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Montenegro government falls over ties with Serbian Orthodox Church

Euronews (21.08.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3T9TkPu> - The Montenegrin government fell in a no-confidence vote early Saturday that followed a rift over relations with the powerful Serbian Orthodox Church.

Lawmakers voted 50-1 to oust the government of Prime Minister Dritan Abazović just weeks after he signed an agreement regulating the position of the church in Montenegro.

The issue is sensitive for many in the small Balkan nation of 620,000 people that split from its much bigger neighbour Serbia in 2006. The Serbian Orthodox Church, or SOC, enjoys the biggest following in Montenegro, but the nation is divided over the church's dominant role and the country's ties to Serbia.

Critics have argued there was no need for a special deal with the SOC separate from other religious communities. Pro-Western groups in Montenegro also have described the agreement as a tool for Serbia and Russia to increase their influence in Montenegro amid the war in Ukraine.

Abazović has defended the agreement as the way to put behind the long-standing church dispute over its property and other rights in Montenegro and focus on other important issues.

It was not immediately clear whether the fall of the government would lead to snap parliamentary elections or if the parties would try to form a new governing coalition.

Political bickering in Montenegro has blocked progress toward integration into the European Union. In 2017, Montenegro defied Russia, with whom the country had strong economic ties in past decades, to become a member of NATO.

Religious issues, which are very sensitive in the small Adriatic country that became independent from Serbia in 2006, are one of the main reasons for the fall of the last two governments.

A third of the 620,000 inhabitants identify themselves as Serbs, and some nationalists deny Montenegrins a separate identity.

The SOC is the dominant religious institution -- along with a minority Montenegrin Orthodox Church not recognised by the Orthodox world -- but its opponents accuse it of serving Belgrade's interests.

Further reading

[Montenegro government faces no-confidence vote over Church deal](#)
[Serbian Church agreement shakes Montenegro coalition](#)
[Montenegrin PM secretly signs controversial contract on church property](#)
[Dispute flares with Serbian Church over Montenegro Monastery /](#)

Photo: Montenegrin Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic (L) and Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Porfirije (R) meeting in Montenegro. Photo: Government of Montenegro

Authorities sign an agreement with Serbian Orthodox Church

HRWF (05.08.2022) - On 3 August 2022, Patriarch Porfirije of the [Serbian Orthodox Church](#) and Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović signed the Basic Agreement on relations between the Serbian Church and the state. This is reported by the official [website of the Government of the Republic](#).

The Basic Agreement was first signed by the Prime Minister on 8 July. It was afterwards approved by the Government and by the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The treaty regulates the relations, mutual rights and obligations between the state and the Church and stipulates the following:

- The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro is separated from the state;
- The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is separated from the State; the SOC is recognized as a legal subject and has had continuity since 1219;
- The State of Montenegro guarantees to the Serbian Orthodox Church that no security measures can be taken on its premises by public authorities without prior approval of the competent church authorities;
- The Serbian Orthodox Church is vested with public legal powers;
- The State guarantees the inviolability of the property of the Church and undertakes to register (enter into the cadastre) previously unregistered immovable property belonging to the dioceses of the SOC in Montenegro;
- The introduction of religious education in public educational institutions is allowed.

The end of a controversial law

Serbia and Montenegro were part of a federation until 2006, when Montenegro declared its independence.

As of late December 2019, a newly adopted Law on Religion, which de jure transferred the ownership of church buildings and estates built before 1918 from the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Montenegrin state. That is the year when Montenegro - predominantly Orthodox Christian - joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church was then subsumed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, losing all of its property in the process.

The 2019 law sparked large protests and road blockages. Seventeen opposition Democratic Front MPs were arrested prior to the voting for disrupting the vote. Demonstrations continued into March 2020 as peaceful protest walks, mostly organised by the [Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral](#) and the [Eparchy of Budimlja and Nikšić](#) in the majority of Montenegrin municipalities.

In the [2020 parliamentary election](#), the opposition won more votes than the ruling party. The new government -- which came to power after elections -- said it would rewrite the law to ensure the properties stay in the hands of church, which is based in neighboring Serbia.

Montenegro is a member of NATO and aspires to join the European Union.

Further reading

[Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application](#) (Annual FoRB Report of Aid to the Church in Need)

[Montenegro clashes as Serb Orthodox church leader installed](#)
[Montenegro rocked by violent clashes over inauguration of new Serbian church independence](#)
[Montenegro: Clashes erupt over inauguration of church leader](#)

*Photo : Patriarch of the SOC Porfirije and Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović.
Photo: gov.me*
