

Macedonia: Parliament votes to change the country's name

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On 11 January, a two-thirds majority in the Macedonian parliament adopted amendments to the constitution, which provide for a change in the name of the state to the Republic of Northern Macedonia. Members of the VMRO-DPMNE opposition boycotted the vote, as they were opposed to changing the name of the state. The amendment was supported by seven former members of VMRO-DPMNE as well as independent MPs. It is part of an agreement concluded by Greece and Macedonia in June 2017 and intended to end the dispute over the constitutional name of the state of Macedonia which has been ongoing for over two decades.

The adopted amendment to the constitution, apart from introducing the name Republic of Northern Macedonia, also changes the wording of the preamble. Text which had aroused fear in Greece of territorial claims on the part of Macedonia has been removed, and a reference to the Ohrid agreement, which ended the domestic Macedonian-Albanian conflict in 2001, has been added. Another amendment changes Article 3 of the constitution, adding a declaration of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of neighbouring countries. According to another amendment, the state protects the rights and interests of its citizens residing or living abroad and promotes their ties to the motherland, while at the same time not interfering in the internal affairs of other states. The amendments adopted will come into force when both the Greek-Macedonian agreement, as well as the protocol on the accession of Macedonia to NATO, are ratified by the Greek parliament. Full implementation of the agreement with Greece will enable Macedonia to accelerate the process of integrating the country with Western structures, which Greece has blocked since 2008.

Commentary

- The amendment to the Constitution is a great success for the government of Zoran Zaev. However, this success has come at the price of concessions to the opposition MPs and the Albanian minority, all of whom supported the agreement. Macedonia (North) has the chance to join NATO as early as 2020. Skopje also expects a positive decision to open accession negotiations with the EU in June this year. This would be a very positive signal to the other Balkan states that the resolution of disputes through mediation brings specific benefits.
- Ensuring support in the parliament to change the constitution was a major challenge for the Macedonian government, given that VMRO-DPMNE, the largest opposition party,

which governed the country in the period 2006-17, has been sabotaging the implementation of any agreement with Greece. VMRO-DPMNE's leader Hristijan Mickoski has been hoping that the government's failure in this matter would allow him to take power. Although 97% of voters supported the agreement with Greece in the referendum held on 30 September last year, the low turnout (37%) allowed VMRO-DPMNE to claim that the majority of the population had rejected it. The government convinced several members of VMRO-DPMNE to support the changes to the constitution in exchange for concessions including dropping criminal charges for actions related to the intrusion into parliament of nationalist militiamen on 27 April 2017. This incident was intended to prevent Zaev's leftist government from taking power, and around 200 people were injured. The VMRO-DPMNE politicians who voted for the constitutional changes were excluded from the party, but secured their impunity. In turn, the MPs representing ethnic Albanians achieved a slight strengthening of this minority's position in the constitution in exchange for supporting the constitutional changes.

- The biggest threat to the implementation of the Greek-Macedonian agreement is the unstable situation on the Greek political scene. The agreement will come into force only after ratification by a simple majority vote by the Greek parliament. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, however, has the support of only 146 deputies in the 300-seat parliament, as on 11 January the leader of the Independent Greeks (ANEL) group, Panos Kammenos, withdrew from the coalition government in protest at the agreement with Skopje. The Greek Prime Minister has thus asked the parliament for a vote of confidence. The vote on this issue will most likely be held on 16 January. Tsipras has a good chance of staying in power; the three independent MPs and four members of ANEL have announced that they will support the vote of confidence. Most likely, those MPs who favoured the vote of confidence will vote for the agreement with Macedonia. German Chancellor Angela Merkel convinced Greek parliamentarians to support the agreement with Skopje during a visit to Athens on 11 January.
- The protracted process of implementing the agreement with Greece has considerably slowed down the process of political and economic reforms. Zoran Zaev came to power against a background of ambitious slogans to strengthen the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, and to restore freedom of the media after a decade of dominance by VMRO-DPMNE. In this way Zaev sought to distinguish himself from his predecessors, who committed a number of irregularities, such as using state institutions to fight political opponents, and strengthening corrupt practices and nepotism. Since taking power in spring 2017, the current government has postponed domestic reforms, which would require a reduction in employment in the public sector among other moves, in order not to arouse further public protests. It has focused instead on foreign policy, and especially the process of unblocking Euro-Atlantic integration by regulating its disputes with its neighbours. However, the decision to grant impunity to members of the opposition who had been facing criminal allegations in return for their support for the changes to the constitution, has severely affected Zaev's credibility. It is true that this enabled the adoption of the agreement with Greece, but at the same time the move is in conflict with the Prime Minister's promises to restore the rule of law in Macedonia. This creates the impression that supporting government policy continues to guarantee

impunity.

- The long-running debate about relations with Greece and renaming the country, which has been especially fervent in recent months, remains a source of controversy in Macedonia. Leaders of the VMRO-DPMNE opposition are still trying to mobilise their electorate, arguing that they would be able to negotiate a better agreement with Greece. However these assertions are not credible, because during the decades of its rule VMRO-DPMNE was unable to work out a compromise with Athens. The escape to Hungary by Nikola Gruevski, the party's long-time leader, who is facing many allegations of corruption, has further weakened the position of the party. As a result, the protests after the vote to change the name of the state have been minor. A pragmatic approach has prevailed among the public, namely that a more uncompromising defence of national identity would lead to further isolation for Macedonia on the international stage, and would reduce the country's chances of achieving stable economic growth.