

# THE MACEDONIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: THE WAY TO THE AUTOCEPHALY

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**Abstract:** *Christianity in the lands of Macedonia dates back to apostolic times. However, the Macedonian Orthodox Church remained unrecognized by the Ecumenical Orthodoxy for more than half a century due to the controversy over its canonicity.*

*The paper includes an excursion into the history of Macedonian Orthodoxy, the country's path to its own autocephalous church and the prospects of gaining Pan-Orthodox recognition.*

*This subject is quite relevant today. To this day, there is no clearly defined algorithm of granting a Tomos. This means that there is no unified legitimate way for a church to obtain an autocephaly when separated from the mother church. Therefore, obtaining autocephaly always entails ambiguous perception in the Orthodox world.*

*On July 19th, 1967, the Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church announced autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Macedonia on their own.*

*Since that time the canonical status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church wasn't recognized by any of Local Churches.*

*2018 the stage of meetings between the Macedonian authorities and the Ecumenical Patriarchate begins. Fanar negotiated with the President of Macedonia Gheorghe Ivanov regarding the granting of autocephaly.*

*2022 the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided to recognize MOC canonical. The Serbian Patriarch officially proclaimed the autocephaly of the Macedonian Church. Archbishop Stephen was given a Tomos.*

*The peaceful act of returning the church to the canonical field took place in the Orthodox world.*

**Keywords:** *Macedonian Orthodox Church, autocephaly, national identity*

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## Introduction

The Christianization of the Macedonian lands has an ancient history and reaches back to apostolic times. However, the Macedonian Orthodox Church remained unrecognized by the Ecumenical Orthodoxy for more than half a century due to the controversy over its canonicity.

The paper includes an excursion into the history of Macedonian Orthodoxy, analysis of the current situation, the country's path to its own autocephalous church and the gaining Pan-Orthodox recognition.

This subject is quite interesting and relevant today. To this day, there is no clearly defined algorithm of granting a Tomos. This means that there is no unified legitimate way for a church to obtain an autocephaly when separated from the mother church. In the Ecumenical Orthodoxy, there are different opinions on this subject. Therefore, obtaining autocephaly always entails ambiguous perception in the Orthodox world.

The chronological framework of this work covers the period after World War 2 until now, because the effort of gaining autocephaly of the Northern Macedonian Orthodox Church starts at the postwar period.

## The path to Autocephaly

In 1945 during the second meeting of Antifascist Veche of the national liberation of Yugoslavia the Macedonian nation was recognized as independent and equal with other Yugoslavic nations. It had a great impact on Macedonian consciousness: separate Slavic ethnos with its own language and culture could have had rights on the independent church.

In October, 1958 the second church council in Ohrid decided to restore the ancient archbishop department and ask the Serbian Orthodox Church for an autonomy for Macedonian Orthodox Church.

In 1959 the Macedonian Orthodox Church gained autonomy in the Serbian Orthodox Church squad. And in 1966 the Serbian Orthodox Church got the request for autocephaly but refused it in May, 1967 declaring a few formal bases (for example: insufficient amount of bishops and priests or violation of the bishop's oath "to maintain canonical unity with the Serbian Orthodox Church") (Скърват, К. 1994)

In fact, Serbia was not ready to grant an autocephaly to the Macedonians, since changing of their jurisdiction would have resulted in the loss of influence of the Serbian Church on Orthodoxy in the Balkan region. "Quite often some Orthodox Churches struggle to keep on their orbit other churches of independent countries which seek for an independence (as Serbian Church relatively to Macedonian Church)". (Еленський, В. 2021)

On the other hand, if Macedonians renounced their effort to gain autocephaly it would mean the loss of their national identity, history and spiritual freedom. After

all, religion is one of the main factors contributing to the preservation of an ethnic group in today's global world.

As a result of participation and support by Macedonian political power on July 19th, 1967, the Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church announced autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Macedonian Republic on their own. And the Primate gained the title: Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia.

The Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church in September 1967 broke the Communion with the Macedonian Orthodox Church and announced them as a schismatic religious organization, and also informed other Local Churches on this regard. The interesting fact is there were no canonical bans on any bishops in North Macedonia.

Obviously the Yugoslavian government intruded which didn't want any political tensions to be raised. British explorer Stella Alexander, considering the question of relationships between the church and the government, wrote that the creation of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was the product of the national politics of Communist Party of Yugoslavia. (Alexander, S. 1979)

Since that time the canonical status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church wasn't recognized by any of Local Churches. The dialogue between SOC and MOC was restored in 1998 with assistance of the Greek Orthodox Church. As the result of these negotiations in 2002 they signed the Nisch agreement which provided MOC with broad autonomy in the SOC structure. (Нацрт споразума о воспостављању црквеног јединства, 2002). But because of the active intrusion of Macedonian government which desired to distance themselves from Serbia as far as possible, the Synod of MOC turned down the agreement. Only Metropolitan Velevskiy John (Vranishkovskiy) and some other monks restored the canonical dialogue with SOC according to signed agreement.

SOC announced John as exarch of the whole Ohrid Archbishopric territory and on December 25th, 2003 under deanship of Metropolitan John "The Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese" was created. It significantly deepened the conflict between churches. Metropolitan John was arrested and imprisoned several times. He was blamed on financial schemes and inciting religious feuds. (Забияко, А., Красников А., Элбакян Е. (Eds.), 2008).

In 2004 Macedonia officially published "Declaration of support of the Macedonian Orthodox Church" (07-327/1 January 23rd 2004). This document stated that the only legal orthodox community is MOC, therefore Ohrid Archdiocese registration is denied and Ohrid Archdiocese is illegal and its clergy is banned to enter the country. (Колосков Е., 2013)

In 2005 the MOC Synod stated about Ohrid Archdiocese: "All their decisions don't have legal power in Republic of Macedonia and MOC, because they are anti-Gospel, anti-Church, anti-Pastor, anti-nation, anti-state and contradicts the spirit of holy Orthodoxy. The Serbian Orthodox Church don't have neither canonical nor constitution right to make any decisions about MOC since 1959". (Соопштение, 2005)

In 2017 MOC OA made a new attempt to gain autocephaly through the Bulgarian Orthodox Church: MOC recognizes them as Mother Church and BOC promise their facilitation and intercession in front of Local Churches and aim to establish the canonical status of MOC.

But it caused resistance of other churches: Hellas, Constantinople, Serbian. As a consequence, BOC refused the status of Mother Church.

Subsequently, the stage of meetings between the Macedonian authorities and the Ecumenical Patriarchate begins. In 2018, Fanar negotiated with the President of Ukraine P. Poroshenko and the President of Macedonia Gheorghe Ivanov regarding the granting of autocephaly. (President Ivanov visiting Patriarch Bartholomew, 2018).

Later, in 2019, a meeting was held with the Presidents of Macedonia and Montenegro, where the Exarch of Constantinople, Archbishop Danyil (Zelinsky) of Pamphylia stated that he adheres to the opinion of the right of every people who wishes to have their own Orthodox church, the right to establish it and ask for recognition by other churches.

Later the chain of meetings with Patriarch Bartholomew took place. The Macedonian Orthodox Church hoped to make progress on the issue of its autocephaly, which was considered by the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

For half a century of the MOC's existence, not a single local church recognized it, so could this situation change now?

But the events suddenly took on an unprecedented pace. On May 6, 2022, information was received about the resumption of dialogue between the Serbian and Macedonian churches on the issue of healing the church schism.

Later on May 9, the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided to recognize MOC canonical. Patriarch Bartholomew instructed the Serbian Church to settle the issue of the church's status. (Ecumenical Patriarchate Communiqué, 2022).

A few days later, the Serbian Patriarchate recognized the Macedonian Church as an autonomy and resumed liturgical and canonical communion with it. It was said separately that autonomy is a stage on the way to a full autocephaly. The Synod of the Serbian Church declared its non-interference in the name of the Macedonian Church and in its sphere of jurisdiction.

On May 19 in the Cathedral of St. Savva in Belgrade, Serbian Patriarch Porphyry and Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia Stephen celebrated the first joint liturgy after the healing of the schism.

On May 24, a delegation from the Serbian Church paid a return visit. In the Cathedral in Skopje, the Serbian Patriarch officially proclaimed the autocephaly of the Macedonian Church. Patriarch Porphyry of the Serbian Orthodox Church presented Archbishop Stephane of Ohrid with a tomos in Belgrade on June 5, 2022, thus fully confirming the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Macedonia – Archdiocese of Ohrid.

The Synod of the Church of Hellas denied the use of the term “Macedonian Orthodox Church” and noted that only Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople was authorized to grant autocephaly. (Patriarchate Of Serbia overrides centuries old traditions: It granted “Tomos of Autocephaly” to Ohrid Archdiocese, 2022)

But Patriarch Porfirije`s Tomos says that SOC is not the only factor of autocephaly since this is the fulfillment of all Orthodox Church; therefore, reception from other Orthodox Churches is needed. Question of the name of MOC should be settled during the brotherly dialogue between Greek speaking and other Local Orthodox Churches. So, the document of Patriarch Porfirije contains clear guidance that it is not the final document. (Бупера, 2022)

The head of the church, Archbishop Stephen, announced his intention to ask for autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarch: the head of the MOC - OA Archbishop Stefan, in an exclusive interview for the Greek newspaper "To Vima", says that the Ohrid Archdiocese will respect the canonical order of the Orthodox Church and will request a Tomos for autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, because it is the only Church that according to traditions and canons issues such a document. (Архиепископот Стефан за “То Вима”: Единствено Вселенската Патријаршија издава томос за автокефалност, 2022)

During his stay in Phanar, the Head of the Macedonian Church received an Act of canonical unity from Patriarch Bartholomew. The name of the Church is “the Ohrid Archbishopric” (and the area of its jurisdiction is exclusively within the territory of the state of Northern Macedonia).

## Conclusion

This is how the dream of Macedonians, for which they have been waiting for 55 years, came true. The long-standing schism was healed, and the church became on a par with the Local Orthodox Churches.

Of course, questions remain and there will be many more, because the process of recognizing autocephaly in the Orthodox world continues.

Will Bartholomew provide his patriarchal Tomos, or will the MOC-OA limit itself to the Tomos from the Serbian Church? But it can be confidently stated that the peaceful act of returning the church to the canonical field took place in the Orthodox world.

It is important that the Macedonian bishops were not deprived of dignity, were not under anathema, and therefore, preserved the apostolic succession, which also played a positive role in the process of overcoming the schism.

I would like to note separately the hierarchs, in such a delicate matter, they managed to agree, found a common language, made compromises.

A special respect must be given to Serbian Patriarch Porphyry, who wisely approached such an important issue and released the church ship of the Macedonians to sail.

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