

Serbian Church to Rally in Montenegro Against Property Law



Thousands of supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro are expected to attend a protest rally on Saturday in Niksic against what the church calls a plot to rob it of its property.

Tensions in Montenegro could be heightened after the Serbian Orthodox Church holds an assembly and a protest rally in Niksic on Saturday against a controversial new law on religion.

Clergy led by Metropolitan Amfilohije announced that they would expose the relics of a revered saint, St Basil of Ostrog, at the assembly, while calling again on the government to withdraw the controversial law.

The Church has said it expects tens of thousands of supporters to attend the rally in Niksic held after the service.

Bishop Amfilohije earlier told a TV station in Bosnia that civil war could break out in Montenegro if the law is passed. "A civil war could happen ... People will not allow churches in Montenegro to be stolen and desecrated," he told FTV on December 11.

The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, on Wednesday urged the Montenegrin government to withdraw the law, claiming it was trying to rob the Serbian Church in the country of than 650 churches.

“They should give up passing the law ... We hope and pray that they give up and that our saints will not be endangered,” Irinej told the daily *Kurir*.

However, Montenegrin Prime Minister Dusko Markovic said on Wednesday that he would not withdraw the law, and that the government was behind its proposal. In parliament, he insisted that the law was not directed against the Serbian Church.

“Why is it not a problem that the St Sava Church [in Belgrade] is owned by the state of Serbia? Why should the Ostrog Monastery [in Montenegro] be owned by the Serbian Patriarchate ... We have to put this in order,” Markovic said.

The main area of contention in the law is the proposal to register as state property of all religious buildings and sites formerly owned by the independent kingdom of Montenegro before it became part of the Serb-dominated Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later called Yugoslavia, in 1918.

The law states that religious communities can only retain their assets if they can produce evidence of the right to ownership, triggering accusations from the Serbian Church that the government plans to dispute its holdings.

The government proposed the law in May after consulting the Venice Commission – the advisory body to the Council of Europe – and, it claimed, some Serbian Church representatives. The Venice Commission welcomed the law in principle but called for more clarity and consultation.

It was returned for revision in June after Serbian bishops said at an emergency Church council held in the capital, Podgorica, that they would defend their Church’s property with their lives.

Although Amfilohije and Markovic said after a meeting in September that they expected a compromise, Markovic later told the public broadcaster in October that the government was ready to propose the law, whether or not it got Church approval. He also said that he would be in parliament on December 24 for the debate on the law.

In June, media reported that the head of the global Orthodox communion, Patriarch

Bartholomew of Constantinople, had written to Montenegro's President, Milo Djukanovic, demanding that the law be withdrawn.

In July, the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church called on the Montenegrin authorities to "abandon the [planned] appropriation of Church property".

Relations between the largest denomination in multi-ethnic Montenegro and the pro-Western government have always been poor. The government considers the Church hostile to the country's independence, and generally too pro-Serbian and pro-Russian.

The Church accuses the government of routinely trying to undermine it and strip the country of its Serbian heritage.

— Source: balkaninsight.com