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Slovenians hold a referendum on ending the dispute with Croatia

On 3 May, the Slovenian parliament decided to hold a national referendum on 6 June to approve the Slovenian-Croatian arbitration agreement. A rejection of the agreement in the referendum may cause further delays in Croatia's accession to the EU.

The Croatian-Slovenian agreement, according to which the border delimitation issue would be decided in international arbitration, was signed on 4 November 2009. The agreement was ratified by the Croatian parliament on 20 November 2009 and by the Slovenian parliament on 19 April 2010. However, the latter did so in the absence of opposition MPs. The agreement was to resolve a border dispute dating back to 1991. Moreover, as a result of its conclusion, Slovenia unblocked Croatia's accession negotiations with the EU.

The decision to vote on the agreement in a referendum is the effect of a political struggle between the governing Social Democrats (SD) and the largest opposition party, the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS). Right-wing parties are claiming that the agreement is unfavourable for Slovenia and that the arbitration will deprive it of access to international waters. In turn, the left-wing government sees the ending of the dispute with Croatia as its success. Although, according to polls, 46% of citizens support the agreement and 38% oppose it, the result of the vote is difficult to predict at the moment. The SDS wants to turn the referendum into a plebiscite testing the government's popularity and will demand the dismissal of the cabinet should the referendum's result turn out to be negative.

If the agreement is rejected by Slovenians, the parliament will not be able to consider this issue for the next twelve months. Since Croatia has undertaken to resolve the dispute with Slovenia before accession, Croatian membership of the EU may be delayed. This will have an adverse impact on bilateral relations and waste the chance for an improvement in them. <MarSz>