

Djukanovic: Montenegro must have its own church to resist interference from Serbia

Milo Djukanovic believes that Montenegro must have its own Orthodox Church in order to consolidate its national identity and oppose interference from Serbia.

World Remit (14.02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/20Xzvvh> – Djukanovic, who has been running the country for three decades, spoke about the controversial law on religious freedom, which triggered mass protests of the tens of thousands of believers who regularly take to the streets, a few months before the parliamentary elections in Montenegro.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), based in Belgrade, represents the vast majority of Orthodox believers in Montenegro. However, her relations with Djukanovic, who was an advocate of separation from Serbia in 2006, with whom Montenegro has been together for almost 90 years in 2006, have worsened in recent years.

The SPC is accused of being linked to the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian opposition to the ruling party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), headed by Milo Djukanovic, who has dominated political life in Montenegro since the 1990s.

According to him, Belgrade is using the SPC to interfere with Podgorica's internal affairs.

Djukanovic believes that SPC is one of "important instruments used by the ideologists of Greater Serbia nationalism against Montenegro, against its independence, its national, cultural and religious identity".

The law, passed in late December, provides for the state to take control of property that religious communities cannot prove to have belonged to them before 1918. That year, Montenegro lost its independence and integrated itself into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slavs.

The text of the law could refer to a large part of 650 churches and monasteries in Montenegro. The SPC accuses the government of wanting to confiscate her property, with mass prayers being held twice a week, and at these rallies, it is called for the law revocation.

“SPC uses a skillful form of manipulation to believe that the state wants to take away their holy sanctuaries,” Djukanovic said, adding that state-controlled churches would continue to receive Orthodox believers.

“It is a blackmail. The SPC is trying to use believers as a way of pressure on the state to give up the law, or to force it to capitulate. This is absolutely unacceptable”, the Montenegrin President said.

According to him, Montenegro should have its own church as a way of asserting its national identity 14 years after independence.

“We are driven by the indisputable need to improve spiritual, social and state infrastructure in order to strengthen citizens’ awareness of their identity,” he said, adding that there should be an autonomous Orthodox Church in Montenegro that would bring together all Orthodox believers, “the members of the Serbian, together with the members of the Montenegrin nationality”.

For 30 years, the small Orthodox Church of Montenegro, in the minority, has been trying to revive, but it has not been recognized in the Orthodox world. As parliamentary elections scheduled for fall are nearing, critics accuse Djukanovic of using this controversy to divert attention from economic

problems, mass emigration or corruption. Djukanovic, who has almost continuously changed his position from prime minister to president, has also been criticized for being an obstacle to democracy.

He responds that voters have always been free to express themselves and that his opponents are bad losers.

“My opponents are deceived if they think we will do them a favor and give them power without elections,” he said, adding that Montenegro, which has made the most progress in EU membership negotiations, will continue its path of reform.

“I think that we will be able to fulfill our commitments and that Montenegro will be able to join the EU in 2025,” he said, adding that the issue of the date of accession is not a priority, but to succeed in the Europeanization of Montenegrin society is among the priorities.

Montenegro is rethinking the Law on Freedom of Religion

According to daily “Vijesti”, the Government of Montenegro is ready to temporarily postpone the implementation of the Law on Freedom of Religion.

World Remit (07.02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2uRKfES> – EU Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi said that Montenegrin Prime Minister Dusko Markovic had informed him that the Government was ready to temporarily postpone the implementation of the Freedom of Religion Act.

Multiple sources confirmed to “Vijesti” that Várhelyi conveyed

this message at a meeting with the Montenegrin opposition.

Markovic allegedly offered to postpone the implementation of the Act until the Constitutional Court's decision, and in case the initiative of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral was rejected, until the decision of the Court in Strasbourg.

Unofficially, the government explained to "Vijesti" that this was a logical move, because the law is a *lex specialis* and that the constitutionality of the law is very important.

"Vijesti" has not yet received an answer to the questions formally referred to the government.

"Everything was said at the conference"

After Montenegrin media wrote that the European Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi had said at a meeting with the opposition that the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Dusko Markovic, had informed him that the government was ready to suspend the implementation of the Law on Religious Freedom, the Montenegrin government briefly replied to CdM that Markovic said everything he had on that subject, at the press conference.

At a press conference held earlier today, Markovic did not mention any possible delay in the implementation of this law.

"The Prime Minister said at a press conference what he had to say on the subject of your question", the government told CdM in response to a question whether there had been any discussions during the meeting between Markovic and Várhelyi regarding delaying implementation of the Law on Religious Freedom.