



13

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Orthodoxy in Today's North Macedonia

Historical experience and current challenges

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How many *Tomoi* do we need?

Dejan Borisov

1. The history of autocephaly

In the early centuries, the Church adopted an adapted model of diocesan governance and administration based on the structure of the Roman Empire. The shifting of diocesan boundaries, as well as changes in interstate borders, motivated the Church to adjust its administrative divisions accordingly. In essence, the Church adhered to the principle of modifying its administrative jurisdictional boundaries in accordance with political and administrative changes in the world. This led to the abolition of certain existing local churches while also facilitating the establishment of new ones that had not existed before.

With the decline of Roman imperial power and influence, newly emerging states on former imperial territories sought to establish their own ecclesiastical institutions. Over time, under the influence of these newly formed states, it became widely accepted that a single independent (autocephalous) Church should exist within the borders of each state. Exceptions to this principle included Justiniana Prima and the Archdiocese of Ohrid. The former was established by imperial decree under Emperor Justinian, while the latter, after 1018, coexisted alongside the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Roman Empire), later the Patriarchate of Tarnovo (Second Bulgarian Empire), followed by the Serbian Patriarchate (Medieval Serbian State) and from the late 14th century until its abolition in 1767, once again alongside the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Ottoman Empire).

During the medieval period, the absence of an independent local church within a state signified the nation's spiritual subordination to the state whose ecclesiastical jurisdiction controlled its Church. That is to say, if a local Church lacked independence, the state itself was also regarded as lacking sovereignty. Through the Church, both religious and

cultural influence was exerted, carrying significant implications for political life. For this reason, nearly every newly established state endeavored to create its own independent Church. This trend intensified in the 19th and 20th centuries, coinciding with the formation of modern European nation-states and, consequently, the contemporary autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

Although the term “national Churches” usually is avoided, being considered alien to the essence of the Church and its divine mission – often equated with ethnophyletism – the reality remains that within national state, a national Church operate and it’s not immune to the political processes within society. This, in itself, is neither inherently negative nor erroneous; rather, it depends on how a local Church positions itself with respect to the secular policies of the state in which it functions.

The Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid, on its path to independence and autocephaly, has faithfully adhered to the conditions, rules, and traditions established by the other autocephalous local Orthodox Churches formed during the 19th and 20th centuries.

2. What does autocephaly actually mean?

The term “autocephaly” is used to denote the territorial-administrative jurisdictional independence of a local Orthodox Church from another local Orthodox Church. This independence is most visibly manifested in the free election and consecration of its primate by the bishops of that Church. Beyond the election of its own primate, autocephaly also entails preserved apostolic succession and full ecclesiastical jurisdiction within the territory it covers, including all rights and obligations derived from this, meaning independent governance and self-administration of ecclesiastical life within its jurisdictional boundaries.

At the beginning, relationships between two or more Christian communities or Churches were quite straightforward. Each was territorially and administratively independent from another, having its own bishop and determining its own means of preaching and confessing the faith. This last aspect is particularly evident in the numerous creedal formulations examined at the First Ecumenical Council, held four centuries after Christ. However, this did not imply doctrinal diversity; rather, unity expressed through shared faith and adherence to conciliar decision-making, culminating in the Ecumenical Councils.

Over time, multiple bishops began forming ecclesiastical communities. This occurred for reasons of greater administrative efficiency, marking the origins of local Churches, though these early formations differed considerably from contemporary ones. By the fourth century, with the convening of the First Ecumenical Council, this process of administrative adaptation had largely been established and practiced, yet it still incomplete and continues to evolve to this day. Indeed, administrative and organizational matters were among the issues addressed at the First and subsequent Ecumenical Councils.

The administrative jurisdictional organization of the Church into distinct local Churches was relatively straightforward in its early period, primarily due to the fact that most of them operated within a single state – the Roman Empire and were founded either by one of the Twelve Apostles, the Apostle Paul, or their disciples. However, as the Church, expanded, administrative modifications became increasingly necessary, and such adjustments were deliberated in council. Among other decisions, these councils established that in a city there should be only one bishop, a rule that is not strictly observed today. Further, at the councils the status of the Church of Cyprus and that of Justiniana Prima were determined, as well as the jurisdiction over non-Christian (barbarian) peoples within and beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, assigning them to the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Seem like that this particular canon from the Fourth Ecumenical Council is exploited today by the Patriarchate of Constantinople to impose its jurisdiction on Christian nations with a predominantly Orthodox population where an established, legal, and legitimate ecclesiastical jurisdiction already exists. During the 19th and 20th centuries, conciliar decision-making concerning ecclesiastical jurisdictional adjustments ceased. This shift occurred due to the dissolution of empires and the emergence of independent national states (our field of interest is Europe). These newly formed states, following historical ecclesiastical practices, established their own independent Churches. However, the local Church from which these territories separated often resisted acknowledging the new reality for decades, but eventually, faced with the practical impossibility of administrating them, begrudgingly conceded and issued the appropriate Tomos granting them full ecclesiastical independence¹.

¹ In most cases, it was the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople that received jurisdiction over the Balkan Peninsula and parts of Southeastern Europe during the time of the Ottoman Empire.

3. How, in fact, was the Church divided into new local Churches? What were the reasons for this, and what were the conditions for it?

The earliest Churches did not need to prove their independence to anyone nor seek recognition; their existence and authority were grounded in the authority of their founder, most often one of the Apostles or their collaborators. However, after the Edict of Milan, which granted Christians the freedom to practice their faith within the Roman Empire, the Church appeared to imitate the empire not only in territorial administration but also in ecclesiastical governance. As a result, the human factor became increasingly evident in the life of the Church, with Roman rulers interfering in Church affairs, along with certain bishops seeking power and dominance. This had a negative impact on ecclesiastical life, particularly in administrative governance. Recognizing this issue, the Church sought to curb bishops who exceeded their diocesan boundaries and authority through conciliar decisions. Although these canons were universally accepted, they did not lead to a long-term resolution of such tendencies, which can still be observed in the Church today.

The division of jurisdictions occurred at Ecumenical or Local Councils, in accordance with the will of the local episcopate and laity, with the primary motive being the more effective propagation and preservation of Christ's teachings among the population of a given territory. From the earliest times, it was evident that no autocephalous local Orthodox Church had the right to grant autocephalous status to a part of another autocephalous Church. Such an action contradicts established Church order and tradition and constitutes direct interference in the jurisdiction and internal life of another Church.

Secular authorities, emperors, kings, tsars, generals, and after the French Revolution, presidents, parliaments, and governments, have often interfered in ecclesiastical governance, at times unilaterally declaring the autocephaly of Churches whose jurisdiction extended over their territories. However, the Church officially sanctioned such interference as early as Canon 12 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, though neither ecclesiastical nor secular authorities have always respected this canon. We can observe ongoing discussions on this issue at the First, Fourth, and Quinisext Councils, emphasizing its persistent relevance throughout history.

A necessary condition for a local Church to attain autocephalous status is its ability to fulfill Christ's fundamental command given to the Apostles, that is missionary activity and the spreading of the Gospel, as well as its capacity to independently organize ecclesiastical life within its territorial jurisdiction. Additionally, a high-ranking clergy is required, lawfully and legitimately consecrated bishops and in accordance with Apostolic Canon 1, their number must be no fewer than two.

Ecclesiastical jurisdiction held by a local Orthodox Church at a given historical moment does not guarantee its permanence; it may be lost due to changes in the conditions that initially led to its establishment. However, this does not preclude the possibility of reclaiming lost jurisdiction. Such is the case with the Church on the territory of Macedonia. Historically, this region was home to the Church of Justiniana Prima, later the Archdiocese of Ohrid. At various times, jurisdiction was also held by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which first partially lost its authority in 1784 following a referendum in which the local population expressed its decision against it. Later through military conquests during the Balkan Wars and World Wars of the 20th century, the jurisdiction over it was gained by the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Exarchate, and the Albanian Archdiocese. In 1945, at a Church-People's Assembly, the Macedonian people formally declared that ecclesiastical jurisdiction over People's Republic of Macedonia would be held exclusively by the Macedonian Orthodox Church, as the sole canonical successor to the Archdiocese of Ohrid.

4. How many *Tomoi* are required for the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid to be autocephalous?

Following the precedent set by newly established local Orthodox Churches, their recognized practices, and the methods through which they attained autocephaly in the 19th and 20th centuries, while also adhering to canonical regulations, the Macedonians, in their country: the People's Republic of Macedonia, convened the First Macedonian Church-People's Assembly on March 4–5, 1945, with 300 delegates in attendance. This Assembly passed a *Resolution* that restored the Archdiocese of Ohrid under the title *Saint Clement's Archdiocese of Ohrid*, with its primate

bearing the title *Archbishop of Ohrid*. The decisions of this Assembly were sent to the Serbian Orthodox Church, but were rejected, despite the Serbian Church no longer having any real control over the dioceses within the newly created Macedonian state.

The appeal was directed to the Serbian Orthodox Church because, in the Tomos of autocephaly granted to it by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1922, the dioceses that in that period were in the People's Republic of Macedonia were placed under its jurisdiction. However, this jurisdiction was lost during World War II, with ecclesiastical governance over these dioceses temporarily assumed by clergy from the Bulgarian Patriarchate. No appeal was made to the Bulgarian Patriarchate, as it had never obtained jurisdiction over these dioceses legally or canonically, according to Church tradition, but rather through military occupation and force.

In 1946, the Macedonian request for the recognition of autocephaly for Saint Clement's Archdiocese of Ohrid was altered to a request for autonomy. When Vikentije became Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1950, the Macedonians agreed to recognize Serbian jurisdiction under three conditions:

1. Two bishops must be appointed: Bishop Dositej (Titular Bishop of Toplica) and Protoiereus Toma Dimovski (to be consecrated as a bishop).
 2. The Macedonian language must be used in all ecclesiastical administration and record-keeping within Macedonia.
 3. Only Macedonian clergy may be appointed across the dioceses.
- In 1951, with approval from the new Serbian Patriarch, Bishop Dositej visited Macedonia. In 1954, the Serbian Patriarchal Assembly approved the election of bishops for the Macedonian dioceses, but instead of two bishops, only Dositej, who had previously served as the Serbian Patriarch's vicar, was appointed.

In 1956, the Serbian Patriarch was formally accepted as administrator of the Macedonian dioceses (Skopje, Ohrid-Bitola, and Zletovo-Strumica), and on May 27, 1957, the Patriarchal Assembly granted permission to resolve the church question in Macedonia, allowing for the ordination of Macedonian bishops. Next year, Serbian Patriarch Vikentije, Bishop Jovan of Niš, and Bishop Chrysostom of Ničevac confirmed this decision during their visit to Macedonia in 1958 by. However, upon their return to Serbia, on May 10, 1958, the Serbian Patriarchal Assembly reaffirmed its pre-war position, refusing to recognize the Macedonian initiative.

In response to this, and after more than a decade of waiting for approval of Macedonia's request for autonomous/autocephalous restoration of the Archdiocese of Ohrid in the newly formed People's Republic of Macedonia, the Second Church-People's Assembly was convened on October 4–6, 1958. This Assembly reestablished the Archdiocese of Ohrid under the name *Macedonian Orthodox Church*, with its primate titled *Archbishop of Ohrid and Skopje, and Metropolitan of Macedonia*. Within the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, the Serbian Patriarch remained the supreme ecclesiastical authority.

The Assembly elected Dositej (Bishop of Toplica) as the first Primate of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Toma Dimovski as Bishop of Zletovo-Strumica, and Nikola Trajkovski as Bishop of Ohrid-Bitola, and enacted the Church Constitution. The Serbian Orthodox Church was notified of these decisions, and on June 24, 1959, convened a Patriarchal Assembly, which formally acknowledged that:

“The dioceses of Skopje, Ohrid-Bitola, and Zletovo-Strumica, at the Church-People's Assembly held on October 4–6, 1958, in Ohrid, have separated into an independent Macedonian Orthodox Church, governed by the Constitution adopted at that Assembly, while continuing to maintain canonical unity with the Serbian Orthodox Church through its Primate.”²

This decision legally affirmed the restoration of the Archdiocese of Ohrid as the Macedonian Orthodox Church, while also recognizing that the Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, according to its Constitution, would serve as the highest and final ecclesiastical court for all matters within its dioceses.

In 1959, Serbian Patriarch German, Bishop Nikanor of Bačka, and Bishop Visarion of Banat, together with Archbishop Dositej, consecrated Clement (Nikola Trajkovski) as Bishop of Ohrid-Bitola at St. Mina Church in Skopje on July 10, and Naum (Toma Dimovski) as Bishop of Zletovo-Strumica at St. Nicholas Church in Štip on July 26.

Serbian Patriarch German notified Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras by letter (Synod No. 515/May 31, 1959), explaining that, following World War II, Macedonia had been recognized as a nation with autonomous republican governance, and at the request of clergy and believers, had been granted ecclesiastical autonomy in 1959.

On May 25, 1962, in the Church of the Most Holy Mother of God, Kamensko, Ohrid, the Russian Patriarch Alexy, Serbian Patriarch Ger-

² Decisions No. 47/1959 and 6/1959, Record 57.

man, and Archbishop Dositej of Ohrid served together in liturgical communion.

Following the developments, one might assume that the matter of the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was settled, but that was not the case. In 1966, the Serbian Orthodox Church's Patriarchal Assembly revised its June 24, 1959 Decision recognizing the autonomy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, asserting that no constitutional changes could be made without the approval from the Serbian Holy Synod.

In response, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church sent a formal letter (Synod No. 226/July 5, 1966) requesting recognition of its autocephalous status. The reply was a threat of sanctions against the bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, leading to the *Third Church-People's Assembly*, held on July 17, 1967, where *autocephaly* was proclaimed.

On July 18, 1967, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church issued a *Decree* declaring autocephaly, thereby establishing the autocephalous *Macedonian Orthodox Church*, led by an Archbishop with the title *Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia*. The decree also defined its jurisdiction, which encompassed the territory of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia at that time.

On August 31, 1967, the Holy Synod formally notified the Serbian Orthodox Church of its decision. In response, at an extraordinary session held on September 14–15, 1967, the Patriarchal Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church declared the bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church schismatic, disregarding the fact that if the bishops were schismatics, then the Macedonian people would also be considered schismatic, since the decision to declare autocephaly had first been debated and supported at the Church-People's Assembly on July 17, 1967.

Over the following decades, numerous discussions were held between the clergy of the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches to overcome disagreements regarding the latter's status, but without success. No other local Orthodox Churches were officially involved in resolving the Macedonian ecclesiastical issue. Nevertheless, the clergy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church co-served with clergy from other local Orthodox Churches, including those of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. However, since the canonical jurisdiction over the dioceses in Macedonia, as per the official Tomos, belonged to the Serbian Orthodox Church, no other Church attempted to intervene, as it was regarded as an internal matter of the Serbian Patriarchate.

For decades, the matter remained unresolved. Why? Because the Macedonian ecclesiastical issue was not merely a Church matter, it was deeply entangled in the history and politics of the region. In April 2018, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, seeking intervention as a court of appeal, since for more than half a century, the Serbian and Macedonian Churches had failed to reach a mutual agreement on the Macedonian Orthodox Church's status.

In 2022, a breakthrough was finally achieved, thanks to meetings and discussions between His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije of the Serbian Orthodox Church and His Beatitude Archbishop Stefan of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, who, in the spirit of Christian love, addressed the Macedonian ecclesiastical issue solely within the framework of Christ's Church.

As a result, on May 9, 2022, the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, issued an official statement announcing that "we receive into Eucharistic communion the hierarchy, clergy, and people of this Church under Archbishop Stefan," "while leaving the Most Holy Church of Serbia to arrange administrative matters" with the Macedonian Orthodox Church, "within the framework of the Holy Canons and ecclesiastical tradition."³

Unfortunately, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its Primate, who is the first among equals in the Orthodox Church, failed to demonstrate genuine Christian love, instead allowing the Macedonian issue to remain entangled in secular politics. Not only is the name of the Church, *Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid* omitted from the statement, but it also implied that the term "Macedonia" and any derivative of it should be excluded from its official designation. All of this despite the fact that the only nation officially bearing the name "Macedonian" is the Macedonian people, and the only state that officially use name "Macedonia" is the Republic of North Macedonia.

Following this, the Macedonian Orthodox Church formally appealed to the Serbian Orthodox Church, declaring a return to autonomous status, as confirmed in 1959. On May 16, 2022, the Serbian Orthodox Church

³ The Communiqué from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Communiqué from the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as the text of the *Tomos* for the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric, were published in: *Весник, службен лист на Македонската православна црква*, Пригоден број, Година LXIV, 2022 година.

accepted this and confirmed “the establishment of full liturgical and canonical communion, granting the widest possible autonomy and complete internal independence” to the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

Significantly, the Serbian Orthodox Church’s statement clearly emphasized that in resolving the status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, “realpolitik, geopolitics, church politics, and similar imposed factors would not be considered [...] nor unilateral initiatives [...] and no external influences or pressures would be tolerated.” The inclusion of such a disclaimer indicates that these pressures do indeed exist; otherwise, there would be no need to mention them.

Three days later, on May 19, at St. Sava Church in Belgrade, the Primates of the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches co-celebrated the Divine Liturgy, alongside clergy from both Churches.

On May 24, 2022, the feast of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, at the Archbishop’s Cathedral of St. Clement of Ohrid in Skopje, His Holiness, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, announced the Serbian Orthodox Church’s decision to grant autocephaly to the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

The next joint liturgical service between the two Primates took place in Belgrade on June 5, 2022.

From June 9 till 13, a delegation from the Macedonian Orthodox Church, led by His Beatitude Archbishop Stefan, visited the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul. On June 12, during the Feast of Pentecost, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and His Beatitude Archbishop Stefan of Ohrid, Macedonia, and Justiniana Prima co-celebrated the Divine Liturgy at St. George Church in Phanar.

Despite all these events, the restoration of Eucharistic communion with Ecumenical Patriarchate, the resolution of the schism between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches, the issuance of the Tomos of autocephaly, and co-celebration of the Primates of these Churches, the autocephalous status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church still appears to be an ongoing matter.

All local Orthodox Churches recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church as an autocephalous Church, yet some dispute the content of the Tomos granted by the Serbian Orthodox Church, while others disagree with its name, even though they all co-celebrate with its clergy.

The Serbian Patriarchate is the only Church that legally and canonically had jurisdiction over the territory and dioceses of the Republic of Macedonia, making it the sole authority entitled to issue the act of sepa-

ration, designating part of its jurisdiction as an independent local Orthodox Church. Over 50 years, no other Orthodox Church officially intervened in resolving the issue, as it was considered an internal problem of the Serbian Patriarchate. Now that the Tomos of autocephaly has been issued, many other local Orthodox Churches seemingly feel entitled to dictate its content and name, positioning themselves as godfathers to the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid.

In the spirit of Christian love, the mission of Christ's teachings among the Macedonian people, and the preservation of ecclesiastical unity, this Tomos is sufficient. Anything beyond this risks diminishing the love that binds the faithful.