


7-2018

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Recommended Citation

Murzaku, Ines (2018) "Motherless Despite Three Mothers: the Plight of the Macedonian Orthodox Church for the Recognition of Autocephaly," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss3/3>

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MOTHERLESS DESPITE THREE MOTHERS: THE PLIGHT OF THE MACEDONIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH FOR THE RECOGNITION OF AUTOCEPHALY

By Ines A. Murzaku

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The Macedonian flag, which depicts a central golden disk on a bright red field with golden rays that extend to the flag's edges, is proudly displayed at Via di Porta Cavalleggeri, near St. Peter's Basilica—the seat of the Macedonian Embassy to the Holy See. Macedonia changed its national flag after the fall of Yugoslavia when they gained independence. The former flag's bright red field was retained in their new flag; however, the *Star of Vergina*, or the rayed-solar-flag--an ancient Macedonian-Greek emblem that likely comes from the tomb of either Philip II or Philip III of Macedon, father or half-brother of Alexander the Great as a symbol of their dynasties--was replaced with the current central golden disk.

In the past, Greece had vigorously objected to Macedonia's rayed solar flag choice, claiming the star was a Greek emblem. Indeed, the Macedonian flag, together with the name "Macedonia," became the focus of a long-standing dispute between Greece and Macedonia. In July 1995, Greece went so far as to lodge a request with the World Intellectual Property

Organization for exclusive trademark protection of the *Star of Vergina*. In 1995, due to pressure, the then Republic of Macedonia replaced its “Greek” starburst flag with the current central golden disk. Upon seeing Macedonia’s flag proudly flying atop the Macedonian Embassy near the Vatican, I could not help but wonder: will the design of the national flag of Macedonia change to match the country’s recent name change? Will the Macedonian Orthodox Church limbo be resolved? Will the Catholic Church play any role in this complicated ecclesial-political process?

Settling on a name for Macedonia is indeed ground breaking. On June 12, 2018, in a [tweet](#) signed by Federica Mogherini, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, and Johannes Hahn, EU Commissioner, the historic name-change agreement between Greece and Macedonia was commemorated: “We wholeheartedly congratulate Prime Ministers Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev for their determination and leadership in reaching this historic agreement between their countries, which contributes to the transformation of the entire of South-East Europe. This achievement belongs to the leaders of the two countries and their teams but first and foremost it belongs to all the citizens of both countries, and of Europe as a whole.” Macedonia will now be known as the “Republic of North Macedonia,” and according to Greek Prime Minister Tsipras, as reported by [Reuters](#), “Macedonia’s name change to ‘Republic of North Macedonia’ would be reflected both domestically and abroad.” Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said at a press conference: “Our bid in the compromise is a defined and precise name, the name that is honorable and geographically precise—Republic of North Macedonia.”

The new name—Republic of North Macedonia, and the short name, [North Macedonia](#) (article 1/a)—will be used domestically and internationally. The country’s citizens will continue

to be called Macedonian citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia and this will be registered on all travel documents. The language will continue to be called the [Macedonian language](#) (article 1/c), which clarifies that this language belongs to the family of South Slavic languages. Most importantly, both countries acknowledge that their own perceptions of the noun “Macedonia” and adjective “Macedonian” refer to different historical contexts and different cultural heritages.

However, the agreement will be put to popular vote in a referendum later this year. The name-change deal is doubly beneficial for Macedonia: it will speed up the process of Macedonia’s integration into the EU and NATO—which were blocked by Greece, a EU and NATO member—and it will contribute to the peace and security in the region. Jens Stoltenberg, who was among the first officials to welcome the name-change, declared: “This will set Skopje on its path to NATO membership, and it will help to consolidate peace and stability across the wider western Balkans.” Following this, on June 29, 2018, the *EUobserver* [announced](#) :

Macedonia will be invited to join NATO at its summit in July and should complete formalities, including ratification by all 29 current NATO members, between one year and two years later, NATO head Jens Stoltenberg said in Brussels with Macedonian prime minister Zoran Zaev on Friday. Stoltenberg said Skopje's "historic opportunity" depended on Macedonian and Greek people agreeing to Macedonia's new name in referendums in autumn.

With the successful name-change agreement, it seems that one of the thorny issues between Macedonia and Greece is resolved. The question next is: will the name change have any impact on settling the autocephaly status issue of the Macedonian Orthodox Church?

At the end of last year, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church–Ohrid Archbishopric sent [a letter](#) to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church with three urgent requests: the recognition of the Macedonian Autocephalous Orthodox Church by other Eastern Orthodox churches, the recognition of Macedonian Orthodox Church’s autocephalous status (canonical

independence), and the willingness to recognize the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as the mother Church.

Initially, the response from Bulgaria seemed to have been hopeful in helping to find a solution to the Macedonian autocephaly issue. [Patriarch Neofit of Bulgaria](#), in answer to media questions at the Bulgarian Holy Synod's headquarters in Sofia, explained: "The Macedonians are our brothers and accepting the outstretched hand of the Macedonian Orthodox Church is the least we can do." The [bishops](#) who participated in the Holy Synod wrote:

This was also the reason and the main incentive for the Holy Synod of our Orthodox Church to accept the role proposed by the Macedonian side to be an intermediary that is to undertake the necessary and possible steps and actions before the rest of the brotherly Orthodox Churches for settling the canonical church statute of the Orthodox Church in the Republic of Macedonia that has been suffering from the isolation imposed on it for more than half a century. With this motive and with this intention, in the end of November 2017 we accepted the request that arrived from the Republic of Macedonia and the proposal to take upon ourselves the responsibility of being an intermediary for settling the statute of the Orthodox Church in this country.

The positive reaction of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church marked progress in Macedonian-Bulgarian relations, as Bulgaria has in the past struggled to recognize Macedonia and Macedonians as a distinctive nation, with a distinctive cultural heritage and traditions, including a distinctive language—Macedonian. The history of the Macedonian Orthodox Church has shifted legacies between three “ecclesiastical motherhoods” of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and Patriarchates of Bulgaria and Serbia. During the Ottoman Empire, the Macedonian Orthodox Church was under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Upon the fall of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans, Macedonia was divided into southern Macedonia, which became part of Greece, northern Macedonia, inhabited by South Slavs, which became part of the kingdom of Yugoslavia and eastern Macedonia which is part of Bulgaria. During the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 Macedonia was partitioned between the three allied countries of Greece,

Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia but during World War I, the territory of present-day Macedonia came under Bulgarian rule. When the war ended, in 1918, Macedonian territory became a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Serbian Orthodox Church took over the Church of Macedonia. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople agreed that the Orthodox Macedonians in the North be under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Serbia. During World War II Macedonia was again under Bulgarian control. However, after World War II, when the Communists took over Yugoslavia, they encouraged the creation of a separate Republic of Macedonia, and in 1967, an independent Macedonian Orthodox Church. With the restoration of the ancient autocephalous Archbishopric of Ohrid, the Macedonian Orthodox Church declared its autocephaly and petitioned the Patriarchate of Serbia to recognize the autocephalous status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In 1967, the Patriarchate of Serbia rejected the Macedonian Orthodox Church's request for autocephaly. Consequently, the Serbian Orthodox Synod declared the Macedonian Orthodox Church "a schismatic religious organization" and broke off all liturgical and canonical links with its bishops. Since then, the Macedonian Orthodox Church has been considered a church of "irregular status" and not in communion with the Orthodox churches. The thorny issue of recognition of autocephaly has isolated the Macedonian Orthodox Church from the rest of the Orthodox churches for 51 years and has caused a schism with the Serbian Orthodox Church.

However, in May 2018, there was a turn in Bulgarian-Macedonian relations. The Bulgarian Holy Synod published a [statement](#) from His Eminence Metropolitan [Naum of Ruse](#), explaining the changed position Bulgaria was taking in regards to the status of Macedonian autocephaly, "emphasizing that it will not cause a schism in the Orthodox world over the issue," as the promised help from Bulgaria had "provoked negative reactions from the Serbian, Greek,

and Constantinopolitan churches.” The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had some [strong words to say](#) to Gjorge Ivanov, President of the Republic of Macedonia, during his April 2018 visit to the headquarters of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Phanar in Istanbul, Turkey, regarding the Macedonian Church’s request for “ecclesiastical motherhood” to the Bulgarian Church. He condemned the Bulgarian Church’s involvement in the matter, stating:

I am thinking about this because I want to be perfectly honest with you. This action of the sister Church of Bulgaria was wrong. It does not help. It complicates things. The Mother Church of all the Balkan peoples is Constantinople. This is what the true history says. What is being discussed is a fictitious mother. And Bulgaria cannot introduce you to canonicity, in normal relations with the other Churches. There must be direct, honest and sincere (...) in the inter-Orthodox relations. Every time a Synaxis of Orthodox Primate is convened either here or in Chambésy, the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s attempt is to put all subjects on the table and to discuss them with honesty and sincerity.

What seems to have exacerbated the relations between the Macedonian and Bulgarian Churches was the Macedonian Church’s celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of the Ohrid Archbishopric on May 28 and 29, 2018, respectively, in Ohrid, Macedonia. The Bulgarian Holy Synod announced that it would not be sending a delegation to participate in the Macedonian Church’s celebrations for the 1000th anniversary of the Ohrid Archbishopric, as they considered the Archbishopric of Ohrid their [own](#). When asked in January about Bulgarian participation in the 1000-year anniversary of Ohrid, the Patriarch Neofit [promised](#) that “we will try to think of how to mark this event.... We will strive to serve the love and peace of Christ.” But there is more: the bishops also declared that Bulgarian priests must not engage in common prayer with Macedonian clergy honoring the day of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the enlighteners or apostles of the Slavs on May 24 in the Basilica di San Clemente in Rome, Italy. This year, the prime ministers of Bulgaria, Boyko Borisov, and Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, visited Rome to commemorate Saints Cyril and Methodius Day on May 24. It was the [first](#) time for a Macedonian-Bulgarian delegation to jointly commemorate Saints Cyril and Methodius, who

visited the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in A.D. 869, where [Pope Adrian II](#) in A.D. (867-872) endorsed Saints Cyril and Methodius' rendering of the liturgy in the Slavonic language.

The next piece in the Macedonian Orthodox Church's plight for ecclesiastical motherhood and autocephalous-status recognition is the May 30, 2018 letter from the Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia Zoran Zaev to the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, requesting that the Macedonian Orthodox Church be incorporated in the canonical order of the Church under the name Archbishopric of Ohrid. Zaev's letter gave his approval to a petition the church leaders of the Macedonian Orthodox Church had sent earlier to Constantinople. The Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued the following [statement](#) on May 30, 2018, announcing its decision to act to resolve the Macedonian Church matter, and the Holy Synod's intention to help the Macedonian Church return to normality and preserve the unity of the Orthodox churches:

The Holy and Sacred Synod, convening today ... examined the petition of the schismatic Church of Skopje, supported by a letter from the Prime Minister of FYROM, His Excellency Mr. Zoran Zaev, that the Ecumenical Patriarchate undertake an initiative to return that Church within the [Orthodox] canonical framework under the name Archdiocese of Ohrid.

The recognition of an autocephalous church in a place where there has already existed an ancient autocephalous Archbishopric of Ohrid since the Middle Ages makes sense ecclesiastically. The autocephalous Archbishopric of Ohrid held jurisdiction over various territories during different periods, sometimes even from the Danube and Dalmatia to the Black Sea and Sicily, but the seat has always been in Ohrid, in the territory of Macedonia. As historian Ivan Snegarov, explains in his book, *History of the Archbishopric of Ohrid*: "the history of the Church of Ohrid is a history of eight centuries of spiritual independence ... of the spiritual sovereignty of Macedonia. The autonomous spirit of Macedonia is not new, but was a product of

its historical life. It was developed by the autocephalous church of Ohrid.” In fact, the Ohrid Archbishopric was abolished by the Ottoman administration, and its dioceses were put under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1767.

There is also a Russian take on this intricate matter, as His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations considers resolving the Macedonian Church matter “inconceivable” without the Serbian Orthodox Church participation, [saying](#): “We are convinced that settling the ‘Macedonian’ Church issue must be resolved within the canonical framework, and it is inconceivable not to, in this process, take into account the leading role of the Serbian Orthodox Church, from which the Macedonian Church seceded 50 years ago.” The Serbian Orthodox Church has refused to recognize the 1967 autocephaly proclamation of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and claims that the decision was uncanonical and was made for political reasons under pressure from the then Yugoslav Communist government. It is important to note that the Patriarchate of Moscow has never recognized Macedonian Orthodox Church autocephaly.

The fact is that more than half a century—51 years, to be exact—has passed since the Macedonian Orthodox Church proclaimed its autocephaly, and the Church is still living in a limbo and isolation, waiting for “sponsorship” of an ecclesiastical mother Church. With the most recent petition to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, it is clear that the Macedonian Orthodox Church is trying very hard and is exhausting her requests for recognition to end the schism and gain the respect the MOC deserves among the Orthodox churches. The situation with the Macedonian Church and the five decades of irregular status is deeply hurting the unity of the Orthodox churches and the unity of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. There is hope that Constantinople will provide an ecclesiastical home for the Macedonian Orthodox Church and

will put the irregular status of the Macedonian Church to rest. This is what the Macedonian Church is requesting.

What will be the Catholic Church's position in resolving the Macedonian Church question? Rome will be supportive of a solution coming from the main stakeholders: Constantinople and the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Why? First, Catholics are a minority in Macedonia ([One percent](#) of the population); [65](#) percent of the population in Macedonia is Orthodox and [32](#) is Muslim. Safeguarding and promoting inter-religious dialogue with Islam and Catholic-Orthodox dialogue in Macedonia are Rome's priorities. Second, Vatican relations with Serbia and Kosovo are cordial as the most recent (June 2018) visit of Cardinal Parolin in the Balkans confirms. In fact, this is the [first visit](#) of a Vatican's Secretary of State in a Balkan country. Third, Rome cannot afford to jeopardize the friendly relations, the growing consensus and "the convergence of views with [my] beloved brother Bartholomew," as [Pope Francis](#) said on June 28, 2018 to the members of a delegation representing the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, who were visiting Rome to commemorate the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. The Catholic Church, in the words of Pope Francis, will not support any decision that will jeopardize ecumenism or the good relations forged with the Orthodox churches, in general, and the Patriarchate of Constantinople, in particular, or as he put it in his May 30, 2018 [statement](#) to the Russian Orthodox delegation: "the extended hand, the fraternal embrace, thinking together, and journeying" together. It is clear that what Francis said about the Ukrainian Church applies to the Macedonian case:

The Catholic Church, the Catholic Churches must not get involved in internal matters of the Russian Orthodox Church, nor in political issues. This is my attitude, and the attitude of the Holy See today. And those who meddle do not obey the Holy See. This regards politics.

In conclusion, the political leaders of Greece and Macedonia seem to have come up with a sound solution regarding the name of Macedonia: the Republic of North Macedonia. The time has come for church leaders to resolve Macedonian Orthodox Church autocephaly and let this tormented nation and its Orthodox Church “breathe freely,” as one of my Macedonian students, a millennial, once said in class. *The Republic of North Macedonia and the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archbishopric of Ohrid* – will be geographically, historically, and ecclesiastically sound solutions to old problems.