



# Bulgaria 2015 Crime and Safety Report

*Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)*

*The following is based on open-source reporting.*

**February 11, 2015**

## **Overall Crime and Safety Situation**

Bulgaria is a welcoming country with few specific threats targeting American citizens, businesses, or organizations. Located strategically as a gateway between the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, Bulgaria is one of the key exterior borders of the European Union. While illegal migration and smuggling have challenged law enforcement, the Syrian conflict has exacerbated the migration/refugee situation in the poorest of the EU's member states. Bulgaria has struggled with housing/caring for the asylum seekers and refugees and the political backlash from vocal minority ultranationalists.

Crime Rating: High

### Crime Threats

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) reported an 8.2 percent decrease of all registered crimes in 2014 compared to 2013. 40 percent of cases were resolved in 2014 compared to 39 percent in 2013. According to the MOI, since 2000 the majority of incidents involving U.S. citizens were economic in nature, including ATM skimming, credit card fraud, theft, robbery, and motor vehicle theft. The volume and the type of reported incidents suggest that Americans are not being targeted as a nationality. Over the same period, the MOI reported a 50 percent drop in registered crimes involving American citizens, which is consistent with the trend observed by the U.S. Embassy's Consular Section. The MOI has launched an outreach campaign targeting crimes against tourists, allocating additional resources and training for officers on the Black Sea coast and winter resorts during tourist seasons.

While pickpocketing increased slightly the past year, there was a reduction in the registered number of murders. The murder rate is less than half of that in the United States.

Thefts from homes and non-violent burglaries remain the most frequently registered property crimes. On February 10, 2014, the police launched an operation aimed at reducing property crimes in villages and small towns that led to a short-term 26 percent decrease of those crimes. End-of-year statistics indicate that registered thefts in 2014 decreased by 10.8 percent compared to 2013. Burglaries predominantly occur during the night; however, a quarter still take place during the daytime, according to statistics from security companies. Multiple break-ins have been reported while the tenants are inside their homes. Burglaries of homes are more often perpetrated by professional criminals. Thefts from adjacent buildings (attached garages, storerooms, etc.) and thefts with no element of burglary are more often conducted by opportunistic criminals. While professional criminals almost exclusively look for valuables with a quick turnover (cash, jewelry, or electronics), the non-professionals steal anything they can use, trade, or resell.

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Registered robberies decreased by 29 percent in 2014 compared to 2013 and were concentrated mainly in Sofia, where 44 percent of all robberies occurred. Other cities with high rate of robberies are: Burgas, Plovdiv and Varna. The targets of armed robberies were financial institutions, gas stations, retail stores, and restaurants.

Europe's open borders and uneven patchwork of vehicle databases make car theft relatively easy. The MOI registered 3,627 car thefts in 2014, with almost 80 percent of them being stolen in Sofia, representing a 2.1 percent increase over 2013. Car thieves target new luxury cars, various models of SUVs, and older cars that are usually dismantled and sold for parts. In the last few years, the main markets for the stolen vehicles have been the Middle East, Albania, and Kosovo. Vehicles stolen and moved into Syria were used by terrorist groups, including in one in a suicide attack. Less than nine percent of stolen vehicles are recovered.

The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by criminal elements against each other and by hate groups remains a challenge for law enforcement, although the total number has decreased precipitously since its height in the 1990s and early 2000s. The MOI registered 16 IED attacks in 2014 compared to 21 in 2013. Another seven were disabled by the authorities in 2014.

A continuing trend over the past three years of anonymous telephonic bomb threats has impacted OSAC constituents. During the first 10 months of 2014, 222 telephonic bomb threats were registered compared to 271 threats in 2013 and 145 in 2011. Charges were filed against 30 percent of perpetrators. Bomb threat calls were directed at schools, shopping malls, court houses, airports, railway stations, and large office compounds – some including private American businesses. The police have handled these extremely disruptive threats professionally – both in terms of the initial public safety response and the follow-up investigation. No actual devices have been located during these incidents.

Contract killings by organized crime largely dropped off following the arrest of five “Killers” gang members beginning in 2010. In 2014, another “Killers” group, disrupted in Plovdiv, is suspected of being responsible for the contract killing of Customs officers in 1998. Four contract killings targeting criminal actors were reported in the first 10 months of 2014; the perpetrator of one has been arrested. A group of three Bulgarian nationals has also been arrested in Cyprus for planning contract assassinations.

Document fraud is a challenge and impacts OSAC constituents when hiring and conducting due diligence. The most targeted documents are university diplomas, electronic payment documents, and identification documents. According to U.S. law enforcement, genuine blank Bulgarian passports, including biometric data customized to specification, can be found on the black market for 250 Euros. These are primarily used to gain access to the European Union. Authorities disrupted a major document fraud ring in August 2014, seizing 10,000 components used to make fake Syrian passports destined for Turkey. There has been a decline in seized counterfeit currency. The BGN 20 bill is most frequently counterfeited, followed by BGN 10 and BGN 50 bills.

Value added tax (VAT) fraud cases have been widely covered in the press. Numerous police operations against groups dealing with VAT fraud have been conducted in 2014. 22 financial crimes and 27 crimes against the banking system were registered in 2014.

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According to U.S. law enforcement, Bulgaria is the number one source country for ATM and credit card skimming-related crimes in the world. Bulgarian transnational organized criminal groups manufacture the skimming devices and send their teams to other countries to skim credit cards. These groups send the proceeds back to their Bulgarian bosses. The increase of ATM skimming in Sofia, Varna, and Burgas has increased several-fold. Criminal groups install skimming devices not only to test the devices but to profit from the skimmed cards. These criminal groups are targeting high-volume ATMs, usually around tourist areas or shopping centers. Numerous police operations against criminal groups dealing with skimming fraud have been conducted all over the world during the first 10 month of 2014. Bulgarian criminal groups operating worldwide steal more than 50 million Euro (8 million BGN domestically) on an annual basis.

While Bulgaria is not a major regional financial center, money laundering remains a concern. The law has statutes to address financial crimes, but American and European experts have identified weaknesses in the legislation. Recent improvements, including closing a loophole in Bulgarian financial laws regarding cash transaction reporting, have been made.

Official corruption remains a serious challenge, according to the European Cooperation and Verification Mechanism report. Statistic shows that 98 percent of public procurement deals are won by two percent of the companies in Bulgaria. Cases of corruption schemes aimed at draining public money are common. Inefficiency and corruption within the judiciary are considered a major stumbling block against high-level corruption and organized crime. Americans are most likely to encounter corruption at state-run medical facilities and from traffic police.

## Cyber

The southeastern European region poses significant cyber threats to the U.S., Canada, and Europe. Bulgaria is the fourth major source of cyber threats with 7 percent of all global data breaches in the world originating in Bulgaria in 2012, according a study based on some 47,000 reported cyber-related incidents. The Bulgarian Computer Emergency Readiness Team registered locally 2,949 alerts for cyber attacks in 2014, 67 percent of which were in the form of malicious code and 18 percent in the form of distributed denial-of-service attacks. In December 2014 alone, 319 attacks were registered, 37 of which were identified as threats with very high risk.

## Transportation-Safety Situation

Over charging by taxi drivers, poor road conditions, and aggressive driving are the most frequent road risks faced by Americans.

### Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road conditions are generally underdeveloped aside from some of the main roads and highways that have been renovated or newly constructed over the past few years. Most of these major highways and roads are still under construction. Secondary roads are often poorly maintained. In 2015, the government plans to continue and complete the construction of new highways and renovate roadways, including main boulevards and some secondary roads in the larger cities. This process could cause heavy traffic and lead to more road accidents. In some

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cities, late at night, traffic lights blink yellow in all directions, leaving right-of-way unclear and contributing to accidents.

Heavy truck traffic along the two-lane routes from the Greek border at Kulata to Sofia and from the Turkish border at Kapitan Andreevo to Plovdiv creates numerous hazards. Motorists should expect long delays at border crossings.

Travel conditions deteriorate during the winter, as roads become icy and potholes become larger. Traffic difficulties are experienced even on small streets in Sofia, where the snow is not cleared, and the tenants must have a four-wheel-drive vehicle to drive safely. Rockslides and landslides may be encountered in the mountains and Black Sea area.

Aggressive driving habits, the lack of safe infrastructure, and a mixture of late model and older vehicles, livestock, and animal-drawn carts on the roads contribute to road accidents and fatalities. While the number of registered traffic accidents stayed almost the same in 2014 as in 2013, the number of fatalities increased by almost 10 percent. Bulgaria has 7.9 road deaths per 100,000 compared to the EU average of 3.0 in 2012.

Motorists should avoid confrontations with aggressive drivers. In particular, many drivers of late-model sedans speed and drive erratically. Violent altercations are not unheard of, some including the use of firearms to threaten drivers.

All drivers are obliged to observe local traffic laws, which in some cases are different from those in the U.S. Bulgarian law allows Americans to use their U.S. driver's license for up to one year; however, an international driving permit is recommended. Drivers operating motor vehicles must obey the signals given by traffic police officers. All fines for traffic violations are paid either electronically or via wired bank transfer.

Avoid leaving valuables in plain view, especially in cars with foreign license plates, and exercise caution while stopping at gas stations, motels, or roadside restaurants. Visitors should insure their cars against theft with one of the major insurance companies. Cars have been reported stolen when drivers leave their vehicle with the engine running during cold weather.

#### Public Transportation Conditions

Inter-city buses are newer, frequent, relatively fast, and more comfortable.

There have been several fires on trains over the past few years. Criminals do operate on trains.

Sofia has a modern, clean, and relatively safe Metro.

It is recommended that travelers use official taxi companies, which include "OK Supertrans" in Sofia; "OK Trans Taxi" in Varna; and "Eko Taxi" in Burgas.

#### Aviation/Airport Conditions

Airline transportation is reliable, and there have been no registered airplane accidents in the past 30 years. The national carrier, Bulgaria Air, is in compliance with the safety standards of the International Civil Aviation Organization. There are few reports of thefts, scams, ATM

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skimming, or pickpocketing at the four major airports (Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas and Varna). The biggest problem is related to “rip-off” taxis. They usually have an accomplice inside trying to lure travelers to the vehicle. Some of their logos are designed to look like other companies (ex. “CK” v. “OK”). Official taxi companies have desks inside the arrival terminals, and it is recommended taxis to be ordered at these desks.

## **Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence**

Bulgaria’s population is generally peaceful in its political orientation. Since the democratic changes in 1989, there have been several democratic, non-violent transfers of government power. An unprecedented eight parties were elected to sit in the Parliament after the October 2014 elections. The election results made it difficult for the election winner – the center-right party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) – to form a stable government.

Political Violence Rating: Low

### Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Bulgaria’s strategic location makes it a key point for transnational terrorists transiting by land into Europe, and it highlights the significant responsibility the Bulgarians bear as a frontline state of the European Union. The civil war in Syria and terrorist threat posed by ISIL have increased border pressure, raising concerns of potential foreign fighter infiltration legitimate asylum seekers. Countermeasures put in place by Bulgarian and Turkish officials in 2014 helped cut illegal border crossings by more than 50 percent from the spike in 2013. However, 2014 still saw double the number of illegal border crossers compared to 2012.

On July 18, 2012, Lebanese Hizballah conducted a bombing against Israeli tourists in Burgas. The attack killed five Israelis and a Bulgarian bus driver and injured 32 Israelis.

Terrorism Rating: High

### Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

There are several small political parties and organizations with anti-American rhetoric. Most active are the ultra-nationalists from the political party “ATAKA,” the nationalists from the youth organization “BNS,” and followers of the “Skinheads” sub-culture.

### Civil Unrest

Bulgarians regularly hold demonstrations to protest or advocate specific causes. Some political parties and organizations, particularly ultranationalist groups, have hired protestors from local soccer fan clubs who have been violent. Most neo-Nazi and extreme right groups are associated with soccer fan clubs and publicly demonstrate their associations during soccer games. These groups do not differentiate between police, opposition groups, and innocent bystanders.

The dynamic and large anti-government protest movement from 2013 largely tapered out in 2014. The most significant non-violent protests during the second half of the year were in reaction to the government’s response to a banking crisis.

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Past election cycles have seen protest activity, localized violence, blocking of main roads and government buildings, and minor security incidents (arsons, vandalism acts, provocations, explosions, etc.) in and around political party offices, election events, politicians, etc.

### Religious/Ethnic Violence

Religious violence tends to be focused on Muslims and Christian missionary groups. In February 2014, over 2,000 people protested against the return to the Chief Mufti's office of an ancient mosque in Karlovo, which was nationalized more than 100 years ago. Over 120 people were detained after protestors confronted police around the mosque, chanting anti-Islamic slogans, and smashing windows by hurling stones.

U.S. missionaries have been targets of harassment and assaults. They have been physically assaulted and threatened directly and indirectly. There have been cases of pepper spray used against missionaries, as well as armed threats with guns and knives. Missionary property has also been defaced with anti-American graffiti.

Ethnic violence tends to be focused on Roma or, to a lesser extent, the Turkish minority. In September 2011, protests erupted in Plovdiv following the death of a 19-year old Bulgarian male in Katunitsa. A Roma driver who hit the victim claimed it was an accident; however, the investigating magistrate ruled that this was an intentional hit-and-run. Villagers marched on the Roma clan leader's compound and overturned several of his vehicles and ransacked and burned several buildings. Violent protests spread over two weeks to several other cities and villages, including Sofia, Varna, Burgas, Stara Zagora, and Pernik. Instances of violence were mainly fueled by members of various soccer fan clubs, motorcycle groups, and the ultra-nationalist ATAKA political party. Protestors vandalized the largest mosque in Plovdiv, breaking several windows of the building. No injuries were reported.

### Post-specific Concerns

#### Environmental Hazards

Bulgaria is in a seismically active area. There were no registered earthquakes over 4.5 in 2013. The last significant earthquake occurred on May 22, 2012, and registered a 5.8. Its epicenter was 15 miles from Sofia, close to Pernik. OSAC constituents are urged to take steps to prepare themselves and review safety measures.

Flooding primarily occurs during the spring and winter in areas close to water. Floods are more likely in smaller villages and towns due to insufficient infrastructure to handle heavy spring rainstorms and winter runoff. In January 2013, melting snow and heavy rain in Smolyan and Kardzhali increased the levels of some reservoirs and rivers. The situation became critical, as a river overflowed and submerged a road section between Nedelino and Krayna.

In July 2014, a severe hailstorm hit part of Sofia. Substantial damage was reported to vehicles, building roofs, windows and façades. Another severe hailstorm with similar consequences was reported in Lovech.

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Cold weather and sizable snow fall can cause serious transportation problems, floods, and electrical outages. In case of heavy snowfall, roads may not be plowed or salted and can be extremely dangerous or closed to traffic. Three tourists survived an avalanche in the Pirin Mountain in January 2014, and one person was killed by an avalanche in the Rila Mountains on December 26, 2013.

Forest/wildfires are more likely in mountain areas during the summer time. During 2014, 39 forest fires were reported compare to 171 fires in 2013. Wildfires were concentrated in Sofia, Haskovo, Sliven, Yambol, and Razgrad.

Hot weather can cause serious transportation and health problems. In late July, a Code Orange for extremely hot weather was declared with temperatures reaching 100-104F.

A European study found that Bulgaria has the most polluted air among EU countries. Four of Europe's cities with the highest levels of particulate matter – Pernik, Plovdiv, Pleven, and Dobrich – are in Bulgaria. High concentrations of particulates were found in the air in Pernik for about 180 days of the year compared to about 15 days a year for Paris and Stuttgart. Bulgaria also has the highest concentration of carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide. The polluted air was the reason the EU commission announced infringement proceeding against the country's environment sector in 2014.

#### Critical Infrastructure Concerns

There were several industrial accidents in 2014. The most serious left 15 workers dead after an ammunition plant explosion in October 2014. Ten people were injured in a similar incident at the TEREM military ammunition plant in Kostenets in August. A third incident occurred in December at an ammunition plant in Maglizh, leaving one person dead and three wounded. In all cases, government regulators cited numerous irregularities during inspections, according to press reports.

#### Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

Counterfeit and pirated goods are widely available on the local market. Websites that allow free illegal downloading of software are accessible from Bulgarian IP addresses after almost a decade of efforts to disrupt these operations. Music revenue per capita is USD 0.4 compared with USD 2 in Croatia and USD 14 in US, and Bulgaria ranked 57 out of 58 on an International Property Rights Index in 2014. Alcohol and tobacco products are frequently counterfeited. According to a survey by the Center for the Study of Democracy, every fifth cigarette is illegal, and cigarettes are more profitable than narcotics. Several companies, including OSAC constituents, have reported difficulty when seeking recourse for patent and trademark infringement at the Bulgarian Patent Office.

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) crimes are a challenge for officials and the private sector. OSAC constituents using security offices, investigations, and disruption programs have met limited success in detecting, deterring, and disrupting criminal efforts. They have also used the information gathered during these efforts to develop stronger countermeasures. Those constituents relying on courts or a legal department centric strategy to protect their brand express frustration with the speed, lack of effectiveness, and outcome of their efforts. There have been a number of significant IPR investigations, including some in concert with other EU

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countries. The MOI and the Customs Service continue to combat contraband garments, shoes, cosmetics, and other products bearing knock-off trademarks. According to a report by the European Commission in 2013, 28 percent of all counterfeit goods seized annually within the European Union are stopped at Bulgaria's border. A report from the Commission in 2014 shows a 72 percent decrease of seized goods.

### Privacy Concerns

Bulgaria has a combination of talented computer programmers and a tradition of organized crime. ATM skimming, computer hacking, and other electronic intrusions are a risk. American businesses involved in high profile and politically- charged sectors (energy, finance, or similar industries with a higher risk of privacy concerns) should contact their corporate security headquarters or consult with the Regional Security Office about specific issues and countermeasures.

### Personnel Background Concerns

Harassment of minorities by skinheads and neo-Nazis has been reported more frequently throughout the region, including in Bulgaria. Several attacks against foreigners were highly publicized in Sofia in 2014. In October 2014, a pregnant Bulgarian female and her Moroccan husband were assaulted and seriously injured after a group of skinheads overheard the husband speaking to his wife in English. In 2014, several incidents of racism, ethnic slurs, and harassment of African-Americans, including diplomats, private sector expats, and missionaries, were reported. The media widely reported incidents of assaults, armed assaults, and harassment of refugees and asylum seekers.

Concerns about the rise of xenophobia, racism, and extreme nationalism in the society have been expressed by the likes of Amnesty International, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, and the Jewish organization, "Shalom."

### Drug-related Crimes

The MOI reports that drug-related crimes are rising. While drug abuse and addiction continue to climb, the age of first-time drug users is dropping.

Bulgaria is a "gateway" country for the transit of illicit drugs and contraband. Bulgaria serves as a major transshipment point for heroin from Southwest Asia along the Balkan Route to Europe. Organized crime groups are heavily involved in drug trafficking. Heroin and synthetic drugs are the primary drugs transported through Bulgaria, principally via overland methods, including Transport International Routier (TIR) trucks, passenger vehicles, buses, vans, and small trucks. Small amounts are smuggled by air. Varna and Burgas are used as entry points for controlled substances, including cocaine, that are smuggled into the Balkans, Greece, and Western Europe. In recent years, there has been a steady rise in cocaine smuggling from South America. Two arrested Bulgarian citizens are believed to have been linked to 1.4 tons of cocaine that was seized from a freight ship in France in February 2014.

Bulgaria disrupted illicit laboratories producing counterfeit Captagon (amphetamine) in 2014. Since the beginning of the year, police have broken up more than 40 drug labs primarily in the

Sliven, Yambol, Burgas, and Sofia regions. In 2014, over one ton of heroin, 105 kg cocaine, 404 kg marihuana, 727 kg cannabis, and 468 kg synthetic drugs were seized.

### Kidnapping Threat

Kidnapping as a tactic used by organized crime largely dropped off following the arrest of the “Impudent” gang in December 2009. Kidnapping was primarily used between rival criminal groups for ransom or because of unresolved financial dealings. The “Impudent” gang was accused of at least 13 high-profile abductions in 2008-2009.

On March 5, 2013, the 10-year old daughter of a drug kingpin was violently kidnapped by three masked, armed men as she left her house for school. Her bodyguard/driver was shot twice in the back. The girl was released after 48 days in captivity.

There were no significant kidnapping incidents in 2014.

### Police Response

#### How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Police officers are not allowed to issue spot fines or accept cash for any reason. Traffic police officers are not allowed to issue on-the-spot fines for minor traffic violations due to modifications in the Traffic Act. Per the law, requests for spot fines is a form of extortion.

In cases of lawful police detention or police harassment, U.S. citizens are encouraged to contact the American Citizen Services unit in Consular section at the U.S. Embassy for advice and assistance immediately. The ACS emergency number is: (+359) 2 937 5101 or e-mail at: [ACS\\_Sofia@state.gov](mailto:ACS_Sofia@state.gov)

#### Crime Victim Assistance

If a U.S. citizen is a victim of a crime, s/he should call the National System for Single European Emergency Call Number (NSSEECN): 112. It is accessible throughout Europe on all phones and can connect callers with emergency services. It is also highly recommended that all U.S. citizens report security incidents to the American Citizen Services unit in Consular section of the U.S. Embassy.

#### Police/Security Agencies

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) is the primary law enforcement body, encompassing the National Police Service, Border Police, Fire Safety and Civil Protection, Migration. It oversees 28 regional police directorates and over 180 police stations with more than 55,000 employees. Most interactions American citizens would have with law enforcement would be with MOI employees.

The customs administration is a centralized administrative structure, organized within the National Customs Agency (NCS) under the Minister of Finance. NCS counteracts the contraband channels of different goods, drugs, etc. It also is responsible for collecting all duties and excises paid to the state budget.

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The National Investigative Service (NIS) is the investigative arm of the Prosecution Service, which is part of the Judiciary. They work with the Ministries of Interior and Justice to bring investigations through the court process.

The National Protection Service (NSO) provides protective security to national leadership, including the president, prime minister, and visiting government dignitaries. NSO does not conduct criminal investigations.

The State Agency for National Security (DANS) is a domestic security agency with investigative responsibility, and since May 2013 with some enforcement authority after acquiring most of the responsibilities of the closed MOI Chief Directorate for Combating Organized Crime. There is a movement in 2015 to reverse these changes.

The enforcement of the [Traffic Act](#) falls on the Bulgarian Traffic Police.

### **Medical Emergencies**

Medical providers are trained to a very high standard, but most hospitals and clinics, especially in rural areas, are not equipped or maintained to U.S. or Western European standards. Basic medical supplies and over-the-counter and prescription medications are widely available, but highly specialized medication and/or treatment regimens may not be. Not every hospital/clinic is equipped to care for pediatric patients. If you are in need of emergency services for an infant/child, please call ahead to ensure those services will be available.

In the event of a medical emergency, call the emergency number 112 to request an ambulance. Dispatchers are unlikely to speak English, and this service will not transport a person to a private hospital. Ambulance service can be slow; in large cities it may take 30+ minutes for an ambulance to respond. If there is a medical emergency in Sofia, it may be quicker to call a taxi or ask a friend or colleague to drive you to a hospital.

#### Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

You can find a list of hospitals and physicians on the U.S. Embassy's website at: [http://bulgaria.usembassy.gov/list\\_of\\_hospitals2.html](http://bulgaria.usembassy.gov/list_of_hospitals2.html)

#### Recommended Air Ambulance Services

Since March 2014, air ambulance services are available from Heli Air Services Company (<http://www.heliair.bg/en>).

Another air ambulance company is International SOS.

Geneva: +41 22 785 6464, Fax: + 41 22 785 6424

Frankfurt: +49 61 023 588, Fax: +49 61 022 02644

#### Recommended Insurance Posture

Serious medical problems requiring hospitalization and/or medical evacuation to the U.S. may cost thousands of dollars. It is imperative that you have enough cash (or access to cash) to

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cover a medical emergency, and most doctors and hospitals expect immediate cash payment for services rendered.

#### CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Tuberculosis (TB) continues to be a serious health concern. For further information, please consult CDC's information on TB at: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2014/chapter-3-infectious-diseases-related-to-travel/tuberculosis>

You can find detailed information on vaccinations and other health precautions on the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) at: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/bulgaria>. The CDC maintains an international travelers' hotline at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747) or, by fax, at 1-888-CDC-FAXX (1-888-232-3299). For current information about outbreaks of infectious diseases abroad, consult the World Health Organization website at [http://www.who.int/topics/infectious\\_diseases/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/infectious_diseases/en/), which also contains additional health information for travelers, including detailed country specific health information at: <http://www.who.int/countries/en/>.

#### Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

##### Scams

Organized crime groups exert a strong influence in some bars/nightclubs and control a great deal of the prostitution business. Special attention should be paid to the drink prices at high-end bars and nightclubs. There have been instances of visitors charged exorbitant prices. Bills have been as high as several hundred dollars for drinks, and in some establishments, the management may use force to secure payment.

Another scam involves a suspect(s) puncturing a victim's tire. While the driver changes the tire, the suspect(s) burglarizes the vehicle.

Be wary of skimming devices placed on ATMs. Take actions to protect your PIN, although that does not eliminate the risk. U.S. citizens should use ATMs inside trusted banks and similar institutions only, and limit use of credit cards to trusted retailers and institutions. Closely monitor your bank statements for anomalies. Privacy information should be destroyed by shredder or similar destruction method.

A trend of vehicle lock jamming emerged in 2013, wherein thieves use radio frequencies to block the victim's fob. Jamming will leave their car unlocked despite the owner pressing the "lock" button. When the driver walks away, the criminals steal contents/valuables. In some cases, criminals have also stolen vehicles using devices that mimic an electronic key. These incidents have been prevalent at shopping centers, gas station convenience stores, and school drop-off areas.

##### Situational Awareness Best Practices

Maintain a low profile; dress down; use alcohol sparingly; and avoid disputes. When using public transportation or transiting via crowded markets, shopping streets, malls, etc. be particularly wary of pickpockets. Pickpocketing is often preceded by a diversion in the form of an

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argument or fight. Safeguard belongings when visiting cafes or restaurants and while using public transportation. Do not leave luggage unattended. Visitors should be wary of beggars and people selling trinkets and other items.

Residents should take measures to protect their dwellings, including installing window grilles/shutters, solid doors with secure locks, and an alarm system that is monitored by a security company with an armed response capability. Do not keep valuables in visible places or close to entry doors and balcony doors.

Companies that plan to open offices should take measures to protect their offices. Some bank vaults and private company offices reportedly have been broken into using jamming equipment in an attempt to circumvent alarm systems.

While demonstrations are generally peaceful, it is strongly recommended to avoid areas where they are being held.

Be aware that body language norms differ from those in the U.S. Shaking one's head side to side means "no" in the U.S. but means "yes" in Bulgaria, and conversely an up and down nodding in the U.S. means "yes" while it means "no" in Bulgaria. This body language can be very disconcerting for newcomers and takes some adjustment. Many Bulgarian businessmen may adjust their nodding to the non-Bulgarian version when speaking English. Even people living in Bulgaria for years may not pick up on subtle changes in body language that could provide warning of hostile intent. Understanding and acknowledging this limitation and a heightened awareness is important for all travelers and expatriates.

## **U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information**

### Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

U.S. Embassy Sofia  
16 Kozyak Street  
Sofia 1408, Bulgaria

The Consular Section is open Monday-Friday, except on American and Bulgarian official holidays.

### Embassy Contact Numbers

Emergencies involving U.S. citizens 24 hours a day: +359 2 937-5101 (via the Duty Officer)

Telephone operators: +359 2 937 5100 or +359 2 939 5500

Fax number: +359 2 937 5320

Websites: <http://bulgaria.usembassy.gov>, <http://sofia.usembassy.gov>

General e-mail: [sofia@usembassy.bg](mailto:sofia@usembassy.bg)

### Embassy Guidance

Before doing business in Bulgaria, American companies should check with the U.S. Embassy's Foreign Commercial Service office and American Chamber of Commerce regarding potential local business partners.

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Enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) at: <https://step.state.gov/step/>, so that the Embassy can keep you up to date with important safety and security announcements and help your family and friends get in touch in an emergency. Also, pay attention to Warden Messages published on Embassy and OSAC websites: <http://bulgaria.usembassy.gov> and [www.osac.gov](http://www.osac.gov)

### **OSAC Country Council Information**

OSAC stands ready to assist American companies with security-related information. OSAC's Bulgaria Country Council's Charter was signed on November 29, 2012. Over 70 companies are part of the Country Council, with representation in many different sectors, including High Tech, Energy, Academia, Entertainment, Retail, Banking/Finance, Service, Logistics, and Faith-based Organizations. If you are interested in getting more information about the Bulgaria Country Council, please contact the Regional Security Office either by phone or via e-mail at: +359 2 937 5316 or [DS\\_RSO\\_Sofia@state.gov](mailto:DS_RSO_Sofia@state.gov). To contact OSAC's Europe team, please email [OSACEUR@state.gov](mailto:OSACEUR@state.gov).

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