
MACEDONIA PARLIAMENT TO VOTE ON NAME CHANGE

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Macedonian legislators will decide on Monday if the country will change its name from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of Northern Macedonia over two weeks after a referendum on the issue was marred by low turnout.

The name change pushed by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev would end a decades-long dispute with southern neighbour Greece and potentially open up the route to European Union and NATO membership for Macedonia.

Zaev is looking to get two-thirds of the parliament behind the plan to amend the constitution.

But for the change to happen, Zaev will need to garner support from members of the right-wing opposition VMRO-DPMNE party, which is against the name change.

Currently, the ruling coalition has planned talks with several members of the opposition, of which it will need four or five members to implement the change.

MPs from VMRO-DPMNE have sent mixed signals about their support on the issue, with some coming out strongly against it and others ambivalent.

"There will be no two-thirds majority, do not hope for it," VMRO-DPMNE MP Trajko Veljanovski said last week.

His fellow VMRO-DPMNE party member Ilja Dimovski was less outspoken, saying the issue is still undecided.

"We will see what will happen, but VMRO-DPMNE MPs, or most of them, will not support the deal," Dimovski said.

Zaev has said that if parliament fails to pass the name, he will immediately call early elections.

The vote comes several weeks after Macedonia held a referendum on the change, which has been a political issue ever since the country gained independence in 1991.

In that referendum, 90 percent of voters approved changing the name to the Republic of Northern Macedonia.

However, opponents have said the plebiscite was illegitimate since only a third of the electorate turned up.

EU and NATO membership

The country's name change, a process that was initiated in June this year, has been a sticking point with Greece, which 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.

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.

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 EU.

If Macedonia changes its name, Greece would have to ratify the agreement signed in June in its parliament and then 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.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/macedonia-parliament-vote-change-181015065347448.html>

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