



Weekly Briefing

Montenegro Social briefing:
Status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro
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Church question and law of freedom of religion revisited

Djukanovic's inaugural speech in May has announced big changes in Montenegro's politics. Resourceful as the media has been about predicting Djukanovic's resolution to meddle into government's affairs and foreign policy, announcement to propose a new law on freedom of religion and amend existing one from the Yugoslav period came relatively unexpected and many were clueless about the intention and the aim of this new law. During the inauguration, he pledged to "solve church question" once and for all by making a law that will tackle the legal status and mutual relations of two main Orthodox institutions in Montenegro – Serbian Orthodox Church and Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

Judging from the first reactions, Djukanovic plans to re-shuttle similar initiative that DPS caucus failed to deliver on parliament floor in 2015, when the opposition parties rejected the proposal. The issue came to fore in early June when several religious organizations, among them Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC), admitted that they have been approached by the government institutions to help drafting a new "freedom of religion" law which will be sent to the Parliament by the end of the year. However, according to media, Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) this time was not included in preparation. After Vijesti contacted Montenegro-Littoral Metropolitanate of SOC, their spokesperson Gojko Perovic only remarked that SOC has not been contacted by authorities and that "according to the news from the media, SOC can only sadly conclude that the government in principle couldn't go far from the similar proposal in 2015, when Catholic, Muslim and Orthodox religious communities protested against the proposal." Mr. Perovic also confirmed the speculations that MOC would be only beneficiary of the new law which, in case it gets approved by the parliament, will stipulate that all temples and religious objects built by "public

funds or by common contribution” before December 1st 1918 will become state property.

Meanwhile, Ana Vukotic, president of civic petition group Amanet (Heritage), in an apparent attempt to seize the moment of media attention, was busy spreading the news that the proposal is not, in fact, intended against SOC but regulates the ownership of Montenegro’s cultural and historic heritage. Her main concern is that according to a present situation, more than two thirds of Christian Orthodox property in Montenegro, out of which a big part is declared as national cultural heritage, is owned by a church registered in Serbia. She replicated similar statement by the DPS mouthpieces when she said that “Montenegro’s cultural heritage cannot be someone’s private property, especially not the property of a Church belonging to a foreign country”.

Background check

It can be found that over the years the government has been very tactful not to infuriate the majority of Montenegro’s population (including Serbs as well as Montenegrins) who professed SOC to be their highest religious authority. Under secularist pretense the government refrained from any meddling in the land and property dispute between newly established MOC and SOC. As a result, there was an awkward situation where eponymous church of predominantly orthodox nation had a legal status similar to a small and new religious organization: had limited funding from the government and no right to inherit or retrieve the property seized by Communists during the Yugoslav period.

At the time the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia started with returning the property to previous owners (so called denationalization), SOC was deemed as legal successor of the church property seized by Communists in 1945. It was also at the height of new liberal wing of DPS won over ex-Communist hardliners and the time when DPS-SOC political courtship started. SOC enjoyed international (canonical) recognition, broad popular acceptance and inherited the most of the sacral objects and properties in Montenegro. Among others, SOC

became an owner of Cetinje Monastery, historical seat of Montenegrin Orthodox Diocese, highly revered Ostrog Monastery, Orthodox temples in Kotor, Podgorica, Niksic and inherited all the church lands previously registered under the Orthodox Church.

The problem started when Montenegro became independent and Montenegrin Orthodox Church, created in 1993 but claiming succession to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church that existed until 1918, unsuccessfully contested canonical jurisdiction of SOC over Montenegro and laid claims on all Orthodox property under SOC. The path to reclaim its legitimacy came to a halt after Orthodox Synod, “the UN of Orthodox Churches”, refused to recognize its autocephaly and only unrecognized church denominations fraternized with MOC. Without the support in Orthodox Synod, MOC was hoping to obtain political support to become a national church (similar to status of Macedonian Orthodox Church), however, Montenegro’s leadership has never extended support. One of the reason for a strict secularism of the government was definitely public support SOC enjoyed, but it was also coupled with MOC’s anonymity and creeping “sense of cultural belonging” that secular and anti-nationalist elite felt towards SOC.

On the other hand, MOC gradually started to make its own name, first by siding with Montenegrin independentists, such as Liberal Alliance, and second by insisting to be sole legal successor of the old Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The conflict between the two seemed to reach the stalemate when it took the contours of the conflict Montenegrin independentists had with Serb nationalists. MOC demanded that churches, monasteries and chapels in Montenegro built before 1918 should be returned to MOC, even including those built to SOC, because old MOC commissioned and financially assisted the construction. However, SOC openly denies that modern MOC is rightful successor of the old MOC, for which they additionally claim that is had participated in the church version of “Podgorica Convention” and joined SOC in 1920.

The conflict occasionally became very fierce when MOC Council wanted to forcibly reclaim their property occupied by SOC. The head of MOC, Bishop Mihajlo frequently attacked SOC's cultural and political hegemony, but has also distinguished doctrinal schism between the two churches. SOC is thus trying to impose "primo-veneration for St. Sava" which is against the tradition of MOC. During some public disputes, President Vujanovic came in to pacify both sides by vowing to protect the property of SOC but supporting MOC in raising legal suits on specific cases.

The conflict re-emerged this month when Bishop Mihajlo accused SOC to pay off some inspectors to build within protected cultural area of Dajbabe Monastery. The similar cases also happened a couple of years ago in Rumija Monastery and Cetinje Monastery, both designed as protected cultural objects under SOC ownership. This time, however, the statement of Bishop Mihajlo had more resonance in the media and the government's reaction may be conducive to draft the law faster than expected.

Reactions on the law proposal

One can, as some media did, speculate whether the law proposal was a result of an alleged rift between Djukanovic and Amfilohije Radovic, Montenegro-Littoral Bishop of SOC which sparkled when "Milo recognized Kosovo" and has been on "off-on mode" until Montenegro took radical pro-West direction and joined NATO. Bishop Amfilohije, known for his anti-independence stance and statements denying Montenegrin separate ethnic identity, several times has crossed a line by criticizing "alienated elites" and openly siding with pro-Serb opposition when the government was in the middle of the fight with "foreign-paid anti-Montenegrins". In December 2017, he authored a controversial "Kosovo manifest", a political pamphlet which most commentaries interpreted as his attempt to become a leader of Serb "alt-right" movement and contest Vucic's "hijacking" Kosovo dialogue. However, the manifest was also very critical on Montenegro's government, calling their

decision to recognize Kosovo “outright disgrace and betrayal”. During Montenegro-Kosovo border demarcation crisis, he openly called to scrap off all agreements with “so called Kosovo government” and remained loyal to his very picturesque vocabulary in criticizing (and sometimes cursing) the government, its officials and, finally, Milo himself. It is, therefore, unsurprising outcome of ongoing feud between the two previously “inseparable political allies”, which, as some have suggested, didn’t escalate earlier because Milo feared political backlashes.

Along the same line, there are commentaries that after several electoral victories of DPS see growing confidence in the government and a new president Djukanovic in touching “hornet’s nest” of pro-Serb opposition. It is an attempt to finally settle accounts with the religious organization/ community which enjoyed disproportionately more privileges from the state. Some opinions agree that now is a perfect time to downsize political influence SOC has in the Montenegro’s public opinion, especially cut off its sway over pro-Serb political parties and diminish conservative and neo-traditionalist appeal it has among the opposition. LA and SDP, fiercest critics of SOC, claimed that it is the most subversive organization in Montenegro as it refuses to recognize Montenegrin ethnicity and is instrumental for Serbian state interests. Minority parties, such as Croatian Civic Initiative, are against Serb nationalism that is openly disseminated through SOC outlets.

On the other hand, there are accounts justifying the law proposal only as it “repatriates” Montenegro’s cultural heritage, without any affirmative action towards MOC. The other political parties and civic organizations tend to comply with the “silent majority” of Montenegro’s public widely considered to be in favor of non-interference in SOC-MOC balance of (soft) power.

If one scratches the surface on which SOC draws its public support and cross-checks with some electoral and referendum results, one may conclude that Montenegro’s public has very schizophrenic commitments. According to a survey conducted in 2009, more than two thirds of Montenegro’s citizens

(regardless of ethnicity) supported SOC over MOC, even though SOC never kept secret its anti-independence and pan-Serb nationalism, while MOC offered clear alternative to both. CEDEM, an independent public think-tank, delivered data showing that SOC is continuously being regarded as the most trusted institution in Montenegro, before the government and any political party. Therefore, the fear of mobilizing popular backlash is very probable reason why the government is precipitous to use this window of opportunity and pass the law without having the consent from SOC, same fear that kept SOC afloat all these years. However, the draft has just been reviewed by each religious community, final wording is expected to come if and when DPS passes proposal in the parliament, but until then an interesting question arises for SOC-DPS relations watchers: how will SOC react if or when faced with the second nationalization of its property?