

NCSEJ Country Report

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Bulgaria



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Bulgaria has undergone a tumultuous transition toward democracy and a market economy while combatting inflation, unemployment and corruption. Despite progress made, these problems continue to be a major obstacle to the country's development.

Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. As a member of these organizations, Bulgaria is focused on further integration into European political and security structures. Bulgaria shares close historical, cultural, and economic ties with Russia. Despite recent tensions in relations with Russia, and the termination of the South Stream natural gas pipeline project, Russia remains Bulgaria's major trading partner.

Bulgaria and Israel enjoy a special relationship, stemming from Bulgaria's role in saving its Jews from deportation to the Nazi death camps. Bulgaria and the U.S. also have a close bilateral relationship.

Bulgaria's Jewish community is estimated at 2,000-5,000 people and is mostly centered in Sofia. There is no state discrimination against the Jewish community. Instances of anti-Semitic attacks and vandalism are not common, but anti-Semitic rhetoric in online media remains a problem. Jewish elderly and other vulnerable members of the community have struggled to keep up with rising costs of living in the country.

Statistics:

Population: 7,102,000 (July 2018 est.)

Size: 110,879 sq. km

Capital: Sofia

Major cities: Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Rousse

Jewish population: 2,000-6,000
2014 Aliyah (*emigration to Israel*): 40,000

Head of State: President
Rumen Radev

Head of Government: Prime
Minister Galab Donev
Foreign Minister: Teodora
Genchovska

Ambassador to United States:
Georgi Panayotov
U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria:
Herro Mustafa

Freedom House Rating:
Free

History

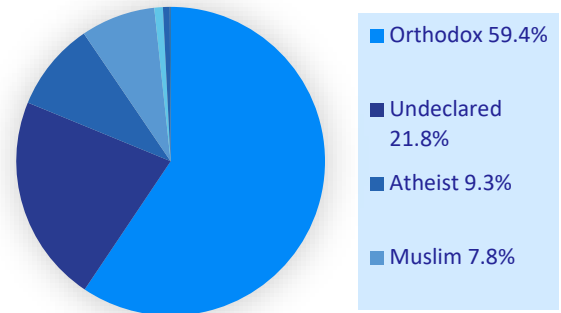
Bulgaria, slightly larger than the state of Tennessee, is bordered by Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, and the Black Sea. Over the centuries, the territory of modern-day Bulgaria was settled, invaded and conquered by Thracians, Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines, and by the end of the 14th century was overrun by the Ottoman Turks.

After 500 years under Ottoman rule, Bulgaria gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century. The country fought on the losing side in both World War I and World War II, subsequently falling under the Soviet sphere of influence. In 1946, the country became the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

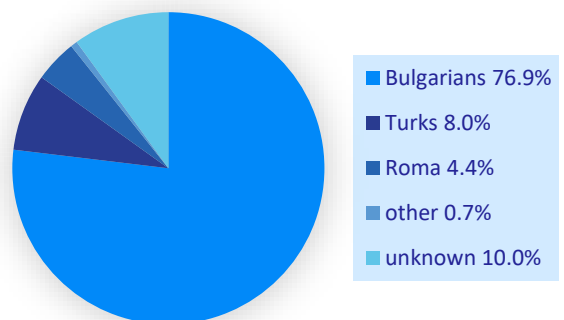
Under communist rule, Bulgaria underwent massive industrialization and collectivization campaigns; thousands of dissidents were sent to labor camps or executed. After Stalin's death, there was some relaxation of censorship and communist economic policies. Later, Gorbachev's perestroika encouraged a national opposition movement against communist rule.

Communist domination ended in 1990. Since then, the country has undergone a difficult transition toward democracy and a market economy while combatting inflation, unemployment, and corruption.

Religious Composition



Ethnic Background



Domestic Affairs

The Republic of Bulgaria is a parliamentary democracy with executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

The President is elected every five years. Rumen Radev has been President of Bulgaria since January 2017.

The Prime Minister is the leader of the Cabinet of Ministers, and has greater political power than Bulgaria's president. Boyko Borisov is currently serving his third term as prime minister, since his reelection in January, 2017. The Cabinet of Ministers is nominated by the prime minister and elected by the National Assembly.

The unicameral National Assembly has 240 seats. Members are directly elected in multi-seat constituencies by proportional representation to serve four-year terms. The National Assembly was dissolved in January 2017 and Bulgaria did not have a legislative body until after a general election in March 2017. Since 2009, the Bulgarian political system has been dominated by the GERB party, which was founded by Boyko Borisov in 2006.

Since the collapse of communism, Bulgaria has transitioned to a free-market democracy. However, observers note that the country's democratic institutions are still weak, and inefficiency and corruption are major obstacles to the country's development.

In 2013-2014, widespread public protests took place against the rising cost of electricity, leading to the resignation of Bulgaria's center-right government. Early elections were held in May 2014. The appointment of a media mogul to head Bulgaria's security agency led to a new wave of protests. As a result, Prime Minister Borisov resigned.

Another round of parliamentary elections was held in October 2014. Parliamentary votes were distributed among eight parties, with GERB winning 84 seats, twice as much as its main opponent – the Socialist party. Borisov was reappointed as the country's Prime Minister.

In the October 2016 presidential elections, independent candidate Rumen Radev won the popular vote with 59.4% against pro-EU GERB (a conservative, populist Bulgarian political party established on 13 March 2006. The initials of the party rep6/gerb also translate as "coat of arms" in Bulgarian) candidate Tsetska Tsacheva. Following the elections, Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borisov resigned as

he acknowledged that his government had clearly lost its majority of support. The new President is known for his warm attitudes toward Moscow and his willingness to deepen ties with Russia in general.

Borisov led GERB to election victory again in the snap 2017 general election, becoming Prime Minister for a third time. Borisov received the Order of the Republic of Serbia in February 2019. He thanked the Serbian president in the name of Bulgarian people, promising to further help Serbian EU agenda and the overall relations of the two neighboring states.

In October 2019, Borisov urged the European Union to stop its criticism of Turkey, adding that Bulgaria's relations with Turkey are good. Several days later on October 15, Bulgaria turned harsher, condemning the Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria and firmly insisting that it stop immediately.

Since July 2020, Bulgaria has been experiencing a large protest movement, mainly in the capital Sofia, as well as cities with a large Bulgarian diaspora, such as London. The protest movement is the culmination of long-standing grievances against endemic corruption and state capture, particularly associated with Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's governments, which have been in power since 2009. The protests were triggered on 9 July 2020 when prosecutors and law enforcement officials raided the offices of two of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev's staff on as part of investigations, prompting thousands to take to the streets of Sofia later in protest at their action. Many protesters saw the showy raids as an attack on the head of state and accused prosecutors of deliberately delaying probes into the country's graft-prone political elites and local oligarchs. Radev has often criticised the Centre-right government of doing too little to uproot endemic corruption and has slammed prosecutors for cherry-picking their probes and working in cahoots with the government.

Despite months of continued unrest in the capital and throughout the country, Borisov has refused to resign, insisting that the "mafia wants to overthrow him" and that "no alternatives" to his rule have been presented.

Despite its severe economic depression in the 1990s, Bulgaria has showed impressive strides in economic recovery.

The government undertook significant structural economic reforms in the 1990s to move the economy from a centralized, planned economy to a more liberal, market-driven economy. These reforms included privatizing state-owned enterprises, liberalizing trade, and strengthening the tax system — changes that initially caused some economic hardships but later helped to attract investment, spur growth, and make gradual improvements to living conditions.

- **Currency:** 1.86 Bulgarian Lev= \$1
GDP: \$69.11 billion (2020 est.)
- **GDP per capita:** \$9,975.78 (2020 est.)
- **GDP Growth:** -4.2 % (2020 est.)
- **Unemployment rate:** 5.71% (2020 est.)
- **Population below poverty line:** 22% (2020 est.)

From 2000 through 2008, Bulgaria maintained robust, average annual real GDP growth in excess of 6%, which was followed by a deep recession in 2009 as the global financial crisis caused domestic demand, exports, capital inflows, and industrial production to contract, prompting the government to rein in spending.

Bulgaria is heavily reliant on energy imports from Russia, a potential vulnerability, and is a participant in EU-backed efforts to diversify regional natural gas supplies. In late 2016, the Bulgarian Government provided funding to Bulgaria's National Electric Company to cover the \$695 million compensation owed to Russian nuclear equipment manufacturer Atomstroyexport for the cancellation of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant project, which the Bulgarian Government terminated in 2012.

Despite a favorable investment regime, including low, flat corporate income taxes, significant challenges remain. Corruption in public administration, a weak judiciary, low productivity, and the presence of organized crime continue to hamper the country's investment climate and economic prospects.

Electricity, gas, water; food, beverages, tobacco; machinery and equipment, automotive parts, base metals, chemical products, coke, refined petroleum and nuclear fuel are leading industries in Bulgaria. According to the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom, Bulgaria is ranked 47 out of 178 countries, and is considered a "moderately free" economy.



Bulgaria shares close historical, cultural, and economic ties with Russia, and is largely dependent on Russian energy supplies. Bilateral tensions stem from Bulgaria's pro-Western orientation. Relations with Russia became strained after Bulgaria's decision to allow U.S. military bases on its territory, and to cancel Russian energy projects: a nuclear power plant, and an oil pipeline linking its Black Sea coast with Greece's Aegean coast.

Relations with the United States

In June 2014, Bulgaria halted construction of the South Stream pipeline project to supply Russian gas to the Balkans and Central Europe, under pressure from the European Commission.



US Ambassador to Bulgaria, Herro Mustafa

The United States first formally established diplomatic relations with Bulgaria in 1903, when John B. Jackson became the first U.S. representative and Diplomatic Agent to Bulgaria. Relations between the two countries were severed in 1950 and resumed a decade later.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bulgarian-U.S. relations improved dramatically and Bulgaria became a reliable U.S. ally. The U.S. government is working closely with the Bulgarian government to strengthen the rule of law, encourage multi-party democracy, develop military units, and to develop major industry sectors in Bulgaria.

The U.S.-Bulgarian Defense Cooperation Agreement signed in April 2006 by Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, allows the United States to access and share the use of several Bulgarian military facilities.

In 2002, the governments of Bulgaria and the United States signed an agreement on the protection and preservation of certain cultural properties in Bulgaria. U.S. companies conduct business across major industry sectors. The United States and Bulgaria have a treaty on avoidance of double taxation and a bilateral investment treaty. U.S. citizens traveling on a U.S. passport for business or tourism purposes can enter and stay in Bulgaria for up to 90 days in a 6-month period without requiring issuance of a visa.

President Bill Clinton became the first U.S. President to visit Bulgaria in 1996. In 2007, President George Bush visited the Bulgarian capital to meet with the President Georgi Parvanov and Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev to discuss military and political cooperation.



Bulgarian Ambassador to the US, Ambassador Tihomir Stoychev

Following Russia's decision to cancel the South Stream pipeline project, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Bulgaria in

Relations with Israel

January 2015. During his first official visit, Kerry met with Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev, Prime Minister Borisov and other Bulgarian leaders to discuss security cooperation, military modernization, energy dependence on Russia, and bilateral trade and investment.

Bulgaria and Israel enjoy a special relationship, stemming from Bulgaria's role in saving its Jews from deportation to Nazi death camps. Over 40,000 Bulgarian Jews have immigrated to Israel since 1948, making it the fourth largest group to come from a European country, after the Soviet Union.

Bulgaria was the twentieth country to recognize the State of Israel, and the countries quickly developed diplomatic ties and trade relations. Over the years, however, relations deteriorated and were severed completely after the Six Day War in 1967, but Bulgaria and Israel resumed trade in 1968.



Ambassador of Israel to Bulgaria, H.E. Yoram Elron



The Bulgarian Ambassador to Israel, Rumiana Bachvarova

In 1990, diplomatic relations resumed. Israel opened its embassy in Sofia and a consulate in Varna. Bulgaria opened its embassy in Tel Aviv and a consulate in Jerusalem.

In July 2011, Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed a cooperation agreement in the areas of tourism, energy, agriculture, foreign affairs and national security.

In July 2012, a terrorist attack carried out by Hezbollah killed five and injured thirty-two Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria. To demonstrate unity following the terrorist attack, the Israeli and Bulgarian governments met in September 2012.

Relations with Israel (Cont.)

In October 2012, Bulgarian President Plevneliev visited Israel. In meeting with President Peres, Prime Minister Netanyahu and other senior political figures, the two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in areas of anti-terrorism and national security.

In May 2014, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman visited Sofia, pledging to deepen cooperation.



Benjamin Netanyahu met with Boyko Borisov in Jerusalem on June 13, 2018

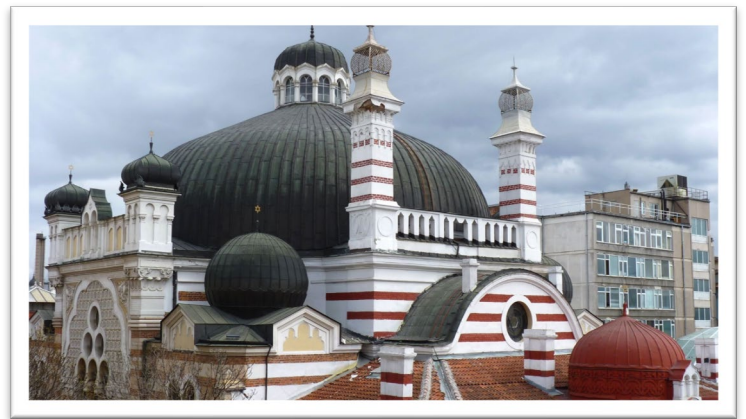
In February 2016, the terrorist Omar Zayed wanted by Israel for the killing of an Israeli student was murdered at the Palestinian Embassy in Bulgaria. In November 2018, Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu visited Bulgaria for meetings with political leaders from Balkan nations, which he said would focus on strengthening diplomatic ties and pushing for a change in the European Union's "hypocritical and hostile stance" toward Israel. In Bulgaria, Netanyahu attended an international summit and met with the prime ministers of Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Serbia, which is not a member of the EU.

In June 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his Bulgarian counterpart assured him that his country will open an honorary consulate in Jerusalem. Netanyahu told the weekly cabinet meeting at his office in the capital that he had spoken with Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov about setting up the mission. As of October 2020, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not committed to this move.

In November, 2018 Benjamin Netanyahu attended Balkan Craiova Forum in Sofia. In Bulgaria, Netanyahu attended an international summit and met with the prime ministers of Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Serbia, which is not a member of the EU. The Bulgarian PM, Boyko Borisov, said that he hoped Netanyahu would follow up on previous discussions about developing production of military technology such as drones in Bulgaria. Bulgaria has inherited a huge defense industry from communist times, but lacks modern projects. The last major revamp to Israeli-Bulgarian security operations were in 2012.

Jewish Community

Jewish settlement in Bulgaria began after the Roman conquest of the region. After the First Bulgarian Empire was established, a number of Jews persecuted in the Byzantine Empire escaped to Bulgaria. The Jewish community in Bulgaria continued to enlarge with successive waves of settlement of Ashkenazim from Hungary and Bavaria and Sephardim from Spain. Under Ottoman rule, Bulgaria had sizable Jewish communities in many of its major cities, and the Jewish population continued to flourish and grow throughout this period. After the end of Ottoman rule, Jews in Bulgaria were granted equal rights by the Treaty of Berlin.



Central Synagogue in Sofia, Bulgaria

Organization of Jews in Bulgaria-Shalom

Telephone: +359 2 40 06 301

Fax: + 359 2 988 46 937

E-mail: info@shalom.bg

Website: <http://www.shalom.bg/>

President: Mr. Alexander Oscar

During World War II, Bulgaria joined the Axis alliance, and starting in 1940 enacted anti-Jewish legislation, prohibiting Bulgaria's Jews from owning land, working in government positions, voting, running for office, marrying ethnic Bulgarians, among other restrictions. Between 1941 and 1943, conditions for Jews drastically deteriorated.

In 1943, Nazi Germany began pressing Bulgarian authorities to deport the country's Jews. This created a wave of public opposition, and with the help of parliamentary leader Dimitar Peshev, Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia and leaders of the Bulgarian Church, and many others, Bulgaria's Jewish community was saved from deportation to death camps. However, Jews in northern

Jewish Community (Cont.)

Greece and parts of Yugoslavia, which were under Bulgarian control, were deported to the Treblinka killing center in Nazi-occupied Poland.

After the end of World War II, 35,000 Bulgarian Jews left for the British Mandate in Palestine, a part of which became the State of Israel, and by 1950 most surviving Bulgarian Jews had made aliyah.

Bulgaria's Jewish community currently is numbering approximately 2,000-5,000 people, centering in Sofia. The community is represented by Shalom: Organization of Jews in Bulgaria. Shalom organizes clubs for children, youth, and veterans, and runs Hebrew studies and Sunday schools for children. The Jewish community center provides social and medical services for the elderly and people with disabilities. The organization publishes the *Evreyski Vesti* (Jewish News) newspaper, launched in 1933.



The cleaning of a defaced monument in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has two functioning synagogues in Sofia and Plovdiv. The Sofia Synagogue is the largest synagogue in Southeastern Europe and the third-largest in Europe. The Sofia Synagogue also houses a Jewish Museum of History. In 2003 The US Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad provided funds to restore the interior of the Zion Synagogue in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second most populous city. Jews first lived in Plovdiv during Roman times. They maintained a continuous presence in the town since at least the Byzantine era. They were mostly artisans and merchants in what long was one of the main trading centers on the overland route between Europe and the Middle East. More than 5,000 Jews lived in Plovdiv before World War II. About 400 lived there in recent years. The Sephardic Zion synagogue is located at Tsar Kaloyan Street 13, in the remnants of a small courtyard in what was once a large Jewish quarter. Dating to the 19th century, it is one of the best-preserved examples of the so-called "Ottoman-style" synagogues in the Balkans. An exquisite Venetian glass chandelier hangs from the center of the ceiling, which has a richly painted dome. All surfaces are covered in elaborate, Moorish-style, geometric designs in once-bright greens and blues. Torah scrolls are kept in the gilded Aron-ha-Kodesh.

Anti-Semitism

In September 2019, Bulgaria's Jewish community opened its first Jewish school in over 20 years. The opening of the Ronald S. Lauder Day School in Sofia was a significant development for the some 6,000 members of the Jewish minority in Bulgaria. Lauder, the president of the World Jewish Congress and a major donor to Jewish communities and organizations, attended the school's opening in Sofia, the capital, on Sept. 15. Prior to the opening of the school, whose 88 students are all under 12, Bulgarian Jewry had a Jewish school in the Lauder-ORT No. 134 "Dimcho Debelianov" Jewish School in Sofia.

According to the data research of Pew Research Center in 2018, the level of Anti-semitism is 7%. The respondents asked the question: "Would you like to live in one country with Jews".

In September 2020, a court in Bulgaria sentenced two men to life in prison for a 2012 bus bombing at an airport there that left five Israelis dead. Meliad Farah, 39, an Australian of Lebanese origin, and Hassan El Hajj Hassan, 32, a Canadian of Lebanese origin, were convicted Monday in absentia and remain at large for the attack in Burgas, on the Black Sea coast, which also wounded 35 people. They are believed to be part of the Hezbollah terror group and are on Interpol's wanted list.

In February 2020, Sofia mayor Yordanka Fandukova banned the annual Lukov March for the first time in 17 years. The annual, torch procession of ultranationalists and neo-Nazis draws thousands of extremists from all over Europe to Sofia each year. The Supreme Administrative Court upheld the Mayor's ban after as a result of the efforts of the Bulgarian authorities to fight antisemitism, intolerance and hate speech, according to the country's MFA.

In January 2020, A Jewish cemetery in northeastern Bulgaria, Shoumen, was vandalized. Gravestones were pushed over and broken, and a fence around the cemetery was damaged. Shoumen was home to a Jewish community during centuries of Ottoman rule. The Jewish cemetery in Shoumen dates from the 19th century.

In January 2019, the Great Prayer Hall of the Central Synagogue in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, was subjected to an attack in which stones were thrown through the temple windows. A couple of weeks before this incident, a graffiti depicting swastikas and an antisemitic slogan covering a monument



Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and National Coordinator on combating antisemitism, Georg Georgiev

Anti-Semitism (Cont.)

meant to memorialize those who fell victim to the ruling Communist regime in Bulgaria during World War II.

In February 2019, reports began circulating that detailed the anti-Semitic language used on social media by the ultra-nationalist promoters and participants of the Lukov March in Sofia. The annual march is a torch-lit demonstration that draws neo-Nazis from across Europe to the capital Sofia each February in honor of General Hristo Lukov, a Nazi collaborator whose movement sent 11,300 Jews to their deaths in the Nazi death camp of Treblinka. The organizers of the march claim not to be anti-Semitic, but the comments left on its official Facebook page indicate a clear proliferation of Jew-hatred among its supporters, against the Bulgarian Jewish community, and the Jewish world at large.

In April 2019, Swastikas were spray-painted on all the tombstones that had been preserved over the years in the old Jewish cemetery of Stara Zagora. The operation took place on the night of April 19-20, and probably related to the 130th anniversary of the birth of Adolf Hitler.

Swastikas and offensive language have been found daubed on a monument in the Bulgarian town of Stara Zagora, the day after April 11, the international day of the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. The monument, in the city's Peti Oktombri Park, is to anti-fascist fighters killed between 1923 and 1944 and lists dozens of names from the Stara Zagora area.

In February 2018, Hundreds of far-right extremists marched through the center of Sofia to honor a Bulgarian general who led a pro-Nazi organization in the 1930s and 1940s.

In October 2017, the Bulgarian government adopted the international working definition of anti-Semitism and appointed a national coordinator on combatting anti-Semitism.

The primary source of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria is online media. The Jewish community has expressed concern about an increase in such anti-Semitic manifestations.

In August 2017, a monument erected to thank the residents of the Bulgarian town of Vidin for preventing the deportation of their Jewish neighbors during World War II was defaced with anti-Semitic slogans, according to the Shalom Organization of Jews in Bulgaria.

In October 2017, vandals painted the anti-Semitic slogan “100 years Zionist occupation” in Bulgarian, at the base of a Soviet Army monument in Sofia.

Anti-Semitism (Cont.)

In August 2016, Jewish organizations expressed concern over hate speech and commemoration of World War II figures associated with Nazism, the U.S. State Department said in its annual report on religious freedom, covering 2016.

At an exhibition match in Sofia in August 2015, soccer fans attacked Israeli players and coaches and reportedly shouted anti-Semitic slogans during the game. The police reportedly believed the attacks were premeditated.

In 2013, close to 1,000 Bulgarians participated in an annual march to honor World War II general Hristo Lukov, known for his anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi activities. In 2014, only 300 attended. Every year the Bulgarian Jewish community organizes a counter-protest. In February 2016, scores of people defied a ban against the annual torchlight procession to commemorate Lukov in Sofia, and the ‘Lukov March’ took place for the thirteenth year in a row.