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Serbian Church, Montenegro Govt to Discuss Disputed Religion Law



The Serbian Orthodox Church argued that a controversial law on religion which has sparked angry demonstrations should be suspended during negotiations with the government.

Ahead of the start of talks between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin government on Wednesday, the church called on the authorities to halt the implementation of the law on religion, which it strongly opposes.

The dispute centres on the Freedom of Religion law's call for the creation of a register of all religious buildings and sites that authorities say were owned by the independent kingdom of Montenegro before it became part of the Serb-dominated Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, later renamed Yugoslavia.

Under the law, religious organisations must provide clear evidence of ownership in order to retain their properties, a provision that the Serbian Orthodox Church – the largest faith group in the country – says is designed to strip it of its holdings.

The Serbian Orthodox Church's legal team coordinator, Velibor Domic, accused the

authorities of starting to compile the controversial register of church properties even before the talks had begun.

“I think it is not a good idea for the Real Estate Directorate, at such a sensitive moment, to go ahead with the initiation of procedures for listing the property,” Domic told a press conference on Tuesday.

On Saturday, the director of Montenegro’s Real Estate Directorate, Dragan Kovacevic, said that by the end of this week, he will submit to the Property Directorate all the information about religious buildings in Montenegro.

He told Dnevne novine that most of the documents have already been submitted and that data was awaited from Podgorica, Herceg Novi, Kotor and Pluzine.

The new law gives the Property Directorate until January 8, 2021 to compile a register of all religious sites in the country.

Once the register is complete, the Property Directorate can submit requests to register some of these objects as state property if faith groups cannot prove that they own them.

The Serbian Orthodox Church – whose relations with the government are poor – claims this could allow the state to rob it of its holdings.

Tens of thousands of Serbian Orthodox Church clergy, believers and supporters have been protesting twice a week since December to demand the withdrawal of the disputed law.

Opposition pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political movements have been regular participants at the rallies and marches.

> Legal experts of the Government of Montenegro and the Episcopal Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro have started talks about Law of Freedom of Religion. The Government is strongly committed to this dialog for the benefit of all the citizens of Montenegro. pic.twitter.com/CLSjNe0qkp
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> — Govt. of Montenegro (@MeGovernment) March 11, 2020

— Source: balkaninsight.com