

7-2020

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Recommended Citation

Angelovska, Maja and Cacanaska, Ruzhica (2020) "The Macedonian Orthodox Church at the Crossroads between the External Denials and Internal Challenges," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 5 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss5/7>

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THE MACEDONIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AT THE CROSSROAD BETWEEN THE EXTERNAL DENIALS AND INTERNAL CHALLENGES

By Maja Angelovska-Panova and Ruzica Cacanaska

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an insight into the challenges the Macedonian Orthodox Church has faced since the independence of the Republic of Macedonia in the 1990s until today. In doing so, some of the more essential events were considered, such as the dispute with the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as the request sent in 2017 by the Macedonian Orthodox Church to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to act as a mother church of the MOC. In terms of internal affairs, special attention has been paid to several key aspects such as religious education, revitalization of monasticism, denationalization of church property, as well as events related to the registration of the Albanian Orthodox Church in Macedonia.

Keywords: Macedonian Orthodox Church, religious education, Orthodox monasticism, denationalization of church property, Religious Communities of Orthodox Albanians in Macedonia.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which actually marked the end of communism as a social system, was reflected in all spheres of public discourse, including the question of the status of religion, which was evidently marginalized, especially due to the dominant influence of atheism. Democratic processes in the post-communist period guaranteed not only political, but also religious pluralism, which in practice resulted in undertaking appropriate initiatives to establish laws guaranteeing the freedom of religion.

The return to traditional values has in principle generated an increasing number of Orthodox believers, especially among the younger population. Namely, based on a survey conducted in the middle of 1990, 86% of the total number of Macedonians surveyed, declared themselves as members of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (hereinafter referred to as the MOC), out of which 51% defined themselves as deeply religious.¹ According to the 1991 Census, the MOC had 1,355,816 believers or 66% of the total number of citizens of the Republic of Macedonia.²

In other words, in modern Macedonian society the decades-long existence of religion on the margins of society or in the "private sphere" of practicing, was elevated to a higher level with a tendency to properly position itself in the new emerging social circumstances.³ Subsequently, the status of religious institutions also changed. After the independence of Macedonia, regardless of their primary religious and ritual function, religion became a paradigm for national identification.⁴ In fact, the general impression is that most churches in post-communist societies identify the titular Orthodox Church as a traditional and historical religion of the nation, and therefore, there is need for new religious groups to be recognized by the state.⁵

There is no doubt that the MOC, by the change of the social environment, re-established its status in a positive sense. However, the church problems inherited from the Yugoslav

¹ Mirko Blagojević, *Religija i Crkva u transformacijama društva / Religion and Church in Transformations of the Society* (Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i drushtvenu teoriju 2005 / Belgrade: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, 2005), 225 – 226.

² Aleksandar Trajanovski, *Vozobnovuvanje na ohridskata arhiepiskopija kako Makedonska pravoslavna crkva i nejniniot sematizam: 50 godini od vozobnovuvanjeto na ohridskata arhiepiskopija kako makedonska pravoslavna crkva 1958-2008 / Restoration of the Ohrid Archdiocese as a Macedonian Orthodox Church and its Sematism: 50 Years since the Restoration of the Ohrid Archdiocese as a Macedonian Orthodox Church 1958-2008*, (Skopje: Institute of National History, 2008), 245.

³ Ruzhica Cacanaska, "Religious Polarization in Contemporary Macedonian Society," Chapter VIII in *The Role of Religion during the Yugoslav State Crisis*, Ed. Branislav Radeljic, (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 121-153.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ani Sarcissian, "Religious Reestablishment in Post-Comunist Polities," *Journal of Church and State*, vol.51, Issue 3 (summer 2009): 495-496.

Federation (SFRY) are not only still relevant, but have become intensified, especially in 1994, when the tensions between the MOC and the Serbian Orthodox Church (hereinafter referred to as: the SOC) reached its peak. Namely, the Synod of the SOC issued an ultimatum to the MOC "to return to the canonical order" and "enter into the church canonical unity," which was followed by the appointment of Pahomije, the Bishop of Vranje as an "administrator of the dioceses in Macedonia." As an antipode to this, demonstrating categorical unity, the Archbishop's Clergy and Laity Assembly, which was held on October 31 and November 1, 1994, adopted the new Constitution of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. This reaffirmed the autocephaly of the MOC as a "Holy, Universal and Apostolic Church that maintains the dogmas, canons and the unity of worship with the Eastern Orthodox Church."⁶ Referring to the ancient origin of the Ohrid Archbishopric, the then Archbishop H.B. Mihail⁷ noted that: "It should be known, and our Christian believers should remember this well, that the Serbian, Greek and Bulgarian churches when it comes to Macedonia, do not act as churches, but as advocates of the ideals of Great Serbia, Great Greece and Great Bulgaria."

Despite the challenges of the type of so-called Nish Agreement,⁸ and later the intrusion of Jovan Vraniskovski,⁹ the Synod of the MOC took a decisive position which resulted in the Resolution of November 12, 2009, to change the Constitution of the MOC, by which the Macedonian Orthodox Church added the term "Ohrid Archbishopric" to its name, denoting that it is the direct successor of the old Ohrid Archbishopric. According to the Synod, the addition to the name was in line with "the centuries-old tradition of the Orthodox Churches whose names include the historical and current attributes of each local church." MOC-OA also made changes in its coat of arms and its flag, i.e. instead of the image of the church of the Holy Mother of God -Perivlepta, there is the image of the church of St. Sophia in Ohrid being the seat of the archbishops of the Ohrid Archdiocese. The Synod also emphasized that it addressed all Orthodox

⁶ Todor Cepreganov, Maja Angelovska-Panova, Dragan Zajkovski, "Macedonian Orthodox Church." *Eastern Christianity and Politics in Twenty-First Century*. Ed. by Lucian N.Leustean, (Routledge 2014) 428-429.

⁷ The Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia H.B. Mikhail (1912-1999) was the fourth Archbishop of the MOC, who held this position in the period between 1993 and 1999.

⁸ The adjustment of the text of the draft of so-called Nish Agreement on establishing church unity between the SOC and MOC of May 17, 2002, which proposed autocephaly of the MOC to be reduced to autonomy, and change of its name to Ohrid Archdiocese was unacceptable for the Macedonian participants.

⁹ Jovan Vraniškovski, the then Metropolitan of the Diocese of Povardarie is the man whose mission was to impel an internal schism in the MOC and install OOA as an instrument for completion of the dispute with the SOC. See: Ljupčo S. Risteski, "Priznavanje avtokefalnost na Makedonskata pravoslavna crkva (MPC) kako prashanje na makedonskiot nacionalen identitet" / Recognition of the Aucephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) as an Issue of the Macedonian National Identity. *EtnoAntropoZum*, vol 6, (2009), 148.

churches in the name of the evangelical love to ensure "full accession of the MOC to the assembly of local Orthodox churches."

The complexity of the issue of the church conflict regarding the MOC has resulted in the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church (hereinafter referred to as: the ROC), which has on several occasions offered its mediation to resolve the dispute. At the meetings with the Macedonian leadership on December 7, 2009, in Skopje, Nikolay Balashov, a senior church official of the ROC, suggested granting the status of "autonomy" to the MOC, as a compromise, but not the autocephaly.¹⁰ Two years later, in April 2011, a meeting was held in Istanbul between the then President of the Republic of Macedonia, H.E. Gjorge Ivanov, and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; but unfortunately, this attempt also ended with declarative efforts to renew the dialogue, without any concrete results.

A new turning point in terms of resolving the status of the MOC-OA occurred in November 2017, when the Holy Synod of the MOC-OA sent a letter to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (hereinafter referred to as the BOC) requesting that the BOC declared itself a mother church of the MOC. More specifically, the letter read: "The Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archdiocese will recognize the Bulgarian Orthodox Church - Bulgarian Patriarchate as its mother church, being the first to accept and recognize its autocephaly, declare and actualize it, represent and stand behind it before the Ecumenical Patriarchate and before other local churches. With the signing of this agreement by the leaders of the two churches, to establish Eucharistic unity among all their bishops, which will be the basis for the smooth establishment of Eucharistic unity with the bishops of other local Orthodox churches."¹¹ This request of the MOC addressed to the BOC largely corresponded to the already signed Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria,¹² which was basically purely political in nature. This event obviously disturbed the Macedonian public, especially since the Synod was not united on this issue. The Metropolitan of Povardarie, H.E. Agatangel was strongly against this Treaty, and he presented his disagreement with his statement in the media: "My anxiety and my disagreements over our request to the BOC are fueled by the fact that we live in a time when intensive work is being done to resolve the so-

¹⁰ <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/960831.html> accessed on 25.5.2020.

¹¹ <https://religija.mk/pismoto-na-mpc-do-bpc>. <https://mk.voanews.com/a/macedonia-church/4128154.html> accessed on 14.5.2020.

¹² Treaty was signed by the Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov on August 1, 2017.

called "Macedonian question" which, as a final result, should erase everything that is Macedonian from our memories. If the treaties we sign are aimed to destroy the national feeling of the Macedonian people, then the thesis of "mother-church" aims to clog the spring and bury the well from which our people have been drinking for two millennia. Today, someone may be able to suffocate the Macedonian national feeling, but I am sure that he will not be able to erase the biblical and clergy history of the Macedonian people."¹³ There were also reactions from outside. The Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church expressed its concern over the interference of the "Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the jurisdiction of another Orthodox Church, i.e. the Serbian Orthodox Church, an act that is contrary to the Holy Canons and the Church's Tradition, which puts aside the canon law and the leading role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which may be the beginning of unpleasant events."¹⁴

Recently, the Metropolitan of the Prespansko-Paelagoniska eparchy H.E. Peter, presented new information, previously unknown to the public, especially in regard to the relations with the BOC, but also with the SOC. What is very important for our topic is that he gave a special interpretation regarding the meaning of term "Mother Church."¹⁵

Despite the fact that the Holy Synod of the BOC decided at one of its sessions to represent the interests of establishing the canonical status of the MOC before the local Orthodox churches, to date no final resolution has been reached, in terms of establishing an official position on this question. Unfortunately, the status quo state regarding the recognition of the MOC has been largely determined by the increasingly expressed presence of Balkan nationalisms 148 years after ethnofiletism was proclaimed a heresy at the 1872 Assembly in Constantinople. The sentence in the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" seems as if it had completely lost its primordial significance in our time.

However, despite the challenges and turmoils, the MOC actively continued its activities. Namely, in the period of October 5-7, 2018, in Ohrid and Struga the jubilee meeting of the

¹³ <https://religija.mk/baranjeto-do-bpc-e-prodolzenie-na-dogovorot-so-bugarija/>, accessed on 15.5.2020.

¹⁴ <https://www.dw.com/mk/%D0%B3%D1%80%D1%87%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D1%86%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%BF%D1%86-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%88%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D1%98%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%BF%D1%86/a-41822608>, accessed on 18.5.2020.

¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDgZhe_i8UY

Archbishop's Clergy and Laity Assembly was held which resulted in the Resolution by which the MOC retained its position against changing the name of the church. The Resolution envisaged the amendment to Article 2 of the Constitution of the MOC, which would read: "the Macedonian Orthodox Church - historical and legal successor of the Ohrid Archdiocese and Iustiniana Prima, has the dignity of the Archbishopric and its name is Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric, or Macedonian Orthodox Church, in its communication." Article 9, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the MOC was also amended, and it would read: "The title of the Archbishop is Metropolitan of Skopje, Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia and Iustiniana Prima and he will be addressed "Your Beatitude."¹⁶ It was impressive that in 2018 the MOC celebrated several fundamental anniversaries. Some of these anniversaries include 60 years since the restoration of the Ohrid Archbishopric as the MOC, 1000 years since its establishment, 75 years since the Clergy Assembly in the Ohrid village of Izdeglavje, and 1155 years since the Moravian mission of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodiu.

There is no doubt that Macedonia's independence in the 1990s was followed by revitalization of the religion and the strengthening of the religious entities on the public stage. Such a situation implied a greater representation of the religion in the media which resulted in concrete measures in the field of "religious education." Events of social nature, renewal of monasticism, as a credo of Orthodoxy, denationalization of "confiscated property," challenges with the Orthodox Albanians in Macedonia, etc.¹⁷

Stefan Sandžakovski, Father Jovan Takovski, and Presbyter Ivica Todorov¹⁸ are just some of the names in the church hierarchy who have taken more concrete steps for the introduction of classes in religious instruction, intended primarily for the believers in local churches whose knowledge in the field of religion was mostly based on the preserved traditional values, rather than on some kind of theological education and interpretation. The modest knowledge of the consumers in the field of religion is quite normal, especially having in mind its decades-long treatment as a retrograde phenomenon.

The tendency to absorb "religious education," especially among the younger population, has resulted in the introduction of optional teaching in religious education in the third grade of

¹⁶ <https://telma.com.mk/mpts-ostanuva-protiv-promenata-na-imeto-na-tsrkvata/>, accessed on 18.5.2020.

¹⁷ Cakanoska, "Religious Polarization in Contemporary Macedonian Society," 122.

¹⁸ We have to point out that there are a lot of other authorities, who used to work on that issue, but due to lack of space we will omit those names, although they definitely made significant contributions.

primary school.¹⁹ The confronting relations between the then ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unit (VMRO-DPMNE) as a Demo-Christian party and the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) over the introduction of the course of religious education has authentically demonstrated the political and ideological division of the Macedonian social body. A specific compromise was the introduction of electives in the sixth grade, "Introduction to Religions" and "Ethics of Religions,"²⁰ as a substitute for religious instruction, by which the pupils had the opportunity to get knowledge of the religious teachings from different religions, but also of the ethical aspects of the religious and ideological concepts. The fact that in the school year of 2011/12 the course "Ethics of Religions" was chosen by 46% of the pupils, versus 33% in the school year of 2010/11, it was a clear indicator that prejudices and reservations among parents were being overcome.²¹

Regardless of this "basic" acquaintance with the issues related to religions, the MOC undertook appropriate activities for the development of theological scholarly discipline at a higher academic level. The Orthodox Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Theological Faculty "St. Clement of Ohrid" are relevant educational institutions which use their potential to create staff not only for the needs of the MOC, but also for the state institutions which are focused on the religion and religious communities in general. In this context, it should be mentioned that in the academic year 2008/2009, the Orthodox Theological Faculty, which was established by the Holy Synod of the MOC in 1977, was granted state accreditation and today operates with the status of the youngest associate member of the "St. Cyril and Methodius" University in Skopje. In its decades-long work, the Faculty has developed a rich publishing

¹⁹ On October 3, 2002, the then Minister of Education and Science, Prof. Nenad Novkovski, PhD, made a decision to introduce optional religious education in the third grade of primary education. Regarding this decision, the Constitutional Court initiated the procedure with the explanation that the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia provided for the principle of separation of state from religion, and the Law on Primary Education prohibited religious organization and activities in primary schools. Such a solution, in principle, reached by consensus between government officials and church authorities, has created controversial public reactions. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE, a conservative Demo-Christian party, turned such an initiative into a draft-law of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, despite the reaction of the opposition led by SDSM. In 2007, the Members of Parliament passed a law introducing religious education, and its practical implementation began in the following school year. At the initiative of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), two years later, the Constitutional Court repealed Article 26 of the Law on Primary Education, which allowed for the organization of religious education in schools. Religious communities were allowed to organize religious schools, but it meant outside the state educational institutions.

²⁰https://www.bro.gov.mk/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B8/?idcat=61&customposttype=documents_category accessed on 14.05.2020

²¹ Todor Cepreganov, Maja Angelovska-Panova, Dragan Zajkovski, "Macedonian Orthodox Church," 430.

activity, issuing individual papers and periodicals, such as the "The Annual." The Students' Association publishes a bulletin "Pravoslaven blagovesnik" in order to stimulate the publication of scientific and theological contributions among the students.²²

Aside from the publishing activity of the Orthodox Theological Faculty, the MOC through its dioceses is actively working in this field, affirming itself through publications of original pastoral texts, translations of the history of hesychasm and modern world theology, texts with didactic and apologetic contents. The diocesan magazines "Pelagonitisa," "Vistina," "Premin," "Ogledalo," "Troichnik," etc. are only part of the current publishing activity of the dioceses of the MOC.

Charity work is another activity of the MOC, especially given the general view that the Church would achieve its most positive impact in the society when it would intensify its charity work. As a principle, such activities exist, but they are more of a result of the engagement of individuals or the dioceses, rather than of an organized strategy, implemented in the agenda of the MOC. In 1995, the charity organization "Milosrdie" was established within the MOC, the main goal of which was to help the elderly and infirm, orphans, disabled, homeless, and widows. In 2015, also under the patronage of the MOC, the charity organization "St. Spas" was established, which took care of more than 200 families with a supply of food and hygiene products. The first charity kitchen was opened in 1998 and it functioned within the church of "St. Petka." Two years later, the second charity kitchen was opened within the church of "St. Peter and Paul" in the Skopje settlement of Gjorce Petrov. At the initiative of the Metropolitan of the Diocese of Povardarie H.E. Agatangel another charity kitchen was opened in Veles in 2006. These charity kitchens operate under the patronage of the charity organization "Gjakonia." The "Samarjanin" charity organization operates within the diocese of Prespa and Pelagonia, which activities consist of providing food and clothes for socially handicapped families.

The revitalization of monasticism in the early 1990s in Macedonia imposed itself as a real and essential need for the entire completion of the process of establishing the church infrastructure. It is a credo of the MOC, and as Simeon, the new theologian once said, the monk is "a man who is not involved with the people, but constantly communicates with God the One and Only." In the period between 1995-1997, the largest increase was recorded in terms of quantitative renewal of monastic life on the territory of Macedonia, which resulted in satisfactory

²² <https://pbf.edu.mk/za-fakultetot/>, accessed on 14.5.2020.

statistical data of 37 active monasteries and about 200 monks and nuns. Statistics show that almost half of the monks and nuns have completed a higher education and their average age is about 34 years. Beside Macedonians, members of other nationalities from Romania, Croatia, and Serbia also participate in the monasticism of the MOC.²³

Life in the monasteries is Christ-centered, which means the focus is on the silence and repetition of Jesus' prayer. Apart from the obligatory liturgical practice and manual work for economic survival of the monasteries, the monks and nuns are engaged in a number of activities, that is, authentic literary and creative activities, translations of the works of the church fathers, restoration of Byzantine painting, organization of permanent museum exhibition, such as the example of the "Marko's Monastery," manufacture of miters for high Orthodox church dignitaries, among which we can mention the miters for the Ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew, for the Russian patriarch Cyril by the sisterhood in the monastery of "St. George the Victorious" in the village of Rajchica, near Debar. In the monastery of the "Assumption of the Most Holy Mother of God" in Matka, near Skopje, priestly clothes, church inventory and souvenirs are made, and incense is produced. Although these activities are in the function of nurturing Christian values, they are also of intellectual nature, meaning that monastics not only progress in spiritual catechism, but also work intensively on their personal education in the spirit of Orthodox theology.

With the Resolution of October 2005, the Archbishop's Clergy and Laity Assembly of the MOC, among other things, addressed the issue of the return of the property of the MOC in accordance with the Law on Denationalization. In this regard, Article 8 states that "there has been a delay in this process for a longer period of time, so the MOC most energetically and urgently demands that the Council for Denationalization and the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Macedonia should urge the return of property to the MOC. In that sense, the return of property should be treated as a legal obligation which the state should fulfill." The Assembly also called for the return of all sacred and religious items to the MOC: icons, crosses, liturgical books and manuscripts, sacred and liturgical bowls, relics, etc. If some of the mentioned sacred items require special protection and care, they can remain in the premises of the relevant state

²³ Maja Angelovska-Panova, "Monashtvoto vo duhovno-istoriskiot kontinuitet na Makedonija". *Spektar XIX*, N. 57, (2011): 34–44; Maja Angelovska-Panova, "Monastic Traditions and Practices in Macedonia and their Implications in Modern Times". *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. 37, issue 14 (2017): 144-158.

institutions, but their ownership should be defined, meaning that they are the property of the MOC."

In an interview for the newspaper "Spitz" from April 7, 2007, Metropolitan of Povardarie H.E. Agatangel pointed out, "The process of denationalization of the properties of the Macedonian Orthodox Church is a correction of a great injustice inflicted, not only on the Macedonian Orthodox Church, but directly on the Macedonian people." In the context of the successfully implemented process of denationalization the Metropolitan H.E. Petar said that 70% of the property within the diocese of Prespa and Pelagonia has been returned. Among the properties of the diocese is the building of the University Library "St. Clement of Ohrid" in Bitola.

According to the information from February 17, 2011, published by Macedonian Informative Agency (MIA), attractive land within the monastery complex of "St. Naum" was returned to the MOC, more precisely to the Diocese of Debar and Kichevo. It is a land of 2,770 hectares, mainly forested areas with natural rarities and habitats of endemic species, which have so far been managed by the National Park "Galichica." Metropolitan H.E. Hilarion also made special efforts for denationalization of the monastery property, which for the most part, has been found returned and is being managed by the church.²⁴

The return of the properties to the MOC is a positive step taken by the state and was appropriately perceived by the public. However, the acts of selling part of the property by MOC received a negative connotation in the society, which treated this trend as a deviation of the Church from the Orthodox-Christian values.

In the middle of 2014, at the initiative of Branko Manojlovski, the idea of introducing an Albanian-language service for Albanians of the Orthodox faith was presented. In October 2014, the MOC-OA decided to meet such a request, for which priests who spoke the Albanian language would be engaged. The initiation of the first service in the Albanian language was marked by the memorial service for the Orthodox Albanian, Kristo Bagheri, the son of the educator Josif Bagheri, who died in the early 20th century in a Komita company near Bitola.²⁵

²⁴ Cepreganov, Angelovska-Panova, Zajkovski, "Macedonian Orthodox Church," 432.

²⁵ Aleksandar Spasenovski, Mitko B.Panov, Kornelija Cipunseva, *Mestoto na malcinskite verski zaednici vo ramki na dominantnite etnichki grupi vo Republika Makedonija / The Place of Minority Religious Communities within the Dominant Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Macedonia*. (Case study of the ethnic Macedonians of Islamic religion and the ethnic Albanians of Christian religion. (Skopje: Conrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of Macedonia, Euro-Balkan Institute 2016), 29-30.

Such a decision by MOC had a positive impact on the public, and an additional step forward in that direction was the introduction of the Albanian language on the official website of the Diocese of Kumanovo and Osogovo, which also showed readiness to worship in Albanian language. The events began to gain political connotation with the announcement regarding the intention for establishment of the Religious Communities of Orthodox Albanians. The initiator was Branislav Sinadinovski, a special adviser of the leader of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), Ali Ahmeti, who also said that permission to practice the Albanian language in Macedonian churches was not enough to overcome the problem. The problem was further complicated by the fact that the request for registration of the Religious Communities of Orthodox Albanians was promoted on the day of the celebration of the Albanian flag, which caused a negative reaction by the MOC. Nevertheless, the Judge in charge of registration of churches, religious communities and religious groups at the Basic Court Skopje 2, on December 4, 2015, decided to accept the request to register the establishment of a "Religious Community of Orthodox Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia."²⁶ There have been no public comments that would indicate the danger that the realization of religious rights based on ethnicity could cause serious divisions among Orthodox believers in Macedonia, especially given the experience of Jovan Vraniskovski's self-proclaimed Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric.²⁷

The challenges which the MOC was facing exist, and will continue to exist, and are a part of our history, and our everyday lives. An article published in the newspaper "Dnevnik" from July 13, 2012, among other things, stated: "... ordinary people want and expect that clergy should pay attention to the moral values. And the meaning of the existence of the clergy is the affirmation of high moral values. People have a feeling that in the clergy some mechanisms have failed in that respect, that is, the mechanisms of modesty have been abandoned." On the other hand, the presence of politics in the Church is increasingly evident, which certainly has negative implications on the confidence of the believers. Euphoric practicing of the religion and visits to the church buildings are characteristic of the period after the independence of the Republic of Macedonia has been transformed in the context of religious passivization in recent years. Unofficially, out of the total number of Christian believers in Macedonia, 30% refer to those who

²⁶<https://a1on.mk/macedonia/formirana-verska-zaednica-na-pravoslavnite-albanci-vo-makedonija-mpc-molchi-povekje-od-edna-godina/> accessed on 22.05.2020

²⁷ Aleksandar Spasenovski, Mitko B.Panov, Kornelija Cipusheva, *Mestoto na malcinskite verski zaednici vo ramki na dominantnite etnichki grupi vo Republika Makedonija / The Place of Minority Religious Communities within the Dominant Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Macedonia*, 35-36.

are constantly active, 7-10% are atheists, and the vast majority of 60% are so-called traditional believers who associate religion exclusively with customs and cultural traditions.²⁸

It seems that the head of the MOC, H.B. Stefan alluded to the distancing of believers from the Church and the displaced values, in his last address on the occasion of the great Christian holiday Christmas, said: "Despite all the gifts--said the Archbishop H.B. Stefan,²⁹ modern humanity is affected by the most terrible disease--selfishness. Today's generation seems to have changed its values, and by remaining in selfishness, it has humiliated humility, and by doing so, it has not only rejected honesty and piety, but it has also disrupted interpersonal relationships. There is less and less humanity today, and more and more intolerance and misunderstanding between people and nations." He also pointed out the fundamental importance of national unity, especially in the current situation of party polarization, and in that sense he stated:

Every survival is a temptation and a challenge, so only in harmony and unity you can defend your own, with dignity and with your heads held high and loud--NO. Power does not pray for the justice, but the moments that affect the spiritual, cultural, historical and national identity of a nation should not and must not be relinquished or turned into an opportunity for compromise. That is why we urgently need unification and a national strategy.³⁰

There is no doubt that the Republic of Macedonia in the past has faced with fundamental historical turbulences, which have been reflected in all spheres of society as well as of the Church. The centuries-old role of the MOC--OA as a protector of the people and the identity is possible only with its distancing from the politics, which will certainly contribute to restoring the trust of the believers.

²⁸<https://www.dw.com/mk/%D0%B3%D0%B3-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BD-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D1%87%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%B8%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B4%D1%83%D1%85%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%82/a-51910144>, accessed on 25.05.2020.

²⁹ H.B. Stephen is the fifth Head of the MOC, elected to this position at the Clergy and Laity Assembly held in Ohrid, on October 9-10, 1999. <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/%D0%B3-%D0%B3-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BD-20-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%BF%D1%86/> accessed on 25.05.2020.

³⁰<https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/razno/bozhikjino-poslanie-na-gg-stefan-da-ja-chuvame-verata-da-gi-chuvame-svetinjite-da-go> accessed on 25.05.2020.