

Excessive real estate development is jeopardising Montenegro's landmark historical site of Kotor, with the United Nations heritage protection agency threatening to strip it from its World Heritage List.

Kotor, a medieval town with Venetian and Austro-Hungarian palaces and fortifications, is situated in Adriatic's picturesque Boka Kotorska bay. It has been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979.

UNESCO has been warning Kotor since early 2000s that excessive real estate construction, uncontrolled tourism with the docking of large cruiser ships in Kotor's small port were endangering its Old Town area.

In July 2016, UNESCO stepped up the pressure and gave Montenegro, a European Union aspirant and the newest NATO member state, until mid-March to remedy the problem if it wants Kotor to remain on the World Heritage List.

In February, the Montenegro government ordered a temporary construction ban in Kotor due to go into effect in April, apparently acting just in time to avoid triggering the procedure to remove the city from the list.

But just before the ban came into effect on April 5, it allowed construction of some large tourist complexes inside the town. The issue is now mired in a dispute among the local government, which is run by the parliamentary opposition, the national government and the previous town assembly.

"We're totally convinced that presently we have a bogus process (enforced by the national government) intended to stop the development of the city, ... under the pretences that something is being done to right the wrongdoing by the previous (local) administration," said Kotor's mayor Vladan Jokic.

Since its independence in 2006, Montenegro has generated about a quarter of its economic output through revenues from tourism and real estate development along its Adriatic coast. In 2016 tourism revenues stood at 22.1 percent of GDP.

But during that time, reckless housing construction frequently coupled with cronyism and nepotism, took its toll.

Sandra Kapetanovic, an architect with a local centre for sustainable planning, said that the concerns over the real estate boom are over a decade old.

"UNESCO'S committee for world legacy has been warning since 2003 about negative consequences of this excessive urbanisation," she said.

The Montenegrin coast, which is only 293 km (182 miles) long, is now peppered with buildings, including dozens of unfinished and abandoned concrete structures. Kotor's palaces are dwarfed by modern concrete dwellings.

Montenegro's Kotor risks losing Unesco status over excessive development

Olivera, a resident of the nearby town of Dobrota, said that new houses are ruining the area. "These newly-built houses, they're like some skyscrapers with slabs on top, as tombs," she said.

Source: reuters