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MACEDONIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH – ARCHBISHOPRIC OF OHRID AND IT'S ARDUOUS ROAD TO AUTOCEPHALY

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the recent developments related to the Macedonian Orthodox Church–Archbishopric of Ohrid, the acceptance of the canonical status by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the conferring of status to autocephaly by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2022. From the ecclesiological and the liturgical aspect, the MOC-OA is no longer in isolation and is part of the family of Orthodox churches through the restoration of Eucharistic communion. The final step, the granting of a *Tomos* by the Ecumenical

Patriarchate is expected, which would make the MOC-OA the first by all recognized and accepted autocephalous church in the 21st century.

Key words: Macedonian Orthodox Church, Archbishopric of Ohrid, autocephaly

In the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, Christianity has maintained a constant presence since Christianity's inception. In the ninth century, St. Clement and St. Naum of Ohrid, disciples of St. Cyril and Methodius, continued their missionary activities by entering into Ohrid. After seven years of educational activity in the newly founded school in Ohrid, St. Clement was appointed bishop of the diocese, with territory extending around the Ohrid Lake. This diocese soon grew into the Ohrid Archbishopric. This Church of Ohrid, as autocephalous, held jurisdiction over various territories during different periods until 1767, when it was abolished by the Ottoman administration. In the nineteenth century, the national Orthodox churches of neighbouring countries were present in various parts of the country. In the twentieth century, the situation escalated with the Balkan Wars. During World War I, the territory came under Bulgarian rule, while in 1920, as a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the renewed Serbian Orthodox Church took on the dioceses in this part of Macedonia. During World War II, the Bulgarian administration established the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Church in the eastern part,³ while a small part in south-west became part of the Albanian Orthodox Church. These unstable and ever-changing external church jurisdictions were considered adversaries by the people and clergy, who, as a result, decided never again to allow a foreign church administration. At the First Clergy-Laity Council held in 1945 in Skopje, the renewal of the Ohrid Archbishopric and church independence were both demanded. At the Second Clergy-Laity Council, held in Ohrid in 1958, the Ohrid Archbishopric, in the form of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, was renewed. Then in 1959, The Serbian Orthodox Church accepted the decision and agreed to grant autonomous status. Due to some mutual understanding, the Macedonian Orthodox Church demanded complete independence, i.e., autocephaly in 1967 at the Clergy-Laity Assembly in Ohrid. This decision however was not accepted by the Serbian Orthodox Church and that provoked the isolation of the Macedonian Orthodox Church from the other Orthodox Churches.¹ For nearly a half century, no solution had been finalized, until the beginning of 2022.

¹ Gjoko Gjorgjevski, „Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Context of Balkan and European Orthodoxy,“ *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Special Issue on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Declaration of the Autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Volume 37, Issue 4 (2017) <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss4/>

The Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople decided to recognize the “Archbishopric of Ohrid” on May 9, 2022. With this pronouncement, the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized the Church known as “Macedonian Orthodox Church– Archbishopric of Ohrid” (MOC-OA), its ecclesiastic hierarchy, as headed by the actual Head of the Church (Archbishop Stephen) and upheld as canonical and valid in the entire Orthodox world. With this was established canonical and eucharistic communion with the Church after a long struggle for solving its canonical status. The decision was surprising, even though it had been expected and desired for a long time. In the official statement issued by the Holy Synod, it is explained that this decision resulted from a process which “discussed extensively the ecclesiastical matter of Skopje” and that it is a “final stage of the petition of appeal of that Church to the Mother Church.”² However, in the decision it is clarified that “it cedes to the Most Holy Church of Serbia the regulation of the administrative matters between itself and the Church in North Macedonia, in the context of course of the sacred canonical order and church tradition,” but also that “it recognizes ‘Ohrid’ as the name of this Church (understood as the region of its jurisdiction solely within the boundaries of the territory of the state of North Macedonia), as also promised in writing to the Ecumenical Patriarchate by its Primate. Thereby it excludes the term ‘Macedonian’ and any other derivative of the word ‘Macedonia.’”³ The decision by the Constantinople Ecumenical Patriarchate to recognise MOC-OA as the “Church of Ohrid” was articulated in a meeting between the country’s Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and its Archbishop Stefan in Skopje the day after receiving autocephaly. The Prime Minister called this decision a historic one.

In fact, four years before this momentous decision, in April 2018, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church–Archbishopric of Ohrid sent a plea for appeal to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It requested consideration of its right, with the historical and canonical rights and privileges, to decide upon appeals and be granted autocephaly. After that, the state leadership sent several letters and petitions to the Ecumenical Patriarchate to accept this appeal. The appeal was taken into consideration and according to the public

² “Most joyful annunciation from Constantinople: The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognised our historical and reinstated Ohrid Archbishopric as canonical”, <https://bigorski.org.mk/en/reports/events/most-joyful-annunciation-from-constantinople-the-ecumenical-patriarchate-recognised-our-historical-and-reinstated-ohrid-archbishopric-as-canonical/>; Το Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο δέχθηκε σε εκκλησιαστική κοινωνία την Αρχιεπισκοπή Σκοπίων. <https://www.romfea.gr/epikairota-xronika/49974-to-oikoumeniko-patriarxeio-anagorise-tin-sxismatiki-ekklisia-ton-skopion>; <https://www.romfea.gr/epikairota-xronika/49974-to-oikoumeniko-patriarxeio-anagorise-tin-sxismatiki-ekklisia-ton-skopion>.

³ “The Church of Ohrid restored into eucharistic communion”, <https://www.ecupatria.org/2022/05/22/the-church-of-ohrid-restored-into-eucharistic-communion/>

announcement in May 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarchate “decided to take interest in this matter” (i.e. to get engaged in the solving of this canonical issue of the Church) and to take all the necessary steps, according to the guaranteed rights for its historical and canonical responsibility and privileges as a primate Church.”⁴ It was the first step in resolution of the several decades long isolation and non-recognition of the MOC-OA Church by the Orthodox ecumene. The Ecumenical Patriarchate’s 2022 statement, following four years of dedicated processes, declares that “it welcomes into Eucharistic communion the Hierarchy, clergy, and laity under Archbishop Stefan of this Church, thereby healing the wound of schism and pouring ‘oil and wine’ on the ordeal of our Orthodox brethren in that country. To this end, the appropriate Patriarchal and Synodal Act is issued.”

Everything would be simple and straightforward if the whole process was not binary. Namely, at the beginning of 2022, confidential meetings began between delegations of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church, led by the Heads of the respective Churches. All gatherings took place in Serbia, and it was only after several meetings that delegations reached favorable outcomes for both parties on more significant topics. It is assumed that all present prepared procedures according to the favorable conclusions developed solely within these veiled meetings.

The first evidence that something was happening came just from an announcement, just three days before the Statement of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. On this occasion, Fotije, Bishop of Zvornik and Tuzla, publicly revealed that a Serbian delegation, including His Holiness Patriarch Porfirije, had recently held a productive meeting with a Macedonian delegation. The meeting produced permission for the Macedonian Orthodox Church to return to canonical unity with the Serbian Church as early as the latter’s Council of Bishops in May 2022. This was notably twenty years after the Niš Agreement failed to resolve the issue.⁵ Some information about renewing the

⁴ „Државата во офанзива за признавање на МПЦ-ОА, се бара апелација од Цариградската патријаршија” [Drzavata vo ofanziva za priznavanje na MPC-OA], <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/drzhavata-vo-ofanziva-za-priznavanje-na-mpc-oa-se-bara-apelacija-od>; Το Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο δέχθηκε σε εκκλησιαστική κοινωνία την Αρχιεπισκοπή Σκοπίων. <https://www.romfea.gr/epikairoτητα-xronika/49974-to-oikoumeniko-patriarxeio-anagorise-tin-sxismatiki-ekklisia-ton-skopion>; “Most joyful annunciation from Constantinople: The Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized our historical and reinstated Ohrid Archbishopric as canonical,” <https://bigorski.org.mk/en/reports/events/most-joyful-annunciation-from-constantinople-the-ecumenical-patriarchate-recognised-our-historical-and-reinstated-ohrid-archbishopric-as-canonical/>

⁵ “МПЦ и СПЦ седнале повторно на маса и повторно во Ниш, Соборот во мај можна пресвртница?” [MPC i SPC sednale povtorno na masa vo Nish, Soborot vo maj mozna presvrtnica], <http://religija.mk/najnova-vest-mpc-i-spc-sednale-povtorno-na-masa-i-povtorno-vo-nish-soborot-vo-maj-mozna->

dialogue between the two churches appeared in the meantime,⁶ but without any serious results, having in consideration all unsuccessful attempts for canonical restoration in the last 20 years.

The first official announcement of the Serbian Orthodox Church astonished the public, both in Serbia and in Macedonia, especially the believers of Macedonian Orthodox Church: considering it as complete attainment of so desired autocephaly. On May 16, 2022, the Bishops' Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church published the Communiqué on the restoration of the eucharistic and canonical communion with the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric, reporting that the Synod of the MOC-OA is accepting "the universally recognized canonical status of the broadest possible autonomy, i. e. the status of full internal independence granted as far back as 1959,"⁷ as an autonomous Church and a part of the Serbian Patriarchate. It was highlighted that "with the establishment of unity on canonical basis and on terms of respect for canonical order throughout the territory of the Serbian Orthodox Church, a dialogue on the future and possible final status of the dioceses in Northern Macedonia is not only possible but also expedient, legitimate and realistic." Besides, in this dialogue, the Serbian Orthodox Church will be guided "only and exclusively by ecclesiological, canonical and church pastoral principles, standards and norms," disregarding any political factors or unilateral initiatives and being unaffected by outside influence or pressure (these probably referring to the recent announcement of the Patriarchate of Constantinople). It was very notable that also in this stage, it was clarified that after making the decision on the status, "it does not intend to subject the new sister Church to restrictions as to the sphere of her jurisdiction in her own country and in diaspora and recommends that the issue of her official designation be defined in a direct fraternal dialogue with Greek-speaking and other Local Orthodox Churches."⁸

After this decision of the Serbian Orthodox Church, positive reaction arrived from the Ecumenical Patriarch, when in an interview with Greek television ERT he expressed

[presvrtnica](https://presvrtnica.rs/constantinople-enters-into-communion-with-macedonian-church/); "Constantinople Enters Into Communion With Macedonian Church," <https://orthochristian.com/146056.html>

⁶"Patriarch Porfirije Reportedly Resuming Dialogue with Macedonian Church," <https://orthochristian.com/144604.html>

⁷ Саопштење Светог Архијерејског Сабора, [Saopštenje Svetog Arhijerejskog Sabora], <http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/node/90603>; Church of Serbia for North Macedonia: The dialogue is fair and realistic, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/church-of-serbia-for-north-macedonia-the-dialogue-is-fair-and-realistic/>

⁸ Саопштење Светог Архијерејског Сабора, [Saopštenje Svetog Arhijerejskog Sabora], <http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/node/90603>

satisfaction with the latest developments in the church issue,⁹ but also from Moscow. While previously critically commenting on the announcement of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, saying that “the Russian Orthodox Church will primarily take into account the approach to the problem from the side of the Serbian Church, to which we continue to recognize exclusive canonical rights in North Macedonia,”¹⁰ now it welcomed the decision by the Serbian Church to resume its canonical communion with the Macedonian Orthodox Church.¹¹

But the news about this decision was not very positively welcomed in Northern Macedonia. The reaction in wider society was not enthusiastic, considering this as a “scandalous end in the negotiations between MOC-OA and SOC,” because “the Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church returned the Macedonian Church to an autonomous status in 1959” and more because “the Council made such a decision, at the request of the Synod of the MOC-OA” and that “in a possible future development, the MOC-OA will never achieve autocephaly.”¹² This reaction was probably further incited by the silence concerning the decision from both sides, especially by the MOC.

The head of the SOC invited the head of the MOC-OA for a joint liturgy in Belgrade on May 19, 2022. The concelebration was attended by hierarchs of both Churches, and it was considered as an invitation to a “canonical communion of the two sister Churches.”¹³ In his sermon, the Primate of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Porfirij, noted that overcoming the schism and restoring canonical communion with the Macedonian Church is a miracle of God; saying: “We are one in Christ, one in the Church, and this response of

⁹ “In the past, before our decision, a dialogue was started with the Church of Skopje, but our decision facilitated the Church of Serbia and on Thursday, May 19, His Beatitude Patriarch Porphyry, the head of the SOC invited the head of the Ohrid Church and had a joint liturgy in Belgrade. This fills us with pleasure. It is a historic moment. A schism that lasted for about six decades, at the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, ended, was removed and we are entering a new period. Serbia called this joint liturgy on May 19 a reconciliation liturgy and we are glad for these events”. SOC approved and blessed, and Fanar should confirm the autocephaly of MOC-OA, <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/spc-ja-odobri-i-blagoslovi-a-fanar-treba-da-ja-potvr-di-avtokefalnosta-na-mpc-oa/>

¹⁰ Moscow’s reaction to the Archdiocese of Ohrid: The Serbian Church has the exclusive canonical rights in N. Macedonia, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/moscows-reaction-to-the-archdiocese-of-ohrid-the-serbian-church-has-the-exclusive-canonical-rights-in-north-macedonia/>

¹¹ Russian church endorses the Serbian response on the dispute with Macedonia, <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/russian-church-welcomes-the-serbian-response-on-the-dispute-with-macedonia/>

¹² “СПЦ ја врати МПЦ-ОА во автономија, со статус полош од Нишкиот договор. Кој ќе понесе одговорност?”, [SPC ja vrati MPC-OA vo avtonomija so status polos od Niskiot dogovor], <https://religija.mk/spc-ja-vrati-mpc-oa-vo-avtonomija-so-status-polosh-od-nishkiot-dogovor-koj-ke-ponese-odgovornost/>

¹³ Moscow’s reaction to the Archdiocese of Ohrid: The Serbian Church has the exclusive canonical rights in N. Macedonia, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/moscows-reaction-to-the-archdiocese-of-ohrid-the-serbian-church-has-the-exclusive-canonical-rights-in-north-macedonia/>

brothers and sisters shows that the hearts of our virtuous peoples beat with the rhythm of Christ. It shows us that God has had mercy on us... He also ordered all to be one...For all to be one, that is what the Lord wants from us.” For his part, Stefan, Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, underlined that the faithful of Macedonia thank God for the reunion with the Mother Church, saying that “the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archdiocese, striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bonds of peace, will continue the path leading and serving the cause of peace and mutual development.”¹⁴

Several days later, on May 23, the final statement of the Bishops’ Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the work and the decisions of the Council was published, but without any mention of further steps regarding the Macedonian ecclesiastical question.¹⁵ However, there was not enough time for extending the skepticism among the Macedonian Orthodox believers; Patriarch Porfirije, with other bishops, had just arrived to Skopje to celebrate the feast of St. Cyril and Methodius following day. On May 24, the second joint liturgy was held by the primates, bishops, and clergy of two Churches in the Cathedral “St. Clement of Ohrid” in Skopje. During the sermon, the Serbian Patriarch announced the autocephaly, underlining that it is the decision of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, saying: “And now we bring you one more piece of good news—that the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has unanimously met the pleas of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and has accepted and recognized its autocephaly,” expressing the assurance that also “all other churches will receive this news with joy.”¹⁶ After many years of frozen relations between these two churches, the Patriarch delivered the good news to the numerous Macedonian believers gathered for a joint liturgy and with this gesture, concluded the half century dispute between two churches. “Let God allow that this act of love be eternal,” stated Archbishop Stephan of Macedonia in his speech. He also revealed his plan to travel to Istanbul on June 12 for the feast of Pentecost. Invited by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to celebrate a joint liturgy, their meeting would communicate harmony between the Churches.

The proclamation of autocephaly was welcomed also by the Russian Orthodox Church, stating that “the recognition of the autocephaly of the Church in Macedonia by the Serbian

¹⁴ “Serbian and Macedonian Primates and Hierarchs concelebrate in Belgrade,” <https://orthochristian.com/146235.html>

¹⁵ Саопштење за јавност Светог Архијерејског Сабора, [Saopštenje za javnost Svetog Arhijerejskog Sabora], http://arhiva.spc.rs/sr/saopshtenje_za_javnost_svetog_arhijerejskog_sabora_6

¹⁶ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Serbian Patriarch Brings ‘Good News’ to Newly-Recognised Macedonian Church,” <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/24/serbian-patriarch-brings-good-news-to-newly-recognised-macedonian-church/>

Orthodox Church” is a joyous event, which is expected to be discussed at the next meeting of the Holy Synod. “We rejoice together with our Serbian and Macedonian brothers. We have been waiting for this event for many years,” declared the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.¹⁷

Finally, the Standing Holy Synod of the Church of Greece also issued a statement, expressing “its satisfaction with the decisions of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate regarding the Archdiocese of Ohrid..., and the restoration of ecclesiastical communion with the Church of the neighboring country of Skopje, under Archbishop Stefanos.” Particularly underlined was the attention for this decision “to be a ‘comfort’ to the Holy Clergy and the pious Greek people, as it meets the expectations both for the naming of the ecclesiastical entity of the neighboring State without using the precious name of “Macedonia” as a constituent or derivative, and for the determination of its limits only within the boundaries of the State.” On other side, the Synod remains skeptical and expresses objections to the stance of the Patriarchate of Serbia on the issue: “On the occasion of the Letter of the Patriarchate of Serbia, the Holy Synod expresses its serious objections and doubts: (a) on the use of the term “Macedonian Orthodox Church,” assigned by the Church of Serbia to the Church of Ohrid; (b) on the mention of “Diaspora” of the Church of Ohrid; and (c) on any granting of Autocephaly by the Patriarchate of Serbia, since the only competent authority for granting Autocephaly is the Ecumenical Patriarchate.” At the end the Synod expresses expectation that the “Archdiocese of Ohrid, under Archbishop Stephen, will make constructive use of its reintegration into ecclesiastical communion and the removal of the schism, avoiding earlier ethno-racial claims, which have indeed been condemned as heresy...”¹⁸

This statement appeared only several days after the third joint liturgy at the St. Archangel Michael’s Cathedral in Belgrade, June 5, when the Patriarch of Serbia handed over to the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia the *Tomos* of Autocephaly. For some experts, this “directly questions the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as the only competent ecclesiastical body for granting Autocephaly.” Few days later, the president of Northern Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski, sent a letter to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew thanking him for the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to restore the canonicity of his

¹⁷ Patriarchate of Moscow: The recognition by the Serbian Orthodox Church of the Autocephaly of the Church in North Macedonia is a joyful event, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarchate-of-moscow-the-recognition-by-the-serbian-orthodox-church-of-the-autocephaly-of-the-church-in-north-macedonia-is-a-joyful-event/>

¹⁸ “The Church of Ohrid restored into eucharistic communion,” <https://www.ecupatria.org/2022/05/22/the-church-of-ohrid-restored-into-eucharistic-communion/>

country's Church, expressing the hope and expectation for a final settlement of its administrative status in the near future through the granting of an Autocephaly *Tomos*.¹⁹

As announced, church delegation of the MOC-OA arrived in Constantinople for a five-day visit to the Phanar. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew celebrated a festive evening on June 9 at the Patriarchal Monastery "Living Source" for the feast of St. Apostle Bartholomew (June 11), when the patriarch also celebrates his name day (The service was held earlier because of the Assumption before Pentecost). The festive celebration was attended by Archbishop Stefan, accompanied by Metropolitans Peter of Prespa-Pelagonia and Timothy of Debar-Kichevo, as well as Bishops Clement of Heraclea and Parthenius of Antanya, abbot of the Bigor Monastery. At this occasion, Patriarch Bartholomew handed to the archbishop Stephen the patriarchal and synodal act for the official acceptance of the local church led by him in canonical and eucharistic communion.

In his speech, Patriarch Bartholomew highlighted: "Today... the long-awaited hour has come to resolve the long and painful schism in the body of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church... Today, many Orthodox rejoice in the return of the Christian people to the arms of the Mother Church." He also noted that "the right of appeal of the Patriarch of Constantinople, to which the Archbishop of Ohrid referred in his recent letter of thanks, is not a privilege but a sacrifice and a *kenosis* (humility) for the salvation of believers." The patriarch assured Archbishop Stefan, that he understands his difficulties, dilemmas, internal considerations, changing opinions; but decisions require sacrifice and courage. For his part, Archbishop Stefan thanked with the words: "The patriarchal and synodal act for our return from the suffering of loneliness is – and we will continue to ensure – the foundation on which we will build our future, always adhering to the wise advice of the Mother Church of Constantinople, which we showed by fulfilling the obedience you directed us to overcome the misunderstandings with the sister Serbian Orthodox Church, which was confirmed by the joint holy liturgies." It seems important to point out that the "*Tomos*" of the Serbian Patriarchate was not mentioned, neither the word "autocephaly."²⁰

¹⁹ Patriarchate Of Serbia overrides centuries old traditions: It granted "Tomos of Autocephaly" to Ohrid Archdiocese, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarchate-of-serbia-overrides-centuries-old-traditions-it-granted-tomos-of-autocephaly-to-ohrid-archdiocese/>. Also, Archbishop Stefan during the last Liturgy in Belgrade recorded that the Tomos of Autocephaly will be issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, cfr. Archbishop of Ohrid finks out on the Serbs: We will get the Tomos of Autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarch, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/archbishop-of-ohrid-finks-out-on-the-serbs-we-will-get-the-tomos-of-autocephaly-from-the-ecumenical-patriarch/>

²⁰ Petar Gramatikov, "The Ecumenical Patriarchate officially accepted the Church in Northern Macedonia," <https://www.europeantimes.news/2022/06/the-ecumenical-patriarchate-officially-accepted-the-church-in-northern-macedonia/>

At the Church of St. George in the Phanar, a historic first joint service was held between the head of the MOC-OA, Archbishop Stefan and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on Pentecost Sunday in the presence of bishops from other Local Orthodox Churches. The very fact that the liturgy was celebrated in Greek and Macedonian, in itself, is unusual in the Orthodox tradition and its meaning is multifaceted. The liturgy was attended by a high-level delegation from N. Macedonia, led by Prime Minister Kovachevski, and included the Ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Interior.²¹ The speech of the Ecumenical Patriarch during the Liturgy contained many messages in all directions. He stressed that “the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople is the mother and nurturer of every child. She doesn’t use her responsibilities for show-offs and smugness...Unfortunately, the greatness and naivety of the Mother Church is perceived by the beneficiaries as indifference, weakness, and incompetence.” Addressing Archbishop Stefan, he underlined that “it is time to review the ecclesiology of self-sufficiency and misunderstood introversion...” calling him to entrust the Mother Church “with the care of her. We have said time and time again that we are willing to deal with you. Your course from now on depends solely on your own behavior and choices.” On his part, Archbishop Stefan expressed the joy for the positive answer to the appeal and for the restoration of the unity, referring also to the actual problematic neighboring circumstances: “yes, we are patriots, like all our neighbors! We also love the country in which we were born and live, as well as the people we come from and live with. But we also love our neighbors! We also love the neighboring hierarchs of your Throne, in Northern Greece. We await with love and impatience the moment we see them face to face, embrace them, and concelebrate with them.” Concluding his sermon, the Archbishop Stefan said: “You are well aware of the desire of our hierarchy and our Orthodox people, and we do not hide this from you... But God is our witness, that as much hope as we have, so much and complete trust we have in Your judgment, in Your opinion of the time in which these things must be settled. In You we leave judgment for time and please, do not forget us, but help us to progress.”²²

The five-day visit to Phanar ended on June 13 with a service in the Church of Holy Trinity near Taksim Square in Istanbul. The service was held by Archbishop Stefan in the

²¹ Martin Gavrilovski, “On many summers!,” <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/na-mnogaja-leta/>; Concelebration at the Phanar with Bartholomew and the Archbishop of Ohrid, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/concelebration-at-the-phanar-with-bartholomew-and-the-archbishop-of-ohrid/>

²² “Concelebration at the Phanar with Bartholomew and the Archbishop of Ohrid,” <https://orthodoxtimes.com/bartholomew-to-stefanos-of-ohrid-your-course-from-now-on-depends-solely-on-your-own-behavior-photos/>

concelebration with bishops of MOC-OA, while Patriarch Bartholomew stood on the throne, attending the liturgy.²³

The short overview of the recent rapid succession of events and drastic developments regarding the status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church raises many questions. In a very short time of approximately one month, a problem that lasted more than a half century for the Macedonian Orthodox Church–Archbishopric of Ohrid, which had been isolated from other Orthodox Churches for 55 years, resolved the misunderstanding with Serbian Orthodox Church and even received *Tomos* from it. It was consequently accepted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and with that, restored into communion with other Orthodox Churches.

The first observation regards the changes of SOC's consistent position that had been in favor of a restoration of communion between two churches, but based on autonomy, followed by further discussions about possible but uncertain autocephaly in the future.²⁴ Not only Macedonian, but more notably, the Serbian public was surprised by the final decision of the SOC Bishops Council to give autocephaly and even to assign a *Tomos*, so rare in the Orthodox tradition, having in consideration that previously this was considered exclusively a right of the Ecumenical Patriarch. And moreover, this is certainly the first proclamation of autocephaly by the Mother Church in the 21st century! Whatsoever the motives, the most important outcome is that the misunderstanding between SOC and MOC-OA has been resolved unconditionally. The Macedonian ecclesiastical reality has been accepted and recognized as it is, permitting the only problem between the Serbian and Macedonian people and states to be overcome.²⁵ What remains uncertain at this point is how far removed all these moves had been made in coordination between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the

²³ MOC-OA to hold liturgy with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Church of Holy Trinity near Taksim Square, <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/moc-oa-to-hold-liturgy-with-the-ecumenical-patriarchate-in-the-church-of-holy-trinity-near-taksim-square/>

²⁴ Cfr. Andreja Bogdanovski, "A Change of Heart — The Serbian Orthodox Church Recognition of The Macedonian Autocephaly," <https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/2022/05/25/a-change-of-heart-the-serbian-orthodox-church-recognition-of-the-macedonian-autocephaly-by-andreja-bogdanovski/>

²⁵ There are opinions that the tensions around Orthodox Churches in Ukraine may have influenced the decision of SOC for a peaceful restoration of relations with recognition of autocephaly instead of a complete and hostile break, "Im Schatten des Ukraine-Kriegs endet auf dem Balkan ein jahrzehntealter Kirchenkampf", <https://www.nzz.ch/international/serbien-und-nordmazedonien-einigung-im-kirchenstreit-ld.1685804?reduced=true>. According to other opinions, with the recognition of the MOC-OA by the SOC is prevented other trespassing of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the jurisdiction of other autocephalous Church; if the case with Orthodox Church in Ukraine was exception, the second case may become a rule, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOzc2mN5m1A>

SOC. However, the acceptance of the MOC-OA into the communion of Orthodox Churches should be seen in the context of the current redrawing of the map of modern Orthodoxy.²⁶

As previously mentioned, the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to recognize the Church in the Republic of Northern Macedonia did not instantly mean granting a *Tomos* for autocephaly, which should officially regulate the final administrative status of MOC-OA Church. Regarding the further developments related to this issue, there are two important conflicts underlined in the aforementioned announcement: the name of the Church and the future status of the diaspora believers affiliated with MOC-OA.²⁷ It was clearly highlighted that the use of the term “Macedonian” and any other derivative of the word “Macedonia” is unacceptable, recognizing only “Archbishopric of Ohrid.” This name was also acceptable by the Synod of MOC-OA, but only for international use. According to a previous tradition, the *Tomos* could be issued and related to the name of the country (“Church of North Macedonia”), or to the ecclesiastical see (“Archbishopric of Ohrid”) and here for both churches the second choice was considered acceptable. MOC-OA reserves the right to use the official and constitutional name for internal use; with other Orthodox churches it is less acceptable. This is the case with neighboring Bulgaria, whose Church also claims to be successor of the Archbishopric of Ohrid and therefore the name “Archbishopric of Ohrid” for the Bulgarian Orthodox church is not acceptable.²⁸ Moreover, this decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was declared “a knife in the back” of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, for which the Ohrid Archbishopric is part of the historical and spiritual space, as well as the oldest Bulgarian church institution.²⁹ The Bulgarian Patriarchate welcomed the decision to remove the schism and entered into canonical and Eucharistic communion with the “Orthodox Church of North Macedonia,” but on the issue of the name “Macedonian Orthodox Church–Ohrid Archdiocese,” the Bulgarian Synod did not make a final decision, with the wording that it “has yet to be considered.”³⁰ The paradox is bigger considering that, in 2017, MOC-OA first demanded the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to be their “mother” church and to accept

²⁶“Church in Northern Macedonia finds recognition in a redrawn Orthodox map,”

<https://www.religionwatch.com/church-in-northern-macedonia-finds-recognition-in-a-redrawn-orthodox-map/>

²⁷ Andreja Bogdanovski, “Is The Macedonian Schism Healed?”,

<https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/2022/05/13/is-the-macedonian-schism-healed-by-andreja-bogdanovski/>

²⁸ In 2018 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was invited to participate in the festivities on the occasion of Thousand years of the Ohrid Archbishopric in Ohrid, but BOC refused to send delegates. In that occasion Metropolitan Naum of Ruse called the presence of a Bulgarian delegation in Ohrid an act of national treason.

²⁹ “Skopje welcomes Patriarchate Bartholomew’s recognition of the “Church of Ohrid”,

<https://greekcitytimes.com/2022/05/11/skopje-bartholomew-church-of-ohrid/>

³⁰The Bulgarian Patriarchate entered into Eucharistic communion with the Macedonian Church,

<https://raskolam.net/en/54814-bolgarskij-patriarhat-vstupiv-u-evharistijne-spilkuvannya-z-makedonskoyu-cerkvoyu>

its ecclesiastical reality. Only after receiving a negative response to the issue, MOC-OA began seeking direct assistance from the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Before the procedure of granting the *Tomos* of autocephaly, another potentially charged issue concerns the Macedonian diaspora. Similarly to the case of Ukraine, in the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, it recognizes the Church of Ohrid “solely within the boundaries” of today’s Northern Macedonia. By the MOC-OA this is understood as the recognition of its jurisdiction solely within the boundaries of the territory of the state and excludes the territories that were part of the famous Archbishopric of Ohrid in the past (during some periods even from Moldavia to South of Italy). The current MOC-OA has developed church life and dioceses in North America, Europe, and Australia. It is already unreal to expect to see these dioceses as a part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, having in mind the actual independence in the church organization, designated the churches as “Macedonian.” Regarding this issue, Archbishop Stefan, in an interview for Greek newspaper *To Vima* (June 5, 2022) expressed his position: “The territory of the historic Archbishopric of Ohrid from today’s aspect is outdated. The Archbishopric of Ohrid now exists within the borders of the modern state of Northern Macedonia. When it comes to the diaspora in general in the Orthodox context, we know how to organize those territories ecclesiologically. But so far, there is no all-Orthodox agreement or general implementation of the solution for the diaspora. We believe that such an issue, which includes many aspects and challenges, cannot be solved partially, but should be a joint work in order to establish the agreement at once and everywhere.”

However, no matter how long the procedure will last, the most important part of the process has been completed. From the ecclesiological and liturgical aspect, the MOC-OA is no longer in isolation and is part of the family of Orthodox Churches. It has obtained restoration of eucharistic communion with the pronouncement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but especially because of the final decision of the SPC as Mother Church to grant it autocephaly and the SPC also recommended its acceptance to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other Orthodox Churches. The final step with the granting of a *Tomos* by the Ecumenical Patriarchate is truly expected, which would make the MOC-OA the first by all recognized and accepted autocephalous church in the 21st century.