Bulgaria: trends in economic emigration to Greece

Description

Over the past thirty years, Bulgarian post-socialist emigration has flocked to the idealized West, mainly Western Europe and North America. Neighboring Greece has also proved a popular destination, welcoming tens of thousands of Bulgarian nationals.



Following the fall of the socialist regime, successive waves of migration contributed to emptying Bulgaria of a significant proportion of its working population. Expatriates prioritized areas offering them the most professional opportunities commensurate with their skills. The majority have emigrated to Europe, countries whose societies are often idealized but offer greater economic security and social benefits in line with the Euro-Western model. One of their favorite destinations turned out to be Greece, a country that shares almost 475km of border with Bulgaria. This territory appeared to be close by and easy to access for would-be emigrants, particularly following the liberalization of visas between Bulgaria and the European Union.

However, this population movement has not been linear; it has evolved: there have been several stages during which the profile of migrants has gradually adapted to the niches of economic activity dedicated to migrants.

The first two waves of post-socialist migration to Greece

In the months and years following the fall of the socialist regime, which until then had restricted East-West mobility, many working Bulgarians left for Western Europe, attracted by an idealized Western lifestyle and the hope of better-paid jobs. Greece, an EU member state and Bulgaria's neighbor, also benefited from this migration. Between 1989 and 2001, two waves of departures(1). The first, from the fall of the regime until the end of 1996, was characterized both by the settlement of expatriates in the Athens region (2,000 to 3,000 Bulgarians in the early 1990s) and by strong seasonal migration of Bulgarian workers in the agricultural sector, mainly in the tobacco fields in the north of the country. Several Greek farm owners in Thessaloniki and Katerini needed labor and had no hesitation in traveling to Bulgaria's Blagoevgrad district (Gotse Delchev, Satovcha, Garmen, and Hadjidimovo) to recruit farm workers. They recruited en masse to plant tobacco from mid-March. During the agricultural season, these workers were rarely declared to the authorities and often stayed illegally in the host country. Alongside this agricultural migration, hundreds of expatriate women have also gone to work in the domestic and tourism sectors, which rely heavily on foreign labor. Finally, mobility based on small-scale commercial exchanges was organized in northern Greece, contributing to the long-term establishment of a Bulgarian presence in these regions. In 1996, 7,000 of these Bulgarian nationals were living in Greece.

The economic crisis in the winter of 1996/1997 increased Bulgarian expatriates, forming an increasingly organized expatriate community. Some of its members opened Bulgarian grocery shops or businesses, recruiting their compatriots (particularly in the construction industry).

From the end of the 1990s, this migration was encouraged by the numerous administrative regularisations decided by Athens and affected the maintenance, agriculture, and tourism sectors, where most Bulgarians worked. It was also during this period that truly community-based associations (mainly made up of expatriates) were founded (Vasil Levski – 1997, Bulgarian-Greek Association – 1999), and that certain newspapers were launched (Svetlina – 1998, Kontakti and Bulgarian News – 1999)(2).

EU membership to make Greece more attractive as a destination for migrants

Since the abolition of Schengen visas for Bulgarian nationals (2001), new workers, often less educated, have been encouraged to move to Greece. In particular, this migration was organized within families or was carried out by single, divorced, or widowed women in financial difficulty. In 2021, 35,014 Bulgarians were living in Greece. Those who emigrated at the time increasingly relied on their network of contacts to make a success of the migration experience. From 1 January 2007, despite Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, its nationals were subject to a transitional period for obtaining the right to work freely, which varied from one Member State to another. In Greece, this period lasted two years. During this period, most Bulgarians continued to work in the hotel and catering sector, as well as in construction, while others worked as cleaners for private individuals and as subcontractors for cleaning companies. As a sign of the many expatriates working in this sector, a Bulgarian woman was elected General Secretary of the Union of Cleaners of Attica in December 2008.

The number of these economic migrants, which is difficult to assess due to the increase in mobility and the number of expatriates in an irregular situation, included almost 80,000 permanent residents(3). They were attracted by Greece's stability, economic security, and professional opportunities. The migration of the entire family structure led to the opening of several Bulgarian schools from this period onwards.

From the Greek crisis to the early 2020s

From 2009 onwards, due to accession, the profile of Bulgarian expatriates changed, gradually becoming "normalized": declared workers are now in the majority. At the same time, Greece experienced a prolonged economic recession, which made its labor market less attractive and led to many returnees who had lost their jobs. The Bulgarian presence then stabilized for a few years(4). In 2011, European statistics counted 75,426 Bulgarian expatriates in Greece; in 2020, the Hellenic Statistical Authority estimated the same population at 75,917, confirming this trend. Despite the economic difficulties Greece experienced, most Bulgarians working in the country have chosen to stay, valuing the higher salaries, the living environment, and the geographical proximity to their families.

The Athens metropolitan area remained the most attractive, receiving almost 30% of Bulgarian expatriates who settled in the Metaxourgeío, Váthi, Kypseli, and Acharnon districts. The other preferred destinations were Thessaloniki, Crete, Messinia, and Laconia. The provinces of northern Greece saw the arrival of tens of thousands of these migrants, 10,000 of whom invested their savings locally by buying homes(5).

The new arrivals were still working in local Bulgarian entrepreneurship (notably grocery shops selling Balkan products), agriculture (often villagers from the mountainous regions of southern Bulgaria), tourism, and surface maintenance. However, they also moved into more technical sectors, such as transport.

More women than men come to work in Greece. Most of them are working women aged between 40 and 60. Male expatriates are younger (25 to 45) and often have families. Researcher Anna Krasteva has observed a gradual change in the behavior of new Bulgarian workers moving to Greece to work: instead of residing there permanently, many prefer to make frequent short trips between the two countries, marking a shift from emigration to mobility.

Bulgarians in Greece today

The Bulgarian presence has decreased slightly (69,550 people in 2022)(6) but remains significant, as Greece is still one of the leading countries of emigration for Bulgarians in Europe. Community life is organized around thirty associations whose main aims are to teach Bulgarian to young people and to organize cultural and community events.

However, migrants who have spent two decades in Greece and thought that their country's accession to the EU would enable them to benefit from a retirement pension paid by Greece, allowing them to live out their old age better in their host country (whose living conditions are much appreciated by expatriates) or their country of origin, have often been disappointed. Indeed, even if a significant proportion of them have paid their contributions for 15 to 20 years and can, therefore, benefit from the minimum pension, the calculation of the amount of the latter is based on a total contribution

period of 40 years. In addition, the pension is reduced by 2% for each missing year. As a result, most of these migrants have resigned to living a more spartan life in Bulgaria from age 60, with their pension reduced by part of the amount they hoped for.

In addition to this economic mobility in Attica, many expatriates and cross-border commuters have bought property in Greece, mainly in the country's north, and rented it out, sometimes to compatriots who have come to work there.

Finally, Bulgaria's presence in this country is not exclusively linked to labor migration. Many Bulgarian nationals now regularly spend their holidays in Greece, a trend that has grown considerably over the last decade.

Notes:

(1) *Report on Bulgarian Immigrants in Greece*, Institute of Social InnovationAthens, December 2011, HALL, 44 p.
Kalina Alexandrova, "Rekordno preselenie na nashi tyutyundzhii v Gartsiya" (Record relocation of our tobacco farm workers to Greece), *Standart*, 9 March 2014.

(2) Agence des Bulgares de l'étranger (rubrique Grèce).

(3) "Vse-poveche-bulgari-iskat-da-rabotyat-v-chujbina," (More and more Bulgarians want to work abroad), *Ikonomika*, 30 August 2012.

(4) *10 godini v ES – Tendentsii v balgarskata migratsiya* (10 years in the EU: trends in Bulgarian migration), Open Society Institute, Athens, October 2017, p. 5. "Posoi metanastes kai apo poies chores eisilthan stin ellada" [Πόσοι μετανάστες και από ποιες χώρες εισήλθαν στην Ελλάδα] (How many immigrants have entered Greece and from which country?), *SL Press*, 25 April 2021.

(5) "25 evro na den i kvartira za nashi tyutyudzhii v Garsiya" (25 euros per day and for accommodation for our tobacco farm workers in Greece), *Ikonomika*, 10 June 2016.

(6) "Kolko balgari zhiveyat v stranite ot EC" (How many Bulgarians live in EU countries), *DW*, 17 May 2023.

Thumbnail: Athens, district at the foot of the Acropolis (© S.Altasserre).

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