
MACEDONIA STARTS WORK ON REFERENDUM PREPARATIONS

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Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said he hoped parliament would adopt a formal decision supporting the referendum on the country's deal with Greece by Monday □ which he added would then be staged with or without the support of the main opposition VMRO DPMNE party.

If we fail to reach an agreement with VMRO DPMNE, I expect each of their MPs to individually make their positions clear before of the public. Thats their right, but we all have obligation to make sure that the process is successful, Zaev said on Wednesday.

On Wednesday, with the participation of VMRO DPMNE MPs, parliament voted to appoint a new electoral commission, which the party had previously blocked for almost a month.

Parliament at the same time adopted several other opposition-sought bills, including a provision guaranteeing the formation of a technical government 100 days ahead of any future elections, to ensure their fairness.

This came after the government and the opposition agreed on these issues on Monday, despite failing to agree on the government's key request □ which is for the opposition to call on its members to vote in the referendum.

The opposition has strongly opposed the agreement with Greece, calling it an act of treason, as it involves changing the country's name.

But observers say the oppositions participation may well be crucial to the success of the referendum, even if they oppose the "name" deal.

Without it, many observers say it will be very hard to achieve a turnout of more than 50 per cent of all voters, which is the set threshold.

Zaev on Wednesday left the door open for later agreement, after the failure of his meeting with VMRO DPMNE head Hristijan Mickovski.

He said that talks were continuing within parliament, and that Mickovski could call an additional meeting with him if he wanted to.

A principal aim of the agreement with Greece, signed on June 17, is to ensure that Greece ends its

longstanding blockade of Macedonia's membership of NATO and the EU.

Under the deal, Macedonia agreed to change its name to Republic of North Macedonia, while Greece agreed to lift its veto on Macedonia's EU and NATO integration.

For the deal to be fully implemented, however, Macedonians must show they support it in a referendum.

The Social Democrat-led government wants the vote held in late-September or early in October, so that there is time to adopt the required constitutional changes by year-end.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-unlocks-referendum-preparations-07-26-2018>

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