

Macedonia: Uncertainty after Referendum on Country's Name

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A September 30, 2018, referendum on changing Macedonia's name to the Republic of North Macedonia produced mixed results and rival interpretations from the government and opposition. Despite voter turnout (37%) being lower than many expected, nearly 92% of those who voted approved changing the country's name to resolve a long-standing dispute with Greece and facilitate Macedonia's eventual membership in NATO and the European Union (EU). Based on this relatively high margin of victory, the government quickly claimed that the nonbinding referendum result was a clear mandate to proceed with a parliamentary vote on required constitutional changes. Yet opponents of the name change, who generally boycotted the referendum, also viewed the result as a win because voter turnout was below the 50% necessary for the referendum results to be considered valid.

With both sides claiming victory, it is unclear whether the government of Zoran Zaev can secure the two-thirds majority of parliamentary votes needed to amend the constitution to allow the name change. If it does not, Macedonia's path to NATO and EU membership could remain blocked, and some analysts suggest it could be years before conditions are conducive to another Greek-Macedonian agreement on the name issue.

Recent Breakthrough in Name Dispute

For nearly three decades, Greece has wielded its veto power to block Macedonia's NATO and EU membership despite generally positive assessments of Macedonia's qualifications. The bilateral dispute dates back to 1991, when Macedonia declared independence from the former Yugoslavia as the Republic of Macedonia. From Greece's perspective, Macedonia's use of the name implies territorial ambitions toward northern Greece reflecting its claim to the cultural heritage of ancient Macedonia. Greece continues to refer to the country as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

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In 2017, Macedonia's new Social Democrat-led government prioritized renewed efforts toward Euro-Atlantic integration. The presence of new leaders at the bargaining table, along with EU and NATO support and positive signals from Athens, provided an opportunity to compromise over the name issue. In June, the foreign ministers of Greece and Macedonia signed the Prespa Agreement, whereby Macedonia would change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia, Greece would no longer object to Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, and both countries would promise to respect existing borders.

Nationalist protests broke out in both countries over the agreement. Prior to the referendum, key officials from Macedonia's opposition VMRO DPMNE party, including President Gjorge Ivanov and party leader Hristijan Mickoski, accused the government of betraying Macedonia. Ivanov called on the party's supporters to boycott the referendum.

Next Steps

For the Prespa Agreement to enter into force, Macedonia's parliament must make constitutional changes that adopt key provisions—including the name change—by the end of 2018. Although the referendum is not binding, the Macedonian government hoped that strong turnout would pressure opposition members of parliament to endorse the necessary changes. Prime Minister Zaev has vowed to move the process forward in parliament. The government believes it has approximately 71 of the 80 votes (out of 120) necessary, but the referendum's relatively low turnout makes it harder for the government to secure nine opposition votes. VMRO DPMNE leader Mickoski declared that the deal with Greece is "dead." Some analysts believe the party is loath to give a political victory to the Zaev government and instead hopes to author a more palatable agreement with Greece down the road, even though it could be years before this is feasible.

VMRO DPMNE lists NATO and EU membership as strategic priorities, and a strong majority of Macedonia's population supports these goals. Some analysts believe the party is sensitive to its international reputation and could yield to pressure from other conservative parties, particularly the parties of key "yes" campaign proponents such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

Prime Minister Zaev put additional pressure on the VMRO DPMNE by threatening to hold snap elections if the constitutional changes fail to pass. If governing parties gain additional seats, the changes could pass without the opposition's support. Some observers view early elections as the more likely scenario.

If parliament approves the constitutional changes, the next step would be ratification by Greece's parliament. The issue is also contentious in Greece, where nationalist protests and accusations of betrayal have mirrored the situation in Macedonia. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras faces opposition to the deal from his government's junior coalition partner, the Independent Greeks, as well as from the conservative opposition. Nevertheless, Tsipras survived a no-confidence vote over the agreement in June.

U.S. Support for Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic Integration

U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have long supported Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and backed its compromise with Greece to resolve the name dispute. A U.S. diplomat has been the key U.N. negotiator for over two decades. The State Department praised the support from Macedonian voters in the September 30 referendum and urged politicians to rise above the partisan fray by finalizing the Prespa Agreement.

NATO leaders have said that membership consultations with Macedonia could be finalized once the Prespa Agreement is fully implemented. Macedonia then could become NATO's 30th member, pending final ratification by member states, including by the U.S. Senate. During past NATO enlargements, the ratification process typically has taken from six months to one year.

U.S. officials and many Members of Congress believe that Macedonia's NATO and EU membership would be a source of stability in the Western Balkans and would help ward off the violence and interethnic tensions that have flared periodically in Macedonia. Some analysts speculate that the Prespa Agreement could set a powerful example of compromise for parties to other seemingly intractable disputes in the Balkans, such as Serbia and Kosovo.

Proponents of Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration also have stressed the importance of countering Russia's increased presence in Macedonia, which presence includes a heightened Russian media footprint, a proliferation of Russia-Macedonia friendship organizations, and cooperation between Vladimir Putin's United Russia party and the United Macedonia Party. Some analysts believe that Russia, which opposes Macedonia's potential NATO membership, may have supported the boycott campaign that dampened referendum turnout.

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