

# Bulgarian Sunday Schools Abroad

## Between National Education and New Contexts

Bulgarian Communities Abroad: Between Inherited and Invented Identities



The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining anthropological, historical, and pedagogical-psychological methods to examine identity formation among Bulgarian communities abroad through the framework of Bulgarian Sunday schools. It integrates the perspectives of teachers and parents to explore efforts to preserve national identity among second- and third-generation migrants. Drawing on examples from countries such as Spain, Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany, the analysis identifies effective practices and strategies. Bulgarian Sunday schools are thus understood as institutions that both adapt to the specific dynamics of diaspora communities and adhere to national educational standards.

Perceptions of identity, what defines “us” and distinguishes or connects us to others, are shaped by the social and cultural dynamics of the new environment, particularly across different migrant generations. These processes influence how stable or permeable identity boundaries remain, and raise questions about the extent to which compromises with core markers such as origin, language, and culture are possible or acceptable. In this context, Bulgarian educational institutions abroad take on an important role in preserving these key elements of identity among communities where the boundaries between “us” and “others” tend to blur over time. Bulgarian Sunday schools thus function as spaces that both sustain and actively reconstruct identity boundaries within ongoing processes of adaptation and acculturation.

The initiative to establish a Sunday school is typically driven by parents or active community members, emerging as a grassroots response to shared needs and aspirations. Often rooted in personal motivation, these efforts aim to help children maintain a connection to their roots, most commonly through learning the Bulgarian language and preserving ties with relatives in Bulgaria. Unlike schools in Bulgaria, Sunday schools bring together individuals from diverse ethnic, confessional, regional, and socio-economic backgrounds. A particularly illustrative case is that of Bulgarian Roma abroad, who often form stable communities. Having overcome significant structural and institutional barriers even in their country of origin, many achieve a strong sense of confidence and equality. Their success in new social and cultural contexts is often expressed through a heightened identification with Bulgarian identity, sometimes articulated as a sense of being “more Bulgarian than Bulgarians.”

In summary, several key conclusions emerge. Education among Bulgarians abroad reflects both the interests of the diaspora communities and those of the Bulgarian state, yet the educational system often lags behind the rapid changes and evolving needs within these communities. The teaching of Bulgarian language, history, and geography, central to identity formation, cannot fully compensate for the absence of a natural environment in which identity develops. This is due, among other factors, to the growing prevalence of mixed marriages among second-generation migrants, where children often lack consistent linguistic and cultural immersion even within the family.

As a result, Bulgarian identity within the educational process tends to become a cumulative construct of stylized symbols, reproduced through curricula that struggle to keep pace with the changing social context. Where identity preservation is successful, it is often influenced by additional motivations, including institutional and symbolic advantages associated with Bulgarian identity, particularly for individuals from other ethnoconfessional communities such as Roma and Turks.



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