
MACEDONIA REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN PICKS UP PACE

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Although the campaign for the referendum on Macedonia's name deal with Greece officially kicks off 20 days before the vote on September 30, the battle to sway public opinion has already picked up pace, mainly on social media.

The propaganda campaigns so far have mainly been waged by the Social Democrat-led government which sees the name deal as a historic opportunity for the country to unblock its EU and NATO accession bids, and those who propose a boycott, deeming the agreement with Greece to change the country's name treasonous.

The latest addition to the pro-deal campaign was a promotional video posted on the Twitter and Facebook page of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, which put forward the message that Macedonia will become part of united Europe and ended with the slogan: It is time for a decision! We are moving forward, into NATO and into the EU.

The government on its website has already published the text of the deal with Greece, along with a separate page of facts on the agreement, containing the main bullet points that address many popular fears and misconceptions about it.

One of the bullet points states that with article 7 of the agreement, Macedonian identity is protected.

The prime minister and other government officials and supporters have been urging people to thoroughly inspect the text of the deal, using the Twitter hashtags #ФактиЗаДоговора [Facts About the Agreement] and #МКвоЕУ and #МКвоНАТО [MK in EU and MK in NATO].

The government campaign will pick up pace by the end of this week and the start of the next, Zaev's political advisor Bojan Maricic said on Tuesday.

The campaign will be promotional and informative, Maricic promised.

It will mainly focus on dispelling false information about the agreement in order to convince people to come out and vote, he added.

The referendum on September 30 will ask voters if they back Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU by accepting the name agreement with Greece that was signed in June.

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

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

On the other side of the spectrum, the most active camp on social networks has been the informal movement Bojkotiram (Im Boycotting), which so far has not named any of its official representatives.

The movement uses slogans like Never North, Always Macedonia, referring to the proposed name change in the agreement, as well as Lets Protect Our Sacred Name.

Among those who have been spreading its messages are university professors, Macedonian diaspora members as well as mainly lower-profile politicians from non-parliamentary political parties.

Opposition stalls on referendum

One element that is missing at the moment is a clear stand from the main opposition VMRO DPMNE party.

The right-wing partys leader, Hristijan Mickovski has previously attacked the name agreement as a capitulation, but has also kept insisting that the party has yet to decide whether to participate in the referendum, thus boosting its turnout and credibility.

The VMRO DPMNE has so far refused to urge its supporters to vote according to their own views, but has also not officially called for a boycott of the referendum either.

I think that VMRO DPMNE will stall [the decision] for a bit longer. The party may even choose not to have an official campaign, political analyst Petar Arsovski said on Tuesday.

However, its prominent members, as is already apparent on the ground, will support the Bojkotiram movement. I think that the party will manoeuvre between no campaign at all and a secretive support for the boycott, he added.

So far it appears that the partys leadership is divided on the issue.

A member of VMRO DPMNEs executive committee, Toni Mihajlovski, and a party MP and former Foreign Minister Antonijo Milososki, have called on social media for a boycott.

On the other hand, the deputy secretary general of the party, Petar Bogojevski, and another executive committee member, Kostadin Bogdanov, have opted for participation, insisting that people should take responsibility for the future of their country.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-referendum-campaign-picks-up-pace-08-14-2018>