

Freedom to plunder? Russian Church slams contentious religious law approved in Montenegro



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Montenegro's law on religious freedom, which gives the go-ahead for the seizure of the Serbian Orthodox Church's property, is a below-the-belt strike against the church, enabling a dangerous rift, the Russian Orthodox Church said in a statement posted on the Moscow Patriarchate's website on Monday.

Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic earlier signed the law on freedom of religion approved by the parliament, which infringes upon the interests of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The legislation endorses the seizure of church property from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The issue at hand is more than 650 holy sites, including

the renowned Ostrog Monastery.

“A crusade to question the legitimacy of religious organizations’ rights to their property after many years of being under the thumb of an atheist regime and having suffered the denial of any legal rights, now looks like a below-the-belt blow to the church, which has been restoring what was stripped of it during those years of repression. The new law on religious freedom is an act of encouraging a schism by weakening the canonical church and an attempt to make it dependent on the state, which is both humiliating and dangerous. This is even more unjust, because Montenegro is a secular state. While arbitrarily and illegally encroaching upon the canonical law sphere, the country’s authorities deny the clear and easily verifiable continuity of the canonical church, by insisting on its re-registration, which takes the church beyond the legal framework and exposes it to the impact of aggressive nationalism,” the statement reads.

The Russian Orthodox Church compared the situation in Montenegro with Ukraine, where laws on seizing churches and monasteries from the property of the canonical church had been passed as well. “Both countries passed discriminatory laws, which laid the legal groundwork for seizing churches, monasteries and land from the church. In Montenegro, fringe elements backed by the authorities have been trying to seize the canonical church’s cathedrals for many years, just like in Ukraine,” the church stressed.

It also called on all Local Orthodox Churches to support the canonical church in Montenegro. “None of us should view the danger looming over it as something distant and alien. What they are trying to impose on believers in Montenegro today can happen to any church tomorrow. We urge the international community to prevent the rights of religious communities in Montenegro from being trampled upon. <...> It is apparent that this legislative act ignores the will of a considerable part of the country’s population,” the statement reads.

On December 27, Montenegro’s legislature passed a controversial law on freedom of religion and the legal status of religious communities amid mass protests throughout the country. Forty-five out of 45 lawmakers present voted for the law. No one voted against or abstained, since the bill was considered after the police had detained all opposition MPs. Huge protests were held in several cities in Montenegro against the new legislation. The Serbian Orthodox Church said that it was aimed at seizing its property in Montenegro.

— Source: tass.com