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Country Snapshot Montenegro

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Country snapshot Montenegro

By Belgrade Open School

The history of religion in Montenegro is similar to the rest of the region. Christianity was present in the cluster of territories which comprise modern Montenegro from around the 4th century, with authority fluctuating between Rome and Constantinople, before Eastern Orthodoxy became established in the late 9th century. In June 1920 the Orthodox Church in Montenegro officially united with that of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians to form the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁶⁶ The Serbian Orthodox Church was in the rank of the Patriarchate, and it was subsequently accepted by other Eastern Orthodox Churches in 1922. In 1993 the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was founded, and was registered as an NGO in 2001. Its leadership claims that Montenegrin churches were illegitimately annexed by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1920 and that it is the sole legal representative of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro. However, the decision to unify was accepted by all of the bishops from Montenegro, and the metropolitan Gavriilo Dožić was among the most prominent candidates for the first patriarch of the united Serbian Church, a role which he eventually took on (1938–1950). As such, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church is not recognised by any other official Eastern Orthodox Churches. Islam was introduced into the area with the Ottoman conquest in the late 15th century, whose influence in the region lasted until the Balkan wars of 1912/13 when the Kingdom of Montenegro gained independence and united with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians in 1918. The Islamic Community claims that significant part of the Muslim population was deported after the country gained independence from Ottoman rule.⁶⁷

Religious composition

According to the 2011 census, about 72% of the population declare themselves to be Orthodox Christian. The Orthodox population in Montenegro is divided between two Orthodox communities – the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC). Their mutual relations are complicated, and they have worsened since Montenegro became an independent state in 2006. Local media outlets have estimated that about 70% of the Orthodox population are adherents of the SOC, with around 30% in the MOC. However, these estimates should be taken with caution since there have been no official studies conducted. About 3.5% of the population identify as Roman Catholic, and reside mostly in the coastal area.

The second largest religion in Montenegro is Islam, forming around 16% of the total population and are represented by the Islamic Community of Montenegro (ICM). The

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66 Đ. Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve: Od početka XIX veka do kraja Drugog svetskog rata*, Vol. 2, (BIGZ: Beograd, 2002), pp. 369–376.

67 Islamic Community of Montenegro, 'Historical development and organisation', <https://www.monteislam.com/islamska-zajednica-u-crnoj-gori>

majority of Montenegrin Muslims live in the northeastern part of the country in Rožaje, Plav and Gusinje, which neighbour the Serbian predominantly Muslim municipalities of Sjenica, Novi Pazar, and Tutin. A further 1.24% identified as atheists and 2.61% who did not want to declare. The rest of the population (about 4.5%) are members of other smaller religions such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Judaism, and various branches of Protestantism and Buddhism.⁶⁸

Interfaith relations

According to Article 14 of the Constitution of Montenegro, 'Religious communities are separated from the State. Religious communities are equal and free to worship and do other religious tasks/works'.⁶⁹ The government has agreements with the Islamic and Jewish Communities and the Holy See further defining the legal status of the respective groups and regulating their relationship with the state. There are no similar agreements with the SOC, MOC, or the other recognised religious groups.

By law, religion may not be taught in public primary or secondary schools. The SOC operates one secondary school in the historical capital of Cetinje, and the Islamic Community operates one private madrassa at the secondary school level in the capital Podgorica – both follow the state curriculum in non-religious matters.

There are 21 recognised religious groups in the country and all applied for official registration except the SOC.⁷⁰ The interior minister from May until November 2016, Goran Danilovic (a member of the opposition party Demos), wrote a letter to the SOC supporting the SOC's assertion that it was not required to register because it had legal status before 1977 and was therefore not a new religious group.⁷¹ As a result, the SOC has experienced regular difficulties with the issuing of residency permits,⁷² and visas for its clergy. There is an ongoing dispute between the SOC and MOC, particularly over the ownership of 750 Orthodox sites.⁷³ Police have prohibited members of the MOC from performing the liturgy in churches on several occasions because of the security concerns, while numerous members of the SOC were already in churches performing liturgies. Police have continued to provide

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68 Montenegro Statistical Office, 'Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Montenegro 2011 – Population of Montenegro by sex, type of settlement, ethnicity, religion and mother tongue per municipalities', pp. 14–15, via [https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje\(1\).pdf](https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje(1).pdf)

69 Montenegro Official Gazette, 'Sl. list CG', br. 1/2007 and 38/2013 - Amendments I–XVI', via <http://www.sluzbenilist.me/pregled-dokumenta/?id={F25BEB5-97DF-43CC-A22B-D3BA57194B23}>; and <http://www.sluzbenilist.me/pregled-dokumenta/?id={67D9E04D-FEB0-4ECD-9122-6FA8A209B35F}>

70 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, May 2018, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=280940>

71 US Department of State, 2016 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268848>

72 See International Religious Freedom Reports prior to 2015, via <https://me.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/official-reports/>

73 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, May 2018, p. 7, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=280940>

protection around churches for events conducted by both groups.⁷⁴ In recent years there have also been tensions among the Islamic Community, with a dispute arising between the head of the ICM, Reis Rifat Fejzic, and one of the two leaders of the Islamic Community in Serbia, former Mufti Muamer Zukorlic, over who represents the Islamic community in the Sandzak region (a historical term for a former Ottoman region now divided by the border between northeast Montenegro and southwest Serbia).⁷⁵

Religious groups have continued to complain that the laws regulating their legal status are outdated and inadequate because they were created based on the demographic conditions of the former Yugoslavia. The government has been working on a new law regulating the legal status of religious communities since 2015.⁷⁶ After three years of preparation, a draft version was completed. However, during an international academic conference on 'Freedom of Religion or Belief in Montenegro' held in Montenegro on 3–4 May 2019, the new draft law was heavily criticised.⁷⁷

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74 Ibid. p.5

75 US Department of State, 2015 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, October 2016, p. 6, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=256223>

76 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Montenegro, May 2018, p. 6, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280940>

77 See more on the official webpage of the Council of European Churches, <https://www.ceceurope.org/conference-reviews-draft-law-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-in-montenegro/>