
SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH URGES MONTENEGRO TO SCRAP PROPERTY BILL

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Thousands of people joined an open-air council of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Podgorica on Saturday, accusing the Montenegrin government of trying to steal its church property through a draft law on religious freedom.

Last month the government introduced the draft law under which all religious facilities owned by Montenegro before 1918, when it lost its independence, would become state property.

Religious communities would only be able to retain ownership of their property if they could provide clear evidence of ownership prior to that date.

The draft law has sparked accusations from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), the largest religious community in the Balkans nation, that the government wants to seize the Church's property.

On Saturday, at the open-air council in front of the main Orthodox church in the capital Podgorica, Bishop Joanikije read a statement labelling the draft bill as "anti-religious" and "preparation for the looting of Church property".

It is aimed "against the Orthodox Church, its priests, bishops, nuns and believers", the statement said, urging the Montenegrin government to withdraw it and draft a new version.

The current bill "deepens divisions ... and incites conflicts on religious and ethnic grounds", the statement said.

Nearly 72 percent of Montenegro's population of 620,000 are Orthodox faithful.

Ethnic Serbs make 29 percent of Montenegro's population, according to 2011 census.

Earlier this month President Milo Djukanovic accused the SPC of trying to "maintain its religious monopoly" in the country and announced the "renewal" of an independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

This Montenegrin church is not recognised by the Serbian or other Orthodox churches.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has added his voice to the chorus calling on the Montenegrin authorities to withdraw the bill.

But the Montenegrin government replied it would not allow "anyone, Serbia included, to influence

our decisions".

Montenegro proclaimed independence from Serbia in 2006.

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190615-serbian-orthodox-church-urges-montenegro-scrap-property-bill>

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