
SERBIAN PRESIDENT CANCELS VISIT TO MONTENEGRO AMID RELIGIOUS DISPUTE

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Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has canceled a visit to Montenegro amid a dispute over a new Montenegrin religious-rights law.

"I decided not to go, and that was agreed with [Serbian Patriarch] Irinej," Vucic said Saturday at a news conference in Belgrade. "We respect their independence."

Vucic had been planning to visit Serbian churches in Montenegro on Orthodox Christmas, which is celebrated January 7. Montenegrin officials had said the visit would add fuel to the existing tensions in the small Balkan state.

Last month, Montenegro's parliament passed a law under which religious communities must prove property ownership from before 1918, the year when predominantly Orthodox Christian Montenegro joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Serbs say the new law will lead to the impounding of Serbian Orthodox Church property in Montenegro. Montenegrin officials have repeatedly denied the claim.

In 2006, Montenegro split from much larger Serbia following a referendum. About one-third of the small Balkan country's 620,000 citizens declared themselves Serbs and want close ties with Belgrade.

On Saturday, Vucic also accused Montenegrin and unspecified Western officials of launching "a hysteric campaign of lies" when he announced the visit.

He said he canceled it because of possible "clashes" that would "hurt the Serbian people in Montenegro."

Read more at: <https://www.voanews.com/europe/serbian-president-cancels-visit-montenegro-amid-religious-dispute>

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