

# Private Housing Typifies Bulgarian Attitudes

By Robert H. Estabrook The Washington Post Foreign Service  
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## Incentive Program Extends to Agriculture

# Private Housing Typifies Bulgarian Attitudes

*This is the seventh of a series of articles resulting from a tour of Eastern Europe.*

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BLAGOEVRAD, Bulgaria—“Bulgarians like to own their own homes,” says a government pamphlet. There is abundant evidence of that phenomenon, unusual in a Communist country, in this provincial town in the mountains south of Sofia.

On almost every street new houses faced with seminished brick are interspersed with older dwellings. Along the highways and in smaller villages the same building boom can be seen.

This is testimony to governmental attempts to relieve the housing shortage by encouraging citizens to build their own homes. They receive government loans and help in acquiring land and materials. Property can be inherited.

### Incentive Programs

Some 75 per cent of the residences in Sofia, including apartments, are privately owned. Government practice is to sell off flats as soon as

possible to release capital for building new ones.

In many other ways the government of Prime Minister Todor Zhivkov is embarking upon incentive programs which depart markedly from the traditional view of communism as a system under which everything but the weather is nationalized.

Last spring, for example, a decree called upon state and collective farms to aid owners of small private plots with tractors, seed and fertilizer.

Some officials contend that this was intended merely to assist peasants to provide better for their own needs. But there are plenty of indications that its main purpose was to provide more inducement to increase the general level of agricultural production.

### Rural Areas Poor

Despite price increases, pensions and a minimum wage guaranteed collective farmers wherever located, the peasant still has not responded as the planners would like. Often he loses heart for the back-breaking effort of previous years, and

this is part of the government's problem.

Rural Bulgaria remains poor. Large farms growing oriental tobacco as well as grain, fruit and vegetables abound between here and Sofia, and some appear well run. But there is relatively little mechanization. Ox carts are prevalent.

Despite the poverty, peasants retain a friendly dignity. On Sundays men wear suits and women their best dresses, often black. There are frequent wedding processions with dancing in village streets. Bulgarian orthodox churches also are numerous.

But the depressed condition of the countryside is one of the contradictions alongside Bulgaria's intensive effort for industrial development. The country still depends upon farm exports, including fruits and vegetables to Western Europe.

Some of the industrial results are undeniably impressive. Starting virtually from scratch a decade ago, Bulgaria's machinery exports now account for one fourth of her total export income and

are expected to reach half within 10 years. There has been major expansion of electric power.

### A Pitfall of Pride

A few miles north of Sofia is the new Kremikovtski steel plant, replete with a dual-lane highway approach with cloverleafs and new residential areas under construction.

But here also in one of the pitfalls of national pride in industrialization. Bulgarian iron and coal resources are inadequate, and the new mill must import ore from Algeria and Brazil and coal from Poland. It could scarcely hope to be competitive.

Officials explain, however, that the purpose of the Kremikovtski plant is primarily to produce steel for the domestic machinery industry, with a little additional for export to other Communist countries.

Of all countries in Communist assistance organization, Bulgaria has perhaps the most reason to be satisfied with specialization. Still relatively weak industrially, she can follow Soviet wishes in con-

centrating on a few items while obtaining her needs from others.

Although life for many probably is far better than it was a generation ago, the benefits of industrialization are scarcely reflected in consumer goods. In Sofia, some stores and supermarkets have attractive displays. But many prices are horrifyingly high.

### Average Wage 1000 Leva

The average industrial wage is about 1000 leva a year—850 dollars at the official exchange rate but actually much less—and the average farmer income perhaps 600 leva. Yet a cotton shirt from North Vieb-Nam costs 11 leva, and dresses are similarly priced. A 15-inch television set would cost an industrial worker three months pay.

Automobiles are obviously prohibitive for all but a favored few, many of them military officers. Yet there is a remarkable number of private Russian-built cars—many more than in Rumania and probably proportionately more than in the Soviet Union.

Far from discouraging car ownership, the 20-year plan anticipates much wider distribution. When that paradise comes the government will have to do something about filling stations. It is common to see vehicles lined up for a block to get to one of the few pumps dispensing what acts and smells like molasses.

Under Marxist theory underdeveloped Bulgaria probably would have been the last country in Eastern Europe to be considered ripe for communism. The system has been heavily dependent upon the Soviet Union and the present liberalization follows the line taken by Nikita Khrushchev.

At the moment Bulgaria's economy is in trouble because of an overindustrialization and too little investment in agriculture. For the government now to rely even more extensively on financial incentives would not be surprising.

Whatever is done in this direction is bound to have some effect upon the evolution of the system, even though the apparatus of power remains unchanged.