

Macedonia



Stable / Unchanged —

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **63.8%**
- Muslims : **32.7%**
- Agnostics : **3.1%**
- Others : **0.4%**

2,081,000

25,713 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution defines Macedonia as a secular state, which guarantees freedom of religion to its citizens. Articles 9, 20, 48, 54 and 110 of the constitution^[1] regulate individual rights of freedom of religion. Article 19 grants collective rights to religious communities, provides for the separation between religious bodies and the state and allows for the establishment of religious educational institutions, social and charitable organisations.

In Macedonia, religious identity is almost equivalent to ethnic identity, which is why it is important to note the following ethnic groupings which are freely acknowledged by the individuals themselves: Macedonians 64.2 percent, Albanians 25.2 percent, Turks 3.9 percent, Roma 2.7 percent, Serbs 1.8 percent, Bosnians 0.8 percent, Vlachs 0.5 percent, other 1.0 percent (2002 census^[2]). The majority of Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers are ethnic Albanians and Turks.

The country's two major religions are Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Other groups include Roman Catholics, members of various Protestant denominations, and Jews.

Most Muslims live in the northern and western parts of the country, while the majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and south-eastern regions.

The largest Roma concentration is in the Skopje and Eastern regions. The Roma have the most severe level of poverty among all ethnic groups.

The state requires religious communities to register through the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups. The commission categorises the religious organisations into Churches, religious communities and religious groups. The law does not make any distinction in the legal status between these categories. All three categories are

treated the same way.^[3]

The first category, Churches, comprises 15 Christian religious groups, the most prominent being the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church. The others are very small Christian churches, both traditional and newly founded. The second category, religious communities, includes: the Islamic Community, the Jewish Community, Jehovah's Witnesses, Sathya Sai Centre, Vaishnavska Religious Community Iskon, Community Universal Life. The third category, religious groups, includes eight associations: six Christian and two Muslim. The Bektashi Community, an Islamic Sufi order, is also registered in this category.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is not mentioned in the register.

The law does not permit private religious primary schools but allows for private religious schools at the secondary level and above. The Ministry of Education requires fifth-grade students to take one of three elective courses: Introduction to Religions, Ethics in Religion, or Classical Culture in European Civilization.

There is no shortage of inter-faith discussions of importance to the religious communities.

The largest organised religious community in Macedonia is the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric (MPC-OA). By the end of the Second World War, a decision by the People's Liberation Front of Macedonia introduced the foundation of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in order to end the dispute between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BPC) and to grant Macedonian Slavic people a source of their own national identity.^[4]

Because of the MPC-OA's role in the country, it is note-worthy that in 1967 the Macedonian Church proclaimed its autocephaly. The Serbian Church bishops denounced the decision and condemned the clergy as schismatic. The autocephaly of the Macedonian Church is also not recognised by other canonical Orthodox churches. Three neighbouring Orthodox churches (the Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek churches) denied its autonomy, and even more its national prefix (Macedonian).

The Macedonian Orthodox Church celebrates its feasts according to the Julian calendar and services are held in Macedonian language. It has about 1,200 churches organised into 10 eparchies, whose bishops make up the Holy Synod of Bishops, headed by the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia. The Church numbers around 500 active priests in about 500 parishes. The Church claims jurisdiction over about 20 monasteries with more than 100 monks.

Islam was introduced into the area with the Ottoman conquest and the inflow of Turkish settlers in the 14th century. The great majority of Muslims in Macedonia follow Sunni Islam (in the Hanafi branch). There is a minority of adherents to the Bektashi order, which is a traditional dervish order. The Sunni group consists of Albanians, Turks, Roma, Muslim Macedonians and Bosnians. Since Albanians comprise the biggest Muslim group in Macedonia, they felt they should be the front-runners in the battle with the state for the equal status of Islam within the state.

The Islamic Community of Macedonia administers about 580 mosques across 13 muftiships. It is headed by the Reis-ul-ulema, Suleyman Rexhepi. The Reis-ululema is the Chief of the Islamic Scholars or the Grand Mufti of the Muslims in Macedonia. Prior to Macedonian independence, the Muslims of Macedonia fell under the jurisdiction of the Islamic Community of the Yugoslav Federation (Rijaset) with its headquarters in Sarajevo.^[5]

The small yet active Catholic community of Macedonia bears the legacy of St Cyril and St Methodius and of Mother Teresa, who was born and raised in Skopje.

The Catholic Church first appeared in Macedonia in 350. The Macedonian Byzantine Catholic Church was established in 1918. Currently, there are about 20,000 members.^[6] These Catholics belong to the Latin (Roman) and to the Eastern (Byzantine) Rites. Around 5,000 Macedonians are Roman Catholics and around 15,000 are Uniats (Eastern Rite Catholics). The Catholics in Macedonia are not homogeneous in ethnic terms. The Uniats are almost exclusively Macedonians, while the majority of the Roman Catholics are Croats, Albanians, Poles, Slovenes and Hungarians.

Both rites are united in Macedonia under the jurisdiction of Monsignor Kiro Stoyanov who has a bi-ritual function in his capacity as Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Skopje, and as Apostolic Exarch with full jurisdiction over the Uniats in Macedonia.

Uniats acknowledge the Pope in Rome as their highest spiritual leader. The distinction between Uniats and Orthodox Christians is only in terms of administrative subordination to different centres and not in terms of religious rituals.

There are around 30 missionaries of the male and female congregations from the Latin and the Eastern rites in Macedonia. The male orders are represented by a Lazarist brother from the order of St. Vincent of Paul of the Latin Rite. There are around 10 Eucharistine sisters of the Eastern Rite. The rest of the sisters belong to the Latin Rites orders of St Vincent de Paul, the Holy Cross and the Missionaries of Charity of Calcutta. There are 11 Catholic churches in Macedonia and 20 priests of both rites.

The Catholic Church in Macedonia enjoys good relations with the representatives of the two other main religions in the country. According to Monsignor Stojanov, the Catholic Church tries to help the Orthodox Christians and the Muslims in Macedonia reconcile their positions.

On 17th April 2017, the Primary Court Skopje officially recognised the Church of Scientology of Macedonia as a religious organisation. It ruled that all legal prerequisites were met according to the law on the legal status of churches, religious communities and religious groups of the Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia.

On 9th November 2017, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Ohrid Archbishopric sent a letter to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church with three requests or proposals:

- 1) Recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by other Eastern Orthodox Churches;
- 2) Recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church's autocephalous status; and
- 3) Readiness to recognise the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as the Macedonian Orthodox Church's mother Church.^[7]

The Serbian Orthodox Church expressed its strong disagreement with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's decision to present the case for the canonicity and autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to the other canonical local orthodox churches.^[8]

There is no progress regarding the 10-year dispute between the Catholic Church and the Macedonian state over the return of property in the village of Paljurci. The property was nationalised by former communist authorities. The local Catholic community wanted to use this property for the construction of a church and a monastery^[9]

| Incidents

There are no incidents to report in violation of freedom of religion. On 26th March 2016, the Skopje Court sentenced Rexhep Memishi, self-proclaimed imam in Tutunsus mosque in Skopje to seven years in prison for taking part in a paramilitary organisation and recruiting fighters who joined the war in Syria.^[10]

Prospects for freedom of religion

After Macedonia survived two very unstable political years, the Social Democrat-led government is now doing everything to transform Macedonia into the front-runner in the race for EU and NATO membership. The unresolved dispute with Greece over the Macedonian state's name got a significant positive boost at the beginning of 2018.

The fact that Macedonia received good reports for its reforms from Brussels, and is included again in the EU strategy of enlargement for the western Balkans, has raised the hope of the ordinary citizens for a better and more prosperous future. However, a long road to stability lies ahead. The fight against the infiltration of Islamist extremism and its dread of individual human rights is far from over;^[11] Macedonia will need the support of the religious communities, the EU and NATO to emerge as the victor.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Macedonia (Republic of)'s Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2011, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Macedonia_2011.pdf), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Macedonia_2011.pdf lang=en, (accessed 7th May 2018).

[2] The last attempt to hold a census in October 2011 was scrapped after it began due to ethnic disputes.

[3] Law on the Legal Status of Churches, Religious Communities and Religious Groups, Republic of Macedonia, <http://www.kovz.gov.mk/?ItemID=4217DECD98B0499FA343E2908C0385>, (accessed 25th April 2018).

[4] Julia Gerlach and Jochen Töpfer (eds), *The Role of Religion in Eastern Europe Today*, Berlin: SpringerVS, 2014

[5] Tome Vangelovski, *Macedonia, Ethno-Religious Conflict (1991 – 2016)*, Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, Australian National University, January 2017, <https://openresearch.repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/133295/1/VANGELOVSKI%20Thesis%202017.pdf>, (accessed 25th April 2018).

[6] Mons Kiro Stojanov interview in *Katolicki tjednik*

[7] Katerina Blaževska, 'MPC traži majku crkvu (Macedonia Orthodox Church Seeks Mother Church)', *Deutsche Welle*, 21st November 2017 <http://www.dw.com/sr/mpc-tra%C5%BEi-majku-crkvu/a-41465796>

[8] 'Orthodox Christianity Serbian Church Reportedly Bewildered By Decision Of Bulgarian Church Regarding Macedonian Church', *Orthodox Christianity*, 13th December 2017, <http://orthochristian.com/109158.html>

[9] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Macedonia', *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016*, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 25th April 2018).

[10] 'Imam Who Recruited Islamists Sentenced to Seven years in Prison, MMIA', *Macedonian Information Agency*, 25th March 2016, <https://www.mia.mk/en/Inside/RenderSingleNews/61/133097044>, (accessed 25th April 2018).

[11] Konstantin Testorides, 'Radical Islam on rise in Balkans', *Associated Press*, 19th September 2010