

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND THE TURKISH MINORITY IN BULGARIA

Bulgaria's population stood at 6.4 million at the end of 2025, down by about 14,000 from the previous year, underscoring the challenge of sustaining communities, public services, and productive capacity. Ageing is a wider European concern, but demographic trajectories differ across countries: between 2005 and 2025, populations increased in France and Spain while Bulgaria's declined.

Dr. Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun

Analyst, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)

Bulgaria's demographic challenge

Bulgaria's population stood at 6.4 million at the end of 2025, down by about 14,000 from the previous year, underscoring the challenge of sustaining communities, public services, and productive capacity. Ageing is a wider European concern, but demographic trajectories differ across countries: between 2005 and 2025, populations increased in France and Spain while Bulgaria's declined. Natural decrease and international migration shape the national population balance, while internal redistribution affects the viability of particular communities and their public services. In 2025, positive net migration of 35,085



offset part of Bulgaria's natural decrease of 49,238, while Türkiye was the leading country of origin for arrivals, accounting for 25.1%—a basis for exploring how voluntary cross-border mobility and inclusive citizenship could support demographic resilience[1]

These pressures also intersect with issues of minority exclusion and displacement. Examining the Turkish minority from the 1878 settlement through communist assimilation, democratization, and European Union (EU) integration, this article asks how historical treatment and contemporary participation relate to demographic sustainability. It argues that homogenization practices contributed to demographic and institutional vulnerabilities, without explaining the crisis alone. Conversely, inclusivity may strengthen resilience through retention, substantive participation, and voluntary cross-border connections. The argument places inclusive citizenship within Bulgaria's response to demographic pressures and its pursuit of constructive regional cooperation.

The Treaty of Berlin established Bulgaria in 1878 as an autonomous, tributary principality under the Ottoman State's suzerainty, whereas independence was proclaimed in 1908.

The 1878 Settlement and the Making of Minority Status

The Treaty of Berlin established Bulgaria in 1878 as an autonomous, tributary principality under the Ottoman State's suzerainty, whereas independence was proclaimed in 1908. This distinction places the emergence of Turkish minority status within a gradual transformation of political authority rather than a single founding moment. Article V required that religious affiliation should not constitute grounds for exclusion from civil and political rights, public employment, or professional activity. It also guaranteed freedom of worship and protected religious communities' organization and relations with their spiritual leaders. Article IV separately required consideration of the rights and interests of Turkish and other populations in mixed districts when organizing elections and drafting the principality's Organic Law. These provisions established a legal basis for participation, but they should not be equated with contemporary guarantees of ethnic identity, language, and minority rights.[2]

The central tension therefore lay between legally prescribed equality and nation-building practices that privileged the Bulgarian majority. Historical scholarship identifies a pattern in which Turkish religious and educational institutions could continue operating, while unequal access to resources constrained substantive participation. Turkish-language schools, for example, were tolerated but lacked the state support afforded to their Bulgarian counterparts. Institutional survival thus did not necessarily entail equal opportunities. For this article, the analytical implication is that formal protections must be assessed alongside the conditions enabling minorities to remain, participate, and sustain community life. This provides the historical starting point for examining later exclusion and displacement, without presenting nineteenth-century arrangements as identical to communist assimilation policies.[3]

Historical scholarship identifies a pattern in which Turkish religious and educational institutions could continue operating, while unequal access to resources constrained substantive participation. Turkish-language schools, for example, were tolerated but lacked the state support afforded to their Bulgarian counterparts.

The Demographic Costs of Exclusion

The earlier tension between formal protection and unequal participation acquired a different character under communist rule, but policy followed a varying trajectory. After 1944, state-supported Turkish-language education coexisted with pressure for emigration; but from the late 1950s, cultural autonomy increasingly yielded to assimilationist practices and Turkish-language schooling was progressively dismantled, while religious activity was curtailed. Socio-economic advancement therefore did not necessarily entail acceptance of a distinct Turkish identity. The decisive escalation came in December 1984–January 1985, when the authorities forcibly replaced Turkish names with Bulgarian ones. Subsequent restrictions on public use of the Turkish language and Muslim cultural practices led to significant difficulties for the Turkish community's publicly expressed identity. [4]

Mass displacement to Türkiye took place in the summer of 1989. Scholarly accounts place departures at approximately 360,000, although estimates differ; the movement cannot be treated as ordinary migration merely because the authorities issued passports. Nor should departures be equated with permanent population loss. A substantial number returned, some before the communist regime collapsed and others afterwards. One contemporary study recorded approximately 155,000 returnees, while later scholarship describes a return approaching half of those expelled. These findings demonstrate partial demographic recovery, not the absence of enduring disruption. The departure of workers disrupted local production, while displacement and return generated difficulties concerning livelihoods, housing, and property.[5]

The demographic significance consequently extends beyond the immediate reduction in residents. Loss of workers and skills, disruption of household livelihoods, family separation, and damaged confidence in state institutions weaken communities' longer-term capacity to retain population. Their persistence and magnitude, however, require evidence rather than inference from departure totals alone. Consistent with the demographic-sustainability framework developed in an earlier AVİM report, assimilation and displacement should be examined as contributing historical pressures, not a sufficient explanation for Bulgaria's subsequent demographic trends. This distinction establishes why democratization must be assessed through both restored rights and the conditions enabling secure, substantive participation.[6]

Democratization and European Integration: Representation Beyond Formal Rights

Against this background, democratization reopened the question of whether citizenship could accommodate Turkish identity. On 29 December 1989, the authorities announced the reversal of the communist assimilation policy; legislation adopted and revised during 1990 enabled the restoration of forcibly changed names. These measures marked a break with homogenization practices, although administrative obstacles initially limited their implementation. Political pluralism also created

channels for participation. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms became an important vehicle for Turkish voters in the 1990 elections, but neither its electoral support nor its institutional role should be equated with the political preferences of the entire community. The 1991 Constitution prohibited discrimination on grounds including ethnicity and religion, while Article 11(4) prohibited parties formed on ethnic, racial, or religious lines. These provisions illustrate the tension between individual equality and the institutional expression of minority interests.[7]

EU integration introduced an additional benchmark for democratic consolidation. The Copenhagen Criteria, established in 1993, made respect for and protection of minorities part of the political conditions for EU accession. Bulgaria joined the EU on 1 January 2007. Accession provided a framework for evaluating reform, not proof that every participation deficit had disappeared. Subsequent monitoring under the Council of Europe's Framework Convention supplies a distinct assessment rather than an EU accession mechanism. Its fifth opinion on Bulgaria identified inadequate provision for minority-language learning and a pronounced decline in pupils studying Turkish.[8]

The analytical distinction is therefore between representation within political institutions and effective participation across society. Parliamentary presence alone cannot establish equal access to education, employment, public services, or local decision-making. Assessment must examine opportunities and outcomes, alongside meaningful consultation with diverse minority voices. For demographic sustainability, the relevant question is whether these conditions strengthen security, institutional trust, and the capacity to remain and contribute. Such effects require evidence; neither restored rights nor EU membership automatically establishes demographic recovery.

Minority Participation as a Component of Demographic Resilience

The distinction between formal rights and substantive participation permits an institutional assessment of demographic resilience; the capacity to sustain communities, livelihoods, and essential services despite population pressures. The earlier AVİM report connects minority integration with demographic sustainability. An institutional approach sharpens that proposition by examining implementation, monitoring, and accessible remedies alongside legal recognition. Although developed for elderly rights in Turkic Eurasia, the framework outlined in the report offers an analytical lens, not evidence about Bulgaria. The first mechanism is retention. Equal opportunities and confidence in public institutions may improve conditions for residents to remain, but this relationship requires testing. The



second is participation: enabling residents to develop skills and influence decisions affecting their lives. Minority-language learning, proficiency in Bulgarian, and meaningful consultation provide complementary foundations. Their effectiveness depends on assigned responsibilities, adequate resources, and accessible procedures for challenging exclusion, rather than statutory recognition alone.[9]

The third mechanism concerns connections across borders. Voluntary return, diaspora engagement, and Bulgaria-Türkiye cooperation could support professional exchanges, enterprise development, and community initiatives without requiring permanent relocation. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) findings on emigrants' skills and returnees' employment difficulties underline why reintegration must accompany return; these national findings do not establish Turkish-minority-specific outcomes. An adapted multi-level approach would connect national guarantees, municipal services, community organizations, and international monitoring, while bilateral cooperation supports rather than substitutes for Bulgarian public responsibilities. Sarıca and Tulun's emphasis on integrated services also directs attention to older residents and intergenerational needs; demographic resilience concerns the well-being of those who remain, not merely attracting workers. Cross-border initiatives should therefore be assessed through sustained employment, recognized qualifications, service accessibility, and durable local benefits, with voluntary participation and respect for Bulgarian sovereignty.[10]

These mechanisms have clear limits. The Turkish minority also faces demographic contraction: the 2021 census recorded 508,378 people identifying as Turkish and a smaller share of ethnicity respondents than in 2011. Non-response and self-identification complicate comparisons; census shares cannot establish fertility differences or explain population change alone. Inclusion cannot independently reverse ageing or national population loss. Minority members must remain rights-holders and policy participants, not passive beneficiaries or demographic resources; their rights do not depend on fertility or economic usefulness. There is thus a distinction between protective intervention and autonomous participation. Measurable demographic effects require evidence on migration, employment, services, and trust, accounting for wider economic conditions. The argument is that institutionalized inclusion may reduce avoidable vulnerabilities, not that the minority can replenish Bulgaria's population.[11]

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms became an important vehicle for Turkish voters in the 1990 elections, but neither its electoral support nor its institutional role should be equated with the political preferences of the entire community.

Inclusive Citizenship and Regional Cooperation: A Practical Policy Agenda

Policy should begin with locally identified access barriers and meaningful consultation, followed by jointly evaluated cooperation projects, with Bulgarian institutions retaining responsibility for rights and service delivery. First, the ministries responsible for education and employment, together with municipalities and public service providers, should identify local access barriers and establish funded improvement plans. Measures could combine educational support, vocational guidance, and accessible services for older residents. Outcomes should be tracked through school completion, sustained employment, and service accessibility, using privacy-protecting data and voluntary self-identification where ethnicity is recorded. The intended result is stronger local capacity and fewer avoidable disadvantages.

Second, national and municipal authorities should institutionalize consultation with diverse Turkish community organizations, including women, younger people, and older residents. Regular forums published responses to recommendations, and accessible complaint channels would connect participation to accountability. Cultural and linguistic measures should include assessing demand for Turkish-language learning, supporting teachers and materials, and sustainable cultural funding. These proposals translate the Council of Europe Advisory Committee's recommendations on minority-language education, sustainable cultural funding, anti-discrimination remedies, and inclusive consultation into practical measures and should be implemented through applicable domestic procedures and Bulgaria's international obligations, alongside proficiency in Bulgarian. Their purpose is effective participation without the problems associated with cultural assimilation.[12]

Bulgarian and Turkish governments, municipalities, universities, and civil society partners should develop transparent cooperation on education, local development, and voluntary diaspora engagement.

Third, the Bulgarian and Turkish governments, municipalities, universities, and civil society partners should develop transparent cooperation on education, local development, and voluntary diaspora engagement. Small jointly evaluated projects could support professional exchanges, mentoring, and enterprise links, while return initiatives should provide information on qualifications, employment, and services. Cooperation should complement Bulgarian state responsibilities, respect the country's sovereignty, and avoid assigning political loyalty through ethnicity. Success should be judged by durable community benefits and participant choice, not ethnic competition or demographic targets concerning the minority.

Conclusion

Taken together, this history shows that communist-era homogenization policies produced displacement and disruption, while restored rights did not automatically secure substantive participation. The Turkish minority should therefore be considered within Bulgaria's demographic sustainability debate as citizens whose inclusion may strengthen resilience, not as a demographic remedy. Two priorities merit monitoring: population retention in regions with Turkish communities and effective participation in education, employment, services, and local decisions. Such assessments must distinguish policy effects from wider economic pressures. Rights-respecting inclusion, supported by accountable institutions and voluntary Bulgaria-Türkiye cooperation, offers a measured contribution to national sustainability and regional stability without promising demographic reversal.

Bibliography

Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. *Fifth Opinion on Bulgaria*. ACFC/OP/V(2024)2. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, published October 10, 2024. https://rm.coe.int/5th-op-bulgaria-en/1680b1c747.

Bulgarian Industrial Association. "Population and Demographic Processes—2025—Final Data." [Insert verified publication date.] Accessed October 13, 2026. https://en.bia-bg.com/service/view/35812/.

Bulgaria. *Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*. Promulgated July 13, 1991. English text published by the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria. https://www.parliament.bg/en/const.

Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria. "History." Accessed October 13, 2026. https://www.gov.bg/special/en/About-Bulgaria/HISTORY/tabsss1.

Dimitrov, Vesselin. "In Search of a Homogeneous Nation: The Assimilation of Bulgaria's Turkish Minority, 1984–1985." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, no. 2 (2001): 1–22. https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/JEMIE01Dimitrov10-07-01.pdf.

Erçin, Emre. "Demographic Crisis, Minority Integration and Strategic Demography: The Case of Turks in Bulgaria." AVİM UEP Rapor no. 2026/1. Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), April 20, 2026. https://avim.org.tr/UEPRapor/DEMOGRAPHIC-CRISIS-MINORITY-INTEGRATION-AND-STRATEGIC-DEMOGRAPHY-THE-CASE-OF-TURKS-IN-BULGARIA-20-04-2026.

European Council. *European Council in Copenhagen, 21–22 June 1993: Conclusions of the Presidency*. SN 180/1/93 REV 1. June 21–22, 1993. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21225/72921.pdf.

European Union. "Bulgaria." Accessed October 13, 2026. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-countries/bulgaria_en.

Eurostat. *Demography of Europe: 2026 Edition*. European Union, 2026. https://doi.org/10.2785/2082883.

Haksöz, Cengiz. "Ethnic Cleansing of Turks in Bulgaria." Review of *Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria*, by Tomasz Kamusella. *Uluslararası Suçlar ve Tarih / International Crimes and History*, no. 19 (2018): 253–57. https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/700942.

Human Rights Watch. "Human Rights Watch World Report 1990—Bulgaria." January 1, 1991. Refworld. https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/hrw/1991/en/92723.

Kamusella, Tomasz. "Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria." Book description and abstract. University of St Andrews Research Portal. Publication record dated August 2, 2018. Accessed October 13, 2026. https://research-portal.st-andrews.ac.uk/en/publications/ethnic-cleansing-during-the-cold-war-the-forgotten-1989-expulsion/.

National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria. *Ethno-cultural Characteristics of the Population as of September 7, 2021: Final Data*. 2021, https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2021-ethnos_en.pdf .

National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria. "Population and Demographic Processes—2025—Final Data." April 29, 2026. https://www.nsi.bg/en/press-release/population-and-demographic-processes-9002.

OECD. *OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Bulgaria 2025*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1787/81e7cac7-en.

Sarıca, Berna, and Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun. "Institutionalizing Elderly Rights: Regional Needs and Policy Pathways in Turkic Eurasia." SocArXiv preprint, version 1. March 13, 2026, https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/6z3qj_v1.

"Treaty of Berlin, The." July 13, 1878. Enclosure in "Mr. Maynard to Mr. Evarts," September 28, 1878. In *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With the Annual Message of the President, December 2, 1878*, document 518. Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1878/d523.

Vasileva, Darina. "Bulgarian Turkish Emigration and Return." *International Migration Review* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 342–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/019791839202600209.

Endnotes

1 National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, "Population and Demographic Processes—2025—Final Data," April 29, 2026, https://www.nsi.bg/en/press-release/population-and-demographic-processes-9002; Eurostat, Demography of Europe: 2026 Edition (European Union, 2026), sections "Population Growth," "Age," and "Births and Deaths," https://doi.org/10.2785/2082883; Bulgarian Industrial Association, "Population and Demographic Processes—2025—Final Data," [publication date: verify], accessed October 13, 2026, https://en.bia-bg.com/service/view/35812/; Bulgarian Industrial Association, "Population and Demographic Processes—2025—Final Data," accessed October 13, 2026, sections "International Migration" and "Population Natural and Migration Growth," https://en.bia-bg.com/service/view/35812/

2 The Treaty of Berlin," July 13, 1878, arts. I, IV–V, enclosure in "Mr. Maynard to Mr. Evarts," September 28, 1878, in Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With the Annual Message of the President, December 2, 1878, document 518, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1878/d523; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, "History," section "1908 Independence," accessed October 13, 2026, https://www.gov.bg/special/en/About-Bulgaria/HISTORY/tabsss1

3 Vesselin Dimitrov, "In Search of a Homogeneous Nation: The Assimilation of Bulgaria's Turkish Minority, 1984–1985," Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe, no. 2 (2001), 4–5, https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/JEMIE01Dimitrov10-07-01.pdf

4 Dimitrov, "In Search of a Homogeneous Nation: The Assimilation of Bulgaria's Turkish Minority, 1984–1985, 13-15.

5 Darina Vasileva, "Bulgarian Turkish Emigration and Return," International Migration Review 26, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 342–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/019791839202600209; Tomasz Kamusella, "Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria," book description and abstract, University of St Andrews Research Portal, publication record dated August 2, 2018, accessed October 13, 2026, https://research-portal.st-andrews.ac.uk/en/publications/ethnic-cleansing-during-the-cold-war-the-forgotten-1989-expulsion/; Cengiz Haksöz, "Ethnic Cleansing of Turks in Bulgaria," review of Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria, by Tomasz Kamusella, Uluslararası Suçlar ve Tarih / International Crimes and History, no. 19 (2018): 255–56, https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/700942.

6 Emre Erçin, "Demographic Crisis, Minority Integration and Strategic Demography: The Case of Turks in Bulgaria," AVİM UEP Rapor no. 2026/1, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), April 20, 2026, abstract and "Policy Recommendation," https://avim.org.tr/UEPRapor/DEMOGRAPHIC-CRISIS-MINORITY-INTEGRATION-AND-STRATEGIC-DEMOGRAPHY-THE-CASE-OF-TURKS-IN-BULGARIA-20-04-2026 .

7 Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Watch World Report 1990—Bulgaria," January 1, 1991, section "Human Rights Developments," Refworld, https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/hrw/1991/en/92723; Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, promulgated July 13, 1991, arts. 6(2) and 11(1), (3)–(4), English text published by the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, https://www.parliament.bg/en/const.

8 European Council, European Council in Copenhagen, 21–22 June 1993: Conclusions of the Presidency, SN 180/1/93 REV 1, June 21–22, 1993, 13, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21225/72921.pdf; European Union, "Bulgaria," section "Overview," accessed October 13, 2026, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-countries/bulgaria_en; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Fifth Opinion on Bulgaria, ACFC/OP/V(2024)2 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, published October 10, 2024), 4–5, 33–35, https://rm.coe.int/5th-op-bulgaria-en/1680b1c747.

9 Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Fifth Opinion on Bulgaria, ACFC/OP/V(2024)2 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, published October 10, 2024), 4–7, 33–38, https://rm.coe.int/5th-op-bulgaria-en/1680b1c747; Berna Sarıca and Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, "Institutionalizing Elderly Rights: Regional Needs and Policy Pathways in Turkic Eurasia," SocArXiv preprint, version 1, March 11, 2026, secs. 2 and 7.1, https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/6z3qj_v1; Emre Erçin, "Demographic Crisis, Minority Integration and Strategic Demography: The Case of Turks in Bulgaria," AVİM UEP Rapor no. 2026/1, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), April 20, 2026, abstract and "Policy Recommendation," https://avim.org.tr/UEPRapor/DEMOGRAPHIC-CRISIS-MINORITY-INTEGRATION-AND-STRATEGIC-DEMOGRAPHY-THE-CASE-OF-TURKS-IN-BULGARIA-20-04-2026.

10 OECD, OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Bulgaria 2025 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), chap. 4, "Making Migration and Integration Work in Bulgaria," [insert specific pages supporting emigrants' skills and returnees' employment difficulties], https://doi.org/10.1787/81e7cac7-en; Berna Sarıca and Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, "Institutionalizing Elderly Rights: Regional Needs and Policy Pathways in Turkic Eurasia," SocArXiv preprint, version 1, [insert OSF version 1 posting date; confirm correspondence with uploaded manuscript], secs. 2, 6.1, and 7.1, https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/6z3qj_v1.

11 National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, Ethno-cultural Characteristics of the Population as of September 7, 2021: Final Data, 2021, 1–2, https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2021-ethnos_en.pdf; Berna Sarıca and Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, "Institutionalizing Elderly Rights: Regional Needs and Policy Pathways in Turkic Eurasia," SocArXiv preprint, version 1, March 13, 2026, secs. 6.3 and 8, https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/6z3qj_v1 .

12 Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Fifth Opinion on Bulgaria, ACFC/OP/V(2024)2 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, published October 10, 2024), 6–7, paras. 10, 12, 15, and 21, https://rm.coe.int/5th-op-bulgaria-en/1680b1c747