

## Why are we creating this handbook?

Listen Up Foundation is an advocacy organization for the rights of Deaf people to achieve equity through empowering education, employment, and active community involvement. It was founded in Sofia, Bulgaria at the end of 2014. This handbook outlines the projects, objectives, and accomplishments that have and will improve education, employment, community involvement opportunities and will pull together all Deaf Bulgarians as members and organizations working with and for the equity of Deaf citizens in Bulgaria.

Our story began with an informal awareness campaign about the challenges that Deaf people in Bulgaria face over the last several decades. This campaign shows that Deaf people who use and rely on Bulgarian Sign Language (BGSL) do not have adequate educational opportunities, are not receiving employment resources, and are often times isolated from their or other deaf communities and resources.

In the first years of its existence, the Foundation faced difficulties because the organizers (deaf themselves) did not have the opportunity to receive training and access resources needed to appropriately work with the Deaf community in Bulgaria.

The Deaf people in Bulgaria have been marginalized for decades and this has led to a dependence on a "caring" model as opposed to an empowerment model. These Deaf Bulgarians rarely got the tools they needed to work for themselves—they were, instead, inadvertently encouraged to stay reliant on a system designed to keep them dependent.

In 2015 and 2016, the Listen Up Foundation won a series of social entrepreneurship competitions, for their projects designed to provide accessibility services through video-relay sign language interpreting for institutions as well as speech-to-text for deaf and hard of hearing students at mainstream schools. During this period, we learned that the allocating targeted aid directly to deaf people proved to be a serious challenge. There was no any investment in the development of the profession of sign language interpreters, who provide spoken Bulgarian translation to Bulgarian Sign Language and vice versa. There was no a focus on interpreter training programs—and thus there is still limited access to information for Deaf Bulgarians. This is why we are

short of quality sign language interpreters in the country and we lack effective practices for qualification of sign language interpreters.

Also during this awareness campaign period, the Listen Up Foundation developed important experience and information about the Deaf Community in Bulgaria, which led to the realization that the inclusion of deaf people cannot happen without their full participation, knowledge, skills, and experience. The call for equity in working with Deaf people in the creation of social services, policies, accessible education for Deaf people is a main pillar of our programming.

Another outcome is the awareness of the importance of Bulgarian Sign Language and the need for its recognition as a true language, just like all world signed languages are, e.g., British Sign Language, French Sign Language, American Sign Language, Mexican Sign Language, etc. In 2017 and 2018 the Ministry of Education and Science began conducting the first linguistic study of its kind on Bulgarian Sign Language (BGSL), which is documenting its signs, grammatical rules, and discourse structures. This is the foundational work for the establishment of the Bulgarian Sign Language Act, which the Bulgarian Deaf community will be involved with.

In 2017 and 2018 Mr. Ashod Derandonyan and Mr. Alexander Ivanov, the founders of the Foundation, became the first Deaf participants from Bulgaria in a professional exchange program (sanctioned by the US State Department) with the National Association of the Deaf in the USA and Gallaudet University, the only higher educational institution in the world that provides accessible and quality education for deaf and hard of hearing students through sign language and written English.

Their work in the United States created key contacts and irreplaceable experience, which led to the view that real change for the Bulgarian Deaf community must be transdisciplinary, whereby Deaf people with experience will work as knowledgeable collaborators. This Deaf-centric approach enables Deaf people to be the initiators in creating policies and principles for joint activities among Deaf people, their family members, professionals, and other stakeholders. By the end of 2018 and through 2019, the Listen Up Foundation began working on forming partnerships with mentors and organizations, all with the aim of equity for Deaf Bulgarians.

This international experience and opportunities lead us to the conclusion that the success of the Deaf community in Bulgaria will come when we move to preserve and

promote the history, identity, culture, and language of Deaf people paired with the introduction and development of the Bulgarian Sign Language in education. The best way to do this is by giving over much of this responsibility and passing the leadership of these endeavors to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Bulgarians.

In this regard, in 2020 the Listen Up Foundation elected a new Management Board, comprised entirely of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, who share the mission of full inclusion of Deaf people to take responsibility and leadership creating policies and resources in and with Bulgarian sign language focusing on the support of the education of Deaf children and youth.

The founder of the Foundation, Mr. Derandonyan, was elected by the new Management Board as the Executive Director for a term of next of 5 years due to his many years of experience in communication and project administration.

The entire management board unanimously decided to create the Working Together initiative project, outlined here in the ***Bulgarian Deaf Community Handbook*** to promote the idea that Deaf people can lead projects and policy change related to their inclusion in all spheres of public and social life.

With this *Handbook*, the Listen Up Foundation presents its principles, rules of operation, and our motivation to be open to partnerships with professionals, family members of Deaf people, and other stakeholders who want to have more knowledge and understanding on topics related to the Deaf community, Bulgarian sign language (BGSL), and our equity projects.