

# BULGARIA

IN THE YEARS AFTER EUROPEAN UNION ACCESSION

A PHOTO ESSAY BY SCOTT A. BRINTON

Bulgaria, a Balkan nation of roughly 7 million people, joined the European Union in January 2007 in the hope of reversing years of fiscal decline following the collapse of the country's communist government 17 years earlier. It was, at the time, the EU's poorest state, and remains so today. This photo essay, of ordinary Bulgarians going about their daily lives with quiet dignity, was shot over five two-week periods between the summers of 2007 and 2013, a time of rising wages but continued hardship.



Outdoor market vendors, city of Kyustendil in southern Bulgaria, 2007, the first year of the country's full membership in the European Union. The average Bulgarian earned an annual income of 5,166 leva at the time, or roughly \$200 to \$250 a month, according to Statista. Many older Bulgarians received less than that in their pensions, forcing them to work well into their later years.



A shepherd tending his flock in the village of Rajdavitsa, southern Bulgaria, 2007.



An engineer pops his head out from a Soviet era locomotive as it chugs across the countryside outside Rajdavitsa, 2007.



Members of the National Guards Unit, office of the Bulgarian president, central Sofia, 2007.



On a public tram, Sofia, 2009.



A playground in Mladost, Sofia's second-largest residential district, in 2009. Public infrastructure suffered after the fall of communism in 1990.



Inside the Bulgarian National Historical Museum in Sofia in 2010. Bathed in marble, the one-time palace was the main residence of Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's Communist Party general secretary from 1954 to 1989. The extravagant structure now stands as a symbol of the opulence and corruption of the old party elite.



A view of a Soviet era  
apartment complex in Mladost,  
2010.



Stamboliyski Street, central Sofia, 2011.



The Sofia Mall, looking out on Stamboliyski Street, 2013. The average annual Bulgarian income was around 9,300 leva, or \$350 to \$400 a month, at this time, so the trappings of mall shopping remained out of reach for many, if not most, Bulgarians.



ЯДКИ МИКС  
50 ГР. - 1,30 ЛВ.  
100 ГР. - 2,60 ЛВ.

СУРОВИ ЯДКИ  
МИКС  
50 ГР. - 1,30 ЛВ.  
100 ГР. - 2,60 ЛВ.

СУРОВО КАШУ  
50 ГР. - 1,30 ЛВ.  
100 ГР. - 2,60 ЛВ.

КАШУ ПЕЧЕНО  
50 ГР. - 1,30 ЛВ.  
100 ГР. - 2,60 ЛВ.

МИНЕРАЛНА ВОДА  
10,60 ЛВ.

Stamboliyski Street,  
across from  
the mall,  
2013.



The outdoor Zhenski Pazar (Women's Market), central Sofia, 2013.

A black and white photograph capturing a large-scale protest. The scene is set on a cobblestone-paved street, likely in a city square or near a government building, as suggested by the arched windows in the background. A dense crowd of people, including men, women, and children, is gathered. Many individuals are holding flags, some of which appear to be national or regional symbols. In the foreground, a man in a light-colored jacket with dark stripes on the sleeves holds a large black sign with white Cyrillic text. The overall atmosphere is one of organized public demonstration.

Атака се прецака,  
само Болен от  
парите е доволен!

Protesters near  
the office of the  
president in 2013,  
decrying  
government  
austerity  
measures that  
were encouraged  
by the European  
Union.

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