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Self-Ruled and Self-Consecrated Ecclesiastic Schism as a Nation-Building Instrument in the Orthodox Countries of South Eastern Europe

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Abstract: The Orthodox concept of autocephaly, a formerly organizational and administrative measure, has been a powerful nation-building tool since the 19th century. While autocephaly could be granted—from the perspective of the Orthodox canon law—in an orderly fashion, it was often the case that a unilateral, non-canonical way towards autocephaly was sought. This usually took place when the state actors, often non-Orthodox, intervened during the nation-building process. We investigated the effects of unilateral declarations of autocephaly (through a schism) by comparing Bulgarian, Northern Macedonian, and Montenegrin examples. We contend that the best success chances are to be expected by the ecclesiastic body that is less willing to make major transgressions of the canon law, than to radicalize the situation after the initial move. This is mostly because autocephaly's recognition requires a global acceptance within the circle of the already autocephalous churches. We also suggest that the strong political backing of the autocephaly movement can paradoxically have a negative impact on its ultimate success, as it can prolong the initial separation phase of the schism and prevent or postpone the healing phase, and with it, the fully fledged autocephaly.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity; autocephaly; religious nationalism; schism; canon law; church–state conflicts

1. Symphony, Autocephaly, and Nation: Orthodox Church's Challenges of Maintaining Unity in Diversity

One of the most visible traits of the contemporary Orthodox Church is its organizational pattern. A non-informed observer may quickly establish that what is nominally one global church, actually consists of a network of quite independent jurisdictions, with their activities' focus often bound to a specific nation (cf. [Linz and Stepan 1996](#), p. 260). Its most important bishop, the Patriarch of Constantinople, has much less authority than the Pope of Rome over the Roman Catholic Church. Although he is styled “the Ecumenical patriarch”, he has very little power or influence over the way any of the autocephalous (i.e., independent) Orthodox Churches runs its internal affairs. Without understanding what autocephaly really means and how it relates to different nationalisms, one can hardly understand many identity conflicts that have taken place in the Orthodox world during the previous few centuries. Moreover, without understanding the scope and limitations of the concept of autocephaly, one can hardly predict the possible outcomes of the ongoing frictions.

The origins of the contemporary Orthodox ecclesiastic nationalisms are probably related to transformations of the relationship between Orthodoxy and the modern nation, where “the meaning of religious affiliation [was turned] into the equivalent of de facto national belonging” ([Roudometof 2014](#), p. 85; cf. [Kitromilides 2019](#), pp. 32–39). The Orthodox Church traditionally has tended to establish a cooperative arrangement with its host state, something often criticized in the

West (cf. [Huntington \[1996\] 1997](#), p. 70; [Makrides 2004](#), p. 17). Even though it is open to debate, to say the least, whether it ever existed in its ideal form (cf. [Makrides 2019](#), p. 236), the principle of *symphonia* (συμφωνία—which may mean accordance, agreement, but also musical harmony) has left a very deep imprint on Orthodox political thinking. Ideally, it requires the state to express its political will to take care of the Church's interests, while the Church is expected to refrain itself from statements that might be related to the daily political life ([Gerogiorgakis 2013](#), pp. 175–76). The Church thus appears as the moral force, or state's conscience in political life (cf. [Papanikolaou 2012](#), p. 27). For as long as the government is not bound to commit some major transgression of Orthodox dogmas, morality or canon law, the Church is not expected to challenge the government's authority or intervene in daily politics. However, although often perceived as docile, the Orthodox Church's history offers many examples of the Church's vigorous resistance to authorities, once such transgressions took place.

Even if one was to argue that there was indeed a clear symphonic orientation on the behalf of the Orthodox Church, it must be discerned between the earlier, imperial, and later, national, character of such arrangements. Instead of having an agreement with the Emperor of the Universal (Roman) Empire, modern local Orthodox Churches often made one with their nation's leaders, provided they were in position to make such choice in the first place. By helping homogenize and mobilize the nation, the Orthodox Church could further its relevance and influence. This was made possible through the Orthodox Church's role in ethnogenesis, indigenization, and vernacularization of the faith ([Makrides 2013](#), pp. 338–40). The historical closeness between Church and state and emerging amalgamation of the concepts of "Church, people and (home)land" ([Makrides 2013](#), pp. 330–49) have only amplified the sense of apparent necessity of the Orthodox Church's national orientation.

In Fr. Alexander Schmemmann's view, the specific Eastern idea of "nationalism" simply merged with its Western prototype, thus converting medieval desire for the one, universal Orthodox Empire into a number of conflicting nation-states. This Eastern "nationalism," characterized by a strong Church–ethnicity bond, was, in his view, born from the decaying Eastern Roman sense of universalism, the demise of which was facilitated first by Hellenization of the late Eastern Roman Empire and then by the Slavic and Arab resistance to complete Hellenization of the Orthodox clergy during the Ottoman rule. By the 19th century, the Orthodox world had already been fractured along the ethnic lines, shattered in a number of provincial traditions, already facing a steep theological decline. The Orthodox Church (and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in particular) was seen by its flock as the keeper of the pre-Ottoman political traditions and in charge of their preservation until political independence could be restored. While this turned the Church into the bearer of national ideals, its byproduct was the emergence of hostility towards other Orthodox peoples ([Schmemmann 1992](#), pp. 277–91, 319; cf. [Hastings 1997](#), p. 202), with conflicting national ambitions. The (local) Orthodox Church and the nation state basically grew to represent different aspects of the same collective. Therefore, since the emergence of nationalism, it has frequently been the case that one nation's desire for self-determination could also manifest itself through its struggle for ecclesiastic independence.

A process of nation-building could not always unfold in a harmonious way. The nation-states and their respective Orthodox churches quite often played dissonant tones. In cases when no agreement with the local Church jurisdiction could be reached, the nation-builders would often attempt to create a schism, hoping that if they persisted for long enough, the change in political circumstances would lead to eventual fulfilment of their initial goal.

The concept of Orthodox autocephaly often appeared to the would-be nation-builders as complimentary to political independence. In this regard, it transcended its initial administrative, technical, and canonical meaning. In the 19th century Balkans—according to Cyril Hovorun—it gained its current political, sociological, and cultural significance. In many Orthodox societies autocephaly was elevated on par with other symbols of statehood, such as flag, currency, or national anthem ([Hovorun 2009](#), pp. 31–32). Yet, it rarely got the attention other components of national identity or national discourse received, especially when evaluating nationalisms in predominantly Orthodox countries after 1989 ([Zabarah 2013](#), p. 47). Neophytos Loizides claimed

that the issue of religion's adaptation to nationalism (and vice-versa) still needs to be adequately addressed in the Balkans (Loizides 2009, p. 203) and we believe that this is especially the case with the autocephaly–nationhood link.

We would like to contribute to the current debates by examining the cases in which neither nationalist nor religious goals were successfully achieved by declaring autocephaly—namely, those of North Macedonia and Montenegro. Since resolution of these ecclesiastic conflicts is not in sight, we will include the third case, that of the Bulgarian Exarchate¹ (1870–1953, in schism 1872–1945). Our decision to begin with the Bulgarian example is motivated by the ambition to demonstrate some important limitations of ecclesiastic nationalisms in the Orthodox context. In order to realize our aims, it will not suffice to describe the motivations behind these schisms and methods by which these ecclesiastical conflicts were initiated and managed. It is also important to address the causes of failure to achieve the ultimate goal by employing radical means. Their application was not problematic in the ecclesiological sphere alone, as schismatic status introduced major limitations for the uncanonical hierarchies. These projects also suffered in their political dimension as well, often to an extent that undermined achieving the proclaimed goals of nation-building in the first place. Our considerations could therefore also contribute to discussions on whether autocephaly is a necessary component, or just a welcome addition, of statehood in the predominantly Orthodox societies of the 21st century. By exploring the trajectories of such schisms, we want to establish what conditions are necessary for a dissonant opening to become a harmonious conclusion. The cases we chose represent three different levels of radicalization (dissonance) of the conflict between the nascent nation and the local ecclesiastic jurisdiction: (1) the Bulgarian schism (1872–1945), (2) the North Macedonian schism (1967–present), and end by analyzing the most radical of our cases, that of (3) the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (1993–present). The last one is particularly interesting from the perspective of Orthodox ecclesiology, as it cannot be described by the word “schism” itself, but rather as an example of the nationalist ecclesiastic alchemy, i.e., an attempt to create ex nihilo the new national church. What also sets all these cases apart from other national autocephalies is that they all predated the actual political independence of their titular nations.

After introducing the reader to some of the important notions related to the concepts of autocephaly and symphonia, we shall proceed by discussing the phenomena of nation and nationalism in the Orthodox context. We shall then examine our three cases and present our perspective of the interdependence of levels of radicalization of the ecclesiastic conflict these produced and the levels of success their attempts had. By doing this, we want to demonstrate that by refraining from continuously transgressing the limitations of the Orthodox canon law, the Orthodox Church seeking autocephaly increases its chances of becoming fully autocephalous. This means that its ecclesiastic independence is recognized as canonical by the rest of the “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church” (Article 9 of the Nicene Creed), something that nationalist leaders, who initiate ecclesiastic schisms, often overlook.

2. The Concept of Autocephaly in the Orthodox Context

In organizational terms, the Orthodox believe that no single bishop can replace Jesus Christ as the Church's Head. The highest decision-making authority can therefore rest not in the hands of the single one bishop, even with the lofty title of the Ecumenical (“universal”) Patriarch, but in the bishops' councils, which are believed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and guided by the Church's Head.

Many current debates related to the concept of autocephaly are easier to follow after one is introduced to the history of its application. The decentralized structure of the Orthodox Church has its origins in the ways the apostolic churches operated. They were organizationally independent from one another in their own affairs and led by their local bishops, who communicated with other bishops and tried to maintain consensus on basic tenets of their faith. After the persecution of

¹ From Greek *exarchos* (ἐξάρχος), meaning governor, vicar, deputy, representative, envoy.

Christians was finally ended by the Edict of Milan in 313, a more elaborate hierarchical structure could emerge. Due to historical or administrative reasons, some bishoprics got the metropolitan status (of the metropolis)—and with it, certain authority over other bishops within their jurisdiction. The metropolitan bishops presided over the bishops' councils on their territory, which usually overlapped with that of a given Roman province. On a higher level, some metropolitan bishops got the authority over others within their region and presided over the regional councils. On the level of the entire Empire, however, no unified hierarchical structure was established, as several bishops' councils could elect their own supreme bishop, without any external interference from other sees. The Greek word for this status, *autokephalia* (αὐτοκεφαλία, originally as an adjective), which came into use much later, literally means “self-headedness,” as autocephalous churches did not have any higher ecclesiastical jurisdiction to regulate their internal affairs. This system, along with the one where one metropolitan bishop had a supra-provincial jurisdiction, was sanctioned already at the Council of Nicea in 325 (cf. Jevtić 2005, pp. 69–70; cf. Milaš [1902] 2004, pp. 315–17), and was reaffirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431, with confirmation of the autocephaly of the Archbishopric of Cyprus (Canon VIII of the Council of Ephesus).

Any autocephalous church has the right to independently elect its own supreme and other bishops, without the necessity to obtain consent or ask for confirmation from any other jurisdiction. This enables it to hold its own local councils in order to resolve its internal issues without any interference from another local Orthodox Church (cf. Bogolepov [1963] 2001, pp. 7–8). This status is based on the canons of the Ecumenical and other universally accepted local councils within the Orthodox Church (Jevtić 2005, pp. 45, 86, 98–100, 257)². In other words, the autocephalous Orthodox Church has its own “internal source of power,” which is reflected in its capacity to promote its own bishops from within its clergy ranks (Troicki 1933, pp. 193–94). To Alexander Schmemmann this served as proof that the church these canons described was not what it is today—a network of, conditionally speaking, “sovereign” or independent entities. It was rather the organization that allowed every local community to reach its full potential, while maintaining a strong sense of unity (Schmemmann 1971, pp. 7–8).

Christianization of Bulgaria in our opinion represents a watershed event in the evolution of the concept of autocephaly. Khan (or *Knyaz*) Boris I Michael (ruled 852–889), who reigned over probably the third-largest realm in Europe of his age, also provided refuge to students of Ss. Cyril and Methodius after 885. These brought the codified Slavonic liturgy to Bulgaria, which served as a means of solidifying both Christianity and *knyaz's* authority, after Boris's heirs expelled Greek-speaking clergy from the then autonomous Bulgarian Archbishopric in 893 (Makrides 2013, p. 340). After Slavic became the main liturgical language in the country, Slavic literature began to flourish, not only in Bulgaria, but also in other Slavic Orthodox countries as well, thus playing an important role in their ethnogenesis. The fate of the Bulgarian Church was also intertwined with the political fortunes of Bulgaria itself. A series of victories against the Eastern Roman Empire also forced the Patriarchate of Constantinople to recognize an autocephalous Bulgarian Patriarchate in 927 (previously declared on a local council in 919). Bulgarians thus created a precedent which enabled a powerful ruler of a Christian realm to ask for autocephaly (or take it among the other spoils of war) on behalf of his local hierarchy. This development also facilitated granting autocephaly to the Serbian Orthodox Archbishopric in 1219, although the political landscape was much more complex at that time due to the temporary

² The Orthodox Church has its own way of counting the Ecumenical councils, which might appear somewhat confusing to a reader with a Roman Catholic background. The relevant canons include: the 2nd canon of the 2nd Ecumenical Council (Constantinople 381), 8th canon of the 3rd Ecumenical Council (Ephesus 431), 9th canon of the Council of Antioch (341) and a letter of the Council of Carthage (424) to Celestine, the Pope of Rome. A very important, probably fundamental canon is the 34th apostolic canon (rephrased in the 9th canon of the Council of Antioch): “The bishops of every nation [not in its modern meaning, but rather “people”] must acknowledge him who is the first among them and account him as their head, and do nothing of consequence without his consent; but each may do those things only which concern his own parish, and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him (who is the first) do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit.”

disintegration of the Eastern Roman Empire, than it was three centuries before. The Russian case was somewhat different, as there was no immediate political threat from Constantinople. What is today by far the largest local Orthodox Church became autocephalous in 1589/1593, although it was de facto autocephalous since the election of a new archbishop of Kiev and All Russia (residing in Moscow), conducted in 1448 by the council of Russian bishops.

Already in the 13th century there was some evidence that the idea of dualistic political-ecclesiastic sovereignty existed among the Southern Slavs (cf. [Blagojević 1999](#), p. 52). According to one of St. Sava's biographers, his aim was to have his Serbian Fatherland self-consecrated (*samoosvećeno*) after it became "by God's help self-governing" (*samodržavno*, also: sovereign; [Domentijan 1988](#), p. 137). Being fully independent meant that one was free from foreign interference in both political and ecclesiastical matters. Given the authority of the Church in the middle ages, especially in legal and education matters, this tendency of the state to limit foreign influences over its hierarchy should not come as a surprise. Similar desires were present among the political elites of the Christian West at the time, where investiture controversy had profound historical consequences (cf. [Cantor 1958](#), pp. 6–9). The Orthodox solution to the problem did not result in a long-lasting conflict between the Church and state, but rather recognition of their joint interests and necessity to support one another within their symphonic relationship (cf. [Gerogiorgakis 2013](#)). Already during the middle ages, the decentralized character of the Orthodox Church facilitated to some extent replication of the Eastern Roman model to Bulgaria and Serbia.

Within the Ottoman Empire, one's legal status was defined primarily by one's religion. Belonging to a religious denomination thus became the most important identity marker. The Ecumenical Patriarch was the overseer of the *millet-i Rûm*, (the Roman *millet*), which took care of legal affairs and taxation of much of the Empire's Orthodox population. Since most Christians who had access to the rare privilege of education were clergy members, these often became community organizers. In functional terms, the Church often fulfilled some of the state's functions, by providing a framework for collective decision-making and polity's representation. After the great Serbian migration of 1690, some elements of the *millet* model were transplanted by the exiled bishops of the Patriarchate of Peć (1557–1766) into the Austrian Empire as well. This arrangement of religious tolerance predated Josephinism (and Emperor Joseph's edicts of 1781) by almost a century. In Montenegro, after 1516 (or 1519, cf. [Pavlovic 2008](#), p. 32), the Church did become the state, after the local bishops gradually became the Prince-bishops (*vladika*, pl. *vladike*). By the dawn of the 19th century, the Orthodox Church in South Eastern Europe had already become the political institution *par excellence*.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the national liberation in the Balkans could not leave the ecclesiastical matters as they were. Nevertheless, it was anything but easy for the Ecumenical Patriarchate to accept and sanction the fragmentation into small local, national, churches. Indeed, to do so meant a break with the ecumenical tradition, which, despite all challenges, was followed and promoted by the Patriarchate well into the 19th century (cf. [Kitromilides 1989](#), p. 184; [Roudometof 2008](#), p. 71; [Makrides 2012](#), p. 32). Several factors have contributed to the proliferation of granting autocephalies in the 19th and 20th centuries, most important being the rise of nationalism and national romanticism, which often aimed at restoring both political and ecclesiastic sovereignties. The new nation-states also wanted to curb the influence of the Ecumenical Patriarch on the grounds that he was the subject of the hostile Ottoman Empire. As such, he was regarded as politically unreliable, if not outright dangerous from the perspective of national interests. It could be argued that the Petrine reforms in Russia and his subjugation of the Orthodox Church (resembling the actions of the Protestant monarchs of his age) made an important mark on the way other Orthodox countries treated their local hierarchies and consequently, the issue of autocephaly. Most autocephalies in the previous two centuries were declared in a unilateral or "sovereign" manner (cf. [Shishkov 2016](#)) and then got recognized by Constantinople, in a move that asserted the sovereignty of the state in the ecclesiastic matters, reminiscent of the way Emperor Peter did.

The proliferation of national autocephalies in the 19th and 20th centuries transformed the way in which this concept became perceived. While autocephaly had previously been considered as a rather marginal issue—from the perspective of the Orthodox Salvation narrative—it has nonetheless in the previous two centuries gained a national, “mythical” (Hovorun 2009), and often emotional character. Its rising importance also revealed that there was no pan-Orthodox consensus over every aspect of the procedure necessary for granting autocephaly. The point of view according to which it was the sole prerogative of the mother church (the jurisdiction from which the new local Church should be created), did create certain problems in pan-Orthodox recognitions of the newly established jurisdictions—especially regarding the Orthodox Church in America after 1970.

Attempts to regulate the procedure of awarding autocephaly to the local Church culminated in the late 20th century. Since the high middle ages, the Orthodox world has oscillated between its sense of universalism and movements for more autonomy of its individual churches. When the sense of universalism became stronger, it helped the Ecumenical Patriarchate strengthen its authority. The phases of growing particularism also led to proliferation of the independent local hierarchies and reduction of the actual influence bishops of Constantinople had.

It was during one of the phases of a growing sense of universalism and affirmation of conciliarity that the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Commission met in the Swiss town of Chambesy and agreed on the procedure for granting autocephaly in November of 1993. The procedure may be initiated by the region requiring autocephaly, by its requests to the mother church. Upon its positive answer, the mother church should send a proposal to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which then seeks the pan-Orthodox consensus among the synods of the local Orthodox Churches. After Constantinople establishes that the consensus has been reached, it can proclaim the new autocephalous Church by issuing a document called *Tomos*. The *Tomos* must be signed by the Ecumenical Patriarch and the primate of the given jurisdiction’s mother church (IOPC 1993, Art. 3). This procedure was further clarified in 2009, at the Russian Church’s behest, by adding that the primates of all the autocephalous churches should co-sign the *Tomos*. Unlike autocephaly, granting autonomy remained in the exclusive purview of the local churches (cf. mospat.ru 2010). It appeared that this issue had finally been settled, until in 2018 the Ecumenical Patriarchate granted autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine. The actions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate indicated that it decided to at least formally revert to some of the principles agreed in 1993 (cf. IOPC 1993), as it maintained that in 1686 it only agreed for Moscow to become the caretaker of its Ukrainian dioceses. Apart from different interpretations of the jurisdictional issues over Ukraine, Constantinople’s decision not to seek consensus *before* the move added to the overall controversy. The obvious reluctance of other local Orthodox Churches to accept this move (so far it has been accepted by the Archbishopric of Greece) might indicate both fear of Moscow’s retaliation and contempt for Constantinople’s decision, considered politically unsavvy, if not outright illegitimate.

2.1. *The Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Nation*

Unlike the issue of autocephaly, which only recently began to receive broader attention among scholars, the issue of Orthodox nationalism has been extensively studied in the past. When viewed from the perspective of its two-millennia-long history, national orientations of many contemporary local Orthodox Churches may appear as a relatively recent development. The Church in the Eastern Roman Empire aimed at overcoming divisions among its many peoples (cf. Romans 10:12, Galatians 3:28) in a way that has never been replicated since its demise. With the emergence of culturally distinct local Orthodox Churches, a specific bond between (local) people and (local) church was created (Makrides 2013, pp. 342–49). Arguably, over time, a strong, organic connection between faith and ethnicity, and in modern times, religion and nationalism, emerged (Rogobete 2004, p. 287), thus creating a specific “church–nation link” (Roudometof 2014, p. 84ff). As Vasilios N. Makrides suggested, the nationalization of the Orthodox Churches was facilitated by the ease with which their pre-modern orientations, structures, and practices could be refitted into the modern framework of nationalism. Moreover, this unfolded in a way that made the whole process appear as traditional, endogenous,

and natural. Even the Eastern Roman Empire's messianic narrative evolved into similar missionary ideologies among different Orthodox nations (Makrides 2013, pp. 329–30, 343–44).

Among the pre-modern orientations that facilitated increased engagement of the Orthodox Church in the national cause was its symphonic tradition (cf. Makrides 2013, p. 330). In a modern context, in which the sovereignty of the people has replaced that of the Emperor, the nation-state as the political expression of this sovereignty simply inherited some of Emperor's obligations. The powers that be may be ordained by God, but through the popular legitimation, nonetheless. As Bulgarian journalist Goran Blagoev once framed it in the official newspaper of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), the nation-state, its army, and the local Orthodox Church represent reflections and embodiments of the same collective—the Orthodox people (Blagoev 2008). Even if the actual symphonia in predominantly Orthodox societies is nowadays out of the question, there is still something that could be understood in terms of Kristen Ghodsee's "symphonic secularism", the state of the contemporary church–state–nation relationships in which modern secular and traditional-religious notions of the Orthodox past coexist (Ghodsee 2009, pp. 227–52).

The nationalization of the local Orthodox Churches took place mostly in an age when there was little objection to the notion that the nation was something eternal, primordial, ancient, and organic. The case of St. Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiča (bishop Nikolaj Velimirović), who in the 1930s portrayed the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) St. Sava (1174–1236) as the first nationalist in Europe, might demonstrate how easy it was for an Orthodox thinker to blur the differences between the modern and pre-modern and between nationalism and proto-national ideas. What in St. Nikolaj's hindsight made St. Sava a nationalist were his contributions to establishing Orthodox people's church, state, dynasty, education, culture (with language), and defense (Nikolaj 2013, pp. 86–91). While a closer investigation of his claims might lead to different conclusions, it is likely that he saw the concept of *national* autocephaly as something normal and legitimized through St. Sava's saintly authority.

In the second half of the 20th century—especially since the early 1980s—several paradigm-changing concepts of nation and its formation gained traction and influenced the way in which it became perceived. The nation was considered as something invented (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 2003), imagined (Anderson [1983] 2006), or constructed (Gellner 1983, p. 1). Within their approaches, the nation was treated as a modern phenomenon and, notwithstanding specific differences among them, as something constructed. Hence, these theoretical frameworks received the labels "modernist" or "constructivist". Perennial and primordial approaches figured as their opposites and, despite their different answers to questions of how and why nations emerged, both regarded them as a pre-modern phenomenon, i.e., existing before the modern age (cf. Rakic 1998, p. 599). Anthony D. Smith's approach, known as ethnosymbolism, was critical of the modernist but aligned neither with the primordial nor with the perennial approach. In his own words, it sought "to link modern nations and nationalism with earlier collective cultural identities and sentiments" (Smith 2000, pp. 62–63). Smith (2003, pp. 9–18), like Adrian Hastings, acknowledged the formative role of religion and, more specifically, of religious affiliation in the process of nation's creation, which is something most modernist approaches either completely ignored or, at best, sparsely mentioned. For instance, both Smith and Hastings took into consideration some factors that were documented already in the Old Testament and that influenced the emergence of many contemporary nations—common territory, language, and religion (Hastings 1997, p. 18, cf. p. 196; Smith 2003, pp. 52–66). This does not mean that Smith and Hastings attributed a religious component to every nationalism, since they differentiated between their religious and secular types. Yet, some of their observations on the interplay between the two could be seen as relevant when discussing bids for autocephaly we are about to present. A formerly religious nationalism may give way to other national identity markers and evolve into a secular one (cf. Hastings 1997, p. 65). Secular nationalisms can coexist with their religious counterparts, while drawing upon their myths, symbols, and traditions, as was the case with secular nationalisms in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and Greece (Smith 2000, p. 59).

Given that “nationalism could be expressed in both secular and religious ways, whose relations can be either complementary, neutral, or opposite” (Makrides 2013, p. 329), it is hardly surprising that multiple modes of nationalisms were competing with one another within every Orthodox society. The Orthodox clergy could support national narratives that insisted on a given nation’s antiquity and presence on certain territory. It could also develop or recreate myths of ancient glory, downfall, suffering under foreign yoke, trials, heroic sacrifice, and political resurrection, which could then be further exploited by the secular elites as well, in the form of “political religion”, a phenomenon akin to “civil religion” in the United States (Payne 2007, p. 833). The first major ecclesiastic condemnation of nationalism came at the expense of the Bulgarians. In 1872, their hierarchs were condemned of the heresy of ethnophyletism, or phyletism (from Greek *ethnos*/ἔθνος—people and *phyletismos*/φυλετισμός, which can be translated as tribalism or loyalty to one’s tribe), although it is difficult to find the evidence that the Ecumenical Patriarchate fought other nationalisms with the same vigor (Makrides 2013, pp. 325–26). Even today, there is no consensus on the actual scope of this condemnation. The interpretations may range from condemning nationalism within the church as such (cf. Amfilohije 2017) to condemning only Bulgarians for establishing a parallel ethnically-based church hierarchy (cf. Thornton 2007, pp. 152–56) besides that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. There was certainly little political will to condemn nationalism within the Orthodox Church in the late 19th century among Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbs, especially after they realized that the presence of one nation’s clergy could also influence the national preferences of the local population. This was best observable in the religious component of their scramble for Macedonia. After the Bulgarian Exarchate (a precursor to the contemporary BOC) had been established, the Serbian government lobbied both the political as well as the ecclesiastic authorities in Constantinople to appoint Serbian bishops in the regions of the present-day North Macedonia. During the Balkan wars, WWI, and WWII, the Serbian clergy was targeted by the Bulgarian occupying forces. Whenever the Bulgarian army retreated from these areas, it would also have consequences for the Bulgarian clergy, who either had to sign an oath of allegiance to the Serbian/Yugoslav state or flee to Bulgaria (Borisov 2007, pp. 47–50). In both cases, coreligionists from all the countries involved were more than ready to put their nationalist aspirations ahead of their presumed Orthodox unity.

The *Realpolitik* has also played its role in instigating and maintaining ecclesiastic nationalisms. The nation-state sanctioned by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 promoted the sovereignty of the state in religious matters as well (first affirmed by the Treaty of Augsburg in 1555). In its Protestant form, this sovereignty allowed for the creation of (national) churches, headed by the Monarch. The wave of proliferation of autocephalies in the 19th and 20th centuries among the Orthodox was closely linked to the emergence of the new nation-states in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. These often asserted their sovereignty and pursued ecclesiastic autocephaly even by the uncanonical means, that is, by creating a schism with the mother church. The would-be nation-builders realized that the autocephalous Church, regardless of its canonical status, could be a powerful tool of internal homogenization and differentiation from the neighboring nations. Whether established before or after the creation of the nation-state, national autocephaly became an important piece of the overall nation-building project.

2.2. Limitations to the State’s Sovereignty in Orthodox Ecclesiastical Matters

The problem with asserting the nation-state’s sovereignty in ecclesiastic matters is that the independence of the nation-state is not entirely analogous to autocephaly. This can best be illustrated by pointing at differences between these concepts in their respective legal frameworks. In the realm of international law, any given state can exist in its full capacity as a state without being universally recognized by other countries, provided it has a permanent population, defined territory, (legitimate)

government, and capacity to engage in relationships with other countries³. The autocephalous church cannot enjoy its status unless it is universally, in an ideal case through a pan-Orthodox consensus, recognized as such. Every Orthodox Church, regardless of its canonical status, repeats in its constitution Article 9 of the Nicene-Chalcedonian creed, and claims that is a part of “the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”. In the ideal case, no local Orthodox Church should remain unrecognized by the others as such.

This pan-Orthodox recognition does not depend on following the formal canonical procedures (i.e., legalism) alone, but also their *spirit* (morality), which, by following Christos Yannaras, can never be reduced to legalistic interpretations (cf. Yannaras 1984, pp. 26–27). Apart from strict adherence to the letter of canons (*akribeia*, ἀκριβεία), the Orthodox decision-makers can implement the principle of leniency, or *oikonomia* (οἰκονομία). The latter term can be found already in the Greek versions of the New Testament (Ephesians 1: 10, 3:2, 3:9; I Timothy 1:4), in relation to God’s dealing with the World. *Oikonomia* can be applied in the interest of salvation, and the schismatic hierarchy may eventually get its autocephaly granted, usually under condition that, being the party accused of transgression, it also shows signs of repentance and will for reconciliation. In other words, the schismatic hierarchy would have to demonstrate its understanding that to unilaterally declare autocephaly was an uncanonical act and transgression against the ecclesiastical and canonical order of the Orthodox Church, in the first place. In practice, calculations of the schismatic hierarchies and their political backers may also include the eventual application of *oikonomia*. The expected roadmap includes a brief period of severing relations, followed by reconciliation and acceptance by the rest of the Orthodox world. Brevity of the severed relations to the mother church reduces the waiting time before reaching the desired fully-fledged autocephaly. However, when demands of the schismatic hierarchy become too radical, this period might get extended way more than expected and can become a burden that several generations have to bear.

3. Three Bids for Autocephaly and Their Limitations

We shall now investigate three examples of declaring national autocephalies, with different levels of subsequent radicalization. In all three cases, the initial move was triggered by the existence of (1) strong nationalism, (2) favorable (geo)political circumstances, and (3) interventionism by a non-Orthodox actor. The churches that emerged were all initially considered uncanonical by the rest of the Orthodox world and accused of blatantly transgressing the Orthodox canon law. The levels of radicalization that followed were different. While the BOC eventually agreed to the terms of reconciliation and could eventually fully realize its ambitions of autocephaly and restore its long-desired historical patriarchal dignity, the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) made its position more difficult by rejecting the previously agreed canonical settlement with the SOC. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MnOC), created in canonical terms *ex nihilo*, supported by the self-declared atheists, led by the excommunicated former clergy members, due to the radicalization of its transgressions of the canon law brought itself in a situation in which no pan-Orthodox solution deemed favorable from its point of view seems possible. As we shall demonstrate by drawing on these examples, no fully-fledged autocephalous Church can emerge by state’s fiat alone. The schismatic Church’s capacity to reconcile with its mother church is the critical factor for the overall success of the autocephaly project.

3.1. The Bulgarian Exarchate’s Schism (1872–1945)

The Bulgarian patriarchate was abolished in 1393, after the Ottoman conquest of the Bulgarian capital of Veliko Tărnovo. The Archbishopric of Ohrid (abolished in 1767) kept Bulgarians mostly

³ Convention on Rights and Duties of States adopted by the Seventh International Conference of American States. Signed at Montevideo, 26th December 1933. Articles 1, 3. *LEAGUE OF NATIONS Treaty Series Treaties and international Engagements registered with the Secretariat of the League of Nations, VOLUME CLXV 1936* (Nos. 3801–3824), Convention No. 3802. pp. 19–45.

as its lower clergy, while its upper ranks were filled by the Greeks. Bulgarian culture and language in some predominantly Bulgarian areas thus remained suppressed for centuries. The year 1762, in which Paisiy of Hilandar (canonized as an Orthodox saint in the second half of the 20th century) published his “Slavo-Bulgarian History”, often serves as the starting point of the Bulgarian revival. St. Paisiy apparently rediscovered to him previously unknown Bulgarian history, after his encounter with the medieval sources at Mount Athos. He criticized not only the Greek clergy, but also the strongly Hellenized educated Bulgarians. He contended that the Bulgarians of his day were the rightful heirs of a glorious tradition, and as such should not be ashamed of asserting their identity. St. Paisiy’s main contribution to Bulgarian liberation was that by writing about Bulgarian past (although lacking scientific rigor), he created the mental framework within which the nascent Bulgarian elites could imagine a future in a liberated country (cf. [Tsankov 1918](#), pp. 24–25). Thanks to St. Paisiy, Bulgarian clergy members became instrumental in shaping and spreading the ideas and institutional networks that fomented Bulgarian nationalism, which grew much in opposition to the policies of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

During the late 18th and early 19th century, Bulgarian nation-building effort and “awakening” were focused on pressuring the Ecumenical Patriarchate into acknowledging specific Bulgarian identity and consequently giving concessions to its Bulgarian flock ([Markovich 2013](#), pp. 232–34). Bishop Sofroniy of Vratsa (1739–1814) printed some of the first books in Bulgarian vernacular ([Hopkins 2008](#), pp. 122–30) and his student Neofit Bozveli (1785–1848), upon returning from Serbia, where he had been acquainted with the ideas of the Serbian Enlightenment, began openly advocating for a Bulgarian Church. To this end, he traveled to Constantinople in order to help establish a Bulgarian parish in the Ottoman capital ([Hopkins 2008](#), pp. 171–76). His activities were not viewed in a positive light by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which resulted in his banishment to Mount Athos, where he died in 1848. The generation of Bozveli’s students, to which bishop Hilarion of Makariopolis (Ilarion Makariopolski) belonged, would nonetheless live to see the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870.

It is not uncommon for Bulgarian historians to write about a dual yoke—the political one of the Ottomans and the ecclesiastic one of the Phanariot Greeks (after the Constantinopolitan quarter of Phanar; cf. [Hopkins 2008](#), p. 131). Decline of the administrative structures of the Ottoman Empire was followed by the increased corruption within the higher clergy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, with clientelist networks, cronyism, and nepotism becoming rampant (cf. [Clewing 2011](#), p. 511). The Orthodox Church became one of the battle lines in Bulgarian nation building, especially after the reforms, known as *Tanzimât*, were initiated by Sultan Abdülmejid I (1839–1861). He attempted to reorganize and democratize the *millet*-system, by demanding increased laymen participation in their councils. The first such “ethnic” council (Εθνοσυνέλευση, Ethnosynéleusē) took place in 1858. Although hardly representative in terms of delegate numbers, this council was dominated by the laypeople ([Stamatopoulos 2004](#), pp. 243–45), thus heralding some degree of secularization of such councils’ agenda. The church, in effect became a representative institution, which gained political weight and importance in Bulgarian elites’ eyes. Given the situation that until WWI the non-Muslims in the European part of the Empire dominated trade and commerce, it is hardly a surprise that the Empire’s Christians wanted not only economic, but political influence as well. Having a say within the Church also affected many other areas important for the nation-building process: language use, education, and de facto political representation. With the exception of the Albanians, the nation-building process in the Balkans usually unfolded as a transition from a religious towards a national community. Parallely, as the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution were gaining traction within the small, but influential Ottoman Christian middle-class, the church councils got an ever-greater number of the secular issues on their agendas ([Clewing 2011](#), pp. 511–12). By the mid-19th century, there was a visible radicalization of tensions between the Phanariot bishops and their Bulgarian Orthodox flock. The non-Orthodox actor, the Ottoman Sultan, maintained his role as the supreme arbiter in such situations, and gave some concessions to Bulgarians, mentioning them as a separate millet for the first

time in his *firman* of 1849, which sanctioned the construction of the Bulgarian church in Constantinople (Hopkins 2008, p. 175).

Political and geopolitical factors had begun to align positively for the Bulgarian cause only after the Crimean war (1853–1856), when the triumphant France, Great Britain, and Sardinia imposed conditions on both their enemies, the Russians, and their allies, the Ottomans. The Empire on the Bosphorus won a Pyrrhic victory and Sultan's government had to agree to give equal rights to his subjects, regardless of their creed. The Ottomans were further financially crippled by the loans taken, with interest rates ranging from 4% to 9% (cf. Stoyanov 2018, pp. 432, 434–35). The change in Russian foreign policy came as one of the consequences of the Crimean disaster. If in the decades before, Russia acted as a defender of the status quo in the Ottoman Empire and supported the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Hopkins 2008, pp. 182–85), she realized that her interests could be better served if she acted as an intermediary in the Bulgaro–Greek conflict. Other Christian powers had also been present with their influence in modern Bulgaria. France, for example, acted as a protector of the Catholics at the Sublime Porte, a status which she had since the 16th century. France also supported anti-Russian activities of the Polish emigrants in Paris, who in turn worked towards influencing the situation in Bulgaria as well. The Poles believed that by weakening Russian influence over other Slavs, they could soon see their homeland liberated. To France, the creation of the independent Bulgarian Church, in the best-case scenario under Rome's aegis, would deliver a serious blow to Russian positions within the Ottoman Empire. In 1850, the Slavic Catholic institute was established in Paris (Hopkins 2008, pp. 177–81). There was a politically significant wave of Unions with Rome or conversions to Roman Catholicism, like the Union of Kukush (Kilkis) of 1861, promoted by, among others, Dragan Tsankov, who would later become a prominent politician in the Principality of Bulgaria. These unions and conversions were often fomented by disappointments with both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the ambivalence of Russian support. After realizing that there was a serious crisis looming, Russia became more supportive of a settlement that would meet Bulgarian demands.

Russian envoy Nikolay Pavlovich Ignatyev pressured both the Sublime Porte and the Ecumenical Patriarch Gregory VI to find a way to properly respond to Bulgarian demands. Ignatyev also organized meetings between the Patriarch and bishop Paisiy, the leader of the moderate faction within the Bulgarian movement for an independent Church. To Gregory VI, some Bulgarian demands were in collision with the Orthodox canon law, which eventually resulted in the failure of these negotiations. Russo–Greek relationships also cooled down, which turned Russia into the main promoter of the Bulgarian cause (Hopkins 2008, pp. 193–99). A change in policy became due in Constantinople after the Cretan uprising (1866–1868), when the Ottomans realized that a prolonged ecclesiastic conflict between the Greeks and Bulgarians might provoke more unrest. In 1870, the Ottoman government established the Bulgarian Exarchate by Sultan's *firman*, that is, by the intervention of a non-Orthodox factor in the dispute.

The Exarchate was conceived as a self-governing structure, representing a separate Bulgarian ethnicity, but still under the spiritual authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. From the perspective of the Orthodox canon law and the ecclesiastical order, its creation was problematic from the very beginning. The Exarchate could assume its jurisdiction in regions where two thirds of the population opted for the Bulgarian Church. In ethnically-mixed areas, such as Macedonia, it created unrest, which the Ottomans used to act as mediators and regulators of the conflict. The Exarchate represented a parallel structure to that of the Patriarchate, something the canons discouraged (cf. Canon 8 of the Nicaean Council of 325). It was established by a fiat of the Sultan Abdülaziz and without genuine consent of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Adding insult to the injury, the seat of the Exarch was in Constantinople, the city which the Archbishop of Constantinople and the Ecumenical Patriarch considers his own jurisdiction *par excellence*. The Patriarchate attempted to pressure the newly elected Exarch Antim (former bishop of Vidin) not to accept his election as the Exarch. After Antim refused, tensions escalated and in 1872 the Bulgarian Exarchate severed its relationship with the Patriarchate.

The Patriarchate convened a council in 1872 which condemned the actions of the Bulgarian Exarchate as heretical. A new type of heresy was defined—ethnophyletism. Article I of their condemnation reads, in its English translation: “We censure, condemn, and declare contrary to the teachings of the Gospel and the sacred canons of the holy Fathers, the doctrine of phyletism, or of the difference of races and national diversity in the bosom of the Church of Christ” ([Eastern Churches 1873](#), pp. 270–71). In the following article, this heresy is described as “[...] unlawful, unprecedented Church assembly upon such a principle [...],” which is, “[...] foreign and absolutely schismatic to the only holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” The last piece quoted could also be interpreted that the way in which the Exarchate was structured, as a parallel ecclesiastic organization to that of the Patriarchate, was actually condemned, not the concept of the national Orthodox jurisdiction as such.

Six years into the schism another Russo–Turkish war ended by the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878. The creation of the Principality of Bulgaria, which would roughly occupy the extent of the Bulgarian Exarchate, was also one of its provisions. The treaty was rejected by other Great Powers, and at the Berlin Congress that same year a much smaller Bulgarian state was agreed. It also resulted in the formation of another Bulgarian entity, the autonomous Principality of Eastern Rumelia, with significant non-Bulgarian minorities. The Exarchate became the official Church in the Principality of Bulgaria (although with a Catholic monarch), but also served as the pan-Bulgarian institution, linking the Principality with those Bulgarians that awaited liberation, especially in Macedonia and Thrace. The Exarchate organized the network of Bulgarian schools, also as an attempt to counter similar policies funded by Greece and Serbia. These institutions not only fostered religious upbringing, but also spread Bulgarian national ideals. After 1878, both the Ottomans and Bulgarians asserted sovereignty in ecclesiastical matters. This forced the Exarchate to operate from Constantinople, where the Exarch resided, and Sofia, from where the BOC was run by the Holy Synod. The success of the Exarchate in national matters paradoxically resulted in its organizational and political decline. The Exarchate was perceived as an instrument of Bulgarian foreign policy ([Ramet 1998](#), p. 279), rather than an important national institution. While successive governments were ready to subsidize the BOC’s clergy in the Ottoman Empire, they were eager to save on their salaries at home. There was no ambition to invest in the clergy’s education. The Samokov seminary created by the initial Russian administration of the Principality was closed in 1886 without even asking the Holy Synod for opinion. In the Ottoman areas, more radical Bulgarian nationalist grew dismissive of the Exarchate, due to its links with the Ottoman authorities ([Hopkins 2008](#), pp. 221–24, 246–50).

Although in a schismatic status, the Bulgarian Exarchate has never been completely isolated from the canonical Orthodoxy ([Kalkandjieva 1994](#), p. 101). This despite the view that the conduct of Bulgarian troops during WWI towards the non-Bulgarian Orthodox clergy members was particularly atrocious. For example, the SOC recently canonized as Orthodox martyrs bishop Vikentije Krdžić (who was tortured, killed, and burned in 1915; [Sava 1996](#), p. 76) and abbot Vladimir Protić, both presumably killed by Bulgarian soldiers. Like other Orthodox Churches in the Balkans, the BOC could not remain insulated from nationalist policies of its country ([Hopkins 2008](#), p. 259). After the war ended, the Orthodox world had to readjust to new realities. Many Bulgarians were expelled from Macedonia, Dobruja, and Thrace. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was suffering the consequences of the revolution, while communist influence grew stronger throughout Europe. The Ecumenical Patriarchate lost most of its flock in Asia Minor as the consequence of the Greek defeat in war with Turkey. After the Ecumenical Patriarchate declared its jurisdiction over Greeks in America in 1922, the edge of its 1872 condemnation appeared blunter.

On one hand, these developments opened the way for gradual restoration of official relations with the canonical Orthodoxy. On the other, they initiated a process of gradual acknowledgment of the universally acceptable limits of canonical jurisdictions. It was the Romanian Orthodox Church that first entered into the full sacramental communion with the Exarchate in 1922 and supplied it with its Myron oil. Not surprisingly, it was also Romanians who advocated lifting the schism and cancelling

the condemnations altogether (Döpmann 2006, pp. 60–61). By the mid-1920s, relations were restored with the SOC and the Church of Greece. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem offered to mediate between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Exarchate (1932–1936), but since the Bulgarian government insisted on keeping the Exarchate as it was, including keeping the Exarch's throne in Constantinople, the negotiations broke down. After 1915 no new Exarch could be elected, as the Turkish government decided not to give its approval (Kalkandjieva 1994, p. 102).

This all changed after another Bulgarian defeat, this time in WWII. The new government wanted to end the schismatic status of the Exarchate and put an end to its governance without the Exarch. Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia was elected the first Exarch after 1915 on 21 January 1945. The Ecumenical Patriarchate lifted the schism the following month, after more than 70 years. The mediation of the Russian Orthodox Church (backed by the political leverage of the USSR) was important in this situation, as were changes in Bulgarian foreign policy. After the new government withdrew its remaining forces from Macedonia and Thrace and joined the Allied cause, it also renounced any territorial claims regarding Greece, Yugoslavia, and Romania (Kalkandjieva 1994, p. 103). The Exarchate had to do the same, and consequently move its seat from Constantinople to Sofia.

The reconciliation process would be difficult to imagine without the BOC's acquiescence to demands of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its mother church, solidly grounded on the Orthodox canon law. Yet, recognition of autocephaly does not mean a secession and independence analogous to the concepts of the international law. It is often desired that the new local church maintains a respectful relationship with its mother church, even after it is granted the desired autocephaly. When the BOC could not secure the timely blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for its elevation to the highest dignity and rank in 1953, another crisis in their relationship broke out. This move was approved from Moscow and the "brotherly states", but not from Constantinople and several other Greek-dominated churches. Patriarch Athenagoras refused to participate in the ceremony by claiming in his letter to Metropolitan Kiril (Cyril), among others, that "[t]he Bulgarian Orthodox Church had, in accordance with the ecclesiastical order established in ancient times, to attest in advance its maturity in church life and ability by unswerving constancy and devotion in the canonical order [...] and only then ask through us for its elevation to patriarchal dignity [...]" (Kalkandjieva 1994, p. 105). Almost six centuries after St. Euthymius (Evtimiy) of Tarnovo witnessed the end of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, and nine decades after the beginning of the schism, Constantinople recognized the BOC's patriarchal dignity after yet another reconciliation in 1962. While it should not be forgotten that the non-Orthodox factors did play an important role, there would be no successful resolution of the schism without the BOC's readiness to accept the most important terms of reconciliation. After overcoming its internal schism of the 1990s, the BOC became a part of what Alicja Curanović dubbed the "antischismatic alliance" (Curanović 2007, p. 311), a joint effort with the ROC and the SOC to prevent further proliferation of uncanonical autocephalies.

3.2. *The Macedonian Orthodox Church*

In our next example, the Orthodox hierarchy in question has hitherto failed to reach its desired goal. Although it unilaterally separated from the SOC in 1967, more than half a century later, it is still struggling to get recognition. The failure of the overwhelming majority of its hierarchs to reconcile with the SOC resulted in indefinite postponement of fulfilment of its ambitions and aggravation of its canonical problems.

The history of Slavic Orthodoxy in North Macedonia is closely interwoven with those of Bulgarian and Serbian churches. The traditions of the contemporary Macedonian Orthodox Church are strongly embedded in those of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, established by an imperial decree most probably in 1018/1019. It originated in the state church of the defeated medieval Bulgarian Empire, which was re-organized by the Eastern Roman Emperor as an autocephalous archbishopric, directly subjugated to the imperial office. It may be said that it was de facto autocephalous, although it probably never received such acknowledgment from an ecclesiastical body (neither the Patriarchate nor a council).

In the Bulgarian national narrative, the Archbishopric of Ohrid represents one of the historic Bulgarian churches. The contemporary BOC also sees itself as the legal successor (*pravopriemnitsa*) of the Archbishopric (Ustav 2008, Art. 1). The contemporary SOC also has historical ties to Ohrid. Its precursor, the autocephalous Archbishopric of the Serbian lands and the littoral (first in Žiža, later in Peć) was established in 1219, after St. Sava's negotiations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The see of Žiža received mostly territories formerly under Ohrid's jurisdiction. The Ecumenical Patriarchate also accepted the creation of the Bulgarian Patriarchate of Tărnovo at the Ohrid's expense in 1235. Despite decreases in its territory and Serbian conquest of the area, the see of Ohrid had never been annexed by the Serbian Patriarchate. Even the most powerful of the Serbian medieval rulers, Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (1331–1355), decided not to interfere in its status. For more than seven centuries this archbishopric weathered the storms of the turbulent political events in the Balkans. However, it was abolished by the Ottoman Sultan, who, influenced by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, annexed Ohrid's jurisdiction to that of Constantinople in 1767. The historical path of this ecclesiastical see was by no means straight. Contrary to claims of different national historiographies (Bulgarian or North Macedonian, for instance), its ethnic and cultural composition was far from homogenous throughout its long history. At least since the second half of the 11th century its higher clergy became predominantly Greek and would remain so until its very end in the 18th century.

The Bulgarian national revival of the 19th century was strongly felt throughout the former territory of the Archbishopric of Ohrid. After 1870 the Slavic speaking population was claimed by the Bulgarian Exarchate. According to the Article 10 of the Sultan's *firman* on the creation of the Exarchate, where two-thirds of the population of a town/village opted for the Exarchate, it would empower it to install its hierarchy there (cf. Firman 1870, Article 10; cf. Roudometof 2014, p. 82). However, the clash of the Serbian and Bulgarian geopolitical interests and national aspirations arguably contributed to the emergence of the third, and today dominant, Slavic Macedonian identity (cf. Marinov 2013, p. 276; cf. Markovich 2013, p. 237). Many early leaders of the Macedonian autonomy movement considered themselves ethnic Bulgarians (cf. Marinov 2013, pp. 296–313). They tend to, nonetheless, be appropriated by the contemporary North Macedonian national narratives (for an extensive discussion on the North Macedonian narrative we suggest: Roudometof 2002, pp. 83–117). It is quite interesting and on point that Krste Misirkov, one of such figures, proposed in his 1903 work "On Macedonian Matters" that one of the primary goals of the Macedonian intellectual elite should be to reestablish the Archbishopric of Ohrid—as the independent "Macedonian" church (Misirkov 1903, pp. 22–23). Although Misirkov's proposal had probably little to do with the 1967 unilateral proclamation of Macedonian autocephaly, it did, as it had been noted, reveal much "about the tactics of Balkan nation-building" (Maxwell 2007, p. 172), which continues to this day. It is, however, interesting that Misirkov was not the only one to espouse similar concepts. The exarchist bishop of Skopje, Teodosije (Gologanov) broke away from the Exarchate and attempted to reestablish the Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1891, although under the aegis of the Roman Catholic Church. This attempt failed and bishop Teodosije was suspended but was later reactivated by the Exarchate.

Serbian national propaganda was also present in this region. At the end of the 19th century the Ecumenical Patriarchate agreed to appoint Serbian bishops to the sees located in what today is the Republic of North Macedonia. This is why already after the Balkan wars of 1912–1913, although officially still under Constantinople, this territory could de facto be administered by the Serbian church. After WWI this became an unambiguous reality, which was recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in its *Tomos* issued to the SOC in 1922 (cf. CPC Tomos 2010). The see of Constantinople officially ceded its bishoprics in Bosnia and Macedonia to the newly unified Serbian Orthodox Church and recognized it as an autocephalous Patriarchate. Although bishoprics of the Ecumenical Patriarchate were ceded to the SOC, those parallel, belonging to the Bulgarian Exarchate, were not. However, as long as these remained in Yugoslavia, there was little the BOC, still remaining in schism, could do to challenge the status quo. The situation briefly changed in Bulgarian favor during WWII, when the contemporary North Macedonia was divided between Bulgaria and the Italian protectorate of Albania.

The clergy of the Exarchate returned once again during the occupation and assisted the Bulgarian state in its assimilation policies in the region, although there was a chronic lack of the exarchist clerics, who were expected to promote the Bulgarian national conscience (Opfer-Klinger 2005, pp. 285–88). At the same time, SOC's bishops and clergy were expelled, mostly towards Serbia under German occupation (Opfer-Klinger 2005, pp. 284–85). After the war, the BOC gave up its jurisdiction claims, but it continued to maintain the traditions of the Archbishopric of Ohrid as its own.

Shifting ecclesiastic jurisdictions caused shifting loyalties between either pro-Bulgarian or pro-Serbian sentiments. This was a kind of defense mechanism for those who had found themselves between two (or more) assimilatory currents (cf. Duklevska Schubert 2013, pp. 73–74). After the war, the only nationalism that remained acceptable in the region was the Slavic Macedonian one. According to Eric Hobsbawm, “[t]he only form of constitutional arrangements which socialist states have taken seriously since 1917 are formulas for national federation and autonomy” (Hobsbawm 2000, p. 180). In both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union this commitment often went far beyond constitutional or legal interactions and territorial autonomies. A considerable effort was made to standardize identity markers of the smaller ethnic groups, like language, script, national costumes, and folklore. Unlike in the USSR (with the notable exception of Georgia) and Romania, where the state supported a policy of the unified Orthodox jurisdiction, their Yugoslav comrades saw an autocephalous Orthodox church in Macedonia as a marker of its national emancipation⁴. After all, creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate had been equated to recognition of the Bulgarian nationhood as well (cf. Matanov 1999, p. 400). Already during the war, in 1943, the decision to create Yugoslavia on federal principles was made by the anti-fascist assembly for the national liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ). The AVNOJ's decision, through provisions of its Articles 2 and 3, became the basis for creation of the post-war federation of six republics, envisioned mostly as the national homelands for each of its peoples. The Macedonian anti-fascist assembly (ASNOM), first convened in 1944, became the stem of the future national administration. After the war, under strong influence from Lazar Koliševski, ASNOM rejected any form of Macedonian separatism from Yugoslavia. Koliševski also denounced pro-Bulgarian and pro-Serbian cadres within the Macedonian party and asserted Macedonian national identity. Among the signs that “greater-Serbianism” was dealt with in the newly established republic, he emphasized the decision to ban bishops of the SOC from returning to their pre-war sees in 1945 (Koliševski 1962, pp. 23–25, 47). The ASNOM was also supportive of establishing a Macedonian national church. An Initiative Committee (originally called “the Initiative Committee for the organization of church life in Macedonia”, but soon renamed the “Initiative Committee for the foundation of the independent church in Macedonia and the renewal of the Archbishopric of Ohrid”) was set up as a coordinating body which was de facto running ecclesiastical affairs in the southern-most member of the Yugoslav federation. In March 1945, the Initiative Committee organized the so-called First Church–laity council, or Macedonian Church–laity council (Zečević Božić 1994, pp. 27–28; Radić 2002a, p. 284; cf. Janjić 2018, p. 642).

This council represented the first major instance of a series of interventions by the non-Orthodox factor. At this assembly not a single Orthodox bishop was present, whereas it included members of the local lower clergy, high-ranking local and federal communist party officials, but also representatives of the Catholic Church and the Islamic community (Dimevski 1989, p. 1029). At that point, there

⁴ Despite not allowing its members to express “any form of religious beliefs” (Janjić 2018, p. 313), the League of Communists of Yugoslavia earned a reputation of being less repressive to religion than most other Eastern European communist regimes. Whereas it could be said that the communist persecution of the Orthodox Church and believers never ceased, its forms and severity evolved over time. The regime never lost out of sight its goal of having the Church under control or at least its activities checked. Jovan Janjić wrote of three distinct phases in Yugoslav communists' dealing with the SOC. The persecution phase lasted from 1945 until 1953, when, partly due to foreign pressures, a somewhat liberalized policy of State's oversight over the ecclesiastic affairs was introduced. This second phase lasted until 1984, when “the faith triumphed over ideology”, and Serbian authorities allowed the construction of the St. Sava Cathedral in Belgrade (Janjić 2018; cf. Timotijević 2009, pp. 144–97; cf. Timotijević 2012, pp. 392–95). Edvard Kardelj, the main ideologue of Yugoslav Communists, believed that the Church that abandoned its links with the “antisocialist forces” could operate freely within the Yugoslav system. He was also convinced that in 1977 this was yet to happen (Janjić 2018, p. 314).

was an interesting idea espoused, that the Macedonian church should join the envisaged Yugoslav patriarchate, which would be created out of the SOC or in its stead (Janjić 2018, p. 129). Although on this occasion the independent Macedonian church was proclaimed as the restored Archbishopric of Ohrid, such a declaration was soon replaced by a much more moderate resolution, adopted in May 1946 at the Conference of priests of the People's Republic (PR) of Macedonia (Zečević Božić 1994, pp. 38–40; Ilievski 1973, pp. 78–79). As in the meantime the BOC resolved its schism with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the only bishops who could claim jurisdiction in the Republic were metropolitan of Skopje Josif (Cvijović) and bishop of Zletovo-Strumica Vikentije (Prodanov, future patriarch of the SOC), who were not allowed to return to their posts. The Initiative Committee hardly even considered the Orthodox canon law and administered the affairs of the Orthodox Church without any influence from the SOC's Patriarchate whatsoever (Radić 2002a, pp. 288–99). Owing to the effort of publishing documents from that era, mostly by Radmila Radić and Predrag Puzović, there can be little doubt today that the Yugoslav communists initiated and were heavily involved in the entire process (Radić 2002a, pp. 279–99; Puzović 1997). Radić mentioned that she had been told in 1989 by Petar Stambolić (1912–2007), who served as the Yugoslav prime minister (1963–1967) and chairman of its Presidency (1982–1983), that the creation of the Macedonian church was linked to the overall resolution of the national question in Macedonia (Radić 2002a, p. 282, fn. 1041).

Apart from enraging the SOC, the declarations of 1945 and 1946 did not bring the desired effect. The communist authorities apparently realized that some kind of reference to the canonical order of the Orthodox Church still had to be made. The Second church–laity council, held in 1958 at Ohrid, declared restoration of the Archbishopric of Ohrid as the Macedonian Orthodox Church (Dimevski 1989, p. 1056), which was nominally established as an autonomous structure within the SOC. Despite Patriarch's ban, his vicar bishop Dositej (Stojković or Stojkovski, lived 1906–1981) accepted the committee's invitation and came to Ohrid (cf. Čairović 2018, pp. 168–80), where he was declared “the Archbishop of Ohrid and Skopje and Metropolitan of Macedonia” (Zečević Božić 1994, pp. 94–95). This could hardly take place without the significant involvement of the highest members of the Yugoslav political apparatus, not only at the Council itself, but also during the entire process that preceded it (cf. Čairović 2018, p. 168ff; Radić 2002b, pp. 203–43; Puzović 1997, pp. 48–53). For instance, roughly ten days before the Council was opened on October 4, the president of the Federal committee for religious affairs Dobrovoje Radosavljević gave a speech before the third annual gathering of the regime-sponsored Association of the Orthodox priests of Yugoslavia, saying: “The Macedonian people have achieved national freedom for the first time. There were various aspirations and oppression, but now, the Macedonian people are the master in their own home. . . A unity of the church is needed, but on a brotherly, equal basis. It [the issue of the Macedonian Church—note by the authors] has been solved for 13 years now. The state must show its interest, because the [unspecified—note by the authors] others are interested in this issue and would like to get involved” (Radić 2002b, pp. 231–32, translation by N.Ž.). The organization of the council, as well as the decision of the SOC to ratify its proclamation in 1959, may have also coincided with the death of metropolitan Josif Cvijović in 1957, who, as the canonical bishop of Skopje, opposed any compromise with the communists on this matter.

The solution adopted at the 1958 council provided enough maneuvering space for both sides. As an outcome of a complex set of circumstances, two new MOC bishops were consecrated in 1959 by three SOC bishops and Patriarch German (1958–1990) himself, who by that time had already been styled “the Serbian and Macedonian Patriarch” by the regime (cf. Petrov and Temelski 2003, pp. 155–63). The new bishops' names (Kliment and Naum) were highly symbolic and reflected ideas of continuity, restoration, and the new beginning for the see of Ohrid—all at the same time. Ss. Kliment (Clement) and Naum (Nahum) had laid the foundations of Slavic Orthodoxy in Ohrid more than a thousand years before. This SOC's attempt, aimed at appeasing the MOC, resulted in the complete loss of Belgrade's organizational leverage, as from then on, the MOC could ordain its own bishops. The MOC became a de facto autonomous church after this *fait accompli* (cf. Radić 2002b, p. 246). As of 1961,

all candidates for priesthood in the MOC had to pass a test in Macedonian language, national and ecclesiastical history (*ibid.*, pp. 246–47), thus conforming to the existing nation-building policy.

The third church–laity council symbolically commemorated the second centenary of the abolishment of the Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1967. MOC’s unilateral declaration of autocephaly represented a culmination of a long crisis in its relationship with the SOC and a reaction to SOC’s refusal to positively respond to requests made by Yugoslav authorities and Macedonian hierarchs (cf. [Nikolić and Dimitrijević 2013](#), pp. 196–97; [Risteski 2009](#), pp. 163–65). As expected, the SOC did not recognize the self-proclaimed autocephaly of the MOC, which has been treated as the uncanonical organization by the canonical Orthodoxy ever since. Although Macedonian authorities regarded the Bulgarian national narrative with hostility, the MOC attempted in 1968 to secure the BOC’s recognition. The BOC decided neither to condemn nor support the MOC, while Patriarch Kiril assured the MOC of both the BOC’s love for “brothers in Macedonia” and its “love and respect towards the Serbian Church and the Serbian people” ([Petrov and Temelski 2003](#), pp. 155–63).

Although Yugoslav authorities and the MOC failed at actually reaching their goal, the proclamation of autocephaly in 1967 was celebrated as the final victory in both ecclesiastical and national causes (cf. [Ilievski 1973](#), p. 116ff.; [Dimevski 1989](#), pp. 1086–87). The creation of the national church was more important to the MOC and its communist benefactors than receiving the actual canonical recognition, since they regarded this issue primarily as a part of the solution of the Macedonian national question (cf. [Radić 2002a](#), p. 296). The price paid was to remain for decades in a schism that outlived both Yugoslavia and the communist elites that supported it.

Being unrecognized by the canonical Orthodoxy is a situation any Orthodox hierarchy should struggle to overcome. The SOC and the MOC did have their moments of rapprochement after Macedonia became an independent state, although not without controversies (cf. [Raković 2015](#), p. 225). Being embroiled in a name dispute with neighboring Greece and forced to accept a provisional name “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM) in the UN, the country became particularly sensitive to identity issues. In order to demonstrate its support for the MOC, the government in Skopje banned Serbian clergy from entering the country in cassocks in 1994 ([Raković 2015](#), p. 227).

The SOC’s Patriarch Pavle (1990–2009) actively pursued a policy of healing all the schisms that were initiated between 1945 and 1990. The SOC in the 1990s attempted either to install its own infrastructure, or to negotiate some kind of canonical settlement. Attempts to end the Macedonian schism had their apogee in the “Niš Agreement” signed on 17 May 2002. It represented a long-negotiated draft accord on the restoration of ecclesiastical unity between the SOC and the MOC. The SOC required the MOC to return to the status of the autonomous Church within the SOC, while assuring the MOC that it accepted affirmation of Macedonian national identity and usage of the term “Macedonian” in their communication. In order to secure a pan-Orthodox recognition of the settlement, especially from the influential Greek-speaking churches, the representatives of the SOC and the MOC agreed to externally use the Archbishopric of Ohrid as the MOC’s designation⁵. This agreement, expected to herald the final resolution of the issue, faced vehement rejection in Skopje (deleted for the purpose of peer review) and was rejected by MOC’s Synod on June 6. The rejection was grounded on two rather nationalist and maximalist demands. Neither the adjective “Macedonian” nor swift recognition of autocephaly could be accepted as negotiable. The government in Skopje apparently expected from its Orthodox hierarchs what it itself could not achieve in its dispute with Greece.

The SOC responded furiously by asking individual bishops, clergy members, and believers to return to canonical Orthodoxy. The call was answered by the Metropolitan bishop Jovan (Vraniškoski) of the MOC, who initiated these negotiations in 1998 ([Vraniškoski 2008](#), pp. 86–87). This decision proved to bear far-reaching consequences, since in 2004 the SOC, following the provisions of the

⁵ Draft Agreement on Establishing Church Unity. 2002. In *Zaradi Idnoto Carstvo, Tom I/For the Kingdom to Come*. Edited by Borjan Vitanov. Ohrid: Pravoslavna Ohridska Arhiepiskopija. pp. 106–11, vol. I. Cf. pp. 106–7.

“Niš Agreement” and having bishop Jovan on its side, created the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO) as an autonomous church under its aegis. Ever since in 2005 the SOC issued its *Tomos* of autonomy, two parallel ecclesiastical structures have existed in North Macedonia. The unrecognized MOC represents the majority Orthodox denomination, while the OAO is the only canonical church. Neither the MOC nor authorities in Skopje took Vraniškoski’s enthronement as the head of the OAO lightly. The state prosecutors charged him with embezzlement and instigating ethnic and religious hatred, for which Archbishop Jovan served multiple prison sentences. The government also denied the OAO registration, with some officials vowing never to allow such a thing to happen (Payne 2007, pp. 838–40, 846). The Serbian government reacted by introducing sanctions to its southern neighbor, while several Orthodox Churches, Russian and Bulgarian included, openly demonstrated their support for Archbishop Jovan at different occasions (cf. Raković 2015, pp. 240–49).

The MOC rejected a very promising chance for reconciliation not only with the SOC, but also the rest of the canonical Orthodoxy as well. For the second time in less than 150 years there is a situation that two hierarchies officially operate in North Macedonia. Unlike the BOC, which in 1945 accepted reconciliation under, from the perspective of the Bulgarian national narrative, much harsher conditions, the MOC decided to remain in schism under the pretext of defending national interest (deleted for the purpose of peer review). Truth be told, at least since 2002, the voices within the SOC opposing the MOC’s eventual autocephaly have become marginalized. There have been disagreements on whether this should be a rapid process (bishop Lavrentije) or should include a prolonged trial period (bishop Irinej), in order to leave the impression that the canonical crime of schism is not rewarded (cf. Raković 2015, pp. 236–37).

The MOC invested a significant effort in bypassing the SOC in its autocephaly bid. The government officials of North Macedonia have recently attempted to acquire recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, emboldened by its actions in Ukraine. However, from the canonical perspective, there is little resemblance between these cases, other than similarities in the political sphere. Constantinople agreed to completely transfer its jurisdiction to SOC over this area in 1922 and is unlikely to assert a similar claim like the one regarding Kiev, where it maintained that the ROC was only in charge as the caretaker. Constantinople might demonstrate more initiative regarding the MOC after the long-standing name dispute was settled, but the Ecumenical Patriarchate has so far demonstrated no intention to bypass the SOC. The BOC’s traditional attachment to places in contemporary North Macedonia and the Bulgarian public’s well-known emotionality over Macedonian issues also encouraged the MOC to once again ask the BOC to declare itself for Ohrid’s mother church. The BOC had previously accepted celebrating liturgies with the MOC, and unlike other canonical churches, was not keeping the MOC in isolation, much like the Romanian Orthodox Church did with the Bulgarian Exarchate in the 1920s (cf. Döpmann 2006, p. 60). After facing demonstrations in Sofia, the BOC agreed in 2017 to set up a committee to deal with this request. According to some media reports, the committee was silently dissolved under Russian pressure (Faktor.bg 2018). In January 2020, North Macedonian prime minister Oliver Spasovski and his predecessor Zoran Zaev visited the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul. The Ecumenical Patriarchate agreed to “invite both sides, the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as the Church of Skopje, to a joint meeting, in an attempt to find a mutually acceptable solution to the country’s major ecclesiastical issue” (Orthodox times 2020).

If the Orthodox canon law were to be applied without much leniency, the bid for the autocephaly almost entirely depends on avoiding further canonical transgressions and resuming negotiations with the SOC and the OAO. This is the necessary condition for negotiating the SOC’s initiation of the final procedure with the Ecumenical Patriarchate for awarding the MOC with autocephalous status. Since 2002 there have been some positive developments that might facilitate such a process, including the already mentioned resolution of North Macedonia’s name dispute with Greece. After the Niš Accords of 2002, and especially by supporting the OAO, the SOC also demonstrated that it abandoned Serbian expansionism and denial of the specific Slavic Macedonian national identity.

If the history of the Bulgarian Exarchate schism were to repeat itself in the North Macedonian case, no individual recognitions of the MOC would amount to its full autocephaly. Any attempt to bend the canonical procedures or bypass the SOC might result in complicating the situation further and a prolonged schismatic status, with negative impact for both the Orthodox Church in North Macedonia and the pan-Orthodox affirmation of its cherished identity. MOC's reconciliation with the SOC, on the other hand, would probably represent the fastest road to its full ecclesiastic affirmation.

3.3. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church

The last case in this study is about an organization that is least likely to join the ranks of canonical Orthodoxy, but the context in which it emerged can be used as an interesting study of contemporary nation-building in progress. In canonical terms, it was created *ex nihilo* by the Committee for restoration of Autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church in 1993 (reminiscent of the Initiative Committee of the MOC in 1945), within which not a single canonical bishop was present. It declared an abbot from the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia (ROCOR), Antonije Abramović, for its first bishop. Since Abramović had not previously been consecrated a bishop, the apostolic succession became problematic from the very beginning. When Abramović died, he was succeeded by the former priest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate Miraš Dedeić (self-styled metropolitan Mihailo). Both Abramović and Dedeić were defrocked and later excommunicated by their original jurisdictions in 1995 and 1997, respectively. Dedeić was even anathemised in 1998 (Šistek 2015, pp. 177–78; Aleksić and Krstajić 2005, pp. 66, 104–5, 110, 122–23, 138–41; Raković 2015, p. 82). From the perspective of canonical Orthodoxy, there is one very important difference between this and the MOC case. While the MOC represents a schismatic hierarchy with claims to Orthodox apostolic succession, the leader of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MnOC) is neither a regular bishop, nor recognized as an Orthodox believer by the canonical Orthodoxy (cf. Bartholomew 2019; cf. N1 2019). The very push for the MnOC's creation came from a group of Montenegrin nationalists whose Orthodox credentials were, to say the least, difficult to establish (cf. Raković 2015, p. 171).

The Montenegrin Orthodox Church reinforces Montenegrin nationalism in opposition to the traditional pro-Serbian identity of the Church of Montenegro. This organization claims that in 1993 it only restored the autocephaly of the Metropolitanate of Cetinje, which, in its narrative, was illegally and illegitimately annexed to the SOC by regent Alexander's decree in 1920 (cf. Ustav 2009). This claim, like many others of the MnOC, can hardly sustain deeper scrutiny, as it was the bishops of the Church of Montenegro themselves who had initiated the process of joining with other Serbian jurisdictions in 1918 (Zapisnik 1918). This took place years before the mentioned decision (see below) or *Tomos* of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1922, which canonically sanctioned the jurisdiction of the SOC over what used to be Yugoslavia. However, by drawing on the narrative of Montenegro's forceful annexation to Serbia in 1918, the MnOC derives its claims that it should be compensated for the pre-1920 Montenegrin Church's losses, which should, not surprisingly, take place at the SOC's expense. Today, despite having a strong backing from the Montenegrin state and especially its strongman Milo Đukanović (cf. Politico 2016), it can hardly claim allegiance of more than 30% of the Orthodox believers within the country (cf. Venice Commission 2019, p. 4). The actual figures are probably much lower. In 2014, MnOC printed some 10,000 household calendars (Kalendar 2014), items that every Orthodox household is expected to have, thus reaching hardly more than 50,000 believers. Its leader claimed that same year that the MnOC had between 100,000 and 120,000 "registered" believers. This would account for 22% to 27% of the country's 450,000 Orthodox (cf. Duma 2014). Emil Saggau estimated that MnOC has 5000 active believers, ca. 47,000 people who might feel they belong to it, and 150,000 that somewhat sympathize with the MnOC, while the opinion polls he analyzed might indicate a downward trend in this regard (Hilton Saggau, pp. 38–40). By comparing public opinion surveys, it could be estimated that in reality the MOC does not have the allegiance of significantly less than 8% (ISM 2011, p. 44) and significantly more than 10% of the population (IC 2020). However, due to its strong nationalist disposition, it represents an interesting case for analyzing contradictions that may

arise when nationalist fervor and actions of the state instrumentalize the concept of autocephaly while completely disregarding the Orthodox canon law.

Unlike in North Macedonia, the SOC represents the majority of the Orthodox believers within the country. The SOC's Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (MML) is the largest diocese of the only canonical Orthodox Church. It claims unbroken continuity with the bishopric established in 1219 by the founder of the SOC, St. Sava himself. The region around Cetinje was among the last pieces of the former Serbian Empire that fell to the Ottoman onslaught in 1496, several decades after the Despotate of Serbia. The inhospitable geographical features of this area enabled the Prince-Bishopric of Montenegro to emerge after 1516. The locally elected bishop (*vladika*) acted as a mediator among the chieftains of Montenegrin clans and represented the highest authority within this statelet. After the Sultan incorporated the Patriarchate of Peć into the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1766, the bishops of Cetinje found themselves in a position analogous to that of the Metropolitanate of Karlovci (Karlowitz). Being beyond the Sultan's reach, both metropolitan sees could simply ignore Ottoman's decision. After the Ottomans recognized the breakaway territory in 1789, the Ecumenical Patriarchate could do little to contest Montenegro Church's de facto independence. The title of the Montenegrin Prince-bishop had after 1697 become hereditary and was passed from uncle to nephew within the Petrović-Njegoš clan. This situation was formally abolished in 1852, when Danilo Petrović became the first secular Prince of Montenegro.

The bishops of Cetinje maintained that they kept the traditions of the Serbian Church after 1766 alive, which they indicated by using the historical title of "the Exarch of the throne of Peć" (turk. İpek, alb. Pejë), i.e., of the Serbian Patriarch. The famous prince-bishop and poet Petar II Petrović-Njegoš believed that in the event of Serbian unification, it would be his prerogative to return to Peć, as the Serbian Patriarch (Raković 2015, p. 50). The last King of Montenegro, Nikola I Petrović, also believed that it was his country's right to appoint the Serbian Patriarch, and was furious when, in 1920, the Metropolitan bishop of Belgrade was elected instead (Glas Crnogorca 1920, p. 1). The Church of Montenegro was not the only one that claimed succession to the Patriarchate of Peć. Maybe even stronger claims of continuity could have been made by the metropolitan bishop of Sremski Karlovci, who was a direct successor of the Serbian Patriarchs that oversaw two great Serbian migrations to what was then southern Hungary in 17th and 18th centuries. Since 1848 the metropolitan of Karlovci also styled himself as the Serbian Patriarch. Furthermore, the Metropolitan bishop of the capital city of Belgrade could expect that he might become the new Patriarch, in line with the common practice in the Orthodox world. The council, presided by the Montenegrin metropolitan Mitrofan Ban, reconciled all these claims by bundling them together into the official title of the SOC's primate: "the Metropolitan of Karlovci–Belgrade, Archbishop of Peć and the Serbian Patriarch." In 1920, Dimitrije, the metropolitan bishop of Belgrade, got elected (twice), and thus became the first Serbian Patriarch of the united jurisdiction since 1766.

Contrary to MnOC's claims, the Church of Montenegro from the canonical perspective simply continued to exist within a broader framework of the SOC. It was not abolished by the decree of Prince-regent Alexander (cf. Ustav 2009, Art. 4), since the Prince-regent only acknowledged the decision of "all the Orthodox bishops" of the newly established Kingdom, and gave the executive order to his ministers to implement it (cf. Rastoder 2016, pp. 5–6). It was a decision initiated and approved by all the bishops of the Church of Montenegro (Zapisnik 1918) and atop of it, even the exiled Montenegrin King (Glas Crnogorca 1920). The Ecumenical Patriarchate issued a *Tomos* confirming both the SOC's unification and its territory, while the final integration was completed by the SOC's constitution of 1931. Subsequent claims made by the MnOC's promoters and acolytes that Metropolitan bishop Mitrofan did this under pressure (Brković 1991, p. 4) are, to say the least, difficult to confirm and strongly contradict his other statements and actions during the same period.

Another interesting debate is whether the Church of Montenegro could be considered as canonically autocephalous prior to 1918. It is a historical fact that the see of Cetinje was not subject to any higher jurisdiction, apart from its symbolic adherence to the defunct Throne of Peć, implied by the honorific

usage of the title “Exarch.” It was occasionally listed as an autocephalous Church by several other local Orthodox Churches in the 19th century (cf. [Rallis and Potlis 1855](#), p. 529). However, since Montenegrin bishops depended on consecration and/or confirmation by either Austrian Serbs’ or Russian bishops, the Metropolitanate of Cetinje would not meet the contemporary criteria of autocephaly. Until well into the 19th century, the bishops of Cetinje could not convene their local councils of bishops, and consequently, could not consecrate bishops on their own. The Church of Montenegro defined itself as autocephalous in its Constitution ([Ustav 1904](#), Articles 1 and 2). However, as neither the mentioned “Throne of Peć” nor any other jurisdiction had previously issued a *Tomos* of autocephaly to Cetinje, this claim is seldom considered as a valid one today. This is the current position of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (cf. [Bartholomew 2019](#)) and the Russian Orthodox Church (cf. [Nedeljković 2007](#), p. 281; [Raković 2019](#), p. 172). On the level of political narratives and current debates, however, this distinction does not play any major role. In our view, this is mostly due to indiscriminate application of the secular legal terminology to a very different framework of the Orthodox canon law by both the Montenegrin politicians and the media. More importantly, without being able to assert its claim that the Church of Montenegro was fully autocephalous (and not de facto independent), the MnOC can hardly defend its bid to *restore* Montenegrin pre-1920 autocephaly in the first place.

Montenegrin nationalism grew mostly through differentiation from and the othering of the previously predominant Serbian national affiliation in that country (cf. [Raković 2015](#), pp. 47–50). The pieces of evidence that might support the claim that Montenegro prior to its unification with Serbia in 1918 understood itself as nationally distinct from a broader concept of Serbdom are quite difficult to come across. As the final operations of 1918 were unfolding, even Montenegrin King Nicholas I wrote that in his country, “live the best among the Serbs and Yugoslavs.” In the same proclamation, he expressed his support for Yugoslav unification on federal or confederal principles ([Glas Crnogorca 1918](#), p. 1). Many among his predecessors from the Petrović-Njegoš line also expressed similar national sentiments (cf. [Pavlovic 2008](#), pp. 48–57). The Roman Catholic Church also used to consider Montenegro as a kind of Serbian entity. The honorific title of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bar (Antibari) is *primas Serviae* (the primate of Serbia).

Paradoxically, it appears that the very unification of Serbia and Montenegro initiated a major divergence of their populations’ identities. Already in the fall of 1918 there were hastily organized elections for what would become known as the Assembly of Podgorica. This body voted in favor of unconditional unification with Serbia and dethronement of the exiled Montenegrin king. The loyalists to the Petrović-Njegoš dynasty (*zelenaši*) were the losing side and organized a rebellion in January 1919 (December 1918 old style), which would have far-reaching consequences. With Italian support, they mustered some 4000 insurgents (cf. [Pavlovic 2008](#), p. 111), which was roughly the equivalent to 8% of the total Montenegrin forces mobilized for the operations of the WWI. This rebellion was crushed by the Serbian troops, who were aided by the local volunteers from the Montenegrin clans (*bjelaši*). Since Italy vied for control over Dalmatia with the nascent Yugoslav state, she supported the uprising and offered refuge for the exiled loyalists in the town of Gaeta. Until 1989, this country was the final resting place of the exiled King, who was the father-in-law of the Italian monarch. Although Serbian nationalism had for a long time been fueled by, among others, romantic depictions of Montenegrins as “the Serbian Spartans”, the observers from Serbia soon became aware that different political cultures evolved in these countries. They criticized what they saw as a lack of democratic spirit among the Montenegrins, their particularism, and intricate clan loyalties, which could override devotion to the broader national community (cf. [Raković 2019](#), pp. 17–21).

Within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Montenegrins were counted among the Serbs. King Alexander, himself born in Cetinje in 1888 and one of King Nicholas’s many grandchildren, also took pride in his maternal lineage connecting him to the Petrović Njegoš clan. In the 1920s, he restored the Mausoleum-chapel of Prince-bishop and poet Petar II Petrović Njegoš, linking this event to the birth of the future King Petar II of Yugoslavia. He also made peace with his Petrović relatives, by including the Montenegrin crown-prince Mihajlo in his civil list.

Meanwhile, the goals of the former zelenaši confederalists were adopted by the Communist party of Yugoslavia on its Congresses in Vienna (1926) and Dresden (1928). The communists believed that Serbian domination had to be thwarted in order to enable the emancipation of other Yugoslav ethnicities. Many members of the zelenaši families became prominent communists during or after WWII (Raković 2019, pp. 23–82), like generals Nikola Popović and Jovo Kapičić. Already during the war, Montenegrin communists earned their reputation of being particularly loyal to Stalin and the USSR. After Tito's split with Stalin in 1948, a Gulag was established on the Croatian island of Goli otok (lit. barren island), designated mostly for the Stalinists within the party. The smallest Yugoslav constituent nationality (2.4% of the population) was disproportionately represented by 21.5% of the inmates. The number of Montenegrins arrested with charges of collusion with the Cominform and the USSR was around 1% of the Republic's total population (Balkan Insight 2014; Previšić 2014, pp. 27, 58, 67, cf. 50). On the other hand, this Republic outcompeted the other five in its declarations of loyalty to Tito, as between 1946 and 1992 its capital was officially known as Titograd (Tito-city). However, no major attempt to create the MnOC was made before 1990s, probably as a consequence of two converging factors.

First of all, instead of addressing the church issue the way the PR Macedonia did, Montenegrin authorities opted to diminish any Orthodox Church's influence in their republic. Montenegrin communists were particularly ardent and effective in their struggle against the SOC. The war-time Metropolitan St. Joanikije Lipovac (canonized as a martyr in 1999) was executed by the communists in 1945, under charges of collaboration with the Yugoslav royalists and the Italians. His successor Arsenije Bradvarević (1947–1961) spent most of his time in office either in prison (in his 70s) or in monastery confinement, due to his protests against persecution of the clergy and reluctance to recognize the pro-regime priests' associations. During his show-trial he was also ludicrously accused of celebrating Dwight D. Eisenhower's victory in the US elections of 1952 (Đurić Mišina 2000, pp. 153–66; Sava 1996, pp. 37–38). It was only after 1961, when Metropolitan Danilo Dajković (1961–1990) was enthroned, that the most basic conditions for proper management of the diocese were met. However, by the mid-1970s, there was a sharp decline in religiosity—back then Montenegrin administration estimated that only some 10% of the population believed in God's existence (Raković 2015, p. 68). In neighboring Serbia, there were still complaints over religion's resilience (e.g., Timotijević 2009, pp. 375–87). Montenegrins were the least religious ethnic group of Yugoslavia in the late 1980s (Bakrač 2012, p. 31). While the Berlin wall was crumbling, there were some 15–18 active priests left in the Republic, a fraction of the pre-WWII ca. 300 (cf. Hilton Saggau 2017, p. 36; cf. Novosti 2014; Amfilohije 2017).

Another possible explanation for the lack of schism in Montenegro after 1945 is the gradual character of the post-war differentiation from Serbia, as visible on the symbols of the People's (later Socialist) Republic of Montenegro. Its flag was indistinguishable from that of Serbia and the coat of arms depicted Mount Lovćen's summit with Njegoš's Mausoleum-chapel. Several prominent Montenegrin communists only emphasized that Montenegrins were basically a different kind of Serbs, who won their nationhood through centuries of political independence (Raković 2019, pp. 83–84). There was little doubt in the West that this statement was basically true. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, even in the 1980s linked Montenegrin ethnogenesis to Serbian and Vlach elements, which coalesced during the Ottoman domination of the Balkan peninsula (Hobsbawm 2000, p. 64). Stronger differentiation became visible after 1967, with Veljko Milatović's ascent to power among the local communists. Milatović openly instructed historians to reexamine the existing narratives of Serbian origins of the Montenegrin nation (cf. Raković 2019, pp. 95–105). At the same time, other policies also aimed at creating a new kind of Montenegrin identity. In 1972, the Chapel depicted on the Montenegrin coat-of-arms was destroyed in order to build a new, secular mausoleum to Njegoš. It was the work of the famous Croatian-American sculptor Ivan Meštrović, who was inspired by the pagan aesthetics of the Hellenistic antiquity. The SOC tried to legally halt this project and keep its chapel in place. However, the court in Cetinje rejected the initiative by claiming that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was abolished by King Alexander's decree, and that therefore, it had no legal representative to file the lawsuit, especially

not the one embodied in the SOC (Raković 2015, pp. 61–62). The court thus rejected the SOC's claims of legal continuity with the pre-1918 Church of Montenegro. This was probably the first time that such an argument had actual legal and material consequences⁶.

The policy of Montenegrin differentiation from Serbia and Serbs only added fuel to the already burning fire of the SOC's indignation. The enthronement of Amfilohije Radović as the metropolitan bishop of Cetinje in 1991 also represented an act of the SOC's defiance, as he had hardly been the preferable choice of his homeland's Communist Party (cf. Raković 2015, pp. 71–72). This was also the time when the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo was commemorated, which was coupled with rising feelings of solidarity with Serbia and Serbian nationalism. While the SOC tried to return to the public sphere after decades of marginalization, Slobodan Milošević's "anti-bureaucratic revolution" was already in full sway. Milošević's support propelled Momir Bulatović and Milo Đukanović to Montenegro's top offices, thus securing the continuity of communist cadres' hold on power from 1945 until the present day.

At the same time, a new brand of ardent Montenegrin nationalism got its political wing in Slavko Perović's Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSCG). The circle linked to LSCG created The Committee for Restoration (*vrtanje*) of Autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church in 1990. In their rhetoric, they labeled the SOC as the occupier of Montenegrin churches and monasteries and organized violent takeover attempts of places of worship (Hilton Saggau 2017, p. 41; Raković 2019, pp. 119–20, 171–72) together with parallel religious ceremonies. Both sides made it clear that they were prepared for further clashes, yet the Committee itself did not gain sufficient traction. Its petition to Montenegrin parliament could gather only 8000 signatures (cf. Rastoder 2003). They managed to convince Antonije Abramović to become the first bishop of the MnOC (Morrisson 2018, pp. 89–90). After his death, the MnOC appointed Miraš Dedeić (Mihailo) as the new Metropolitan. After being excommunicated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Dedeić contacted the "Alternative Synod" of the BOC, which consecrated him as a bishop in 1998. Although the canonical BOC considered this an affront to Orthodoxy and even attempted to provoke Bulgarian government's reaction, Dedeić's consecration came at a politically convenient moment. The government of Bulgaria supported the Alternative Synod, while Slobodan Milošević resented the SOC's metropolitan Amfilohije, after his outspoken support for Milo Đukanović, Milošević's former protege (Duma 2014; Raković 2019, pp. 173–75).

Before joining the MnOC, Dedeić had a reputation as a Serbian nationalist, who in the early 1990s collected funds for the Bosnian Serb Army (Nedeljković 2007, p. 279). He would later become quite vocal in his condemnations of Serbian war crimes and war conduct in general. Yet, the man of peace abroad (cf. Šerbo Rastoder for: RTS 2019, 6'56''–7'27'') was not a pacifist at home. Between 1995 and 2002 over 40 violent attacks against the SOC's believers and property were reported, including those with Dedeić's involvement (Raković 2015, p. 83; 2019, p. 176).

The intervention of the non-Orthodox factor came with Đukanović's acceptance of the LSCG's ideas. Đukanović's policies towards the SOC in Montenegro appear analogous to those of Bulgarian governments that supported the Alternative Synod, which is why it deserves some space at this point. This Bulgarian schism was initiated with the support of the governing structures in the early 1990s. The government later adopted a position that there were *two legitimate* Orthodox Churches in the country, only to express a clear preference for the non-canonical one (Hopkins 2008, pp. 334–63). The non-canonical Church thus attempted to overpower the canonical one and eventually take the canonical hierarchy's place. Đukanović's DPS (Democratic Party of the Socialists) probably had a similar trajectory in mind. MnOC was registered as an NGO (Non-government organization) at the Cetinje police station in 2000. That same year, Đukanović, who according to metropolitan Amfilohije

⁶ Previously it had been attempted by the WWII "Independent State of Montenegro", an Axis puppet entity organized along the ideological concepts of the Croatian fascism (promoted mostly by Sekula Drljević), which declared the Montenegrin Orthodox Church autocephalous in the Article 4 of its "constitution", however with little to no practical consequences (cf. Raković 2019, p. 65).

had never been baptized (N1 BiH 2018), lectured the SOC's Patriarch Pavle on "basic Christian values" and demanded that the SOC stops calling "thousands of believers" of the MnOC "a religious sect and godless people" (Raković 2015, pp. 83–84). After legitimizing both organizations as Orthodox, Đukanović then gradually added more support for the MnOC. This does not mean that his involvement has always been direct and that it excluded periods of *détente* with the SOC. The Montenegrin government supported the completion of the Podgorica Cathedral and took part in 1700th anniversary celebrations of the Edict of Milan (Portalanalitika 2013). Montenegrin police also prevented Dedeić and his supporters from occupying the monastery of Cetinje in 2007 (Raković 2015, p. 99), but it banned the SOC's bishop Filaret from visiting part of his diocese in Montenegro during that same year.

One of the reasons for the government's ambivalent support for Dedeić's cause is that MnOC's standing within the general population has never made it a force that could support a stable governing majority. Although during the 1990s the Montenegrin–Serb identity differentiation was finally completed (Džankić 2015, p. 132), the census data clearly indicated that the Montenegrin ethnic identity markers were still far from majority acceptance. If in 1991, Montenegro appeared as a country homogenized around the Montenegrin identity, the 2003 census documented a visible upsurge in Serbian identity markers. Whereas only 22% stated their mother tongue was Montenegrin (at the time recently introduced, cf. Brković 2013, pp. 135–37), 63% opted for the Serbian language. At the same time, there were some 70,000 ethnic Montenegrins more than the ethnic Serbs, or 43% versus 32%, respectively. In 2011, Montenegrin identity was still far from the majority one. In terms of ethnicity there were 45% Montenegrins, 29% Serbs, and 12% Bosniaks and Muslims. The Montenegrin language was spoken by 37%, Serbian by 43%, Bosnian by 5.3%, and other derivatives of Serbo–Croatian accounted for almost 4%. In terms of religion, Orthodoxy accounted for 72% of the respondents, Catholicism for 3.4%, and Islam for 16% (Monstat 2011, pp. 8, 12–13, 15; cf. Monstat 2004). The adherence to MnOC thus became the least prominent among the Montenegrin identity markers.

The SOC on the other hand has not only remained the majority denomination of the country but has in the meantime developed a strong activist base, which enables it to organize protest actions and blockades when necessary (cf. Raković 2015, p. 99). It adopted a policy of accepting the Montenegrin ethnic identity as a personal choice (and even punished high-ranking clerics who discredited it; cf. Novosti 2011; Pravoslavje 2011), rendering its public image more immune to accusations of being anti-Montenegrin and exclusively Serbian.

A radical anti-Serbian rhetoric is a common feature of MnOC's discourse and commentators that support it. The polarization usually unfolds around the narrative that the SOC illegitimately took something away from the Montenegrins (church, historical figures, property, money, etc.). The state should kick the SOC out of the churches and monasteries it currently uses (Popović 2019; cf. Duma 2014). More recently, the discourse moved towards declaring the SOC a security threat. It is now routinely accused of being a problem in Montenegrin security or an anti-state agent, mostly by Milo Đukanović himself (Politico 2016). While such rhetoric serves to homogenize Đukanović's powerbase before his further attempts to intervene in the ecclesiastical matters, it also provokes a strong reaction by the opposition (cf. Todorović 2016, p. 333), thus only expanding the activist base at SOC's disposal. Đukanović's policies thus added a volatile mixture of political, ethnic, and ideological conflicts to the issue, which even without these had already been laden with strong emotions and explosive potential.

For about a decade now, there have been visible signs that the Montenegrin state might go well beyond levels of interventionism seen in the Bulgarian Alternative Synod schism of the 1990s. In 2011, Đukanović stated that his party should advocate "unification of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro", while at the same time accusing MML of not aligning with the interests of the state. This is because it operated as a part of the SOC, which in Đukanović's view, did not hold Montenegro's independence in high regard. That same year the ruling Democratic Party of the Socialists (DPS) included Đukanović's vision in its party program (Raković 2019, pp. 189–90). In 2013 Đukanović announced that he would initiate the final stage of his bid to create a separate Montenegrin Church, when he stated that in Montenegro there should exist only one Orthodox Church with its seat in that country. The reporter of

the German *Deutsche Welle* saw in this nothing less than an attempt to create “a tailor-made Church for the Party” (Canka 2013). The ruling DPS has put the creation of one Orthodox Church in Montenegro, independent, unified, with its jurisdiction adjusted to the internationally recognized borders of the country on its seventh congress priority list (DPS 2015, p. 13). In his most recent appearances, Đukanović also demonstrated that his vision is not grounded in even the most basic knowledge of the matter he would like to regulate. He made a ludicrous statement that Montenegro is being denied the “canonical right [. . .] in line with **the principle of ethnophyletism**, i.e., that the Orthodox Church’s organization all over the world follows the organization of the state” (N1 Pressing 2019, 18’30’’–18’58’’). When asked whether he expected Constantinople’s recognition of such a church he replied: “Of course I do. Of course, I do, as I would be surprised if one thought the other way. I repeat, it would be contrary to the canon law, it would contradict **the fundamental principle of ethnophyletism** [. . .]” (N1 Pressing 2019, 19’00’’–19’13’’); translation and emphasis by D.Š.). As one might guess, the heresy of ethnophyletism has since its condemnation of 1872 not been accepted as the fundamental principle of the Orthodox canon law, quite contrary to Đukanović’s claims.

The SOC has also been subjected to legal pressures. It has never been registered as a religious denomination in that country, simply because no previous legislator demanded it did so. Therefore, since 2011 the state administration expelled SOC’s clergy members (and, in effect, their families) who did not hold Montenegrin citizenship, after they failed to produce the legally required confirmation of their denomination’s registration. The state also appropriated the same level of subsidies to the SOC and the much smaller MnOC (Raković 2019, p. 190). When, in 2015, the government published its draft law on freedom of religion, the SOC reacted with a high level of suspicion. There were several provisions that to the SOC-linked commentators appeared as if they had been specifically designed to target the country’s only canonical Orthodox Church. A provision that banned a denomination from “(. . .) political activity or abusing religious feelings to political aims” resonated with the discourse employed by the Montenegrin nationalists. Furthermore, there was a provision that demanded that the “territorial configuration” of the registered community has to fit Montenegrin territory. A denomination ought to have a seat in Montenegro. A denomination may not use in its name the name of another country or the colors of its flag. Places of worship built before December 1, 1918 by the state or by a joint effort of individual citizens were to be nationalized (Raković 2019, pp. 192–96), despite already being listed in cadaster as the property of the SOC. This draft was withdrawn after criticism from the Venice Commission (The European Commission for democracy through law; cf. Venice Commission 2019, p. 3). In 2019, the Montenegrin government adopted a lighter version of this draft, which still envisioned nationalization of the most important holy sites in the country⁷, as most among them were erected well before 1918. This would also mean confiscation of the sacral objects that have never even been the subject of the Kingdom of Montenegro’s legal system, e.g., the Bay of Kotor (Cattaro). The SOC claimed that the state should not be allowed to nationalize objects that even before 1918 had never been listed as the property of the state (Kračković 2019). The Venice Commission did not reject the idea altogether, but demanded clarifications, compensations for the religious communities, and defining procedures for proving ownership over the sacral objects (Venice Commission 2019, pp. 15–23). How this law is going to be implemented, and how Montenegrin authorities will evaluate medieval and early modern charters in the SOC’s possession, as well as the more recent entries in cadaster, remains to be seen. The SOC feared that the law was drafted with an intent to enable the MnOC to use these objects as well (something that to many believers might amount to sacrilege), which is why it organized a protest rally in the capital city (supported by the

⁷ *Predlog Zakona o Slobodi Vjeroispovesti ili Uvjerjenja i Pravnom Položaju Vjerskih Zajednica*. [the Draft law on Freedom of Religion and Convictions and on Legal Position of the Religious Communities]. Adopted at the Government of Montenegro’s session on 6 December 2019 (No. 07-7592). Available online: <http://zakoni.skupstina.me/zakoni/web/dokumenta/zakoni-i-drugi-akti/884/2178-12812-23-3-19-7.pdf> (accessed on 3 April 2020). Cf. Article 62 of the Draft.

Montenegrin opposition) during which retired bishop of the SOC Atanasije (Jevtić) even threatened to evacuate the relics of the highly revered St. Vasilije of Ostrog ([Atanasije 2019](#), 1'57'').

At this point, one could claim that this Đukanović's strategy backfired and that it resulted in the biggest crisis his regime had to face during the previous 30 years—that due the long mismanagement of the country was long in the making (cf. [Bardos 2020](#)). After the law was adopted in the last days of 2019, a series of protests erupted in the country, probably to an extent never witnessed before. The SOC chose to organize a series of mass religious processions, in order to keep the protests non-violent and to reduce the chances of them being connected to the opposition parties. According to a recent survey (January 2020), 62% of Montenegrin citizens rejected this law, while only 20% endorsed it. This latest tension affected the public standings of the SOC's and the MnOC's leaders in different ways. According to the same survey, the SOC's metropolitan of Cetinje, Amfilohije, is currently the mostly approved public figure in the country, followed by the SOC's bishop of Budimlje-Nikšić, Joanikije. The MnOC's leader on the other hand, had approval below that of the least popular leaders of the neighboring countries ([IC 2020](#)). Another survey, conducted in December 2019, as the outbreak of the crisis was anticipated, marked the SOC as the institution with the highest trust in Montenegro—46.4% (second only to the education system's 52.8%). The MnOC, on the other hand, was the least trusted Montenegrin institution on the list, with the approval of only 17.6% of the population—less than Montenegrin political parties and the parliament ([CEDEM 2019](#)), usually the least trusted institutions in Southeastern Europe. Even if Đukanović manages to somehow survive the most recent wave of unrest and manages to assist the MnOC in getting access to some of the property currently owned by the SOC, the MnOC will probably remain tarnished by its participation in activities that the majority of Montenegrin citizens now perceive as unjust.

From the canonical Orthodoxy's perspective, MnOC's chances of getting recognition, without major changes in its internal structure, attitudes, and leadership, even under a very lenient interpretation of the canons, are next to non-existent. While this statement might appear a bit strong to a person unfamiliar with the Orthodox canon law, one should be reminded that Dedeić would have to require that the very Patriarchate that excommunicated him decides to support his bid. Unlike his main opponent in Montenegro, Metropolitan Amfilohije, who is considered an apt theologian, Dedeić has done next to nothing to initialize meaningful theological production. Supportive of this claim is the situation on the MnOC's website, on which ever since it became public in 2010 not a single item under the submenu "theology" has been uploaded ([cpc.org.me 2010](#)). The MnOC is also known for being notoriously ethnophyletist. It even cleansed its liturgical calendar by applying ethnic criteria (cf. [Kalendar 2014](#)), which represented yet another affront to Orthodox universalism. It went so far as to remove even the saints venerated by the 15th century Montenegrin Crnojević dynasty (cf. [Mijanović 1994](#)). Unlike the MML, which has been very active in building new places of worship, the MnOC made a rather modest effort in this regard. Unlike the MOC, which at least is able to maintain contact with other local Orthodox Churches, the MnOC was disavowed even by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Epiphanius's Synod, established by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019), which until recently was in communion with it ([Press-Service of the Kyiv Metropolia 2019](#)). Dedeić also faced backlash at home, after a schism within the MnOC's ranks erupted. In 2018, archimandrite Vladimir Lajović created an organization that claims to be the true MnOC (frequently referred to as the MnOC-2018 for disambiguation purposes) and that currently operates under the aegis of the uncanonical "Italian Orthodox Church" ([Eparhija Podgoričko-Dukljanska 2019](#); cf. [RTCG 2019](#)).

Dedeić was also disavowed by the bishops of the Bulgarian Alternative Synod that returned to the canonical BOC. The Alternative Synod also consecrated Antonio de Rossi of the Italian Orthodox Church, that from the dogmatic perspective is difficult to categorize as an Orthodox denomination (cf. [Raković 2019](#), p. 175). Even though the Alternative Synod ceased to exist, Dedeić still considers himself a member of the Bulgarian episcopate ([RTS 2019](#), 10'19''–10'56'''). This claim was refuted by BOC's metropolitan Kiril of Varna, who concelebrated a liturgy with Metropolitan Amfilohije in

Cetinje and reassured him that from the BOC's point of view, there is only one Orthodox Church in Montenegro (*Vestnik* 2007, p. 2).

The canonical Orthodoxy's unequivocal support for the SOC and the MML in Montenegro might have already provoked Đukanović's change of course. As rumors began to circulate that Đukanović might attempt to convince the SOC's hierarchs to make a move similar to that of the MOC in 1967 and thus create a unified Montenegrin Church, Dedeić declared that "Montenegrians won't kneel before its [i.e., such a church's] altars" (*RTS* 2019, 4'59''–5'07''). Even if the Montenegrin hierarchy of the SOC were to secede, which is not likely, it would probably not accept Dedeić to its ranks, as this affront to Constantinople might seriously threaten its recognition perspectives. However, given the SOC's lack of trust in Đukanović and that the MML's separation from the SOC would probably be a long process, such a scenario remains highly unlikely. The SOC will remain the only canonical church in the country and probably the majority denomination in the post-Đukanović Montenegro. If it succeeds in accommodating both ethnic Serbs and Montenegrians in a rather equal measure, it might become an example that the national autocephaly is not necessary for Orthodox nation's full affirmation after all.

4. Reconciliation with the Canons—Reconciliation with the Rest of Orthodoxy

Few nascent nation-states would decline the opportunity to tap into an additional source supplying them with more affection, legitimacy, and the sense of purpose. However, regardless of the way its autocephaly as received or won, every Orthodox Church needs to meet the condition of belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. This is a non-negotiable part of the bid for becoming an autocephalous Church in its full capacity. Although since the 19th century it has become difficult to ignore one nation's desire for its autocephalous or autonomous church for a long period of time, the non-Orthodox players still cannot create autocephalous churches by relying on their power alone. Any solution that was not sanctioned by the Orthodox Church's hierarchy is very unlikely to reach its ultimate goal for as long as it cannot be framed within the Orthodox canon law. Therefore, regardless of how the procedure got initiated, it requires the eventual consent of the original jurisdiction. From the perspective of Orthodoxy's ecclesiology, which always presupposes that there is a general ecclesial order (its occasional transgressions notwithstanding), every local Orthodox Church is expected to maintain the same canonical and sacramental provisions. In comparison to the secular framework of the international law, reaching independence within the Orthodox canonical order is a more demanding process.

We may argue that declarations of autocephaly since the 19th century have followed a similar pattern, or even something that might be dubbed as a methodology. In an attempt to reinforce their national(ist) claims through (from the ecclesiological perspective) controversial identification of civil (political) and ecclesial sovereignty, the elites in different predominantly Orthodox societies took part in instigating ecclesial separatism for the same purpose. However, whereas civil authorities have the means to successfully argue in favor of their political independence before the international community, the ecclesial authorities seldom have the same instruments at their disposal, regardless of how much they might try to imitate their secular counterparts.

The extreme trajectories we chose to investigate were a part of the larger nation-building projects, that could be initiated under favorable (geo)political circumstances, such as Great Power rivalries, decline of multi-ethnic states, demands for recognition of a separate identity, appeasing nationalisms, etc. In Bulgarian case, it was the alignment of the Great Powers' policies, in North Macedonia the drive of the local communists to differentiate from Bulgarian and Serbian nationalisms. In Montenegro, it was motivated at first by a desire of the minority to separate from the same country with Serbia and later, by the state policy of nation-building in a direction that would secure its long-term differentiation from Belgrade.

The Orthodox Church will probably continue to face nationalist challenges, as one cannot exclude the emergence of new territorial loyalties or even new nations in the future. As (geo)political circumstances are anything but stable or predictable, possibilities of new ruptures within the Orthodox

world should never be excluded. The Orthodox Church has yet to develop mechanisms for successful dealing with prospective demands for autocephaly, and especially for reducing the possibility of non-Orthodox players' interventions. These often can, due to the nature of their intentions or lack of understanding of the way the Orthodox Church operates, aggravate the already existing conflicts in a way that often leaves it as a burden for the next generations of believers. It is therefore an important task for the pan-Orthodox community to settle the criteria for awarding autocephaly in a consensual and satisfactory manner.

The trajectory of the Bulgarian Exarchate shows that ultimate reconciliation with the mother church and the canons is a necessary pre-requirement for a schism to end. Like the MOC, it too did have contact with other churches, but until this reconciliation phase, its diplomatic efforts resulted in little more than the realization that the key negotiations have to take place with the see of Constantinople. The same will probably be the case with the MOC, which will become autocephalous only after full reconciliation with the SOC. The MnOC also demonstrates that the capacity of the non-Orthodox players to create an autocephalous Church has its limitations. No really effective Orthodox Church can be created without the adequate hierarchy to assume its posts (like in the MOC's case), and radical pushes against the canonical church on a given territory, provided its presence is perceived as legitimate by a significant part of the local population, can result in a backlash against other pieces of the nation-building project as well. Not every independently organized church structure can claim its true ecclesial legitimacy. In schismatic situations, it is not unimportant whether the independent structure in question separated itself from a larger, and more importantly, canonical hierarchy (e.g., MOC), or was created without any kind of universally accepted sacramental and canonical references by the rest of the Orthodox world (e.g., MnOC). The former has, even though in an irregular state of schism, its undeniable origin in the canonical hierarchy and Apostolic succession, which, for as long as it remains dogmatically Orthodox, still motivates other Orthodox actors to engage in different kinds of reconciliation efforts. The latter, however, is regarded as a threat to the very foundation of the ecclesiastic order, which thus motivates the canonical Orthodoxy to resist its recognition attempts. From the perspective of national affirmation, this is exactly the situation the would-be nation-builders should avoid. The most recent protests in Montenegro also represent the fresh case in point. Disappointment with the regime was also manifested by an eruption of pro-Serbian symbolism from the Montenegrin past. When the police got involved in removing the red-blue-white tricolor of the Kingdom of Montenegro, some protesters even started using the image of Papa Smurf (red cap, blue face, white beard; cf. [RTS 2020](#)) in order to ridicule such attempts to reassert the dominance of the official symbols of the state.

The non-Orthodox actors have frequently attempted to model the borders of the Orthodox jurisdictions according to their preferences. The ecclesiastical order of the Orthodox Church, however, could not be bent to meet all their wishes. If pushed too far, it can reduce the chances of a successful resolution and even result in a long-term exclusion of the schismatic organization from the pan-Orthodox fora. The Orthodox canon law was designed to work against prolonged radicalization. Depending on circumstances, this can be regarded as Orthodoxy's positive trait. While nationalism motivated these communities to seek separation, the restoration of the ecclesiastical order might drive both sides to seek reconciliation in the proverbially volatile web of interethnic relations in the Balkans.

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