



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Slightly larger than Tennessee, Bulgaria covers 42,811 square miles (110,879 square kilometers). Much of the terrain is mountainous; the Rila Mountains in the south are the highest on the Balkan Peninsula, with the highest point being Mount Musala at 9,597 feet (2,925 meters). Plains dominate the northern and central regions. To the east lies the Black Sea. The Danube River constitutes the northern border, which separates Bulgaria from Romania. The climate is similar to that of the Midwest region of the United States, with cold, snowy winters and hot, dry summers. Northern regions tend to be colder than southern regions.

### History

Several tribes known as Thracians are the oldest known inhabitants of the area now called Bulgaria. They founded the Odrisaw Kingdom in the fifth century BC. Several hundred years later, Slavic tribes began migrating to the area. In the seventh century AD, Bulgars (a central Asian people) came and mixed with the Slavs and Thracians. A Bulgarian state was recognized by the Byzantine Empire in 681. Two Bulgarian kingdoms existed before Bulgaria was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1396.

The period of Ottoman rule that followed is known in Bulgaria as the "Turkish yoke." The struggle for political and religious independence gave rise to a cultural renaissance at the end of the 18th century. Still, the Ottomans continued to rule until 1878, when Bulgaria became independent as a result

of the Russian-Turkish War. It was briefly divided into the Kingdom of Bulgaria (to the north) and Eastern Romelia (to the south). Eastern Romelia remained part of the Ottoman Empire until it was reunited with Bulgaria in 1885. The Third Bulgarian Kingdom lasted from 1885 to 1944. Although allied with Germany in World Wars I and II, Bulgaria was not always compliant with the military power. In 1943, the protests of the people, clergymen, politicians, and king prevented the country's 50,000 Jews from being deported to Nazi concentration camps in Poland.

However, after World War II, Communists seized control of Bulgaria and consolidated power. The monarchy was abolished by a rigged referendum in 1946. Georgi Dimitrov, who had been a national hero against the Nazis in World War II, made major reforms as the Bulgarian Communist leader. The 1947 constitution was named after him.

In 1956, Todor Zhivkov came to power, first as Communist Party chief and later as prime minister. His authority remained unquestioned until a 1989 coup removed him as reforms swept through Eastern Europe. The Communists (renamed Socialists) won free elections in 1990 but struggled to form a stable government. A new constitution was approved in 1991; subsequent elections established a multiparty parliament. In 1992, Zhelyu Zhelev, a popular former dissident, became the first directly elected president. His government worked to privatize industry, liquidate collective farms, and return property confiscated in 1948 to its owners or heirs. Amid economic turmoil, Petar Stoyanov of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was elected president in November 1996.

In 1996, mass protests against the government's failed

economic policies forced Socialist prime minister Zhan Videnov to resign more than a year early. UDF leader Ivan Kostov became prime minister in 1997, ending years of Socialist rule. In 1999, Bulgaria settled a long dispute with Macedonia over official recognition of Macedonian as a distinct language (Bulgarian and Macedonian are closely related, but Macedonia wanted its language recognized by Bulgaria as separate). The settlement has opened up the way for economic, political, and military cooperation between the two countries.

Membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) came in 2004. Bulgaria undertook substantial economic and political reform before joining the European Union in January 2007. However, organized crime and corruption remain such serious problems that the EU suspended aid to Bulgaria in July 2008. The government continues to combat these issues while working toward promoting economic growth and increasing privatization. A worldwide economic crisis threatens to undermine these efforts, and workers are angry about the way the government has responded to economic problems.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Bulgaria's population of 7.1 million is shrinking by about 0.8 percent per year. Most of the population (84 percent) is ethnic Bulgarian. Another 9.4 percent is Turkish, and 4.7 percent is Roma (Gypsy). Macedonians, Armenians, Jews, Russians, and other groups also inhabit Bulgaria in small numbers. Sofia, the capital, has nearly 1.5 million residents. Most people (about 70 percent) live in urban areas.

### Language

The official language is Bulgarian, and nearly all inhabitants speak it. About half of the Turkish population speaks Turkish as a native language, but most also speak Bulgarian. Bulgarian is a Slavic language that uses the Cyrillic alphabet, which was developed in the ninth century by Christian priests Cyril and Methodius. Russian was previously a required subject in school, so many people can speak it, but Bulgarian is the language of instruction. English, German, and French are the most popular languages to study.

### Religion

Most Bulgarians are Christians, and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church claims a membership of almost 83 percent of the population. Muslims comprise about 12 percent of the population. Another 1.4 percent is Roman Catholic. Orthodox monasteries are held in high regard for their religious and artistic significance. Many monasteries and churches contain frescoes and icons of significant historical value.

While religious worship was discouraged during the communist era, it is relatively unrestricted today. Still, many people see religion as a matter of tradition, rather than one of strong faith. Religious holidays are openly celebrated. Rural people and the older generation are more devout in attending services, but young people in urban areas are also showing an

interest in religion. Traditional religious organizations registered with the government enjoy broad freedoms. Animosity toward outside groups has led to some restrictions on the existence and activities of foreign sects.

### General Attitudes

Bulgarians generally respect those who are open, strong, capable, gregarious, good-humored, forthright, and loyal to family and friends. Group and family concerns are very important, and education is highly valued.

Bulgarians take pride in their heritage and culture, which have been preserved despite centuries of foreign domination. They are particularly sensitive about Ottoman rule. Democracy has always been important to Bulgarians. In fact, the 1879 constitution was one of the most progressive in Europe. People are interested in politics, both domestic and international, and try to be well informed. They are hopeful about their political leaders but sometimes skeptical about their motives.

Bulgarians face many challenges during the transition to democracy. Most people are cautious about the future because of current economic hardships. Young people view the United States as a wealthy and fortunate country, and they also look to Western Europe as a model for their own development. At the same time, many older adults are wary of foreign influences in Bulgaria and oppose non-Bulgarian ideas or items. An entrepreneurial spirit is emerging, but businesspeople are not admired on a personal level. In the past, people could only become wealthy through corruption and organized crime, so negative attitudes toward the rich still exist. Honest private businesspeople have to work hard to gain respect and be regarded in a positive light. Bulgarians take pride in being hard workers and are rebuilding a work ethic weakened by years of guaranteed employment. Careers and professional skills are becoming more important.

### Personal Appearance

Fashions from Europe and the United States are popular, but clothing is expensive. Women generally make an effort to be well dressed and well groomed in public, but they may wear something more casual at home to keep nicer clothing in good condition. Professional women usually wear a skirt, a blouse or sweater, and high heels to work. Clothing is neatly pressed; wrinkled items are rarely seen in public. Sneakers may be worn with jogging suits or other outfits. Young women wear blue jeans and either a sweater or a shirt with buttons. Older, rural women often wear a house dress, sweater, scarf, and conservative shoes.

Professional men wear suits and ties to work, although older men prefer trousers and sweaters. Young men wear jeans, denim or sport jackets, flannel shirts, and sneakers or loafers. Young children are considered the best-dressed people in the country, wearing imported clothing and newly hand-knit items. Hats, boots, scarves, gloves, and winter jackets or fur coats are worn during the cold winters.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

When meeting, Bulgarians usually shake hands. The handshake might be accompanied in formal situations by *Kak ste?* (How are you?) or *Zdraveite* (Hello). Friends, relatives, and colleagues use the informal terms for these greetings: *Kak si?* and *Zdrasti* or *Zdrave*. Close female friends might kiss on the cheek. People do not shake hands when saying *Dobro utro* (Good morning), *Dober den* (Good day), *Dober vetcher* (Good evening), or *Leka nosht* (Good night). They use first names in informal settings but otherwise address others by title and family name. *Gospodin* (Mr.), *Gospozha* (Mrs.), and *Gospozhitsa* (Miss) are common titles, but professional titles are used also. When one joins a small gathering, it is polite to greet each person individually, beginning with the women or the elderly.

*Dovijdane* (Till I see you again) is a common parting phrase. Friends might also say *Vsichko hubavo* (All the best) or *Ciao* (Good-bye). Urban people do not usually greet strangers passing on the street, but this is considered polite in rural areas.

### Gestures

Among older Bulgarians, “yes” is often indicated by shaking the head from side to side, and “no” is expressed with one or two nods. One might shake the index finger from side to side to emphasize the “no” and even add a “tsk” sound to express displeasure. In conversation, people generally do not use hand gestures, but they often touch each other. Female friends might walk arm-in-arm down the street. Pointing with the index finger is rude. It is impolite for men to cross an ankle over the knee or for anyone to put feet on furniture. One should ask permission of other passengers before lowering a bus or train window.

### Visiting

Visiting (*na gosti*) is an important part of Bulgarian life. Friends and neighbors commonly drop by for a short visit without prior arrangement, but more typically, invitations are extended. Hosting friends for afternoon coffee and cake is popular, as is inviting them over for dinner. In addition to visiting at homes, people often socialize at cafés. Outdoor cafés provide opportunities to spend warm summer evenings chatting with friends.

Women guests usually enter the home before men. Many Bulgarians remove their shoes upon entering, unless the hosts object. If slippers are not offered, guests wear their stockings. Hosts usually offer refreshments and a drink; alcohol is rarely served without food. Invited guests often bring chocolates, an odd number of flowers for the hostess (even numbers are for funerals), or a bottle of alcohol for the host.

Evening visits usually start after 8 p.m. and may last until after midnight (until 3 a.m. for special occasions). Bulgarians enjoy showing hospitality to guests and having long conversations, so leaving early is rude.

### Eating

In addition to three meals a day, Bulgarians might have a midmorning snack and afternoon coffee. Breakfast is usually light, consisting of coffee and a cheese-filled pastry or some other bread product (sweet roll, toast, etc.). *Boza* (a malt-based drink) is a typical breakfast beverage. Traditionally, the largest meal is eaten at midday. It consists of soup and/or salad, a main course, and dessert. When family schedules conflict with the traditional mealtime, people eat a lighter lunch—at a fast food establishment, kiosk, or café, if not at home—and eat their main family meal after 7 p.m. If dinner is not the main meal, it is light and consists of some of the same foods as lunch, but not soup or dessert. Salads are eaten from a common platter with individual forks.

The continental style of eating is most common, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. It is considered polite for guests to accept second helpings. An empty plate and glass will usually be refilled. A small amount of food left on the plate (usually after second helpings) indicates that one is full. Conversation is expected, and everyone waits for all to finish before leaving the table. Meals for special occasions can include several courses and may last many hours. Toasting (*Nazdrave*) is done throughout a meal; people maintain eye contact when clinking glasses during a toast.

Rural Bulgarians generally eat at home, but people in cities often dine out, and new restaurants have opened. Bills are paid at the table. *Mehana*, a traditional Bulgarian eating establishment, is still common throughout the country; it features traditional food, folk music, and dancing. Fast food establishments are uncommon in Bulgaria except in major cities.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

The family unit is strong and supportive of its members. Women usually work and take care of household responsibilities, and children typically respect their parents, often caring for them in old age. Unmarried adults live with their parents until they marry. Young couples often live with one set of parents until they are able to get housing for themselves.

Most families do not have more than two children. Some women may receive three years of maternity leave, two of which are paid. Because urban women usually work outside the home, grandmothers play an important role in child care. Men traditionally do not help with household duties, but the younger generation is assuming greater responsibilities.

### Housing

Most urban families live in apartments. Housing in Bulgarian cities has changed since the communist era. Now, parents save money to help their children buy their own apartments. Bulgarians take great pride in being educated and well-read, so there is almost always a bookshelf in their living rooms. Many urban families own village homes, often a childhood home, which they use for summer retreats, for retired parents, or for keeping family gardens or farms. Most Bulgarians still feel tied to their agricultural heritage.

In rural areas, it is not uncommon for a young married couple to take over a floor in the home of one of their parents. In dry areas, private wells are built to provide water for orchards and gardens. Almost every house in a village has a garden, where tomatoes, potatoes, cucumbers, and strawberries are grown. Big houses near the seaside are often turned into private hotels during the summer. Almost every room of every Bulgarian home is adorned with a Persian-style carpet.

### Dating and Marriage

Dating begins in groups, but teenagers also date one-on-one. Favorite activities include meeting at a café to drink and talk, going to a movie, dancing at a club, or relaxing in a park. Most Bulgarians expect to marry and have children, but they may wait to marry until they are financially stable. Most women marry between ages 18 and 25. Rural men tend to marry in their mid- or late twenties, while most urban men marry in their thirties.

Weddings involve big celebrations and can be very expensive. A legal civil ceremony often is followed by a church wedding. A big reception is held in the evening. Folk music, dancing, and eating are common at the reception. Many traditions are kept by families, including filling the empty shoe of the bride with money to “steal” or “buy” her and having the bride and groom pull on opposite ends of a loaf of bread (whoever gets the largest piece will be the boss of the family). Newlyweds have recently begun to go on honeymoons.

### Life Cycle

Naming a baby after a grandparent is very common. It is a way for parents to show respect to their own parents. When visiting the parents of a newborn baby, people bring only odd numbers of gifts (even numbers bring bad luck), but they do not visit without an invitation. About a year after the birth of a child, a *proshchapulnik* is held. This is a celebration in which the child is offered one of several items such as crayons, money, or books. What the child picks is thought to be an indication of a future career path—an artist, a businessperson, or a writer in this example.

At 18, most Bulgarians are considered adults, legally and traditionally. In some cultures, such as the Roma, adulthood comes earlier. Roma girls, for example, can get married at 14.

At funerals, mourners typically honor the memory of the deceased by drinking wine and eating wheat covered with cinnamon and nuts. Forty days after the funeral and every year on All Soul’s days, family and friends visit the grave.

### Diet

Bulgarians eat pork, chicken, fish, or lamb with most main dishes. Dairy products such as yogurt and cheese are common ingredients. Popular main meals include *moussaka* (a casserole with pork or lamb, potatoes, tomatoes, and yogurt) and *nadenitsa* (stuffed pork sausage). *Kufteta* is a fried meat patty mixed with bread crumbs. *Sarmi* is a pepper or cabbage stuffed with pork and rice. Grilled meat (*skara*), such as *shishcheta* (a pork shish kebab), is popular, especially in restaurants. *Shopska salata* is a salad made with *cirene*

(Bulgarian feta cheese), cucumbers, and tomatoes. A favorite cold soup is *tarator*, which includes cucumbers, yogurt, garlic, dill, walnuts, and oil. Cheese-filled *banitsas* (layered pastries) are eaten as a snack or for breakfast, while pumpkin-filled *banitsas* are a popular dessert. Various cakes and *baklava* (a thin, leafy pastry with a syrup-and-nut filling) are also enjoyed for dessert. Meals usually are accompanied by a soft drink, alcohol, or coffee. Espresso and Turkish-style coffee are popular.

### Recreation

People enjoy being out in nature, hiking, walking, or touring in the countryside. Soccer and basketball are popular sports. Volleyball is played by men and women at parks, clubs, and gyms. Skiing is a popular luxury in Sofia. August is the favorite time to visit the Black Sea. Summer vacations also typically include a trip to the mountains. Many professional organizations, schools, and local governments own lodges in the mountains where their members can stay for minimal cost. Urban children have access to recreation centers. Movies from the United States are quite popular.

### The Arts

Bulgarians enjoy folk music. Traditional instruments include the *kaval* (a type of flute) and the *gaida* (a bagpipe). The *chalga*, a mix of Turkish, Roma, and Serbian music, is becoming more popular and is sung in Bulgarian. Festivals throughout the year highlight aspects of traditional Bulgarian culture. Cities sponsor the performing arts, and even small towns have a local theater. Pottery, woodworking, and leatherworking are prominent art forms. Government and educational institutions encourage fine arts, especially opera, and commercial arts.

### Holidays

Public holidays include New Year’s Day, National Day of Freedom and Independence (3 Mar.), Easter, the Day of Bulgarian Culture and Science (24 May), and Christmas Day. On 24 May, Cyril and Methodius are honored for developing the Cyrillic alphabet. The country’s accomplishments in science and culture are also celebrated. On name days (*immeden*), people commemorate the saint after whom they are named. Families recognize each such day with a special meal.

A popular Easter tradition is to go to church at midnight, light candles, and walk around the church three times. Another is to decorate eggs and knock them against each other to see which egg will last the longest without breaking.

The most celebrated season stretches from Christmas Eve to New Year’s Day. On Christmas Eve, products of the soil (no meat) are eaten to represent a successful past harvest and to wish for a good future harvest. On New Year’s Day, people eat a large meal and exchange presents. They often decorate a tree. Children go door-to-door wishing good fortune to friends and relatives. The children carry a small decorated stick (*survachka*) with which they tap people they visit on the back in exchange for candy and money.

At the beginning of March, Bulgarians celebrate spring with *Martenitza*. People exchange red-and-white yarn designs to symbolize health. They wear the yarn designs on their

clothing until they see a stork or a blossoming tree. They then either put the *martenitza* on a tree branch to bring on spring or hide it under a rock to represent the wish that the evil spirits in nature (and humankind) will go to sleep.

## SOCIETY

### Government

Bulgaria is a multiparty democracy. The president (currently Georgi Parvanov) is head of state. The prime minister (currently Boyko Borisov), whom the president appoints from the largest parliamentary party, is head of government. Members of the 240-seat National Assembly (*Narodno Sobranie*) are elected to four-year terms. Bulgaria is divided into 28 regions, each headed by a regional governor. All citizens are eligible to vote at age 18.

### Economy

Bulgaria's transition to a market economy has been difficult. A severe devaluation of Bulgaria's currency, the *lev* (BGL), and hyperinflation (300 percent) led the economy to the brink of collapse in early 1997. With the support of international lenders, the government undertook a strict monetary policy to curb inflation and stabilize its currency. However, additional reforms are needed to revive the economy. Large public debts, a lack of foreign investment, and a small private sector remain challenges. Most people struggle to meet their basic needs.

Bulgaria exports agricultural products (grains, tobacco, wine, dairy foods) and some machinery. Traditionally, it also exported energy but had to reduce its output after closing four Soviet-era nuclear reactors to conform with EU regulations. Plans for the construction of a second nuclear power plant are in place. Bulgaria imports consumer goods, food, and heavy machinery. Increasing foreign investment and finding new markets for Bulgarian goods are essential to progress. Tourism is an increasing source of foreign capital but is still underdeveloped.

### Transportation and Communications

Many Bulgarians use the reliable public transportation system, which consists of buses, trams, trolleys, and trains. Most families own one car, although many roads are in poor shape. Taxis are plentiful in urban areas. Television broadcasts are changing rapidly, as programming from Europe and the United States is becoming more popular. Telephone service is not fully developed, but almost all villages have some access. Internet is available in most places, but computers remain a luxury item.

### Education

Education, compulsory to age 16, was once free at all levels, but extreme financial pressures have led even primary schools to charge some fees. Science and technical training are emphasized in school, but the lack of modern equipment hampers advanced training. Entrance to secondary schools is determined by competitive exam, and urban students often

can choose from five types of schools, each offering a different focus (such as math and science or foreign languages). A number of universities and three-year training institutions offer higher education.

### Health

A national healthcare system provides nearly free medical care to all citizens, but facilities often are not well equipped. Also, drugs and medical testing are expensive. Private doctors offer better care to those who can pay for it.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of Bulgaria, 1621 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 387-0174; web site [www.bulgaria-embassy.org](http://www.bulgaria-embassy.org).

### POPULATION & AREA

Population	7,148,785 (rank=98)
Area, sq. mi.	42,811 (rank=104)
Area, sq. km.	110,879

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	58 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	36 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$12,600
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 98% (female)
Infant mortality rate	17 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	70 (male); 77 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).