

Article

Between Constantinople and Moscow: Autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Archbishopric of Ohrid

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Abstract

The article examines the history and the mechanism of obtaining autocephalous status for the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Archbishopric of Ohrid, from the early initiatives in 1944, through the self-declared autocephalous status in 1967, the appeal to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2018, and finally the granting of a Tomos by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2022 and further steps toward obtaining full recognition by all other Orthodox Churches. In a situation of division in the Orthodox world, with churches gravitating around Constantinople and those around Moscow, there are differences in ecclesiological understandings of the processes for obtaining autonomy and autocephaly. In this dilemma, political motives prevail rather than dogmatic and canonical ones. These differences are profoundly influenced by geopolitics, particularly in light of the Ukrainian Civil War that began in 2014, which escalated into the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022. The Macedonian case is compared to the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019 granted by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

Keywords: autocephaly; Macedonian Orthodox Church; theopolitics; Patriarch of Constantinople; Moscow Patriarchate

1. Introduction

The issue of autocephaly re-emerged in the twenty-first century in connection with the preparation of the Pan-Orthodox Council held in Crete in 2016, and more specifically with the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (2019) and the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Archbishopric of Ohrid (2022). These developments revealed not only differing ecclesiological understandings of the processes for obtaining autonomy and autocephaly, but also the profound influence of geopolitics—particularly in light of the Ukrainian Civil War, which started in 2014 and escalated into the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022.

This paper explores the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Archbishopric of Ohrid (MOC-AO), tracing its development from the first initiatives, through the self-declared autocephalous status in 1967, the appeal to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2018, and finally the granting of a Tomos by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in 2022. It further examines the similarities and differences between this process and the Tomos granted to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), particularly in the context of geopolitical dynamics.

The research employs a combination of content and source analysis, the comparative method, and the observation method. Given the complexity of the subject matter, the investigation necessarily adopts an interdisciplinary perspective. Ecclesiological analysis



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provides insight into canonical structures and theological implications; cultural studies illuminate the symbolic and identity-forming dimensions of the process; and political analysis situates the ecclesiastical struggle within broader questions of sovereignty, statehood, and national identity. This multifaceted approach ensures that the historical process is understood not in isolation, but as a dynamic intersection of religious, cultural, and political forces.

The majority of scholarly works addressing the autocephaly of the MOC-AO were produced during the period of its self-declared autocephaly (1967–2021), and may broadly be divided into two distinct groups. On the one hand are Macedonian authors who defend the self-proclaimed autocephaly of the MOC as a restoration of the ancient Archbishopric of Ohrid (1018–1767), arguing that such autocephaly and continuity should be universally recognized. Among these are (Димевски 1965; Илиевски 1972; Белчовски 1985; Трајановски 2008; Трајановски 2013; Историја на Македонската н.д.; Gjorgjevski 2017). In addition, a collection of archival documents from the Macedonian State Archives—Fundus Commission for Religious Affairs no. 1070—has been published (Мојановски 2004).

On the other hand, there are Serbian authors who maintain that the MOC-AO constituted a schismatic church and should have reverted to its 1959 autonomous status within the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) (Nikolić and Dimitrijević 2022; Ранковић 1989). The topic has also attracted the attention of foreign scholars, such as Oehring (2021), who attempt to mediate between these opposing positions.

Even after the recognition of autocephaly in 2022, Macedonian authors have largely continued to reproduce the national narrative established in 1967, interpreting the eventual recognition by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (PC) and the SOC as a mere acknowledgment of an already existing reality. Such interpretations often overlook the complex and, at times, difficult processes and concessions that accompanied this recognition. Those authors also tend to neglect the broader geopolitical shifts, particularly those associated with the PC's decision to grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. A notable work is (Blazevski et al. 2023), which analyses public reactions through Twitter posts during the period of official communiqués from the PC and the decisions of the SOC in May 2022.

The formation of national or ethnic churches played a significant role in the development of Balkan nation-states, which were predominantly conceived as monoethnic entities. Within these processes of nation-building, the concept of a “golden age” assumes a central role. It denotes a historical period perceived as one of national greatness and prosperity, subsequently lost due to external adversaries (Smith 1991). For the neighboring peoples of Macedonia, such periods were typically associated with their respective medieval kingdoms. For Macedonians, however, this idealized past was linked to the Archbishopric of Ohrid (AO) (1018–1767). This perspective is most clearly articulated in the words of Kyr Kyr Dositej, the first Archbishop of Ohrid and Skopje and Metropolitan of Macedonia, in the foreword to the first *History of the Macedonian Orthodox Church*, published in 1965:

“If any nation has a reason to be grateful to its church for its development, progress, and survival, the Macedonian nation has the greatest. Having no state-legal tradition, its history is part of its church history... The Archbishopric, with its national pastors, has strengthened the Macedonian people for centuries and protected them from denationalization... It may be said that the Archbishopric of Ohrid, and later the memory of it through the centuries, was the sole source of Macedonian national consciousness.” (Димевски 1965, pp. 5–6)

This passage illustrates a nation-building narrative in which the AO is presented as one of the most significant ecclesiastical institutions, at times even positioned alongside the Pentarchy, allegedly encompassing Kyivan Rus within its jurisdiction (Поповски 2007,

p. 4). Within Macedonian historical narrative, it has been perceived as an autocephalous national church that served as the principal pillar and guardian of Macedonian identity, language, culture, and religious life over the centuries.

In this formative Macedonian historical narrative, the origins of the AO are traced to St. Clement of Ohrid, a disciple of Saints Cyril and Methodius, who was appointed bishop in the region of Ohrid in 893. Some accounts extend the foundation even further back, linking it to the establishment of *Iustiniana Prima* in 535 (*Историја на Македонската н.д.*). In certain traditions, the claim is made that the AO was established by the Apostle Paul himself during his missionary journeys, based on the assumption that he traveled along the Via Egnatia through Lychnidos (Ohrid) on his way to Rome (*Поповски 2007*, p. 3).

2. Autocephaly

Autocephaly is defined as the status of a church that is not subject to the jurisdiction of any other church, and that elects its own chief hierarch (*Cunningham and Theokritoff 2008*, p. 293). The Encyclopedia Britannica affirms and further elaborates this definition, noting that such a church maintains full canonical and administrative autonomy, including the prerogative to elect its own primates and bishops. The designation *autocephalous* (self-headed) originates in medieval Byzantine jurisprudence, where the term was applied to dioceses that functioned without subordination to the authority of a provincial metropolitan (*Britannica Editors 2021*).

In these definitions, autocephaly is presented primarily as an ecclesiastical matter. However, in contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy, most autocephalous entities assume the character of national churches. These churches remain in canonical communion with one another, sharing unity in faith and sacraments, while their mutual relations are governed by a traditional hierarchy of precedence in which the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) occupies a primacy of honor. Historically, the territorial boundaries of autocephalous churches have been subject to considerable fluctuation, often reflecting broader political and social transformations. At the same time, the question of the procedure and authority by which new autocephalous churches may be established remains a contested issue within modern Orthodox ecclesiology (*Britannica Editors 2021*).

John Erickson gives the definitions of two Orthodox scholars: J. Karmires, according to whom autocephalous churches are various local churches that have been emancipated and have their own administrative and spiritual head, and Theokletos Farmakidis, according to whom the independence of a state necessarily implies ecclesiastic independence for the territory of that state (*Erickson 1991*, p. 92).

In the process of granting autocephaly, an important term is the “Mother Church”, the church on whose territorial/ecclesiastic jurisdiction the new church is formed and to whose ecclesiastical structures the hierarchy belonged before autocephaly was granted. In other words, the “Mother Church” is the one that can/should grant autocephaly. The Patriarchate of Constantinople, claiming the title Ecumenical, considers itself a “Mother Church” to all Orthodox churches.

The processes of granting autocephaly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—particularly in the context of newly formed Balkan states emerging from the former territories of the Ottoman Empire—were comparatively straightforward. These territories had previously fallen within the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the newly established national churches received a Tomos of autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Constantinople as their real “Mother Church”: Greece (1850), Serbia (1879), Romania (1885), Albania (1937), and Bulgaria (1945). In several cases, periods of self-declared autocephaly preceded official recognition, sometimes lasting for decades. There was always the involvement of the new state authorities (*Burega 2019*).

By contrast, the cases of the twenty-first century involve newly established churches situated not within the canonical territory previously administered by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but rather within the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church within the former Yugoslavia. Both of these churches had themselves previously received a Tomos of autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1589 and 1922, respectively. This shift in context significantly complicates contemporary debates on autocephaly, as it raises questions concerning jurisdiction, authority, and the limits of ecclesiastical intervention.

The modern understanding of the term autocephaly could be simplified into two basic concepts: the Moscow position is that any autocephalous church could grant autocephaly to one of its parts, while Constantinople holds the position that granting autocephaly depends upon the approbation of the Patriarch of Constantinople, as the ultimate “Mother Church” (Erickson 1991, p. 91).

The historical development of the Orthodox Church is closely intertwined with the Roman Empire, particularly from the reign of Constantine the Great, the Edict of Milan in 312, which established religious toleration, the transfer of the imperial capital to Byzantium (Constantinople) in 330, and the convocation of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325, collectively shaping the institutional and theological trajectory of the Church. Subsequent emperors, most notably Theodosius I, further consolidated this relationship by declaring Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 380 and convening the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381. As a result, Orthodoxy became deeply embedded within the structures of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, within which all Ecumenical Councils were held. Ecclesiastical jurisdictions often mirrored the administrative divisions of the Empire. Within this context, Eusebius of Caesarea articulated a model of church–state relations, envisioning a Christian emperor governing in harmony with a Christian Church. This conceptual framework developed into the doctrine of *symphonia*, according to which the Church acknowledged the emperor’s prerogatives as guardian of ecclesiastical order and guarantor of the unity of the faith, while simultaneously maintaining its own authority over the spiritual domain, including the preservation of Orthodox doctrine and the regulation of ecclesiastical discipline. Conversely, the emperor remained subject to the spiritual authority of the Church insofar as he was himself a member of the Christian community—a “son of the Church” (Chadwick et al. 2026).

The corpus of canon law was largely completed through the decisions of the seven Ecumenical Councils, culminating in 787. During this period, Christian communities located outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire were frequently regarded as heterodox or heretical. A notable example is the Assyrian Church of the East, which separated in 431. Located in regions corresponding to Assyria, Babylonia, and northwestern Persia (present-day Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, and western Iran), this church had already been formally recognized in the fourth century under King Yazdegerd I. The Synod of Seleucia in 410 granted its leading bishops the authority to elect a head, the *Catholicos*, who was responsible for representing the Church before the Sassanid ruler. Under sustained political pressure, the Church of the East increasingly distanced itself from the ecclesiastical structures of the Western Church (the Roman Empire). In 424, under the leadership of Catholicos Mar Dadisho I (421–456), its bishops resolved to cease submitting disciplinary or theological matters to external authorities, including bishops and councils within the Roman Empire (Hill 1988, p. 105).

The Church in Mesopotamia and Persia did not participate in councils attended by representatives of the “Western Church” and did not consider itself bound by the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, with the exception of the First Council of Nicaea (325). The Council of Ephesus (431) condemned the Christology of Nestorius as heretical; however,

the Sassanid ruler, seeking to secure the loyalty of his Christian subjects and reduce their ties to the Roman Empire, supported the Nestorian position. In order to reinforce this orientation, he replaced the pro-Roman Catholicos Babowai with the Nestorian bishop of Nisibis, Barsuma (Cross and Livingstone 1997, pp. 351–52).

Since the canonical tradition was largely developed within the framework of the Eastern Roman Empire by the ninth century, its provisions primarily addressed ecclesiastical life within the imperial boundaries of the time. Consequently, questions of autocephaly or ecclesiastical independence most often arose in regions beyond direct Byzantine control. This dynamic is evident in the cases of the Bulgarian Church (first recognized in 927, 1235, 1945) and the Serbian Church (1219, 1879), both of which were established in accordance with the principle *imperium sine patriarchā non staret* (Οὐκ ἄνευ πατριάρχου βασιλεία), reflecting the close interdependence between political sovereignty and ecclesiastical organization (Baar et al. 2022, p. 3).

This historical marriage of Church and state should always be taken into account when analyzing the phenomenon of autocephaly. The processes and outcomes associated with autonomy and autocephaly cannot be adequately understood from a purely ecclesiastical or canonical perspective. Rather, they consistently exhibit political and theopolitical dimensions. Given that national Orthodox Churches are closely linked to the principle of ethnophyletism, the national dimension plays a decisive role in shaping both the claims and the recognition of autocephalous status. This continued with the principle of a new state, a new church (Baar et al. 2022, p. 3).

The development of the concept and the meaning of the term “autocephaly” throughout history is well described by Fr. John H. Ericson. He argues that the peak for the issue of autocephaly was the thirteenth century, after the fall of Constantinople and the formation of the Latin Kingdom in 1204 and several competing “Greek states”, and their churches arguing about which actually had the right to appoint the next Byzantine Emperor or grant autocephaly (Erickson 1991, p. 105).

The earliest use of the term autocephaly meaning a self-governing church appears around 540 in the work of Theodore the Reader in his Church History, about the church in Cyprus, independent from Antioch. The protagonists of supporting Constantinople as “first among equals” are listing several canons as a basis: Canon 28 of Chalcedon (451) which grants the primate, the Archbishop of Constantinople, the authority of ordaining other metropolitans; Apostolic Canon 34 which sets the bishop of a nation or country as a head; and Canons 9 and 17 of Chalcedon (451) which give the archbishop of Constantinople the power to resolve disputes between bishops (Erickson 1991, p. 98).

In order to understand which canons are involved in autocephaly, let us see the reaction of the Archbishop of Ohrid, Demetrius Chomitianus, to the case of granting autocephaly to the Serbian Church in 1219 by the Nicaean Patriarch Germanus II, on what was the canonical territory of the Archbishopric of Ohrid: Canon 2 of The First Council of Constantinople, which prohibits bishops from interfering in other dioceses and mandates that church administration follow civil diocesan boundaries; the 35th Apostolic Canon, which strictly prohibits bishops from performing ordinations outside their own diocesan boundaries, into cities or regions not subject to their authority; Canon 13 of Antioch, which strictly forbids any bishop from traveling to a different province and ordaining individuals to the ministry without an explicit, written invitation from that region’s metropolitan and local bishops; Canon 12 of Chalcedon, which prohibited bishops from using secular, imperial authority to split a single ecclesiastical province into two; and Canon 8 of Ephesus, which protected the autocephalous status of the Church of Cyprus (Erickson 1991, p. 105). This appeal had no effect on Serbia or on Nicaean decision.

3. Constantinople and Moscow in Historical Perspective

The geopolitical status and relations between Moscow and Constantinople have undergone several periods of rivalry and tension. Orthodox Christianity was introduced to Kyivan Rus' in 988, when Prince Volodimir the Great was baptized by the Orthodox Church of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, which subsequently appointed metropolitans to Kyiv. Following the consolidation of Russian principalities after the Mongol period, political power gradually shifted toward Moscow, and in 1325 the Metropolitan of Kyiv relocated his seat to the Grand Duchy of Moscow. After the Great Schism of 1054, several attempts were made to restore ecclesiastical unity, particularly in response to the growing threat posed by Ottoman expansion against Constantinople. The Union of Florence (1439), concluded at the Council of Ferrara–Florence, was perceived by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a betrayal of Orthodoxy by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Metropolitan Isidore of Kyiv, a Greek hierarch appointed by Constantinople who participated in the council and signed the union, was subsequently accused of heresy in Moscow, imprisoned, and later expelled (Dezhnyuk 2017, pp. 74–75). In 1448, the synod of Moscow clergy elected Metropolitan Jonah—who last bore the title “Metropolitan of Kyiv and all Rus’”—without seeking the approval of Constantinople, which was now regarded as compromised by heresy. From that point onward, the ROC effectively considered itself autocephalous (Shubin 2004, p. 133). The fall of Constantinople in 1453 marked a decisive turning point. For the first time in over eleven centuries, the Patriarch of Constantinople no longer operated within a Christian imperial framework, as the Byzantine Empire was replaced by an Islamic Ottoman Empire. In contrast, the Russian state emerged as the principal Orthodox political entity, within which the ROC—apart from the Soviet period—generally enjoyed strong state support. Under Ottoman rule, the Patriarch of Constantinople underwent a profound transformation, becoming the head of the Rum Millet, the recognized Orthodox Christian community within the empire (Gregory 2005, p. 344). The Patriarch was required to obtain a *berat* (imperial authorization) from the Sultan for episcopal appointments, thereby relinquishing long-standing prerogatives that had existed under Byzantine rule.

Within this new configuration, the Russian Orthodox Church, situated in the only predominantly Orthodox empire, functioned independently and in opposition to the Ottoman state. The claims of the “Third Rome” arose. When the See of the Roman Empire was transferred to Constantinople, it was called the “Second Rome,” and thus its Patriarch was considered the first among equals. After the fall of Constantinople, Moscow became the See of the only Christian Empire, and hence arose the claim for the “Third Rome,” and its Patriarch took the leading role in Orthodox Christianity.

The first Patriarch of Constantinople under Ottoman rule, Gennadios Scholarios, recognized the autocephaly of the Russian Orthodox Church, and in 1589, the Patriarch of Constantinople elevated it to the status of a patriarchate. His power began a long decline starting when Jeremias II declared the patriarchate of Moscow autocephalous in 1593 (Britannica Editors 2016). In 1686, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Dionysius IV, transferred the Metropolitanate of Kyiv to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. However, the Patriarch of Constantinople has subsequently interpreted this act not as a full transfer of jurisdiction, but as a limited delegation of ordination rights, ultimately revocable at Constantinople’s discretion.

During the seventeenth century, the Patriarchate of Moscow attained considerable political influence. Patriarch Filaret (1619–1633), for example, effectively governed as co-ruler alongside his son, Tsar Michael Romanov. This concentration of ecclesiastical power eventually provoked tensions, most notably in the conflict between Patriarch Nikon (1652–1666) and Tsar Alexei over the limits of ecclesiastical authority. These tensions culminated in the

reforms of Peter the Great, who in 1721 abolished the patriarchate and established the Holy Synod as a state-controlled governing body, thereby subordinating the Church to imperial authority. This arrangement remained largely in place until the First World War.

On the broader geopolitical stage, the marriage of Sophia Palaeologus (1449–1503), niece of the last Byzantine emperor, to the Grand Prince of Moscow and of all Russia in 1472 was later interpreted as symbolically transferring the legacy of Constantinople as a dowry to the Russian dynasty. This perception, combined with aspirations to liberate Constantinople as the capital of a future unified Orthodox empire and to secure access to warm-water ports, contributed to a series of twelve Russo-Turkish wars, spanning from 1676 to 1877–1878. During these conflicts, Russia achieved significant territorial and political gains. In the war of 1695–1696, Russia captured the fortress of Azov. In the war of 1768–1774, it again secured Azov, along with Crimea and Bessarabia, overran Moldavia, and defeated Ottoman forces in Bulgaria. The resulting agreements granted Russia the right to maintain a fleet in the Black Sea and accorded it a loosely defined role as protector of Orthodox Christians within the Ottoman Empire. In 1783, Catherine II annexed Crimea, and in 1787, Russia gained control over the lower Dniester and Danube regions. The Treaty of Iași (1792) formalized the Ottoman cession of the western Black Sea coast of Ukraine to Russia. The Greek War of Independence precipitated the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829, which ended in Ottoman defeat and recognition of Russian sovereignty over Georgia and Armenia. The Crimean War (1853–1856), however, marked a setback, as Great Britain and France intervened in support of the Ottoman Empire. In the final Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878), Russia, together with Serbia, supported uprisings in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, leading to the liberation or autonomy of several Balkan states. The resulting settlement recognized the independence of Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro, granted autonomy to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and created a large autonomous Bulgaria under Russian protection ([Britannica Editors 2025](#)).

The October Revolution and subsequent civil war led to the restoration of the Patriarch of Moscow; however, the Church soon came under severe persecution following the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922. Meanwhile, the aftermath of the First World War had even greater consequences for the Ecumenical Patriarch. Following the Greek defeat in the Greco-Turkish War of 1922, a large-scale population exchange took place. The majority of the Orthodox Greeks and Turks resettled in Greece, drastically reducing the Orthodox Christian population in the Republic of Türkiye, formed in October 1923. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople was effectively redefined by the Turkish state as the leader of a minority Greek Orthodox community. The Patriarch is required to be a Turkish citizen of Greek ethnicity, and his election is subject to state approval. With limited direct jurisdiction, the Patriarch of Constantinople has increasingly asserted claims over territories outside traditionally Orthodox states ([Britannica Editors 2016](#)).

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Russian Federation, the Russian Orthodox Church experienced a significant revival. Under Patriarch Alexei II (1990–2008), the Church regained substantial influence, including in geopolitical matters, particularly through its claim to jurisdiction over the territories of the former Soviet Union.

In 1942, Athenagoras Spyrou, then Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, reportedly wrote to the CIA indicating that those under his authority would comply with its directives without reservation. Six years later, he was elected Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. In 1951, he reportedly stated to the United States Consul in Istanbul that the United States should maintain a long-term presence in the Near East in order to fulfill what he described as a providential mission to promote freedom, prosperity, and happiness to all people ([Davis 2024](#)). In 1964, he met with Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem, and together they lifted the mutual excommunications of 1054. This act provoked strong

reactions from other Orthodox Churches, which accused him of compromising Orthodox doctrine for the sake of a paper union with Rome. Similarly, Patriarch Bartholomew has maintained close relations with the United States government, a relationship often interpreted as mutually beneficial. According to this perspective, U.S. policy has supported the strengthening of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's position within global Orthodoxy as a counterbalance to the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate, which is frequently viewed as aligned with Russian state interests (Davis 2024).

In this light, the historical relationship between Moscow and Constantinople cannot be understood solely in ecclesiastical or canonical terms. Rather, it has consistently been shaped by broader geopolitical considerations, with both centers of Orthodoxy acting within and responding to, shifting configurations of political power.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the first conflict between Moscow and Constantinople on the issue of who, how, and when has the right to grant autocephaly arose about the Orthodox Church in Estonia in 1996, after decades of tension. The Estonian Church had been placed under Constantinople in 1923 in the then independent Estonia, but Soviet annexation later brought it under Moscow, and in 1978, the Russian Patriarch forced the Patriarch of Constantinople to cancel the Tomos of 1923. Following independence, two rival Orthodox groups emerged: one loyal to Moscow, the other in exile. Constantinople restored the 1923 Tomos, sparking a crisis. After negotiations, Estonia recognized two Orthodox churches in 2002—the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church under Constantinople and the Estonian Orthodox Church under Moscow—allowing congregations to choose affiliation. Latvia's case resembled Estonia's but with a stronger Russian presence. In 1936, the then independent Latvia joined Constantinople, but Soviet annexation ended this. After independence, registration disputes persisted until 2019, when the Latvian Autonomous Orthodox Church gained legal recognition. Constantinople has not yet restored the Tomos, but Latvia has acted to reduce Moscow's influence by requiring Orthodox leaders to be Latvian citizens, a law applying to all churches. Lithuania presented a different picture. Orthodox believers were few, mostly Russians concentrated in Vilnius. Efforts for autonomy were limited, and most remained under Moscow. Yet after Ukraine's autocephaly in 2018, Lithuanian voices argued for separation, citing the growing Ukrainian minority. With about 125,000 Orthodox today—largely Russians and Russified Belarusians—the debate continues over whether Constantinople should establish jurisdiction there, especially as Lithuania encourages Ukrainian migration (Baar et al. 2022, pp. 9–113).

This shows that autocephaly follows the border changes and the establishment and cessation of independent states. It also shows the power dynamics and dependence on the geopolitical situation.

4. Orthodoxy in Macedonia

Macedonia is a geographical region located in the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe. Following the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, Ottoman Macedonia was partitioned among its neighboring states—Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The territory incorporated into Serbia was, after the Second World War in 1944, constituted as the Federal Democratic Republic of Macedonia within the framework of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia.

The territory of the modern Republic of Macedonia¹ has historically been subject to diverse religious influences, including Judaism, Eastern and Western Christianity, and, in later centuries, Islam. The introduction of Christianity to the region is traditionally associated with the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. However, the biblical sites linked to Paul's activity were predominantly coastal or near-coastal locations, which only since 1912

have fallen within the borders of modern-day Greece. The spread of Christianity within the territory of the present-day Republic of Macedonia is more plausibly connected to St. Erasmus of Ohrid, who, according to tradition, preached in the Lake Ohrid region and converted approximately 40,000 individuals before he died in 303 ([The Saint n.d.](#)). Following the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great, Christianity experienced significant expansion and consolidation in the region over the subsequent two centuries.

Situated at the crossroads of East and West, Macedonia was incorporated into the Byzantine Empire in 379. In order to preserve Roman ecclesiastical jurisdiction, Pope Damasus appointed Acholius of Thessalonica as Apostolic Vicar, granting him authority over councils, ordinations, and ecclesiastical disputes, with privileges comparable to those of a patriarch, albeit subordinate to Rome. In 415, Pope Innocent I confirmed Rufus as Apostolic Vicar, expanding both his authority and territorial jurisdiction—an act that marked the formal establishment of the Papal Vicariate of Thessalonica ([Jedin 1995](#), p. 244). Until 535, the Apostolic Vicar of Thessalonica exercised authority over the entire Illyricum Orientale. However, Justinian's *Novella XI* reorganized ecclesiastical jurisdiction by establishing the Archbishopric of Iustiniana Prima, which assumed authority over seven northern provinces, while Thessalonica retained six—Macedonia Prima, Thessaly, Achaia, Crete, Nova Epirus, and Vetus Epirus ([Јошовски 2012](#)). This arrangement remained in place until 732, when Emperor Leo III the Isaurian transferred all Illyrian dioceses to the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople ([Vailhé 1912](#)).

This period was marked by significant migrations, including those of the Slavs and Avars, which disrupted earlier Christian culture and necessitated renewed processes of evangelization. In the late ninth century, this mission was undertaken by Saints Cyril and Methodius and their disciples, particularly Clement and Naum of Ohrid. In 996, Tsar Samuel elevated the Church in Ohrid to the status of a Patriarchate, which Macedonian historiography identifies as the beginning of the Archbishopric of Ohrid ([Трајановски 2013](#), p. 22). Following the Byzantine conquest in 1018, this Patriarchate was reduced to an Archbishopric, retaining jurisdiction over Macedonia and neighboring regions. A detailed account of its institutional development is provided by Snegarov ([Снѣгаровъ 1924](#)).

The first appointed Archbishop of Ohrid, Jovan I of Debar (1018–1037), preserved continuity with the ecclesiastical traditions of Tsar Samuel's reign, maintaining Church Slavonic liturgy and predominantly local Slavic episcopal leadership. Following his death, the office passed to Leo, formerly chartophylax of Constantinople, who initiated a process of Hellenization. This process intensified particularly after the uprising of Petar Delijan (1040–1041), who claimed descent from Tsar Samuel. Emperor Michael IV subsequently abandoned earlier conciliatory policies and began appointing Greek bishops without local consultation. The use of the Greek language expanded rapidly, replacing Slavonic in both liturgical and educational contexts. Archbishop Theophylact of Ohrid (c. 1090–1109) further advanced this process by closing Slavic institutions, enforcing the use of Greek in liturgy, and translating local texts into Greek. A systematic destruction of Slavic manuscripts also appears to have occurred during Byzantine rule. No Slavonic manuscripts survive from the period before the Second Bulgarian Empire (1180s), whereas hundreds from the later period have been preserved. Given that Greek manuscripts from the ninth and tenth centuries were preserved in Ohrid, scholars such as Vladimir Mosin have concluded that the disappearance of earlier Slavonic texts was likely deliberate and carried out by Byzantines before the thirteenth century. In this context, it is not surprising that Slavonic literary culture experienced a marked decline, with no major Slavonic authors active during the Byzantine period ([Fine 1987](#)).

During the reign of Tsar Stefan Dushan (1331–1355), Serbian authority expanded southward, and Ohrid was likely incorporated into his realm around 1334. Dushan re-

spected the Byzantine chrysobulls that guaranteed the privileges of the Archbishopric, allowing it to retain its jurisdiction. His charters for the Treskavac Monastery referred to Ohrid as the “presiding” town, thereby affirming the authority of its archbishop. Bishops continued to be elected and ordained locally, preserving the Archbishopric’s autocephalous character. In 1346, Dushan convened a major ecclesiastical council in Skopje, at which Archbishop Nicholas of Ohrid participated alongside the Patriarch of Tarnovo in elevating the Serbian Archbishop Ioannikios to patriarchal rank. As a result, the Archbishop of Ohrid became an honorary member of the Serbian Synod, reflecting the institution’s prestige within the broader Orthodox world. Dushan’s policies aimed to strengthen Orthodoxy, enhance the reputation of the clergy, and secure ecclesiastical wealth, while respecting Ohrid’s autonomy. After his death, the Archbishopric remained autocephalous, though its jurisdiction was significantly reduced, encompassing fragmented political entities such as those of Volkashin and Marko, Hlapen, Epirus, Albania, and Velbuzhd. At its narrowest extent under Serbian rule, its jurisdiction included dioceses such as Ohrid, Kostur, Pelagonia, Strumica, and Devol. Following the collapse of Dushan’s empire, however, the Archbishopric expanded once more, regaining dioceses such as Prizren, Skopje, Serres, Drama, and Christopolis, and possibly extending eastward to Velbuzhd and Razlog (Archbishop of Ohrid 2006).

By the end of the fourteenth century, Macedonia came under Ottoman rule, introducing Islam into the region. Although the conquest carried a religious dimension, its primary objective was political domination, with Islam spreading through a combination of coercion and voluntary conversion. Many members of the local elite converted to preserve their social status and economic privileges, while broader segments of the population were incentivized by reduced taxation and other advantages afforded to Muslims (Jelavic 1985, p. 39). The Ottoman authorities recognized the Archbishopric of Ohrid, and in the initial phase of Ottoman rule, its jurisdiction expanded to include newly conquered European territories. From the seventeenth century onward, however, its influence declined, culminating in its abolition in 1767, when it was dissolved, and its eparchies were reorganized and placed under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which represented the *Rum millet* before the Ottoman Porte.

Under Ottoman law (sharia), non-Muslim communities were permitted to regulate their religious and civil affairs—such as education, marriage, and inheritance—through the millet system. The Patriarch of Constantinople was responsible to the Sultan for all Orthodox Christians and was required to obtain a *berat* for the appointment of bishops, often accompanied by a financial gift (*peshkesh*). As the Ottoman Empire weakened and foreign powers pressed for expanding rights for Christian subjects, the unified Rum millet gradually fragmented into multiple millets. This development positioned the Church as a central institution in the rise of nationalism and ethnophyletism.

The abolition of the Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1767 is widely regarded in Macedonian tradition as a moment of profound loss, marking the disappearance of a key spiritual, educational, and cultural institution. It is often interpreted as an illegitimate act carried out under the influence of the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople.

With the decline of Ottoman authority and the implementation of the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876), new millets were recognized, further diversifying the religious landscape of the empire and of Ottoman Macedonia. The jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople gradually narrowed, becoming increasingly associated with Greek-speaking Orthodox populations.

This transformation facilitated the emergence of national Orthodox Churches, each linking its mission to the preservation and advancement of a particular nation. By framing the nation as an enduring ethno-religious entity, such developments challenged the

universal character of Christianity. The establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1872 exemplifies this process. Unlike the churches of Greece, Serbia, and Romania, the Exarchate was created by decree of the Ottoman Sultan rather than by an Orthodox ecclesiastical authority. In the same year, the Patriarchate of Constantinople declared it schismatic, thereby excluding it from communion with the wider Orthodox world. The Sultan's decree also established a separate *millet*, granting the Exarchate recognition as a distinct community within the empire. The Exarch thus functioned not only as a spiritual leader but also as a representative of the civil, linguistic, and ethnic rights of his constituents before the Sublime Porte, enjoying significant autonomy from the Patriarch of Constantinople (Kalkandjieva 2024, pp. 133–34).

As a reaction, a Council of Constantinople was held in 1872, summoned by Patriarch Anthimos VI of Constantinople and attended by titular Patriarchs Sophronios IV of Alexandria, Hierotheos of Antioch, and Cyril II of Jerusalem. The Council defined the action of the Bulgarian church as phyletism and condemned it. But Patriarch Cyril II of Jerusalem, the first to actually reside in Jerusalem instead of Constantinople as his predecessors had, did not support condemnation as in his diocese, the main peoples and languages were not Greek but Arabic. The rigid position that all Orthodox must be Greek, using the Greek language in their church life, would have worked against his own Patriarchate (Thornton 2007, pp. 153–54).

The Exarchate extended its jurisdiction over Slavic populations in the European parts of the Ottoman Empire, on territories corresponding to modern Bulgaria, Macedonia, and parts of Serbia, Albania, and Greece. Following the establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria in 1878, it became a state-supported Bulgarian Orthodox Church with expanding influence. In territories formerly under the jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, the faithful were compelled to choose between allegiance to the Patriarchate or to the Exarchate. This resulted in parallel ecclesiastical structures, with both Patriarchal and Exarchate bishops operating in key urban centers such as Ohrid, Bitola, Prilep, and Veles (Archbishop of Ohrid 2006).

In Macedonia, the principal division was between *Patriarchists*, aligned with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and thus associated with Greek influence, and *Exarchists*, aligned with the Bulgarian Exarchate. The Serbian Orthodox Church also entered this contest. The neighboring states and their respective churches exerted influence through clergy, education, and printed materials. Although initially welcomed, these influences soon revealed linguistic and cultural discrepancies, as the standard languages employed differed significantly from local Macedonian dialects. Under these conditions, identity fragmentation emerged, with ecclesiastical affiliation shaping national identification. During this period, Orthodox Churches often acted to suppress the development of a distinct Macedonian national consciousness, instead promoting identities aligned with their respective states; this was also done by armed groups applying terror (Јошовски 2017).

This period concluded with the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), which resulted in the partition of Macedonia among Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. None of these states recognized a distinct Macedonian identity, and they implemented policies aimed at assimilation. While Serbian and Bulgarian, as Slavic languages, were relatively accessible, Greek authorities pursued more radical measures, including the systematic renaming of toponyms and personal names to eliminate evidence of a Slavic presence. Population exchanges between Greece and Bulgaria, particularly following the Treaty of Neuilly sur-Seine (1919), as well as waves of emigration—especially after the Greek Civil War (1946–1949)—contributed to the formation of a Macedonian diaspora in North America and Australia (Ben-Moshe et al. 2012, p. 20).

In the territories annexed by Serbia (later forming the Republic of Macedonia), two Orthodox jurisdictions had previously coexisted: the Greek-speaking Patriarchate and the Bulgarian Exarchate, alongside Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic communities (Јошовски 2022).

Following the Balkan Wars (1912–13), the territory of the modern Republic of Macedonia was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbia, and after the First World War in 1918, was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS), later renamed Yugoslavia. The period between 1912 and 1918 was characterized by continuous conflict and the absence of stable administrative structures. Shortly after the establishment of the Kingdom of SHS, the Ministry of Religion was created on 7 December 1918 to oversee religious affairs. The Orthodox Church, as the largest religious community, was unified on 12 September 1920, incorporating the Serbian Orthodox Church (previously in the Kingdom of Serbia), the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (previously in the Kingdom of Montenegro), the Karlovac Metropolitanate (previously in the Austro-Hungarian Empire), and the Orthodox Church of the Newly Liberated Lands (previously in the Ottoman Empire, including Macedonia and Kosovo). The existing diocesan structure in Macedonia—comprising Skopje, Veles-Debar, Pelagonia, Prespa-Ohrid, Strumica, and parts of Voden—was reorganized into new dioceses: Skopje, Ohrid-Bitola, and Zletovo-Strumica, all integrated into the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Трајановски 2008, p. 204).

On 2 April 1922, the Patriarch in Constantinople issued a *Tomos* recognizing this reorganization. New bishops and clergy were appointed, and new priests took positions. Soon, the Orthodox hierarchy assumed a central role in promoting the process of the “awakening” of the Serbian national identity among the Macedonian believers². A theological school was established in Bitola in 1922, initially as a five-year institution and later expanded to six years in 1928 (Трајановски 2008, p. 207). During this period, the Serbian Orthodox Church constituted the largest religious community in the territory of present-day Macedonia.

During the Second World War (1941–1944), eastern parts of Macedonia were annexed by Bulgaria, while western regions were incorporated into Italian-controlled Albania. Religious institutions were forcibly integrated into the administrative structures of these occupying powers. An important factor that would later influence the resolution of the church question was the relationship with Greece. According to the Megali Idea of 1844, Macedonia was regarded as inherently Greek. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of Macedonia in 1945, Greece refused to recognize the existence of a Macedonian state or people. This tension intensified during the Greek Civil War (1946–1949), in which many Macedonians from Greece participated in the Greek Democratic Army against government forces supported by the United Kingdom and the United States. Much of the fighting took place in the Macedonian region and resulted in significant civilian casualties. Following the defeat of the Greek Democratic Army, large numbers of Macedonian civilians were displaced to Yugoslavia and other socialist countries, while others emigrated to Canada, the United States, and Australia. They were stripped of their Greek citizenship and prohibited from ever returning to their places of origin (Rossos 1997).

5. Formation of the Macedonian Orthodox Church

Following the capitulation of Italy on 8 September 1943, the occupied territories in the western part of Macedonia were liberated by the People’s Liberation Army and the Partisan Detachments of Macedonia. Within the Main Headquarters, a position of Religious Referent was established in 1943, and the priest Veljo Manchevski (1905–1962) was appointed as its first holder. In 1944, a regulatory body governing relations between the

state and religious communities—the Religious (Faith) Authority (*Верско поверенство, Ver-sko poverenstvo*)—was created. Until 1951, this body operated within the Secretariat (Ministry) of Internal Affairs³ and was organized as a Federal and Republic Commission for Religious Affairs (“KOVZ” n.d.). While in other republics of Yugoslavia such commissions, largely composed of communists, primarily exercised control over religious institutions, in Macedonia this body adopted a more proactive role.

With the appointment of Manchevski as Religious Referent, the First Priest Council was convened in Izdeglavje on 21 October 1943. Among its decisions were the following:

1. To sever all ties with ecclesiastical authorities outside the liberated Macedonian territory;
2. To place all clergy within liberated territories under the authority of the Main Headquarters of the People’s Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Macedonia;
3. To maintain all civic and ecclesiastical records in the Macedonian language;
4. To instruct clergy to reassure the population in their parishes that the National Liberation Army does not interfere with religious life and guarantees full freedom to the priests in the performance of ecclesiastical duties;
5. To commemorate “the bishops” without naming them, while including prayers for the National Liberation Army in the liturgy (Мојановски 2004, pp. 10–11).

On 9 September 1944, Bulgaria capitulated, and Bulgarian administrative authorities, bishops, and clergy withdrew from Macedonia. German forces temporarily replaced them, but Macedonian partisan forces succeeded in liberating all the territory by the first half of November 1944. Following the establishment of the Democratic Federal Macedonia within the Democratic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945, an initiative emerged to create a national Orthodox Church. The Macedonian Republic prevented Serbian bishops and clergy, who had left in 1941, from returning to their dioceses, thereby establishing a de facto separation from the SOC. The subsequent development of institutional structures and the pursuit of de jure recognition proved to be a gradual and complex process. To this end, an Initiative Board for resolving the church question in Macedonia (hereafter Initiative Board) was established.

The expression “resolving the church question” became widely used in reference to the legal and ecclesiastical status of the Orthodox Church in Macedonia after the Second World War. Closely related to this was the notion of “canonical status,” although its precise meaning was not always clearly defined. Initially, the objective was the restoration of the Archbishopric of Ohrid—an idea that had been present for approximately eighty years, first within the Ottoman Empire and associated with the mindset of aspiration to establish a separate millet as the institutional basis of an ethnic community. This movement, largely driven by revolutionaries and intellectuals, did not engage deeply with ecclesiological or canonical considerations. Rather, the core understanding of “canonical status” centered on the presence of native bishops, clergy, and education conducted in the vernacular language. The question of whether such conditions constituted mere permission, autonomy, or full autocephaly remained secondary. This conceptual framework is also evident in earlier processes of Uniatism, beginning with the Union of Kukush (1859), where appeals to Rome emphasized these core values rather than formal canonical arrangements. A similar mindset persisted after the Second World War.

The First Church–Laity Assembly, held in March 1945 in Skopje, adopted several key decisions. It affirmed the resolutions of the Izdeglavje Council (1943), called for the restoration of the Archbishopric of Ohrid as an independent Macedonian church under the name “Archbishopric of Ohrid of St. Clement,” and emphasized the ordination of local Macedonian bishops and clergy. It further resolved that the first bishop should be enthroned in Ohrid with the title Archbishop of Ohrid, and that a delegation should be formed to seek recognition from other Orthodox Churches. Additionally, it called for a subsequent session

to nominate episcopal candidates and to invite bishops from other churches to perform their ordination. Within the broader framework of forming a future Yugoslav Orthodox Patriarchate, the Macedonian Church was envisaged as an integral component alongside other Orthodox Churches in the Federal Yugoslavia (Мојановски 2004, p. 13). This indicates that the future Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) was not yet conceived as fully autocephalous, but rather reflected a continuation of the earlier Ottoman understanding of ecclesiastical organization as a foundation for national development, with recognition expected from higher ecclesiastical authorities.

However, these initiatives were perceived by the Yugoslav government as nationalist and irredentist, leading to the imprisonment of those involved. Following strong reactions from the SOC, a second Priest Council was convened in May 1946, which held more moderate positions. It proposed that the Orthodox Church in the People's Republic of Macedonia (PRM) should have ethnic Macedonian bishops and clergy, enjoy self-governance in internal matters, and elect its bishops through the clergy and laity. It also called for the establishment of a Yugoslav Orthodox Church (YOC), encompassing all Orthodox Churches within the Yugoslav federation under a federal patriarch (Мојановски 2004, p. 14). This demonstrates that "resolving the church question" at this stage was understood as achieving autonomy within a unified Orthodox structure in Yugoslavia, rather than immediate autocephaly.

The SOC strongly opposed the creation of a Yugoslav Orthodox Church, and the Initiative Board was directed to negotiate directly with the SOC to reach a mutually acceptable solution, particularly regarding the appointment of the Macedonian bishops, given the absence of a local episcopate. At the same time, the government of the People's Republic of Macedonia began to advocate for Tito's support of an independent Macedonian Orthodox Church (Jonovski 2024, p. 3).

For the Republic's Religious Commission, resolving the church question became a central priority, closely linked to the formation of the Macedonian national identity. The restoration of the Archbishopric of Ohrid occupied a central place in this process, reflecting the broader Byzantine notion that no state exists without a corresponding church. In the absence of bishops, ecclesiastical functions were carried out by episcopal vicariates (архиепископски намесништва), composed of clergy and lay representatives.

In contrast, the position of the churches in other socialist countries followed the Soviet ideology that the Orthodox Church was an integral part of the old rotten system and, as such, must be abolished. Religion was to be replaced with enforced Marxist-Leninist scientific atheism, which involved harassing believers and priests, many of whom were killed or imprisoned. This was also true for Bulgaria (Gerasimova 2017). The legal status of religious communities in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, including the People's Republic of Macedonia, was first formally regulated by the Law on the Legal Position of Religious Communities in 1953 (Службен весник 1953). This legislation guaranteed the right of citizens to establish religious communities and granted equal legal status to all such entities (Art. 2), recognizing them as juridical persons. Accordingly, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, like other religious communities, was formally registered in 1953 (Адресар 2004).

For the People's Republic of Macedonia, the establishment of a national church was a central element of statehood. It was valued not necessarily as the primary spiritual body, but rather as an ethnographic one, serving as a vessel of collective memory, cultural continuity, and identity preservation, where the church functions less as a purely spiritual authority and more as a custodian of language, tradition, and symbolic heritage. Several churches and many monasteries were turned into places of cultural heritage, where liturgies were replaced with cultural events. The national myth of reviving the Archbishopric of

Ohrid as the only “Macedonian” (national) institution during the Byzantine and Ottoman rule had been a powerful national narrative for over a century.

In seeking suitable bishops, the Initiative Board and the Religious Commission explored the possibility of even inviting foreign bishops without dioceses, such as members of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, headquartered in New York. Following Yugoslavia’s break with the Soviet bloc in 1948 and its developing relations with the United States, such options were considered feasible.

The Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia consisted of six republics with formally equal rights. While the official ideology adhered to a Marxist critique of religion as the opium of the masses, the state did not adopt the level of religious persecution characteristic of the Soviet Union. Instead, religious life was regulated through the Commission for Religious Affairs and the Organization of Priests, which functioned within the Union of Working People of Yugoslavia (a socialist version of trade unions). Membership in this organization was effectively mandatory for clergy, and its leadership structures were closely aligned with the ruling Communist Party.

At the same time, the Yugoslav government sought to counter the “Greater Serbian” ideology associated with the pre-war Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Within the new federal framework, it was considered essential that all republics enjoy equal status. The position of the SOC as the sole Orthodox Church in Yugoslavia, and its claim that all Orthodox believers were Serbian, was incompatible with the multiethnic character of the federation, which emphasized “brotherhood and unity”. Consequently, the state exerted pressure on the Holy Synod and the Patriarch of the SOC to recognize the new political reality, emphasizing that the issue was not purely ecclesiastical but also political and state-related. Financial pressure was frequently employed, as state funding of the SOC could be reduced in cases of non-compliance.

In the process of creating the Orthodox Church in Macedonia, the only Macedonian-born bishop within the SOC, Dositej (born Dimitar Stojkovski on 7 December 1906 in Marjovo, Prilep region), emerged as a natural candidate. After emigrating from Macedonia, then part of the Ottoman Empire, with his family to Serbia, he completed his education in Smederevo and Belgrade, enrolled in the seminary in Sremski Karlovci in 1922, and was tonsured as a monk in 1924 at the Monastery of the Holy Theotokos near Kichevo in Macedonia, receiving the name Dositej. He later continued his formation at the Hilandar Monastery on Mount Athos and completed theological studies in Belgrade in 1942. A protégé of Bishop Nikolaj (Velimirović) of Ohrid⁴, he was ordained Bishop of Toplica on 22 July 1951, and in December of the same year, he visited Macedonia, where he met with the Initiative Board (Петковски 2021, pp. 27–75).

Between 1951 and 1957, extensive negotiations took place. Dositej refused to become Bishop in the MOC without the approval of the Serbian Patriarch, considering any unilateral action to be uncanonical and potentially schismatic. An agreement was finally reached on 10 April 1957, stipulating the following:

1. The Patriarch of the SOC would serve as administrator of the eparchies in PRM,
2. A list of five candidates for bishops would be submitted to the Holy Synod of SOC, which would ordain three bishops.
3. The Patriarch’s administration was to be conducted through the priests in Macedonia
4. Until the full ordination of bishops, the Patriarch must not send Serbian bishops in any capacity to PR Macedonia
5. During his administration, the Patriarch would ordain local candidates for the priesthood from the Macedonian graduates student of theology, and regularly visit the eparchies in Macedonia (Мојановски 2004, p. 29).

Patriarch Vikentij assumed administrative authority over the eparchies of Skopje, Ohrid-Bitola, and Strumica-Zletovo, after they were organized in accordance with the Constitution of the SOC (Мојановски 2004, p. 30).

In April 1958, a delegation of the SOC with the Patriarch Vikentij and Bishops Jovan of Nish, Hrizostom of Branicevci, and Vicar Bishop Dositej of Toplica visited the eparchies in PR Macedonia as well as the government institutions. Unfortunately, on 5 June, Patriarch Vikentij died, and the Synod of SOC did not approve the action of the late Patriarch and his undertaken obligations toward the Initiative Board. As a reaction, the Initiative Board on 23 July decided to summon the Second Church–Laity Assembly in Ohrid (4–6 October 1958). This period was very difficult; the pressure on Dositej was great (Петковски 2021, p. 40). The entire state apparatus of the People’s Republic of Macedonia was involved, including the secret police. The list of invitees underwent high-security scanning to avoid any disputes and problems. It was far more a state rather than a pure church event.

In the cathedral of St. Sofia in Ohrid with 219 delegates present, a decision was made to revive the Archbishopric of Ohrid into the Macedonian Orthodox Church, with Dositej II as its head, bearing the title Archbishop of Ohrid and Skopje and Metropolitan of Macedonia, accepting the Serbian Patriarch as the head of the church. On 5 October 1958, Dositej was enthroned in the Holy Theotokos–Peribleptos Church in Ohrid (Петковски 2021, p. 45). The Constitution of MOC was passed.

The next year, Patriarch German, together with Archbishop Dositej and other bishops from the SOC, ordained Kliment (Trajkovski) as Bishop of Prespa and Bitola, and then Dositej and Kliment ordained Naum (Dimovski) as Bishop of Zletovo and Strumica. In a letter of 26 June 1959 from the Holy Synod of the SOC to the State Commission for Religious Affairs, it was confirmed that the three eparchies had passed into the MOC and were governed by their own Constitution but would stay in canonical unity with the SOC through a personal union in His Holiness the Patriarch of the SOC. This meant that the SOC formally recognized the autonomy of MOC.⁵ However, the Holy Synod of the SOC recommended changes to 35 articles of the Constitution of MOC. Especially, requests were for Article 52, regulating the title and insignia of the Archbishop; the SOC insisted those should be used only on the territory of Macedonian eparchies (Мојановски 2004, pp. 45–52). The latter turned into a stumbling block, as neither the MOC nor Archbishop Dositej accepted this. His title in Macedonia from 1958 was Archbishop of Ohrid and Skopje and first Macedonian Metropolitan, allowing him to wear a white ecclesiastic headgear with a pearl cross, as a primate. But in the presence of the Patriarch, he was titled simply as Metropolitan of Skopje, and was asked to remove the white hat as it was entitled only to the highest in status, thus already worn by the Patriarch. After many negotiations, only in 1964, the Federal Commission of Religious Affairs requested the MOC to accept the full requirements by SOC of the Constitution of MOC, and the issues arising from Art. 52 to be settled with a separate Agreement between Patriarch German and Metropolitan Dositej (Мојановски 2004, p. 189).

The agreement meant that the Patriarch should be titled as Serbian and Macedonian Patriarch; in all delegations abroad, a representative of the MOC should be included; and the Patriarch should communicate to all Orthodox churches about the autonomy of MOC. The Patriarch never used the title Patriarch also of Macedonia. The Macedonian part of the delegation was rarely invited to foreign visits and also did not announce the formation of the autonomy of MOC. This made clear that autonomy was not a solution to the church question, according to MOC. Gaining the core values of Macedonia’s bishops and priests and education in Macedonia did not suffice. The next step should be taken: that of full independence–autocephaly.

The Republic's Commission of Religious Affairs was very involved in this process, practically orchestrating it. It was not satisfied with the status of MOC simply as a part of the SOC without recognition by other Orthodox Churches (Мојановски 2004, p. 191). By this, it was actually seeking autocephaly. The differences were deepened as MOC started to work among the Macedonian diaspora on the American and Australian continents. The first Macedonian parish was formed in Melbourne, Australia, in 1960, followed by Gary, Indiana, USA (1961) and Toronto, Canada (1962), many of them being Macedonian emigrants from Greece. This further complicated relations between the MOC and the SOC; the latter claimed that these were eparchies of the SOC. On the other side, the Bulgarian OC complained that those people were Bulgarians and thus under their jurisdiction. The same reaction was by the Greek OC, stating that there could not be a Macedonian Orthodox church, and they supported the SOC position.

Finally, the MOC accepted all the requirements from the SOC for its Constitution and was hoping for a full resolution of the church question at the SOC Council in 1966. At the meeting of the Federal Religious Commission with the Synod of the SOC, headed by Patriarch German, on 26 April 1966, the representatives of the SOC emphasized the following:

- That the Macedonian Church Assembly of 1958 was “non-canonical”;
- That the Patriarch was aware of some minor objections (and that they disagreed with Metropolitan Dositej's visits to Macedonian churches abroad, where SOC also has dioceses);
- The SOC did not agree with the restoration of the Ohrid Archbishopric.
- That they believed informing the other churches about the MOC could not be accepted, since it is only for autocephaly, not for autonomy (Мојановски 2004, pp. 238–39).

This clearly shows the differences in understanding the “Resolution of the church question.” For the Macedonian State and Church, this now meant the fulfillment of a historical dream of the restoration of the Archbishopric of Ohrid as an autocephalous church in the form of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. This was clearly articulated in a letter of 3 December 1966, from the Synod of the MOC to the Synod of the SOC, stating that all possibilities for resolution of the Macedonian church question on the current platform were exhausted and the only possibility was the proclamation of autocephaly (Мојановски 2004, pp. 259–68).

Both churches agreed that with the SOC decision of 1959, the status of the MOC was solved, but their understanding was different. In a letter to Patriarch German, of 3 December 1966, the Holy Synod (HS) of the MOC asked the SOC to grant autocephaly to the MOC. In response on 24 May 1967, Patriarch German answered that the request could not be accepted, as several elements were missing: first, there were only three bishops, not sufficient for ordaining other bishops, nor an ecclesiastical court, many churches were without priests, no monasteries with monks or nuns, no seminary or theological faculties. Such an autocephaly would be a breach of its own Constitution, as it states that the MOC is in canonical unity with the SOC. Also, this request involved governmental agencies that were in contradiction to the canons. Thus, the autonomous MOC did not have the prerequisite abilities to be granted autocephaly, and if it proclaimed it unilaterally, it would be considered schismatic by the SOC and all other Orthodox churches (Мојановски 2004, pp. 307–13).

A milestone shift in Yugoslav politics happened with the deposition of Aleksandar Rankovic, vice president of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, second in power just after Tito. He was pro-Serbian and clashed with Tito, and in July 1966 was removed from his post. This relaxed the relationship between the high state officials from the Serbian and Macedonian people's republics (Risteski 2016, p. 163).

On 17–19 July 1967, marking the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, the MOC self-proclaimed its autocephaly, headed by Kyr Kyr Dositej, now

titled as Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia and Metropolitan of Skopje. This act was not recognized by any other Orthodox church, and the MOC was considered schismatic. The autocephaly of the MOC was strongly supported by the Federal Government, which in turn asked the Patriarch and the HS of the SOC not to cause political destabilization of Yugoslavia, as it was a political, not purely ecclesiastical issue, threatening a change in the current relations of the Government toward the SOC (Мојановски 2004, pp. 376–77).

However, there was an understanding within the MOC that this self-proclaimed autocephaly was not complete, and many attempts were made to gain recognition by the Orthodox Ecumene. The MOC and the Macedonian state continued to seek “resolving the church question”, which meant that the SOC still needed to recognize autocephaly for it to be real, and the first meeting between their delegations took place only in 1978 and in 1979 but with no results. In 1990, the SOC initiated contacts with the MOC, but due to the turmoil of the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation and the upcoming Civil War, the meeting never occurred (Николовски 2025, p. 133).

6. Path to Recognition

The Republic of Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia on 8 September 1991. However, Greece objected to the use of the name “Macedonia,” arguing that it constituted part of Greek historical and cultural heritage. This dispute significantly delayed international recognition; thus, the Republic of Macedonia was admitted to the United Nations only in 1995 under the provisional name “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. In the context of this new socio-political reality, the responsibility for achieving full ecclesiastical autocephaly was assumed by successive Macedonian governments, irrespective of political affiliation.

If the People’s Republic of Macedonia, as a part of the Yugoslav Federation from 1945, was not a fully independent state, meaning statehood as a prerequisite for autocephaly was questionable, after the independence of 1991, the Republic of Macedonia should have had an autocephalous Orthodox Church.

Article 19 of the Constitution of 17 November 1991 explicitly references the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), stating: “The Macedonian Orthodox Church, as well as other religious communities and groups, are separate from the state and equal before the law” (Constitution 1991). The Macedonian model of secularism thus developed within a distinct post-communist context. Although the Constitution defined Macedonia as a secular state with a clear separation between religious institutions and state authority, in practice, the ideological and political dimensions were not always within declared equality (Karakamisheva-Jovanovska and Spasenovski 2020, p. 154). This is evident, for instance, in the Declaration of Support for the Autocephaly of the MOC adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia on 23 January 2004.

Initial attempts to re-establish dialogue with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) began in 1992. The SOC maintained its consistent position that the MOC should revert to its 1959 status, namely autonomy within the SOC. These early discussions took place against the backdrop of the Yugoslav wars (1991–1995), limiting their effectiveness. A more substantive engagement occurred a decade later. On 17 May 2002, delegations of the MOC—comprising Metropolitan Petar of Prespa and Pelagonia, Metropolitan Timotej of Debar and Kichevo, and Metropolitan Naum of Strumica—met with representatives of the SOC in Nish, Serbia, and signed the so-called Nish Agreement.

The Nish Agreement effectively proposed a return to the 1959 arrangement of widest autonomy as a prerequisite step toward eventual autocephaly. Notably, the agreement avoided the use of the name “Macedonian Orthodox Church,” instead referring to the entity as the “Orthodox Church in the Republic of Macedonia,” the “Archbishopric of Ohrid,”

or simply the “church in question.” According to its provisions, this church would be governed by its own Constitution while remaining in canonical unity with the SOC. Its head would retain the right to wear the white ecclesiastical headgear with a brilliant cross, while his ordination would require confirmation by the Serbian Patriarch, who would also participate in the enthronement and inform the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople of it. The church would officially bear the name “Archbishopric of Ohrid,” while the designation “Macedonian Orthodox Church” could be used in internal communication. Accordingly, the primate’s official title would be “Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje,” with the possibility of using the title “Archbishop of Ohrid and of Macedonia” internally. The agreement also reckognized the dioceses of the MOC in the diaspora (Наупт 2002).

Upon disclosure of the agreement to the public in Macedonia, significant opposition emerged. Media outlets and public commentators criticized the arrangement as a relinquishment of autocephaly. In response, the MOC delegation withdrew its signatures, subsequently asserting that the agreement had not been formally signed. Shortly thereafter, Metropolitan Jovan (Zoran Vranishkovski) of Veles and the Vardar Valley initiated separate negotiations with the SOC in an attempt to resolve the ensuing crisis. The SOC extended an individual invitation to bishops, clergy, monastics, and faithful in the Republic of Macedonia to enter into liturgical and canonical unity with it, and thereby with the entire Orthodox Church. Although several bishops of the MOC initially expressed openness to this proposal, only Metropolitan Jovan, together with a portion of his clergy and faithful, ultimately accepted. On 22 June 2002, Serbian Patriarch Pavle (1990–2009) formally received them into canonical communion with the SOC and, by extension, with the Orthodox Ecumene (Archbishop 2016, p. 39).

On 5 July 2002, the Holy Synod of the MOC removed Jovan from his episcopal office, and the following day, the police enforced this decision by evicting him from the Metropolitan residence in Veles. On 24 September 2002, the Holy Synod of the SOC granted Jovan the title of Exarch of the Serbian Patriarch for the throne of Ohrid, thereby recognizing him as the only canonical bishop within the Republic of Macedonia in the eyes of the wider Orthodox Ecumene. In May 2003, two additional bishops were appointed, forming the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO). Subsequently, Metropolitan Jovan was imprisoned on charges of “inciting national and religious hatred, discord, and intolerance.” The OAO made multiple attempts to register as a Church in Macedonia, but these were consistently rejected. On 24 May 2005, Serbian Patriarch Pavle conferred upon Jovan the title “Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje,” while the Holy Synod of the SOC issued a Tomos granting autonomy to the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric. As a result, two parallel Orthodox jurisdictions existed in Macedonia: the MOC, recognized by the state but not by other Orthodox Churches, and the OAO, recognized by the wider Orthodox world but not by the state (Archbishop 2016, p. 42).

The OAO operated under significant pressure from state authorities. Archbishop Jovan constructed a monastery church on his private property in the village of Nizhopole near Bitola; however, the structure was demolished multiple times on the grounds that it lacked proper authorization (Грозданоски n.d.). After repeated attempts, the church was eventually completed and remained the only temple of the OAO. It used a couple of apartments in Skopje, considered chapels. Although no official data exist regarding the number of adherents, estimates suggest that the community remained relatively small. Nevertheless, the OAO maintained a functioning Holy Synod composed of Archbishop Jovan and Bishops Joakim of Polog and Kumanovo, Marko of Bregalnica, and David of Stobi. Jovan himself faced multiple legal prosecutions and periods of detention on various charges, as did Bishops Marko and David (Владиките 2012).

In 2009, an initiative was undertaken to incorporate the designation “Archbishopric of Ohrid” into the official name of the MOC. This proposal provoked public controversy, with critics interpreting it as a step toward abandoning the term “Macedonian” to accommodate the position of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. However, in the following year, with comparatively limited public attention, the official name “Macedonian Orthodox Church—Archbishopric of Ohrid” was formally adopted.

7. The Ukrainian Case

The first attempt to establish a national church in Ukraine was the emergence of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), triggered by the overthrow of the Tsarist regime in 1917 and finally constituted at the All-Ukrainian Sobor in October 1921 (Bociurkiw 1991, pp. 228–49). Following the creation of the Soviet Union, all churches were subjected to severe repression: many clergy were arrested, and numerous churches were destroyed or repurposed for secular use. During the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, the UAOC was reestablished, but after WWII, bishops and clergy emigrated to North America, where they established the Ukrainian Church, led from 1971 by Metropolitan Mstislav (Skrypnyk) (1898–1993). Metropolitan Mstislav met the PC in 1963 and 1971, asking him to annul the 1686 decision (Kuczara 2024, p. 141).

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) considers the territory of the former Soviet Union to be its canonical domain. Ukraine declared its independence on 16 July 1990, with approximately 63% of its population identifying as Orthodox Christians. Shortly thereafter, three Orthodox churches were established. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) was the largest and functioned as an autonomous body within the Russian Orthodox Church. For a long period, it was regarded as the only canonical Orthodox church in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), established in 1992, considers itself the legitimate successor of the “Metropolitan of Kyiv and all Rus,” originally established under the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1686. Metropolitan Filaret, a member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, convened a synod in Kyiv in 1992 and requested autocephaly from Moscow. After being refused, he unilaterally declared the autocephaly of his church, which was not recognized by other Orthodox Churches and was therefore considered non-canonical. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), established in 1990 and tracing its roots to 1921, was likewise not recognized as canonical by other Orthodox churches. During the mandates of pro-Russian presidents in Ukraine, the government supported the UOC-MP, whereas President Poroshenko clearly privileged the UOC-KP. Subsequently, he openly supported the creation of an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Silviu and Buda 2019, p. 23). A detailed study of the process is given by (Kuczara 2024).

8. Similarities with the Ukrainian Case

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the positions of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) exhibited numerous similarities. In both cases, a form of autonomous ecclesiastical jurisdiction had existed in the past, serving as a “historical connection,” namely the Archbishopric of Ohrid and the Metropolitan of Kyiv, respectively. Both of these institutions were incorporated into Orthodox Churches of larger states with similar but distinct ethnic compositions. Both of these state churches had previously received a Tomos from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Macedonia gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, while Ukraine gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1992. In both cases, the respective churches sought independence and autocephaly: the MOC from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), and the UOC from the

Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, both the SOC and the ROC claimed canonical jurisdiction over the territories of all newly independent states, based on Tomos previously granted by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Both the modern states of Macedonia and Ukraine viewed the establishment of a national, independent Orthodox Church as a pillar of the nation-building process, while the jurisdiction of a foreign church was perceived as a channel for the spread of foreign ethnic influence. With independence, the principle of “one state, one church” emerged as a basis for claims to autocephaly.

However, there are also significant differences between the two cases. First, following the October Revolution of 1917 and the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922, the state adopted an aggressively anti-religious stance toward the ROC. Although this diminished its overall influence, it remained the only Orthodox Church present in the territory of the Ukrainian SSR until independence. Additionally, the Soviet Union promoted Russian cultural and linguistic dominance. In contrast, Yugoslavia functioned as a federation of formally equal peoples and minorities. After 1941, there was no effective presence of the SOC in the territory of the People’s/Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Furthermore, the government and the Communist Party of Macedonia strongly supported the establishment and development of a Macedonian Orthodox Church. The broader process of Macedonian nation-building was likewise strongly supported by the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. For example, education was conducted entirely in the Macedonian language, while Serbo-Croatian, the main official language of Yugoslavia, was taught only minimally—two classes per week in the sixth and seventh grades.

Second, as discussed previously, the MOC received formal recognition of autonomy from the SOC in 1958, which was later denied, leading to the unilateral proclamation of autocephaly in 1967 with full state support. It functioned as the only Orthodox Church in the People’s/Socialist Republic of Macedonia, without influence from the SOC. The Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid was established only in 2002 and maintained very limited influence on church life. In contrast, the UOC-KP self-proclaimed autonomy in 1992, while the majority of churches, clergy, and believers in Ukraine remained within the autonomous UOC-MP. Additionally, a third competing structure, the UAOC, existed. In summary, before the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, the MOC had already existed for 45 years as an uncontested, state-supported institution, with a Holy Synod, six domestic and three overseas eparchies, as well as a theological high school and faculty. By contrast, in the Republic of Ukraine, the UOC began developing within a contested religious environment, with the state favoring the pro-Russian UOC-MP.

Finally, the relationships between the MOC and the SOC, and between the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and the ROC, were fundamentally different. While the Patriarch of Constantinople supported developments within the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, his position regarding Macedonia was more complex. As a Greek, he holds the position that neither the church nor the country should use the name “Macedonia,” thereby complicating further steps toward the recognition of autocephaly.

9. Geopolitics at Play

In an effort to enhance its prestige, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, during his 2008 visit to Kyiv, articulated the position that the Constantinopolitan See alone bears “a unique responsibility and obligation to safeguard the faith” and to uphold “the canonical order” across the entire Orthodox communion (Denysenko 2023, p. 622). This statement established the foundation for his actions a decade later.

On the other hand, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church met with Pope Francis in 2016 and signed a joint declaration that addressed, among other issues, the situation of the Ukrainian Church:

27. It is our hope that the schism between the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine may be overcome through existing canonical norms, that all the Orthodox Christians of Ukraine may live in peace and harmony, and that the Catholic communities in the country may contribute to this, in such a way that our Christian brotherhood may become increasingly evident. (Joint Declaration 2016)

The Euromaidan protests in 2013, directed against the pro-Russian President Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union, received strong and visible support from the United States. Notably, Victoria Nuland, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, publicly engaged in distributing sandwiches to the protesters. These events led to the overthrow of Yanukovych and the election of Petro Poroshenko, which significantly altered the relationship between the Ukrainian state and the church question. Pro-Russian regions of Ukraine rejected the overthrow and declared independence, leading to the outbreak of the Ukrainian civil war in 2014 (Saal 2026). This led to further alienation from the ROC, especially after the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022, when the ROC was perceived as one of the main propagators of Russian propaganda.

Prior to these developments, negotiations for ecclesiastical unity had primarily been conducted between the UOC-KP and the UAOC. A turning point occurred in 2014 with the election of Metropolitan Onufriy as head of the UOC-MP, who initiated efforts toward internal consolidation. However, substantive progress toward unity materialized only through the active political involvement of President Poroshenko. On 16 June 2016, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted a resolution appealing to the Patriarch of Constantinople to revoke the 1686 act and grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. On 1 August 2016, Archbishop Job of Telmessos of the Ecumenical Patriarchate stated in an interview given to the *Religion Information Service of Ukraine* that "Constantinople has always believed that the territory of Ukraine is the canonical territory of the Church of Constantinople." He further noted that "if Ukraine wants to obtain autocephaly, then Constantinople could not act unilaterally without a request from the Russian Orthodox Church, as Ukraine is currently in the bosom of this Church" (Archbishop 2016). This position implies that the Patriarch of Constantinople considers itself the "Mother Church" of Ukraine and could potentially initiate the process of granting a Tomos independently.

Poroshenko personally attended the unification council on 15 December 2018, where the UAOC and UOC-KP agreed to merge, although the largest body—the UOC-MP—remained outside the agreement. This partial unification led to the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). At the council, Poroshenko not only participated but also introduced the newly elected primate, Epiphanius, presenting the OCU as a symbolic victory over Russia. For Poroshenko, the OCU functioned as a political project, representing a national church serving as a form of political religion (Denysenko 2023, p. 619). President Zelensky continued this trajectory, promoting cultural and institutional separation from Russia through measures such as church calendar reform and the transfer of property from the UOC-MP to the OCU (Jovic 2025, pp. 60–61).

The prerequisites for granting the Tomos of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church were as follows. First, the three existing Orthodox churches in Ukraine were required to cease to exist as separate legal entities and to unite into a single Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), with jurisdiction limited to the territory of Ukraine and incorporating the bishops and clergy of all three bodies. Its overseas dioceses were to fall under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople (Kuczara 2024, p. 146). The Patriarch of Constantinople is the head of the Church in terms of appellate authority, acting as the final ar-

biter in internal disputes within the OCU, and would also receive a stavropegial monastery under his direct jurisdiction. Another condition was that Metropolitan Onufriy would not become the head of the new Church. The Tomos for the OCU was granted on 5 January 2019. Following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, the UOC-MP severed all ties with Moscow and removed the reference to the Moscow Patriarchate from its name.

The first contact of the MOC with the Patriarch of Constantinople occurred in 1992, when the MOC was instructed to continue negotiations with the SOC. On 12 November 1998, a commission for negotiations with the Greek Orthodox Church was established. Hopes for resolving the question of MOC autocephaly increased when a Tomos was granted to the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia in the same year. President Boris Trajkovski (1999–2004), a Methodist, became the first President of the Republic of Macedonia to visit Patriarch Bartholomew, accompanied by a delegation from the MOC, in 2002, on the eve of the Nish Agreement. His successor, President Georgi Ivanov (2009–2019), a Catholic of the Eastern rite, held multiple meetings with the Patriarch of Constantinople in 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, and 2018. As part of mediation efforts, both the MOC and the Macedonian state also contacted Patriarch Alexius II of the Russian Orthodox Church on several occasions. Both Patriarchates demanded the release of Archbishop Jovan from imprisonment and the removal of political charges against him as a condition for continuing dialogue regarding the status of the MOC-AO (Николовски 2025, pp. 189–95).

The political situation shifted significantly in 2017 with the rise of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and his government's approach to resolving longstanding disputes with neighboring countries, often to the disadvantage of Macedonia. This included the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighborliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria in 2017, which effectively allowed Bulgarian influence over interpretations of Macedonian history as a prerequisite for EU accession. This was followed by the Prespa Agreement with Greece in 2018, which resulted in the renaming of the country to the Republic of North Macedonia, despite a failed referendum. These developments significantly altered the trajectory of the MOC's pursuit of autocephaly.

On 9 November 2017, the Holy Synod of the MOC decided, instead of continuing futile negotiations with the SOC, to propose that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) act as its "Mother Church" in exchange for support in obtaining autocephaly. Involving another church in the issue meant interfering in another church's jurisdiction, and thus it became a basis for an appeal to the Patriarch of Constantinople. This also represented a highly geopolitical move aimed at strengthening relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria. Metropolitan Naum of Strumica explicitly framed this initiative in political terms:

"The establishment of Eucharistic unity between the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church—OA is a natural result of the Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighborliness between Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia and is in accordance with the Euro-Atlantic integration processes towards which, with the help of Bulgaria, the Republic of Macedonia is striving. Therefore, those who oppose this unity also oppose the above-mentioned processes. The relevant services⁶ should check whether these people are working for foreign interests or are doing so out of ignorance. According to the Holy Fathers, ignorance is the greatest evil." (Наум 2017)

However, the Greek Orthodox Church accused the BOC of interfering in the jurisdiction of the SOC and of violating ecclesiastical norms. The Patriarchate of Constantinople and the ROC likewise deemed this initiative non-canonical. These reactions compelled the BOC to withdraw from further involvement despite significant political and public pressure.

On 9 May 2018, the MOC-AO (formally the Archbishopric of Ohrid, accepting that the name "Macedonia" would not be used) appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarchate for

the resolution of its status. The letter was delivered by Prime Minister Zaev, highlighting the political dimension of the process and the involvement of the state in ecclesiastical matters, a pattern characteristic of Balkan contexts (Николовски 2025, p. 168).

With the start of the process for granting the Tomos to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in October 2018, without the consent of the Russian Orthodox Church as the Mother Church, the geopolitical landscape shifted significantly. A schism emerged not only between the ROC and Patriarch of Constantinople, but also within global Orthodoxy. The OCU was recognized by Greek-speaking Churches (Greece, Cyprus, Alexandria, and Jerusalem), while Slavic Churches (Serbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Polish, and those of the Czech Lands and Slovakia), as well as the Romanian and Albanian Orthodox Churches, did not recognize it. This division reflects broader geopolitical and cultural alignments.

These developments occurred in the context of Western sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, encompassing not only economic and political measures but also cultural and ecclesiastical dimensions. The Russian Orthodox Church was increasingly perceived as a significant instrument of Russian influence globally, and efforts to diminish this influence became a central component of Western policy. In this context, support for the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople functioned as a counterbalance.

The Tomos granted to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) by the Patriarch of Constantinople established a precedent whereby the Patriarch of Constantinople could grant autocephaly to a church without the consent of the mother church, the ROC, on whose canonical territory the new church was formed. Following the appeal to the Patriarch of Constantinople, the MOC-AO possibility emerged of a similar “Ukrainian scenario.” In summary, the process of obtaining autocephaly for the MOC-AO, in direct parallel with the Ukrainian case, would have entailed the following steps:

1. The MOC-OA and the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric (OOA) would have been required to dissolve themselves (i.e., deregister as legal entities), although the OOA, lacking formal legal status, would have ceased to exist in practice.
2. A single unified church would have been established from the structures of the MOC-OA and the OOA under the name “*Orthodox Church of North Macedonia*,” with a newly elected primate.
3. The American, European, and Australian dioceses would have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as the newly formed church would have exercised jurisdiction exclusively within the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia.
4. The Ecumenical Patriarch would have functioned as the supreme appellate authority, serving as the final arbiter in internal disputes within the Orthodox Church of North Macedonia.
5. The Ecumenical Patriarch would have received a stavropegial monastery or church in North Macedonia under his direct jurisdiction.
6. Zoran Zaev, then Prime Minister, would have been mentioned in the Tomos.

Such a decision most probably would not have been accepted by the Russian, Serbian, and several other local Orthodox churches, meaning that the dispute with the SOC would have remained unresolved. In such a scenario, the Orthodox dioceses in Macedonia would have effectively reverted to the situation of 1767, when, following the abolition of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, all dioceses were placed under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Patriarch of Constantinople was aware that granting a Tomos to the Archbishopric of Ohrid would provoke strong opposition from both the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches. Consequently, the Patriarch of Constantinople returned to the position that the autocephaly of the Archbishopric of Ohrid should be achieved in agreement with the SOC. This implied a return to the 1959 arrangement of broad autonomy within the

SOC as a means of ending the schism. In practical terms, this required the MOC-AO to renounce its unilateral proclamation of autocephaly in 1967 and to accept the demands consistently articulated by the SOC in negotiations since 1959, including those contained in the Nish Agreement.

With its decision of 9 May 2022, the Patriarch of Constantinople accepted the “Church of Archbishop Stefan” into canonical unity, thereby ending the schism, while leaving administrative matters to be resolved between the Archbishopric of Ohrid and the SOC. The official communiqué stated:

“The Holy and Sacred Synod convened today, Monday, May 9, 2022, under the chairmanship of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and discussed extensively the ecclesiastical matter of Skopje. Having assessed in its final stage the petition of appeal of that Church to the Mother Church, along with the repeated pleas of the State of North Macedonia, it made the following decisions:

It welcomes into eucharistic communion the Hierarchy, clergy and laity under Archbishop Stefan of this Church, thereby healing the wound of schism and pouring “oil and wine” on the ordeal of our Orthodox brethren in that country. To this end, the appropriate Patriarchal and Synodal Act is issued.

It cedes to the Most Holy Church of Serbia the regulation of the administrative matters between itself and the Church in North Macedonia, in the context of course of the sacred canonical order and church tradition.

It recognizes ‘Ohrid’ as the name of this Church (understood as the region of its jurisdiction solely within the boundaries of the territory of the state of North Macedonia), as also promised in writing to the Ecumenical Patriarchate by its Primate, thereby excluding the term ‘Macedonian’ and any derivative of the word ‘Macedonia.’” (Ecumenical Patriarchate Communiqué 2022)

Media coverage widely presented this decision as the recognition of the MOC-AO by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, portraying it as the fulfillment of a long-standing national aspiration (Божјо 2022; Николовски 2025). However, the actual content of the communiqué indicates a different reality. According to the decision, it is the hierarchy, clergy, and faithful under Archbishop Stefan who are received into Eucharistic communion. This signifies the healing of the 55-year schism, whereby the sacraments (such as baptism and chrismation) are recognized, and clergy may concelebrate with those of other canonical churches (ЕКСКАУЗИБХО 2022). This is analogous to the SOC’s personal appeal to clergy and faithful in 2002. The decision separates the clergy and faithful from the institutional structure of the MOC-OA, not recognized as canonical; only its clergy and faithful entered canonical unity. This situation is comparable to the “abolition” of the Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1767, when its dioceses were redistributed, and administrative authority was transferred to the higher instance, i.e., the Patriarch of Constantinople.

The resolution of administrative and institutional issues was left to the SOC. As a result, the clergy and faithful effectively returned under the jurisdiction of the SOC, thereby the self-proclaimed autocephaly proclaimed in 1967 was set aside for the purpose of restoring the communion and thus restoring the 1959 situation in accordance with the Nish Agreement. The Church was designated as the “Church of Ohrid,” with jurisdiction limited to the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. Consequently, dioceses in Europe, America, and Australia would fall under the PC. Previously, the same condition given by the Tomos of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine meant that its dioceses in the diaspora were transferred under the direct administration of the Patriarchate. Moreover, the use of the term “Macedonian” and its derivatives of Macedonia are not to be used for the church. In effect, the Ecumenical Patriarchate delegated further resolution to the SOC, from which

a Tomos would need to be obtained. Notably, the communiqué does not call for negotiations with the SOC but rather assigns it authority to determine administrative matters. According to the PC, the dioceses of the MOC-OA fall within the jurisdiction of the SOC under the Tomos of 1922.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate's use of the designation "Church of Archbishop Stefan" serves to distinguish it from the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, which it recognizes as the canonical church in Macedonia, despite its lack of official state registration. Through this decision, the PC effectively refrained from direct intervention and deferred the matter to the SOC, thereby avoiding a repetition of the Ukrainian renaming of the one previously given to the Russian Orthodox Church. In other words, it will not revoke or rename the 1922 Tomos given to the Serbian Orthodox Church of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The SOC accepted the Patriarchate's appeal and the establishment of canonical unity, i.e., "healing the schism" with joint liturgies and initiating the process of resolving administrative issues.

The MOC-AO de facto accepted to return to the pre-1967 situation, recognizing the now "non-canonical proclamation of autocephaly in 1967" to the state of autonomy from 1959, which meant in personal union with the Serbian Orthodox Church through the Patriarch of Serbia and Macedonia, Porfirije.

The start of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022 was a huge geopolitical shift. Serbia maintained close relations with Russia, while the Republic of North Macedonia, having joined NATO on 27 March 2020, thus fully supported the USA and NATO position. Also, an important political process is the Open Balkan, a unified economic zone of Serbia, Macedonia, and Albania starting in 2019. This intensified the relationships with Serbia, with whom only one unresolved question remained: the status of the MOC-AO and relations with the SOC, so a new geopolitical context surrounded the question.

The process of negotiation of the MOC-AO with the SOC continued. From February to May 2022, several secret negotiations took place. The Patriarch of Constantinople's Communiqué warned SOC of a new possible development. With the Ukraine precedent, the Patriarch of Constantinople could have possibly recognized the MOC as well as potentially a Croatian OC, Montenegrin OC, or even Kosovo OC, all within the canonical jurisdiction of the SOC, but in separate countries. This forced the SOC to come up with a pragmatic solution that would retain its status in this issue. The council of the SOC on 16 May 2022 announced receiving a letter from MOC-AO from 10 May accepting the autonomy granted by SOC in 1959, actually denouncing the self-proclaimed autocephaly of 1967 and entering into canonical unity with the SOC.

In the Communiqué of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church of 16 May, among other things, it states:

"Having received the act of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the "Macedonian Orthodox Church—Ohrid Archbishopric" by which it accepts the universally recognized canonical status granted to it in 1959 by the Holy Council of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and expressing the hope that the Serbian Orthodox Church will fraternally resolve and resolve the issue of its final canonical status, which should be followed by pan-Orthodox agreement and acceptance of that status,

"In the dialog about their future and eventual final canonical status, the Serbian Orthodox Church will be guided only and exclusively by ecclesiological-canonical and church-pastoral principles, standards and norms, without caring about "realpolitik", "geopolitical", "church-political" and other similar issues or for unilateral initiatives and is not subject to anyone's influence or pressure." (Саопштење 2022)

The last statement was most probably to divert public opinion from all the real political processes that secretly underwent, as described by Oliver Andonovski, former Minister of Interior, who took part in the process (Богатиноски 2026).

This was not mentioned in the news. Instead, only that the SOC finally accepted the canonical status of MOC-AO (Давидовска 2022). In order to manage public opinion and to cover this unpleasant moment, several mainstream news agencies wrote that the MOC-AO would not have mutual liturgies with the SOC soon, but instead with the Patriarch of Constantinople (МПЦ-ОА не планира 2022).

Hardly any source wrote negatively about this as a fiasco of SOC–MOC-AO negotiations, and that with the decision, the SOC simply exchanged the OAO with the MOC-AO, proving them wrong in the 20-year conflict with the OAO (СПЦ ја врати 2022).

On 17 May 2022, the SOC invited Archbishop Stefan and all bishops of the MOC-AO to partake in a joint liturgy with the SOC in Belgrade. This took place on 19 May. Part of the agreement was incorporating the OAO, which had already received a Tomos from the SOC, into the MOC-AO, including Archbishop Jovan and the three bishops. Immediately, they partook in all liturgies. On 23 and 24 May, the Serbian Patriarch with seven bishops visited the MOC-AO. And on 24 May⁷, on the feast day of St. Cyril and Methodius, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije announced that the SOC was granting autocephaly to the MOC-AO (Николовски 2025, p. 217).

The text of the Tomos, among others, reads:

“Serbian Patriarch will officially and publicly announce the above Synodal Decision, sign the corresponding Tomos, and submit it to all sister autocephalous Churches for adoption, because the SOC is not the only factor for autocephaly, but rather the fullness of the Orthodox Church, which is why the reception of other Orthodox Churches is also needed.

Patriarchate of Pec, synodally blesses, approves, grants, and recognizes the autocephalous status of the Church of God in the Republic of North Macedonia, which today is called the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which is the successor of the ancient and glorious Ohrid Archbishopric, and due to which its title includes its honorary name, and which covers the canonical space of the previous and so-named autonomous Church of our Serbian Patriarchate of 1959.

The autocephaly of the new sister Church is full autocephaly, which means that the SOC does not condition it with provisions that limit its canonical jurisdiction and pastoral care for its faithful Orthodox people in their home country and in the diaspora.

At the same time, the SOC warmly recommends that His Beatitude, the primate and the Holy Synod of the new sister autocephalous Church, resolve the issue of its official name through fraternal dialog with the hellenophone and other Local Orthodox churches.

The holy churches and monasteries, especially the great holy sites from the Nemanjić period and the more recent period of Serbian presence, church constructions and cultural creation, on the territory of today’s North Macedonia, as well as the entire movable and immovable property of the SOC within its borders, are ceded to the use of the new sister autocephalous Church.” (Read 2022)

This Tomos hints that it is not a finite document, as it requires two things: first, granting autocephaly is not only the responsibility of the SOC, but all other Orthodox churches should accept the autocephaly. This is the position that, an autocephaly should actually be accepted by all churches separately, and not by one center such as the Patriarch of Constantinople. Second, the MOC-AO should resolve its official name with the Greek-speaking and other local churches. Local churches accepted the autocephaly of the MOC-AO, but under different names: these are the Serbian and Russian (MOC-AO), Romanian (Arch-

bishopric of Ohrid and of North Macedonia), Bulgarian (Orthodox Church in the Republic of North Macedonia), and Czech and Slovak (Orthodox Church in North Macedonia).

However, the Archbishop Stefan, with four bishops, visited Phanar (the seat of PC) and on 10 June 2022 (St. Bartholomew's day) attended the liturgy with the Patriarch Bartholomew. And on Pentecost, 12 June the first common liturgy took place, both in the Macedonian and Greek languages, with the attendance of the Macedonian state delegation headed by Prime Minister Kovachevski, who read the Nicene Creed ([Николовски 2025](#), p. 228).

Incorporation of the OAO into the MOC-AO was a challenge. For 20 years, the OAO and Archbishop Jovan were bullied institutionally and by the media ([Предачник 2009](#); [Три години 2013](#); [Крамарска 2023](#); [Следбениците n.d.](#)) Practically overnight, this should have changed, but MOC-AO and society in full decided to be silent on the issue. In order to comply with the requirement for the Tomos, three tiny eparchies were created: Delcevo–Kamenica, for Bishop Marko, former Bishop of Bregalnica; Deljatrovce–Ilinden, for Bishop Joakim, former Bishop of Polog and Kumanovo, and Krushevo–Demir Hisar for Bishop Jovan, former Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje. Those eparchies are of small towns or villages, which makes them administratively and economically non-viable. Even 4 years later, they are not showing on the list of eparchies on the official website of the MOC-OA (mpc.org.mk). Bishop David, formerly Bishop of Stobi and vicar to Archbishop Jovan, became Bishop of Dremvica, vicar to Archbishop Stefan.

This situation is a watershed for the MOC-AO and its place in Macedonian nation-building. With the Tomos of the SOC, the national dreams were fulfilled; the restoration of the Archbishopric of Ohrid in the MOC, preserving the name Macedonian, as well as its churches in the diaspora that represent centers for ethnic and national, cultural and linguistic preservation of Macedonia in the diaspora. This could be understood as a continuation of the processes started in the 1950s for the Macedonian national/ethnic church.

Accepting the communique from the Patriarch of Constantinople and a subsequent Tomos would most probably mean returning to the situation of 1767, when the Archbishopric of Ohrid was canceled by the PC, which was perceived as the saddest moment in the process of Macedonian nation-building. In that national myth, the MOC-AO is seen as the sole guardian of the Macedonian essence for centuries. According to the communique of canonical unity by PC, the word Macedonia and its derivations could not be used. Losing the name Macedonian would be a complete cancellation of the narrative that was the centerpiece around which the Macedonian national narrative was built. The PC used the name the Church of Ohrid. On the other side, the BOC is strongly against the use of the name Archbishopric of Ohrid, as it sees that as a part of its historic traditions ([Bulgarian 2022](#)). Macedonians are now facing another name issue. That seems like a trap with no clear end. The MOC-AO should also hand over all the eparchies in the diaspora to PC, which also reserves the right to interfere with internal affairs of the “Church of Ohrid” or “Orthodox Church in North Macedonia.” The churches in the diaspora are not purely spiritual or ecclesiastical bodies. Those are centers of ethnic groups, with their main aim to preserve the national language and customs in the diaspora, as well as the relations with their country of origin. But they are also a source of revenue for the church in the country of origin. Having in mind the history of the relations between Macedonia and Greece, and its negative politics, even denying the existence of the Macedonian language and Macedonians, this most probably would not happen in the foreseeable future ([Jonovski 2024](#), p. 150).

The third condition set by the PC for the eventual bestowal of the Tomos on the MOC-AO is a purely geopolitical one; the recognition of the OCU. The answer to this is the ultimate indicator under which the geopolitical Orthodox center the MOC-AO is, Constantinople

or Moscow. There is no middle ground; if the MOC-AO even holds a joint liturgy with the OCU, this probably might lead to severing ties with the ROC and the others from that camp. The MOC-AO decided not to have joint liturgies with the OCU until all other Orthodox churches recognize it. On 29 February 2024, a commission for studying the status of the OCU was formed. The chairman of the commission is Metropolitan Ilarion of Breгалница, and the vice-chairman is Bishop Joakim of Deljatrovci-Ilinden. The same commission will study the problem of the naming of the MOC-AO by the Greek-speaking churches (Арсовски 2024). A year later, this commission has not reached any decision. In September, the MOC-AO gave support to the UOC after Zelinsky signed the law on 24 August 2024 forbidding the Orthodox churches with ties to Russia. This was followed by arrests and the confiscation of properties of the UOC (Независен 2024). This firmly places the MOC-AO in the Moscow camp, and thus makes receiving the Tomos from Constantinople a distant feature.

The question of the autocephaly of the MOC-AO is far from a simple canonical one. The geopolitics in the 21st century have far-reaching consequences. The primary division is on the grounds of who has more real power: the NATO-backed Patriarch of Constantinople, a Turkish citizen, with historical claims but with only a few thousand flocks of the Greek minority in Turkiye, or the Patriarch of Moscow backed by Russia and 110 million members.

The MOC-AO, by choosing whom to seek or accept autocephaly from, is choosing the geopolitical Orthodox center, Constantinople or Moscow. This is neither Biblical nor canonical, but is a brutal reality; the Orthodox world is divided not in a dogmatic or ecclesiological way, but by geopolitics, history, culture, and linguistics. On one side, the Slavic-speaking churches of Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Macedonia, and on the other side, there are the Greek-speaking churches of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Greece, Cyprus, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and now the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

10. Conclusions

The process for obtaining a Macedonian church, although based in the second half of the 19th century, actually started with the formation of the People's Republic of Macedonia in 1945 as a revival of the ancient Archbishopric of Ohrid (1018–1767) in the likeness of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The MOC was first recognized as an autonomous church within the Serbian Orthodox Church, but then it self-declared its autocephalous status in 1967. Only with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 did Macedonia start its long journey of recognition in the difficult geopolitical crisis after the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of 1989.

The recognition of the MOC went through a similar path, but a harder one. The growing gap between the Orthodox centers of Moscow and Constantinople showed its cracks at the pan-Orthodox council in Crete in 2016, where one of the main issues was the granting of autonomy and autocephaly. And after Constantinople recognized the Orthodox Church in Ukraine in 2018, a full-scale schism happened. In that light, the MOC finally received a Tomos from the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2022 and recognition from the churches aligned with Moscow's interpretation of the issue.

The contemporary cases of Ukraine and Macedonia illustrate that autocephaly cannot be understood solely through canonical norms. In Ukraine, the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2019 was the result of a complex interaction between ecclesiastical claims, state policy, and international geopolitical alignments. The active involvement of the Ukrainian state, particularly under President Poroshenko, and the decisive role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in granting the Tomos without the consent of the Russian Orthodox Church, marked a significant shift in Orthodox ecclesiology. This

development contributed to a broader schism within global Orthodoxy, dividing churches largely along geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic lines.

A comparable dynamic is evident in the Macedonian case. The long-standing dispute over the status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Archbishopric of Ohrid reflects not only canonical disagreements but also the interplay of national identity, state interests, and external political pressures. While the Ecumenical Patriarchate initially appeared as a potential arbiter, the Ukrainian precedent demonstrated the risks of unilateral action within contested canonical territories. Consequently, the resolution of the Macedonian church issue was ultimately achieved through agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, culminating in the granting of autocephaly in 2022. However, this outcome did not fully resolve underlying tensions, particularly regarding recognition by other Orthodox churches, the issue of the Church's name, and the status of the diaspora dioceses.

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Notes

- ¹ In February 2019, pursuant to the Prespa Agreement and through a highly contested process, the state's official designation was altered to the Republic of North Macedonia. As this study examines developments preceding the name change, the correct contemporary nomenclature is nevertheless employed throughout.
- ² The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes only recognized the three nations listed in the name. Macedonians were not considered a separate nation, and all efforts were put into making them Serbs. The Serbian Orthodox Church had one of the main roles in the process.
- ³ Meaning police and secret services.
- ⁴ Nikolaj Velimirović (1880–1956) was a great Serbian Orthodox theologian who served as Bishop of Ohrid (1920–1936). He was canonized in 2003. An influential theological writer, he was known for his Great Serbian attitude toward Macedonians.
- ⁵ There are two dates when referring to the autonomy; the MOC considers its decision in 1958, while the SOC considers its formal recognition in 1959.
- ⁶ Meaning secret services.
- ⁷ The same date in 2005 Holy Synod of the SOC issued a Tomos granting autonomy to the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric.

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