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In this photo taken Tuesday, May 12, 2020, people wait in a queue in front of the Christian Orthodox monastery of Ostrog, 30 kilometers northwest of the Montenegrin capital Podgorica. Serbia has strongly protested the detention of eight Serbian Orthodox Church priests in Montenegro after thousands of people attended a religious procession despite a ban on gatherings because of the new coronavirus. Montenegrin prosecutors say that the priests are facing charges of violating health regulations during the virus outbreak by organizing the procession on May 12 in the western town of Niksic. (AP/Risto Bozovic)

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Podgorica, Montenegro — May 13, 2020

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Serbia on May 13 strongly protested the detention of eight Serbian Orthodox Church priests in Montenegro after thousands of people attended a religious procession despite a ban on gatherings because of the coronavirus.

Montenegrin prosecutors said that the priests are facing charges of violating health regulations during the virus outbreak by organizing the procession on May 12 in the western town of Niksic.

Most people participating in the procession didn't wear face masks or keep a safe distance from each other.

Angry over the arrests, supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church blocked a regional road in northern Montenegro on May 13, according to the state Montenegrin RTCG television. The report said that a long line of blocked cars formed down the road.

The detentions heightened tensions between the small Adriatic state and Serbia and its church which earlier this year led weeks of protests against a religious law that it says would strip the church of its property. Montenegrin officials have repeatedly denied the allegations.

Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vucic, and Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Irinej said in a joint statement on May 13 that they hope the arrests won't spark any "unwanted unrest or clashes."

The patriarch said the detentions "are only a proof that the Montenegrin state is conducting a purge of the Serbian Orthodox Church."

Vucic urged a peaceful resolution of the crisis and a quick release of the priests.

Montenegro, a country of 620,000 people, split from much larger Serbia in a referendum in 2006. Serbian nationalists both in Serbia and Montenegro have never fully recognized the separation of what they claim is a historic Serbian territory.

Montenegro has reported nine deaths caused by the new coronavirus and more than 300 infections.

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