

Introduction

Bulgaria's striking, rugged shorelines, wooded hills, majestic mountains, thriving vineyards and lush orchards obscure the face of a people recovering from years of political turbulence and intrigue. A country abundant in agricultural wealth, ancient beauty and thermal and mineral waters, Bulgaria's rich potential is being rediscovered after 45 years of Communist rule.



History

In the late 7th century the Bulgars, a central Asian Turkic tribe, merged with the local Slavic and Thracian population to form the first Bulgarian state. Four centuries later the Bulgarian state fell to Byzantine. But the Byzantine Empire only lasted until the 14th century when Ottoman Turks took power and remained in control until the 1800s. To this day many Bulgarians are distrusting of Turks and Muslims.

During both World Wars Bulgaria supported Germany, but by the Second World War, resistance to German occupation, led by Communists, resulted in the country being declared a People's Republic, the abolition of the monarchy and the Bulgarian Communist Party's takeover of the government.

Forty-five years later Communism ended on 10 November 1989. The following years brought many changes including Bulgaria's first democratically elected president, the adoption of a new constitution and the restoration of political parties. The changes have been difficult for Bulgarians with the country being split between those wanting reform and political change, and those urging caution. Bulgaria's former king, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, was elected as prime minister in 2002 and was the first ex-monarch in post-Communist eastern Europe to return to power. However, leading a country desperate for stability and suffering under economic pressure was not easy and in the 2005 elections the Socialist Party won by a small margin.

The country faces numerous challenges; however, despite these challenges Bulgaria's democratization and reforms have helped it achieve NATO membership in 2004 and of EU membership in January 2007.

Current challenges

- ▶ Many Bulgarians believe that their politicians are primarily interested in securing special privileges for themselves and their friends. Corruption remains a major problem.
- ▶ Despite the country experiencing sustained economic growth pockets of poverty exist throughout Bulgaria, particularly amongst the Roma and other minority groups.
- ▶ A complex bureaucracy, a remnant of Communism, has meant that bringing about change or even accomplishing basic administration is complicated and time-consuming. In addition, the judiciary system is weak and in need of major reform. Also, there is a need for modernisation of education and health services and strengthening of local government.

BMS involvement in Bulgaria

BMS World Mission entered into a partnership with the Bulgarian Baptist Union in March 1993. During that time help has also been given through BMS relief grants. The first ever Action Team went to Bulgaria in 2005. BMS currently has one couple working in Bulgaria involved in the following project:

Church planting in Sofia

Mark and Penny O'Sullivan are BMS personnel working at a Baptist church. Their work includes pastoral care, youth work and helping in the mission of the Baptist church.

Background Information

The land

Bulgaria borders the Black Sea and is situated in south eastern Europe between Romania and Turkey. The country is traversed from east to west by the Balkan Mountain ranges, dividing Bulgaria into four distinct areas: the fertile Danube plains in the north, the lowlands of the Rhodope Mountain

slopes in the south west, and the Thracian plains which lie south of the Balkans and east of the Rhodope Mountains. Bulgaria is strategically located near the Turkish Straits and controls key land routes from Europe to the Middle East and Asia.

For a country of its size (only 42,800 sq miles) Bulgaria has an extremely varied landscape, ranging from large plains and lowlands, to low and high mountains, valleys, lakes, gorges and miles of sandy beaches. Just as varied is Bulgaria's climate, which is mostly temperate continental with four distinct seasons and a Mediterranean climate in the south.

Water and air pollution, deforestation, soil contamination and acid rain are major problems. The Black Sea is highly polluted and 25 per cent of the country's woodland is affected by air pollution.

Religion

Sometimes referred to as the land of monasteries, Bulgaria has a rich history of Christian influence. In 864 the Constantinople Patriarchate sent Byzantine clerics to Bulgaria, and Prince Boris and leading members of Bulgaria's foremost families secretly became Christians. Their adoption of Christianity had a huge influence on Bulgarian culture and identity.

During the Communist years, Christians were persecuted and many Orthodox and Protestant Christian leaders were forced to compromise their faith. Today, the Church is still recovering from Communism's influence. With a new constitution that proclaims religious freedom for all denominations there has been growth in all parts of the Church. Orthodox Christianity has welcomed back many non-religious and atheist Bulgarians and evangelicals have more than doubled their numbers. Evangelistic meetings have had a great impact amongst the Slavic people and also in the Turkish community. While there are growing churches there is a lack of trained leaders. There continues to be some tension between the Orthodox, Protestant and Pentecostal churches.

The Muslim population is around 12 per cent and is particularly strong near the Turkish border area. While now protected by law they are still held in suspicion by some who continue to see their historic connection with Ottoman rule.

The Baptist Union of Bulgaria has about 75 congregations and a membership of 4,500.

Prayer points

- ▶ Give thanks that joining the EU has seen economic growth, low inflation and unemployment fall from highs of nearly 20 percent. Despite this, the standard of living remains low. Pray for the people of Bulgaria to experience both spiritual and economic growth.
- ▶ Give thanks for what God is doing amongst the Roma minority. Many are coming to know Christ. The Roma continue to face serious financial and social problems. Pray for the Roma to know the fullness of God expressed in every aspect of their lives.
- ▶ Bulgaria is often described as a land at the crossroads. Bulgarians face the difficult task of saying goodbye to the old and embracing the new. Bulgaria's Communist history continues to have a strong influence on the present day. Pray for the people during this time of transition; that the Church will set an example to those around them by being a place of unity, acceptance and integrity.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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