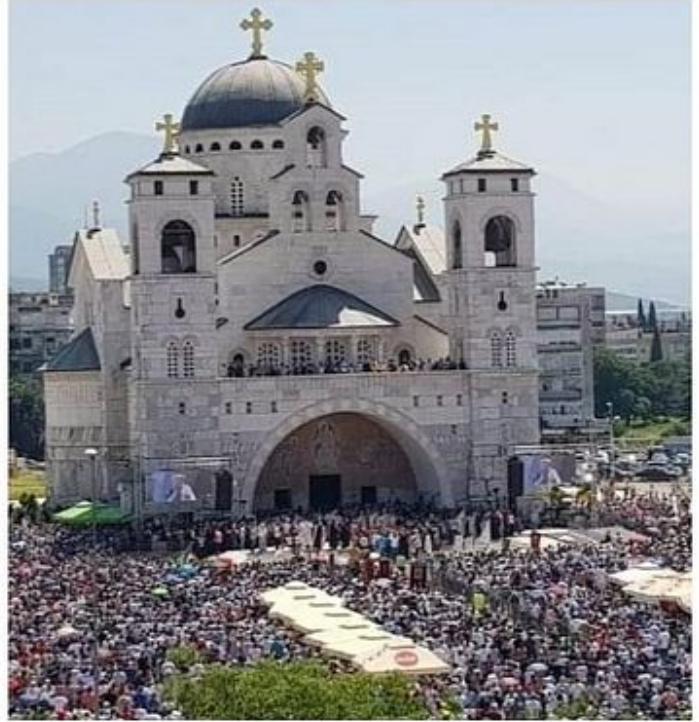


MONTENEGRO MOVING AHEAD WITH CONTROVERSIAL LAW CONCERNING RELIGIOUS PROPERTY



The Montenegrin government submitted its controversial bill on religious freedom on Thursday, December 5 for consideration by the nation's Parliament despite opposition by the Serbian Orthodox Church and threats of social unrest, reports Balkan Insight.

The bill proposes to register as state property all religious buildings and sites formerly owned by the Kingdom of Montenegro before it became part of Yugoslavia in the early 20th century. The Serbian Church, the majority religious institution in Montenegro, has been sounding the alarm since the original draft saw the light of day in May, warning that the law is intended to seize property from the Church.

The law will now be sent to Parliament for consideration at a special session later this month. Pro-Serbian politicians have warned of mass protests against the law. The site of the Serbian Church's Metropolis of Montenegro notes that about 100,000 citizens have signed a protest against the draft law, and thus the state is demonstrating that it does not protect the will of its citizens.

The state favors the miniscule and schismatic “Montenegrin Orthodox Church” and has subjected the canonical Serbian Church to other forms of persecution, considering it hostile to the country’s independence.

However, Justice Minister Zoran Pazin commented that the law aims at protecting the nation’s cultural property, not seizing churches.

“The government does not intend to enter churches, nor does it intend to prevent anyone from enjoying their religious rights in these buildings,” he said, adding that he expects the Serbian Church to take part in the legal discussions on the issue.

The original draft was returned for revision in June after Serbian hierarchs said they would defend Church property with their lives, if need be. In October, Prime Minister Duško Marković said the government was prepared to propose the law with or without the Church’s approval.

According to Fr. Velibor Dzomic, the government ignored the Church’s suggestions and observations submitted via its legal counsel on November 27. The Church simply never received a response.

Thousands of Orthodox faithful flocked to the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of the Resurrection in Podgorica in June to show their support for the rights of the canonical Serbian Church and to pray to God to help protect the Church there.

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