar declared his state a vassal of the Ottomans in 1371, the Ottomans sought complete domination. Over the next 25 years, the Ottomans seized all major settlements in the Balkans. The final blow occurred at the 1396 Battle of Nicopolis

(modern-day Nikopol, Bulgaria) when the Ottomans soundly defeated a combined Army of Bulgarians, French, Hungarians, Croatians, English and others, and took control of the entire Balkan Peninsula. Bulgaria would remain in Ottoman hands for almost 500 years.

Although providing a measure of safety and stability, Ottoman rule effectively isolated Bulgaria from the rest of Europe, while reducing it to a supplier of goods and labor to the Empire. Bulgaria's nobility was destroyed as its members perished or fled, while the peasants became serfs to a Turkish **spahi**, or regional lord, who controlled the land and levied troops for the imperial Army. Further, the Empire instituted **devsirme**. Within this system, Christian Bulgarian peasants were required to give a son in service to the Ottoman sultan. After forced conversion to Islam and a period of education, the young men became civil servants or **Janissaries** (professional soldiers). For these and other reasons, Bulgarians usually consider the Ottoman era to be a dark period of suffering, often referred to as the Turkish "yoke."

Ottoman Administration: Religion lay at the heart of Ottoman governance. In 1454, the Ottoman Empire introduced the *millet* system which hierarchically divided its subjects by religious affiliation, while providing them a certain level of autonomy within their internal affairs. Although the Empire demonstrated significant religious tolerance, in practice the Empire's Christian residents suffered as 2nd-class subjects. They were denied some privileges and legal rights and endured heavy taxation and various discriminations.



Consequently, some Bulgarians converted to Islam (see *Religion and Spirituality*), hoping to regain some rights and privileges. Nevertheless, most Bulgarians remained Christians, though their church lost its autonomy when it was placed under the control of the Greek-language Eastern Orthodox Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

While the Ottomans sent Turkish administrators to Bulgarian cities and towns, Turks did not settle in the country in large numbers. Consequently, most Bulgarians continued to live in their own communities where they were able to maintain their own language and cultural traditions. Largely comprised of fewer than 200 inhabitants, such communities were run by local leaders with little Ottoman supervision aside from tax collection. Over the years, Bulgarians occasionally rose in revolt, but such uprisings were usually quickly repressed.

Ottoman Weakness and Bulgarian Resistance

A series of weak Ottoman sultans in the late 16th and 17th centuries coincided with the rise and expansion of other European powers, notably the Austro-Hungarians and Russians. Both powers viewed Bulgaria's Christian population as potential allies as they sought territory and influence in the Balkans. Austrian propaganda even provoked a Bulgarian uprising against the Ottomans in 1598. Meanwhile, the Ottoman

economy began to falter in the face of increased competition, and the Empire grew increasingly weaker through continued wars.

In the 18th century, Ottoman central governance effectively collapsed in the Balkans. During this period called the ***kurzhaliistvo***, regional strongmen known as ***ayans*** took advantage of the Empire's lack of authority. These *ayans* included Ottoman officials, *janissaries*, and wealthy locals. Meanwhile, Turkish refugees from other Ottoman provinces poured into Bulgaria, further pressuring the Bulgarian peasantry. This turmoil caused many Bulgarians to retreat to mountain towns where the ***haiduk*** (bandit) tradition against the Turks thrived (see "Myth" below). To shore up their authority, the Ottoman Empire instituted several reforms, replacing the powerful and corrupt *janissary* corps with a professional regular Army in 1826, dissolving the *spahi* system, and reorganizing the bureaucracy.

The National Revival

Despite the ongoing turmoil, Bulgaria's economy prospered in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as the region became a



significant provider of resources to the Ottoman Empire. By the mid-19th century, a small Bulgarian middle class had developed in the mountain towns. Bulgarian merchants, manufacturers, and trade guilds used their new wealth to fund schools and

other public works that in turn fueled a broader cultural revival.

In 1834, the first secular school offering instruction in Bulgarian opened, and within 2 decades, most communities possessed a primary school. The sense of a Bulgarian national consciousness was further supported by the opening of cultural centers called ***chitalishta***, each serving as a forum for

community discussion, public library, and space for the arts. The sense of Bulgarian identity was further strengthened in 1870, when the Ottomans recognized the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's autonomy from the Eastern Orthodox Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Political Awakening

Meanwhile, Bulgaria was also experiencing a political awakening. In the mid-19th century, Russian sympathies for Orthodox Christians within the Ottoman Empire evolved into a broader movement called Pan Slavism. Noting the groups' common Slavic identity, the Russians claimed a moral responsibility to free their Bulgarian "brothers" from the Turkish yoke. Suspicious of the Russians' objectives, the other European powers sided with the Ottomans against the Russians in the Crimean War in 1853-56. While the Russians eventually lost, the episode encouraged Bulgarian aspirations for independence and spawned a generation of revolutionaries.

By the 1860s, Bulgarian activists established the Bulgarian Secret Central Committee to conduct an armed uprising against the



Ottomans. From neighboring Romania, Vasil Levski organized a network of guerrilla fighters, hoping to inspire widespread support from the Bulgarian population along with military assistance from Russia or Serbia. Captured by the Ottoman authorities during a bungled raid in 1873, Levski was slain but remains a hero today.

The 1876 Uprising: In 1876, an Ottoman spy infiltrated the Bulgarian revolutionaries, causing them to launch an uprising earlier than planned. The Ottomans answered with ferocity, crushing the revolt and massacring some 15,000 Bulgarians. Shocked at the barbarity, the other European powers condemned the act, referring to it as "The Bulgarian Horrors."

Bulgaria Strives for Independence

In response, Russia declared war on the Ottomans, winning in less than a year. The subsequent Treaty of San Stefano provided for an autonomous Bulgarian state almost as large as the 1st Bulgarian Kingdom. Again fearing the Russians' regional intentions, Britain and Austria-Hungary rejected the arrangement.

The parties returned to negotiations and at the 1878 Congress of Berlin they agreed to the creation of a much smaller Bulgarian state. Though the new state was legally under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire, it effectively functioned independently. The treaty also designated a separate Bulgarian-majority province called Eastern Rumelia that would remain within the Ottoman Empire with a Bulgarian governor. Further, it returned Macedonia to the Ottoman Empire, an act that would result in hostility among Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria for the next 60 years.

The Principality of Bulgaria

Bulgaria's new Constitution designated a parliamentary government led by a Prince. Notably, the Constitution strictly



limited the Prince's power while extending universal male suffrage to elect members of a National Assembly. In 1879, the National Assembly named Alexander of Battenberg, a German noble and nephew of the Russian tsar, Prince (*knyaz*) of Bulgaria.

Liberation from Turkish rule also resulted in significant land reform. First the Russian occupation authorities and then the Bulgarian government confiscated Turkish estates and divided them for sale to the Bulgarian peasantry. Consequently, the new state exhibited one of Europe's most equitable land distributions at the time.

Despite this progress, stability was elusive in the new principality as Bulgarian factions and Russian advisers jockeyed for power.

In 1885, Bulgarians in Eastern Rumelia, with the support of Prince Alexander, staged a bloodless internal coup and announced unification with Bulgaria. Fearing the threat of a unified Bulgaria, neighboring Serbia immediately declared war, though the Bulgarians quickly crushed the Serbs. Meanwhile, Muslim Turks wary of living under Christian rule began to emigrate in large numbers, with the Muslim share of the population falling from 33% to 14% between 1875-1900.

In 1886, pro-Russian Bulgarian officers dissatisfied with his liberal tendencies arrested Alexander, forcing him to abdicate the throne and leave the country. Although the National Assembly named a new Prince, Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the other European powers initially withheld their recognition of his rule. Nevertheless, Ferdinand's position strengthened with the support of a Prime Minister (PM) (referred to as Minister President at that time), who ruthlessly suppressed all opposition. By 1896, Europe formally recognized the legitimacy of Ferdinand's rule.

Bulgaria Finally Achieves Independence

The last 2 decades of the 19th century saw significant modernization efforts. Besides renewing the legal system, the government prioritized industrialization, building new railways and developing new trade relations within Europe. With industrialization came a new class of laborers struggling under harsh working conditions. Increased military expenditures were financed by higher taxes, as government's growing bureaucracy and increasing corruption invited significant criticism.

Prince Ferdinand tightly controlled the political sphere by encouraging party fragmentation, controlling election results, and rewarding or punishing political leaders in various ways. Amidst a climate of growing inequality, corruption, and powerlessness of the poor, new political parties developed. Founded in 1891, the Social



Democratic Party (eventually becoming the Bulgarian Communist Party) focused on socialist ideas to support urban industrial workers. By contrast, the Agrarian Union, founded in 1899 by Aleksander Stamboliiski, sought its support among rural agricultural workers.

Meanwhile, the Bulgarian state still faced regional challenges. Seeking incorporation into Bulgaria, neighboring Macedonia revolted against its Ottoman rulers in 1903. Again, the Turks brutally suppressed the uprising as Bulgaria, seeking to avoid war, refused to provide aid. A subsequent flow of Macedonian refugees into Bulgaria further tested the government.



Taking advantage of unrest among the Turkish leadership in Istanbul in 1908, Prince Ferdinand declared Bulgaria's full independence from the Ottoman Empire then assumed the title of Tsar, previously used in the 2nd Bulgarian Kingdom.

First and Second Balkan Wars

Aggressive nationalism soon caused conflict to flare again. In 1912, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece formed an alliance known as the Balkan League and declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Following the League's quick battlefield



success in this First Balkan War, the Ottomans requested an armistice. In the ensuing treaty, the Empire agreed to give up all of its European territories except for a small strip. Unfortunately, League members had not

negotiated territory arrangements before forming their alliance and were unable to reach an agreement.

Consequently, within a few weeks Bulgaria turned on its former allies, attacking Serbian and Greek positions in Macedonia and starting the Second Balkan War. The Ottomans and Romanians soon joined the fight against Bulgaria, which was quickly defeated, losing most of the territory it had gained in the First Balkan War.

World War I (WWI)

When WWI broke out between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies (the US, Britain, France, and Russia, among others) in 1914, Bulgaria initially declared its neutrality. Later, realizing that support to the Central Powers could provide another opportunity for territorial expansion, Bulgaria committed to them in 1915, declaring war on Serbia in the fall. Of note, Agrarian Union party leader Stamboliiski objected to the move and urged troops to resist mobilization. Consequently, he was arrested and condemned to life imprisonment.

Bulgaria's activities during the war were primarily confined to the Balkans. Bulgaria initially succeeded



in annexing territories in Macedonia, Serbia, Greece, and Romania but was plagued by food and fuel shortages, rampant inflation, and frequent civil unrest. Gradually, the tide turned against the Central Powers.

By fall 1918, Bulgaria had conscripted some 900,000 men, nearly 40% of the male population, and suffered some 300,000 casualties – the worst per capita casualty rate of any country involved in the war. Despite calls to surrender, Tsar Ferdinand was determined to continue the fight. When Allied forces entered Bulgaria in September 1918, many Bulgarian troops deserted to return home while others marched on the capital Sofia to communicate their dissatisfaction to the tsar. Released from prison to help restore order, Stamboliiski instead led a short-

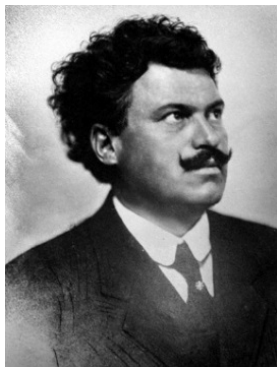
lived rebellion. Amidst the chaos, the Allies granted Ferdinand's request for an armistice. Four days later, Ferdinand abdicated the throne in favor of his son, Boris III.

Interwar Bulgaria

The Treaty of Neuilly between Bulgaria and the victorious Allied powers outlined Bulgaria's punishment for its part in WWI. While Bulgaria's terms and reparations were less harsh than those imposed on the other Central Powers, the re-division of territory meant that 16% of Bulgarians now lived outside Bulgaria's borders. Bulgaria lost its Aegean Sea coastline to Greece and a strip of land on the Black Sea to Romania. Further, Macedonia became part of the newly-formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (subsequently called Yugoslavia), prompting even more Macedonian refugees to flee to Bulgaria and worsening the pre-existing refugee crisis near the border.

Generally, the interwar years were an unstable period marked by terrorist activity, protests, and political oppression. Rallying radical anti-establishment sentiments within both the Communist and Agrarian Union parties became significant forces.

Stamboliiski became PM in 1919. Over the next 4 years, his



government introduced various reforms such as a progressive income tax, land reform, school expansion, and obligatory labor service as an alternative to military conscription. Despite this progress, he eventually lost public support due to his government's authoritarian tendencies. His foreign policy, namely his support for Yugoslavia's claim to Macedonia, cost him the support of most politicians and Tsar Boris III. In 1923, Stamboliiski was ousted in a coup by his

opponents, then murdered. A right-wing government subsequently took office.

The next 2 years were marked by significant violence. Following a communist uprising, the Bulgarian government outlawed the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1924. Nevertheless, the communists continued their activities, committing a series of terrorist acts. The most notable one was an attempt to assassinate Tsar Boris III by blowing up a Sofia cathedral in 1925, in the process killing 123 people. In response, the government imposed martial law, compelling some communist leaders to escape abroad. Among them was Georgi Dimitrov who would later achieve international fame when he was accused by Nazi Germany of setting the Reichstag fire in 1933 before returning to Bulgaria at the end of World War II.

After 1925, the violence from communists calmed, though Macedonian activists continued some terrorist activities. Following the 1929 New York stock market crash, the worldwide Great Depression intensified rural poverty and ongoing political tensions. The collapse of agricultural prices and widespread unemployment facilitated the growth of an authoritarian, fascist movement. The fascists held control briefly in 1934 before Tsar Boris III took over, establishing a royal-military dictatorship in 1935 that would persist through World War II.

World War II (WWII)

When Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, officially beginning WWII, Bulgaria declared neutrality. Over the next year, Bulgaria gradually shifted its allegiance to Germany, especially when Germany forced Romania to restore territory to Bulgaria in 1940. Anticipating the opportunity to acquire additional territory upon Germany's victory, Tsar Boris III allowed the German military the right of passage across its territory in February 1941, then officially joined the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) 2 months later.



During the war, German troops used Bulgaria as a base to attack Yugoslavia and Greece. In return, the Germans allowed Bulgaria to occupy Macedonia and Greek territory, although Germany supervised the occupation. While Macedonia welcomed Bulgarian troops after years of seeking Bulgarian annexation, the Greeks revolted and were brutally suppressed by the Bulgarians.



Tsar Boris III successfully resisted German attempts to increase Bulgaria's role in the war effort. While Bulgaria declared war against the US and Britain, Bulgaria never sent troops to the front lines beyond the Balkans. Boris took special care to avoid sending Bulgarian troops to support Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union (USSR, formerly and currently Russia), fearing that such an act would provoke internal dissent. Consequently, Bulgaria remained relatively untouched by military operations until mid-1943, when the Allies began bombing Bulgarian industrial and rail centers.

When Bulgaria originally joined the Axis, many Agrarian Union leaders immediately protested. Later, Bulgaria's communists established an anti-Nazi initiative, organizing formal resistance efforts, including sabotage and small operations. With about 10,000 participants, Bulgaria's resistance was the largest among Germany's allies.



Tsar Boris unexpectedly died in August 1943. Because his son Simeon II was only 6 years old, a regency council assumed control. Meanwhile, a leftist opposition, including the communists and some left-leaning Agrarians, formed a coalition called the Fatherland Front (FF) that vocally supported a return to neutrality.

The Fate of Bulgaria's Jews

Under German pressure, Bulgaria enacted anti-Semitic legislation in 1941 that curtailed the rights of Bulgaria's Jewish population (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Met with a wave of widespread protest, the laws were never implemented. Bulgaria later complied with a German order to deport Jews living in Bulgarian-occupied territories to a Nazi concentration camp in Poland. But when the order came for the deportation of Bulgaria's Jews, protest was immediate and widespread. Politicians, Orthodox Church leaders, union officials, and the general public alike voiced strong opposition. Despite intense pressure from Nazi Germany, Tsar Boris III cancelled the deportation order. Due to his courageous action, not a single Bulgarian Jew was deported to a Nazi concentration camp. For this reason, Boris III is still revered today.

Surrender

Faced with extensive German losses, Bulgarian government officials considered surrendering to the Allies in mid-1944. Before they could act, the USSR invaded neighboring Romania and set its sights on Bulgaria. Forced to act, Bulgaria prepared to break with Germany. As the Soviets declared war on Bulgaria and entered the country unopposed, FF leaders carried out a coup against the Bulgarian PM and sought an immediate armistice with the Soviets.

Happy to see the Germans depart, most Bulgarians welcomed the Soviets. After officially joining the Allied cause, Bulgaria sent troops to fight alongside the Soviet Army as it moved through Hungary and Austria. During this campaign, some 32,000 Bulgarian soldiers died.

Generally, Bulgaria's war years were harsh. Although its Jewish population avoided the fate of annihilation as many of those in other countries, the war brought severe economic hardships and starvation to many Bulgarians. Nevertheless, Bulgaria was the

only German ally to increase its territory after the war, incorporating a strip on the Black Sea from Romania, though Macedonia was returned to Yugoslavia.

The Communist Takeover

Following WWII, the Soviets remained in Bulgaria as occupiers. Within the FF coalition, communists from the Bulgarian Workers' Party (BWP) held key positions, allowing them to expand their influence under the direction of their Soviet sponsors.

Bulgaria's government quickly convened "people's courts" to prosecute wartime political leaders. After about 6 months of trials, some 2,700 people were condemned to death. Historians believe as many as 30,000 other political opponents were killed without trial.

In November 1945, communist leader Georgi Dimitrov returned from 22 years of exile, taking office as PM in 1946. A September 1946 referendum proclaimed Bulgaria a people's republic, while requiring Tsar Simeon II and the royal family to leave the country. The Agrarian Union attempted to organize resistance to the communist takeover, but when its leader was charged with plotting to overthrow the government, arrested, and then executed in 1947, political opposition to the communists was effectively eliminated.

Meanwhile, the National Assembly collaborated with a team of Soviet jurists to write the country's new Constitution, called the "Dimitrov Constitution," in honor of the communist hero. Modeled on the Soviet Constitution and enacted in 1947, it outlined the Bulgarian state's communist principles, one of which was the nationalization of all privately-held enterprises. In 1948, the BWP was renamed the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) and by 1949 had either absorbed or dissolved all other parties.



Stalinist Bulgaria

As Bulgaria's first communist PM, Dimitrov sought to build a socialist state modelled after Joseph Stalin's USSR. Following Dimitrov's death in 1949, subsequent communist leaders continued Dimitrov's focus on strengthening ties with the USSR, implementing 5-year industrial plans, collectivizing agriculture, clamping down on religious institutions (see *Religion and Spirituality*), and remaking the educational system (see *Learning and Knowledge*). During this period, the BCP also suppressed any potential opposition, including imprisoning thousands.

Zhivkov's Bulgaria

Changes occurring in the USSR following Stalin's death in 1953 also impacted Bulgaria. For example, censorship was relaxed somewhat while some political prisoners were rehabilitated. In 1954, Todor Zhivkov became BCP leader and then assumed the position of PM in 1962. He would remain in power until 1989, becoming the longest-serving party leader of any Soviet bloc country.



During his decades in power, Zhivkov focused primarily on agricultural collectivization, industrialization, and control of all aspects of people's lives. To this end, Zhivkov relied on his secret police, the Committee for State Security, and a network of informers. To further cement his rule, Zhivkov cultivated a "Man of the People" image promoted by the state-run media.

Zhivkov's loyalty to the Soviets helped ensure Bulgaria's economic stability for a time, with the USSR providing a ready market for Bulgaria's manufactured goods and refined oil (see *Economics and Resources*). Living standards rose slowly but noticeably in the 1950s-60s with the introduction of universal healthcare and Eastern Europe's first agricultural pension and welfare system.

By the 1970s, Bulgaria's plans for scientific and technological advancement were unrealized as economic growth stalled. Concerned with the low birthrate of ethnic Bulgarians, Zhivkov introduced policies encouraging larger families, without effect. Then in the mid-1980s, Zhivkov promoted a campaign to "Bulgarize" or assimilate Bulgaria's ethnic Turkish population (see *Political and Social Relations*), estimated at 800,000. Although the Turkish language had been removed from schools in the 1970s, new measures outlawed all Turkish-language media. Further, the government required Turks to replace their Turkish names with Bulgarian ones. Following widespread protests, more than 350,000 Turks left Bulgaria.

An Opening

Meanwhile, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced a series of reforms in 1985 that would eventually result in the dissolution of the USSR. These reforms – most notably **perestroika** (restructuring) and **glasnost** (openness) – introduced market forces into the Soviet economy and increased individuals' freedom of expression. Although the reforms were largely unsuccessful, they helped ignite democratic movements across Eastern Europe, Bulgaria included.

When Zhivkov seemed to reject these Soviet reforms, Gorbachev encouraged other Bulgarian BCP members to remove him. As the Berlin Wall fell, signaling the end of communism in East Germany in November 1989, Zhivkov resigned.



Post-Communist Bulgaria

Following Zhivkov's resignation, the BCP immediately reorganized as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), easily winning Bulgaria's first free elections in 1990 amidst a highly fragmented political environment. Over the following year, the

BSP struggled to form a stable government, while newly-formed democratic splinter groups demanded further political reform and public accountability. Within a year, public protests forced the BSP to withdraw.

In 1991, Bulgaria adopted a new Constitution that formally established the nation as a parliamentary democratic republic and further outlined basic civil rights such as freedom of speech, press, and religion. Subsequent elections yielded a new, multiparty Parliament led by a loose alliance of small political parties called the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF).

In 1992, Zhelyu Zhelev, a popular former dissident and critic of the communists, became Bulgaria's first directly elected President. Together with Zhelev, the UDF government transitioned Bulgaria into a democracy and market economy,

working to privatize industry, liquidate collective farms, and return property confiscated during the communist era.

Despite this progress, Bulgaria continued to struggle with corruption, public



unrest, and economic turbulence for years to follow. Meanwhile, socialist and conservative political groups competed for power, resulting in successive UDF- and BSP-led governments. Although Bulgaria began to stabilize its economy by the late 1990s (see *Economics and Resources*), stringent financial reforms regularly prompted social unrest. Further, rampant corruption and surging organized crime hindered the pace of economic, political, and social progress.

In 2001, former Tsar Simeon II Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became PM in a surprise electoral victory over the ruling UDF government. While rapid inflation, high unemployment, and other economic woes continued to plague the nation, Simeon's pro-Western government pursued democratic reform, nurtured a market

economy, and sought accession into the EU. Although economic and social conditions improved, higher standards of living were slow to materialize. Consequently, the 2005 elections returned the BSP to power.



Under BSP's leadership over the next several years, Bulgaria continued to pursue political, social, and economic integration with Europe. Following substantial economic and political reform, Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007 despite the government's inability to curb still-widespread corruption and organized crime.

Contemporary Bulgaria

Bulgaria's recent political climate has been marked by protests and volatility. In 2009, a newly-formed center-right party, the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB),



defeated the ruling BSP government in the parliamentary elections. The landslide victory resulted in the GERB's leader, Boyko Borisov, assuming the role of PM (see *Political and Social Relations*). A few

years later, another GERB member, Rosen Plevneliev, was elected President.

Although the GERB gained considerable political control as a result of the 2 elections, its influence was short lived: economic instability and allegations of corruption triggered riots barely a year later. By 2013, massive public unrest had forced Borisov to

resign and was replaced by Plamen Oresharski of the BSP. Immediately upon taking office, Oresharski and the BSP made a series of unqualified and questionable official appointments,



prompting thousands of Bulgarians to demand the government once again resign.

Following the 2014 elections, the GERB possessed the most parliamentary seats.

Although the win allowed Borisov to reassume his role as PM, the elections produced an extremely fragmented Parliament, with a record number of political parties garnering votes and no single party or coalition winning an absolute majority. Notably, after BSP newcomer Rumen Radev unexpectedly defeated a GERB candidate in the 2016 Presidential elections, PM Borisov resigned. President Radev then named an interim PM in early 2017. Just a few months later, new parliamentary elections returned Borisov to the position of PM, which he held until 2021. In 2021, Radev won reelection for a second term as President (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Corruption persists in all levels of government, poverty and healthcare issues affect the majority of the population, and organized crime continues to flourish. While the transition to democracy has been challenging, Bulgaria continues to slowly address these and other issues, looking to Western Europe as a model for social, economic, and political development.



Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. For Bulgarians, myths and folklore served to maintain Bulgarian identity through centuries of foreign domination.

Battle of Kleidion: One well-known Bulgarian tale dates to the end of the First Bulgarian Kingdom, when the long struggle between the Bulgarians and Byzantine Empire culminated in the Battle of Kleidion. The battle occurred in 1014 near the modern-day village of Klyuch, where Bulgarian Tsar Samuel's forces engaged those of Byzantine Emperor Basil II.

While history records Bulgaria's loss, the details remain mythical. According to legend, the Byzantines captured some 15,000 Bulgarian prisoners of war, then blinded all but 150 of them so that they could lead their crippled comrades home. Devastated by the loss, Tsar Samuel reportedly fainted then died a few days later. Basil II, by contrast, acquired the title Basil Bulgaroctonus or Basil, Slayer of the Bulgars.



The Haiduk Tradition: The legendary feats of heroes from earlier generations also inspired Bulgarians in their struggles against foreign domination. In one legendary tale, the exploits of Bulgaria's **haiduks** – bandits and partisans who attacked the Ottomans from mountain hideaways in the 17th-18th centuries – served to inspire Bulgarian revolutionaries in the 19th century. For Vasil Levski and

other guerilla fighters, the *haiduks* were comparable to Robin Hood or American patriots during the Revolutionary War.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Republic of Bulgaria
Republika Bălgariya
Република България
(Bulgarian)

Political Borders

Romania: 376 mi
Turkey: 139 mi
Greece: 293 mi
Macedonia: 101 mi
Serbia: 214
Coastline: 219 mi

Capital

Sofia



Demographics

Bulgaria has a population of about 6.8 million. Population has reduced, due in part to historically low birth rates (see *Sex and Gender*) and a stagnant economy which prompted many Bulgarians to emigrate (see *Economics and Resources*). Today, the population continues to decline at an annual rate of -0.66%. Nearly 77% of the population lives in metropolitan areas, with about 1/5 living in the capital city of Sofia.

Flag

First adopted in 1879 and reinstated in 1990 following the end of communism (see p. 20 of *History and Myth*), the Bulgarian flag consists of



3 equal horizontal white, green, and red stripes. The top white band stands for peace and love, while the green band denotes freedom, as well as Bulgarian agriculture. The red band represents courage and the struggle for independence.

Geography

Situated in southeastern Europe on the northeastern portion of the Balkan Peninsula, Bulgaria borders Romania to the North, the Black Sea to the East, Turkey and Greece to the South, and Macedonia and Serbia to the West. Bulgaria's total land area is about 42,000 sq mi, making it slightly larger than Tennessee and about the same size as Ireland.

Plains and plateaus cover over 2/3 of Bulgaria, while mountains dominate much of the rest. The rugged Balkan Mountains run



east to west through the center of the country, separating the hilly and fertile Danubian Plain in the North from the low-lying, central Thracian Plain. The highest ranges on the Balkan Peninsula, the Rila and Pirin Mountains,

dominate Bulgaria's South. The Rila range includes the nation's highest point, Mount Musala, rising to about 9,600 ft. Steep cliffs interspersed with sandy beaches characterize the Black Sea shoreline in the East. The Danube, Europe's longest river, forms much of Bulgaria's northern border. Bulgaria is home to over 330, mostly glacial, lakes scattered throughout the mountains. Forests cover about 36% of the country.

Climate

Similar to the Midwest region of the US, Bulgaria experiences a temperate continental climate with 4 distinct seasons. Summers are hot and dry, while winters are long, cold, and wet. Generally, northern and mountainous regions experience colder temperatures than southern and coastal regions, which are warmed by winds sweeping in from the Mediterranean Sea. Temperatures in the summer month of July average 72°F in the North, but can reach 84°F in the South. By contrast, in the winter month of January, temperatures average 23°F in the North and 36°F in the South. Snowfall typically occurs December-February and is heaviest across the northern plains and at higher elevations.

Natural Hazards

Bulgaria is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards, predominantly floods and earthquakes. While the last significant earthquake occurred in 1928, in 2014 massive floods damaged much of eastern Bulgaria, killing dozens of people and leaving hundreds without food, clean water, or electricity for several weeks. The country also occasionally experiences wildfires. Landslides are a threat in mountainous regions.

Environmental Issues

Rapid and unrestrained industrialization during Bulgaria's communist era (see *History and Myth*) resulted in massive nationwide environmental degradation. Detrimental activities, such as the improper disposal of industrial waste, untreated sewage, and hazardous chemicals, caused significant water and air pollution. By the mid-1990s, over 40% of the population resided in areas contaminated with dangerous levels of pollutants, severely affecting residents' health (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Despite the Bulgarian government's efforts to clean up affected areas, rivers and lakes remain polluted by raw sewage, industrial waste, and agricultural runoff. In addition, industrial emissions continue to significantly degrade air quality in urban areas, where inefficient and often decrepit coal burning power stations emit toxic fumes. Notably, Sofia ranks as Europe's most polluted capital city, where a combination of automobile emissions and industrial discharge result in poor air quality. Air pollution in turn contributes to acid rain, which contaminates soils and groundwater, poisons wildlife, and scars forests. Today, about 1/4 of forests exhibit signs of damage. Finally, deforestation due to commercial logging, agricultural development, and illegal timber production contributes to flooding and landslides in some areas.



Government

Bulgaria is a constitutional republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 28 provinces (**oblasti**) administered by governors, which further subdivide into 262 municipalities run by mayors and elected local councils. Adopted in 1991 (see *History and Myth*), Bulgaria's Constitution separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches while outlining the fundamental rights of Bulgarian citizens, such as the freedom of speech, media, and religion.

Executive Branch

The President, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of Bulgaria's Armed Forces, is elected by popular vote to serve up to 2 consecutive 5-year terms. Presidential powers are largely ceremonial. The current President, Rumen Radev, took office in 2017 and began his second term in 2021.



By contrast, executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who is head-of-government. With the support of a 20-member Council of Ministers, the PM oversees the country's day-to-day affairs of managing the national budget, enforcing

domestic and foreign policies, and maintaining law and order. Elected by the National Assembly (NA) (see "Legislative Branch" below), the PM is traditionally the leader of the political party or coalition that holds the most seats in the legislature. In January 2025, Rosen Zhelyazkov became Prime Minister, after months of coalition talks following the resignation of Nikolay Denkov.

Legislative Branch

Bulgaria's legislature is a single chamber NA (**Narodno Sabranie**) composed of 240 members serving 4-year terms and are directly elected in multi-seat constituencies through a nationwide vote based on proportional representation. The NA controls all national legislative powers such as amending the Constitution, appointing positions in government, approving

declarations of war, passing the national budget, and ratifying international treaties.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court of Cassation, a Supreme Administrative Court, a Constitutional Court, Courts of Appeals, and a system of lower courts. A 25-member judicial



council elects the 72 Supreme Court of Cassation justices and all Supreme Administrative Court justices, each formally appointed by the President to serve until age 65. Meanwhile, the NA nominates and the President appoints the 12 Constitutional Court justices to serve 9-year terms. As the highest courts, the Supreme Court of Cassation and the Supreme Administrative Court are the final courts of appeal for both civil and criminal cases.

Political Climate

Bulgaria's political landscape is characterized by a multi-party system in which political parties or coalitions of parties compete for power. Generally, those parties and coalitions hold the majority of seats in the NA and the bulk of government leadership positions and retain considerable control over Bulgaria's political climate.

In June 2024, Bulgaria held early parliamentary elections. The election was initially scheduled for June 2027. However, the planned PM rotation agreed to by the coalition government failed to occur which resulted in the early election. After months of failed talks, a new PM, Rosen Zhelyazkov, was approved and a new government formed in January 2025.

Bulgaria's government consists of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (***Grazhdani za Evropeisko Razvitiie na Bulgaria***, or GERB), led by former PM Boyko Borisov. The GERB is the largest party in the NA with 69 seats, the center-right and populist GERB finds support among urban, middle-income, and wealthy Bulgarians and the younger generations. In addition to a rigid anti-corruption and organized crime stance,

the GERB promotes integration with Europe, conservative social policies, and the development of Bulgaria's energy industry.

Serving as the GERB's primary opposition, the NA's 2nd largest member (with 37 seats) is the centrist We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) party – a union of several parties formed prior to the 2023 election. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) is a centrist political party, with a support base of ethnic minorities, holding 30 seats. First formed in 1989 from communist roots (see *History and Myth*), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) hold 20 seats and draws its support from older Bulgarians who fondly remember the nation's communist era and from lower income, rural dwellers.

Although elections are generally free and fair, rampant corruption at all levels of government provokes public distrust of officials and threatens to disrupt the democratic process and its institutions. As a result, voter turnout for both Presidential and NA elections is generally low. Despite recent efforts to curb crime, poverty, and corruption, Bulgaria continues to rank as the EU's poorest (see *Economics and Resources*) and one of its most corrupt members. After years of civil disengagement, anti-government protests have become more common, resulting in recent changes of government (see *History and Myth*). Of note, in 2013, six people publicly committed suicide by setting themselves on fire in protest of ongoing corruption and desperate socioeconomic conditions.

Defense

The Bulgarian Armed Forces (BAF) are a unified force consisting of land, maritime, and air branches and recently formed Joint Forces Command with its subordinate Special

Operations Command. The BAF defends against domestic and foreign threats and contributes to international peacekeeping and security operations. Bulgaria abolished mandatory military service in 2008. Today, both men and women may voluntarily enlist at age 18.



With a joint strength of 36,950 active-duty troops and 3,000 reserve personnel, Bulgaria relies on the support of its allies to respond to large, state-level threats. Bulgaria receives military support primarily from the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – a political and military alliance among 32 nations (the US included) that promotes its members' security through collective defense.

Land: The Bulgarian Land Force consists of 17,000 active-duty troops (46% of total BAF), consisting of 5 maneuver battalions, brigades and regiments (reconnaissance, mechanized and light), 3 combat support regiments and battalions, and a combat service support regiment.

Navy: Consisting of 4,450 active-duty personnel (12%), the Bulgarian Navy is equipped with 3 principal surface combatants, 4 patrol and coastal combatants, 10 mine countermeasures vessels, 2 amphibious vessels, and 10 logistics and support vessels.

Air Force: The Bulgarian Air Force consists of 8,500 active-duty personnel (23%) and has 1 fighter/intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) squadron, a transport squadron, 2 training squadrons, an attack helicopter squadron, and a transport helicopter squadron. These units are equipped with 20 fighter/attack aircraft and 29 helicopters.



Joint Forces Command (JFC): comprises 19% of the total BAF. The JFC develops operational action plans of the Armed Forces, both in peacetime and during war. Other defense branches are subordinate to the JFC.

Paramilitary: The Bulgarian Paramilitary forces consist of 12,000 Border Guards divided into 12 maneuver regiments and equipped with 26 patrol and coastal combatants, and 4,000 Security Police members.

Bulgarian Air Force Rank Insignia



General



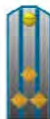
Lieutenant
General



Major
General



Brigadier
General



Colonel



Lieutenant
Colonel



Major



Captain



Senior
Lieutenant



Lieutenant



Junior
Lieutenant



Warrant
Officer



Chief
Petty
Officer



Sergeant
First
Class



Staff
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Private

Foreign Relations

Upon emerging from communism, Bulgaria pursued political, economic, and military integration with Western Europe and the US but continued to maintain bilateral ties with Russia. By joining NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, Bulgaria more decisively demonstrated its divergence from Russian influence. Yet, it continues to balance its foreign policy between its Western allies and Russia, with which it shares religious, historical, and cultural ties (see *History and Myth*).

International Cooperation: As a NATO member, Bulgaria has contributed to military operations in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan and regularly participates in and hosts NATO military exercises. In addition, Bulgaria has participated in UN and EU peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance missions. Bulgaria also works with other international organizations, including the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization.



Relations with the EU:

The EU is a political and economic partnership among 27 nations located in Europe. Although Bulgaria is an EU member, ongoing

economic woes and a record of corruption and organized crime prevent its full political, economic, and social integration within the EU. Since 2007, the EU has repeatedly reproached Bulgaria for not adequately addressing corruption and social inequities, and on multiple occasions, has suspended foreign aid and threatened economic sanctions.

Despite these tensions, membership remains popular among Bulgarian citizens, who generally view the European nations as positive political, economic, and social influences. Although the EU initially blocked Bulgaria from joining the Schengen passport-free zone, in 2014 it eased restrictions to allow Bulgarians visa-free travel and work within the EU. In addition,

in 2018 Bulgaria held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU – an institution that determines and steers the EU's general political direction and priorities.

Relations with Macedonia: Although Bulgaria was one of the first nations to recognize Macedonia's 1991 independence, for years relations remained strained. This tension was due primarily to Bulgaria's reluctance to officially recognize the uniqueness of the Macedonian language, which it views as closely related to Bulgarian (see *Language and Communication*). Bulgarians generally remain reluctant to recognize the Macedonian language despite a 1999 formal agreement settling the language dispute and establishing diplomatic relations. Further, Bulgarians continue to question the existence of a Macedonian nationality separate from theirs (see *History and Myth*).

Relations with the US: Although the US and Bulgaria first established diplomatic ties in 1903, they became strained at the onset of World War I. Relations continued to deteriorate during World War II and subsequently remained tense during Bulgaria's communist era (see *History and Myth*). Following Bulgaria's emergence from communism, the 2 nations have worked diligently to restore political, economic, and military ties.



Over the last 2 decades, the US has worked with the Bulgarian government to develop its free market economy and democratic institutions, advocating Bulgaria's accession into various international organizations such as NATO and the EU. Today, Bulgaria has become a strategic ally and important regional sponsor for the US, promoting a democratic and pro-Western agenda in the Black Sea region.

The US provides substantial defense assistance to Bulgaria (see *Economics and Resources*). In addition to financial

resources, the US provides military training and equipment to bolster Bulgarian military capability and aid its interoperability with NATO forces. In return, Bulgaria allows the US use of Bulgarian military facilities primarily to house US military personnel and provide the US with strategic access to the Black Sea region. Further, the US and Bulgaria have signed several bilateral trade and investment agreements protecting intellectual property and allowing goods, services, and capital to move freely between the 2 nations.

Security Issues

Bulgaria's security environment is dominated by increased tensions with a recently aggressive Russia. An influx of migrants from the Middle East and Africa presents additional security concerns. Of note, Bulgaria relies on military and economic support from NATO, the UN, and the EU to maintain its security.

Tensions with Russia:

Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea, its continuing support of rebels in eastern Ukraine, bolstering of Russian military capacity along the Black Sea, and 2022 invasion of Ukraine have caused friction between



Bulgaria and Russia. Although Bulgaria accepted increased NATO presence within its borders to deter further Russian aggression, it is concerned that further militarization of the Black Sea region will rapidly escalate regional tensions. As a result, Bulgaria remains reluctant to fully participate in military operations against Russia. In 2016, it rejected a Romanian proposal for a permanent NATO fleet in the Black Sea, reasoning the move would significantly increase military tensions and hurt tourism.

Generally, Bulgaria's deep historical, economic, and cultural ties with Russia considerably diffuse bilateral tensions. Prominent political figures have historically attempted to balance national interests between Western Europe and Russia, affirming both

NATO and EU commitments while avoiding anti-Russian rhetoric. However, after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Bulgaria imposed sanctions on Russia, deeply affecting their trade. PM Denkov met with Ukrainian PM in Zelensky 2023 and stated that Russia should withdraw from Ukraine, recognize its borders, and be held accountable for war crimes.

Nevertheless, while some Bulgarians feel a cultural affinity with Russia and support its economic and political integration with Bulgaria, others are committed to continuing Bulgaria's sociopolitical alignment with the West. Further, there is some concern that Russia desires to leverage its historical and cultural ties with Bulgaria to weaken its alliance with Western Europe and the US.

Accordingly, observers assert that the Russian government is waging an information warfare campaign to promote pro-Russian propaganda, while simultaneously eroding public faith in the EU and the US. In addition, far-right political parties such as the nationalist Attack (**Ataka** in Bulgarian) foster pro-Russian sentiment, while a number of Bulgarian media outlets openly propagate Russian nationalist ideas.



Illegal Migration: Thousands of migrants seeking refuge from conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq illegally pass through Bulgaria before attempting to reach Western Europe. As of early 2024, nearly 72,775 Ukrainian and 22,226 Syrian refugees are living in Bulgaria. This influx stresses national resources and stirs interethnic tensions, occasionally resulting in protests, riots, and clashes between Bulgarians, the police, and migrants. Hoping to contain cross-border movement, Bulgaria has erected fences along its southern borders and reinforced security along the Black Sea coast.

Ethnic Groups

While Bulgaria has historically been a crossroads of various ethnic groups (see *History and Myth*), today it is a relatively homogenous country. According to the 2021 census, about 85% of the population is ethnically Bulgarian.

Turks make up Bulgaria's largest minority group, comprising about 8% of the population. First settling in Bulgaria during Ottoman rule (see *History and Myth*), Turks faced significant discrimination and persecution by the Bulgarian communist government. Consequently, there was a notable reduction of their population in the 1980s (see *History and Myth*), though many Turks returned following the communists' fall. Today, the majority of Bulgarian Turks live in the southern Kardzhali province bordering Turkey, and the northeastern Razgrad, Shumen, Silistra, and Targovishte provinces.



The 2021 census reports that Roma or “Gypsy” residents are nearly 4% of the population. An ethnic group of northern Indian origins, the Roma probably settled in the region during the 14th century. Today, Roma live throughout Bulgaria in small, secluded communities, often located on the peripheries of urban areas. These communities tend to be socially segregated from broader Bulgarian society, with residents suffering from relatively high rates of poverty, illiteracy, and significant health issues (see “Social Relations” below).

Pomaks are ethnically Slavic Muslim Bulgarians who speak a Bulgarian dialect and likely number around 100,000. Although nearly 200,000 Macedonians lived in Bulgaria in the 1950s, this number shrank to under 10,000 by the end of the communist era. Other small minority groups include Armenians, Vlachs, Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, and Greeks, among others.

Social Relations

Bulgarians typically identify with several regions (including Northern Bulgaria, Central Bulgaria, Southern Bulgaria, and Black Sea coast) or with urban centers and sub-regions such as Sofia, the Rhodopes, and Pirin. Differences in the ethnic makeup of each area result in some regional variance of language, customs, dress, and the arts (see *Language and Communication* and *Aesthetics and Recreation*). As is common in other societies, Bulgaria divides along rural-urban, male-female, rich-poor, generational, and ethnic lines. Urban dwellers, men, and the wealthy typically enjoy greater access to economic opportunities and hold the most prestige. By contrast, rural dwellers, the poor, and women are more likely to face economic and social barriers (see *Sex and Gender*).

Some social divisions exist between Bulgarians and ethnic minorities. While relations between ethnic Bulgarians and Turks were severely strained during the communist era (see *History and Myth*), today the 2 groups generally coexist harmoniously but do not always mix. Living in small, tight-knit communities, Turks often choose to socialize among themselves, follow their own faith, and attend Turkish language schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Religious discrimination of Turks by ethnic Bulgarians occasionally leads to heightened tensions (see

Religion and Spirituality).



The most pronounced social division lies between Bulgarians and the Roma, who regularly face socio-economic exclusion. Existing on the

periphery of national life, the Roma suffer from abject poverty, reduced access to healthcare, and chronic unemployment. Illiteracy forces some Roma into low-skilled or informal jobs in agriculture, construction, or illicit activities. While the EU has pressured Bulgaria to improve Roma welfare and protect their culture, the Roma continue to suffer from negative social stereotypes, employment discrimination, and low school attendance rates.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

According to the 2021 census, about 70% of Bulgarians identify as Eastern Orthodox Christian, primarily affiliated with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), around 11% are Muslims, and fewer than 13% identify as Roman Catholics, Protestants, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, Mormons, or Jehovah's Witnesses. About 8% of the population does not identify with any religious tradition.



Bulgaria's Constitution protects freedom of religion, criminalizing discrimination and advocating tolerance and respect of both non-believers and religious followers, regardless of denomination. The law allows all religious groups to practice freely yet also outlines a registration process allowing the Bulgarian government to grant religious groups legal recognition. Notably, the Constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as Bulgaria's "traditional" religion and exempts the BOC from the registration process.

Registered groups retain rights and privileges not granted to unregistered groups. These include receiving government funding; performing religious services; owning assets (such as places of worship and cemeteries); participating in commercial ventures; providing followers with medical, social, and educational services; distributing religious media and literature; and opening religious schools. Besides the BOC, Bulgaria presently has 132 registered religious groups.

Bulgaria's Early Spiritual Landscape

The region's early inhabitants had a rich spiritual life. Archeological finds indicate early Thracian settlements (see

History and Myth) featured massive temples. They also included necropolises, large above-ground burial sites housing numerous graves of Thracian kings, aristocrats, and other members of elite society. While there are few if any records of early inhabitants' religious practices and beliefs, scholars believe they recognized and worshipped multiple gods. The region's later arrivals, the Slavs and Proto-Bulgars (see *History and Myth*), worshipped a number of deities, particularly an all-powerful god of thunder known as Perun by the Slavs and Tangra by the Bulgars.

The Arrival and Spread of Christianity

The Romans first introduced Christianity to the region in the 3rd century, and in the 4th century, the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion, facilitating its spread. By the 9th century, Bulgaria had formally adopted Christianity (see *History and Myth*).

With the support of the Byzantine Church, Bulgaria's leaders converted much of its population to the new faith, while violently suppressing followers of pagan traditions (see *History and Myth*). Instead of the traditional Greek, Latin, and Hebrew languages used by most other Christians, Bulgarian clergy taught Christianity using their own Slavic language and Cyrillic alphabet (see *Language and Communication*). As a result, the

region established a distinct religious identity that helped preserve Bulgarian culture and avoid assimilation by the Byzantine Empire.

Fusing both Byzantine and indigenous traditions, Bulgarian clergy



eventually formed the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC). During subsequent centuries of Byzantine and Ottoman domination (see *History and Myth*), the BOC played an important role in the definition and preservation of Bulgarian identity, serving as a center of Bulgarian cultural and literary life.

For centuries, theological differences had been forming within the Christian tradition. In 1054, these differences resulted in a permanent division between the Roman Catholic Church centered in Rome and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey). To escape persecution by the Pope's religious crusaders in the 12th century, Bulgaria accepted the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. By doing so, Bulgaria avoided forced conversion of its population to Catholicism and retained its Orthodox traditions, although the BOC lost some of its religious autonomy for a period (see *History and Myth*).

Cults in Bulgaria's History

Beginning in the 10th century, cults rooted in Christian beliefs but with widely varying theologies gained popularity across the region. Born from the despair of the destitute and ill-treated peasantry, the cults were harshly critical of the Orthodox Church and of Bulgaria's political and social order (see *History and Myth*). They discouraged the populace from joining the BOC and rejected participation in community politics. Although the state persecuted members of these movements, cults continued to thrive among peasants for several centuries, occasionally obstructing the BOC's spread and reducing its influence.

Religion during Ottoman Rule

In the late 14th century, Bulgaria fell to the Ottoman Empire (see *History and Myth*). While the Muslim Ottomans dominated Bulgaria until the 19th century, they generally chose not to impose their religion on the region. Instead, the Ottoman Empire divided Bulgaria's population according to faith, privileging some groups over others but allowing each community to manage its own affairs (see *History and Myth*). Although this system allowed the Bulgarians to continue practicing their religion, it placed the BOC under the authority of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople.

During this time, Bulgarian society consisted mostly of small, remote settlements relatively free of Ottoman influence (see *History and Myth*). As a result, Bulgarian religious leaders were able to retain their cultural traditions and continue to preserve a Bulgarian identity and follow the BOC's distinctive rituals.

Of note, the Ottomans allowed many Jews to settle in Bulgaria following their expulsion from Hungary, Bavaria (in present-day Germany), and Spain in the 14th and 15th centuries. These arrivals joined the few small Jewish communities already settled in the region, moderately increasing Bulgaria's Jewish population by the 15th century.

During almost 5 centuries of Ottoman rule, the Empire forced some Bulgarians to convert to Islam (see *History and Myth*), while favorable social and economic policies toward Muslims prompted others to convert voluntarily. The descendants of these Muslims are known as Pomaks (see *Political and Social Relations*). Nevertheless, most Bulgarians remained Christian. Bowing to nationalist pressures (see *History and Myth*), the Ottomans officially recognized the BOC as separate from the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1870, thereby establishing its religious autonomy.



The Bulgarian National Revival and Independence

By the 19th century, Bulgarian society was experiencing a cultural revival (see *History and Myth*). The BOC continued to expand its influence during this period as Bulgarian national identity became closely linked to the BOC. When Bulgaria became a principality led by a Christian prince in the late 19th century (see *History and Myth*), Muslim Turks who had settled in the region during the Ottoman era left Bulgaria in large numbers (see *History and Myth*).

World War II (WWII)

Although Bulgaria participated in WWII as an ally to Nazi Germany, its Jewish population managed to escape the devastating consequences endured by Jewish residents in neighboring Romania and other European countries (see *History and Myth*). As a result, Bulgaria saved its entire Jewish population, some 50,000 people, from deportation and certain death.

Religion during the Communist Period

When the communists assumed control at the end of WWII (see *History and Myth*), they brought significant changes to Bulgaria's religious landscape. The communist worldview included atheism, or the disbelief in deities and the rejection of religion. Consequently, the Bulgarian communist state confiscated religious property, destroyed places of worship, persecuted or outlawed religious organizations, and generally discouraged religious worship.



While the BOC continued to function, the communist regime pushed it to the fringes of social life and strictly supervised all church activities. For example, the government banned religious education in public schools and renamed religious

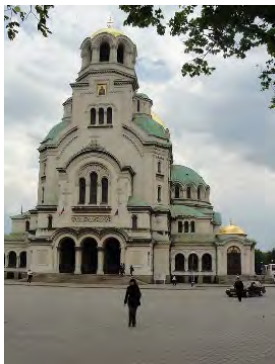
holidays while replacing traditional rites-of-passage rituals such as marriage, baptism, and burial with secular ceremonies. In addition, the regime forced some BOC members to become agents of the state's secret police (see *History and Myth*). With some of its members working as spies and even disclosing the contents of confessions to the regime, the BOC engendered public distrust of church officials and further alienated the populace from the Church.

The regime was particularly harsh to followers of non-Christian faiths. For example, the state attempted to strip ethnic Turks of their cultural identity by severely restricting Islamic religious

practices and banning the use of the Turkish language, among other policies (see *History and Myth*). As a result, over 350,000 Bulgarian Turks had migrated to Turkey by the late 1980s. Similarly, Bulgaria's Jewish community shrank dramatically during the communist era, as some 43,000 Bulgarian Jews chose to flee the religiously restrictive environment, emigrating to Israel and elsewhere.

Religion Today

According to a recent survey, over a majority of Bulgarians believe in the positive influence of religion. Over the last 25 years, the government has rebuilt many places of worship and restored ancient religious altars, icons, and frescoes. Of note, religious participation tends to vary by geography and age: it is higher in rural areas and among older generations.



Muslims, Jews, and other members of minority religious groups report incidences of harassment and vandalism of their places of worship. In some regions, these groups are subjected to routine discrimination and prejudice by local authorities. Further, public figures and some nationalist political parties promote anti-religious rhetoric and hate speech towards minorities. To diffuse rising tensions, the government convened a “Festival of Religions” in 2014 to promote interfaith tolerance and has occasionally issued statements condemning hate speech and ethnic intolerance.

BOC: Following communism's collapse in 1989, there was a significant revival of Orthodox religious activity. Approximately 80% of Bulgaria's urban dwellers and 62% of the rural population identify as Orthodox Christian. The Church continues to play an important social role in society, with many Bulgarians intrinsically linking the BOC to their Bulgarian national identity. As of 2021,

the BOC has some 7-8 million members, over 2,600 parishes, and 120 monasteries.

Nevertheless, the Church has its challenges. An ideological split between young religious leaders born during or since the democratic movement and those who came to power during the communist era causes some tensions. The younger group views communist-era church leaders as corrupt and morally compromised, occasionally accusing them of continuing to promote communist interests.

Islam: According to the 2021 census, almost 640,000 Bulgarians are Muslim. Most Muslims are adherents of the Hanafi sect of the Sunni branch, a generally tolerant and liberal school of Islamic thought. Some Bulgarian Muslims live in the Rhodope Mountains bordering Greece and Turkey in the South, while others live in large communities along the Black Sea coast and in the Northeast. While most Muslim Bulgarians are ethnic Turks, a few are Roma (see *Political and Social Relations*), Pomaks, or recent immigrants from Asia or the Middle East.

Although the law prohibits religious discrimination, Muslims repeatedly report harassment and intimidation by local police



and security services. Further, some schools ban the wearing of the ***hijab*** (a veil worn by some Muslim women), and in some regions, authorities prevent the construction of new mosques. Religious tensions escalated in 2014, when a district court convicted 13

Muslim leaders of propagating extremist ideology and hatred of other religions. Further, police detained 26 others for spreading anti-democratic dogma and incitement of war.

Judaism: Bulgaria's Jewish population today is very small, numbering about 2,200. Most Jews live in Sofia, Plovdiv, or along the Black Sea coast.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

Typically maintaining strong family ties, Bulgarians consider the ideal home as a multi-story dwelling where parents and their adult children's families each have their own floor. Extended family members remain involved significantly in each other's lives even though challenging economic realities limit the number of multigenerational households today.

Residence

At the end of World War II, the vast majority of Bulgarians lived in the countryside, with just 24% of the population residing in cities. As Bulgaria's communist government pursued rapid industrialization in the 1960s-80s, many Bulgarians moved to the cities. As of 2023, just 23% of Bulgarians live in rural areas.

Rural: During much of Bulgaria's almost 500 years of Ottoman rule, most Bulgarians lived in small, isolated farming communities (see *History and Myth*). With their depopulation during the communist era, most rural villages declined and saw little modern development. Consequently, rural residences today generally lack modern conveniences such as indoor plumbing even though they are typically larger than their urban counterparts.



A rural Bulgarian farmhouse usually is constructed of cement and brick and contains 2-3 bedrooms. The home interior is often decorated with colorful handmade carpets, paintings, and religious icons. Grounds usually include a garden, orchard, and outbuildings. Some farmhouses feature an attached summer kitchen where family members live during the summer months to avoid bringing soil from farm work into the main house.

Urban: Slightly more than 3/4 of Bulgarians live in urban areas. Although some families reside in old historic houses, most urban residents live in multi-story apartment buildings constructed during the communist era.



Apartments also consist of 2-3 rooms, 1 often serving as both the living room and a bedroom. With the privatization of the housing market following the end of communist rule, apartment prices in cities skyrocketed. Today, urban residents still

struggle to find affordable housing, while homelessness is a continuing issue. Consequently, many Bulgarians prefer to live in newly-constructed apartment buildings or single-family homes in suburban areas, while others simply return to rural areas.

Family Structure

Since Bulgarians traditionally preferred to live with or near their extended family, households typically included 3-4 generations. While this custom continues in many rural areas, housing shortages in urban areas force most families to live as nuclear families (2 parents and their children). Traditionally, the father was the head of the household and primary breadwinner. While communist policies brought many women to the workplace, they continued to have the responsibility for household chores and child-rearing (see *Sex and Gender*).

Children

Members of the extended family customarily share childcare responsibilities. If parents work away from home, either in other Bulgarian communities or outside the country, their children often live with relatives, especially grandparents. Children usually live with their parents or relatives until their education ends or until they become financially independent. Adult children frequently support their parents financially, also providing care when they are no longer self-sufficient.

Bulgaria's government continues to encourage childbearing (see *Sex and Gender*) in order to reverse the country's negative population growth (see *Political and Social Relations*). While ethnic Bulgarian families normally average 2 children, Roma and Turkish families may have 3 or more.

Childhood Ceremonies

Birth: Following a child's birth, Bulgarian parents typically appoint godparents who provide moral and financial support to the child throughout his life. Friends and family gather to toast the child's birth and present gifts. Bulgarians often name their children after their grandparents (see *Language and Communication*).

First Birthday:

Around a child's first birthday, his parents host a gathering called **proshtapulnik**.

During the event, the child is

presented numerous items, such as pencils, books, money, tools, balls, or other sporting equipment. Tradition holds that the child's preference among the items indicates his future career path.



Dating and Marriage

Boys and girls typically interact from a young age and tend to begin casual dating in their early teens. Popular activities for young couples include taking walks, dancing, and going out to movies, restaurants, bars, or parties.

The legal marriage age in Bulgaria is 18 years, though most Bulgarians marry in their late 20s or early 30s. While unmarried cohabitation is increasingly common, unmarried couples occasionally face societal disapproval. Of note, some Roma communities (see *Political and Social Relations*) practice arranged child marriage (see *Sex and Gender*).

Engagement: Serious courtship may proceed to betrothal or engagement. Traditionally, members of the 2 families would meet to negotiate the engagement. Today, the prospective groom typically proposes directly to his bride. The couple exchanges rings, which they wear on their left hands while engaged and on the right after marriage.

Weddings: Weddings in both rural and urban areas often involve both civil services and religious ceremonies. During the civil service, the marriage official informs the couple of their rights and obligations followed by the bride and groom signing the legal documents.

Bulgarian Orthodox weddings customarily occur on a Sunday in the early spring or fall and usually are preceded by several days of traditional rituals. The best man traditionally constructs a wedding banner from a piece of wood, decorating it with colorful



ribbons and ivy. On the day of the church ceremony, the groom's family gathers to present gifts to the best man and maid of honor, then travels to the bride's house. The entire

wedding party then proceeds to the church, usually in cars decorated with ribbons and flowers. During the ceremony, a priest sanctifies the union while the bride and groom speak their vows, then exchange rings while wearing special wedding crowns. Ceremonies are generally followed by feasting, dancing, and special traditions. During the reception, the groom's mother traditionally presents 2 loaves of bread, 1 salty to represent the difficulties the young couple will face and the other dipped in honey, representing life's joys.

Bulgarian Muslims (see *Religion and Spirituality*) enjoy their own unique wedding traditions. For example, Pomaks (see *Political*

and Social Relations) traditionally celebrate wedding ceremonies for 2-3 days during the winter months with feasting, dancing, and a parade. Some Pomak women recently have revived customs that were repressed during the communist era. One such custom is **gelina** or face-painting, whereby an artist applies special colors to the bride's face and finishes the design with sequins in a floral pattern.

Divorce: Marriage dissolution is relatively uncommon and sometimes carries social stigma. In 2022, Bulgaria's divorce rate of 1.4 per 1,000 inhabitants was significantly lower than the US rate of 2.4 per 1,000 people.

Death

Following a loved one's passing, Bulgarian Orthodox mourners gather in the deceased's house, where the coffin is displayed. On the day of the funeral, family and friends accompany the coffin to a church for a funeral service then follow the coffin to a cemetery for burial. The family holds another memorial service at the grave 40 days later to mark the end of the mourning period.



In line with Islamic tradition, Muslim Bulgarians bury their loved ones as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. After a death, the deceased's body is cleansed, wrapped in a clean white cloth, and placed in a coffin. Male relatives and friends then transport the coffin to a mosque where a cleric offers prayers. Relatives then transport the deceased to a cemetery for burial. At the gravesite, family and friends remove the deceased from the coffin for direct placement in the grave. Following the burial, the family receives mourners who bring food, offer condolences, and pray.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Traditionally, Bulgaria had a patriarchal society which means men held most power, authority, and social prestige. While this outlook on gender roles is changing as women and men have equal rights before the law, traditional attitudes continue to hinder women's full social, economic, and political participation.

Gender Roles and Work

Bulgarian women traditionally were responsible for all household chores, child rearing, preparing food, and caring for the elderly. During the communist era, the government promoted equality between men and women in all spheres of life, expecting most citizens to participate in the workforce. As a result, urban women usually worked in a variety of industries, often earning the same wages as their male counterparts. Meanwhile, rural women labored on farms alongside men. Today, some women continue



to work outside the home, although they still perform the majority of domestic chores.

Labor Force: In 2024, about 51% of Bulgarian women worked outside the home, lower than averages in the US (57%) and the EU

(52%). While the majority of Bulgarian working women occupy low-skill and low-paying jobs in the services, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors, others attain high-level positions in government and business. In 2024, almost 41% of women in the workforce held positions as legislators, senior officials, or managers, up from 31% in 2007 and closing in on the US rate of 43%.

Despite this trend, women typically earn 9% less than men with comparable education levels and work experience, a gap

significantly less than that of the US with an average of 17%. Women are also likely to experience discrimination in hiring and promotion and sexual harassment in the workplace (see “Gender and the Law” below).

Gender and the Law

In 1985, new legislation granted men and women equal rights within marriage, divorce, and their authority over their children. In addition to recognizing a female head of household, the 1985 law also provides women with equal access to land, property, and financial services, while guaranteeing equal inheritance rights to wives, widows, and daughters. Further, the 1986 Labor Code prohibits discrimination and harassment based on gender, race, or nationality in the workforce and in higher education. Infractions are punishable under criminal law.



Nevertheless, discrimination and harassment laws are rarely enforced. Women often face discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. In addition, fear of losing their jobs or incurring social stigma and a general mistrust of the judicial system discourages victims from reporting such crimes. In 2022, only 12% of women reported sexual harassment at work, 5% from male colleagues and 1% from men in managerial positions. Further, the government routinely fails to enforce child maintenance orders following a divorce, often leaving mothers unable to attain childcare benefits from former spouses.

Gender and Politics

Bulgarian women's political participation rates have risen over the last several decades. In 1998, Reneta Indzhova became Bulgaria's first and so far only female Prime Minister. In recent years, women have held prominent public positions, including mayor of the capital city of Sofia, speaker of the Parliament,

members of the Council of Ministers, and Presidential candidates. Today, women hold 5% of ministerial positions and

21% of Parliamentary seats – lower than the US, where some 28% of Congress members are women.



Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Bulgarian women are sometimes victims of violence, mostly related

to domestic incidents. While rape is a criminal offense that carries severe penalties, the law does not criminalize domestic violence, nor does it account for spousal rape. In 2023, 23% of Bulgarian women were victims of domestic violence, with levels higher among Roma (see *Political and Social Relations*) and other ethnic minorities.

Women generally are hesitant to report GBV crimes or to seek help following an incident. While some consider it a private matter, others fear stigmatization and social exclusion. Consequently, victims typically consult friends and family rather than the police. Moreover, despite recent government initiatives and public media campaigns to raise awareness of domestic violence, some women remain unaware of their rights to protection and of available reporting and support mechanisms. Generally, when GBV cases are reported, indictment and prosecution of perpetrators is rare. In fact, courts often dismiss GBV cases outright, labeling them “family” or “private” matters.

While early (before age 18) and forced marriage are criminalized, the practices persist within some Roma and other ethnic minority communities. Further, “honor killings” (the killing of females perceived to have brought dishonor to their families) occur among some such communities.

Trafficking: Bulgaria is a source, transit, and destination country for sex and labor trafficking of men, women, and children. Although the government has sought to eliminate the practice, Bulgaria struggles to meet minimum international anti-trafficking standards. Moreover, corruption in government, law

enforcement, and the judiciary enables some trafficking crimes. Besides insufficient domestic prevention methods, government victim support services such as shelters, medical services, and reintegration assistance are inadequate. In 2024, Bulgaria remained one of the largest source countries for trafficking in the EU.

Sex and Procreation

While public displays of affection and sexuality were largely uncommon during the communist era, attitudes have liberalized in recent years. Young urban couples more commonly hold hands, kiss, and show affection in public.

Bulgaria's birth rate is just 1.5 births per woman, far below the rate required to maintain the population. Alarmed at this low rate, the



government has instituted programs to encourage families to have children. Notably, Bulgaria has one of the world's most liberal parental leave policies: women are entitled to over 2 years of maternity leave during which they receive 90% of their salaries for the first 12 months and for the remainder the average national monthly wage. Further, mothers may choose to transfer the benefit to the father after the first 6 months.

Homosexuality in Bulgaria

Bulgarian law decriminalizes homosexual activity but does not recognize same-sex marriage nor does it grant homosexual couples the same legal rights as heterosexual couples. Enacted in 2003 and amended in 2015, the Protection Against Discrimination Act outlaws discrimination, hate speech, and violence against members of the homosexual community, although in practice, cases are rarely reported and perpetrators are even more rarely prosecuted. Generally, homosexuals experience significant social stigmatization. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Bulgaria. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Bulgaria's official language is Bulgarian. Almost 95% of the population have some knowledge of the language, while over 77% speak it as a native language.

The modern Bulgarian language traces its roots to the 7th century, when the Slavs and Proto-Bulgars began to intermix (see *History and Myth*). In the 9th century, Greek missionary brothers Cyril and



Methodius devised a new alphabet to translate parts of the Bible into this Slavo-Bulgarian language (also known as Old Church Slavonic or Old Bulgarian). In the 10th century, Orthodox monks

Naum and Kliment published additional Christian texts written in this Cyrillic alphabet. They also opened a religious educational center that trained more than 3,000 Bulgarian priests. These monks facilitated the spread of Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*) by providing regional inhabitants access to religious books in their own language, while laying the foundation for a Bulgarian national identity (see *History and Myth*).

Today, Bulgaria celebrates the invention of the Cyrillic alphabet annually on May 24, the Day of Slavonic Culture and Literacy. Of note, Bulgaria is the only EU member to use the Cyrillic alphabet. Variants of the Cyrillic alphabet are also used to write Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian, among other languages.

Bulgarian

Bulgarian belongs to the southern Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family and exhibits features also present in ancient Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit. Bulgarian is most similar to other southern Slavic languages such as Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian and the eastern Slavic language, Macedonian.

Bulgaria historically disagrees with the recognition of Macedonian as a language distinct from Bulgarian (see *Political and Social Relations*). Loanwords from other languages such as Greek, Turkish, Russian, and English also add to modern Bulgarian vocabulary.

In spoken Bulgarian, stress occurs on any syllable of a word, and each letter is spoken exactly as written. Written Bulgarian uses a 30-letter Cyrillic alphabet. While each region has its own variant, the Contemporary Standard Bulgarian is based on the dominant Palitayan dialect.



Other Languages

About 8% of the population speaks Turkish, usually as a 2nd language after Bulgarian. Predominantly Muslim (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Bulgaria's Turkish speakers live primarily in south-central and northeastern Bulgaria. According to the national census, around 7% of the population speaks Romani, the language of the Roma, though those numbers are likely higher (see *Political and Social Relations* and *Learning and Knowledge*).

Some Bulgarians speak Macedonian, the Wallachian dialect of Romanian, Greek, and Armenian. Popular 2nd and 3rd languages include English, German, and Russian.



English: Since the fall of communism and Bulgaria's orientation to Western Europe (see *History and Myth*),

English has become increasingly popular. English instruction

begins in primary school and continues into secondary, where the majority of students study the language.

Communication Overview

Communicating effectively in Bulgaria requires not only knowledge of the language but also the ability to use the language to interact effectively. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.



Communication Style

Bulgarian communications are typically engaging and emotional. Loud conversations are not uncommon, as many Bulgarians regard quiet speech as a sign of insecurity or lack of confidence. Often talkative, Bulgarians prefer to avoid breaks in conversations. Nevertheless, Bulgarians may be reserved when interacting with strangers or new acquaintances.

Whether in professional or personal conversations, foreign nationals should follow the lead of Bulgarian counterparts in defining the formality of communications. Bulgarians typically remain formal and professional within business settings.

Greetings

Bulgarian greetings are usually simple and direct, consisting of a firm handshake with continuous eye contact, a smile, and a verbal greeting appropriate for the time of day (see “Useful Words and Phrases” below). A simple “Hello” (**zdrasti** between good friends or family members, **zdravei** to a single acquaintance or stranger, **zdraveite** to a group) also suffices. In less formal circumstances, members of either gender may extend both hands to each other, while women may exchange 1 or 3 cheek kisses. Of note, rural Bulgarians do not kiss twice on the cheek, as even numbers are typically considered unlucky.

Forms of Address

Bulgarians use different forms of address, depending on the nature of the relationship. For instance, they typically address new acquaintances with **Gospodin** (Mr), **Gospozha** (Mrs), or **Gospozhitsa** (Miss), or another appropriate title followed by the family name. In informal settings or with family, friends, and close colleagues, Bulgarians commonly call each other by first name.

Bulgarian has distinct “you” pronouns that reflect different levels



of formality and respect. They usually use the formal “you” or **vie** when meeting for the first time or with business associates, elders, or authority figures. They tend to reserve the informal **ti** for friends, relatives, and close colleagues.

Foreign nationals should use formal forms of address unless directed otherwise.

Names

Bulgarians typically have 3 names: a given or first name, their father’s name, and a family name. They often name their children using a variation of the grandfather’s name, such as naming a boy Miloslav after his grandfather Milko. Of note, a last name may also be a different form of the paternal grandfather’s first name. For example, names like Georgi Georgiev (meaning Georgi’s Georgi) are common. Slavic male last names often end in **–ov**, **–ev**, or **–chev**, while women’s last names typically end in **–ova**, **–eva**, or **–cheva**.

Last names can also indicate ethnic origin, with some Armenians, Turks, and Jews choosing not to add Slavic endings to their last names. Of note, when the communist government tried to compel Turks to adopt Slavic last names in the 1980s (see *History and Myth*), the move prompted widespread protests and the policy was eventually discarded.

Conversational Topics

Common conversation topics include family, work, hobbies, history, culture, and soccer. Some Bulgarians may also introduce more sensitive topics such as salary, age, or marital status. Potentially offensive topics include immigration (either legal or illegal); relations with Macedonia, Greece, or Turkey; and the status of the Roma (see *Political and Social Relations*).

While profanity and slang are common in some circles, foreign nationals should avoid using them.

Bulgarians typically are appreciative when foreign nationals attempt to speak a local language.



Gestures

Bulgarians are highly expressive, especially in informal conversation, using facial and hand movements to augment their words. Of note, traditional Bulgarian gestures for “yes” and “no” are opposite American and Western European habits. Specifically, Bulgarians typically shake their head side-to-side once to indicate agreement while nodding indicates “no.” However, Bulgarians who have spent time abroad may adapt their “yes” and “no” gestures for foreign audiences. Foreign nationals who are unsure of their conversational partner’s intent should seek verbal confirmation. Bulgarians consider pointing with the index finger impolite, preferring to indicate direction with the entire hand. They may indicate disapproval by clicking the tongue loudly.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Bulgarian
Hi / Hello	Zdraveite
Good morning	Dobro utro
Good afternoon	Dobur den
Good evening	Dobur vecher
My name is ____	Az se kazvam ____
What is your name?	Kak se kazvate?
How are you?	Kak ste?
I'm well, thank you. And you?	Az sum dobre, blagodarya. A Vie?
Please	Molya
Thank you	Blagodarya
You're welcome	Ti si dobre doshal / Molya
Yes / No	Da / Ne
Goodbye	Dovizhdane
Good night	Leka nosht
See you later	Do skoro
I am American	As sum amerikanets
Do you speak English?	Govorite li angliiski?
I don't understand	Ne razbiram
Sorry	Suzalyavam
I don't know	Ne znam
I'm lost	Zagubih se
Help!	Pomosht!
Cheers!	Nazdrave!
What?	Kakvo?
Where?	Kude?
Who?	Koï?
How? / How much?	Kak? / kolko?
When?	Koga?

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 98.4%
- Male: 98.7%
- Female: 98.2% (2021)

Education in the Early Bulgarian Empires

Before the introduction of formal education, the region's early residents informally transmitted values, skills, and knowledge to



younger generations. Following the development of the Cyrillic alphabet (see *Language and Communication*) and his adoption of Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Tsar Boris I of the First

Bulgarian Kingdom (see *History and Myth*) opened 2 schools offering instruction in the Slavo-Bulgarian language. Other schools in Pliska and Ohrid (in present-day Macedonia) provided training for Bulgarian priests (see *Language and Communication*), while also serving as centers of translation, poetry, and art.

During the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (see *History and Myth*), schools at Kilifarevo and Turnovo became prominent educational centers. Meanwhile, popular cults (see of *Religion and Spirituality*) provided some educational opportunities.

Education under the Ottomans

Bulgarians' educational opportunities were limited during most of the period of the Turkish "yoke" (see *History and Myth*). While local communities and Orthodox monasteries supported so-called "cell schools," education was not sufficiently widespread to allow significant literary or educational growth. Nevertheless, these limited offerings did allow the Orthodox faith (see *Religion and Spirituality*) and the Bulgarian language to survive.

Education and the National Revival

By the mid-19th century, wealth from an expanding economy prompted local guilds, individual merchants and manufacturers, and village councils to fund education in various ways. These included building schools and supplying them with books and other resources, funding scholarships for students to study at foreign universities, and building cultural centers called **chitalishta** (see *History and Myth*).

In 1834, Bulgaria's first secular school opened in Gabrovo. By 1840, around 12 primary schools offered education to Bulgarian boys, while 1 opened its doors to girls. A decade later, almost all Bulgarian communities had a school offering primary education. By the late 19th century, the government made primary schooling mandatory.

In the 2nd half of the 19th century, secondary school offerings began to expand, adding courses in business, teaching, and theological. By 1878, when Sofia University was founded, Bulgaria was home to 1479 primary schools, 50 secondary schools, and 130 cultural centers.

Education in the Early 20th Century

Bulgaria's educational system saw significant growth and important reforms following World War I. Besides opening thousands of new schools, the government mandated secondary school attendance and greatly expanded vocational education offerings.



Education under Communism

Following the end of World War II (see *History and Myth*), the communists took over and quickly established full control over the educational system. The Ministry of Public Education assumed authority over all schools – public, religious, and those serving ethnic minorities. While the 1947 “Dimitrov Constitution”

(see *History and Myth*) mandated education for ethnic minorities in their own languages, this policy was rarely implemented. For example, by the early 1970s, the state had outlawed even elementary-level lessons in the Turkish language.

To promote its socialist system, the government implemented standardized curricula promoting communist tenets of atheism, collectivism, and Marxist-Leninist philosophy while purging the teaching ranks of individuals considered insufficiently patriotic. Focused on achieving rapid industrialization, the government emphasized practical technical training, with all secondary students required to work part-time in industry, agriculture, or construction.

These efforts had both positive and negative consequences. Literacy rates improved considerably over the decades. By focusing on technical training, however, schools offered students limited educational opportunities. In the late 1970s, Prime Minister Zhivkov (see *History and Myth*) introduced sweeping educational reform in support of Bulgaria's scientific and technological advancement. Intended to reinforce the country's communist underpinnings, this reform effort failed and was abandoned.

Modern Education System

Following the fall of communism, the educational system was depoliticized and restructured through the 1991 Law on Public Education. Today, a comprehensive network of public primary and secondary schools offers free, compulsory education to students aged 7-16. On average, Bulgarians complete 14 years of schooling.



In 2023, over 96% of children of the appropriate age attended primary school. By upper secondary school, attendance was 91%. In 2023, Bulgaria spent some 4.1% of its GDP on education, a slightly higher than neighboring Romania (3.3%) but lower than the EU average of 4.7%.

While Bulgarian is the primary language of instruction in public schools, the government recognizes several “mother tongues” as other languages of instruction. Since 1992, local schools have provided instruction in Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, Roma, and Turkish. Turkish activists frequently advocate for additional educational opportunities in that language (see *Political and Social Relations*).



Pre-Primary: Preschool is optional for children aged 3-5, although children aged 5-6 are required to complete a kindergarten year before entering 1st grade. Some facilities offer gardening, music, and athletic activities like tennis or skiing, yet others suffer from underfunding. Some ethnic minorities (see “The Education of Roma” below) and rural children are disproportionately underrepresented at this level.

Basic: Consisting of 8 grades starting at age 6, basic schooling comprises primary school (grades 1-4) and lower secondary school (grades 5-8). The curriculum includes Bulgarian literature, math, history, geography, science, art, music, foreign languages, and physical education. Generally, basic schooling is highly standardized with little differentiation based on aptitude.



Upper Secondary: Following attainment of a Basic Education Completion Certification, students take an exam to determine their entrance

into secondary school. Bulgaria offers 3 types of upper secondary schools lasting 4-5 years: comprehensive (general); vocational-technical; and “profile-oriented” schools that focus on a language (such as English, German, Russian, Turkish, Italian, French, Spanish, Armenian, or Hebrew), math and science, or the humanities.

Many upper secondary schools lack adequate modern equipment, especially for science and technical subjects. Nevertheless, participation in vocational secondary programs is above the EU average.

Post-Secondary: To pursue post-secondary academic and vocational studies, students must graduate secondary school and pass admissions exams. Some 60 universities and other institutions offer post-secondary programs of study in various languages, including Bulgarian, English, German, and French. The most prominent institutions include Sofia University, New Bulgarian University, the American University in Bulgaria, the University of National and World Economy, and the National Academy of Arts. As of 2023, about 36% of Bulgaria's 25-34 year olds held post-secondary degrees, although this rate remains below the EU average of 43% for this age group. Further, over 16% of recent graduates are unemployed. Of note, Bulgaria has experienced a "brain drain" or the emigration of the highly trained or educated in recent years due to a lack of jobs matching graduates' qualifications.

The Education of Roma

Bulgaria's Roma population (see *Political and Social Relations*) exhibits significantly lower educational achievement than populations of other ethnicities. According to a 2024 EU report, nearly 7% of Roma aged 7-15 do not attend school, while about 72% of Roma fail to complete upper secondary school. The Roma's educational underperformance is linked to a variety of factors, such as severe poverty, societal discrimination, and lack of access to education in their primary language, Romani.

Religious Education

By law, public schools must offer an optional religious education course examining Christianity and Islam from cultural, historic, and philosophical perspectives. Further, all officially registered religious groups (see *Religion and Spirituality*) may request that their beliefs be incorporated into the course curriculum.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Bulgarians consider trust, respect, and a sense of humor fundamental to building strong personal and professional relationships. They are typically generous and hospitable hosts.

Time and Work

Bulgaria's workweek runs from Monday-Friday with most business hours from 9:00am-6:00pm. While hours vary by store size and location, some shops are open weekdays from 9:00am-8:00pm and Saturdays from 10:00am-6:00pm. Stores are either closed on Sundays or have reduced hours, though major shopping centers are typically open every day, often for longer hours.



Most banks are open Monday-Friday from 9:00am-4:00pm. Post offices typically open Monday-Friday from 8:00am-5:00pm, with reduced hours on weekends. Some banks, post offices, and shops stay open later in urban centers than in rural areas. While most businesses close on public holidays, some large stores and supermarkets in urban areas remain open.



Working Conditions: The standard workweek is 40 hours with up to 8 hours paid overtime, although some sectors such as construction and agriculture require longer hours. While

Bulgarian labor laws provide comprehensive regulations to protect workers, enforcement is inconsistent and violations sometimes occur. In addition to paid public holidays, Bulgarians receive 20 days of annual paid leave.

Time Zone: Bulgaria observes Eastern European Time (EET), which is 2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Bulgaria follows daylight savings from the end of March-October, which makes Bulgaria 3 hours ahead of GMT during that period.

Date Notation: Like the US, Bulgaria uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Bulgarians write the day first, followed by the month and year.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March 3: Liberation Day
- April / May: Orthodox Easter Holidays (dates vary each year)
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 6: St. George's Day / Army Day
- May 24: Culture and Literacy Day
- September 6: Unification Day
- September 22: Independence Day
- December 24: Christmas Eve
- December 25: Christmas Day
- December 26: Boxing Day

Any holiday falling on a weekend is observed on the following Monday.

Time and Business

Business tends to move slower in Bulgaria than in the US. Bulgarians usually prefer to build trust and develop personal relations before doing business, requiring extra time and communication. While Bulgarians appreciate punctuality in business, arriving late to a meeting is generally acceptable given prior notification. Most business discussions occur during scheduled office meetings, although informal meetings in other locations or during meals are also common.

When meeting for the first time, Bulgarian businesspeople greet and shake hands (see *Language and Communication*). Potential business partners typically exchange gifts such as wine, chocolates, or dessert to help establish rapport. To build



interpersonal relations, Bulgarians often begin and end business meetings with light conversation on topics such as health, family, and pastimes. Joking is another common way to build rapport. To ensure trust and confidence among

colleagues, Bulgarians often use personal favors and hire relatives or close friends.

Bulgarians favor practical, competent, and flexible business relations. Business conversations in Bulgaria are often direct and specific, supplemented by nonverbal communication (see *Language and Communication*). Managers generally deliver feedback and criticism in private in order to avoid conflict and embarrassment.

The Bulgarian workplace is typically hierarchical. Maintaining formality, respect, and deference to authority is considered essential. While senior officials or upper management tend to run meetings and make most decisions, they also value consensus.



Consequently, Bulgarian business culture may also include consultative and informal discussions that consider the opinions of all participants, even though managers make most final decisions.

Personal Space

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the nature of the relationship. When conversing with strangers and acquaintances, Bulgarians are typically comfortable with closer distance than Americans and even closer when conversing with close friends and family.

Touch

Bulgarians tend to engage in more conversational touching than Americans, especially among close friends and family. Same-sex friends of both genders may touch and embrace to demonstrate the close nature of their platonic relationships.

Eye Contact

Direct eye contact is important during any greeting (see *Language and Communication*) or business meeting to convey interest, respect, and transparency. While constant eye contact is not always necessary, Bulgarians typically prefer to maintain at least periodic eye contact during conversations.

Photographs

Banks, churches, museums, secured areas, and similar places may prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should always acquire a Bulgarian's permission before taking his photo.

Driving

Some Bulgarians have aggressive driving habits, passing vehicles on blind corners at high speeds or ignoring designated traffic signals. At 8 per 100,000 people in 2023, Bulgaria's rate of traffic-related deaths was the highest in the EU, on par with neighboring Romania (8), and nearly twice the EU average (4.5). Drunk driving is a serious offense punishable by high fines and imprisonment. Although traffic enforcement has improved in recent years, it still suffers from corruption. For example, officials sometimes accept bribes instead of issuing fines. Like Americans, Bulgarians drive on the right side of the road.



9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Bulgarian dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect centuries of foreign influences, rural traditions, and modern global trends. Many traditions also are rooted in Bulgaria's ancient pagan past and nearly 12 centuries of Orthodox Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Dress and Appearance

Traditional: Bulgarians tend to wear traditional dress during special events, festivals, and sometimes on national holidays. While specific styles and fabrics vary across regions, folk costumes usually are made of wool or linen and richly ornamented with bold, bright embroidery. Historically, girls learned to embroider garments, blankets, and other items from a young age. Even today, young single girls usually wear garments embroidered with the brightest and most colorful stitching, while the clothing of older or married women features darker colors and simpler patterns.

Women's wear typically includes a **riza**, a white blouse decorated with intricate embroidery on the sleeves, around the neck, and along the hem.



Depending on the region, the *riza* is worn under a **sukhman** (a long, sleeveless tunic) or a **saya** (a long, short-sleeved tunic with an opening at the front). The tunic is topped with a **bruchnik**, an apron often adorned with bold, geometric, and embroidered designs representing plants, flowers, animals, and the human form. While young girls usually wear headscarves exposing their hair, married women usually keep their hair completely covered. For weddings and festivals, headdresses tend to be elaborate. Women sometimes accent their costumes with jewelry.

Men's wear includes a white blouse featuring colorful embroidered patterns at the neck and cuffs. The blouse is tucked into narrow trousers and topped with a jacket adorned with decorative braiding along the pockets and seams. Men complete their traditional look with a **kalpak** (hat made of black lambskin), socks, gaiters, and ox-hide or pigskin shoes. The costume may be topped with a long woven cloak of goat or sheep's wool.

Modern: Although specific styles vary by age and geographic location, Bulgarians typically wear clothing that reflects the latest European fashion trends. In business settings, Bulgarians prefer more formal attire. Men don tailored suits, while women may wear suit jackets with trousers or skirts, often paired with high heels.

Among younger Bulgarians, denim jeans, button-up shirts, sweaters, denim or sport jackets, and sneakers or loafers are popular. Generally, older Bulgarians tend to dress more conservatively than younger generations, with comfort and utility taking precedence over style. During the winter, Bulgarians wear wool hats and scarves, leather gloves, fur coats or thick winter jackets, and sturdy boots.

Recreation and Leisure

Bulgarians generally prefer to spend their leisure time with close friends and family. Younger Bulgarians often socialize in large groups, meeting at bars and cafes, watching movies, attending



concerts and sports events, and going to the theater or ballet. By contrast, older Bulgarians often gather at home with a small, close circle of friends. During the summer, Bulgarians enjoy barbecuing outdoors, taking long walks, and meeting friends in parks and gardens. Bulgarian men also enjoy making homemade wine and brandy (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Bulgarians often reserve extended vacations for the summer months. Common destinations include the mountains and the Black Sea coast, where camping, swimming, fishing, and rowing are popular activities. Wealthier Bulgarians may spend their holidays abroad. During the winter, Bulgarians enjoy skiing and other winter sports (see “Sports and Games” below) but typically socialize indoors. Reading is a particularly popular pastime.

Festivals: Easter is one of the most important Christian holidays of the year, when many Bulgarians observe traditional customs such as painting and eating boiled eggs. Important Muslim holidays include the month-long Ramadan, when religious observers abstain from food, water, and tobacco during the day. Another Muslim holiday is **Kurban Bayram**, also known as **Eid al-Adha**, a festival of sacrifice in which participants slaughter sheep and goats and host large feasts with music and dancing.

Other festivals celebrate annual events, some rooted in ancient pre-Christian traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Some of these events mark the changing of the seasons or celebrate the bounty of the harvest. For example, Bulgarians celebrate the beginning of spring with **Baba Marta**, an occasion when friends exchange **martenitsa** (braided red-and-white yarn adornments), which are believed to bring good fortune. After exchanging the **martenitsa**, Bulgarians often pin them to their clothing or tie them around their wrists.



During **Enyovden**, celebrated on the summer solstice, women gather flowers and herbs to chase away evil spirits and promote health, love, and wealth. Some communities celebrate an ancient ritual known as the **Kukeri** to mark the end of winter. For this ritual, participants parade through the streets wearing elaborate wooden masks that protect the wearers from evil spirits, promote fertility, and ensure a successful harvest.

Throughout the year, folk song, dance, and music festivals are popular across the country. Held every 5 years to celebrate Bulgaria's rich history of folklore and folk music, the Koprivshtitsa Folklore Festival is the largest and most famous national festival. Other notable festivals include the Varna

Summer International Festival, the International Folklore Festival, the Sofia Musical Weeks, and the Festival of Roses, among others.



Sports and Games

Sports: Bulgarians enjoy a variety of winter sports

such as skiing, ice skating, and ice hockey. Swimming, sailing, tennis, and hiking are popular during the summer. While Bulgarians also enjoy basketball and volleyball, football (soccer) is the most popular team sport. In addition to a national soccer team, most large cities have professional league teams.

Bulgarian athletes have performed well in the Olympics, medaling in wrestling, gymnastics, weightlifting, and ice skating. Notably, the Bulgarian team collectively won 20 medals in the 1988 Olympics, ranking 8th in the world that year. Prominent athletes include soccer player Christo Stoichkov and Stefka Kostadinova, who has held the women's world record for the high jump since 1987.

Traditional Games:

Traditional games are especially popular during holidays. Children typically play "guards and thieves," whereby a designated child closes his eyes and counts to 10 while other players collect nearby objects. When done counting, the child randomly assigns objects to be "thieves" or "guards." A game of tag follows, where children who picked the objects labeled as "guards" chase those who picked "thieves." Backgammon, checkers, and chess are popular among all ages.



Music



Traditional: Bulgaria has a rich history of folk music, orally passed through generations. Today, it is customary to perform traditional music at weddings, funerals, festivals, and other special occasions. Although

specific styles vary by region, folk songs generally incorporate complex harmonies, a variety of rhythms, irregular beats, and contrasting dissonance. For example, folk styles in the southern Rhodope Mountains often include slow tempos, melancholy lyrics, and low-pitched instruments, while songs in the North tend to be more energetic.

Bulgarian folk music uses a variety of traditional instruments, such as simple reed instruments, horns, flutes, and stringed instruments. Popular instruments include the **kaval**, a type of wooden flute; the **gaida**, a goatskin bagpipe; and the **tamboura**, a long-necked 4-string instrument similar to a lute.



Modern: During the communist era (see *History and Myth*), the government limited

Western-style rock, pop, and jazz, instead promoting opera and classical music. Still popular today, opera houses and orchestras in Sofia and other urban areas offer concerts featuring an array of musical styles. Prominent musicians include opera singers Boris Hristov, Nikolai Ghiaurov, and Ghena Dimitrova. Theodosii Spassov is a legendary folk artist who fuses traditional folk music with jazz, classical music, and pop. A pop-folk fusion style called **chalga** incorporates elements of Turkish, Roma, and Serbian music and has gained popularity since the 1990s. Bulgarians today once again enjoy international pop, rock, and jazz music.

Dance

Traditional Bulgarian folk dances vary by region yet exhibit certain common characteristics. Groups of dancers typically perform in lines, open crescents, or closed circles, often while singing or chanting. Dancers tend to perform their steps methodically and in a range of speeds. Some dances are reserved for women or men, while others are performed by both genders.

During the popular **horo** dance, participants gather in either a straight line or a circle and perform a series of fast, repetitive steps, while holding each other's belts and hands or waving handkerchiefs. Dancers typically shake their bodies in the fast-paced **shopluk**. In the competitive **ruchenitza**, men and women



challenge each other to a series of increasingly complex steps.

Over time, dance traditions from other European countries influenced and altered Bulgarian folk dances. During the communist era, classical ballet

became an important form of dance. Today, Bulgarians perform dances with partners and in other non-traditional formations.

Literature

Early Bulgarian folklore and folk poetry was orally transmitted through ballads and other traditional songs with lyrics exploring a range of themes, such as nature, love, and friendship. The earliest written Bulgarian literature traces to the 9th century, when Christian missionaries Cyril and Methodius first developed the Cyrillic alphabet (see *Language and Communication*). Through the 14th century, most written works comprised historical accounts and translations of religious texts. During the almost 500 years of Ottoman domination (see *History and Myth*), Ottoman rulers restricted the spread of Bulgarian literature, allowing its use only in churches and monasteries.

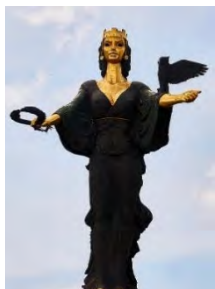
In the late 19th century, literature, art, and education flourished as a part of Bulgaria's National Revival (see *History and Myth*).

During this time, Ivan Vazov penned the famous and influential “Under the Yoke,” a novel chronicling the hardships Bulgarians endured under Ottoman rule. Meanwhile, poets Hristo Botev and Pencho Slavevkov published works encouraging the development of a Bulgarian national identity, influencing subsequent generations of Bulgarian authors.



During the communist era (see *History and Myth*), the government closely supervised the literary community, restricting the publication of certain books, magazines, and newspapers. Some artists were subject to censorship, while others were jailed or emigrated to Western Europe or the US to escape oppression.

Today, Bulgaria has a flourishing literary scene. Acclaimed contemporary artists include poet and novelist Blaga Dimitrova, who briefly served as Vice President; novelist and playwright Yordan Radichkov; and authors Maria Stankova, Emil Andreev, Georgi Tenev, and Milen Ruskov. Since relatively few works of Bulgarian literature have been translated, some contemporary Bulgarian poets and authors remain unknown to readers outside the country.



Arts and Handicrafts

Like other creative works, Bulgaria’s arts and crafts reflect Bulgarian folklore, its peasant history, and rural life. Traditional handicrafts include elaborate woodcarvings, embroidered clothing, woven carpets, pottery, leatherwork, and jewelry. In addition, artists traditionally produced Orthodox Christian icon paintings, frescoes, mosaics, and illustrated religious manuscripts. During the Ottoman era,

some artists blended traditional Bulgarian styles with Islamic art. Today, folk art often incorporates geometric or abstract designs and stylized images of animals and plants. As noted earlier, egg painting is particularly popular during Easter.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Entertaining guests at home has been central to Bulgarian culture for centuries. Today, *na gosti* (visiting) remains important in daily life. Bulgarians enjoy socializing with friends and family, often sharing simple meals prepared from seasonal, local ingredients.

Dining Customs

Bulgarians typically supplement 3 daily meals with a midmorning snack and afternoon coffee with sweets. While lunch was traditionally the

largest meal, today dinner is usually the most substantial. In most families, women prepare the meal, set the table, and wash the dishes. While some close friends and relatives may drop



by unannounced, most visits to the home usually are arranged in advance. When invited to a home for a meal, guests may bring chocolates and flowers for the hostess or a bottle of alcohol for the host. Upon entering the home, guests remove their shoes and, if provided by the hosts, replace them with slippers.

Hosts usually serve their guests first. After guests finish their portions, they either accept second servings or decline several offers of additional food. Of note, leaving a small amount of food on the plate indicates the diner is finished. Dinners, especially on special occasions, typically last several hours, and hosts may consider it rude if guests depart early. In addition to full meals, Bulgarians often invite guests over for afternoon coffee and light snacks.

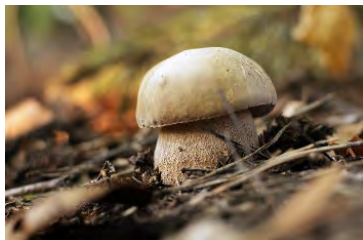
Alcoholic beverages are present during most meals. Bulgarians toast frequently and generally maintain eye contact when clinking glasses during a toast.

Diet

Bulgarian cuisine reflects the nation's unique geography and history of foreign influence (see *History and Myth*). For example, northern and central Bulgarian fare resembles Greek and Turkish cuisine. Here, meats are fried, stewed, baked, or ground, and topped with hearty sauces or layered into pastries. In addition, olive oil and bold spices are a part of most recipes. By contrast, dishes in the Rhodope Mountains of southern Bulgaria are typically simple with few spices and little oil. These dishes usually include garlic, nuts, dairy products, and seasonal vegetables. Along the coasts, Bulgarians enjoy fresh fish, often grilled or fried and served with lemon.



Fresh bread accompanies most meals. Pork is the most popular protein, followed closely by lamb, chicken, and fish. Meats are typically served alongside staples like potatoes, pasta, and rice. Many dishes incorporate or are served with yogurt, cheese, milk, sour cream, and other dairy products.



Bulgarians consume a variety of native vegetables including mushrooms, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, cabbage, green onions, carrots, and spinach. In addition to consuming them fresh, Bulgarians also enjoy pickled and soured vegetables. Popular fruits include grapes, apples, cherries, melons, and watermelons.

Popular Dishes and Meals

Breakfast is usually a light meal, consisting of cheese, bread, or a pastry served with coffee, tea, or milk. In rural areas, **boza** (a malt drink) is a popular breakfast beverage.

A traditional lunch begins with salad or a thick stew or soup, followed by a main course of meat, starch, and vegetables, and ends with dessert. In urban areas, lunch is typically lighter, usually comprised of a sandwich or salad and often purchased from a café, kiosk, or office cafeteria. Generally served around 7pm, dinner is a hearty meal that typically incorporates a variety of appetizers known as **meze**, salads, or soups served alongside meat, chicken, or fish and potatoes, rice, or pasta.



Popular entrées include **moussaka** (a casserole of pork or lamb, potatoes, tomatoes, and yogurt); **nadenitsa** (stuffed sausage); **sarmi** (cabbage or grape leaves stuffed with rice and pork); **kufleta** (fried meat patty mixed with spices, onions, and bread crumbs); and **tarator** (a cold soup of yogurt, cucumbers, dill, garlic, walnuts, and oil).

For dessert, Bulgarians enjoy fresh fruit, compote (stewed fruit), and various cakes and pastries, such as pumpkin-filled **banitsas** (fluffy layered pastries). A variety of confections are prepared with honey, such as the popular **baklava** (a thick, honey pastry made with crushed nuts).



Beverages

Bulgarians enjoy tea or coffee throughout the day, particularly espresso and thick Turkish-style coffees. Fresh fruit juices and diluted yogurt are other popular non-alcoholic beverages. Alcohol is inexpensive and widely available. In addition to beer, popular varieties include **rakia** (a grape or plum brandy) and **mastika** (an anise brandy), both customarily consumed with salad or **meze**. Wine is served with many midday and evening meals. Tracing back over 2,000 years, Bulgaria's winemaking tradition is still important today (see *Economics and Resources*).

Eating Out

While rural Bulgarians generally eat at home, urban residents eat out regularly, using restaurants and bars as popular socializing locations. Serving primarily national and European cuisine, restaurants range from upscale establishments to small casual eateries offering inexpensive and hearty meals. In the summer, outdoor cafés are particularly popular in urban areas and along the Black Sea coast.



Prevalent across the country, **mehana** (traditional Bulgarian restaurants) serve customary cuisine while featuring folk music and dancing. Street vendors

in urban areas sell fresh fruits, seasonal vegetables, and light snacks such as cheese-filled *banitsas*, sausages, fried dough balls, and sandwiches. Although restaurants do not automatically add a surcharge to the bill, waiters expect a 10% tip for good service. In more casual cafés, it is acceptable to simply round up the bill.

Health Overview

Bulgarians' overall health has improved in recent years. Between 1990-2020, maternal mortality dropped significantly from 25 to 7 deaths per 100,000 live births. Meanwhile, life expectancy at birth increased from 72 to 76 years, though it remains below the EU average of 81. Further, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) reduced from 18 to 8 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1990-2024. Nevertheless, it remains one of Europe's highest rates and double the EU average of 3. Pollution from industrial activities severely impacts residents' health in some regions.

While Bulgarians generally have access to free and modern healthcare, facilities are concentrated in cities and underserve rural dwellers. Further, quality of care varies significantly between private, public, urban, and rural facilities. In 2023, Bulgaria had 319 hospitals.

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Bulgarian medicine centers on the use of home remedies consisting of herbal and other natural non-surgical methods to identify and treat illnesses. Today, modern treatments often are supplemented with traditional therapies. Pharmacies and merchants in both urban and rural areas commonly sell herbal remedies and medicinal plants. Among others, herbal treatments include the use of bearberry leaves, stinging nettle, and bilberry to treat a variety of ailments, ranging from burns and minor cuts to arthritis and diabetes.

In 2004, the Bulgarian government legalized the use of medicinal plants and certain traditional procedures in public and private clinics. These



treatments include non-traditional physiotherapy methods; homeopathy (a form of alternative medicine developed in 18th century Germany whereby a patient ingests diluted plant, mineral, and animal substances to trigger the body's natural system of healing); and acupuncture (the process of inserting long, thin needles into a patient's skin).

Modern Healthcare System

Besides developing national healthcare policy, the Ministry of Health regulates Bulgaria's national healthcare system. This system provides free universal healthcare for all employed and retired Bulgarians through the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). Funded by federal, municipal, and private contributions, the NHIF covers most medical services and procedures such as preventive care, emergency services, prescription medicine, maternal care and compensation, rehabilitation, retirement, and costs associated with death. Meanwhile, uninsured Bulgarians must pay out-of-pocket for all medical procedures, tests, and medicines.

Despite increased government investment into healthcare over the last several decades, Bulgaria's healthcare system is underfunded. While private facilities offer exceptional care to the wealthy, public hospitals are generally understaffed, ill-equipped, and overcrowded. Quality of care further diminishes in rural areas, where clinics offer limited medical procedures and generally underserve rural dwellers. In addition, low wages in the public sector force many of Bulgaria's finest physicians to seek employment in the private sector or elsewhere in Europe.

Bulgaria's aging population is likely to burden the nation's already overloaded healthcare services in the coming decades. The 21% of the population aged 65 or older in 2024 is expected to grow to about 30% by 2050. Meanwhile, Bulgarians' low



fertility (see *Sex and Gender*) combined with high emigration (see *Political and Social Relations*) result in a dwindling number of Bulgarians of working age. As the proportion of retirees rises over the next decades, these demographic trends are expected continue

to add significant strain to national resources and the healthcare system.

Health Challenges

Common in most developed countries with aging populations, non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases include cardiovascular illnesses, malignant tumors, stroke, diabetes, and liver disease. In Bulgaria, these diseases account for over 83% of deaths. In addition, respiratory illnesses associated with smoking are pervasive. While cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death, cancer is the second, accounting for 14% of all deaths among Bulgarians, which is below the EU average but slightly increasing. Preventable "external causes" such as accidents, suicides, and drug use result in about 2% of all deaths.

The average life expectancy of Bulgarians is 4-5 years less than the EU average – a rate that experts attribute to their unhealthy lifestyle habits such as unbalanced diets, smoking, inadequate physical activity, and insufficient prevention and treatment of diseases. Unhealthy habits have also led to rising obesity. As of 2022, about 12% of Bulgarian adults are obese, lower than both the EU average of 15% and the US rate 33%.

Significantly, Roma (see *Political and Social Relations*) disproportionately lack access to modern healthcare, experience higher rates of chronic disease, and are more likely to contract communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis. Further, Roma have an average life expectancy 10 years less than the national average. In addition, about 19% of Roma households remain unconnected to a sewage system, while 12% lack access to running water.

Pollution and Waste: Unrestrained industrial development during the communist era (see *Economics and Resources*) left many Bulgarian cities heavily polluted. Consequently, high rates of respiratory and other pollution-related diseases developed by the 1990s. Today, toxic industrial discharge continues to contaminate the air, water, and soil in some regions, leading to high rates of lead poisoning, asthma, bronchitis, stunted growth, birth defects, and other medical issues. Pollution most heavily affects residents living in the south-central province of Stara Zagora and in highly industrialized cities such as Sofia, Devnya, Plovdiv, Varna, Elisseina, Kurdzhali, and Pirdop.

While tap water in most regions is clean, unregulated disposal of household and industrial waste

contaminates and degrades groundwater in some urban areas such as the capital city of Sofia. As a result, some urban residents lack access to clean water.



11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For centuries, most Bulgarians subsisted as peasants in an agrarian-based economy, although others existed as sheep herders or traders on the numerous trade routes linking Europe and Asia. Despite significant investments in light industry and oil refining during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, about 80% of Bulgarians still worked in agriculture in 1940.

From 1945-90, Bulgaria pursued economic policies prioritizing heavy industrialization and farm collectivization modeled on the centrally-planned Soviet system (see *History and Myth*). As a

result, millions of Bulgarians were attracted to cities offering factory jobs, while most of those remaining in rural areas worked on large collective farms. For



about 2 decades following World War II, a rapidly growing Bulgarian economy brought notable a rise in living standards through the early 1960s.

In subsequent years, perpetual mismanagement and corruption resulted in economic decline. Despite an attempt to liberalize the economy in the mid-1980s, shortages of food and other goods became widespread, as regional discontent spread throughout the Soviet bloc. In 1989, Bulgaria's government and economy collapsed (see *History and Myth*).

Thereafter, Bulgaria pursued what would become an arduous transition to a liberal free-market economy. Using the West as an economic model, Bulgaria sought to reform its economy by privatizing land and state-owned companies, curbing price controls, and reforming banks.

Initially, corruption in the privatization process, resistance to change, and political instability prevented Bulgaria from implementing the necessary reforms. As it aligned more with the West, Bulgaria traded less with its traditional economic partners, further aggravating the situation. In 1996-97, inflation peaked at over 1000% as a major bank collapsed and unemployment rose steadily, triggering a political crisis (see *History and Myth*). Consequently, most Bulgarians' living standards declined through 1997.

To combat the political and economic crises, the Bulgarian government partnered with international financial institutions to introduce stabilization measures. These included strict financial discipline, a currency board, additional privatizations, and other reforms. By successfully implementing these reforms, Bulgaria managed to shrink its national debt and attract foreign direct investment (FDI). To further attract investors, Bulgaria invested in 6 free trade zones: Burgas, Ruse, Plovdiv, Vidin, Dragoman, and Svilengrad.



By 2000, the reforms had begun to gain traction, and Bulgaria's economy returned to growth. Unemployment and inflation declined as FDI increased. Despite some structural issues and persistent corruption,

Bulgaria began to modernize its industrial sector. It strengthened its financial and services sectors and privatized more state-owned firms. Having established economic stability, Bulgaria gained accession to the European Union (EU) in 2007, facilitating further economic expansion and resulting in an average annual growth rate of 7% between 2000-08.

The global financial crisis of 2008-09 hit Bulgaria hard, largely due to its trade-dependent economy. In 2009, the economy shrank by about 5% and has since been slow to recover. While real annual growth averaged a meager 1.5% from 2010-14, unemployment steadily rose, reaching a peak of almost 13% in 2013. A 2014 domestic banking crisis brought financial instability

and a lack of investor confidence in the economy. Moreover, external factors such as the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia negatively impacted tourism, real estate, exports, and other sectors of the economy (see *Political and Social Relations*).

More recently, GDP growth declined from 3.9% in 2022 to 1.9% in 2023, but is expected to reach 2.7% in 2024, supported by investments from EU funds. Positive indications include declining unemployment, low corporate taxes, an increasingly stable financial sector, low inflation, and an improving business environment.

Although Bulgaria has successfully transitioned to a modern free-market economy, it remains the EU's poorest member. Persistent corruption, net emigration, structural unemployment, organized crime, poor infrastructure, and the socio-economic exclusion of the Roma population and other minority groups continue to plague Bulgaria's economic health (see *Political and Social Relations*). Of note, the unemployment rate among the Roma is nearly 55%.

Services

Accounting for about 63% of GDP and 65% of employment, the services sector is the largest and fastest-growing segment of Bulgaria's economy. Significant sub-sectors include wholesale and retail trade, transportation and storage, banking, communications, public administration, and tourism.

Tourism: Bulgaria's geographic location between Europe and Asia, its temperate climate, and its historical sites make it popular among tourists. In 2023, tourism industry receipts directly accounted for approximately 6.9% of GDP. In 2023, Bulgaria hosted over 8.64 million tourists who visited such key attractions as Black Sea beaches, ski resorts, historic centers in Sofia and Plovdiv, and rural villages. Tourists primarily come from Ukraine, Turkey, Romania, Germany, and Greece.

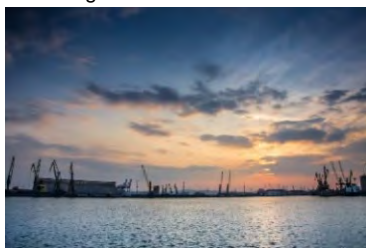


Industry

As the second-largest component of the economy, the industrial sector accounts for about 23% of GDP and 30% of the labor force. Manufacturing, construction, mining, and oil refining are the most significant sub-sectors.

Manufacturing: Accounting for around 14% of GDP, Bulgaria's diversified manufacturing sector includes metalworking, electronics, light machinery, textiles, tobacco, pharmaceutical products, as well as food and chemical processing.

Construction: The Bulgarian construction market size was valued at 3.4% of GDP in 2023 and is expected to achieve an annual growth rate of more than 4% during 2024-2027.



Construction market over the forecast period will be supported by investments in the transport and energy sectors.

Mining: Bulgaria has large reserves of coal, copper, iron, lead, and zinc. Accounting for about 12% of exports and 7% of GDP in 2023, mining activities provided around 22,900 jobs.

Oil Refining: While Bulgaria has limited oil reserves, it has a significant capacity for oil refining. The Lukoil Neftochim Burgas refinery is the largest industrial enterprise in Bulgaria and the largest refinery in southeastern Europe, alone accounting for over \$2 billion of Bulgaria's GDP.

Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry and is the smallest component of the Bulgarian economy, accounting for around 3% of GDP and 6% of employment.

Farming and Livestock: By redistributing land from many collectivized farms following the end of communism, Bulgaria today has about 42% of its land area dedicated to cultivation.

Despite recent efforts to consolidate and modernize holdings, many farms remain small family-owned enterprises. Major agricultural products include grains, fruits, tobacco, sunflowers, corn, sugar beets, and other vegetables. While Bulgaria's wine industry was one of the world's largest in the 1980s, production has declined notably since then, although quality has improved. Of note, Bulgaria is one of the world's leading producers of rose attar, an oil extracted from roses



used in perfumes and other cosmetic products. Poultry, pigs, cows, sheep, and goats are common livestock varieties.

Fishing: In 2022, the relatively small Bulgarian fishing industry consisted of around 2,000 small vessels that harvested about 18,145 tons of sprat, anchovy, mullet, and blue fish. Including production from both coastal and inland waterways as well as fisheries, Bulgaria exported almost \$9.5 million of fish and related products, primarily to Romania, Sweden, and Spain.

Forestry: With over 35% of its territory covered by woodlands, Bulgaria has a productive forestry industry. Timber, furniture, and other wood products comprise nearly 3% of GDP. While



state-protected forests account for nearly 20% of Bulgaria's total land area, commercial yields include oak, pine, beech, and spruce trees.

Currency

Bulgaria's currency is the **lev** (лв), issued in 7 banknote values (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100) and 1 coin value (лв1). A lev subdivides into **stotinki** (cents), issued in 6 coin values (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50). The lev was pegged to the Euro in 2002, and with fluctuations in exchange rates, \$1 has been worth between лв1.7-лв1.90 in recent years.

While some businesses in urban areas accept credit cards, smaller vendors and businesses in rural regions mostly only accept cash.

Foreign Trade

Totaling \$63.4 billion in 2023, Bulgaria's exports primarily consisted of petroleum, garments, copper, wheat, and natural gas sold to Germany (14%), Romania (11%), Italy (8%), and Greece (6%). In the same year, Bulgaria imported \$59.16 billion in petroleum, metals, medications, automobiles, and electrical components from Germany (12%), Turkey (8%), Romania (8%), Russia (7%), and Italy (6%).

European Union

Membership in the EU (see *Political and Social Relations*) provides a large common market for exports, a more secure business environment, and easier access to FDI. In 2023, about 58% of Bulgarian trade was with EU countries. Notable disadvantages to EU membership include restrictions on the flow of some goods and services and easier emigration of Bulgarians to other EU countries, thereby reducing Bulgaria's labor force.



Foreign Aid

The EU has pledged about €11 billion for Bulgaria to use for economic, social, and territorial cohesion projects between 2021-2027. In recent years, the US has provided more than \$238 million in security assistance to Bulgaria to increase security cooperation and

NATO interoperability (see *Political and Social Relations*). In 2023, the US disbursed \$7.8 million to Bulgaria in foreign assistance.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

With a decline in physical infrastructure over the past several decades, Bulgaria is in the process of modernizing road, rail, water, and air transport. Overall, Bulgaria's physical infrastructure is inferior to all other EU countries except Romania. Due to its strategic location between Europe and Asia, Bulgaria plans to ensure that its transportation system and pipelines play a significant role in regional trade and transport. Despite significant investments, progress is often slow, and some projects remain incomplete for indefinite periods. Bulgarians generally enjoy free speech and unrestricted Internet access, though recent collusion between media outlets and the government has resulted fewer press freedoms.

Transportation

While the number of Bulgarian families owning privately-owned vehicle (POV) is increasing, travel by train, bus, taxi, or foot remain popular. Sofia has an extensive transport system



consisting of trams, trolleys, minibuses, and 2 underground metro lines. Most urban areas have efficient and interconnected public bus and train transit systems that typically run daily from 5:00am-midnight. Train and bus service is also available in some smaller towns. POVs, oxcarts, bicycles, and walking are common modes of transport in rural areas.

Roadways: In 2023, over 97% of Bulgaria's 11,886 mi of main roads were paved. Of Bulgaria's 6 major highways, only 3 (routes A1, A4, A6) are complete. Persistent corruption and underinvestment have delayed the completion of highways A2, A3, and A5. Although roads in urban areas are in reasonably good condition, secondary roads in rural towns and the countryside are typically unpaved and in poor condition.

Railways: Bulgaria has over 2,504 mi of railways that connect its cities and towns with the rest of Europe. The state-owned **Bulgarski durzhavni zheleznitsi** (Bulgarian State Railways) provides most train services. Primarily due to mismanagement and corruption, passenger and freight volume has decreased since the early 1990s. Nevertheless, the inexpensive rail services remain popular. In 2015, Bulgaria completed a high-speed railway between Plovdiv and Turkey.

Ports and Waterways: Bulgaria has about 292 mi of inland waterways. Both Burgas and Varna are major Black Sea ports that offer ferry services to neighboring countries. Additionally, Varna is a free trade zone (see *Economics and Resources*).

Airways: Bulgaria has 68 airports, 57 with paved runways. The largest, Sofia Airport, served over 7.9 million



passengers in 2024. In the same year, Varna and Burgas Airports on the Black Sea coast catered to 3.3 million passengers and are often busier than Sofia Airport in the summer. Bulgaria Air is the national flag carrier, offering services to many international destinations. Of note, the Bulgarian Air Force's Vrazhdebna Air Base is located at Sofia Airport.



Energy

Bulgaria's only significant energy source is lignite, a low-quality soft coal. Until 2022, the country relied on imported oil and natural gas from Russia for 75% of its total energy consumption. Bulgaria is

pursuing the development of renewable energy sources such as nuclear, hydroelectric, and wind power. In 2023, around 32% of Bulgaria's total energy consumption came from renewable resources, already surpassing its EU 2020 goal of 16%.

Media

While Bulgaria's Constitution protects freedom of speech and press, some Bulgarian media outlets collude with businessmen and politicians, threatening media's independence. As a result, journalists sometimes self-censor their publications to serve the interests of these powerful actors. Overall, Bulgaria ranks worst in the EU in an international index of freedom of the press.

Print Media: The Bulgarian press includes hundreds of local and national periodicals published in Bulgarian, English, Turkish, and other languages. *Dnevnik*, *24 Chasa*, *Dneven Trud*, *Capital*, and *Telegraf* are popular national newspapers, while *Sofia Echo* is a national weekly English-language publication. In 2015, the Bulgarian government fined *Dnevnik* and *Capital* over coverage of a banking crisis and corruption, resulting in increased tensions over media censorship.

Radio and TV: Bulgaria has a wide range of both public and private radio and TV broadcasters. Households generally subscribe to cable, satellite, or Internet services that provide international content in Bulgarian, English, and other languages.

Telecommunications

Bulgaria has an extensive telecommunications network despite slow rates of modernization and connectivity growth. In 2022, Bulgaria had about 10 landline and 117 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people.

Internet: Bulgaria has some of the EU's lowest-quality Internet services. While fixed broadband coverage reaches 95% of households, only about 79% of Bulgarians are regular internet users and nearly 9% have never used the Internet, compared to EU averages of 88% and 5% respectively. Nevertheless, Bulgarians have some of the highest rates of social media and video call use in the EU. Most urban areas are well-connected to Internet services, while small towns often have Internet cafes that provide online access. The government offers few online public services.





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