

## THE ATTITUDE OF THE BULGARIAN EXARCHATE TO THE “MACEDONIAN ISSUE” (1878-1913)

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### Abstract

The establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate is a very important event in the national Bulgarian history since the Bulgarian nationality was accepted by this act, and the foundations of the spiritual and educational activities were laid. According to the historiography of Skopje, the Bulgarian exarchate was continuously working on hindering national development through educational activity. With its widespread and organized church and school network, through paid Bulgarian priests and teachers, who conducted their preaching and teaching in Bulgarian, they wanted to instill Bulgarian national consciousness. Before the alternative of choosing between the Exarchate and Patriarchate, namely Catholicism or Protestantism, the Orthodox in Macedonia supported a Slavic Exarchate. A full reconciliation was never reached between the Exarchate and Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). The idea of evolution, reflected in the educational-religious activity of the Bulgarian Exarchate, was undoubtedly in opposition to the revolutionary ideas promoted by IMRO. Regarding the number of Orthodox followers under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian exarchate in the territory of Macedonia, different scholars provide different data. According to Bulgarian authors, in the beginning of the 20th century, there were more than one thousand Bulgarian schools. Apart from ecclesiastical and school activities, the Bulgarian exarchate paid special attention to health and social activities in Macedonia.

*Keywords:* Exarchate, Macedonian Slavs, ecclesiastical organization, educational activity, political propaganda

### Description of research methods

Relevant literature in Albanian, Macedonian, and Bulgarian was selected for the drafting of the paper. Due to the nature of the paper, three main research methods were used: analysis, descriptive and comparative methods. Being aware that historiography is a discourse profoundly related to politics, particular attention was paid to the materials used as well as to their source.

The establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate, following the decree of the Sultan on 29.2.1870, represents a highly significant occurrence in the Bulgarian national history. Through this action, the Bulgarian ethnicity was recognized, and the groundwork for national intellectual and educational endeavors was laid (И. Галчев (1994): 9).

In 1871, the Exarchate's Constitution was endorsed, which represented the constitution of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The constitution concurrently delineated the territorial-administrative partition and governing entities. On September 16, 1872, the Istanbul Patriarchate proclaimed the schism and anathematized the Bulgarian Exarchate. The schism put the Bulgarian Exarchate in a precarious position, chiefly because it exacerbated the Bulgarian – Greek ecclesiastical conflict, which evolved into a national dispute between the Bulgarians and Greeks. The Patriarchate in Serbia aligned with the Istanbul Patriarchate in Istanbul (Национално освободително движење на македонските и тракииските бугари 1878-1944, III (1997): 80-82).

In his memoirs, Sultan Abdul Hamid concedes that the High Porte committed a grave error by failing to prevent the fragmentation of the Orthodox Church. He remarked that this exarchate might also be viewed as

the genesis of the Bulgarian national movement. The Archbishoprics of Ohrid and Skopje turned into hotspots of Bulgarian propaganda. The High Porte committed a misstep by granting the Bulgarians more benefits than necessary, as the Bulgarian schools, established through these privileges, became our chief enemies (Sulltan Abdylhamiti (2010): 152-158).

According to the historiography of Skopje, the Bulgarian Exarchate persistently endeavored to obstruct national development through its educational initiatives. With its extensive and organized network of churches and schools, through Bulgarian priests and teachers who preached and taught in the Bulgarian language, they sought to sow Bulgarian national consciousness (М. Миноски (2008): 94).

With regards to the Ottoman administration, subsequent to the acceptance of the Bulgarian Exarchate as a “Bulgarian religion”, it was compelled to recognize the Bulgarian ethnicity within the Ottoman Empire. This was utilized by the Exarchate, which provided Bulgarian teaching-belief and the Slavic mass to the Slavic population in Macedonia, while also establishing Bulgarian schools and even issuing a seal, and at the same time, the status of an officially recognized nationality [М. Пандевски (1986): 53].

After to the Russo-Ottoman war (1877-1878), the initial task of the Exarchate in Macedonia was to rehabilitate its deteriorated infrastructure and thereby contribute to the reconstitution of ecclesiastical - educational municipalities.

The second task of the Exarchate was to eliminate and ultimately and surreptitiously obliterate the revolutionary movement. The third task of the exarchs’ propaganda in Macedonia was to defend the acquired positions from other propaganda - especially from the Greek one, which had powerful financial means and many years of tradition, and the Serbian one - which operated covertly behind the shared Slavic origin and national proximity, as well as to strengthen those positions on account of these propagandas [М. Пандевски (1962): 11-16].

Throughout the period of 1870-1913, the Bulgarian Exarchate established 22 dioceses in Macedonia and Thrace and another 11 in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Exarchate dioceses in the Ottoman Empire territory drew in the majority of Bulgarians residing in Macedonia and Thrace (И. Галчев (1994): 10).

The insufficiency of priests was one of the enduring problems that the Bulgarian Exarchate faced. To train its clergy, the Exarchate ran two priest schools, located in Edirne and Skopje, as well as a high religious school in Istanbul (Национално освободително движење на македонските и тракиските булгари 1878-1944, III (1997): 85).

### **The resistance of the Christian population in Macedonia to the policy of the Bulgarian Exarchate**

The Exarchate was able to gain control of the ecclesiastical municipalities due to favorable internal political, social, and economic conditions in Macedonia. The local population, faced with the choice between the Exarchate and the Patriarchate, respectively Catholicism and Protestantism, showed a preference for the Slavic Exarchate. This enabled the Exarchs’ officials to easily assume leadership positions of authority in the ecclesiastical municipalities. The Exarchate later initiated the centralization of power in the municipalities and their total submission (С. Димевски (1961): 183-184).

It intervened in the appointment of mayors and staff, which led to dissatisfaction and protests from the local population. Therefore, around 1890, a movement emerged in Macedonia against the Exarchate’s aspirations to independently govern church and school matters throughout the country (Д. Митрев (1970): 9-13).

Several ecclesiastical- educational municipalities were struggling to reclaim their lost powers in the recent times. This was the case with the ecclesiastical- educational municipalities of Thessaloniki, Veles, Shtip, Ohrid, and a few others, which opposed the Exarchate’s interference in the appointment and dismissal of teachers. The dissatisfaction with the exarchist ecclesiastical-educational policy turned into a widespread resistance against the Exarchate in “all areas”.

In addition to the ecclesiastical-educational municipalities, the Macedonian intelligentsia also waged a war with the educational-exarchist policy, implemented in schools. The formation of revolutionary circles among students was initiated by former teachers, led by Trajko Kitancev. Gjorche Petrov and Pere Toshev were among those who became members of these circles (С. Димевски (1961): 185-187).

A significant portion of the Macedonian intellectual elite became conscious that the Bulgarian state and the Exarchate were deploying "Bulgarians to Macedonia to turn the Macedonian Slavs into Bulgarians" (К. Битоски (1977): 13-14).

This peril was also perceived by Krste P. Misirkov, who argued that while religious convictions and requirements were unquestionable, religion should never be means for delinquent politics and national purposes, as was happening in Macedonia at that time. Orthodoxy in Macedonia, right now, is suffocated, and one can't talk about an Orthodox church - now there are three churches, but not Orthodox, but Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian. The Church must be Unique, Unifying, Enlightened and Apostolic. The church in our country has lost its main purpose, that is why it must be eliminated (К. П. Мисирков (1980): 67-68).

The recovery of the Archbishopric of Ohrid was opposed by both Orthodox churches. The Exarchate, backed by Russian consuls, took action to obstruct the negotiations in Istanbul, a task carried out by Naum Spostranov and Metodija Kusevic, both of Macedonian origin. They presented the request for the recovery of the Archbishopric of Ohrid as a protest, due to the disapproval of the appointment of Exarchist bishops in Macedonia. The Patriarchate of Istanbul was willing to lift the anathema and recognize the Bulgarian Exarchate as a legitimate canonical church, provided that it was limited to the territory of the Bulgarian Principality. However, the Bulgarian Exarchate refused this offer since it was determined, even if it meant being considered as a schismatic church, to maintain its presence in Macedonia. After this, the movement to recover the Archbishopric of Ohrid gradually faded and lost its political significance. (М. Миноски (2008): 97; С. Димевски (1961): 182).

The arrival of Metropolitan Teodosij Gologanov in Skopje in the summer of 1890 marked the beginning of a strong anti-exarchate movement. He became independent in the bishopric of Skopje, brought new rules and by the end of the year removed the entire exarchist apparatus, replacing them with supporters of the recovery of the Archbishopric of Ohrid. He called upon all the priests to rally the people in order to overthrow the foreign church authorities. He initiated negotiations with the Istanbul Patriarchate, which opposed the recovery of the Ohrid Archbishopric. He sought assistance from the Vatican, but the latter was indifferent to resolving this matter (М. Миноски (2008): 99-100).

The governments of the Balkan states, namely Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece, also opposed the initiative of Teodosij Gologanov. Eventually, the Skopje Metropolitan was detained by the Ottoman authorities, who then turned him over to the Bulgarian Exarchate, which dismissed him from office and exiled him in solitary confinement (М. Миноски (2008): 101-102).

### **The official attitude of the Exarchate to the VMORO activity after Ilinden**

What the Exarchate failed to achieve in terms of countering foreign propaganda was compensated for by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). However, complete reconciliation between these two entities was never reached. The idea of evolution, as evidenced by the educational and religious endeavors of the Bulgarian Exarchate, undoubtedly clashed with the revolutionary ideas espoused by IMRO. In some cases, the Exarchate and IMRO attempted to improve their rapport, such as by appointing several exarchist educators from within IMRO's ranks. As a legal institution, the Exarchate shoulders the majority of the responsibility for its strained ties with IMRO (М. Миноски (2008): 87).

On the verge of the Ilinden Uprising, the Bulgarian exarch, Joseph, issued a circular stating that he acknowledged the difficult situation but he opposed armed actions and ordered the exarchist believers in Macedonia to refrain from any actions against the sultan and his administration. The Exarch backed

allegiance to the Sultan, and maintained that the Bulgarians could attain societal prosperity as a people, and gain benefits from the Sultan's privileges only through strenuous efforts and constant persistence within the framework of existing laws. Even during the Ilinden uprising, the Exarchate adhered to its pacifistic principles, and forbade its devoted adherents from joining or supporting it, which hampered the uprising and contributed to its defeat [А. Трајановски (1980): 48].

Following the Ilinden uprising, the Bulgarian Exarchate alleged that the Ottoman authorities exhibited bias in favor of the Greek Patriarchate and created daily obstacles to prevent its normal activity. Conversely, the Ottoman administration repudiated these claims and attributed them to Bulgarian propaganda, which purportedly coerced the Orthodox patriarchate community to submit to the Bulgarian Exarchate jurisdiction [МАКЕДОНИЈА- Сборник на документи и материали (1978): 501-502].

### **The number of believers and the budget of the Bulgarian Exarchate in Macedonia**

Regarding the number of Orthodox believers under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate in the territory of Macedonia, different researchers provide different data. Nevertheless, the number of exarchists, registered as Bulgarians was much higher than that of patriarchists, registered as Greeks.

The Greeks were listed in the statistical registrations based on their religious affiliation, not their language, while for most of the registered Bulgarians, race and nationality served as the criteria (И. Галчев (1994): 10-11).

As the Ottoman Empire did not acknowledge the particular Albanian nationality, and since Albanians adhered to three different religions, they constituted a substantial number of the Macedonian population.

Throughout the period of 1903-1913, the budget of the Bulgarian Exarchate experienced a steady increase, yet Bulgarian sources claim that it remained significantly smaller than the one of the Greek Patriarchate (Национално освободително движење на македонските и тракииските булгари 1878-1944, III (1997): 85).

Besides religious and educational activities, the Exarchate also dedicated considerable attention to healthcare and social endeavors in Macedonia. The Exarchate's social and health activities were undertaken for purely humanitarian and political-propaganda reasons. Given the pressing need for staff and medical services, the task was entrusted to the ecclesiastical municipalities, which repeatedly implored the Exarchate and the Bulgarian government for assistance through numerous letters. The Bulgarian exarch, Joseph, was personally involved in these efforts. Bulgarian commercial agents constantly reported on the social and healthcare needs of the population in Macedonia, claiming that the absence of Bulgarian physicians allowed rival propaganda to exploit the situation to the detriment of Bulgarian interests by deploying their personnel and healthcare services. The need for social and medical support was particularly felt in rural areas. To address these needs, the Exarchate established a special fund called the "Miscellaneous Income" (И. Галчев (1994): 25-34).

### **Conclusion**

The establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate, represents a highly significant occurrence in the Bulgarian national history. Through this action, the Bulgarian ethnicity was recognized, and the groundwork for national intellectual and educational endeavors was laid. After to the Russo-Ottoman war (1877-1878), the initial task of the Exarchate in Macedonia was to rehabilitate its deteriorated infrastructure and thereby contribute to the reconstitution of ecclesiastical - educational municipalities. The Exarchate was able to gain control of the ecclesiastical municipalities due to favorable internal political, social, and economic conditions in Macedonia. Throughout the period of 1903-1913, the budget of the Bulgarian Exarchate experienced a steady increase, yet Bulgarian sources claim that it remained significantly smaller than the one of the Greek Patriarchate.

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