
MACEDONIA TO HOLD REFERENDUM ON NAME CHANGE ON SEPTEMBER 30

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Macedonia will hold a high-stakes referendum on a proposed name change for the country on September 30, legislators have decided.

Last month, Skopje and Athens signed an historic deal to rename the small landlocked country to "Republic of Northern Macedonia", in an effort to bring an end to a 27-year bitter dispute.

Greece has objected to its neighbour being called Macedonia because it has a northern province of the same name, accusing Skopje of territorial ambitions and appropriating its cultural heritage.

Apart from resolving the long-running fight with Greece, a name change would also pave the way for the former Yugoslav republic to join NATO and start accession talks with the European Union.

On Monday, a total of 68 out of the 120 Macedonian legislators approved the referendum question supported by the socialist government of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, which, however, does not spell out the new name clearly.

On September 30 the public will be asked: "Are you for EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?"

The nationalist opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, which opposes the referendum, boycotted the parliamentary vote by leaving the room, signalling a rocky road ahead.

"The question is ambiguous and multifaceted, and above all manipulative," said Igor Janusev, a leading member of VMRO-DPMNE.

A "yes" vote would involve more than changing the constitutional name, "Republic of Macedonia".

Zaev's socialist government will have to remove references to the "Macedonian people" as an indigenous race, implying ancient heritage.

He will also have to remove references to past struggles to unite all Macedonians from Skopje to the Aegean, implying irredentist claims on Greek territory.

Then, by the end of the year, Greece would have to ratify the agreement in Parliament, and lift its veto on the country's entry into the EU and NATO.

Official entry would happen well in advance of elections scheduled for the autumn of 2019 in both countries.

Macedonia lies north of Greece, west of EU-member Bulgaria, and east of non-EU member Albania, which signed a cooperation deal with the bloc in February.

Macedonia and Greece have had a dispute over the former's name for decades.

The historical region of Macedonia, includes the modern Greek region and some territory within what is now the sovereign state of Macedonia.

The Greek region was the birthplace of Alexander the Great - born in Pella 356BC, northwest of Greece's second-biggest city of Thessaloniki - whose empire stretched from Greece to India.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/macedonia-hold-referendum-change-30-september-180730191058894.html>

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