

# Blagoevgrad

Population (2013)	319 135
Area (sq. km.)	6 449.5
Number of settlements	281
Share of urban population (%)	59.5

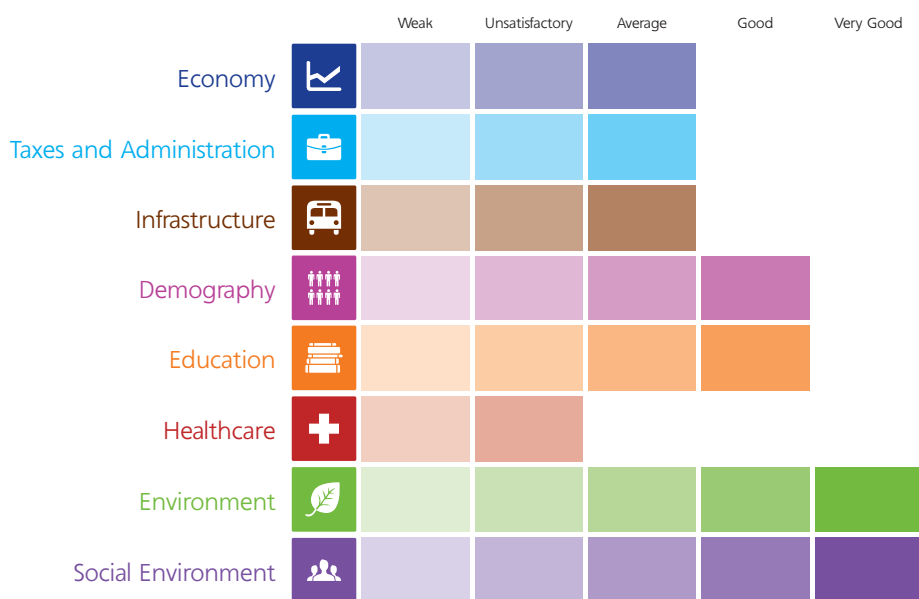


## Overview

Blagoevgrad district is the third largest in terms of its territory and the sixth largest in terms of its population. Its demographic condition is good, it has an attractive social environment and well preserved local environment. The education system is well developed, and in the last few years, local universities have managed to attract an increasing number of students.

The effects of the economic crisis still suppress the full potential of the local economy, which has led to the deterioration of some labor market indicators in 2013. The investment activity of local enterprises is still subdued, and foreign direct investment is not enough to guarantee higher incomes and standard of living.

The leading challenges in front of Blagoevgrad are the faster infrastructure development and the reversal of negative processes in the healthcare system.



## Economy

Blagoevgrad District ranked 11th in respect of GDP per capita – 6,682 BGN per capita in 2011. The investment activities have remained too low since 2009. The businesses' investments in fixed tangible assets amounted to 1,105 BGN per capita in 2012, being 2,129 BGN in 2008.

Although foreign direct investments in non-financial enterprises have gradually increased, the cumulative rate thereof (about 307 million EUR as at the end of 2012) is still insufficient to generate higher incomes. After 2005, the annual average income per household member in Blagoevgrad has been traditionally lower than its counterpart – it was 4,132 BGN in 2013, the average rate being 4,814 BGN concerning Bulgaria.

The annual average unemployment rate of the population aged 15+ reached 13.5% in 2013, Bulgaria's average being 12.9%. It has been for the first time for a decade now that the annual average unemployment rate for Blagoevgrad has been higher than the one in respect of the country. Nonetheless, Blagoevgrad has remained the only district, together with Sofia (capital), since 2010, where the annual average employment rate of the population aged 15+ has been higher than 50%.

As at 31 January 2014, the municipalities of Blagoevgrad District have managed to draw down 127.4 million BGN as beneficiaries under the EU operational programmes. In relation to the rate of utilisation of EU funds per capita, the highest rate has been in the municipalities of Bansko (1,950 BGN per capita) and Gotse Delchev (724 BGN per capita) – the district's average has been 399 BGN per capita and the country's one has been 380 BGN per capita. Less than 100 BGN per capita of the average annual population have been utilised in the municipalities of Satovcha and Hadzhidimovo.

## Taxes and administration

For a second year in a row, Blagoevgrad's local administration has received a lower grade compared to Bulgaria's average in respect of its interaction with local businesses. Businesses graded the criteria Fast Servicing and Appropriate Qualification and Skills of Staff the lowest (2.7/5.0 given the country's average is 3.0/5.0, and 2.9/5.0, given the country's average is 3.2/5.0, respectively). About 37% of companies claim to have used e-services from June 2013 to May 2014. The quality of these services has been consistent with the country's average grade of 3.4 (out of 5.0).

The weighted average 2014 Active Transparency Rating of local government bodies by the 'Access to Information Program' Foundation for the district is 37.1/82.4, the country's average being 44.1/82.4. The municipalities of Bansko and Garmen have received the top grade (63.1 and 51.0 respectively), and the municipalities of Kresna and Belitsa – the lowest (11.8 and 10.2 respectively).

The rates of local taxes and charges in individual municipalities have almost remained the same in 2013 and 2014.

## Infrastructure

The relative share of households with access to the internet in Blagoevgrad District has continued to quickly increase – from 20.8% in 2009 to 60.5% in 2013 – which is the third highest rate in Bulgaria after Sofia (capital) and Plovdiv. The relative share of persons who have used the internet for the past twelve months is about 56%.

By reason of its geographical features, and mostly due to the predominating alpine topography, Blagoevgrad District features the lowest road network density in Bulgaria – just 10.3 km of roads per 100 sq. km of territory. The railway network density has also remained low – 2.5 km per 100 sq. km. In 2013, half of the roads within the district were in good condition, though this share decreased five percentage points compared to 2012.

The completion of the Struma Highway has turned out to be a key project regarding the future infrastructural development of the district. However, the section between Blagoevgrad and Sandanski includes two tunnels that have not been funded yet.

## Demographics

With an annual average population of 319,000 people, Blagoevgrad District ranked sixth in Bulgaria in 2013. The district's age structure is more favourable than the average rate for the country. Blagoevgrad possesses the fifth highest coefficient of demographic replacement after Pazardzhik, Razgrad, Sliven and Targovishte – 69.5% in 2013, Bulgaria's average being 61.5%. This means that there are 69.5 persons aged 15–19 per 100 persons aged 60–64. Blagoevgrad and Sofia were the only districts in 2013 where there were four persons of working age per

individual aged 65+. This is due to the availability of two universities that attract and retain the young longer in the district.

Notwithstanding these good data, some clearly demonstrated negative demographic trends have also available here. The rate of natural increase was minus 2.7‰ in 2013, which has been the most unfavourable value for more than a decade. The net migration rate has also been negative meaning that more people have left the district than have settled.

## Education

Blagoevgrad is one of the districts with the best developed system of educational institutions in Bulgaria featuring good availability of facilities, good enrolment rates, enhancing results at state matriculation exams when finishing secondary education and increasing popularity of local universities.

The district's educational system features a traditionally low relative share of repeaters (just 0.5% in the 2013/2014 school year, 1.0% being the average for the country) and a high net enrolment rate of the population (grades 5th through 8th) (83.5% for the 2013/2014 school year, 79.7% being the country's average). The relative share of dropouts from primary education for the 2012/2013 school year was 1.5% compared to 2.3% for the country. Only Smolyan and Sofia featured lower rates – 0.5% and 0.9% respectively. Pupils' average grades have been higher than Bulgaria's average for the past three years concerning the state matriculation exams.

Although the relative share of the population aged 25-64 with tertiary education has remained lower than the country's average rate, it has continued to grow reaching 18.0% in 2013, being 12.9% in 2007. This is, first of all, due to the continuous influx of students to local universities. 14,800 students studied in the 2013/2014 academic year compared to 13,300 students in 2012/2013 academic year.

## Healthcare

Although the number of beds in multi-profile hospitals for active medical treatment increased to 923 in 2013 compared to 890 beds in 2012, it has remained limited given the numerous population of the district. 84.9% of the district's citizens were health insured persons in 2013, the average for Bulgaria being 86.1%. The trend of quick decreasing of the number of specialists in Internal Medicine has continued. Their number dropped to 36 in 2013, from 72 in 2006. The number of general practitioners and cardiologists has also been lower than Bulgaria's average.

The data from the survey, conducted for the purposes of this research among citizens of the district, confirm this conclusion. From June 2013 to May 2014, 35% of treated people have had to travel out of the district to receive the services they had needed. Almost 90% of the surveyed people stated the lack of specialists in the district as the reason thereof or distrust of a specialist.

## Environment

More than 60% of the district's citizens are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the environmental quality – only the citizens of Smolyan District have evaluated this element of their life higher. Emissions of pollutants into the air have been relatively small due to the favourable geographical location of the district – about 20.8 tonnes of carbon dioxide per sq. km in 2012, the country's average being 346.3 tonnes per sq. km of territory. Given the high share of the population with access to public sewerage systems (77.4% in 2012), the low relative share of connectivity of the sewerage network to waste water treatment plants draws attention – only 26.3% of the population has been connected to such plants, Bulgaria's average being 56.1%.

## Social environment

Blagoevgrad is one of the districts featuring the best indicators for the state of the social environment in Bulgaria. Local citizens are mostly satisfied with their health, education and housing. The predominant part of the district's population (more than 70%) does not wish to change their permanent addresses.

The district features a relatively low crime rate and also good indicators on social inclusion and living conditions. The relative share of the population living below the district's poverty line was the lowest in the country – just 12.4% in 2011, the average being 21.2%. The share of the population living in material deprivation has also decreased for the period 2009–2011, as well as the relative share of the population living in households with

low work intensity. Simultaneously, deterioration of these indicators could be expected in the following years in view of the negative trends on the labour market in 2012 and 2013.

It has been for a fifth consecutive year that the increase in the number of visits to cinemas in the district continued in 2013. 103,000 visits were recorded in 2013, 99,000 were recorded in 2012 and 72,000 in 2009. Local theatres managed to attract 42,000 people in 2013, this figure was 34,000 people in 2012..

## Key indicators for the district of Blagoevgrad

Indicators / year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
GDP per capita (BGN. current prices)	6 032	5 982	6682	n.a.	n.a.
Annual average employment rate of the population aged 15+ (%)	55.4	53.6	52.9	53.1	51.4
Annual average unemployment rate of the population aged 15+ (%)	3.4	5.8	8.4	10.4	13.5
Relative share of people living below the district's poverty line (%)	10.2	14.4	12.4	n.a.	n.a.
Age dependency ratio, 65+ to 15-64 (%)	21.6	22.1	23.5	24.0	24.7
Rate of natural increase (‰)	-0.4	-1.8	-2.1	-2.6	-2.7
Net migration rate (‰)	-2.3	-4.4	-3.2	-4.8	-3.7
Relative share of the population aged 25-64 with tertiary education (%)	15.3	15.9	16.6	17.7	18.0
Percent of failed students at state matriculation exams (%)	5.0	4.4	3.5	5.4	3.8
Average grade at state matriculation exams	4.3	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.3
Share of roads in good condition (%)	n.a.	39.0	56.6	55.0	51.9
Relative share of households with Internet access (%)	20.8	24.3	42.3	54.9	60.5
Share of the population with access to public sewerage systems. connected to WWTP (%)	25.6	25.8	26.3	26.3	n.a.
Health insured persons as share of the population (%)	89.0	86.4	86.6	86.1	84.9
Cases of hospitalization per 1.000 people	133.4	126.6	127.1	159.7	168.6
Average annual income per household member. BGN	3 107	3 077	3 225	3 823	4 132