



Bulgarian folk dancers in traditional clothing.  
Flickr / Donald Judge

# BULGARIAN

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# Chapter 1 | Profile



The central reserve at Rila National Park.  
Wikimedia / Borislav krustev

## Introduction

The Republic of Bulgaria is situated along the eastern portion of the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe. Its natural landscape is diverse, featuring lowlands, plains, plateaus, river valleys and basins, and many mountains. Situated on the western edge of the Black Sea, Bulgaria shares borders with Romania to the north, Serbia and North Macedonia to the west, Greece to the south, and Turkey to the east. The country is roughly bisected by the Balkan Mountains, acting as the boundary for northern and southern Bulgaria.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>

The country's culture, society, cuisine, architecture, and religious institutions demonstrate influences from the East and the West.<sup>4, 5</sup> Bulgaria traces its national roots back to the seventh century CE, when the Bulgar people established statehood, making it one of the oldest countries in Europe. The Bulgars fought against several empires

1 Bulgaria Travel, "Nature," n.d., <https://www.bulgariatravel.org/en/Article/Details/4077/Nature#map=6/42.750/25.380>

2 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria," *The World Factbook*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>

3 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria: Tourism," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Finance#ref253978>

4 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria>

5 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria," *The World Factbook*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>

over the centuries, from Byzantium to the Ottoman, before gaining full independence in the early 20th century.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-20th century, Bulgaria transitioned into a communist nation. This oppressive regime lasted until the waning influence of the Soviet Union in the late 20th century proved to be the death knell for Bulgaria's communist regime. Bulgaria set about establishing a new form of government in the aftermath of its successful revolution; the National Assembly adopted a new constitution that created a parliamentary republic. Painful readjustments plagued Bulgaria for decades after the collapse of communism, but the country has begun to find its footing on the international stage by joining both NATO and the European Union (EU).<sup>7, 8</sup>

## Geography

### Northern Bulgaria

The northern part of Bulgaria is divided into 14 provinces (*oblasti*) and consists mainly of plains and plateaus.<sup>9</sup> The region is bordered by the Balkan Mountains to the south, the Danube River to the north, the Timok River to the west, and the Black Sea to the east. The region covers 48,596 sq km (18,763 sq mi) in total.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Northern Bulgaria is largely occupied by the Danubian Plain, which holds historical significance for Europe. Throughout the centuries, the steep terrain on the Bulgarian side of the Danube acted as an effective buffer against invasions from the north. The fortresses erected in Ruse and Silistra stand as testaments of the river's significance.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>

### Balkan Mountains

Rising near the Timok River, the Balkan Mountains run through the center of the country for 557 km (346 mi) from east to west before abruptly ending at the Black Sea. The mountain range separates the northern region from the southern region of the country. These naturally diverse mountains hold a significant place in Bulgarian history, going all the way back to the seventh century C.E. Geographically, it forms a very effective natural barrier that was leveraged over the centuries by medieval capitals such as Pliska of the First Bulgarian Empire, which once stood in one of the fertile valleys of this range. The Roman Imperial province of Moesia also grew to prominence here, thanks in part to the secure geography of the region.<sup>15, 16</sup> Located in central Bulgaria, Botev is the highest peak

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- 6 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria: Government and Society," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Government-and-society>
  - 7 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria>
  - 8 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria," *The World Factbook*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
  - 9 Map Universal, "Provinces of Bulgaria-Oblasts of Bulgaria," n.d., <https://mapuniversal.com/provinces-of-bulgaria-oblasts-of-bulgaria/>
  - 10 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria: North Bulgaria," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria#ref253971>
  - 11 National Statistical Institute, "Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Bulgaria 2011," n.d., <https://www.nsi.bg/census2011/indexen.php>
  - 12 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 108–109.
  - 13 Agnes Sachsenroeder, *Cultureshock! A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette: Bulgaria*, (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 2008), 232.
  - 14 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria: North Bulgaria," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria#ref253971>
  - 15 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 129.
  - 16 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Moesia," 29 March 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Moesia>

in this mountain range, rising to 2,376 m (7,795 ft).<sup>17, 18</sup> Bulgaria's capital Sofia lies in the Sofia Valley, which is the largest valley in the southern arm of the Balkan Mountains.<sup>19</sup>

## Southern Bulgaria

Southern Bulgaria covers 62,414 sq km (24,098 sq mi) and is also divided into 14 provinces.<sup>20</sup> The Thracian Lowlands and their surrounding area in the extreme south are known for their well-established wine production.<sup>21</sup> The highest Bulgarian mountains are located in the Rila and Pirin ranges, which run through these lowlands. The Rila Mountains feature 31 peaks with an altitude of over 2,600 m (8,562 ft) and the two highest peaks on the Balkan Peninsula. Mount Musala is the highest peak in the entire peninsula with an elevation of 2,925 m (9,596 ft). The peak is the coldest place in Bulgaria and on the Balkan Peninsula. Mount Vihren, located in the northern part of Pirin, is the second-highest summit in Bulgaria and the third-highest of the Balkan Peninsula, with an elevation of 2,914 m (9,560 ft).<sup>22, 23</sup> Pirin National Park was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1983.<sup>24</sup>

The Rhodopes Mountains, located east of Rila Mountains, feature 11 peaks with an elevation of over 2,000 m (6,562 ft). Traditional villages, caves, waterfalls, and rock formations attract many tourists to the area. A number of glacial lakes, such as the Seven Rila Lakes, are prominent fixtures of the landscape. The city of Plovdiv is located in southern Bulgaria on the banks of the Maritsa River.<sup>25, 26, 27</sup>

## Black Sea Coast

Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, which stretches 350 km (217 mi), forms the country's eastern boundary. The coastline features sandy beaches, fishing villages, historical landmarks, and natural wonders.<sup>28, 29</sup> Popular destinations on the Black Sea coast include Irakli Beach, where travelers can partake in wilderness camping; Pomorie Lake, known for its salt extraction; and the Veleka River Estuary, revered for its natural beauty. The coast is also home to Varna and Burgas, Bulgaria's busiest commercial ports.<sup>30, 31, 32</sup>

- 17 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Balkan Mountains," 21 April 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkan-Mountains>
- 18 Boiana-MG, "10 Curious Facts About the Balkan Mountains," 17 October 2017, <http://blog.boiana-mg.com/bulgaria/10-curious-facts-balkan-mountains/>
- 19 Bulgaria Travel, "Nature," n.d., <https://www.bulgariatravel.org/en/Article/Details/4077/Nature#map=6/42.750/25.380>
- 20 Map Universal, "Provinces of Bulgaria-Oblasts of Bulgaria," n.d., <https://mapuniversal.com/provinces-of-bulgaria-oblasts-of-bulgaria/>
- 21 Mike Desimone and Jeff Jenssen, "Thracian Lowlands, Bulgaria—Best Wine Destinations 2017," *Wine Enthusiast*, 5 January 2017, <https://www.winemag.com/2017/01/05/thracian-lowlands-bulgaria-best-wine-destinations-2017/>
- 22 Kenneth Kimutai too, "The Tallest Mountains in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/tallest-mountains-in-bulgaria.html>
- 23 Bulgaria Travel, "Nature," n.d., <https://www.bulgariatravel.org/en/Article/Details/4077/Nature#map=6/42.750/25.380>
- 24 UNESCO, "Pirin National Park," n.d., <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/225/>
- 25 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria: South Bulgaria," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria#ref253973>
- 26 National Statistical Institute, "Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Bulgaria 2011," n.d., <https://www.nsi.bg/census2011/indexen.php>
- 27 Bulgaria Travel, "Nature," n.d., <https://www.bulgariatravel.org/en/Article/Details/4077/Nature#map=6/42.750/25.380>
- 28 John D. Bell et al., "Bulgaria: Coastal Region," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria#ref253974>
- 29 D. Bibishkov, "Black Sea Coast of Bulgaria," *My Guide Bulgaria*, 4 May 2017, <https://www.myguidebulgaria.com/regionalinfo/black-sea-coast-of-bulgaria>
- 30 Maria Angelova, "A Nature Lover's Guide to the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast," *Culture Trip*, 31 July 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/a-nature-lovers-guide-to-the-bulgarian-black-sea-coast/>
- 31 The Crazy Tourist, "15 Best Things to do in Varna (Bulgaria)," n.d., <https://www.thecrazytourist.com/15-best-things-varna-bulgaria/>
- 32 The Crazy Tourist, "15 Best Things to do in Burgas (Bulgaria)," n.d., <https://www.thecrazytourist.com/15-best-things-burgas-bulgaria/>



## Bodies of Water

### Danube

The Danube is the second-longest river in Europe and forms the majority of Bulgaria's northern border with Romania. It begins in Germany and makes its way through 10 countries in all before emptying into the Black Sea. Bulgaria's portion of the Danube is considered very biodiverse in part because there are no dams or other manmade impediments along its stretch. The river also marks the beginning of the Danubian Plain, a tableland that stretches throughout northern Bulgaria. The Danube has a number of tributaries within Bulgaria: Erma, Nishava, Ogosta, Iskür, Vit, Osam, Yantra, Rousenski Lo, and Danube Dobroudja rivers.<sup>33, 34, 35</sup>

### Maritsa

The Maritsa runs 480 km (298 mi), of which 309 km (192 mi) flows through Bulgaria. The river originates in the Rila Mountains and forms part of Bulgaria's border with Greece before emptying into the Aegean Sea. The river winds through Plovdiv, which is considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.<sup>36</sup> Farming for exports, along with a portion of the Sofia–Istanbul railway, are found within the river's valley.<sup>37, 38</sup>

### Struma

The Struma runs 415 km (258 mi) southwest of Sofia before joining the Aegean Sea. Its drainage basin, 17,330 sq km (6,691 sq mi) in all, originates in Bulgaria and reaches into Greece and North Macedonia.<sup>39, 40</sup> Approximately 290 km (180 mi) of the river runs through Bulgaria. The Struma River valley is home to a number of vineyards, part of Bulgaria's bustling wine production region.<sup>41</sup>

### Tundzha

The Tundzha runs for approximately 365 km (227 mi) and is fed by 50 tributaries before becoming a tributary itself for the Maritsa. The upper and middle Tundzha river valley are hotspots for archaeological and paleo-environmental discovery.<sup>42, 43</sup>

33 Victor Kiprop, "The Longest Rivers in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 2 July 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-longest-rivers-in-bulgaria.html>

34 ICPDR-IKSD, "Bulgaria: Danube Basin," n.d., <https://www.icpdr.org/main/danube-basin/bulgaria>

35 Peter Georgiev Pencev and Patricia Garland Pinka, "Danube River," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2 August 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Danube-River>

36 Dimana Trankova, "Maritsa, Arda, and Tundzha: Tale of Three Rivers," Vagabond, 27 October 2016, <https://www.vagabond.bg/travel/high-beam/item/3493-maritsa-arda-and-tundzha-tale-of-three-rivers.html>

37 Encyclopædia Britannica, "Maritsa River," 2 September 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Maritsa-River>

38 Victor Kiprop, "The Longest Rivers in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 2 July 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-longest-rivers-in-bulgaria.html>

39 Victor Kiprop, "The Longest Rivers in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 2 July 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-longest-rivers-in-bulgaria.html>

40 Encyclopædia Britannica, "Struma River," 1 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Struma-River>

41 World Rider, "The Struma River Valley – Home to Bulgaria's Big Red Wines & So Much More," 15 July 2019, <https://www.worldrider.com/the-struma-river-valley-home-to-bulgarias-big-red-wines-so-much-more/>

42 Victor Kiprop, "The Longest Rivers in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 2 July 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-longest-rivers-in-bulgaria.html>

43 Brian Ballsun-Stanton and Adela Sobotkova, "Introduction," Tundzha Archaeological Project, 27 November 2018, <https://www.tundzha.org/>

## Iskŭr

The Iskŭr is the largest river that is found entirely within Bulgaria. It flows 368 km (229 mi) before meeting up with the Danube. It is the primary source of water for the Iskŭr Reservoir and its associated hydro-stations; its water is used for both domestic and industrial purposes.<sup>44, 45, 46</sup>

## Climate

Bulgaria's climate is temperate-continental with distinct seasons. The average annual temperature varies based on region: in the north, temperatures average 8°C (46.4°F); in the south, they reach 11°C (51.8°F); temperatures drop to 2.6°C (36.7°F) in the mountain regions; and in the plains, they average 12°C (53.6°F). Average annual rainfall reaches around 700 mm (27.5 in); the mountains average a little more, with 1,000 mm (39.4 in), while the coast experiences less with 4–600 mm (15.7–23.6 in). Rainfall is common year-round.<sup>47</sup> Frequent snowfall occurs between December and March, particularly in the mountainous regions. Spring runs from March to May, with light rainfall and the first warm days of the year. Summer is June to August, when the heat is at its most intense in the lowlands. Autumn runs from September to November and features milder weather at first before cold winds begin to circulate across the country.<sup>48</sup>

## Major Cities

### Sofia

Sofia is the largest city in Bulgaria and its capital. It is situated in the Sofia Basin, a trough-like valley in western Bulgaria.<sup>49, 50</sup> The Thracian Serdi tribe first settled there in the eighth century BCE. It was conquered by the Roman and Ottoman Empires over the following centuries. On 3 April 1839, Russian troops liberated the city from Ottoman rule, at which point it was declared the capital of Bulgaria. After World War II, the city industrialized, becoming a hub for engineering, metallurgy, food production, and textile and clothing manufacturing. Its surrounding area is largely agricultural.<sup>51</sup> Sofia is also home to prominent museums, such as the National History Museum, the Sofia History Museum, and the National Gallery.<sup>52</sup>

### Plovdiv

Plovdiv is the country's second-largest city and the oldest continuously inhabited city in Europe. The city has a long history, tracing back to 6,000 BCE when ancient settlements sprang up in the area. In 342 BCE, Philip II of Macedonia founded Philippopolis, which eventually evolved into Plovdiv.<sup>53</sup> It features ancient architecture and ruins like the Roman stadium, and the Ancient Theatre, a Roman structure that still hosts events today. the city has a lively arts scene and holds several cultural festivals, unofficially earning the title of the cultural heart

44 Panacomp Wonderland Travel, "Iskar River," n.d., <http://www.panacomp.net/iskar-river/>

45 Victor Kiprop, "The Longest Rivers in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 2 July 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-longest-rivers-in-bulgaria.html>

46 Encyclopædia Britannica, "Iskŭr River," 28 July 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Iskur-River>

47 Weather Online, "Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.weatheronline.co.uk/reports/climate/Bulgaria.htm>

48 Climates to Travel, "Climate – Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/bulgaria>

49 Encyclopædia Britannica, "Sofia," 13 November 2019 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sofia>

50 Amber Pariona, "What Are the Biggest Cities in Bulgaria?" *World Atlas*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-biggest-cities-in-bulgaria.html>

51 Encyclopædia Britannica, "Sofia," 13 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sofia>

52 Maria Angelova, "8 Reasons You Should Visit Sofia at Least Once in Your Lifetime," 4 May 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/8-reasons-you-should-visit-sofia-at-least-once-in-your-lifetime/>

53 Plovdiv, "History of Plovdiv," n.d., <http://www.plovdivguide.com/History-of-Plovdiv>

of Bulgaria. Wine is very popular there, with more than 20 wineries within the city and its surroundings.<sup>54</sup> Its economy is focused on tobacco production, food processing, textiles, and brewing. The city is bisected by the Maritsa River and home to several colleges and universities.<sup>55</sup>

## Varna

Varna is Bulgaria's third-largest city, located along the Black Sea coast and known as "Bulgaria's Sea Capital." The Port of Varna is the largest seaport in the country and home of the Bulgarian Navy. The city is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe; it attracts visitors to its large seaside resort and Varna's Museum of Archaeology, which hosts the world's oldest gold jewelry that traces back to the Middle Eneolithic Age (4500–4000 BCE).<sup>56, 57, 58, 59</sup>

## Burgas

Burgas is one of two major port cities on the Black Sea and the fourth-largest city in Bulgaria and the administrative center for its region. The city's growth is closely related to the growth of Bulgaria's railroad system, which allowed for expansion and innovation in the fishing town around the turn of the 20th century.<sup>60, 61</sup> The largest oil refinery in southeastern Europe and the main contributor to the city's economy is the Neftochim Burgas oil refinery. The city attracts many visitors to its museums, archaeological ruins, churches, and monasteries.<sup>62</sup>

## Veliko Tarnovo

The city of Veliko Tarnovo is a relatively small city in north-central Bulgaria. Picturesque and ancient, it stands as a symbol of Bulgarian national pride for its citizens and has been closely compared to Constantinople in terms of beauty. Veliko Tarnovo features a number of historic monasteries and museums featuring artifacts from its ancient history.<sup>63, 64</sup>

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- 54 Bulgaria Wine Tours, "Inside Plovdiv: Travel Tips and Tales," n.d., <https://bulgariawinetours.com/inside-plovdiv-travel-tips-and-tales/>
- 55 Amber Pariona, "What Are the Biggest Cities in Bulgaria?" World Atlas, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-biggest-cities-in-bulgaria.html>
- 56 Guide Bulgaria, "Town Varna," n.d., <http://www.guide-bulgaria.com/NE/Varna/Varna/Varna>
- 57 Best BG Properties, "Information about the City of Varna, the Sea Capital of Bulgaria," n.d., [https://www.bestbgproperties.com/bulgarian\\_districts/Varna\\_property.html](https://www.bestbgproperties.com/bulgarian_districts/Varna_property.html)
- 58 Amber Pariona, "What Are the Biggest Cities in Bulgaria?" World Atlas, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-biggest-cities-in-bulgaria.html>
- 59 Varna Museum of Archaeology, "Prehistory – The Earliest Traces of Human Presence," n.d., [https://www.archaeo.museumvarna.com/en/category/list?category\\_id=3&id=6](https://www.archaeo.museumvarna.com/en/category/list?category_id=3&id=6)
- 60 Encyclopædia Britannica, "Burgas," 11 November 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Burgas>
- 61 Guide Bulgaria, "Town Bourgas," n.d., <http://www.guide-bulgaria.com/se/bourgas/bourgas/bourgas>
- 62 Amber Pariona, "What Are the Biggest Cities in Bulgaria?" World Atlas, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-biggest-cities-in-bulgaria.html>
- 63 Information Bulgaria, "Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.informationbulgaria.com/veliko-tarnovo-bulgaria/>
- 64 VT Bulgaria Real Estate, "About Veliko Tarnovo," n.d., <http://www.vtbulgaria.com/index.php?mod=infos&show=7>

# History

Evidence of human civilization in Bulgaria traces back to the fifth millennium BCE, when prehistoric settlements existed in the northeastern part of the country.<sup>65</sup> More advanced settlements arrived in the sixth century BCE when Slavic tribes settled in eastern Bulgaria, followed by Thracian tribes in the fourth century BCE.<sup>66</sup> Thracians were a warrior aristocracy, considered as one of the original peoples of the Balkans.<sup>67</sup> Although Thracians were eventually eradicated by expulsion or assimilated over time, their influence on the region is still seen in ruins, monuments, and the cultural significance of horses. Alexander the Great explored and expanded his empire into the region, founding a number of settlements in the east and northeast in the fourth century BCE. However, the Greeks were unable to push further inland due to conflicts with the Thracians, who still dominated the territory. Greek culture maintained its presence in the region for hundreds of years and the Bulgarian language still retains some Greek words as a testament to their influence.<sup>68, 69</sup>

The Romans entered Bulgaria in the first century CE when they began seizing control of Greek ports and settlements. Romans divided the territory into two provinces, Moesia in the north and Thrace in the south.<sup>70</sup> Thracians eventually became full-fledged citizens during Roman rule. The Roman period is marked by rapid development; roads, towns, and military and civilian infrastructure emerged in rapid succession. Some of the roads the Romans established are still in use today.<sup>71</sup> Sofia (known then as Ulpia Serdica) was declared the capital of Roman province Dacia. A series of clashes in the third century with local tribes and groups such as Goths, Visigoths, and the Huns contributed to the Roman decline in the region.<sup>72, 73</sup>

Slavic people began arriving in the Balkan Peninsula in the sixth and seventh centuries, and established communities centered on agriculture and animal herding. The seventh century saw the Bulgars move into the area, and was marked by warfare and the assimilation of the Bulgars with the Slav people. The First Bulgarian Empire was established in 681 CE, following the defeat of Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV. Peace was not achieved with this victory, however, as warfare marked much of the empire's early years. The rise of Krum, Khan of the Bulgars in the early ninth century stabilized the empire and developed the foundation of the state by abolishing the tribal structure and appointing governors to different regions.<sup>74, 75, 76, 77</sup> Christianity first took root during this period, when Khan Boris made Christianity the state religion in 865.<sup>78, 79</sup>

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- 65 BBC News, "Europe's 'Oldest Prehistoric Town' Unearthed in Bulgaria," 31 October 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20156681>
  - 66 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: Ethnic Groups," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/People#ref253975>
  - 67 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 287.
  - 68 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/History>
  - 69 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria: History," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/history>
  - 70 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/History>
  - 71 Bojidar Dimitrov, *Bulgaria: Illustrated History* (Sofia: Borina, 2002), <https://www.bulgaria-embassy.org/en/history-and-symbols/>
  - 72 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 288.
  - 73 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria: History," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/history#233579>
  - 74 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria: History," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/history>
  - 75 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/History>
  - 76 Veneta Pavlova, "Khan Krum—Victorious Ruler and Lawmaker," 17 April 2014, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/100398780/khan-krum-victorious-ruler-and-lawmaker>
  - 77 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Krum," 9 April 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Krum>
  - 78 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria: History," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/history>
  - 79 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 289.



At the beginning of the 11th century, Bulgaria was incorporated into the Byzantine Empire. In 1185, a successful revolt against Constantinople resulted in the establishment of the Second Bulgarian Empire. This empire was toppled in 1396, when the Ottoman Turks invaded and conquered the entire region.<sup>80</sup> The era of Turkish rule, dubbed “Turkish yoke” to evoke imagery of imprisonment and slavery, was oppressive for Bulgarians. It is estimated that nearly half of the existing population was killed or forced into slavery during Ottoman rule. In response to Turkish brutality, many Bulgars became haiduks (outlaws) in order to defy the oppressive empire.<sup>81</sup> Ottoman rule continued until 1878, when a war between Turkey and Russia created an opportunity for Bulgarian autonomy. In 1908, a united Bulgaria formally declared itself an independent kingdom, taking advantage of the regional turmoil caused by the Young Turk revolution occurring within the Ottoman Empire.<sup>82, 83, 84</sup>

One of the ways Bulgaria established its presence on the global stage in the early 20th century was by participating in both world wars. World War I was particularly devastating to Bulgaria, however, due to the country’s massive casualties; and World War II saw the country aligned with Germany and the Axis Powers. In 1944, the Soviets invaded Bulgaria, culminating in the communist group known as the Fatherland Front seizing power; the Fatherland Front quickly abolished the Bulgarian monarchy. Communist rule continued under the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, led by Todor Zhivkov. Although Bulgaria continued to be an independent country, its policies so closely aligned with those of the USSR that Bulgaria was jokingly referred to as the 16th Soviet republic.<sup>85</sup> Zhivkov’s rule continued until a coup within the communist party dissolved the country’s one-party rule and paved the way for parliamentary elections in 1990. In the post-Soviet era of the 1990s, the Bulgarian communists renamed themselves as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). But the growing strength of dissidents and pro-democracy forces saw the BSP lose power in 1991.<sup>86, 87, 88</sup>

As Bulgaria collectively sought to reconcile the lingering influences of communism and socialism in the 1990s, a number of economic reforms were implemented to expedite privatization and restitution of property confiscated during communist rule.<sup>89</sup> The political instability of the period led to economic chaos marked by bread lines, fuel shortages, and increased corruption. After an incredible rate of governmental turnover, Bulgarians elected former king Simeon Saxe-Coburg (also known as Simeon II) as prime minister in 2001. Political and governmental instability was not solved with Saxe-Coburg’s election, as the socioeconomic problems that plagued the country persisted. In 2004, Bulgaria joined NATO; EU membership followed three years later.<sup>90</sup> Bulgaria’s membership in the EU has been problematic, complicated by its status for a time as the poorest country in the union. While there has been some progress in recent years, Bulgaria is still susceptible to social, economic, and political instability; in 2014 alone, there was a banking crisis, the prime minister resigned, and ongoing antigovernment protests caused significant unrest throughout the country.<sup>91, 92, 93</sup>

80 Lonely Planet, “Bulgaria: History,” n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/history>

81 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 292.

82 BBC News, “Bulgaria Profile—Timeline,” 22 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17205431>

83 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 295.

84 BBC, “Bulgaria Profile—Timeline,” 22 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17205431>

85 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide*. London: Rough Guides, 1999, 298.

86 Lonely Planet, “Bulgaria: History,” n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/history>

87 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide*. London: Rough Guides, 1999, 301–302.

88 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, “Bulgaria: History: Bulgaria’s Transition,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Bulgarias-transition>

89 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), 302.

90 Lonely Planet, “Bulgaria: History,” n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/history>

91 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, “Bulgaria: History: Bulgaria’s Transition,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Bulgarias-transition>

92 Infoplease, “Bulgaria News & Current Events,” n.d., <https://www.infoplease.com/world/countries/bulgaria/news-and-current-events>

93 BBC News, “Bulgaria Profile—Timeline,” 22 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17205431>

## Government

In July 1991, a new constitution was adopted creating the framework for a parliamentary republic and allowing for separation of powers. The freedom of speech, press, conscience, and religion, and direct elections were also guaranteed by the new constitution. The majority party in parliament elects a prime minister; a president is elected through direct elections and serves a five-year term. It is the president's responsibility to schedule national referenda and elections, and to carry out diplomatic duties. The president also has the sole ability to veto laws.<sup>94</sup>

Bulgaria is governed by the Council of Ministers, which consists of the prime minister, deputies, and additional ministers. This group oversees domestic and foreign policy in accordance with the constitution. The 240-member National Assembly is a unicameral, representative body that acts as the legislative branch of the Bulgarian government. Members serve four-year terms and are tasked with passing or amending laws, ratifying treaties, and levying taxes. The Assembly also has the authority to cast a vote of no confidence upon the Council of Ministers or the prime minister.<sup>95</sup>

Below the national level, Bulgaria's next-highest government body is at the *oblast* level. There are 28 *oblasti* in all, containing 264 municipalities.<sup>96</sup> Within the *oblasti* are township councils that administer governmental duties on the local level. Township council members are elected to four-year terms and are headed by an elected mayor.<sup>97, 98</sup>

Bulgaria's justice system is led by a prosecutor general and consists of a Supreme Court; Supreme Administrative Court; and military, local, and appellate courts, with the option for specialized courts to be created if needed. The 25-member High Judicial Council is responsible for appointing judges, prosecutors, and investigators. The parliament, president, and supreme courts are allowed to appoint four justices each. These twelve justices sit on the Constitutional Court, with each serving a nine-year term in that role. These justices interpret the constitution and address the legality of the National Assembly's measures.<sup>99</sup>

## Media

Freedom of the press was technically granted when Bulgaria's current constitution was enacted in 1991, but the reality of that freedom is controversial. In recent years, the independence of the media has been subjected to significant interference, due in part to the funding the media receives from the state and the vulnerabilities associated with such a relationship. While there are laws against political interference in the media, politicians are technically allowed to own and operate outlets, endangering the independence of the press.<sup>100</sup> Freedom House classifies Bulgaria's press as "partly free" due to a significant amount of interference from the government and

94 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: Government and Society," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Government-and-society>

95 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: Government and Society," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Government-and-society>

96 Free World Maps, "Bulgaria Political Map," n.d., <https://www.freeworldmaps.net/europe/bulgaria/political.html>

97 Statoids, "Regions of Bulgaria," 30 June 2015, <http://www.statoids.com/ubg.html>

98 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: Government and Society," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Government-and-society>

99 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: Government and Society," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Government-and-society>

100 Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe, "Media Freedom in Bulgaria," 3 May 2018, <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Dossiers/Media-freedom-in-Bulgaria>

political parties; Reporters Without Borders ranks Bulgaria 111 out of 180 on its World Press Freedom Index for 2019.<sup>101, 102</sup> As of 2018, the Bulgarian press is considered the least free of all EU countries.<sup>103, 104</sup>

Bulgarians have access to many daily independent newspapers.<sup>105</sup> Publications in English and German accommodate the largest foreign audiences. A number of television and radio stations operate in-country and are subject to the same kinds of vulnerabilities as other media outlets, and have a reputation for being sensationalist.<sup>106</sup> Broadcasts from foreign television such as the BBC and the French-based TV5 are available.<sup>107, 108, 109</sup>

## Economy

Economic reforms of the 1990s slowly shifted Bulgaria's economy from centralized to open and market-based. This shift, which included the introduction of a currency board monetary authority, the creation of a Privatization Agency, and the subsequent privatization of previously state-run sectors, prompted significant growth; despite this, Bulgaria remains one of the poorest countries in the EU.<sup>110, 111</sup> Persistent economic instability caused by systemic corruption, rising inflation, and social unrest has adversely affected economic growth. With assistance from the international community, however, some of these problems have seen some relief, particularly after Bulgaria's induction into the EU in 2007.<sup>112, 113, 114</sup>

Energy, mining, metallurgy, agriculture, and the food and beverage industries dominate Bulgaria's economy.<sup>115</sup> Domestic energy comes from coal, hydro, and the Kozloduy nuclear plant; the country imports virtually all of its oil and natural gas from neighboring countries, with Russia as the primary source for both. Tourism provides a healthy income for the country, as Bulgaria is a popular travel destination for tourists from Greece, Germany, and Romania. Mining is a significant sector, but it has seen a steady decline, in part due to a lack of funding and proper equipment. In agriculture, Bulgaria's largest crops are wheat, corn, and barley, and the largest industrial crops are sugar beets, sunflowers, and tobacco.<sup>117, 118</sup>

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- 101 Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press 2017," 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/bulgaria>
- 102 Reporters Without Borders, "Bulgaria," 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> <https://rsf.org/en/bulgaria>
- 103 Euractiv, "Bulgaria Is Last on Media Freedom in EU and in the Balkans," 25 April 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/bulgaria-is-last-on-media-freedom-in-eu-and-in-the-balkans/>
- 104 Reuters, "Bulgarian Journalists Protest Over Freedom of Speech," VOA News, 13 September 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/bulgarian-journalists-protest-over-freedom-speech>
- 105 John D. Bell, *Bulgaria in Transition* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 237.
- 106 Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria: Political, Economic and Social Transformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 124.
- 107 Jonathan Bousfield and Dan Richardson, *Bulgaria: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 1994), 24–25.
- 108 Agnes Sachsenroeder, *Culture Shock! Bulgaria: a Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 2008), 95–96.
- 109 Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to Postcommunist Bulgaria: Political, Economic and Social Transformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 74.
- 110 Vladimir Subev, "Currency Board in Bulgaria: Twenty Years later – Pros and Cons," Radio Bulgaria, 3 July 2017, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/100848803/currency-board-in-bulgaria-twenty-years-later-pros-and-cons>
- 111 Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to Post-communist Bulgaria: Political, Economic and Social Transformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 84–85.
- 112 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria: Economy," *The World Factbook*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 113 World Bank, "The World Bank in Bulgaria: Overview," 18 October 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bulgaria/overview>
- 114 Countries of the World, "Bulgaria Economy," 8 February 2019, [https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/bulgaria/bulgaria\\_economy.html](https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/bulgaria/bulgaria_economy.html)
- 115 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria: Tourism," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Finance#ref253978>
- 116 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," *Countries and Their Cultures*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 117 Global Tenders, "Economy and Business Opportunities in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.globaltenders.com/economy-of-bulgaria.php/>
- 118 Countries of the World, "Bulgaria Economy," 8 February 2019, [https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/bulgaria/bulgaria\\_economy.html](https://theodora.com/wfbcurrent/bulgaria/bulgaria_economy.html)

The official currency of Bulgaria is the Bulgarian Lev (BGN). The word lev translates to “lion.” Though the lev was first introduced in 1881, it has undergone multiple iterations before the latest redenomination in 1999 resulted in its current form and currency code. Since joining the EU in 2007, Bulgaria has been working towards replacing the lev with the euro, although a transition date is pending Bulgaria’s ability to meet the requirements for the transition. In 2018, Bulgaria applied for entrance to the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM-2), which is a prerequisite to adopting the euro. As of 2019, USD 1 is the equivalent of BGN 1.75.<sup>119, 120, 121, 122</sup>

## Ethnic Groups

### *Bulgarians*

Ethnic Bulgars are the largest ethnic group, accounting for approximately 77% of the population, according to 2011 estimates.<sup>123</sup> Bulgarians, a South Slavic group, trace their roots back to the assimilation of various settlers in the region ahead of the establishment of the First Bulgarian Empire in 681 CE. Bulgarian, a South Slavic language of the Indo-European language family, is the national language. Bulgarian uses Cyrillic script and is closely related to Macedonian and to Serbian-Croatian.<sup>124, 125</sup>

### *Turks*

Turks make up the second-largest ethnic group, with approximately 8% of the population. Bulgarian Turks arrived in the region with the Ottoman conquest of the region during the 15th century and speak Turkish, a Turko-Altaic language. Bulgarian Turks, most of whom practice Islam, maintain their own culture and traditions that differ from the Eastern Orthodox-influenced culture of other Bulgarians.<sup>126, 127</sup>

Bulgarian Turks are subject to discrimination and ethnic tension within Bulgaria. Historically, the Turks have lived in separate communities, apart from the cultural and societal mainstream of the country. Between 1984 and 1989, a forced exodus campaign saw more than 350,000 Bulgarian Turks sent to Turkey as part of “revival” efforts designed to create a homogenous Bulgaria. The assimilation campaign was met with massive protests by the Turkish population, but violent crackdowns motivated many of them to comply and flee the country.<sup>128</sup> The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), a Bulgarian political party that represents Bulgarian Turks and Muslims, has fought an uphill battle against the anti-Turkish sentiment in Bulgaria’s political culture since its formation in 1990.<sup>129, 130, 131</sup>

- 119 Daniel Montiglio, “History of the Bulgarian Lev and the Possible Euro Adoption,” *Foreigner.bg*, n.d., <https://www.foreigner.bg/the-history-and-evolution-of-the-bulgarian-lev/>
- 120 Europa.eu, “Which Countries Use the Euro,” 29 October 2019, [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/euro/which-countries-use-euro\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/euro/which-countries-use-euro_en)
- 121 Oanda, “Currency Converter: USD to BGN,” 31 December 2019, <https://www1.oanda.com/currency/converter/>
- 122 Cory Mitchell, “Bulgarian Lev (BGN),” *Investopedia*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/bgn-bulgarian-lev.asp>
- 123 Central Intelligence Agency, “Bulgaria: People and Society: Ethnic Groups,” *The World Factbook*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 124 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, “Bulgaria,” *Countries and Their Cultures*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 125 John Misach, “What Is the Ethnic Composition of Bulgaria?” *World Atlas*, 23 July 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-the-ethnic-composition-of-bulgaria.html>
- 126 Central Intelligence Agency, “Bulgaria: People and Society: Ethnic Groups,” *The World Factbook*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 127 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, “Bulgaria,” *Countries and Their Cultures*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 128 Daily Sabah Turkey, “Bulgaria’s Turks Remember Exodus, Fight for their Lives,” 25 May 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2019/05/25/bulgarias-turks-remember-exodus-fight-for-their-names>
- 129 Palash Ghosh, “Bulgarian Turks: From Imperial Rulers to Marginalized Minority,” *International Business Times*, 21 January 2013, <https://www.ibtimes.com/bulgarian-turks-imperial-rulers-marginalized-minority-1028200>
- 130 Tomasz Kamusella, “Bulgaria’s Denial of its Ottoman Past and Turkish Identity,” *New Eastern Europe*, 24 March 2019, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/03/24/bulgarias-denial-of-its-ottoman-past-and-turkish-identity/>
- 131 Sofia Globe, “Bulgaria’s MRF, Other Turkish Parties Commemorate Victims of Communist-era ‘Revival Process,’” 26 December 2018, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2018/12/26/bulgarias-mrf-other-ethnic-turkish-parties-commemorate-victims-of-communist-era-revival-process/>



## Roma

The Roma people, also referred to as Tsigani, account for about 4.4% of the population.<sup>132</sup> The Roma people are scattered throughout the country and are commonly found in urban environments. The largest Roma communities are located in Sliven and Montana provinces. The Roma speak about 30 different dialects; many speak also Bulgarian, Turkish and Romanian. The majority of the Roma are Muslim.<sup>133, 134</sup>

The Roma minority is subject to harassment from non-Roma Bulgarians and marginalization from the government. Roma settlements have been torn down after claims they were illegally erected.<sup>135</sup> Roma also experience significant discrimination, which has manifested among nationalists in protests and demonstrations throughout the country. These protests have occasionally turned violent, spurring fears among the Bulgarian Roma population.<sup>136, 137, 138</sup>

Other ethnic groups include Armenians, Russians, Greeks, Romanians, Vlachs, Jews, and Tatars.<sup>139</sup>

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- 132 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria: People and Society: Ethnic Groups," *The World Factbook*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 133 John Misach, "What Is the Ethnic Composition of Bulgaria?" World Atlas, 23 July 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-the-ethnic-composition-of-bulgaria.html>
- 134 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," *Countries and Their Cultures*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 135 Nick Thorpe, "Bulgaria Tensions Lead to Roma Home Demolitions," 21 July 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33597660>
- 136 Atanas Zahariev, "Welcome to Bulgaria! Well, Not if You Are Roma!" European Roma Rights Centre, 13 September 2017, <http://www.errc.org/news/welcome-to-bulgaria-well-not-if-you-are-roma>
- 137 Associated Press, "Anti-Roma Protests Take Place in Bulgarian City of Gabrovo," 12 April 2019, <https://apnews.com/7ade2fc2871e40e7a7396468155a2164>
- 138 Denise Hruby and Arno Friebe, "Their Homes Were Burned Down in Racist Violence. Then Officials Told Them to Flee," CNN, May 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/world/roma-bulgaria-violence-eu-elections-cnnphotos/>
- 139 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: People: Ethnic Groups," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/People>

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 1 | Profile, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Bulgaria became a communist republic in 1990. ☐ True ☐ False
2. The Balkan Mountains roughly divide northern and southern Bulgaria. ☐ True ☐ False
3. Turks are the second-largest ethnic group in Bulgaria. ☐ True ☐ False
4. The Danube forms most of Bulgaria's border with Romania. ☐ True ☐ False
5. The Thracians established the First Bulgarian Empire in the seventh century. ☐ True ☐ False

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 1 | Profile, Assessment Answers

1. False:  
Bulgaria became a communist republic in 1946 and was a close ally of the Soviet Union. In 1990 Bulgaria transitioned out of communist rule.
2. True:  
These naturally diverse mountains run through the center of the country for 557 km (346 mi) before abruptly ending at the Black Sea.
3. True:  
Bulgarian Turks have lived in the region for more than 500 years and have been subjected to organized discrimination and ethnic tensions from the majority Bulgarian ethnic group.
4. True:  
The Danube River is the second-longest river in Europe, making its way through 10 countries before emptying into the Black Sea.
5. False:  
Thracians, a warrior aristocracy, settled in the Balkans more than 2,500 years ago and left the earliest signs of civilization in the region. Over time, the Thracians were eventually eradicated by expulsion or assimilation.

## Chapter 2 | Religion



The Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia.  
Flickr / Kalpak Travel

### Introduction

Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the largest religious institution in Bulgaria. The faith's cultural and social relevance cannot be overstated, as it is largely considered enmeshed with the concept of Bulgarian national identity. Over half of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox, five times more than Muslims, the next-largest religious group.<sup>1</sup>

Orthodox Christianity became the official state religion of Bulgaria in the ninth century when the ruler of the first Bulgarian Empire converted to Christianity and aligned Bulgaria with Constantinople, laying the foundation for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Islam was introduced to Bulgaria by the Ottomans, who conquered the region and ruled it for centuries. The Ottomans endorsed the Sunni branch of Islam and conducted a wide campaign of enforced conversions.<sup>2</sup> Despite the Ottoman's oppressive tactics, Bulgarians maintained their religious affiliation with Eastern Orthodoxy, often as an act of defiance.<sup>3</sup>

1 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria: People and Society," *The World Factbook*, 18 December 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>

2 Glenn E. Curtis, ed., *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/26.htm>

3 Oishimaya Sen Nag, "Religious Beliefs in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-bulgaria.html>



During the communist era, atheism replaced Eastern Orthodoxy, and the faithful were subjected to the harsh policies of Todor Zhivkov's oppressive regime.<sup>4</sup> Freedom of religion was established upon the collapse of communism, and today Bulgaria does not have an official state religion. However, Orthodox Christianity is recognized as the country's traditional religion, and many Orthodox holidays are celebrated throughout the country.<sup>5, 6</sup> Bulgaria's various religious groups generally exist harmoniously side by side, although disagreements and conflicts arise on occasion.<sup>7, 8</sup>

## Major Religions

### *Eastern Orthodox*

Orthodox Christianity is the most widespread religion in Bulgaria. Its roots date back to the ninth century when it was established as the state religion of the First Bulgarian Empire. The church grew in prominence for centuries, weathering the collapse of the First Bulgarian Empire and the rise of the Second Empire until opposing forces—first the Ottoman Empire and then communism—assumed control of the region and sought to shift it away from Christianity and its influence. The 14th–19th centuries were a period known as the Turkish Yoke, evoking imagery of slavery under Ottoman rule. Both Turks and Greeks tried for centuries to assimilate Bulgarians into their respective cultures and faiths.<sup>9</sup> These efforts at suppression backfired, however, as Bulgarian resolve hardened in response, making faith part and parcel of their national identity. There was a concerted effort during the communist era to restrict and limit the influence of all churches; religious holidays were no longer celebrated, and churches were shut down.<sup>10</sup> The Rila Monastery, the largest in Bulgaria, was a victim of this sustained campaign; it was closed in 1961 and converted into a museum. Upon the collapse of communism, however, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church experienced a revival in Bulgarian society. Religious holidays were once again celebrated, and the Rila Monastery was returned to the church.<sup>11</sup>

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church blends some Western customs with the traditions of Eastern Orthodox churches; for example, Christmas is celebrated on 25 December in Bulgaria (with a Second Day of Christmas celebrated on 26 December), as opposed to the Eastern Orthodox date of 7 January. Bulgarian Christians also adopted the concept of the Muslim pilgrimage hajj for their own purposes—the Bulgarian hadzhi. The hadzhi is a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its origins date as far back as the 16th century. Upon completion of the pilgrimage, it is customary for Bulgarian Christians to apply the prefix Hadzhi to their surname.<sup>12</sup>

- 4 Tomasz Kamusella, "Words Matter. Bulgaria and the 30th Anniversary of the Largest Ethnic Cleansing in Cold War Europe," *New Eastern Europe*, 25 February 2019, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/02/25/words-matter-bulgaria-and-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-largest-ethnic-cleansing-in-cold-war-europe%E2%82%AC%91%BB%BF/>
- 5 Loring Danforth, Francis William Carter, Philip Dimitrov, and John D. Bell, "Bulgaria: People: Religion," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 6 January 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/People#ref253977>
- 6 Oishimaya Sen Nag, "Religious Beliefs in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-bulgaria.html>
- 7 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria: People and Society," *The World Factbook*, 18 December 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 8 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Bulgarian Orthodox Church," 22 February 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bulgarian-Orthodox-Church>
- 9 Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria: Political, Economic, and Social Transformations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 11.
- 10 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Bulgarian Orthodox Church," 22 February 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bulgarian-Orthodox-Church>
- 11 Glenn E. Curtis, ed., *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/26.htm>
- 12 Agnes Sachsenroeder, *Cultureshock! A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette: Bulgaria* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 2008), 50.

The church's Holy Synod ruling body acts as its clerical, judicial, and administrative authority. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church states that an estimated 6.7 million Bulgarians claim church membership. Each church building in Bulgaria is assigned a patron saint and sells icons of them for the faithful to display as tribute. Fueled by the religious revival of the 1990s, the church has rebuilt, restored, and reclaimed many churches, maintains <sup>13</sup> dioceses, and publishes weekly and monthly periodicals.<sup>13</sup> There is a theological academy in Sofia, as well as many smaller seminaries throughout the country. There are Bulgarian Orthodox churches outside of the country as well, in places such as the United States, Canada, and Australia.<sup>14, 15, 16</sup>

## Islam

Islam is the second-largest religious community in Bulgaria.<sup>17</sup> Bulgaria's Muslims overwhelmingly belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. In 2011, their population in Bulgaria was approximately 546,000, almost 20 times the Shia population, Islam's next largest group.<sup>18</sup> Bulgaria's Muslim-majority ethnic groups—Turks, Tatars, and some Roma—reside heavily in the northeast and the Rhodope Mountains region. Muslim Turks are Bulgaria's largest ethnic population and are generally concentrated along the country's border with Turkey. Ethnic Bulgarian Muslims, commonly also known as Pomaks, are primarily the descendants of religious converts from the time of Ottoman rule. Roma, the third-largest Muslim ethnic group in the country, are scattered throughout Bulgaria.<sup>19</sup>

During Bulgaria's Turkish Yoke era, Islam was introduced to the population, as it was the religion of the Ottoman Empire. While the Sunni branch of Islam was the dominant form practiced by the Ottomans, Shia sects nevertheless formed in pockets throughout the region. A significant portion of the Shia Muslims in Bulgaria originated as Bulgarian converts, supposedly because of the perception that Shia Islam was more relaxed about differing national and religious customs.<sup>20</sup> Communist rule placed significant pressure on Muslims, as it did with all other religions practiced in Bulgaria. This culminated in the emigration of an estimated 300,000 Turks and Pomaks across the border in the late 1980s. With the collapse of communism and the Zhivkov regime, Muslims achieved newfound freedom, similar to what Bulgaria's Christians experienced. In some instances, new churches and mosques were built near each other or even side-by-side. One of the oldest mosques in Europe, the Büyük Mosque, is located in Sofia, where a number of different places of worship exist within close proximity of each other.<sup>21, 22, 23</sup>

13 Information Bulgaria, "Explore Bulgarian Religion," n.d., <https://www.informationbulgaria.com/religion-in-bulgaria/>

14 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Bulgarian Orthodox Church," 22 February 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bulgarian-Orthodox-Church>

15 Monk Nicodemus, "History of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church," St. Herman Press, 2002, <https://www.bulgariandiocese.org/bulgarianchurchhx>

16 Agnes Sachsenroeder, *Cultureshock! A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette: Bulgaria* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 2008), 48–50.

17 Oishimaya Sen Nag, "Religious Beliefs in Bulgaria," World Atlas, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-bulgaria.html>

18 Antonina Zhelyazkova, "Islam: Muslims in Bulgaria," Oasis, 8 May 2019, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/who-are-muslims-in-bulgaria>

19 Mouzenidis Travel, "Religion of Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.mouzenidis.com/en-us/bulgaria/article/religion>

20 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Bulgaria 2018 International Religious Freedom Report," n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

21 Glenn E. Curtis, ed., *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/26.htm>

22 Mouzenidis Travel, "Religion of Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.mouzenidis.com/en-us/bulgaria/article/religion>

23 Maria Angelova, "10 Things We Can All Learn from Bulgaria's Square of Religious Tolerance," Culture Trip, 8 June 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/10-things-we-can-all-learn-from-bulgarias-square-of-religious-tolerance/>

Pomaks have been subjected to numerous concerted efforts at assimilation into mainstream Bulgarian society, which expected them to abandon their religion and culture.<sup>24</sup> Bulgarian Muslims are the largest Muslim minority in any European Union nation. Despite a history of internal pressures, Muslims have resisted radicalization and maintained a relatively harmonious relationship with the rest of the country.<sup>25, 26</sup>

## Other Religions

While Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the religious majority, other Christian denominations have a presence in the country. Groups of Catholics can be found in northwest Bulgaria, with a population estimated at 40,000. Protestantism, brought into Bulgaria by its interactions with the United States, has a small presence throughout the country, particularly among the Roma and Bulgarian peoples.<sup>27</sup> Bulgaria is also home to smaller clusters of other religions, accounting for about 29% of the population. These include Baha'i, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism, as well as a number of traditional beliefs, such as animism, Badimo, Confucianism, Kirant, paganism, shamanism, and spiritualism.<sup>28, 29</sup>

## Religion and Government

Bulgaria's constitution grants freedom of religion to its citizens. Religious practice is unrestricted by the government. Registration with the government is not required for religious groups, though benefits are afforded to the groups that choose to register. Benefits include state funding, the ability to operate schools and hospitals, and tax exemptions. Unregistered groups are denied these benefits, as well as the ability to own property, open financial accounts for the group, and sell merchandise. Registered and unregistered groups may publish, import, and distribute religious materials. Counting the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, there are 181 registered churches in Bulgaria.<sup>30</sup>

Freedom of religion does have its limits in Bulgaria. If a religious group is deemed a threat to national security, public health, morals, or the rights of others, the government could use this as justification to restrict the group's freedom to operate in-country. In 2016, a group of Roma Muslims was charged with supporting the Islamic State and other foreign fighters, among other charges. It is also illegal to engage in political activities on religious grounds. Face-covering garments are not authorized in Bulgaria, regardless of religious significance; a fine of USD 120 can be imposed for violations, with steep increases for repeat offenders.<sup>31</sup>

In 2018, proposed amendments to a 2002 religious law were hotly debated when they came before the National Assembly for approval. Critics objected to the restrictions the amendments would place on language, membership requirements, foreign funding, and the activities of the clergy. The amendments triggered massive protests from

24 John D. Bell, *Bulgaria in Transition: Politics, Economics, Society, and Culture after Communism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 170.

25 Valentin Karamomchev, "Why Bulgaria's Muslims Said 'No' to Radicalisation," *Balkan Insight*, 10 October 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/10/why-bulgarias-muslims-said-no-to-radicalisation/>

26 Minority Rights Group International, "Bulgarian-Speaking Muslims (Pomaks)," July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/bulgarian-speaking-muslims-pomaks/>

27 Oishimaya Sen Nag, "Religious Beliefs in Bulgaria," *World Atlas*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-bulgaria.html>

28 Index Mundi, "Bulgaria Religions," 7 December 2019, <https://www.indexmundi.com/bulgaria/religions.html>

29 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," *Countries and Their Cultures*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>

30 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Bulgaria 2018 International Religious Freedom Report," n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

31 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Bulgaria 2018 International Religious Freedom Report," n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

all major religious groups, leading the National Assembly to revise the proposals. The discriminatory provisions were removed, allowing for the bills to pass.<sup>32, 33</sup>

## Religion in Daily Life

The impact of religion on daily life in Bulgaria has changed dramatically throughout history. The social and political influence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has persisted despite the oppressive tactics during the Ottoman and communist eras.<sup>34</sup> With freedom of religion declared and regulation eased starting in the 1990s, religion's influence in Bulgarian society has experienced a resurgence.<sup>35</sup>

Both Christians and Muslims place religious significance upon life events such as births, marriages, and deaths. Christians participate in rituals such as christenings, while Muslims commonly practice circumcision. Some pagan rituals and traditions have been incorporated into Christian traditions as well.<sup>36</sup> Orthodox Bulgarians celebrate most common Christian holidays, including Lent and saints' days. Muslims celebrate the common Islamic holidays, including Ramadan and the Festival of Sacrifice. Christian religious services are typically on Sundays, although many churches hold services daily. Muslims usually attend mosque on Fridays, in addition to daily prayers.<sup>37</sup>

Religious practice in Bulgaria is not without its challenges and discrimination. Minority religious groups have reported instances of violence, harassment, and discrimination. Discrimination has often been systematic, with government officials using their power and influence to limit the ability of religious groups to gather for worship or protest.<sup>38</sup>

## Religious Events and Holidays

Bulgarian Christians celebrate a number of holidays, both mainstream and regional. Religious public holidays include the Orthodox Good Friday, Orthodox Holy Saturday, Orthodox Easter Sunday, St. George's Day, Christmas Day, and occasionally the Second Day of Christmas.<sup>39, 40</sup> Bulgarian holidays mostly follow the traditional Julian calendar dates, with some exceptions; Christmas, for example, is celebrated on 25 December in accordance with the Gregorian calendar. The church also observes a number of days honoring saints—also known as name days—throughout the year; a prominent example of this is Ivan's Day, celebrated 7 January in honor of St. Ivan Rilski, the patron saint of Bulgaria. Name days are celebrated by individuals named after saints on the saint's designated day.<sup>41, 42, 43</sup>

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- 32 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Bulgaria 2018 International Religious Freedom Report," n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>
- 33 Greg Puppink, "Great Victory for Religious Freedom in Bulgaria," ACLJ, January 2019, <https://aclj.org/persecuted-church/great-victory-for-religious-freedom-in-bulgaria>
- 34 Commisceo Global, "Bulgaria—Guide to Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette," n.d., <https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides/bulgaria-guide>
- 35 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," Countries and Their Cultures, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 36 Kristian Ismail and Gary Griffith, "Popular Faith and Practice in Bulgaria Today," East-West Church & Ministry Report, Spring 1999, <http://www.eastwestreport.org/articles/ew07202.htm>
- 37 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," Countries and Their Cultures, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 38 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Bulgaria 2018 International Religious Freedom Report," n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>
- 39 Edarabia, "Bulgaria Public & National Holidays (2020)," n.d., <https://www.edarabia.com/bulgaria/public-holidays/>
- 40 BulgarianPod101, "2019 Holidays in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.bulgarianpod101.com/bulgarian-calendar/>
- 41 Kashtite, "Bulgarian Traditions and Celebrations," 2015, <https://www.kashtite.com/en/traditions-and-celebrations/bulgarian-traditions-and-celebrations>
- 42 Crux, "Visiting the Monasteries and Churches of Rila and Bachkovo," 31 March 2016, <https://cruxnow.com/life/2016/03/visiting-the-monasteries-and-churches-of-rila-and-bachkovo/>
- 43 Maria Angelova, "How to Celebrate a Name Day in Bulgaria," Culture Trip, 14 February 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/how-to-celebrate-a-name-day-in-bulgaria/>



Bulgarian Muslims celebrate the standard religious holidays of their faith, such as Eid-al-Fitr or Ramadan. Muslims have historically avoided celebrating any holidays besides those belonging to the Islamic faith, but there have been recent instances in which Bulgarian Muslims invited Christians to celebrate their holidays with them.<sup>44, 45</sup>

## Places of Worship

### *Eastern Orthodox Places of Worship*

Countless churches, cathedrals, and monasteries have risen and fallen since the introduction of Christianity to Bulgaria in the ninth century. Despite attempts to convert or replace Christian places of worship, many have survived and operate today. Famous examples include the Rila Monastery, just south of Sofia. Within Sofia are the St. Alexander Nevsky, St. Sofia, and St. Nicholas (Russian) churches.<sup>46, 47</sup>

The Rila Monastery is located in the Rhodope Mountains, it was the first of its kind in Bulgaria and was founded by St. Ivan Rilski. It has weathered fires, occupations, and other intrusive foreign influences. It became a source of national pride during the Ottoman era and has remained so into modern times. Rila was one of the only religious facilities to receive government protection during the communist era (although it was converted into a museum during this time); in 1983, UNESCO designated Rila as a World Heritage Site. In 1991, the Bulgarian government formally returned ownership of Rila to the church, and it resumed operations as a monastery.<sup>48, 49, 50</sup>

### *Muslim Places of Worship*

Islamic places of worship in Bulgaria were primarily constructed during Ottoman rule. Mosques are most often found in cities and urban areas, while smaller places of worship—*mescits* (smaller mosques), *tekkes* (gathering places), and *turbes* (tombs or memorials)—are more common in rural areas. Larger mosques tend to reflect the architectural influence of Sunni Islam, while the smaller places of worship are typically found in Shia-dominant areas and adhere to the group's traditional architecture.<sup>51</sup>

The Tombul Mosque in Shumen is the largest and most prominent mosque in Bulgaria. Constructed in 1744, the mosque features Asian and French architectural influences.<sup>52</sup> In Sofia, the Banya Bashi Mosque is a historical landmark that was built in the 16th century by the famous Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan. Banya Bashi's prayer hall is made of stone, its columns were carved from one piece of stone, and its dome is lead-plated.<sup>53</sup>

44 Kristen Rogheh Ghodsee, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010), 18–19.

45 Mariya Cheresheva, "Muslims and Christians Celebrate Together in Bulgarian Town," *Balkan Insight*, 7 July 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/07/07/muslims-and-christians-celebrate-together-in-bulgarian-town-07-07-2016/>

46 Maria Angelova, "The Most Beautiful Churches in Bulgaria," Culture Trip, 31 January 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/beautiful-churches-bulgaria/>

47 U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, "Selected Protestant Historic Monuments and Sites in Bulgaria," 2013, <https://www.heritageabroad.gov/reports>

48 Glenn E. Curtis, ed., *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/26.htm>

49 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Rila Monastery," 17 November 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rila-Monastery>

50 Crux, "Visiting the Monasteries and Churches of Rila and Bachkovo," 31 March 2016, <https://cruxnow.com/life/2016/03/visiting-the-monasteries-and-churches-of-rila-and-bachkovo/>

51 U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, "Selected Muslim Historic Monuments and Sites in Bulgaria," 2010, <https://www.heritageabroad.gov/reports>

52 Lonely Planet, "Tombul Mosque," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/shumen/attractions/tombul-mosque/a/point-of-interest/502450/358760>

53 Bulgaria Travel, "Sofia Mosque," n.d., <https://www.bulgariatravel.org/en/Article/Details/379/Sofia%20Mosque#map=6/42.750/25.380>

# Behavior in Places of Worship

## Churches

Etiquette in Eastern Orthodox churches is well-established, with many customs dating back to at least the fourth century. When entering a church, either as a guest or for services, it is recommended to demonstrate respect by minimizing noise; it is recommended that all electronic devices are silenced or shut off upon entering.<sup>54</sup>

For those attending services, standing is common for most, if not all, of the service; some churches won't have seats or pews because of this tradition. Other common aspects of worship include facing east in prayer, lighting candles, and making prostrations and the sign of the cross. Appropriate clothing for men includes dress pants and a collared shirt; for women, modest clothing with a skirt or dress that is at least knee-length is recommended, as well as a head covering for most monasteries and some parishes. Cologne, perfume, or flashy jewelry are not recommended. Departing a church should be done as quietly as possible.<sup>55</sup>

## Mosques

Bulgarian mosques follow the same basic customs and etiquette found around the world. Visitors should be respectful at all times when visiting a mosque, as it is considered a house of God. Shoes are removed prior to entry and kept outside; this is a common practice for Bulgarian residences as well.<sup>56, 57</sup>

Whatever the purpose of a visit, appropriate clothing is expected—long trousers for men; skirts, trousers, or dresses along with long-sleeved shirts and headscarves for women. All electronic devices should be silenced or shut off altogether. Mindfulness is expected; it is important to account for your waste and belongings at all times. While children are welcome in a mosque, they should not be allowed to play inside. Food and drink are generally prohibited inside a mosque.<sup>58, 59, 60</sup>

54 Jeremiah, "Orthodoxy 101: Proper Etiquette & Worship Practices," Orthodox Road, 11 November 2018, <https://www.orthodoxroad.com/orthodoxy-101-proper-etiquette-worship-practices/>

55 St. James Armenian Church, "Church Etiquette," n.d., <http://stjamesevanston.org/church-etiquette>

56. Gehad Medhat, "Etiquette 101: The Dos and Don'ts of Visiting Mosques in the Middle East," Culture Trip, 19 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/articles/etiquette-101-the-dos-and-donts-of-visiting-mosques-in-the-middle-east/>

57 Sofia Travel Guide, "Do's and Don'ts: A Guide to Travel Etiquette in Bulgaria," January 2015, <http://flipfloppeople.com/Travel-Etiquette-in-Bulgaria-66>

58. Gehad Medhat, "Etiquette 101: The Dos and Don'ts of Visiting Mosques in the Middle East," Culture Trip, 19 September 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/articles/etiquette-101-the-dos-and-donts-of-visiting-mosques-in-the-middle-east/>

59 Mark Robison, "Visiting a Mosque? Here Are a Few Things to Know," Reno Gazette Journal, 26 April 2016, <https://www.rgj.com/story/news/2016/04/26/visiting-mosque-here-few-things-know/83525082/>

60 Gregory Rodgers, "Mosque Etiquette for Southeast Asia Visitors," Trip Savvy, 26 June 2019, <https://www.tripsavvy.com/mosque-etiquette-for-visitors-1629901>

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 2 | Religion, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. The majority of Bulgarians are Muslims. ☐ True ☐ False
2. Islam is the second-largest religion in Bulgaria. ☐ True ☐ False
3. Pomaks are ethnic Bulgars who follow Islam. ☐ True ☐ False
4. Most of the Eastern Orthodox holidays in Bulgaria follow the traditional Julian calendar. ☐ True ☐ False
5. None of the mosques that were built during the Ottoman rule of Bulgaria survived after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. ☐ True ☐ False

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 2 | Religion, Assessment Answers

1. False:  
Orthodox Christianity is the most practiced religion in Bulgaria. More than half of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox.
2. True:  
Muslims make up less than 10% of the Bulgarian population. Most Bulgarian Muslims belong to the Sunni subgroup, which was the form of Islam endorsed by the Ottoman Empire.
3. True:  
Pomaks are the outcome of centuries of religious conversions during the Ottoman rule. There have been many unsuccessful attempts to assimilate them into mainstream society.
4. True:  
Eastern Orthodox holidays in Bulgaria follow the Julian calendar dates, apart from Christmas, which is celebrated on 25 December in accordance with the Gregorian calendar rather than the Orthodox date, which falls on 7 January.
5. False:  
Several mosques built during the Ottoman rule still operate today, such as the Tombul Mosque in Shumen or the Banya Bashi Mosque in Sofia.

## Chapter 3 | Traditions



Kukeri dancers perform during a festival.  
Flickr / Ali Eminov

### Introduction

Bulgarians prize their traditions and culture, which display influences that go back a thousand years. Many holidays, popular dishes, and daily activities date back to the Middle Ages, when Bulgars, Slavs, and other groups occupied the region and created the foundation for Bulgarian society. Furthermore, centuries of Ottoman rule (1396–1908) galvanized those traditions and customs and strengthened the desire to establish a Bulgarian national identity. Today, the Bulgarian population is mostly homogenous, which further solidifies cultural norms and ideas of what it means to be Bulgarian.<sup>1</sup> Bulgarians were able to preserve their traditions even after the country began embracing modernity and urban development after World War II.<sup>2</sup>

1 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Philip Dimitrov, and Loring Danforth, "Bulgaria: Cultural Life," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 13 January 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Cultural-life>

2 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," *Every Culture*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>



## Formulaic Codes of Politeness

Bulgarians consider hospitality and fellowship in their society as a source of national pride. Despite attempts at disrupting social and cultural customs by Bulgaria's communist regime, traditional customs and etiquette have prevailed.<sup>3</sup> Bulgaria has ranked low on the Charities Aid Foundation's World Giving Index in the past but has shown steady signs of increasing overall and specifically in the aiding strangers category.<sup>4</sup>

Formality is vital when meeting people for the first time, and titles should be used. Standard titles in Bulgaria are *gospodin* (mister), *gospoda* (mrs.), and *gospodica* (miss). First names are used between friends.<sup>5</sup> Handshakes are appropriate when men and women meet, regardless of their familiarity with each other. It is common for Bulgarian men to firmly shake hands and maintain eye contact when they greet each other. When women greet other women, a kiss on the cheek is common if they know each other; a light handshake is more appropriate for first meetings.<sup>6, 7</sup> Friends will sometimes hold hands or walk together arm-in-arm.<sup>8</sup>

Conversations are usually drawn-out affairs, and social meals are often dominated by extended discussions.<sup>9</sup> Speaking voices are usually kept at a low volume in everyday conversation; it is considered inappropriate to speak loudly or cause a commotion, as raised voices or yelling indicate that something is upsetting. Asking a question multiple times is not regarded as rude, given the inclination in Bulgarian society for indirect communication.<sup>10</sup>

Although eye contact is expected in greetings, it is advisable not to make eye contact with strangers in public. If possible, it is preferable to greet a person in their native language.<sup>11, 12</sup> When speaking with members of the opposite sex, holding eye contact conveys interest; between men, however, it is typically viewed as a threat. In general, eye contact conveys honesty and is acceptable in most social situations.<sup>13</sup>

It is essential to pay attention to tone and nonverbal cues, as indirect communication is pervasive in Bulgarian culture. Bulgarians are known to shake their heads side-to-side to indicate "yes" and up and down to indicate "no," the opposite of what is common in most Western countries. Finger pointing is generally considered rude, as is slapping anyone on the back, even if it is done in a friendly manner.<sup>14</sup> Hats are removed when entering places of worship, and gloves are removed prior to shaking hands.

- 3 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Philip Dimitrov, and Loring Danforth, "Bulgaria: Cultural Life," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 13 January 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Cultural-life>
- 4 Charities Aid Foundation, "CAF World Giving Index 2018," 2020, <https://www.cafonline.org/about-us/publications/2018-publications/caf-world-giving-index-2018>
- 5 Lucy Debenham, "Good Manners in Bulgaria," *Travel Etiquette*, 25 November 2018, <http://www.traveletiquette.co.uk/good-manners-bulgaria.html>
- 6 Culture Crossing Guide, "Bulgaria: Greetings," 2017, [https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=9&CID=32](https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=9&CID=32)
- 7 Commisceo Global, "Bulgaria—Guide to Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette," n.d., <https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides/bulgaria-guide>
- 8 Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria, London, "Fun Trivia and Etiquette," n.d., <http://bulgarianembassy-london.org/explore-bulgaria/fun-trivia-and-etiquette/>
- 9 Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria, London, "Fun Trivia and Etiquette," n.d., <http://bulgarianembassy-london.org/explore-bulgaria/fun-trivia-and-etiquette/>
- 10 Culture Crossing Guide, "Bulgaria: Communication Style," 2017, [https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=9&CID=32](https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=9&CID=32)
- 11 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria: Etiquette," *Every Culture*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 12 Welcome to Bulgaria, "Bulgarian Customs and Etiquette," <http://welcometobulgaria.bg/bulgarian-customs-and-etiquette/>
- 13 Culture Crossing Guide, "Bulgaria: Eye Contact," 2017, [https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=10&CID=32](https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=10&CID=32)
- 14 Culture Crossing Guide, "Bulgaria: Gestures," 2017, [https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=9&CID=32](https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=9&CID=32)

Bulgarian families commonly adhere to the extended nuclear family model, in which a household will consist of parents and at least one adult child and their spouse.<sup>15</sup> Seniors are afforded the most respect in a typical family unit. When meeting a family, it is most appropriate to greet the eldest members first.<sup>16</sup>

## Hospitality and Gift Giving

When visiting a Bulgarian home, guests typically remove their shoes at the front door, and hosts provide slippers to wear indoor. For foreigners, this can be optional, but it is best practice to follow Bulgarian customs. It is also proper to bring a gift when invited to someone's home, particularly if the host is a business associate.<sup>17</sup> Common gifts are chocolates, desserts, alcoholic beverages, or fruit—something that can be shared during the visit is most appropriate. Flowers are acceptable as gifts, with the exception of lilies and chrysanthemums, as they are associated mostly with funerals.<sup>18</sup>

Guests in Bulgarian homes are often greeted with sweet bread and an alcoholic beverage—either wine or rakia, the national drink of Bulgaria. Rakia can be distilled from almost any available fruit, most commonly grapes, plums, or apricots; it is similar to grappa. These treats are shared as a symbol of good wishes.<sup>19, 20</sup>

## Eating Customs and Cuisine

Meals are highly social events in Bulgarian society. Diners are expected to eat a lot, engage in lively conversation, and demonstrate basic table manners, such as placing napkins on your lap or not placing elbows on the table. It is considered appropriate to keep hands visible at all times.<sup>21</sup> Dinner is the most important meal of the day.<sup>22</sup> During meals, it is customary for elders to be served first, followed by guests. Strangers are treated with a reverence similar to elders; unexpected visitors are generally treated as guests and extended invitations inside.<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> Leaving a little food on the plate when done eating is considered a sign that you do not want anymore.<sup>25</sup> If out at a restaurant, it is customary to engage in a friendly debate about who will pay the bill.<sup>26</sup>

Cuisine in Bulgaria shows great regional variation. The coastal areas feature abundant seafood, the plains rely heavily on vegetables, and dairy is a staple in the mountainous regions. Food availability is heavily dependent upon seasons, but bread is an important staple year-round. For religious Bulgarians, fasting is a common tradition.

- 15 John D. Bell, Francis William Carter, Philip Dimitrov, and Loring Danforth, "Bulgaria: Cultural Life," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 13 January 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Cultural-life>
- 16 Vicky Katsarova, "Bulgarian Customs and Etiquette You Should Not Miss!" *High Net Worth Immigration*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.high-net-worth-immigration.com/blog/bulgarian-customs-and-etiquette>
- 17 Welcome to Bulgaria, "Bulgarian Customs and Etiquette," n.d., <http://welcometobulgaria.bg/bulgarian-customs-and-etiquette/>
- 18 Culture Crossing Guide, "Bulgaria: Gift Giving," 2017, [https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?Id=23&CID=32](https://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=23&CID=32)
- 19 Orange Smile, "Bulgaria," n.d., <http://www.orangesmile.com/travelguide/bulgaria/traditions.htm>
- 20 Maria Angelova, "A Brief History of Rakia, Bulgaria's National Drink," 5 February 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/a-brief-history-of-rakia-bulgarias-national-drink/>
- 21 Commisceo Global, "Bulgaria—Guide to Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette," n.d., <https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides/bulgaria-guide>
- 22 Maria Angelova, "What the Locals Eat: A Typical Day's Food in Bulgaria," *Culture Trip*, 10 July 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/what-the-locals-eat-a-typical-days-food-in-bulgaria/>
- 23 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria: Etiquette," *Every Culture*, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
- 24 Lucy Debenham, "Good Manners in Bulgaria," *Travel Etiquette*, 25 November 2018, <http://www.traveletiquette.co.uk/good-manners-bulgaria.html>
- 25 Welcome to Bulgaria, "Bulgaria Customs and Etiquette," n.d., <http://welcometobulgaria.bg/bulgarian-customs-and-etiquette/>
- 26 Sofia Travel Guide, "Do's and Don'ts: A Guide to Travel Etiquette in Bulgaria," January 2015, <http://flipfloppeople.com/Travel-Etiquette-in-Bulgaria-66>

Orthodox Bulgarians fast before Easter, while Bulgarian Muslims commonly observe a fast in the daylight hours during the holy month of Ramadan.<sup>27</sup> Bulgarians often offer candy to people on special occasions.<sup>28</sup>

Popular dining establishments in Bulgaria include bakeries, *meyhanes* (taverns), guesthouses, cafes, and standard restaurants. *Banitsa*, bread-like pastries stuffed with various meats and cheeses, are popular and available in most bakeries. Meyhanes typically serve local specialties; guesthouses are similar to a meyhane but serve Bulgarian comfort food such as hearty soups, both hot and cold. Offerings at standard restaurants can run the gamut of influences from neighboring cultures such as Greek, Turkish, and Hungarian.<sup>29</sup>

## Types of Food

Bulgarian food features influences from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, particularly from Italian, Greek, and Turkish cuisines. Many traditional Bulgarian recipes include dairy, fruit, and vegetables. Yogurt, *sirene* (feta cheese), and meat are also staples; pork and chicken, in particular, are the most popular meats. Spit-roasted sheep or goats are common for celebratory meals.<sup>30, 31</sup>

Typical Bulgarian meals consist of *gyuvech* (meat and vegetable stew), *kufte* (spicy ground meat patty), *meshane* (mixed salad), and *banitsa*.<sup>32</sup> Rakia is commonly served during meals, usually dinner.<sup>33, 34</sup> Bulgarian honey has a reputation for its delicious taste, nutritional value, and supposed healing qualities, attributed to the unique variety of rare or endangered flowers that grow in the country. A popular dish is *tolumbi*, a honey-soaked pastry log.<sup>35, 36</sup> Bulgaria produces the most herbs and spices of all EU members and is one of the top three exporters in the world.<sup>37, 38</sup> Parsley is featured in virtually all Bulgarian dishes. Other common herbs are basil, thyme, oregano, and spearmint. Bilkov is a popular herbal tea.<sup>39, 40</sup>

Coffee and tea are everyday drinks for many Bulgarians. Wine and beer are also popular; fruit beers that are lower in alcohol content have grown in popularity in recent times.<sup>41</sup>

27 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria: Etiquette," Every Culture, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>

28 Sofia Travel Guide, "Do's and Don'ts: A Guide to Travel Etiquette in Bulgaria," January 2015, <http://flipfloppeople.com/Travel-Etiquette-in-Bulgaria-66>

29 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Eating," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/in-location/eating/a/nar/b1474e80-6932-483e-8009-d439c4e764d8/358731>

30 Sofia Travel Guide, "Do's and Don'ts: A Guide to Travel Etiquette in Bulgaria," January 2015, <http://flipfloppeople.com/Travel-Etiquette-in-Bulgaria-66>

31 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Eating," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/in-location/eating/a/nar/b1474e80-6932-483e-8009-d439c4e764d8/358731>

32 Kerry Kubilius, "An Introduction to Food and Traditions of Bulgaria," Trip Savvy, 3 May 2018, <https://www.tripsavvy.com/bulgarian-cuisine-introduction-to-food-traditions-1501243>

33 Maria Angelova, "What the Locals Eat: A Typical Day's Food in Bulgaria," Culture Trip, 10 July 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/what-the-locals-eat-a-typical-days-food-in-bulgaria/>

34 Gregory Dicum, "Sofia, Bulgaria: An Ancient City That Wears Its History Well," *New York Times*, 30 April 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/30/travel/sofia-bulgaria-an-ancient-city-that-wears-its-history-well.html>

35 Visit My Bulgaria, "10 Best Bulgaria Food Recipes," 8 November 2018, <https://visitmybulgaria.com/bulgarian-must-eat-foods-12-delicacies-not-to-be-missed/>

36 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Eating," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/in-location/eating/a/nar/b1474e80-6932-483e-8009-d439c4e764d8/358731>

37 Sofia News Agency, "Bulgaria Is the Largest Producer of Herbs in the European Union," 7 January 2019, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/194295/Bulgaria-is-the-Largest-Producer-of-Herbs-in-the-European-Union>

38 Boiana-MG, "Bulgaria Is One of the Top 3 Herbs Producers and Exporters in the World," 8 April 2016, <http://blog.boiana-mg.com/bulgaria/bulgaria-is-one-of-the-top-3-herbs-producers-and-exporters-in-the-world/>

39 Visit My Bulgaria, "10 Best Bulgaria Food Recipes," 8 November 2018, <https://visitmybulgaria.com/bulgarian-must-eat-foods-12-delicacies-not-to-be-missed/>

40 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Eating," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/in-location/eating/a/nar/b1474e80-6932-483e-8009-d439c4e764d8/358731>

41 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Eating," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/in-location/eating/a/nar/b1474e80-6932-483e-8009-d439c4e764d8/358731>

Street food is readily available throughout the country. Banitsa dominates the street food market, along with *palachinki* (savory pancakes), *mekitshi* (yogurt donuts), and *kiflichki* (croissant buns). Corn on the cob and toasted sunflower seeds are also commonly found with street vendors.<sup>42, 43</sup>

## Dress Code

Bulgarian clothing is influenced by modern Western culture. For casual outings, jeans and walking shoes are sufficient; good quality shoes, in particular, are essential in rural areas, as it is common to come across sidewalks and pathways that are in disrepair. In winter months, boots with soft rubber soles are recommended.<sup>44</sup>

Traditional folk clothing is not as common as modern Western clothing but is still seen in public events and celebrations, such as weddings, holidays, and festivals. The traditional garb features ornate embroidery, a skill that has been traditionally passed down to Bulgarian women starting at the age of 12. The embroidered imagery itself is significant, as the pattern was believed to protect the wearer from evil spells and spirits. Many of the designs and elements of traditional clothing are pagan in origin. The general features of traditional clothing did not change much over hundreds of years; men wore pants, shirts, vests, and girdles, while women wore dresses and aprons.<sup>45, 46</sup>

Formal or business clothing in Bulgaria follows the trends of other Western and European countries. Depending on the industry, the dress code will vary in its level of formality. Men are generally expected to wear suits, while women are expected to wear appropriate business attire.<sup>47, 48</sup>

## Non-Religious Holidays

Each year, Bulgaria celebrates a number of non-religious holidays; many of these holidays reflect the country's rich history and culture. Stores and public places may be closed on many of these holidays.<sup>49</sup>

### New Year's Day

On 1 January, Bulgarians ring in the new year (also known as Survaki) with the rest of the world. Celebrations are held in major cities, such as Sofia, which hosts festive performances in Batenburg Square. A unique Bulgarian new year tradition is *survankane*, in which children beat adults with elaborately decorated sticks while reciting cryptic incantations intended to bring good luck to the adult. In return, the children receive money for the "beating."<sup>50</sup>

42 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Eating," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/in-location/eating/a/nar/b1474e80-6932-483e-8009-d439c4e764d8/358731>

43 Wailana Kalama, "The Best Bulgarian Food That You Didn't Know You Needed to Try," Hostel World, 20 August 2018, <https://www.hostelworld.com/blog/bulgarian-food/>

44 Maria Angelova, "What to Pack for a Trip to Bulgaria," Culture Trip, 12 August 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/what-to-pack-for-a-trip-to-bulgaria/>

45 Michaela Koleva, "Traditional Clothing: Bulgarian Folk Costume," Fasion Art Ventures, n.d., <https://www.fashionartventures.com/traditional-clothing-bulgarian-folk-costume/>

46 RusClothing, "Bulgrian Folk Clothes," n.d., <https://www.rusclothing.com/russian-clothing/bulgarian-clothes/>

47 Passport to Trade, "Business Etiquette," n.d., <https://businessculture.org/eastern-europe/bulgaria/business-etiquette/>

48 Just Landed, "Bulgarian Business Etiquette: Culture of Business Meetings, Dresscode," n.d., <https://www.justlanded.com/english/Bulgaria/Bulgaria-Guide/Business/Bulgarian-business-etiquette>

49 Kerry Kubilius, "Guide to Bulgaria's Holidays," Trip Savvy, 3 June 2019, <https://www.tripsavvy.com/bulgaria-holidays-1501248>

50 Todor Bozhinov, "6 Weird Bulgarian Holiday Season Traditions," Kashkaval Tourist, 23 December 2015, <https://www.kashkaval-tourist.com/6-weird-bulgarian-holiday-season-traditions/>

## ***Baba Marta***

Baba Marta translates to “Grandmother March” and is celebrated on 1 March. Baba Marta is the personification of the month itself, a pre-Christian belief tied to the end of winter and beginning of spring. The holiday is similar to Groundhog Day in the United States. If there is bad weather in March, it is believed that Baba Marta is unhappy for some reason. However, most portrayals depict her as a kind grandmother. *Martenitsi* are red and white amulets or bracelets crafted in honor of Baba Marta. Traditionally, a martenitsa amulet was worn to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck. Today, they are given out as gifts to family and friends.<sup>51</sup>

## ***Liberation of Bulgaria Day***

Every 3 March, Bulgaria celebrates its liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, when Bulgaria became an autonomous state.<sup>52</sup> Celebrations include government events, speeches, and parades. The Bulgarian flag is hoisted, and wreaths are placed at monuments across the country.<sup>53</sup>

## ***Labor Day***

On 1 May, Bulgaria celebrates Labor Day, keeping in line with international Labor Day celebrations. Most businesses close for the day.<sup>54</sup>

## ***Unification Day***

Unification Day is celebrated on 6 September and commemorates the unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia in 1885. Plovdiv, the site of the unification, is central to the day’s celebrations. Many museums offer free admission on this day.<sup>55</sup> In other cities, various events are staged, including public speeches. A symbolic changing of the sentry takes place in Sofia.

## ***Independence Day***

On 22 September, Bulgaria celebrates its full independence from the Ottoman Empire. Although Bulgaria became an autonomous state in 1878, it was still subject to Ottoman influence until a war with Serbia created the opportunity for Bulgaria to completely sever ties with the Ottomans in 1908. Celebrations are similar to Liberation Day and Unification Day, and offices and businesses are closed.<sup>56</sup>

## ***Revival Day***

Revival Day is observed every 1 November in honor of Bulgaria’s cultural and spiritual leaders. Celebrations are usually smaller in scale than other national holidays; in lieu of the typical parades and events, Revival Day features flag ceremonies and torchlight processions. The Day of Bulgarian Science and Day of Bulgarian Journalism share the same date.<sup>57, 58</sup>

51 Stephanie Craig, “Baba Marta & Martenitsa: 7 Facts About This Bulgarian Holiday,” Sofia Adventures, n.d., <https://sofiaadventures.com/baba-marta-day-martenitsa-bulgarian-tradition/>

52 Radio Bulgaria, “On March 3 Bulgaria Celebrates National Liberation Day,” 3 March 2017, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/100803129/on-march-3-bulgaria-celebrates-national-liberation-day>

53 Holidays Around the World, “Bulgaria Celebrates National Liberation Day,” n.d., <http://aglobalworld.com/holidays-around-the-world/bulgaria-national-liberation-day/>

54 Sofia News Agency, “Bulgarians Celebrate International Labor Day,” 1 May 2017, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/180045/Bulgarians+Celebrate+International+Labor+Day>

55 Office Holidays, “Unification Day in Bulgaria in 2020,” n.d., <https://www.officeholidays.com/holidays/bulgaria/bulgaria-unification-day>

56 Office Holidays, “Independence Day in Bulgaria in 2020,” n.d., <https://www.officeholidays.com/holidays/bulgaria/bulgaria-independence-day>

57 Bulgarian Pod 101, “Celebrating Revival Leaders’ Day in Bulgaria, 24 September 2019, <https://www.bulgarianpod101.com/blog/2019/09/24/revival-leaders-day/>

58 Holidays Around the World, “Bulgaria Marks Revival Day,” n.d., <http://aglobalworld.com/holidays-around-the-world/bulgaria-revival-day/>



## Dos and Don'ts

### *Do*

- **Do** remove your shoes when entering a home. Hosts will often offer slippers to wear in the house.
- **Do** give an odd number of flowers to someone when giving them as a gift. Even numbers of flowers are used in funerals.
- **Do** wear good quality, durable shoes while out in public, as many pavements can be old or unstable.
- **Do** offer to pay restaurant bills when being social and leave a tip for the server. Typically, 10% of the tab or less is an acceptable tip.

### *Don't*

- **Don't** visit someone's home without a gift. Typical gifts include candy, wine, or flowers.
- **Don't** attempt to bargain in stores. It is considered rude because prices are typically affordable.
- **Don't** discuss politics or history, which are sensitive topics. It is also considered rude to criticize Bulgarian food.
- **Don't** forget that "yes" and "no" head nods mean the opposite of what they mean in the United States.

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 3 | Traditions, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. When Bulgarians get excited they raise their voices over one another, especially when speaking about topics close to their hearts. ☐ True ☐ False
2. Head nods for “yes” and “no” in Bulgaria have the opposite meaning as in the United States and the West. ☐ True ☐ False
3. Lilies and chrysanthemums are the recommended flowers to bring as gifts when invited to someone’s home. ☐ True ☐ False
4. Meals are elaborate social events in Bulgarian society. ☐ True ☐ False
5. Many Bulgarians wear traditional folk clothing on a regular basis as a demonstration of national pride. ☐ True ☐ False

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 3 | Traditions, Assessment Answers

1. False:  
In Bulgaria, speaking voices are usually kept at a low volume in everyday conversation. It is considered inappropriate to speak loudly, as raised voices or yelling indicate that something is upsetting.
2. True:  
Shaking the head from side-to-side in Bulgaria means “yes,” while shaking it up and down means “no.”
3. False:  
While flowers in odd numbers are acceptable gifts to give to a host, lilies and chrysanthemums are associated with funerals.
4. True:  
Diners are expected to eat a lot and engage in lively conversation.
5. False:  
Traditional folk clothing is not as common as modern Western clothing in Bulgaria, but is still seen in public events and celebrations, such as weddings, holidays, and festivals.

# Chapter 4 | Urban Life



Independence Square.  
Flickr / Deensel

## Introduction

The majority of Bulgaria's population today lives in urban areas. The transition from rural to urban has been steady and relatively recent in Bulgarian history, reflective of the country's shift from an agriculture-based economy to that of industry, technology, and services. As with most major cities, Bulgaria's urban centers offer its citizens better employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and cultural experiences. The capital Sofia is emblematic of this shift from rural to urban, with its historical landmarks interspersed with modern infrastructure and commercial districts. With relatively low crime rates, Bulgarian cities rival other European cities in the region in affordability, safety, and innovation.<sup>1, 2</sup>

1 John D. Bell, Philip Dimitrov, Loring Danforth, and Francis William Carter, "Bulgaria: Settlement Patterns," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 17 February 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/People#ref42693>

2 Chris Leadbeater, "City Life: Sofia," *National Geographic*, 19 May 2014, <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/travel/2014/05/city-life-sofia>

## Urbanization Challenges

Urbanization began in earnest for Bulgaria after independence was declared in 1878. However, the process was slow for decades, thanks in part to the international turmoil of two world wars and the emigration of Turks upon the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Urbanization ramped up in the communist years with the rapid development of various industries; Bulgarian cities tripled or even quadrupled in size in the years between 1950 and 1990.<sup>3</sup> Growth slowed again momentarily as Bulgaria transitioned from the highly centralized, planned economy of the communist regime to the open market economy it has today. As of 2020, 75.7% of the total population resided within urban areas.<sup>4, 5</sup> Compared to the rest of Europe, Bulgaria's urbanization is below average but rapidly climbing.<sup>6</sup>

Unemployment has been a major topic in Bulgaria's political arena. Since 2000, urban employment has demonstrated an overall increasing trend punctuated by brief episodes of decline. A four-year period of rapid success that culminated in record highs in 2008, followed by a rapid decline through 2012, and then a steady, moderate rise beginning in 2014.<sup>7</sup> The largest factors in the rising employment statistics are Bulgaria's focus on specialized labor mediation through public employment services, targeted programs, enacted initiatives, and project-based activities.<sup>8</sup>

Job creation has been at the center of a national restoration program called Beautiful Bulgaria, a joint program administered by the UN's development program and Bulgaria's ministry of labor and social policy. Originally starting in 1997 in five cities, it has since expanded throughout the country and provided Bulgarians with vocational training.<sup>9</sup>

Unemployment numbers are similarly decreasing across the country, in line with 20 other EU nations.<sup>10</sup> Bulgaria's labor offices are tasked with combating unemployment; in 2019, more than 216,000 unemployed citizens found work in the commerce, auto, public administration, hospitality, and administration industries.<sup>11</sup> As unemployment generally eases, consumer confidence in the urban population is improving.<sup>12</sup>

Bulgaria's urban population is subjected to poor air quality. Air pollution is a significant concern across the country. In urban settings, up to 60% of the population is exposed to harmful pollution. In 2014, Bulgaria has the highest mortality rates tied to air pollution in Europe.<sup>13, 14</sup>

- 3 Glenn Curtis, *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/24.htm>
- 4 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria: People and Society," *The World Factbook*, 29 January 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 5 World Bank, "The World Bank in Bulgaria: Overview," 18 October 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bulgaria/overview>
- 6 Sofia News Agency, "Bulgaria among Countries Worst Hit by Urbanisation," 30 June 2006, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/65799/Bulgaria+Among+Countries+Worst+Hit+by+Urbanization>
- 7 CEIC, "Bulgaria Labour Force: Employed: Urban," 14 November 2019, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/bulgaria/labour-force-survey-15-years-and-above/labour-force-employed-urban>
- 8 European Parliament, "Bulgaria: Recent Developments in Employment and Social Affairs," Directorate-General for Internal Policies, 2017, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/607358/IPOL\\_IDA\(2017\)607358\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/607358/IPOL_IDA(2017)607358_EN.pdf)
- 9 United Nations Development Programme, "Beautiful Bulgaria," n.d., [https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/poverty-reduction/supporting\\_transformationalchange/beautiful\\_bulgaria.html](https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/poverty-reduction/supporting_transformationalchange/beautiful_bulgaria.html)
- 10 Sofia Globe, "Unemployment in Bulgaria in December 2019 was 3.7%—Eurostat," 30 January 2020, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2020/01/30/unemployment-in-bulgaria-in-december-2019-was-3-7-eurostat/>
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- 13 Timothy Spence, "Bulgaria's Killer Air Exposes Wider EU Problems," Euractiv, 14 November 2011, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/transport/news/bulgaria-s-killer-air-exposes-wider-eu-problems/>
- 14 Health and Environment Alliance, "Air Pollution and Health in Bulgaria: Facts, Figures and Recommendations," December 2014, [https://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal\\_briefing\\_air\\_bulgaria\\_eng.pdf](https://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/heal_briefing_air_bulgaria_eng.pdf)



Water availability is also a challenge for Bulgarians. Although water is available to virtually all citizens throughout the country, wastewater treatment plants do not meet EU standards and remain inefficient. The urban sewage system is a major source of pollution for surface water.<sup>15</sup> In 2019, a water shortage crisis affected thousands, created a political controversy, and sparked protests.<sup>16, 17</sup>

## Healthcare and Health Issues

Bulgaria's mixed public-private healthcare system has had a rough path in the country's transition out of the state-sponsored system of the communist era. The introduction of private healthcare led to rapid advancements in quality and availability.<sup>18</sup> Today, while it touts a skilled, competent medical workforce, Bulgaria's healthcare system ranks below EU averages. The country currently stands at 121 out of 228 countries for life expectancy.<sup>19</sup> Reforms and initiatives, such as the Bulgarian National Health Strategy, have been proposed to address the system's inadequacies and failures, but relief and stability remain elusive.<sup>20, 21, 22, 23</sup>

During Bulgaria's communist era, healthcare was administered under the "Semashko" system, a centralized program that saw the operations of all hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, and other medical facilities assumed by the People's Republic of Bulgaria.<sup>24</sup> Today's decentralized, compulsory health insurance system is funded by Bulgarians and the government. The National Health Insurance Fund provides most of the funding by collecting funds from the working population; the rest is subsidized by the government on behalf of exempted individuals.<sup>25</sup> Foreigners from EU member nations with a European Health Identity card may also receive healthcare while in the country.<sup>26, 27</sup> Private insurers provide an alternative to healthcare services included in the state's health insurance package. The private sector largely mirrors its public counterpart with facilities for dental, pharmaceutical, outpatient, and many other services.<sup>28</sup>

- 15 Stanislava Dimitrova, "Bulgaria's Wastewater Mission," *WaterWorld*, 1 September 2010, <https://www.waterworld.com/international/wastewater/article/16201883/bulgarias-wastewater-mission>
- 16 Angel Krasimirov and Tsvetelia Tsoleva, "Bulgarian Government Survives No-Confidence Vote over Water Crisis," *Reuters*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-government/bulgarian-government-survives-no-confidence-vote-over-water-crisis-idUSKBN1ZS0UA>
- 17 Heather Donald, "Bulgaria: Residents in Pernik Protest about Water Shortages," *Euro News*, 25 January 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/25/bulgaria-residents-in-pernik-protest-about-water-shortages>
- 18 European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, "Health Systems in Transition: Bulgaria Health System Review," *Health Systems in Transition* (Medical University Varna, 2018), vol. 20, no. 4, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1)
- 19 Central Intelligence Agency, "Country Comparison: Life Expectancy at Birth," *The World Factbook*, n.d., <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/355rank.html#BU>
- 20 Daniel Montiglio, "10 Most Common Causes of Death in Bulgaria," *Foreigner.bg*, n.d., <https://www.foreigner.bg/10-most-common-causes-of-death-in-bulgaria/>
- 21 Dionne S. Kringos, *Building Primary Care in a Changing Europe: Case Studies* (Copenhagen, Denmark: European Observatory on health Systems and Policies, a partnership hosted by WHO, 2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK459008/>
- 22 European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, "Health Systems in Transition: Bulgaria Health System Review," *Health Systems in Transition* (Medical University Varna, 2018), vol. 20, no. 4, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1)
- 23 Angel Krasimirov and Tsvetelia Tsoleva, "Bulgaria's Government Faces No-Confidence Vote over Healthcare," 15 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-government/bulgarias-government-faces-no-confidence-vote-over-healthcare-idUSKCN1MP202>
- 24 National Health Insurance Fund, "Healthcare in Bulgaria," n.d., <http://www.en.nhif.bg/page/healthcare-in-bulgaria>
- 25 China-CEE Institute, "Bulgaria Social Briefing: The State of Health in Bulgaria—Challenges and Perspectives," 2 July 2019, <https://china-cee.eu/2019/07/02/bulgaria-social-briefing-the-state-of-health-in-bulgaria-challenges-and-perspectives/>
- 26 Health Management, "The Bulgarian Healthcare System," March 2013, <https://healthmanagement.org/c/hospital/issuearticle/the-bulgarian-healthcare-system-1>
- 27 Daniel Montiglio, "Bulgarian Health Services," *Foreigner.bg*, n.d., <https://www.foreigner.bg/bulgarian-health-services/>
- 28 D. S. Kringos, *Building Primary Care in a Changing Europe: Case Studies* (Copenhagen: European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK459008/>

Bulgaria's healthcare has experienced three major periods of reform since 1989. From 1989–1996, the focus was on dismantling the centralized infrastructure of the Semashko model; from 1997–2001, the health insurance system formally launched along with new laws governing healthcare facilities and providers; and since 2002, reforms have been focused on bolstering enrollment in the insurance system while ensuring its financial stability.<sup>29</sup>

Cities have a significantly better quality of healthcare staff and facilities than rural areas. While the number of physicians and dentists is high in Bulgaria, there is an overall shortage of nursing staff. It is common for family members to perform light nursing duties when staffing at a given facility is insufficient.<sup>30, 31</sup> Government spending on healthcare has steadily increased since the introduction of insurance in the late 1990s; as of 2015, healthcare accounted for 8.5% of Bulgaria's gross domestic product. Out-of-pocket costs, too, have risen—since 2000, private expenditure on healthcare has gone up almost 10%. Although eligible Bulgarians technically receive healthcare coverage as part of their payment into social security, it is estimated that patients pay close to half the costs of the health services they receive. Some 12% of the population does not have public or private insurance and relies upon free emergency assistance when necessary.<sup>32</sup>

Mortality rates are a significant concern in Bulgaria; the country has the highest death rate in the European Union.<sup>33</sup> In 2015, Bulgaria's mortality rate was 1,660 per 100,000 people; the EU average for the same period was 1,036 out of 100,000 people. Cancer and cardiovascular disease have remained the top causes of death for Bulgarians and the EU at large.<sup>34</sup> Mortality rates hit their highest numbers in 2012, when Bulgaria experienced 1,709 deaths per 100,000 people. In 2020, Bulgaria's under 5-years-old mortality rate was 810 per 100,000 live births and the maternal rate was 10 per 100,000 live births. Despite having the lowest life expectancy in the European Union, there have been recent signs of improvement. In 2018, men averaged 71.3 years and women 78.4 years; in 2020, men rose to 71.8 years and women inched up to 78.5 years.<sup>35, 36, 37, 38</sup>

29 Health Management, "The Bulgarian Healthcare System," March 2013, <https://healthmanagement.org/c/hospital/issuearticle/the-bulgarian-healthcare-system-1>

30 Daniel Montiglio, "Bulgarian Health Services," *Foreigner.bg*, n.d., <https://www.foreigner.bg/bulgarian-health-services/>

31 Health Management, "The Bulgarian Healthcare System," March 2013, <https://healthmanagement.org/c/hospital/issuearticle/the-bulgarian-healthcare-system-1>

32 China-CEE Institute, "Bulgaria Social Briefing: The State of Health in Bulgaria—Challenges and Perspectives," 2 July 2019, <https://china-cee.eu/2019/07/02/bulgaria-social-briefing-the-state-of-health-in-bulgaria-challenges-and-perspectives/>

33 Eurostat, "Causes and Occurrence of Deaths in the EU," 16 July 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20190716-1>

34 Sofia News Agency, "Bulgaria is Again the Country with the Highest Mortality Rate across the European Union," 16 March 2018, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/188776/Bulgaria+is+Again+the+Country+with+the+Highest+Mortality+Rate+Across+the+European+Union>

35 Mariana Dyakova, Elena Shipkovenska, Peter Dyakov, Plamen Dimitrov, and Svetla Torbova, "Cardiovascular Risk Assessment of Bulgarian Urban Population: Cross-Sectional Study," *NCBI*, December 2008, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2621028/>

36 UNICEF, "Country Profiles: Bulgaria," December 2018, <https://data.unicef.org/country/bgr/>

37 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria: People and Society," *The World Factbook*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>

38 Sofia News Agency, "Bulgarians Have the Lowest Life Expectancy in the EU," 12 May 2018, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/190046/Bulgarians+have+the+Lowest+Life+Expectancy+in+the+EU>

## Urban Education

Bulgaria's ministry of education and science is responsible for the management of the country's educational system, which is modeled after other European systems and features general, vocational, language, and foreign educational facilities. Schools are further divided by agency: state, municipal, and private. This system originated with Bulgaria's independence in 1878 and maintained its basic structure through communist rule, in which the curriculum shifted toward the promotion of Marxist theory and communist values. In the post-communist years, the educational system underwent a full overhaul, supplanting its socialist administration with a system of educational councils and delegates elected to the National Council of Teachers.<sup>39, 40, 41</sup>

Today, school is compulsory for Bulgarian children ages 7–16 during basic education (primary and presecondary, grades 1–8). Kindergarten is available for children ages 3–6. At the age of 15, Bulgarian students become eligible for vocational training during upper secondary school. School years are split into two terms, with the first running September–January and the second running February–June. It is also common for schools to rotate start times for different grades, with some starting in the morning while and others in the afternoon.<sup>42</sup> A typical school week will include anywhere from 22–30 hours of instruction, with occasional evening instruction for later grades. Upon graduation from upper secondary school, students able to afford higher education have a number of options: higher education colleges, universities, technical colleges, academies, and private institutions.<sup>43, 44</sup>

Private schools are competitive alternatives to public schools at each grade level, including higher education. They are also growing in number; by 1999, there were 52 private schools in all. Today, more than 200 private schools operate in Bulgaria, with the highest enrollment levels found at private colleges.<sup>45, 46</sup>

The Higher Education Act was passed in 1995 and has been amended or supplemented since then to address the challenges and problems facing the Bulgarian education system. The act established and expanded the type of educational systems allowed to operate within the country, with the goal of bringing the Bulgarian education system up to the standards of the rest of Europe. Divisions along ethnic and economic lines hinder the success of educational reforms. In particular, Roma children are typically far less successful in school than their Bulgarian counterparts. Only 7% of Roma students finish secondary school. The education sector also has an unstable workforce, further complicating successful outcomes.<sup>47, 48</sup> If reforms like the Reimbursable Advisory Services

39 Glenn Curtis, *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/24.htm>

40 Fulbright Bulgaria, "Educational System of Bulgaria," n.d., <http://www.fulbright.bg/en/educational-services/education-usa-advising/educational-services-for-visiting-us-schools/educational-system-of-bulgaria/>

41 European Commission, "Bulgaria: Organization of Single Structure Education," 29 December 2019, [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/organisation-single-structure-education\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/organisation-single-structure-education_en)

42 Just Landed, "Education in Bulgaria: Structure of the Education System," n.d., <https://www.justlanded.com/english/Bulgaria/Bulgaria-Guide/Education/Education-in-Bulgaria>

43 Fulbright Bulgaria, "Educational System of Bulgaria," n.d., <http://www.fulbright.bg/en/educational-services/education-usa-advising/educational-services-for-visiting-us-schools/educational-system-of-bulgaria/>

44 European Commission, "Bulgaria: Organization of Single Structure Education," 29 December 2019, [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/organisation-single-structure-education\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/organisation-single-structure-education_en)

45 State University, "Bulgaria Educational System-Overview," n.d., <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/210/Bulgaria-EDUCATIONAL-SYSTEM-OVERVIEW.html>

46 Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, "Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for 2017/2018 School Year," March 2018, [https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Education2017\\_en\\_854DBUN.pdf](https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Education2017_en_854DBUN.pdf)

47 CEDEFOP, "Bulgaria—Government Must Reform the Educational System in Order to Produce Staff Needed by the Economy," 17 November 2011, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/bulgaria-government-must-reform-educational-system-order-produce-staff-needed>

48 Morgan Leahy, "Education in Bulgaria," *Borgen Magazine*, 8 April 2017, <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/education-in-bulgaria/>

agreement, which will utilize the World Bank's resources to implement new educational best practices, succeed, it is expected that Bulgaria will reach EU standards within a generation.<sup>49</sup>

## Restaurants

Like other European countries, cafes and markets are popular destinations for people, as they are fast and affordable.<sup>50</sup> Bulgarian cities like Sofia feature hundreds of dining establishments, reflecting the European and international cuisines common throughout the country. Cities commonly feature a wider variety of cuisine than in rural areas, including enotecas, Irish pubs, and sushi bars. Pizza parlors and Chinese restaurants are also particularly popular in Bulgarian cities, while the coastal cities are dominated by seafood establishments.<sup>51, 52</sup>

Dining out is an opportunity for conversation and socializing. Toasts and indulgence in food and drink are common occurrences over a meal in a dining establishment. Social meals can take 3–4 hours, so it is best to pace oneself when eating and drinking.<sup>53</sup> Food portions in some restaurants, such as *mehanas*, are smaller than average, so it is common to order multiple dishes for a single meal. Tipping is expected; common tips are 10% of the bill.<sup>54</sup>

Bulgarian restaurants commonly do not differentiate between lunchtime and dinner; their menus will remain the same throughout the day. Food is usually delivered to customers as soon as it is prepared. Dishes found on most menus include *tarator* (cucumber and yogurt soup), *shopski* (baked cheese with tomato, onion, and egg), and *patatnik* (grated potato fried with onion, egg, goat cheese, and herbs).<sup>55</sup>

## Marketplaces and Street Vendors

Traditional marketplaces in urban settings like Sofia have shrunk in recent years in favor of shopping malls. Most major cities in Bulgaria now have shopping malls; as a result, many marketplaces have transitioned from selling a wide variety of goods to selling primarily fruits and vegetables.<sup>56</sup> Haggling over prices is not appropriate unless purchasing something in bulk. Some markets, like the Thursday market in Plovdiv, have been in continual operation for hundreds of years. Operating hours vary from daily to weekly, depending on location, although common hours are 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Saturday.<sup>57, 58, 59</sup>

Urban settings such as Sofia typically offer three major types of street food: pizza, kebabs, and *banitsas* or *bureks*. Pizza (sometimes called *parlenka*) is sold by the slice and served along with corn, peas, and pickles;

49 World Bank, "Providing Better Quality Education to Bulgaria's Youth with Support from the World Bank," 21 August 2016, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/08/22/world-bank-government-of-bulgaria-sign-advisory-agreement-to-support-education-sector-reforms>

50 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Eating," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/in-location/eating/a/nar/b1474e80-6932-483e-8009-d439c4e764d8/358731>

51 Sofia Guide, "Eating Out," n.d., <http://www.sofia-guide.com/eating-out/>

52 My Guide Bulgaria, "Restaurants in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.myguidebulgaria.com/restaurants>

53 Welcome to Bulgaria, "Bulgarian Customs and Etiquette," n.d., <https://www.myguidebulgaria.com/restaurants>

54 High Net Worth Immigration, "Bulgarian Customs and Etiquette You Should Not Miss!" n.d., <https://www.high-net-worth-immigration.com/blog/bulgarian-customs-and-etiquette>

55 Frommers, "Bulgaria" Tips on Dining in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.frommers.com/destinations/bulgaria/planning-a-trip/tips-on-dining>

56 My Guide Bulgaria, "Shopping Malls in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.myguidebulgaria.com/shopping/shopping-malls>

57 Dan Hancox, "Abundant Markets and Artisan Producers: Plovdiv Has Much to Offer Food Lovers," The National, 25 January 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/travel/abundant-markets-and-artisan-producers-plovdiv-has-much-to-offer-food-lovers-1.967975>

58 Maria Angelova, "The Best Markets in Sofia, Bulgaria," *Culture Trip*, 15 May 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/the-best-markets-in-sofia-bulgaria/>

59 World Travel Guide, "Shopping in Sofia," n.d., <https://www.worldtravelguide.net/guides/europe/bulgaria/sofia/shopping/>

kebabs come with french fries, cabbage, and are garnished garlic sauce; and the *banitsas*, *bureks*, and other Bulgarian puff pastry dishes are sold by *banicharnitsas* vendors.<sup>60, 61</sup>

Bulgaria also has markets for specific goods, such as books or antiques. The *bitaka* (flea market) in Sofia is one of the largest in the country and remains a place where a wide variety of goods can be found. However, it is common for items sold at flea markets to be stolen goods or otherwise scavenged.<sup>62, 63, 64</sup>

## Money, Credit Cards, and ATMs

Bulgaria's central monetary authority is the Bulgarian National Bank (BNB), which oversees the country's banking operations and is responsible for the stability of the Bulgarian lev. Once Bulgaria joined the EU, the BNB became a member of the European System of Central Banks.<sup>65</sup> With 25 banks operating throughout the country, Bulgaria's banking sector has shown some signs of growth in recent years.<sup>66, 67</sup>

While credit cards are accepted in most establishments in cities, it is still advised to have cash on hand.<sup>68</sup> ATMs are located in most shops, public transit hubs, or at banking establishments. ATMs in banks are the most secure option, as card skimming devices have been used by thieves at ATMs throughout the country. Credit cards are widely used in Bulgaria and have seen a surge in recent years—there was approximately 60% growth in credit card users from 2015 to 2016.<sup>69, 70</sup>

## Urban Traffic and Transportation

Bulgaria's cities have a network of taxis and buses available for use. Mini-buses known as *marshrutkas* are a common way for people to get to and from cities and suburbs. Public transportation is the most popular method of getting around in Bulgarian cities and towns. Many urban downtowns also offer trolley service.<sup>71</sup>

The cost of taxi service varies widely from city to city; for example, taxis at airports or resorts cost more than what you would find on the average city street. Deception by taxi drivers does happen—tourists are often asked to negotiate the price ahead of time or told that the trip cost display is broken.<sup>72</sup>

60 Leslie Strnadel, *Bulgaria (Other Places Travel Guide)* (Other Places Publishing, 2012), 82.

61 Frommers, "Bulgaria" Tips on Dining in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.frommers.com/destinations/bulgaria/planning-a-trip/tips-on-dining>

62 World Travel Guide, "Shopping in Sofia," n.d., <https://www.worldtravelguide.net/guides/europe/bulgaria/sofia/shopping/>

63 Kryzsiak Filipiuk, "Bitaka—The Largest Flea Market in Sofia," Old Long Road, 25 March 2015, <http://oldlongroad.com/bitaka-the-largest-flea-market-in-sofia/>

64 Dimana Trankova, "Sofia's Hidden Market," Vagabond, 4 April 2017, <https://www.vagabond.bg/travel/high-beam/item/3647-sofia-s-hidden-flea-market.html>

65 Corporate Finance Institute, "Overview of Banks in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/careers/companies/top-banks-in-bulgaria/>

66 Association of Banks in Bulgaria, "The Banking System in Bulgaria in 2018—Facts and Figures," n.d., <https://abanksb.bg/en/the-banking-system-in-bulgaria-in-2018-facts-and-figures/>

67 Association of Banks in Bulgaria, "The Economy and the Banking Sector in Bulgaria: Fourth Quarter of 2019," 6 February 2020, <https://abanksb.bg/downloads/quarterly-information/2019-Q4-Review-EN.pdf>

68 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria in Detail: Money and Costs," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/a/nar-gr/money-and-costs/358731>

69 Sofia News Agency, "Credit Cards Become More Popular in Bulgaria," 24 November 2016, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/177615/Credit+Cards+Become+More+Popular+in+Bulgaria>

70 TransferWise, "ATMs in Bulgaria: Credit Cards and Fees," 28 June 2018, <https://transferwise.com/gb/blog/atms-in-bulgaria>

71 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria: Local Transport," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/transport/getting-around/local-transport>

72 World Goo, "The Cost of Taxis in Bulgaria: Prices in Different Cities," n.d., <https://worldgoo.com/the-cost-of-taxis-in-bulgaria-prices-in-different-cities/>



For travel between cities, trains are very popular modes of transportation, even though they are generally slower than buses. Bulgaria has 4,029 km (2,503 mi) of railway lines as of 2016, much of which is outdated as it was constructed during the communist era.<sup>73</sup> Within cities, buses tend to be newer and more comfortable, and the roads are better maintained. Some cities have upgraded their bus fleets with new electric buses as part of transportation overhaul initiatives.<sup>74, 75</sup> Since 2007, the European Union has funded public transportation upgrades and renovations in Sofia, with the goal of creating a system that is environmentally friendly and affordable.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the strong public transportation options available in Bulgarian cities, private automobiles are increasing in number and causing significant delays in many urban settings. Bulgarian cities lack a strong cycling infrastructure, as bicycles are not a popular transportation alternative.<sup>77</sup>

## Street Crime

While crime in Bulgaria is considered a minimal risk overall, the country has reported higher instances of violence, vandalism, and crime than its EU counterparts.<sup>78</sup> Most urban crime is economic in nature—ATM skimming, credit card fraud, and theft. The most common threat to foreigners are pickpockets.<sup>79</sup>

The General Directorate National Police is Bulgaria's law enforcement entity and is administered by the interior ministry. The police force has been accused of various abuses over time, leading to the implementation of ambitious reform initiatives with a "human rights-based approach to policing."<sup>80</sup>

According to official statistics, crime in Bulgaria has declined in recent years. In 2018, the interior ministry reported that there was a 9.8% decrease in registered crimes; 46% of the cases were resolved, a 2.3% increase from the previous year.<sup>81</sup>

- 73 European Parliament, "Briefing: Research for TRAN Committee—Transport and Tourism in Bulgaria," 18 September 2017, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/601993/IPOL\\_BRI\(2017\)601993\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/601993/IPOL_BRI(2017)601993_EN.pdf)
- 74 Orange Smile, "Bulgaria: Travelling Through Bulgaria—Roads, Airports, Railway, Bus Transportation," n.d., <http://www.orangesmile.com/travelguide/bulgaria/transport.htm>
- 75 Sofia News Agency, "New 56 Last Generation Electric Buses Will Fill the Lines of Urban Transport in Burgas," 21 October 2019, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/201077/New+56+Last+Generation+Electric+Buses+Will+Fill+the+Lines+of+Urban+Transport+in+Burgas>
- 76 European Commission, "Constructing Sofia's Integrated Urban Transport System, Stage 2," 22 March 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/projects/bulgaria/constructing-sofias-integrated-urban-transport-system-stage-2](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/bulgaria/constructing-sofias-integrated-urban-transport-system-stage-2)
- 77 S. D. Tzvetkova, "Development of Bicycle Transport in the City of Sofia as Part of the Concept for Stable Urban Mobility," 2018, <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/182/1/012019/pdf>
- 78 Sofia News Agency, "Survey: Bulgaria is the Most Dangerous Country in the EU: The Highest Number of Crime, Violence and Vandalism," 27 November 2018
- 79 Overseas Security Advisory Council, "Bulgaria 2019 Crime & Safety Report," 25 March 2019, U.S. Department of State Diplomatic Security, <https://www.osac.gov/Country/Bulgaria/Content/Detail/Report/082260cf-7448-4a31-b4f6-15f4aebacc78>
- 80 Swiss Confederation, "Strengthening Human Rights-based Policing in Bulgaria," 3 August 2019, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/bulgaria/en/home/news/news.html/content/erweiterungsbeitrag/en/meta/news/2019/03/08/staerkung-der-menschenrechtsbasierten-polizeiarbeit-in-bulgarien>
- 81 Daniel Montiglio, "How Safe Is Bulgaria?" Foreigner.bg, n.d., <https://www.foreigner.bg/how-safe-is-bulgaria/>

# Bulgarian Orientation

## Chapter 4 | Urban Life, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. During Bulgaria's communist era, city populations shrunk because many people were sent to rural areas to cultivate the land and work in factories. ☐ True ☐ False
2. Air pollution is a significant problem in Bulgaria's cities. ☐ True ☐ False
3. Bulgaria's healthcare coverage is completely free and one of the best-funded among Europe's postcommunist countries. ☐ True ☐ False
4. School is compulsory for Bulgarian children ages 7–16. ☐ True ☐ False
5. Market vendors expect shoppers to haggle over prices, so many products may be priced higher than their true value. ☐ True ☐ False

# Bulgarian Orientation

## Chapter 4 | Urban Life, Assessment Answers

1. False:  
From 1950 to 1990, Bulgarian cities grew 3–4 times in response to the rapid development of various industries.
2. True:  
Up to 60% of Bulgaria's urban population is exposed to harmful air pollution. Bulgaria has one of the highest mortality rates tied to air pollution in Europe.
3. False:  
Since 2000, out-of-pocket costs for healthcare have risen by almost 10%. It is estimated that patients pay close to 50% of the cost of the health services they receive.
4. True:  
Bulgarian children must attend primary and secondary school, grades 1–8. At the age of 15, Bulgarian children become eligible for vocational training during upper secondary school.
5. False:  
Haggling over prices is not appropriate unless purchasing something in bulk.

## Chapter 5 | Rural Life



A field in the Central Balkan National Park.  
Flickr / Toli Nikolaev

### Introduction

Village life in Bulgaria is rapidly and steadily fading from existence due to urban migration, falling birth rates, and a lack of economic vitality in the country's rural regions. Most residents in Bulgaria's rural areas grow their own food and exist in some state of poverty, faced with high unemployment rates and a lack of access to medical care, modern infrastructure, or other amenities found in abundance in urban settings. Thanks in part to grassroots efforts and assistance from the international community, there are signs of hope that can potentially turn the tide in rural Bulgaria's favor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bulgarian Life, "Village Life in Bulgaria," 2018, <http://www.bulgaria-life.com/villages-in-bulgaria.htm>

## Rural Migration

Bulgaria has experienced a steady depopulation in rural areas, due to migration to urban centers and death rates that outpace birth rates. Details about migration rates are scarce because sufficient statistical data are unavailable. Depopulation more strongly affects rural areas near the borders and in the mountainous regions. In these areas, vital facilities that are already scarce, such as schools and healthcare centers, are closing down; villages are also losing their political influence and representation.<sup>2</sup>

## Land Distribution and Ownership

Bulgaria has diverse terrain within its borders, from massive mountain ranges to valleys and lowlands that end along the Black Sea coastline.<sup>3</sup> Despite the steady depopulation of rural areas, it is estimated that 46.25%, or 50,210 sq km (19,386 sq mi) of land is used for agriculture—either for permanent crops or pastures.<sup>4</sup> Rural lands are divided into two farming systems; small private farms and mostly large farms run by cooperatives. Major crops include fruit, vegetables, grains, oilseeds, and tobacco.<sup>5</sup>

The administration of Bulgaria's rural lands was completely overhauled after the collapse of communism in 1991. Privatization reforms focused on restoring property rights to landowners, dismantling and distributing collective farms, and reinstating land property rights. Industries reliant upon the land, such as food and canning, were prioritized in the privatization efforts, often faster than the land itself. By 1998, 82% of Bulgaria's agricultural land had been restored to its previous owners. Further land reforms and adjustments to export laws were enacted as part of Bulgaria's membership application to the European Union (EU).<sup>6, 7</sup>

The standard of living in rural areas is deteriorating despite aggressive land and agricultural reforms. A significant contributor to the reduced quality of life is the manner in which land restitution was rolled out, because the land was often restored to older residents and households who were either unable or unwilling to cope with the rigors of farming. In addition, the high cost to start a farm made it difficult for new farms to establish themselves.<sup>8</sup> Land fragmentation, once viewed as a significant hurdle to land and agricultural reform is at its lowest since the 1870s.<sup>9</sup>

Bulgaria recognizes public and private land ownership. Bulgarian statutes dictate that lands containing mineral resources, coastal beaches, national roads, or those that hold historical or cultural significance are exclusively public property.<sup>10</sup>

2 Chavdar Mladenov and Margarita Ilieva, "The Depopulation of the Bulgarian Villages," *Bulletin of Geography, Socio-Economic Series* 17, no. 17, January 2012, 99–107, <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10089-012-0010-8>

3 John Moen, "Bulgaria Geography," World Atlas, n.d., <https://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/bulgaria/bgland.htm>

4 Trading Economics, "Bulgaria—Agricultural Land (% of Land Area)," n.d., <https://tradingeconomics.com/bulgaria/agricultural-land-percent-of-land-area-wb-data.html>

5 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Bulgaria," n.d., <http://www.fao.org/3/y2722e/y2722e0m.htm>

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## Rural Economy

Agriculture is the dominant sector in rural Bulgaria, employing 6.8% of the country's total labor force.<sup>11</sup> Approximately 81% of Bulgaria's total land area is defined as rural, with more than 46% of this land dedicated to agricultural activity. However, agricultural productivity is challenged due to a lack of technological modernization and depopulation.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>

Since Bulgaria acceded to the EU in 2007, its overall economy has shown steady, yet slow, improvement. Despite a generally low deficit, rising economic activity, and stable GDP growth, however, Bulgaria's rural communities have maintained a downward trajectory, the result of dwindling resources, poverty, and unemployment exacerbated by depopulation. The economy's dependence upon foreign trade has resulted in more than 350,000 jobs lost and contributed to income inequality, further affecting unemployment in already stricken areas throughout rural Bulgaria.<sup>15</sup>

The farming and agriculture sectors underperform as a result of these negative demographic and economic trends. Besides grain and oil-producing crops, the agriculture industry is not self-sustaining due to depopulation and a rapid shift in production methods—small family farms and the labor-intensive farming of fruits and vegetables and animal breeding are increasingly in danger from these shifts.<sup>16</sup>

Bulgaria has some of the highest unemployment rates in the EU. Rural areas are particularly afflicted by unemployment, coming in 16.7% higher than urban areas according to 2015 statistics; women are particularly negatively affected by unemployment. Poverty, in general, is about twice as prominent in rural areas as urban.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> Smaller farms account for the majority of the rural population. Generally, there is no shortage of skilled farmers in rural Bulgaria, yet unemployment remains high as small farms do not have a viable marketplace to regularly sell their surplus. Some farmers have joined producers' associations to collaborate on market trends and product improvements.<sup>19</sup>

The European Commission's Rural Development Program was adopted in 2015 to help alleviate the challenges faced by Bulgaria's rural population. Funds from the program are allocated to small and new farmers to assist in the start-up and development of their businesses. The program also seeks to protect the agriculture industry from climate change, bolster the efficient use of resources, and create thousands of diverse new jobs.<sup>20</sup>

- 11 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria," *The World Factbook*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 12 European Network for Rural Development, "Bulgaria," n.d., [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/country/bulgaria\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/country/bulgaria_en)
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- 14 European Commission, "Factsheet on 2014–2020 Rural Development Programme for Bulgaria," n.d., [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/key\\_policies/documents/rdp-factsheet-bulgaria\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/key_policies/documents/rdp-factsheet-bulgaria_en.pdf)
- 15 Jordan Velikov, "Development in Agriculture and Rural Areas of Bulgaria," 2013, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/10399-20131211.pdf>
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- 17 Eurostat, "Statistics in Rural Areas in the EU," February 2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/59433.pdf>
- 18 Oleksiy Ivaschenko, "Poverty and Inequality Mapping in the Bulgaria," World Bank, January 2004, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources/342674-1092157888460/Ivaschenko.MappingBulgaria.pdf>
- 19 FAO Investment Centre, "Bulgaria: Expanding ProCredit's Operations in Rural Areas," January 2004, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-af097e.pdf>
- 20 Sofia Globe, "EC Approves Bulgaria's 2.9B Euro Rural Development Programme," 26 May 2015, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2015/05/26/ec-approves-bulgarias-2-9-bn-euro-rural-development-programme/>

## Rural Transportation

Bulgaria has approximately 19,876 km (12,350 mi) of national roadways crisscrossing the country, maintained by the Main Road Administration. The roads are divided into classes: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and local roads. First-class roads are typically highways or roads designed for long-distance travel, second-class roads are generally for shorter transit between regions, and third-class roads are those found within a specific region. In addition to roadways, Bulgaria has a network of railways totaling 4,030 km (2,504 mi). Although hitchhiking is illegal, it is common in rural areas, as it is generally preferable to the inconsistent and unreliable public transportation available.<sup>21, 22, 23, 24</sup>

Generally, The vast majority of roads are paved with bitumen; approximately 500 km (311 mi) were constructed using either cobblestone, crushed stone, or coarse aggregate, or are unpaved.<sup>25</sup> The road infrastructure throughout Bulgaria is aging and failing—progress has stalled significantly on proposed motorway construction projects for decades, dating back to a 1964 proposal for a motorway ring of new highways linked together.<sup>26</sup> The state of disrepair of Bulgaria's roads has impeded access to the country's remote or rural areas, prompting the government to prioritize road renovations upon accession to the EU.<sup>27</sup>

With more than 40% of all roads in some state of disrepair, Bulgarians in both rural and urban regions have been susceptible to serious vehicle accidents. In recent years, the Bulgarian government has prioritized solutions to the problem. Recent roadway improvements reduced accidents by 11% in 2018. Roadway restoration is being partially funded by road taxes called vignettes.<sup>28</sup>

## Rural Healthcare

Healthcare, like every other institution in Bulgaria, underwent a significant overhaul in the 1990s, after the fall of communism. Private medical coverage exists alongside free medical care for all Bulgarians.<sup>29</sup> Reform efforts continue today, with initiatives such as the National Health Strategy 2020 that aim to continue the decentralization of healthcare and bolster the country's social health insurance system. Bulgaria spent 8.2% of its GDP on healthcare in 2016.<sup>30, 31</sup>

- 21 Leila Zlaoui, *Bulgaria: the Dual Challenge of Transition and Accession*, (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2001), 153–154, <https://books.google.com/books?id=P-79YYVpOSwC&pg=PA153&dq=what%20are%201st%202nd%203rd%20class%20roads%20europe&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- 22 National Statistical Institute, "National Road Network by Road Category," Republic of Bulgaria, 30 May 2019, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/7203/national-road-network-road-category>
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- 25 National Statistical Institute, "National Road Network by Type of Pavement," Republic of Bulgaria, 30 May 2019, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/7205/national-road-network-type-pavement>
- 26 Sofia News Agency, "Of the 1370 km of Planned Highways Only Half Are Ready," 5 February 2018, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/187608/Of+the+1370+km+of+Planned+Highways+Only+Half+are+Ready>
- 27 World Bank, "Bulgaria Road Infrastructure Project," 23 January 2007, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/485411468006584187/pdf/BG0RIP010PID1Concept0Stage.pdf>
- 28 Vladimir Sabev and Kostadin Atanasov, "Bulgaria Gradually Enters into Era of High-Speed, Safe and Eco-Friendly Transport," Radio Bulgaria, 1 July 2019, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101065466/bulgaria-gradually-enters-into-era-of-high-speed-safe-and-eco-friendly-transport>
- 29 Francis William Carter, John D. Bell, Loring Danforth, and Philip Dimitrov, "Bulgaria," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2 March 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Government-and-society#ref42710>
- 30 Central Intelligence Agency, "Bulgaria," *The World Factbook*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bu.html>
- 31 Anne Spranger and Ewout van Ginneken, "Bulgaria: Health System Review," 2018, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/383054/HIT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/383054/HIT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1)

The quality and availability of healthcare facilities and staffing in rural areas lags behind that of urban areas and has been declining steadily. This discrepancy has had troubling results. For example, infant mortality in rural areas is roughly double the rate in urban centers. The Bulgarian government has offered financial incentives for general practitioners to operate in rural areas, but this has not significantly impacted the issue.<sup>32</sup>

It is common for rural medical staff to have a large coverage radius. In areas with little healthcare presence, residents often rely on auxiliary services for emergency medical care to provide medical triage, diagnostics, short-term observation, and emergency treatment. Dental and vision care are similarly impacted by the remote nature of rural life.<sup>33</sup>

Rural residents lag behind their urban counterparts in a number of ways. In 2014, 21.7% of the rural population reported that their healthcare needs were not met, as opposed to 15.8% in towns and 14.4% in cities. Because of the shortage of healthcare providers and facilities, 6.9% of rural residents reported that they delay seeking treatment, as opposed to 3.2% in suburbs and towns, and just 1.9% in cities. In all, 62% of small-town residents and 59% of rural residents did not seek health services when needed.<sup>34</sup>

## Rural Education

School funding was significantly reduced in the 1990s as Bulgarian households were struggling with one or both parents being unemployed. The decentralization of the education system drastically affected how education is administered throughout the country. Currently, Bulgaria has almost 2,000 general education schools. Out of the 587,800 students enrolled in the 2017–2018 school year, only 90,200 were rural students.<sup>35</sup>

Rural students are more disadvantaged when compared to those in urban settings. Reliable statistics for rural enrollment are elusive, but for the 2017–2018 school year, the average number of students enrolled in rural kindergartens was reported as 62 per school; the average for urban kindergartens for the same time period was 156.<sup>36</sup> Roma students seem particularly affected by the disadvantages faced in rural areas—drop-out rates remain high for rural students and Roma students particularly, regardless of where they are located. Many schools in rural areas have little to no ethnic Bulgarian students and a large number of Roma students. In 2018, Bulgaria revised its financial support of schools to route funds to disadvantaged rural school.<sup>37, 38</sup>

32 Anne Spranger and Ewout van Ginneken, “Bulgaria: Health System Review,” 2018, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1)

33 Anne Spranger and Ewout van Ginneken, “Bulgaria: Health System Review,” 2018, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1)

34 Anne Spranger and Ewout van Ginneken, “Bulgaria: Health System Review,” 2018, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/383054/HiT-Bulgaria-2018-web.pdf?ua=1)

35 State University.com, “Bulgaria: History & Background,” n.d., <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/208/Bulgaria-HISTORY-BACKGROUND.html>

36 National Statistical Institute, “Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for 2017/2018 School Year,” Republic of Bulgaria, 16 March 2018, [https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Education2017\\_en\\_854DBUN.pdf](https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Education2017_en_854DBUN.pdf)

37 State University.com, “Bulgaria: History & Background,” n.d., <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/208/Bulgaria-HISTORY-BACKGROUND.html>

38 European Commission, “Education and Training Monitor 2018: Bulgaria,” 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2018-bulgaria\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2018-bulgaria_en.pdf)

## Village Life

There were approximately 5,000 villages in Bulgaria as of 2017. The average population of a village is anywhere from 3–500 people; hundreds of villages have less than 10 residents, with many settlements being totally abandoned.<sup>39</sup> In some villages, like Paramun in the west of the country, the average age is 75 years old.<sup>40</sup> Villages often include hamlets, farmsteads, shops, and historic monasteries. It is common for residents to farm fruit, vegetables, and livestock for sustenance.<sup>41, 42, 43</sup> The dwindling population in rural Bulgaria is indicative of a larger trend in the area; a 2019 UN report indicated that Bulgaria's is one of the top 10 fastest shrinking populations in the world.<sup>44, 45</sup>

### Where is the nearest checkpoint?

Soldier:	Where is the nearest checkpoint?
Local:	It's two kilometers.

Exchange 00

Older villages lack infrastructure and amenities that are available to residents of newer settlements, towns, and cities, such as public sewage systems and a direct water supply. Many villagers rely on wells for drinking water and outhouses for toilet or bathing facilities.<sup>46</sup> Many villages are often home to unique cultural landmarks or are adjacent to Bulgaria's natural wonders.<sup>47</sup>

Social and economic factors such as dwindling birth rates and high unemployment have ravaged Bulgaria's villages. If nothing changes, Bulgaria's villages could become ghost towns by 2060. Intervention from the government and the EU addresses these concerns, with some success seen in the improvements to the agricultural sector. Revitalization efforts include funding for roadways and infrastructure for water and sewage systems.<sup>48</sup> Residents are also seeking ways to revitalize dying villages by leveraging social media outreach.<sup>49</sup>

- 39 Sofia News Agency, "571 Villages in Bulgaria Have no Population or a Single-Digit Number of Inhabitants," 5 June 2018, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/190492/571+Villages+in+Bulgaria+have+no+Population+or+a+Single-digit+Number+of+Inhabitants>
- 40 Ivan Bakalov and Nevena Borisova, "Ghost Villages and the Slow Death of Rural Bulgaria," Equal Times, 31 October 2015, <https://www.equaltimes.org/ghost-villages-and-the-slow-death#.XnENVnJ7m71>
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- 42 Sofia News Agency, "571 Villages in Bulgaria Have no Population or a Single-Digit Number of Inhabitants," 5 June 2018, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/190492/571+Villages+in+Bulgaria+have+no+Population+or+a+Single-digit+Number+of+Inhabitants>
- 43 Bulgarian Life, "Village Life in Bulgaria," 2018, <http://www.bulgaria-life.com/villages-in-bulgaria.htm>
- 44 Angel Petrov, "'Where Did Everyone Go?' The Sad, Slow Emptying of Bulgaria's Vidin," Balkan Insight, 26 February 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/26/where-did-everyone-go-the-sad-slow-emptying-of-bulgarias-vidin/>
- 45 Daniel McLaughlin, "Welcome to Bulgaria, the World's Fastest Shrinking Nation," *Irish Times*, 13 October 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/welcome-to-bulgaria-the-world-s-fastest-shrinking-nation-1.3658819>
- 46 Bulgarian Life, "Village Life in Bulgaria," 2018, <http://www.bulgaria-life.com/villages-in-bulgaria.htm>
- 47 Maria Angelova, "Traditional Villages Where You Can Experience True Bulgarian Hospitality," Culture Trip, 8 June 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/bulgaria/articles/10-villages-where-you-can-experience-true-bulgarian-hospitality/>
- 48 Ivan Bakalov and Nevena Borisova, "Ghost Villages and the Slow Death of Rural Bulgaria," Equal Times, 31 October 2015, <https://www.equaltimes.org/ghost-villages-and-the-slow-death#.XnENVnJ7m71>
- 49 Mariya Cheresheva, "Bulgarians Eye Way to Revive Empty Villages," Balkan Insight, 2 May 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/05/02/bulgarians-eye-way-to-revive-empty-villages-04-29-2016/>

## Border Crossings

Bulgaria shares borders with Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey, and has a long coast on the Black Sea to the east.<sup>50</sup> As of 2015, Bulgaria had 23 border checkpoints: six with Greece, three with North Macedonia, five with Romania, five with Serbia, and two with Turkey.<sup>51</sup> Most of Bulgaria's major cities and industrial regions are located far from borders, placing many border crossings and checkpoints within the country's more rural regions.<sup>52</sup>

All forms of modern transportation options are available along Bulgaria's borders. In addition to the country's sprawling roadway network and toll bridges, a network of trains operated by the Bulgarian State Railways provides service to many neighboring countries. Buses are also a popular way to cross borders with neighboring countries; however, many bus routes originate in urban settings.<sup>53</sup>

There have been reports of illegal crossings of Bulgaria's borders in recent years, with unregulated movement to Serbia and Turkey and back. Some reports have been either fabricated or embellished, yet it has prompted periodic calls for border closings whenever they arise.<sup>54, 55</sup> In March 2020, some of Bulgaria's neighbors temporarily closed borders in response to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>56</sup>

## Landmines

In 1997, Bulgaria joined the Mine Ban Treaty. Previously, Bulgaria had produced and exported antipersonnel mines. Its borders with Turkey, Greece, and North Macedonia are a significant concern because of the landmines believed to be buried there. In 2002, Bulgaria declared it had met all of its treaty requirements in the destruction and removal of all landmines.<sup>57, 58</sup> As of 2018, Bulgaria had no stockpile of landmines, after having destroyed 891,872 landmines.<sup>59</sup>

Bulgaria's munitions dismantling efforts were extensive and dangerous. In 2014, explosions at the Midzhur munitions dismantling plant killed 15 people and completely destroyed the factory, creating a hazard for rescue workers. As a result, munitions dismantling activities ceased in the area, forcing Bulgaria to return almost 200,000 landmines to Greece in 2018.<sup>60, 61</sup>

50 Nations Online Project, "Political Map of Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.nationsonline.org/one-world/map/bulgaria-political-map.htm>

51 Slavi Dimitrov, "Geographic Location and Contemporary State Borders of Bulgaria," Espaço E Economia, 2015, <https://journals.openedition.org/espacoconomia/1857>

52 Bulgaria Industrial Zones, "Bulgaria," Trakia Economic Zone, n.d., [http://www.industrial-zones.com/general\\_eng.html](http://www.industrial-zones.com/general_eng.html)

53 Lonely Planet, "Bulgaria: Land," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgaria/transport/getting-there-away/land>

54 Bordermonitoring Bulgaria, "Border Crossings to Bulgaria Are Increasing," 11 November 2018, <https://bulgaria.bordermonitoring.eu/2018/11/11/border-crossings-to-bulgaria-are-increasing/>

55 ANSA, "Bulgaria Tightens Security at Southern Border," Info Migrants, 10 April 2019, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/16209/bulgaria-tightens-security-at-southern-border>

56 Balkan Insight, "Balkan Countries Close Border Crossings to Stop Coronavirus," 13 March 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/13/balkan-countries-close-border-crossings-to-stop-coronavirus/>

57 Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, "Bulgaria," 2000, <http://archives.the-monitor.org/index.php/publications/display?url=lm/2000/bulgaria.html>

58 AP Mine Ban Convention, "State Parties to the Convention—Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.apminebanconvention.org/states-parties-to-the-convention/bulgaria/>

59 International Campaign to Ban Landmines, "Country Status," November 2018, <http://www.icbl.org/en-gb/the-treaty/treaty-status.aspx>

60 Georgi Kantchev, "After Deadly Blast, Bulgaria Asks if Arms Disposal Is Worth It," *New York Times*, 2 October 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/03/world/europe/deadly-blasts-in-bulgaria-rip-through-plant-decommissioning-land-mines.html>

61 Radio Bulgaria, "Bulgaria Returns nearly 200,000 Landmines to Greece," 21 November 2018, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101047881/bulgaria-returns-nearly-200000-landmines-to-greece>



# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 5 | Rural Life, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Bulgaria's villages are shrinking due to depopulation. ☐ True ☐ False
2. Rural lands are quickly disappearing as a result of rapid urbanization and intensive development. ☐ True ☐ False
3. Aggressive land and agricultural reforms in post communist Bulgaria improved the quality of life for many farmers and rural residents. ☐ True ☐ False
4. Land that contains mineral resources cannot be privately owned in Bulgaria. ☐ True ☐ False
5. Low deficit, rising economic activity, and a stable GDP growth have boosted Bulgaria's rural economy. ☐ True ☐ False

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 5 | Rural Life, Assessment Answers

1. True:  
Low birth rates and urban migration have caused a steady depopulation in rural Bulgaria. Depopulation trends affect villages and rural areas near Bulgaria's borders and in the mountainous regions.
2. False:  
It is estimated that 46.25% of Bulgarian land are used for permanent crops or pastures.
3. False:  
The standard of living in rural areas did not improve following land reforms because the land was often restored to older residents and households who were either unable or ill-suited to perform farming activities. In addition, the high cost of starting a farm made it difficult for new farmers to establish themselves.
4. True:  
Bulgarian statutes dictate that lands containing mineral resources, coastal beaches, national roads, or those that bear a national significance belong to the state.
5. False:  
Bulgaria's rural communities have maintained a downward trajectory, the result of dwindling resources, poverty, and unemployment exacerbated by depopulation.

## Chapter 6 | Family Life



A Bulgarian family pose together.  
Flickr / Hannes De Geest

### Introduction

Family is an integral part of Bulgarian society. Bulgarian families are similar in composition to families found in the United States. A typical household will be composed of parents and children, with some households also including extended family such as grandparents. Bulgaria's Family Code provides a framework for marriage, family planning, gender equality, and protections for children within the country. While many households provide adequate caregiving for their children, there are a significant number of children who have poor access to education and caregiving, or equal access to some services due to disability. The importance of family life in Bulgarian society is evident in the naming conventions and the ways that special events and holidays are celebrated.<sup>1, 2</sup>

1 Lucy Debenham, "Good Manners in Bulgaria," Travel Etiquette, 25 November 2018, <http://www.traveletiquette.co.uk/good-manners-bulgaria.html>

2 Glenn E. Curtis, ed., *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/27.htm>

## Typical Household and Family Structure

Bulgarian families are similar in many important respects to families in the United States. The average household size is 2.5 family members.<sup>3</sup> A typical household includes parents and children. Rural households often include grandparents. It is common for both parents to work and share financial responsibilities while maintaining equal authority for household decisions.<sup>4</sup> Average annual household incomes have steadily risen in recent years. In 2018, the average annual income for a household topped out at USD 7,340.<sup>5</sup>

The Bulgarian Family Code affirms equality for all citizens, a continuation of policies enacted in 1971 during the communist era. Despite attempts at legislating equality, household chores have remained primarily the responsibility of women and children.<sup>6</sup> Meals are commonly eaten as a family unit, though it is not unusual for separate meals when family members have conflicting schedules. Families differ greatly when it comes to cooking duties, as there are no rigid traditional roles for who cooks. Cooking is also viewed by many as a hobby, particularly among the younger generations.<sup>7</sup>

Fertility rates in Bulgaria have become a concern in recent years. For more than a decade, live births have steadily decreased. In 2010, Bulgaria registered roughly 10 live births per every 1,000 citizens; in 2018, that number dropped to just under 9 live births.<sup>8, 9</sup>

When both parents work, it is common for grandparents to care for grandchildren and even perform some of the household chores. In some instances, newlyweds may move into the husband's family home and become part of that household. Bulgarian kin groups, known as *blizki* (close people), include family members related by either blood or marriage and can be from the husband's or wife's side. In addition to family members, it can include friends and neighbors as it is determined by factors like proximity and frequency of interaction.<sup>10</sup>

Pets are popular in modern Bulgarian households. Cats and dogs are the most common pets and require registration, proof of vaccinations, and licensing with local municipalities. Households do not have any limits on the number of cats or dogs they may have; however, Bulgarians are authorized one cow and three horses as pets per person.<sup>11</sup> While strays and animal cruelty plague the country, Bulgaria has animal welfare legislation in place and has established an animal welfare police force to protect them.<sup>12</sup>

3 ArcGIS, "Bulgaria Average Household Size," 7 January 2020, <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=035b038118e745809223917ef1435ff8>

4 AFS-USA, "Exploring Bulgarian Culture," n.d., <https://www.afsusa.org/countries/bulgaria/#afs-nav-people-and-community>

5 Republic of Bulgaria, "Household Income," National Statistical Institute, n.d., <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/5640/households-income-expenditure-and-consumption>

6 Glenn Curtis, *Bulgaria: A Country Study* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/bulgaria/27.htm>

7 AFS-USA, "Exploring Bulgarian Culture," n.d., <https://www.afsusa.org/countries/bulgaria/#afs-nav-people-and-community>

8 Republic of Bulgaria, "Live Births by Districts, Municipalities and Sex," National Statistical Institute, n.d., <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6623/live-births-districts-municipalities-and-sex>

9 WorldOMeter, "Bulgaria Population," n.d., <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bulgaria-population/>

10 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," Every Culture, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>

11 Anglo Info, "Pets and Animals in Bulgaria," n.d., <https://www.angloinfo.com/how-to/bulgaria/family/pets-animals>

12 Four Paws, "Animal Welfare Police Launched in Bulgaria," 8 July 2015, <https://www.four-paws.bg/en/news-press/2015/animal-welfare-police-launched-in-bulgaria/>

## Gender Issues

Bulgaria has traditionally been a patriarchal society. However, women in modern Bulgaria commonly hold equal responsibility in a family unit or otherwise have substantial authority in their households. Men and women both have the right to own property and vote. Although laws grant equality for all citizens, women are often hit harder by unemployment or underemployment and are slightly behind men in terms of educational achievements.<sup>13</sup>

Bulgaria has made strides toward gender equality. In 2015, the country set forth gender equality laws with the goal of achieving equality within 15 years. Through coordination with the state and specialized bodies, Bulgaria seeks to strengthen provisions for equal treatment, equal access to resources, and equality in every aspect of social, economic, and political life. The World Bank identifies Bulgaria as one of the highest performing economies in women's legal rights affecting work, noting that the country is one of six to remove all job restrictions on women.<sup>14, 15</sup>

Bulgaria's strongest advancements in gender equality have been in healthcare and employment. In a 2005–2015 study, 94% of men and women reported being able to access medical and dental services. With improvements in access to healthcare, life expectancy for men and women has increased, although the number of healthy years has decreased for both genders in the same timeframe.<sup>16</sup>

Equal employment opportunities have also shown signs of slight improvement in recent years, especially in the area of income. However, wealth distribution and poverty became more unequal from 2005–2015. Equality in education has also shown lackluster improvement, showing signs of stalling during the same time period, despite a slight increase in attendance.<sup>17</sup>

While gender discrimination is illegal, it still occurs in Bulgaria. In early 2018, Bulgaria ratified the Istanbul Convention, an international effort headed by the Council of Europe to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence.<sup>18</sup> Political parties such as the United Patriots Alliance opposed this decision, and in July 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the Istanbul Convention to be unconstitutional. The UN has encouraged Bulgaria to reconsider its stance on the convention and reopen the ratification process.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

Domestic violence is a significant concern; in 2016, it was estimated that one-third of all Bulgarians experienced domestic or gender-based violence within their lifetime. Despite laws aimed at curbing this type of violence, victims have accused the state authorities of being ineffective in addressing the issue.<sup>22</sup> In light of the government's

13 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, "Bulgaria," Every Culture, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>

14 UN Women, "Bulgaria Pledges Adoption of a Gender Equality Law and Aims to Achieve Full Equality in 15 Years," February 2017, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/step-it-up/commitments/bulgaria>

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16 European Institute for Gender Equality, "Gender Equality Index 2017: Bulgaria," 2017, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2017-bulgaria>

17 European Institute for Gender Equality, "Gender Equality Index 2017: Bulgaria," 2017, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2017-bulgaria>

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19 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018: Bulgaria," n.d., <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2018>

20 Georgi Gotev, "Istanbul Convention 'Unconstitutional' in Bulgaria," Euractiv, 27 July 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/istanbul-convention-unconstitutional-in-bulgaria/>

21 United Nations Human Rights, "Bulgaria: UN Expert Concerned about Pushbacks on Women's Rights and Misinterpretation of the Term 'Gender' that Stopped the Ratification of the Istanbul Convention," 21 October 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25178&LangID=E>

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rejection of the Istanbul Convention and other factors risking the progress of gender equality, the advancement of women's rights has increasingly become a grassroots issue.<sup>23</sup>

## Married Life, Divorce and Child Birth

### *Marriage*

The Bulgarian Family Code authorizes civil marriages for Bulgarian citizens. A religious ceremony may be held, but marriages must adhere to the civil requirements to be legally valid. Religious ceremonies are considered optional and take place after civil ceremonies. Residents seeking to be married must be 18 years old or older, with exceptions made for those as young as 16 years old with permission from the appropriate chair of the regional court. Same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in Bulgaria.<sup>24</sup>

Potential spouses are allowed to select a partner in Bulgarian culture, although it is not uncommon for families to exert some pressure on family members in regards to potential suitors. The Roma minority traditionally had arranged marriages but they have lost prominence in modern times. Marriages are monogamous and typically homogenous in terms of ethnic groups and religious affiliations. Most Bulgarians marry in their mid-20s.<sup>25</sup>

Marriage rates are similar in urban and rural areas. In 2018, there were roughly three times as many marriages in urban areas as in rural areas, consistent with Bulgaria's population distribution; with urban areas having three times more residents than rural or remote regions.<sup>26, 27, 28, 29</sup> In 2017, the region with the highest marriage rate was northeastern Bulgaria, centered around Dobrich. The lowest marriage rate was in the northwestern region, centered around Vratsa.<sup>30</sup>

Since 2000, the marriage rate has been declining steadily, reflecting the fading interest in marriage for many Bulgarians—rates peaked in 2000, 2005, and 2006 at 4.3 and bottomed out in 2011 and 2012 at 2.9 per 1,000 Bulgarians. Meanwhile, the mean age for first-time married couples in Bulgaria has increased from 28 in 2000 to almost 31 in 2014. In the same time period, the average age of brides increased from 24.7 to 27.5. The data indicate that consensual unions, in which partners live together but do not pursue a legal union, are growing in popularity. Many families start without going through the motions of marriage. In 2017, almost 60% of babies born in Bulgaria were born to unmarried couples.<sup>31, 32</sup>

- 23 Nadejda Dermendjieva and Gergana Kutseva, "Fighting the Backlash against Feminism in Bulgaria," Open Global Rights, 2 May 2018, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/Fighting-the-backlash-against-feminism-in-Bulgaria/>
- 24 Lawyers Bulgaria, "Marriage in Bulgaria," 18 April 2016, <https://www.lawyers-bulgaria.com/marriage-in-bulgaria>
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- 28 Trading Economics, "Bulgaria—Urban Population," n.d., <https://tradingeconomics.com/bulgaria/urban-population-wb-data.html>
- 29 Index Mundi, "Bulgaria—Rural Population (% of total population)," n.d., <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/bulgaria/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>
- 30 Sofia Globe, "Bulgaria's Marriage Rate is Down While the Divorce Rate is Up—Official," 12 April 2017, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/04/12/bulgarias-marriage-rate-is-down-while-the-divorce-rate-is-up-official/>
- 31 Eurostat, "Marriages and Births in Bulgaria," 23 December 2015, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriages\\_and\\_births\\_in\\_Bulgaria&oldid=273407#Marriages.2C\\_divorces\\_and\\_births\\_in\\_Bulgaria\\_at\\_the\\_beginning\\_of\\_the\\_21st\\_century](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriages_and_births_in_Bulgaria&oldid=273407#Marriages.2C_divorces_and_births_in_Bulgaria_at_the_beginning_of_the_21st_century)
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## Divorce

Divorce is legal in Bulgaria. Until the 1940s, divorce was rare and there was a stigma attached to it, but that has eased in modern times.<sup>33, 34</sup> Divorce rates have increased slightly since 1970, with periods of significant decline in the early 1990s and significant increase in the mid-2000s.<sup>35</sup> In 2017, the average marriage lasted just under 16 years, with “mutual agreement” and “incompatibility of temperament” given as the most common reason for the dissolution of marriage.<sup>36</sup> Divorce in urban areas is outpacing the rate of divorce in rural areas. In 2018, there were 8,517 divorces in urban areas and 2,079 divorces in the rural regions.<sup>37, 38</sup>

According to the Bulgarian Family Code divorce is allowed by mutual consent or by petition. In cases of divorce by mutual consent, it is the responsibility of both spouses to settle all domestic issues, including parental rights, division of property, and the use of the family name. Divorces by petition can be pursued for any number of “serious or irretrievable breakdowns” in the marriage. The fault at the heart of the petition will affect the court’s rulings regarding child custody or property. Bulgarian courts issue rulings that dictate the specifics regarding child custody and support. Spousal support may also be granted to a spouse should the court rule that the divorce was not their fault. Spousal support can be required for up to three years or a timeframe agreed upon by the spouses.<sup>39, 40</sup>

## Status of the Elders, Adolescents, and Children

### The Elderly

Bulgarian customs dictate reverence for elderly people in society. However, there is a certain level of disdain for the older generations, who are often held responsible by younger generations for the political strife of the recent past.<sup>41, 42</sup> Bulgaria’s elderly population is increasing annually. In 2010, 17.4% of the population was over 65 years of age; in 2018, that percentage climbed to 21.3%; and by 2060, it is estimated to reach 32.7%. In 2017, Bulgaria was ranked fourth in the world as the fastest aging country.<sup>43</sup> The aging of the general population is believed to be mainly the result of low birth rates and high mortality rates.<sup>44, 45, 46</sup>

- 33 Barbara A. Cellarius and Tim Pilbrow, “Bulgaria,” Every Culture, n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>
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- 36 Sofia Globe, “Bulgaria’s Marriage Rate is Down While the Divorce Rate is Up—Official,” 12 April 2017, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/04/12/bulgarias-marriage-rate-is-down-while-the-divorce-rate-is-up-official/>
- 37 Eurostat, “Marriages and Births in Bulgaria,” 23 December 2015, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriages\\_and\\_births\\_in\\_Bulgaria&oldid=273407#Marriages.2C\\_divorces\\_and\\_births\\_in\\_Bulgaria\\_at\\_the\\_beginning\\_of\\_the\\_21st\\_century](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriages_and_births_in_Bulgaria&oldid=273407#Marriages.2C_divorces_and_births_in_Bulgaria_at_the_beginning_of_the_21st_century)
- 38 Republic of Bulgaria, “Divorces by Districts and Place of Residence,” National Statistical Institute, n.d., <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6669/divorces-districts-and-place-residence>
- 39 Jeremy Morley, “Divorce in Bulgaria,” International Family Law, 27 March 2018, <http://www.internationalfamilylawfirm.com/2018/03/divorce-in-bulgaria.html>
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- 43 Natalie Pitheckoff, “Aging in the Republic of Bulgaria,” *Gerontologist* (Volume 57, Issue 5, October 2017) 809–815, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnx075>
- 44 Zlatina Naydenova, “12th Meeting of the Working Group on Ageing, UNECE Geneva, 18–19th November 2019, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2019, [https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/age/WG.12/Presentations/2\\_National-Strategy-Active-Ageing-Bulgaria.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/age/WG.12/Presentations/2_National-Strategy-Active-Ageing-Bulgaria.pdf)
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- 46 E. Georgieva, D. Dimitrova, L. Georgieva, N. Hristov, and P. Pesheva, “Demographic and Social Problems of Aging in Bulgaria,” *European Journal of Public Health*, 21 November 2018, [https://academic.oup.com/eurpub/article/28/suppl\\_4/cky214.238/5186812](https://academic.oup.com/eurpub/article/28/suppl_4/cky214.238/5186812)

In 2019 an initiative known as the National Strategy for Active Ageing was proposed with the goal of “creating conditions and providing equal opportunities for dignified and adequate living” for Bulgaria’s senior population, as part of a comprehensive policy aimed at bolstering the country’s cultural, economic, and social development.<sup>47, 48, 49</sup> Formal long-term care was granted by the government through various social service systems for citizens 65 years old or older in the form of access to healthcare, housing in public residential institutions, or community-based or home-based care services.<sup>50, 51</sup>

## Children

Bulgarian children face several social challenges. Stereotypes and societal norms have traditionally kept fathers at a distance from their children, placing a strain on the overall caregiving children receive in their homes. Children also face challenges from poverty, insufficient caregiving, and a lack of educational opportunities.<sup>52</sup> In 2016, Bulgaria had 1,194,454 children, making up 16.8% of the total population. UNICEF estimates that fewer than 80% of kindergarten-age children are actually enrolled. Roma children are hit the hardest, as 45% on average do not attend preschool and 15% do not attend any form of school. Disabled children are at a particular disadvantage although international law and advocacy groups like Disability Rights International pressure the government to improve the integration of children with disabilities in state institutions.<sup>53, 54, 55</sup>

## Family Social Events

Bulgaria has a number of traditions that blend folk roots with a more modern, formal culture that formed during the Ottoman Empire rule. With most of the population belonging to the ethnic Bulgarian majority, there is little variation in cultural traditions from region to region. The government values the country’s culture and traditions and is active in promoting its continual observations.<sup>56</sup>

## Weddings

It is common for weddings to take place on Sundays and be staged in public, with large numbers of extended family and friends in attendance. Prior to the wedding ceremony, it is customary for the bride’s mother to assist in kneading dough for pitka bread, which then rises as a symbol of the creation of the new family unit. In a traditional wedding, it is the best man’s duty to create a wedding banner, which is affixed to a large pole and decorated with bright cloths,

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- 47 Zlatina Naydenova, “12th Meeting of the Working Group on Ageing, UNECE Geneva, 18–19th November 2019, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2019, [https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/age/WG.12/Presentations/2\\_National-Strategy-Active-Ageing-Bulgaria.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/age/WG.12/Presentations/2_National-Strategy-Active-Ageing-Bulgaria.pdf)
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ribbons, and even popcorn. An apple or onion is wrapped in colorful material and impaled on top of the pole.<sup>57</sup> In a traditional wedding procession, family members such as siblings, *krastnitsi* (spiritual parents), and other prominent family figures lead the event by encouraging people to drink from a *baklitsa*, an ornate container of wine and other beverages.<sup>58</sup> If the wedding is held in a church, it is good luck for the bride and groom to step into the building with their right foot first. At the conclusion of the ceremony, whoever could step on the other's foot first is the spouse who will "dominate" the marriage. During receptions, tradition calls for the bride to kick over a small bucket of water that contains one white flower and one red; if the white flower falls out furthest from the bucket, it is said that the newlyweds' first child will be a boy. If the red flower travels the farthest, the child will be a girl.<sup>59, 60, 61</sup>

## Funerals

Funeral traditions are largely rooted in Eastern Orthodoxy. During communist rule, the government provided civil funeral services but did not prohibit religious services.<sup>62</sup>

Funerals generally take place within 24 hours of a person's passing. Cremation is prohibited by the Eastern Orthodox Church but is legal in Bulgaria. As a result, in-ground burials are most common. Services are traditionally held in churches, with the coffin left open for family and friends to view the deceased. It is customary for a priest to lead attendees in a series of prayers during the service; musical performances are common as well. Family members will then escort the hearse in a procession to the cemetery. Offerings of food, wine, clothing, money, or other sentimental items are left on the grave of the deceased at the end of the ceremony. A small wooden cross is the traditional grave marker for deceased Bulgarians.<sup>63, 64</sup>

Bulgaria has a rich tradition of folk clothing that is most often worn during cultural festivals, holidays, and religious ceremonies. Traditional clothing features colorful motifs and ornaments inspired by pagan artistry.<sup>65</sup> Motifs and patterns are region-specific. Traditional wear for women typically consists of ornate dresses or aprons. For men, traditional clothing consists of pants, shirts, and vests. This style of clothing was mainstream until the 20th century; for most events in modern times, Bulgarians not performing or otherwise modeling traditional clothing will dress in formal or informal Western attire.<sup>66, 67, 68</sup>

57 Barbara Rolek, "Old Bulgarian Wedding Customs," Spruce, 9 February 2020, <https://www.thespruce.com/old-bulgarian-wedding-customs-1137540>

58 Trekking BG, "Traditional Customs of Bulgaria," n.d., <https://trekkingbg.com/bulgaria/culture/customs/>

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## Naming Conventions

Bulgarian names are typically composed of three names: a given or first name, then a patronymic (a name derived from the father's personal name), and finally the family name. Common Bulgarian family suffixes are: -ov, -ev, -ski, -sky, -in for males and -ova, -eva, -ska, and -ina for females. Given names for many Bulgarians are derived from religious or regional sources. The most common male names are Georgi, Ivan, and Dimitar, which honor important saints in Bulgarian culture. For females, Maria, Ivanka, and Elena are the most popular names. Given names are usually associated with Name Days, which are yearly Eastern Orthodox holidays in honor of saints. Common honorifics are *gospodin* (mr), *gospozha* (mrs), or *gospozhitza* (miss).<sup>69, 70</sup>

Bulgarian babies are often named in honor of older relatives, most commonly grandparents. On occasion, children will be given their grandfather's name as a surname in place of the family name. It is also common for firstborn sons to be named after a grandfather, which can result in a person's given name and family name being derived from the same name. For example, a first-born son named after a grandfather named Stefan could be named Stefan Georgiev Stefanov. It is also common for Bulgarians to drop the family name altogether and use the patronymic name as their surname. Legal guidelines for naming Bulgarians are dictated by the Bulgarian Civil Registration Act.<sup>71, 72, 73</sup>

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71 Financial and Banking Information Infrastructure Committee, "A Guide to Names and Naming Practices," March 2006, [https://www.fbiic.gov/public/2008/nov/Naming\\_practice\\_guide\\_UK\\_2006.pdf](https://www.fbiic.gov/public/2008/nov/Naming_practice_guide_UK_2006.pdf)

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# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 6 | Family Life, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. “Blizki,” which literally means “close people,” refers to the Bulgarian family kin group or clan. ☐ True ☐ False
2. Bulgaria’s fertility rates have reached record highs in recent years. ☐ True ☐ False
3. Bulgaria is not a signatory of the Istanbul Convention, an international effort headed by the Council of Europe to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. ☐ True ☐ False
4. Long-term care to seniors is granted by the government. ☐ True ☐ False
5. Bulgaria recognizes religious wedding ceremonies performed in church. These marriages do not require a separate civil marriage. ☐ True ☐ False

# Bulgarian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 6 | Family Life, Assessment Answers

1. True:  
Bulgarian kin groups, known as *blizki*, include family members by blood and marriage on the as well as friends and neighbors.
2. False:  
Low fertility rates in Bulgaria have posed a concern in recent years. For more than a decade, live births have steadily decreased.
3. True:  
In July 2018, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the Istanbul Convention as unconstitutional. The UN has encouraged Bulgaria to reconsider its stance on the convention and reopen the ratification process.
4. True:  
Bulgarians 65 years or older are granted access to healthcare and housing in public or community-based residential institutions, or home-based care services.
5. False:  
A religious ceremony may be held, but marriages must adhere to civil requirements to be legally valid. Religious ceremonies are considered optional and take place after civil ceremonies.

# Bulgaria Cultural Orientation

## Further Readings and Resources

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# Bulgaria Cultural Orientation

## Final Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1.      Burgas is the capital of Bulgaria. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
2.      Bulgaria's press is considered the least free of all EU countries. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
3.      The fishing industry is the most dominant economic industry in Bulgaria. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
4.      During World War II, Bulgaria fought against the Nazis and on the side of the Allies. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
5.      The official currency of Bulgaria is the zloty. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
6.      All mosques and monasteries were permanently altered or destroyed during Bulgaria's communist era. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
7.      Thousands of ethnic Turks were expelled from Bulgaria during Todor Zhivkov's communist regime. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
8.      Bulgaria's constitution guarantees freedom of religion. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
9.      Bulgarian Muslims have not been radicalized by the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s or more recent conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. ☐ True    ☐ False
  
10.     Many Orthodox churches in Bulgaria do not have seats or pews. ☐ True    ☐ False

11. *Hadzhi* refers to the pilgrimage that Bulgarian Christians make to Jerusalem. ☐ True ☐ False
12. Employment rates in Bulgaria rank among the highest in the European Union. Government programs help keep employment rates high. ☐ True ☐ False
13. Finger-pointing is a common greeting in Bulgaria. ☐ True ☐ False
14. Apple cider is the national drink of Bulgaria. ☐ True ☐ False
15. Most of Bulgaria's border crossings are located far from cities. ☐ True ☐ False
16. The Baba Marta holiday honors Saint Marta, patron saint of bakers. Women named after St. Marta receive flowers and perfume on this day. ☐ True ☐ False
17. Beautiful Bulgaria is a program designed to bolster job creation. ☐ True ☐ False
18. Healthcare in Bulgaria is sponsored by the state, a holdover program from the communist era. ☐ True ☐ False
19. Bulgaria is among the lowest mortality rates in the European Union. ☐ True ☐ False
20. The majority of children from the Roma minority do not complete high school. ☐ True ☐ False
21. The *marshrutka* is a shared taxi in the Baltic states and Bulgaria, similar to the minibus. ☐ True ☐ False



22. The Bulgarian government still owns most of the land it seized during the communist era. ☐ True ☐ False
23. The Rila monastery, located south of Sofia, was demolished by the Ottomans during their brutal conversion campaign. ☐ True ☐ False
24. Having babies out of wedlock is extremely rare in Bulgaria because of conservative religious attitudes. ☐ True ☐ False
25. Bulgaria is one of the world's fastest aging countries. ☐ True ☐ False
26. The Bulgarian Family Code creates a legal basis for gender equality. ☐ True ☐ False
27. Divorce is rare and highly stigmatized in Bulgaria, especially in rural areas. ☐ True ☐ False
28. Bulgaria's mosques are located in the cities. In rural areas, Bulgarian Muslims pray in small places of worship. ☐ True ☐ False
29. Children in Bulgaria are vulnerable to poverty, insufficient caregiving, and a lack of educational opportunities. ☐ True ☐ False
30. Firstborn sons are often named in honor of an older relative, usually a grandfather. ☐ True ☐ False

# Turkmen Cultural Orientation

## Final Assessment Answers

1. False:  
Sofia is the capital of Bulgaria. Burgas is one of two major port cities along Bulgaria's Black Sea coast.
2. True:  
Freedom House classifies Bulgaria's press as "partly free" due to a significant amount of interference from the government and political parties. Reporters Without Borders ranks Bulgaria 111 out of 180 on its World Press Freedom Index for 2019.
3. False:  
Bulgaria's most dominant economic industries are energy, mining, metallurgy, agriculture, and tourism.
4. False:  
World War II saw Bulgaria aligned with Germany and the Axis Powers. In 1944, the Soviets invaded Bulgaria.
5. False:  
Bulgaria's official currency is the Bulgarian lev (lev translates to "lion").
6. False:  
Many places of worship were destroyed or converted for other purposes during communism, but upon the collapse of the Zhivkov regime, many buildings were returned to their respective religious organizations, such as the Rila Monastery, which spent some time as a museum and is now once again a functioning monastery.
7. True:  
Between 1984 and 1989, a forced exodus campaign forced more than 350,000 Bulgarian Turks out of Bulgaria to Turkey as part of an effort to make Bulgaria ethnically homogenous.
8. True:  
Religious practice is unrestricted by the Bulgarian government. The right to own property, open financial accounts, and sell merchandise are granted only to religious groups that register with the government.
9. True:  
Despite a history of internal pressures, Muslims have resisted radicalization and maintained a relatively harmonious relationship with the rest of the country.
10. True:  
Orthodox services are often held with attendees standing for the entire period; as a result, many churches do not have seats or pews.

11. True:  
Bulgarian Christians adopted the idea of the Muslim hajj to Mecca and transformed it into a Christian *hadzhi* to Jerusalem. Upon completion of the pilgrimage, Bulgarian Christians apply the prefix Hadzhi (hajj) to their surname.
12. False:  
Bulgaria's employment rates are among the lowest in the European Union. Rural areas are particularly afflicted by unemployment, coming in 16.7% higher than urban areas.
13. False:  
Bulgarians consider finger-pointing rude and therefore it should be avoided.
14. False:  
Rakia, a liquor distilled from fruit, is the Bulgarian national drink. It is often served in meals, particularly dinner.
15. True:  
Most of Bulgaria's major cities and industrial regions are located far from borders, placing many border crossings and checkpoints in rural regions.
16. False:  
"Grandmother March" or Baba Marta is celebrated on 1 March and marks the end of winter and beginning of spring. Decorative *martenitsi* bracelets and amulets are given out as gifts during the holiday.
17. True:  
Beautiful Bulgaria is a joint vocational training initiative between Bulgaria's labor ministry and the UN's development program.
18. False:  
Bulgaria has a mixed public-private healthcare system. While it touts a skilled, competent workforce, it ranks below EU averages.
19. True:  
Bulgaria has the highest mortality rate in the EU. Cancer and cardiovascular disease account for the top causes of death in Bulgaria.
20. True:  
Roma children accomplish far less than their non-Roma counterparts—only 7% of Roma students complete secondary school. The Higher Education Act addresses inequalities in the educational system.
21. True:  
Minibuses, known as marshrutkas, are a common way for people to get to and from cities and suburbs.

22. False:  
In 1991, following the collapse of communism, Bulgaria began implementing privatization reforms focused on restoring property rights to owners, dismantling and distributing collective farms, and reinstating land property rights.
23. False:  
The Rila monastery was a source of national pride during the Ottoman era. During the communist era, the monastery was converted to a museum. In 1983, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
24. False:  
Many couples start a family without going through the motions of marriage. In 2017, almost 60% of babies born in Bulgaria were born to unmarried couples.
25. True:  
Bulgaria's elderly population is increasing annually. Villages have been severely affected by a shrinking population and a low birth rate. It is estimated that by 2060, 32.7% of the population will be over 65.
26. True:  
The Bulgarian Family Code affirms equality for all Bulgarian citizens, a continuation of policies enacted in 1971 during the communist era.
27. False:  
Divorce rates have seen a significant increase starting in the mid-2000s. In 2017, the average marriage lasted just under 16 years. Divorce in urban areas outpaced the rate of divorce in rural areas.
28. True:  
*Mescits* (smaller mosques), *tekkes* (gathering places for Muslim), and *turbes* (tombs or memorials) are places of prayer common in rural areas.
29. True:  
Children from minority ethnic groups like the Roma or disabled children are particularly hurt by a lack of educational opportunities.
30. True:  
Children are sometimes given their grandfather's name as a surname in place of a family name so that their given name and family name are taken from the same name.