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Country snapshot North Macedonia

By Mariglen Demri

Many religious beliefs and cultures have existed on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM). Orthodox Christianity has been present in the geographical area of the modern RNM since the first century AD and is the largest religious denomination of North Macedonia. According to the most recent census, conducted in 2002, 64.8% of citizens identify as Orthodox Christians.⁷⁸ Indeed, it has been inscribed into cultural memory that the region of 'Macedonia' is cited in the Bible – its roughly 25 mentions are a source of particular pride amongst Orthodox believers.⁷⁹ As such, the followers of the RNM Orthodox Church consider themselves to be the successors of the first Christians on the Balkan Peninsula.

However, North Macedonia is also characterised by its religious diversity, having been under the religious and cultural influence of the Bulgarian, Serbian and Ottoman empires, as well as experiencing a major influx of Sephardic Jews from Iberia in the fifteenth century. Positive interfaith relations have generally been preserved in the modern era although at times they have experienced moments of tension. According to the 2002 census, the religious distribution of RNM is as follows: 64.8% are Orthodox Christians, 33.3% are Muslims, 0.35% Catholics, and 0.03% Protestants. A more recent study by Brima and WIN-Gallup⁸⁰, found that only 1% of citizens identified as atheists, while 88% declared themselves as members of one of the religious communities. Similar to other countries in the Balkan region, members of the largest ethnic groups in North Macedonia tend to belong to distinct religious communities. According to research conducted by Abdul Gaffar Mughal using data from the State Statistical Office, over 90% of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia identify as Muslim.⁸¹ On the other hand, more than 90% of ethnic Macedonian identify as Orthodox.⁸²

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- 78 Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, *Census of Population*, available at: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/publikacii/knigaX.pdf>
- 79 T. Tordsson, 'How Do Religion And National Attitudes Coexist In Contemporary Macedonia?'. Unpublished Master's Thesis 2013, Humanistic Faculty, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway. Available at: <http://bora.uib.no/bitstream/handle/1956/6940/106778789.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> Accessed 12.05.2019
- 80 WIN-Gallup International, *Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism – 2012*, accessed at: 07.05.2019, available in: <https://sidmennt.is/wp-content/uploads/Gallup-International-um-tr%C3%BA-og-tr%C3%BAleysi-2012.pdf>
- 81 A. Gaffar Mughal, 'Muslim Population of the Republic of Macedonia: A Demographic and Socio-economic Profile', *Balkan Social Science Review*, Vol. 5, June 2015, p. 90, js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/BSSR/article/download/1021/1032
- 82 Ruzhica Cacanaska, "The Process of De-Secularization in Macedonian Society", (2003) Available on: <https://newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/item/The-Process-of-De-Secularization-in-Macedonian-Society#.XN6rKY4zaM8> Accessed on: 15.05.2019

Politics and religion

Given this historical context and the particular geography of North Macedonia, religion is often interwoven with daily politics. More often than not religious representatives openly communicate political positions on issues that fall out of the scope of their capacity as religious communities. The ethnophyletism⁸³ – the conflation of national and religious identities – of the Orthodox Church enables it to claim certain responsibilities regarding ethno-national issues. For example, during negotiations in the Macedonia naming dispute with Greece (and the law on the use of languages, where Albanian was supposed to become an official language of state), some bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) joined public protests claiming that the MOC is strictly against changing the name and the constitution of the country.⁸⁴

Considering that the theory and practice of politics in the region is often framed in ethnic terms, such ethno-political conflicts have a major effect on the religious cohesion of North Macedonian society, such as in the armed conflict between the government and Albanian separatists in 2001.⁸⁵ The principle basis for the conflict was inter-ethnic disagreement, but inevitably involved a religious element too. The inter-ethnic conflict in this case grew into an interreligious conflict between the two main religious communities. During the armed conflict, objects of religious and cultural-historical significance from both sides were demolished or destroyed.⁸⁶

Even after the Ohrid Agreement ended the conflict, tensions have persisted. According to the US State Department's 2016 Religious Freedom Report the reconstruction of the mosque in Prilep called 'Charshi Mosque' was facing obstructions by the government.⁸⁷ Also, in 2011 a government decision to build a museum in the shape of church inside Kale Fortress in Skopje led to a violent confrontation between young members of the two main ethnic communities, Albanians and Macedonians.⁸⁸ Albanians were angry for building the so called church-museum on location which they claimed should have been a mosque. Macedonians, however, felt the need to defend the 'church'. All Albanian ethnic political parties were against this project, calling it a provocation.⁸⁹

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83 See G. Papathomas, *Course of Canon Law – Appendix VI – canonical glossary*. (Paris, 1995).

84 (Video) The Bishop Petar: MOC is against change of the Constitution and the name of country. [(Видео) Владиката Петар: МПЦ е против промена на Уставот и името на државата], MakFax, 27 February 2018. Available on: <https://makfax.com.mk/daily-news/...> accessed on: 12 May 2019

85 The 2001 insurgency in the Republic of Macedonia was an armed conflict which began when the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) militant group attacked the security forces of the Republic of Macedonia at the beginning of February 2001, and ended with the Ohrid Agreement.

86 V. Petroska-Beska and M. Najcevska, 'Macedonia: Understanding History, Preventing Future Conflict', Special Report 115, United States Institute Of Peace, February 2004, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN017851.pdf>

87 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report - Macedonia, 15 August, 2017, p. 6, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269084.pdf>

88 European Commission. Working Paper, 'The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia 2011 Progress Report', 12 October 2011, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/mk_rapport_2011_en.pdf

89 S. Marusic, 'Eight Injured in Clashes over "Church" Construction in Macedonia', Balkan Insight, 13 February 2011, Available on: <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/02/13/albanians-macedonians-clash-over-museum-church/>

State interference in religious freedom

The Macedonian Orthodox Church (formerly the Archbishopric of Ohrid), which after the Second World War had been reinstated an autonomous diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, declared its independence in 1967. Its autocephality is still disputed by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Besides internal administrative church motives, ecclesiastical inner circles do not reject the possibility that movement for autocephaly has been led by ethno-political and ethnophyletist elements in the Orthodox Church, in general.⁹⁰

In 2002, one of the bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church broke off and joined the Serbian Orthodox Church canon. Bishop Jovan, also known as Zoran Vranishkovski, and his followers then tried to register the Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese (OOA) as a religious community but was rejected by the state commission, which recognises the MOC.⁹¹ In 2017, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled that the blocking of registration was in breach of Article 11 of the convention, and awarded the OOA 4500 euros in damages.⁹² Vranishkovski has been charged and served criminal sentences, but the Church is still not officially registered.⁹³

Similar circumstances exist within the Islamic community in Macedonia, although with a lesser intensity. Namely, the law on religious communities from 2007 disputes the legal status of the Bektashi Community which registered in 2000 in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as its right to the property of the Arabati Baba teqe (Sufi religious building). With the inability to register itself as a legal entity, and the subsequent denied right to acquire property, the teqe has become the property of the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) of the RNM. Representatives of the Bektashi community consider this to be an instance of the state favouring the IRC at the expense of a smaller community.⁹⁴ In 2018, the European Court of Human Rights passed a verdict requiring the state to pay the Bektashi community in North Macedonia compensation for the damages caused by the obstacles imposed by national courts that made it impossible for the Bektashi community to retain its status as religious community.⁹⁵

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90 G. Gjorgjevski, 'Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Context of Balkan and European Orthodoxy', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 37, Iss. 4, Article 2, 2002, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss4/2>

91 Критика и противаргументи за нерегистрирање на ПОА, available at: <https://www.dw.com/mk/критика-и-противаргументи-за-нерегистрирање-на-поа/a-4549834>

92 Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese (Greek-Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese Of The Peć Patriarchy) vs. The Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia, App no. 3532/07 (ECHR, 9 April 2018)

93 Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia, 'Annual Report on the situation in the area of human rights in the Republic of Macedonia for 2014', available in: http://www.mhc.org.mk/system/uploads/redactor_assets/documents/1110/Godishen_Izvestaj_English_.pdf

94 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report - Macedonia, 30 May 2018, p. 6-8, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281176.pdf>

95 Bektashi Community and Others v. the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, App. nos. 48044/10, 75722/12, and 25176/13 (ECHR, 12 April 2018).