

## The Deaf of Bulgaria The Bulgarian Sign Language Community



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Deaf education was in existence in Bulgaria in 1898. Bulgarian Sign Language has its roots in Russian Sign Language, which was first introduced to the country approximately 10 years later. Sign language was allowed in the classroom by 1945.

In 2013 Deaflympics were held in Sofia, Bulgaria. This event brought many Deaf people from around the world to the country, and increased the awareness among many Bulgarians of Deaf culture and sign language.

As a Deaf population within a hearing one, the Bulgarian Deaf struggle from the same things that most Deaf globally do:

- Most are born to hearing parents, but do not usually learn language or values from them. They often lack anything more than basic communication skills with family members.
- Their difficulty is not the inability to hear, but the great barrier to communicating with the surrounding dominant culture, especially acquiring information.

In addition there are some things specific to Bulgaria:

- At present there are three boarding schools in Bulgaria for the Deaf. These schools utilize “oral methods,” emphasizing speaking/voicing Bulgarian and understanding written Bulgarian while downplaying the use of Bulgarian Sign Language (if it is allowed at all in the schools).
- The concepts of “Deaf culture,” “Deaf community,” etc., are fairly well established in North America and western Europe, but are relatively new concepts in Bulgaria, particularly among hearing Bulgarians. Bulgarian Sign Language is not officially recognized as a minority language by the Bulgarian government.
- Because of the lack of recognition or protection by the government for the Deaf as a linguistic and cultural group, obtaining support services, such as adequately trained and certified interpreters, is a struggle for the Deaf of Bulgaria.

**Primary Religion:**

Non-religious

**Disciples (Matt 28:19):**

Less than 2%

**Churches:**

A Few

**Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):**

No Scripture

**Population (date):**

30 - 40,000 (2015 estimate)



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### **Have They Heard the Gospel?**

#### **Response to the Gospel**

Among the Deaf, the number of Christians is very low (though no specific demographic data is available). Many Deaf may attend church, but due to the linguistic barriers, they do not learn very much, if anything, from their attendance of religious services or from family life. They lack access to the information to make informed religious decisions.

#### **Christian Congregations Serving Group**

Typically Deaf Christian groups in Bulgaria are associated with hearing churches. Many meet in hearing services that provide interpretation. There are some small Deaf groups who meet by themselves.

#### **Do They Have the Word of God Translated?**

No, no part of the Bible has been video-recorded in Bulgarian Sign Language.

#### **Any Hindrances to Scripture Distribution?**

##### Literacy Rate

We have no estimates of the literacy rate for Bulgarian Deaf, but we consider that it is quite low, given the low literacy rate among the Deaf worldwide.

#### **What Other Forms of Gospel Presentations are Available?**

Recordings

At this point there are none of these resources in Bulgarian Sign Language

Literature

None available

Films/videos

Only in Bulgarian

Radio

No

None available

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## **Group Description**

### **Population**

Comment

When we speak about Deaf people as opposed to deaf people, we're making the distinction of, among other things, their language of preference. Simply stated, Deaf people identify with the Deaf culture and use that signed language; deaf people do not and prefer to use the spoken language. Estimating the population of a Deaf community is difficult. Quite honestly, no one knows how many Deaf there are in a given country. However, some generalities seem to hold true. In 1st world nations (like the US) 1-2 people in 1000 are Deaf; in those nations that are considered "2nd world", 3-4 people per 1000 are Deaf; in 3rd world nations, the numbers are much higher: 6-8 people per 1000 are Deaf. Again, this is an estimation only. There is absolutely no quantifiable documentation to support these numbers. But, they are the best we know.

As implied, the estimated number of deaf is always larger than the number of those who learn sign language and become part of the Deaf community. Some become deaf late in life. Some children's parents do not have the funds to send their child to a deaf school and some of these children never encounter others with whom to communicate. Almost all deaf children are born to hearing parents. Instead these children grow and work at home where they use gestures and sounds but do not have a true language. The number of these is unknown.

### **Geography & Environment**

Location

Bulgarian Deaf populations are spread throughout Bulgaria. Bulgaria lies in the eastern Balkan Peninsula, surrounded by Greece and Turkey to the south, Macedonia and Serbia to the west, and Romania to the north. Bulgaria has several mountainous regions, and the land flattens out into plains, broadening as one proceeds east to the Black Sea coastline.

Climate

Although Bulgaria is not a large country (it ranks 105<sup>th</sup> in geographic size), it has large temperature variations. The record high in Bulgaria is 113.4°F or 45.2°C, and the record low is -36.9°F or -38.3°C.

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### **Language/Linguistic/Literacy**

Primary Language

Bulgarian Sign Language

Comment

Bulgarian Sign Language, the heart language of the Bulgarian Deaf, is thought to be descended from Russian Sign Language (though is distinct from it). Russian Sign Language was introduced to Bulgaria in 1910, and was permitted in Bulgarian Deaf primary schools in 1945.

Attitude towards mother tongue

Very receptive

Monolingual

Unknown, but probably most. Ability to lip read or read Bulgarian is limited.

Second Languages

Bulgarian

Linguistically related

Unknown; perhaps Russian sign or perhaps a cluster with Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, and Polish Sign

Adult Literacy

Less than 20%

Literacy Attitude

It is especially difficult for the Deaf to learn to read and write, but in many cases it is their most viable method of communication with the hearing world and therefore a necessity.

### **Economics**

Bulgaria has an emerging market economy. The country moved from a primarily agricultural economy in the mid-1940s to an industrial economy with a thriving scientific and technological research component by the 1980s. (Currently out of the 2.45 million people in the Bulgarian labor force, only 7.1% are employed in agriculture, while 35.2% are employed in industry and 57.7% are employed in services.) At the same time, individual average income in Bulgaria remains one of the lowest in the European Union; more than one-fifth of the labor force are employed at minimum wage. General unemployment in the country has held above 12% over the last several years.

Occupation:

In the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades, Deaf schools typically offer training in industrial trades, including tailoring, carpentry, and culinary arts. The Deaf are typically underemployed or unemployed at a rate far above the hearing equivalents. This often causes a migration of the Deaf toward urban environments, both for job opportunities as well as fellowship with other Deaf.

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### **Society**

#### Neighbor Relations

Because of the linguistic barriers between the Deaf and hearing (the vast majority of the Deaf struggle with spoken/written language, and most hearing people do not know how to sign), the Deaf often remain culturally isolated from the hearing. Deaf individuals are born into hearing households, and thereby are involved in hearing culture, but there is a lot of difficulty with obtaining information or communicating. Skilled interpreters are in short supply in Bulgaria, so it is often difficult for the Deaf to communicate well with the hearing in official capacities.

The hearing view of the Deaf is generally that they are a broken people who need to be fixed, rather than a sociolinguistic culture that needs to be recognized and empowered. Oppression and discrimination are still very real in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian Sign Language is not recognized by the government, so the majority hearing culture does not have a large awareness of Deaf culture, sign language, or the need for empowering the Deaf.

#### Social Habits/Groupings

The Deaf tend to move to cities, especially those where schools for the deaf are located, because they can both find work there and find a community of other Deaf with whom they identify and can socialize.

Most Deaf live for “today.” Many fall into sexual immorality as well as drugs, alcohol, gangs, and stealing to survive.

### **Education/Youth**

#### Language of Instruction

Schools utilize oral methods, emphasizing speaking/voicing the Bulgarian hearing language and learning written Bulgarian, which comes at the expense of learning Bulgarian Sign Language.

#### Language of Textbooks

Only Bulgarian

#### Greatest Needs

If government policy could shift so that students could be taught using sign language, deaf students could be much better educated. Teacher training would then be needed. Materials such as textbooks and visual aids would be helpful.

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### **Religion**

Bulgaria has officially been a Christian country ever since Christianity was adopted as the country's official religion in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The dominant religion of the country is Eastern Orthodox Christianity (Bulgarian Orthodox Church), estimated to constitute 59.4% of the population in the 2011 Bulgarian census. About 21.8% did not declare a religion in this census. 9.3% claimed to be atheists, and 7.8% claimed to be Muslim. Protestants, Catholics, and others hold less than 1% each of the population.

Among the Deaf, the number of Christians is very low (though no specific demographic data is available). Many Deaf may attend church, but due to the linguistic barriers, they do not learn very much, if anything, from their attendance of religious services or from family life. They lack access to the information to make informed religious decisions.

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### **Status of Christianity**

#### **Church Growth**

Reached Classification	Unreached.
Total Believers	An estimated less than 2%. There are Deaf Christians, most of whom attend the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. However, many would struggle to articulate much at all about their faith.
Pastors	No Deaf pastors
Churches	Typically Deaf Christian groups in Bulgaria are associated with hearing churches. Many meet in hearing services that provide interpretation. Due to the linguistic barriers, they do not learn very much, if anything, from their attendance of religious services or from family life. They lack access to the information to make informed religious decisions.  There are some small Deaf groups who meet by themselves.

#### **History of Christianity in Group**

Year Began	Christianity in Bulgaria has its roots in the Balkan areas in the first century.
By Whom	The work of the Apostle Paul
Significant Events	It was formally established in the 9 <sup>th</sup> century under the First Bulgarian Empire of Boris I. This led to the centrality of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the religious life of the country for the centuries to follow.  While Christianity has existed for centuries among the hearing in Bulgaria, purposeful church-planting work among the Bulgarian Deaf has only recently begun (within the past few years). This includes the work that DOOR has done in training Deaf leaders. There is much need of this work to continue and be strengthened, both in terms of Scripture resources and training of personnel.

#### **Scripture**

Translation Status	Planned
Available Scripture:	None in sign language
Available Form	Printed in Bulgarian, but only a very, very few Deaf can read Bulgarian.

#### **Missions/Churches Working Among**

Organization #1 DOOR International