



Bulgaria

Continuing with our review of the Emerging Europe countries this month we focus on Bulgaria, a small country which links the East and West. It is situated on the Black Sea sharing its borders with Serbia, Macedonia, Romania, Greece and Turkey. A network of international motorways crosses the country, making vital connections to Western Europe, Russia, Asia Minor, to the Adriatic, the Aegean and the Black Sea.

After World War II Bulgaria became a satellite of the Soviet Union but it is now a member of the EU and NATO. It has a population of 7.1 million comprising 77% Bulgarian, 8% Turkish, 5% Roma and others. The capital is Sofia and is home to almost 20% of the Bulgarian population. A predominantly Slavonic-speaking, Orthodox Christian country, Bulgaria was the birthplace of the Cyrillic alphabet, which was created there towards the end of the 9th century AD. Today, English is the second language of a younger and professional generation who are well educated thanks to Bulgaria's tradition of technical schooling.

Family is an integral part of Bulgarian culture and strongly influences how people behave and live their daily lives. Loyalty and commitment to family members is essential. An extremely high importance is placed on relationships in general. Hospitality and socialising are vital to establish the necessary relationships of cooperation and trust and to set up the informal communication channels through which people get things done. Decisions are often taken outside the office in an informal environment.

For a long time Bulgaria was a patriarchal society. Management is still strongly centralised and tends towards the autocratic rather than democratic. Generally, among the older generation there is deference to authority and amongst younger workers more enthusiasm for exploring new opportunities and ways of working. As there can be high levels of bureaucracy and slow processes, knowing the right people is a key attribute.

Bulgaria remains a fairly formal society and Bulgarians are reserved initially – they do not appreciate too much “talk” so avoid over-zealous or rhetorical speech. During this stage, it can be difficult to obtain opinions and views. They are excellent listeners and rarely interrupt. Be patient and do not rush as with time, Bulgarians will provide feedback – albeit in a circuitous manner.

Meetings tend to be formal and follow a strict routine of introductions, handshakes and an exchange of business cards. Often they will go past the allocated time, so schedule extra time between meetings. Punctuality is valued.

Bulgarians make a lot of gestures while communicating and clearly show their emotions in facial expressions. It is important to note that Bulgarians have different head gestures to indicate ‘no’ and ‘yes’ to other cultures, such that shaking your head from side to side signifies ‘yes’ and an up and down movement means ‘no’.

Finally, gift giving is sensitive so offer thoughtful rather than expensive gifts that may be misunderstood. This could include a high quality pen with the logo of your company, a souvenir from your region or a bottle of good wine.