



## In Memoriam: Maxim, Patriarch of Three Eras



Patriarch Maxim is already part of history – not only the history of Bulgarian Orthodox Church, but of this society as a whole. He had become part of history long before passing on, and not only because of his longevity, but because of the many arguments that he engendered.

Patriarch Maxim was the last high-ranking member of the clergy to be a witness to and participant in three eras of the Bulgarian church. In 1944, he was a 30-year-old monk; in 1971, after a long tenure as a metropolitan, he was elected patriarch at the age of 56; he greeted the changes of 1989 at the venerable age of 75.

Through these 41 years of service as patriarch, he led the church through the atheist propaganda of the communist regime and the tempestuous years of political transition and church schism. After being subject to public insults and slander, he lived to see people refer to him as “grandfather Maxim” and the members of the Holy Synod of Bulgarian Orthodox Church hiding behind his authority.

He lived to be venerated as a patriarch not only in the literal sense, but figuratively. Like any person who lived in controversial times, he will be judged through the lens of how people view an era. And his successor, for better or worse, will be compared to him.



Why did so many people, especially the rulers of the day, not love him? Why did he polarise opinion so much? Often described as a weak man as a patriarch, relatively invisible in public life (even suspected of close ties with the communist regime), many believe that he did not manage to satisfy public expectations regarding him and his office.

The main reason is that he was not a politician. From a layman's view, the Patriarch might have looked exactly like that – weak and distant from his flock. The communist regime did a lot of damage to the church life, but its most intractable inheritance is that it tried to turn the church into a means, an instrument.

Depending on their own bias, everyone expected the church and its patriarch to be an instrument – for “defending Bulgarian identity and culture”, for “maintaining morality”, for carrying out a social mission or something else. Few looked at the church as a goal or a path in itself, but the Patriarch was one of them. From a layman's point of view, that made him look weak, but that was the source of his strength from the church's point of view.

Perhaps that is the best way to sum up his service – his success in turning weakness into strength. The major success that no one can take away is that he managed to maintain the unity of the church, which was tested not just during the years of the schism, but during the communist era as well.

Patriarch Maxim failed to meet another public expectation – that the Bulgarian patriarch should be should resemble the Roman Catholic Pope, or at least the Russian Patriarch, in ruling his church nearly autocratically, consulting the Holy Synod, but imposing his opinion in it.

However, the statute of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, as well as Eastern orthodox tradition, maintains that the Patriarch is merely the first among the bishops, who are equal to him, and has almost no administrative power over the other metropolitans. The real power in the church belongs to the Holy Synod, made up of the metropolitans in charge of their respective dioceses.

His path before the patriarch elections in 1971 is well known. Born in 1914 with the lay name Marin Naidenov Minkov, Maxim graduated from Sofia Seminary in 1935 and received his degree in theology from Sofia University in 1942. He was tonsured a monk in 1941 and, over the next decades, would advance to the highest ranks of the clergy.

His spiritual path is linked to the Troyan Monastery, the abbot of which, Kliment, would encourage him to further his education. The Metropolitan of Vratsa, Paisii, guided him towards monkhood and became his spiritual mentor.

In 1950, as Archmandrite Maxim, he became the representative of the Bulgarian church at the Moscow patriarchate. At that point, the communist regime described him as “reliable and with progressive views”, but, more important is his “provenance from a poor rural family”.

He returned to Bulgaria in 1955 and a year later was ordained bishop of Branichevo, serving as chief secretary of the Holy Synod until 1960, a position in which he witnessed the last days of the former Exarch Stefan, who died incarcerated in 1957. In 1960, he was picked as the next Metropolitan of Lovech, becoming only the second metropolitan appointed during the communist regime (unless one counts the



ordination of Nikodim, Metropolitan of Sliven, in 1947). The first was Pimen, Metropolitan of Nevrokop, chosen in 1952 and confirmed after protracted debates in the Synod. Already then the difference between Maxim and Pimen could be seen – the former avoiding confrontation and public rows, the latter does not.

Patriarch Kiril died on March 7 1971, at a time when the public influence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church already had been traduced to its lowest. Since 1965, militia cordons had been surrounding churches on Easter and, in the early 1970s, a new campaign was gaining momentum to impose civil rites, meant to build a system that would have had no ties to the religious holidays. Churches and monasteries were turned – visibly or symbolically – into monuments of culture.

Despite that, some state institutions insisted that the Church was too successful in rebuilding its authority and improving its finances – data was cited concerning the rising sales of candles and the increased number of religious services. Statistics show that 80 per cent of all burials were carried out using church rites, including for deceased members of the communist party.

The thesis of an increasingly active church was put forward by the Interior Ministry, specifically by State Security, which demanded stronger administrative repression of the rank-and-file priesthood. It was opposed by the Committee on church issues, whose long-serving chairman Mihail Kyuchoukov argued that repression risked alienating a certain part of the country's population.

The decision to appoint Maxim as Patriarch was taken by the Politburo a day after Kiril's death – “to propose and support as head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church the Metropolitan of Lovech Maxim”. The proposal came from Kyuchoukov and, at first glance, it was a mere formality. But it caused a debate that would leave its mark on Maxim's entire tenure.

Three respected members of the Synod signed a special opinion asking that the election of the patriarch be postponed until elections were held for the entire church pyramid – the parish electors who voted for the members of the patriarch election council in 1971 were illegitimate, which made all metropolitans elected after 1955 similarly so, when the terms of the last elected parish electors expired.

The request was not realistic – this could have led to the renewal of church life, something that the Bulgarian Communist Party did not wish. The same year, in 1971, the new Zhivkov constitution was up for plebiscite, to be followed by nationwide elections – holding legitimate church elections was seen as a provocation. On July 4 1971, the patriarch electoral council enthroned the Metropolitan of Lovech Maxim as Patriarch.

In the years of Patriarch Kiril's service, the communist regime wanted a strong patriarch, to hold him responsible for the state of the church. Initially, it appeared as if the same approach would be used with the new patriarch, but this opinion would change rapidly. Centrifugal forces took over church life almost immediately after Maxim was elected; by the mid-1970s it became clear that the regime preferred to push its policy through other favourites who could impose their opinion in the Holy Synod, ignoring the opinions of the head of the church.

An evaluation of the relationship between the Patriarch and the communist regime will always remain ambiguous. On one hand, it is clear that Maxim was never a dissident in the strictly political sense of the



word – he did not succeed in stopping the state atheist campaign, oppose the imposition of civil rites, defend the rank-and-file clergy from the administrative abuse of local authorities.

But he also accomplished small victories in his struggle to keep church life going, which no one can take away from him. In 1978, during one of his rare meetings with Todor Zhivkov, he saved from demolition the St Ivan Rilski church in Pernik. Shortly before that, he made the famous trip to the US – the other members of the delegation were State Security agents, who on return prepared a special report that starts as follows: “Given the particular importance of the mission (...), we believe necessary, led by our sense of patriotic duty, to share in strict confidence some constataions...”

In the early 1980s, he successfully lobbied for a new edition of the Bible, but neither the Patriarch, nor the Synod could influence the size of the print run or distribution, which were fully controlled by the communist regime.

The issue of the legitimacy of his election is raised again in 1992, when several metropolitans once again challenged his election and set up the so-called “alternative Synod”, leading to the schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. During the years of the schism, much was written about Patriarch Maxim’s ties to State Security, resulting in many insulting epithets being directed at his address. So much has been written, in fact, that to this day many people cannot believe the Dossier Commission, which in January 12 made public the names of 11 out of 15 current metropolitans who collaborated with the State Security. The Patriarch was not one of them.

Overcoming the schism and, more importantly, the wounds it caused, was Patriarch Maxim’s greatest achievement. Maintaining the unity of the church was possible precisely because of his patience and unwillingness to take autocratic decisions. Always careful, ready to co-ordinate each difficult decision with the Synod, during his service, the metropolitans have once again become the fulcrum of church policy – something that has its positive and negative sides. But that was the price of maintaining church unity and that is the inheritance he passes on to his successor.

In evaluating the personality of Patriarch Maxim, one has to take into account some clearly visible, but often discounted, circumstances. The first and least important is his longevity. Born during World War 1, he was witness to the church battles during World War 2 and the early years of the communist regime – it is highly likely that he realised how transitory and impermanent political regimes are, unlike many of his contemporaries, both inside the church and outside it.

The other, more important circumstance is that he was a monk first, and that was reflected in his modest way of living. Indeed, these are qualities expected from the Bulgarian Patriarch and other high members of the clergy, although lately we have started to realise how rarely that is the case.

We can imagine how quickly a patriarch could find himself at the centre of state policy, surrounded by rich “helpers” who would defend him from public criticism. The personal example of Patriarch Maxim was precisely in his refusal to adopt the visible trappings of power, an example that some metropolitans did not follow, as the “archons” row showed.

But he is unlikely to be remembered for his modesty and monastic virtue. These are qualities that can be appreciated only when they are absent. Like any historical personality that lived in times of controversy



and tension, his evaluation depends on the bias that people have towards the entire era. And our era is not biased towards God, unlike Patriarch Maxim.

*Source:* [Sofia Globe](#)