

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Bulgaria

Population: 6.92 millions (#103 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 110,879 square km. Located in Southeastern Europe, Bulgaria borders Romania, Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and the Black Sea. The Danube River forms the Romanian border. Mountains cover most areas, with some lowlands and plains in northern and southeastern areas. The climate is temperate with cold, wet winters and dry, hot summers. Earthquakes and landslides are natural hazards. Environmental issues include air and water pollution, deforestation, and soil contamination. Bulgaria is divided into twenty-eight administrative provinces.

Peoples

Bulgarian: 76.9%

Turk: 8.0%

Roma: 4.4%

Other: 0.7%

Unknown: 10%

Bulgarians constitute the largest ethnic group and populate most areas. Turks are concentrated along the Greek and Turkish borders. Bulgaria has the highest percentage of Roma of any European nation.[1] Roma live throughout the country, with the highest concentrations in Sliven and the northwest. Other ethnic groups include Macedonians, Armenians, Tatars, and Circassians. Bulgaria has reported negative population growth rates since the late 1980s when the population reached an all-time high of nine million people.

Population: 7,057,504 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.63% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.47 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 71.5 male, 78.3 female (2018)

Languages: Bulgarian (87.3%), Turkish (8.6%), Roma (4.0%), other (0.1%). Bulgarian is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (6.2 million).

Literacy: 98.4% (2015)

History

Various ancient peoples, including the Thracians, Macedonians, Greeks, and Romans ruled the region in antiquity. Modern-day Bulgarians trace their roots to the Turkic Bulgars, which settled Bulgaria from Central Asia. Intermixing with the indigenous Slavic tribes was followed by the establishment of the first Bulgarian nation in the late 600s. The Byzantine Empire exerted influence in the region, which came under Ottoman control in the fourteenth century. In 1878, northern Bulgaria gained autonomy, and the nation as a whole achieved independence in 1908 from the Ottoman Empire. Both world wars took a heavy toll on Bulgaria, which became a communist nation in 1946. In 1990, communist rule came to an end with democratic elections. Rapid change to a free-market economy occurred in the 1990s and 2000s. Bulgaria became a member of NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007.

Culture

Bulgaria boasts a rich history of art and ancient artifacts from the various civilizations that ruled the region. The Cyrillic alphabet traces its origins to Bulgaria during the ninth century AD and is in use in modified forms throughout much of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. A legacy of athletics and competitive sports includes wrestling, weight-lifting, volleyball, football, and tennis. Bulgaria produces fine wines that are consumed worldwide. Cuisine shares much in common with other nations in the Balkans and Southeast Europe. Folk music is played with instruments common in the region. Tobacco and alcohol consumption rates are higher than the world average.

Economy

GDP per capita: $21,800 (2017) [36.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.813 (2017)

Corruption Index: 43 (2017)

Bulgaria has taken significant steps towards becoming a free-market economy and integrating with Europe as a whole. Steady economic growth has occurred since the mid-2010s although corruption, organized crime, low productivity, and dependence on Russian imports to meet energy needs pose barriers for greater growth. Services account for two-thirds of the workforce and GDP, whereas industry comprises most of the remaining one-third of the workforce and GDP. Primary industries include electricity, gas, water, food products, and mining. Vegetables, fruit, tobacco, and wine are major agricultural products. Primary trade partners include Germany, Russia, Italy, Romania, and Turkey. Bulgaria’s strategic geographic location provides abundant trade opportunities and carries importance as a link between Asia and Europe.

Corruption ranks among the highest in the European Union albeit perceived corruption has slightly improved in the past decade. Organized crime and accusations of corruption among public officials continue to deter economic growth and stability.

Faiths

Christian: 84.1%

Muslim: 10%

Other/Unspecified/None: 5.9%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Bulgarian Orthodox – 6,220,000

Evangelical – 145,536

Catholic – 40,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 7,098 – 242

Latter-day Saints 2,296 12

Jehovah's Witnesses – 2,475 – 56

Religion

Most Bulgarians are Orthodox Christians, approximately half of whom are religiously active. Catholics are concentrated in Plovdiv and have high rates of church participation with as many as 90% attending worship services regularly. Muslims are primarily ethnic Turks found in areas bordering Greece and Turkey. Areas with the highest percentages of Roma tend to have the greatest percentages of Protestants nationwide.[2] Orthodox Christians constitute 80% of the urban population and 62% of the rural population, whereas Muslims constitute 4% of the urban population and 25% of the rural population.[3]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is typically upheld by the government for registered religious groups. The government recognizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the traditional religion. Religious groups may meet and worship without government registration although unregistered religious groups are not granted special privileges reserved for registered groups such as government funding or the right to own property. Political parties are not allowed to have religious ties. Issues with government upholding religious freedom focus on the failure to prosecute those who harass individuals based on religious affiliation. For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints have experienced increased persecution and harassment for more than a decade and this mistreatment has appeared to escalate within the late 2010s.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 75% (2018)

Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Ruse, Stara Zagora, **Pleven, Sliven, Dobrich, Shumen.**

Cities listed in **bold** do not have an official branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Six of the ten most populous cities have a Church congregation. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of the national population lives in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

Elder Russell M Nelson and Elder Hans B. Ringger visited government officials in Sofia in October 1988 and again in February 1990. During the second official Church visit to the country, Elder Nelson dedicated Bulgaria for missionary work and asked the government what the Church could do to help the people of Bulgaria. The government indicated that sending English teachers would be most beneficial.[5] Bulgaria pertained to the Austria Vienna East Mission in the late 1980s prior to the start of missionary work.

Missionaries initially taught English instead of engaging in proselytism. In November 1990, the first proselytizing missionaries arrived and baptized the first six converts later that month. These missionaries did not wear name tags, did not openly proselyte, and worked only through member or investigator referrals.[6] The Bulgaria Sofia Mission was organized in 1991 with Kiril P. Kiriakov—a native Bulgarian living in the United States—called as mission president.[7] Seminary and institute began in 1994. By 1999, convert baptisms among relatives of Church members led to the first known instance of a four-generation Bulgarian Latter-day Saint member family being established.[8] In 2000, Bulgaria became part of the Europe East Area.[9] In addition to Bulgaria, the Bulgaria Sofia Mission also administered Serbia for a period in the late 1990s and early 2000s before mission administration for Serbia was transferred to the Slovenia Ljubljana Mission. In 2007, the mission president met with Bulgarian Councilor of Religious Affairs to discuss the Church's activities.[10] In the early 2010s, the Bulgaria Sofia Mission oversaw missionary activities in Turkey until the organization of the Central Eurasian Mission in 2015. In 2018, the Church announced the closure of the Bulgaria Sofia Mission and the reassignment of Bulgaria to the realigned Central Eurasian Mission (renamed Bulgaria/Central Eurasian Mission). Mission headquarters were announced to be maintained in Sofia following the removal of all

volunteers from Turkey in April of 2018.[11]

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 2,418 (2017)

There were only four members in Bulgaria when missionaries who taught English first arrived in 1990.[12] In May 1991, there were about fifty members living primarily in Sofia.[13] There were six baptisms in 1990, 147 baptisms in 1991, and 167 baptisms during the first nine months of 1992.[14]

During the early 1990s, membership grew rapidly from 320 in 1992 to approximately 800 in 1994.[15] Membership totaled 1,100 in late 1997. The Church began to experience greater membership growth outside the largest cities. For instance, there were fifty-six members in the Pazardjik Branch by 1999.[16] By year-end 2000, there were 1,587 members nationwide.

Annual membership growth rates slowed dramatically in the 2000s from over 9% in 2001 and 2002 to less than 1.5% for years between 2006 and 2009. Membership totaled 2,022 in 2004, 2,115 in 2006, and 2,206 in 2010. Stagnant membership growth occurred for most years in the 2010s as membership totaled 2,402 in 2013 and 2,429 in 2016. High emigration rates have reduced Church membership, as by 2000 about half of Bulgarians who joined the Church had emigrated from Bulgaria. Similar challenges with member emigration appeared to continue in the 2000s and 2010s.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 7 (2018)

There were four branches in Bulgaria in 1992 – all of which operated in Sofia. There were also two member groups at the time that met in Plovdiv and Smolyan. By early 1994, the Church had eight branches in Sofia organized into two districts and one branch each in Plovdiv and Smolyan.[17] By the mid-1990s, branches were created in Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Dobrich, Ruse, Shumen, Varna, and Veliko Turnovo.[18]

In 2000, there were fourteen branches and two districts in Sofia and Plovdiv. The number of branches increased to nineteen in 2002 and to twenty-one in 2006. Additional cities received their first branches, including Pleven, Stara Zagora, Khaskovo, Pazardzhik, Pernik, Sliven, and Yambol.

The Church has steadily closed most of its branches in Bulgaria since the late 2000s. The number of branches declined from twenty-one in 2007 to twenty in 2008, thirteen in 2010, ten in 2011, nine in 2013, and seven in 2018.

In the first half of 2010 six branches in Dobrich, Khaskovo, Pernik, Shumen, Veliko Turnovo, and Yambol were discontinued and became groups. The Area Presidency discontinued branches with fewer than fifteen people attending church weekly and advised the mission to pull missionaries from these cities due to their poor productivity. In 2011, the Church closed both districts in Sofia and Plovdiv. Additional branches closed included the Bulgaria Sofia Mission Branch, Pazardjik (2011), Mladost (2011), Sofia 2nd (2013), Sliven (2018), and Pleven (2018). Some cities that previously had branches may continue to have member groups supervised by the nearest branch.

Activity and Retention

President Neuenschwander spoke to 230 people at a fireside.[19] Quick baptism tactics and unsustainable membership growth in the early 1990s led to inactivity issues. Several cities had fewer than 15% of total membership actively attending church. President Gary Stephens served as the mission president of the Bulgaria Sofia Mission between 1997 and 2000 and greatly improved member activity while continuing convert baptisms and improving retention. Active Bulgarian membership accounted for as many as 65% of membership in 2000 (approximately 1,000 people), achieving one of the highest activity rates worldwide at the time.

Over one hundred youth attended the first youth conference in 1999.[20] In recent years, youth and single adult conference have been held regularly.[21] Seventy-one were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. In 2005, over 700 attended a presentation on the Church to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Joseph Smith in Sofia.[22] One hundred attended a conference for six branches in eastern Bulgaria commemorating the establishment of religious freedom in Bulgaria in 2006.[23] In 2010, most branches appear to have between thirty and sixty active members.

Small congregations with few active members are not concentrated in one area of Bulgaria. Thirty attended church meetings in Sliven in late 2009. In early 2010, approximately thirty members attended church weekly in Mladost Branch in Sofia. Pleven once had around thirty active members, but in late 2008 had less than ten. In late 2008, Pernik was one of the smallest

branches with four active members, and Yambol had fewer than ten attending church meetings. The average number of members per branch increased from 101 in 2002 to 108 in 2009, 230 in 2012, and 269 in 2017.

In the mid-2010s, average church attendance was as follows for the following branches or member groups per returned missionary reports: Sofia (80), Plovdiv (30), Sliven (20), Stara Zagora (20), Blagoevgrad (10), Haskovo (10), Pleven (10), Ruse (5), Veliko Tarnovo (5), and Yambol (5). Returned missionaries in the mid to late 2010s reported that approximately two-third of new converts remained active one-year after baptism. However, very few converts joined the Church during this time period. Approximately thirty attended a nationwide youth conference in 2018. Many members have appeared to emigrate and the whereabouts of most inactive members who have left the country are unknown. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 200-250, or 10% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Bulgarian, Turkish.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures are available in Bulgarian. Only the Book of Mormon has been translated into Turkish although plans were announced in 2017 to translate the remainder of Latter-day Saint scripture into Turkish.[24] Many unit, temple, priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, and family history materials are available in Bulgarian and Turkish. Several CES manuals are available in Bulgarian. The Liahona has four Bulgarian issues a year.

Meetinghouses

The Church completed the first church-built meetinghouse in Bulgaria in 2000 in Sofia. The new meetinghouse brought increased media and government exposure to the Church.[25] Most congregations meet in rented spaces or renovated buildings.

Humanitarian and Development Work

In 1993, the Church sent many doctors and physicians to Bulgaria to train medical personnel. The Church also provided educational training to school administrators. Donations to schools for the mentally handicapped occurred the same year.[26] Church members started a foundation named One Heart, which donated nutritious foods to Bulgarian orphanages in 2003.[27] In 2007, the Church donated equipment to a hospital in Plovdiv used to diagnose brain and cranial conditions.[28] The Church has conducted a total of 310 humanitarian and development projects in Bulgaria since 1985, including seventeen projects in 2017.[29]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church is registered with the government but experiences regional restrictions and some persecution. Major improvements in public relations occurred in the late 1990s. However, the media has produced many negative news stories about the Church in recent years. In 2007, humanitarian missionaries met with the mayor of central Sofia and provided information about the Church and its operations in Bulgaria.[30] In 2008, an Orthodox priest in Burgas requested the government to expel two Latter-day Saint missionaries who he accused of interrupting an Orthodox Church service by entering and distributing religious literature. Missionaries declared that they were invited to attend the service and left when they realized they were unwelcome. The government did not take any action, but the incident resulted in many negative media reports internationally.[31]

In the late 2000s, missionaries were prohibited from proselytism and distributing literature in Ruse and Varna. The Church complained to the national government concerning harsh treatment of missionaries in Pleven and Plovdiv. A letter was received from the government reinforcing its obligation to protect religious freedom but did not address the specific situation. Acts of vandalism occurred at some meetinghouses. In June 2009, LDS missionaries were beaten by a group of youth, and the police investigated the incident.[32] The Church has attempted to address issues regarding religious freedom and the Church's right to proselyte by developing positive relations with local and national government through visitations and education about the Church. In 2017, there were twenty-two reported instances of harassment or physical assault of full-time missionaries in Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Pleven, Sliven, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, Plovdiv, and Sofia. Persecution of missionaries and the Church has significantly escalated in the 2010s and may result in proselytism restrictions imposed by the Church to better protect missionaries and members.

Cultural Issues

The Church previously reported success in growing membership in the 1990s and 2000s despite the strong historical tradition of Orthodox Christianity for centuries and communist rule for four decades. Increased secularism resulting from recent economic reforms may be partially responsible for low increases in membership over the past several years albeit the emigration of active members appears primarily responsible for the Church's decline in Bulgaria in the 2010s. Many Orthodox Christians hold negative views and misconceptions of the Church, which have been perpetuated by local government and the media. Bulgarians tend to be more religiously active than citizens of many nations in the European Union, suggesting that once negative views and false information about the Church are dispelled, greater membership growth and activity may occur. Because of high cigarette consumption rates, potential converts frequently struggle to completely end their cigarette addictions prior to baptism. Converts who do not fully overcome substance addictions before baptism experience high rates of relapse and inactivity.

National Outreach

The Church used to maintain some of the most reaching national outreach in Southeastern Europe in Bulgaria, as cities with congregations used to account for 44% of the national population in the late 2000s. However, at year-end 2018 only 35% of the population lived in the seven cities with an official branch. The population living in medium-sized and smaller cities has never been reached by formal proselytism efforts. The approximately fifty cities with between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants do not have a congregation.

Low receptivity to full-time missionaries and a lack of member-missionary efforts in many areas has reduced mission outreach over the past few years. It is difficult for Church leaders to assign greater numbers of missionaries to Bulgaria, as the size of the worldwide missionary force has maintained only slight increases while opportunities for missionary work have grown. Expanding national outreach to additional cities will depend on members' initiative for member-missionary work and on leadership for congregations in established church centers to reduce the demands on full-time missionaries to free up additional manpower.

The Church has an Internet site in Bulgarian at https://www.lds.bg/. The website profiles information about the Church and its presence in Bulgaria, including contact information for local Church leaders. However, there remains no Bulgarian translation of its official website for those interested in learning more about the Church at Mormon.org. Implementation of cottage meetings in member homes, the distribution of religious materials, and informing contacted individuals about the Bulgarian lds.org website can improve national outreach without sacrificing missionary manpower. Church internet campaigns designed at change societal attitudes of the Church may also be productive and helpful to correct misinformation.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Limited gospel teaching and quick baptism tactics of full-time missionaries in the early 1990s fueled significant inactivity after only a few years of missionary presence. Reactivation efforts were fruitful in the late 1990s, but little progress was made in the 2000s and unprecedented decline occurred in the 2010s. In some cities, new converts have struggled to integrate into congregations, and many have become inactive. Threats of persecution and ostracism have likely deterred some from joining the Church or attending church meetings regularly. Ambitions were high among many for a stake to be established in Sofia during the 2000s, but these efforts were frustrated due to low member activity, inadequate numbers of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and the slowdown in membership growth. Few active members in many branches in the late 2000s and 2010s prompted the mass consolidation of two-thirds of the Church's branches and the closure of both member districts.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnic integration issues have not been reported in Bulgaria. Some members in Bulgaria are Armenian.[33] Non-Bulgarians do not appear to have challenges integrating into congregations with any more difficulty than new Bulgarian converts. There remain no organized or concentrated mission efforts among the Roma people, who have been more receptive to Christian missionary efforts than in many other European nations. Turkish Bulgarians have received some language-specific outreach since missionary activity began in Turkey in the early 2010s although these efforts have lacked consistency and vision to yield any long-term results.

Language Issues

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and many Church materials are available in Bulgarian, allowing for outreach among all but a small subset of the population, primarily Roma or foreigners speaking languages with no Church materials translated. There appears to be no consistent outreach among Turkish speakers.

Missionary Service

By May 1991, ten elders, four sisters, and two couples were serving as missionaries in Bulgaria.[34] Missionaries serving in Bulgaria grew to seventy in 2009 and dropped to fifty the following year. The first native Bulgarian missionaries since the fall of communism began serving in 1992. Twenty Bulgarian missionaries were serving primarily in Europe by mid-2000.[35] Bulgaria remains dependent on foreign missionaries to staff its national missionary force. Few native members serve missions at

present.

Leadership

Overreliance on full-time missionaries continues to challenge local members' ability to staff needed leadership to allow congregations to run smoothly. At least half the branches had native branch presidents in 2010. Few active members capable of holding leadership positions contributed to the Church's decision to close most its branches in the 2010s. There is a great need for more Bulgarian youth to join the Church and serve faithfully to ensure leadership for the future. In 2018, all seven remaining branches were led by native branch presidents. There are no realistic prospects for the establishment of a stake albeit the formation of districts may be likely if active members who serve in leadership positions remain in Bulgaria and do not emigrate elsewhere.

Temple

Bulgaria pertains to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. By 1996, there were 138 endowed members. Temple trips occur regularly and have in the past included members in neighboring countries like Romania. Travel to the temple is costly and time consuming, requiring significant sacrifice from members.

Comparative Growth

Church growth in Bulgaria shares many characteristics with Romania, as both have had a Church presence for nearly three decades, similarly-sized memberships, and comparable membership growth trends. With the exception of Albania, Bulgaria is the country with the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints on Church records among countries in Southeastern Europe. However, as of the late 2010s, the Church in Bulgaria reported the lowest member activity rate of any Eastern European nation at a mere 10% of total church membership. Furthermore, no other nation in the world has reported as dramatic of decline in the number of congregations during the past decade as Bulgaria considering two-thirds of branches have closed. Bulgaria is the country with the most members without a stake or district. Perhaps no other country in the world has reported as major problems as Bulgaria in regards to member emigration that has negatively impacted church growth trends among countries without a sizable foreign membership base.

Many Christian denominations reported slow growth starting in the 2000s. Seventh-Day Adventists have reported no increase in membership since 2002, and have experienced a 7% decrease in membership during the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses experienced modest increases in membership and congregational growth. Both Adventists and Witnesses maintain a significantly larger presence in Bulgaria compared to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Future Prospects

A shrinking full-time missionary force, the closure of two-thirds of the Church's branches in the past decade, and the loss of active members to emigration continue to challenge the scope and vision of Latter-day Saint missionary operations in Bulgaria. At this point, it would take considerable resources, vision, and manpower for the Church resume its previous level of outreach extended at its zenith of missionary operations in the mid- to late 2000s. Increasing materialism, negative views of the Church, and persecution have lessened the receptivity of many and will continue to present challenges despite good improvements in convert retention reported in the past few years. Long-term growth consisting of expanding national outreach, improving self-sufficiency of local membership and leadership, and increasing missionary service and active membership will require wise placement of limited mission resources as well as policies and practices directed toward these ends. The Church may reestablish a district in the foreseeable future as long as active membership stabilizes and there are sufficient numbers of church leaders to warrant the operation of a district again in the country.

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