

# CAFÉ EUROPE

## Breaching Bulgaria's Schengen Wall

Nadezhda Mihaylova and visa-free travel

Kristof Bender 19 February 2009



*Nadezhda Mihaylova. Photo: NATO*

**“When I visited Brussels for the first time it was like the first day in school, when you go and nobody knows you,” recalls Nadezhda Mihaylova, foreign minister in Bulgaria’s reform government from 1997-2001. During this period, Bulgaria achieved visa-free travel to the EU and set the basis for its accession to NATO and the EU.**

**N**adezhda Mihaylova, born in Sofia in 1962, was in her late 20s when the Berlin Wall fell, working as a freelance journalist and a translator of Spanish poetry and English literature. She became spokesperson of the newly formed anti-communist Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) during the 1991 election campaign and subsequently became the spokesperson of Bulgaria’s first non-

communist government from November 1991 until December 1992. Following four years in opposition, with the former communists back in charge, Mihaylova became foreign minister in [Ivan Kostov's](#) reform government, which took over following elections triggered by disastrous mismanagement and Bulgaria's deep crisis of 1996/97. She was 35 at the time.

Against the background of a currency collapse, hyper-inflation and bread queues in the streets of Sofia in the winter of 1996/97, the task facing the Bulgarian government was tremendous.

The foreign ministry Mihaylova took over had not only been run for more than 40 years by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), but had also been dominated throughout the 7 years of transition by the Socialist Party, the direct successor of the BCP.

*"Not being myself a professional diplomat, for the staff of the ministry to accept me as leader was something which in the beginning they couldn't swallow. So I told them: 'This is what I believe Bulgaria needs to do. You declared publicly that there is a national consensus on the European Union and then on NATO. If your party is a part of the national consensus, you have to follow and defend this package.' Officially they couldn't stand against, but they did a lot behind the curtain. However, some of them have changed a lot. And I was able to choose quite a young team of people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, people who might never have had a chance to be on very important positions if they remained part of the old system, and which got a unique opportunity ... It was very interesting to see some of the sons or daughters of former communist functionaries, educated abroad, but at the same time part of the old system, change in front of my eyes. Simply because somewhere deep in their souls there was a very strong wish to see Bulgaria become part of the free world. No matter that they came from communist families."*

At the same time Mihaylova faced the difficult task of convincing her European counterparts that Bulgaria was now serious in its attempts to reform and able to overcome its terrible crisis and protracted failed transition. As an eloquent female politician of a new generation she stood out at meetings of European foreign ministers, the face of a "new Bulgaria" abroad. "I was very blunt in everything what I was saying."

Perhaps her biggest success as Foreign Minister was to convince the European Union to lift the visa requirement for Bulgarian citizens.

From very early on, Bulgaria's strategy was to lobby EU member states to abolish the visa requirement, in place since the early 1990s. Under Prime Minister Ljuben Berov in the early 1990s, the government even appointed a special envoy to make Bulgaria's case on the visa issue in European capitals. The Kostov government changed the approach. The best way forward, it felt, was to ask the European Commission what actually needed to change – and then to convince sceptics by actual change in these areas. Bulgaria improved border management, issued better and safer travel documents. It made the procedures for obtaining a Bulgarian passport more rigid and changed the Bulgarian visa system.

Following these reforms there was still opposition in some member states and the European Commission. One of the most difficult moments in Mihaylova's time as foreign minister was at a meeting with the European Enlargement Commissioner, Gunter Verheugen.

*"It was the night before the last negotiations with Gunter Verheugen. The Prime Minister [[Ivan Kostov](#)] called me very late, around 11 o'clock in the evening. He said: 'Are you ready for tomorrow?' – I said: 'Yes, I am.' – He said: 'Are you sure that you read everything, that you're aware about all the details?' – I said: 'I am ready and I know all the details.' – And then he said: 'You must know that every Bulgarian will watch you tomorrow. And you have a big responsibility.' And I remember that I cried. To feel that the whole of Bulgaria was watching, and if you fail, this would be a big failure, was depressing me. I told him: 'You should not speak with me like this. It is unfair and it is inhuman. I do my best, but no one knows what is going to happen. It does not depend on me.' – And he said: 'It does depend on you.'*

*I slept just for two hours. And the next day I negotiated for six hours. At the fifth hour, I was as far from success as I was in the first hour. And I felt desperate. It was me and my team, Verheugen and his people, reports and dossiers on the table.*

*Then at one point I closed my papers, and I said: 'Okay, I have been here for six hours, and I still cannot understand what is your main concern. Tell me: what is your main concern? And I will address it. But do not keep me like this. It is something which I will not accept. It is humiliating for Bulgaria. I am not going to stay here anymore.'*

*He was taken aback. He looked at me. Then he smiled. He opened his files again, and then, at this moment, I felt that now he was on my side. He said: 'Okay, we will do it again. I will tell you what you need to do.'*

*I will help you do it. And I will convince those member states which are not convinced.’ And the next two, three months, we did everything.*

*This particular conversation between me and him was the turning point for the abolishment of the visas. We went outside to give a press conference – he was a different person, I’ve never seen him like this. Every time when he was saying something he was turning his head to me. He was marvellous. And he helped Bulgaria a lot.”*

Finally, the EU lifted the visa requirement for Bulgarian citizens in April 2001.

Despite an impressive sequence of reforms, and the launch of EU accession negotiations in 2000, the Kostov government lost the national elections in 2001. Unemployment had risen to 18 percent in 2001 (before falling in the years to follow). The government’s reputation had also been sullied by allegations of corruption and by receiving party financing from dubious sources.

However, the Kostov government had succeeded in putting Bulgaria, almost a European pariah in 1996 and on the verge of breaking off relations even with international financial institutions, on track for both EU and NATO membership.

*“I think that in a political life of every country, there are certain moments when you make processes irreversible ... The Socialists always declared that they were in favour of Bulgaria to join the European Union, but they were not ready to share the responsibilities. That is why I and people in Bulgaria had a lot of doubts about their real commitment towards the European Union. And in the case with NATO they were openly opposed.*

*This changed first of all when the European Union abolished the visa regime and Bulgarians saw the results of the increase in trust ... Then, when we were moving closer and closer and then became members of NATO, this was another step forward. And finally we joined the European Union.*

*You know, when Bulgaria joined NATO, I was asked whether I do not regret that I am not the foreign minister who, after doing so much for Bulgarian NATO membership, puts her signature on the treaty. People asked me: ‘What did you feel when you saw that a former communist signed the treaty? Did you feel disappointed or sad?’ I responded: ‘No, I felt relief, because everybody knows that I am in favour of NATO, but when I am able to make a former communist sign the treaty with NATO, I feel secure that my country will not step back, that the process*

*is irreversible.' And this was the moment when we knew that we could not turn back."*

In February 1999, Mihaylova was elected as one of the vice-presidents of the European People's Party. After Ivan Kostov resigned from the UDF leadership after the electoral defeat of 2001, she was elected party president in March 2002. Mihaylova held this position until 2005. She resigned following the 2005 elections, in which her party obtained only 8.4 percent of the votes. ■