

Montenegro President Rebuffs Serbian 'Church Property Theft' Claim



President Milo Djukanovic rejected calls to scrap a draft law that includes a register of religious buildings owned by Montenegro before 1918, which the Serbian Orthodox Church claims is a pretext for disputing its property holdings.

President Milo Djukanovic said on Monday that he will not allow anyone to take away what belongs to Montenegro and warned of what he called “external” interference in the country’s affairs.

Djukanovic insisted that the new draft law on freedom of religion was not intended to baselessly take away anyone’s property.

“There is no intention from Montenegro to take away a metre of space from anyone, but [the country] also does not intend to let anyone steal what is state property,” Djukanovic said at a party meeting of his ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS in the northern town of Berane.

The Montenegro government adopted a religious freedom draft law on May 16 that includes a register 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 in 1918.

The new law states that religious communities can only retain ownership of their property if they have clear evidence of ownership, triggering accusations from the Serbian Orthodox Church that the government plans to dispute its holdings.

The leading Serbian Orthodox bishop in Montenegro, Amfilohije Radovic, summoned a church council on June 15 in Podgorica to protest against what he called government interference in the church and the new law.

Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Irinej warned President Djukanovic that his actions might lead to a formal curse, or anathema, being declared.

But Djukanovic said that Montenegro is determined to establish the rule of law.

“Today is the time to realise that, if someone wears a suit or [Orthodox] vestments, they must be equally accountable to the state of Montenegro. We must send them a warning that this is the last moment to understand this, so that they do not lead us to an unpleasant situation,” he said.

On June 8, Djukanovic accused the Serbian Orthodox Church of trying to maintain its religious monopoly in the country and promised the “renewal” of an independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

“The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is trying to maintain the infrastructure of a Greater Serbia, in which it believes,” he said. Serbian news agency Tanjug announced that the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church will meet on June 26 in Belgrade to discuss the Montenegrin draft law and “plan steps for the protection of church property”.

Media in Serbia have accused the government of Montenegro of planning to “rob” the Serbian Orthodox Church of its assets, while Serbian officials have warned that the proposed law on church property will worsen diplomatic relations.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is the largest denomination in multi-ethnic Montenegro, but its relations with the country’s pro-Western government have always been poor. The government considers the church hostile to the independence of the country, 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