

Church Protests in Montenegro

– Key Facts

USF.NEWS- BULGARIA (27.01.2020) – <http://bit.ly/2tNP3e2> – Large-scale protests, as well as some road blocks, began after the Montenegrin parliament adopted the law on December 27, 2019.

As lawmakers considered the bill, police shut down central Podgorica and halted a column of protesters headed by bishops and priests of the SPC; they instead held an open-air liturgy, denouncing the legislation.

People took to the streets in several other cities and towns in support of the Podgorica protest and some roads were blocked. Some towns saw unrest, with police using pepper spray to disperse crowds and arresting dozens.

The law envisages a register of all religious objects and sites that authorities say were the property of 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 communities will have to provide clear evidence of ownership in order to retain their property, a provision that the SPC says is designed to allow the government to strip it of its holdings. The government denies harbouring any designs on Church assets.

Following adoption of the law, the SPC continued to lead daily protest marches, in Podgorica, Bar, Niksic, Berane, Bijelo Polje, Andrijevica, Herceg Novi, Danilovgrad, Pluzine and Zabljak.

After Orthodox Christmas on January 7, the protests became twice weekly, on Thursdays and Sundays. The SPC says some

50,000 people are taking part, in a country of just 650,000.

Who are the organisers?

Clergy of the SPC in Montenegro – led by Metropolitan Amfilohije – are organising the protests. National flags or those of political parties are notably absent.

Those attending sing church songs and chant, ‘We will not give you holy places’. Each protest begins with a prayer in the local church and end in a speech by the priest or bishop leading it. There are no overtly political speeches.

What is the role of opposition parties?

Pro-Serbian opposition parties in Montenegro have called on their supporters to participate, but party leaders say they themselves are not involved in organising the protests.

Representatives of the Democratic Front, Democratic Montenegro, Socialist People’s Party, United Montenegro and Pravedna have been seen at the protests but have on the whole avoided public statements during the marches.

On the day of the vote in parliament, MPs of the main opposition Democratic Front charged towards the speaker of the parliament, some shouting that they were “ready to die” for the Church. Police intervened, after which the assembly voted to approve the bill.

A total of 22 people were detained over the incident, including 18 Democratic Front lawmakers, 15 of whom were later released.

Who is supporting the protests?

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and the government led by his Progressive Party have spoken out in support of the protests in neighbouring Montenegro, while Vucic has called for dialogue between the SPC and the government in Podgorica.

The issue was discussed during a meeting between Vucic and his Montenegrin counterpart, Milo Djukanovic, on the sidelines of the World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem on January 22.

In Belgrade, SPC Patriarch Irinej has called on the Montenegrin government to annul the law. Serbs in the Bosnian city of Banja Luka have also protested in solidarity with the SPC, while in Belgrade fans of the Red Star football club marched on the Montenegrin embassy and launched fireworks at the Montenegrin flag flying from the building.

The Night Wolves, a pro-Kremlin Russian bikers group, has also expressed support.