
THOUSANDS OF MONTENEGRO WOMEN PROTEST WELFARE CUTS

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Several thousand women demonstrated in Montenegro's capital Podgorica on Thursday to protest cuts in subsidies for mothers with three or more children.

The protesters came from across Montenegro to gather in front of the main government offices, demanding to meet with Prime Minister Dusko Markovic.

At one point they broke through a metal fence to approach the heavily guarded entrance. The women later vowed to spend the night outside the offices.

"We do not want riots, we want to wait peacefully... that someone from the government addresses us," said Zeljka Savkovic, one of the demonstrators.

The government introduced the lifetime subsidies last October, but as of January 1 they have been cut by about 25 percent as Montenegro grapples with worsening public finances.

About 18,500 women are eligible for the monthly payments, which are expected to cost the government some 67 million euros (\$71 million) a year.

The reductions drew widespread criticism and the payments now range from 144 to 264 euros a month, in a country where the average monthly salary is 500 euros.

Banners at the rally included slogans such as "We demand responsibility" and "Mothers for their children, for future, for justice".

Montenegro, which is seeking to join NATO and is a candidate for EU membership, is under pressure to improve its finances, with public debt standing at 62 percent of GDP. It is struggling with more than 20 percent unemployment.

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