



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Political briefing:**  
**The Road to the Referendum on the Prespa Agreement**  
**Anastas Vangeli**

## China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.



+36 1 5858 690



office@china-cee.eu



china-cee.eu

## **The Road to the Referendum on the Prespa Agreement**

### **Introduction**

A crucial step in the implementation of the Prespa Agreement signed by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Macedonia and Greece on June 17 will be the nation-wide referendum to be held in Macedonia on September 30. As argued in the paper on Macedonia's politics in July 2018, the signing, ratification and implementation of the Prespa Agreement have become the dominant topics in the public debate, and further polarized the political field in the country, contributing to the and restructuring of political relationships and the balance of power between different actors. Ever since the signing of the Prespa Agreement, all other political processes and issues have become subordinated to the Agreement and the process of its ratification and implementation, with the question of the referendum coming to the fore in the months of August and September. The Government of SDSM and DUI, as an architect and sponsor of the Agreement, has been particularly active in setting the agenda and shaping the discourse around it. With the Agreement being subjected to the vote of the public, the Government needs to win a broad support, which would require cooperation with (or co-optation of) political opponents. The challenge to meet the threshold of at least 50% voter turnout for the referendum to be valid can be only met by ensuring that opponents of the Agreement will not boycott the referendum, but rather vote against. Yet, as it will be elaborated below, this task will not be easy for the Government, as the road to the referendum has been mired with political tensions and pressure.

### **Launching the Referendum**

After weeks of heated debates and tense negotiations between the major political parties, on July 30, the Parliament approved the proposal for the country to hold a nation-wide referendum, with the support of 68 out of the total

120 of its members. Previously, on July 26, the Parliament elected a new State Electoral Commission tasked with overseeing the referendum, to be led by Oliver Derkovski, who was proposed by VMRO-DPMNE. The final version of the referendum question as approved by the Macedonian Parliament read as follows: “Do you support EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between Macedonia and Greece?” The possible answers on the ballot will be “Yes” and “No.” Aside from SDSM and DUI, deputies from the smaller ethnic Albanian parties (Alliance for the Albanians and Besa) also supported the decision for the referendum. One deputy from the ruling coalition, Ferid Muhic, a renowned professor of philosophy and an independent member of the SDSM parliamentary group, has voted against the decision to hold the referendum.

The July 30 decision on holding the referendum was brought without the participation of the deputies from VMRO-DPMNE, the largest party in parliament and leading opposition party. The official reason for VMRO-DPMNE leaving the Parliament session prior to the vote was what they perceive as an ambiguous, multifaceted and manipulative referendum question. As voices from VMRO-DPMNE and beyond have pointed out, the multifaceted “3 in 1” question framed as such has at least eight possible answers (for instance, the official stance of VMRO-DPMNE is that they accept EU and NATO accession, but reject the Prespa Agreement).

However, the uncooperative stance of VMRO-DPMNE, according to SDSM and other critics, has not been a result of honest political conviction, but rather the attempt at political bargaining for the release of the party functionaries and supporters persecuted on charges of grand corruption, as well as for the involvement in the violent events in the Parliament of April 27, 2017. In other words, VMRO-DPMNE has allegedly conditioned its participation in the decision-making process on the referendum with the release of and/or softening the penalties for its persecuted members.

Nevertheless, the decision to hold a referendum, and the phrasing of the referendum question have been accepted as legitimate by most state institutions

(sans the President Gjorge Ivanov, who has condemned the Agreement since the signing, and confronted the Government of SDSM and DUI on numerous occasions). Macedonia is already well into the preparations for the referendum, which has become the central issue in all public debates. An important factor in the process has been the external influence of the EU and NATO and the European and the US governments, as well as the international press, who have embraced the language of the Macedonian government and expressed their support for the referendum, and for the camp “Yes.” The support of the EU and the US in the Macedonian context is the highest source of legitimation and historically has had a pivotal role in all political developments.

An important caveat is that the referendum will be a consultative one. This means that whatever the final outcome of the voting may be, it will not be obligatory for the Government and the Parliament to adhere to it. The consultative character of the referendum has been another bone of contention, as Prime Minister Zaev had initially announced that the referendum will be an obligatory one. Moreover, the referendum is supplementary, since it is being held after the Prespa Agreement was ratified by Parliament. In other words, it is not a referendum that seeks the approval of the public for a decision that is yet to be made, but is rather seeking an approval of a decision already made by the Government and ratified by the Parliament. The supplementary-cum-consultative character of the referendum strongly suggests that in this case, the Government and the majority in Parliament have already made up its mind and that the referendum in September is more of an attempt to seal the process rather than an open-ended consultation.

Nevertheless, the Government, at least in rhetoric, frames the referendum as a kind of a vote of confidence for its work. Prime Minister Zaev has publicly entertained the possibility of resigning and even retiring from politics should there is a bigger number of “No” than “Yes” votes – even though, the bigger threat for the referendum is not reaching the minimum voter turnout threshold, rather than not getting enough “Yes” votes.

## **Political Discourse**

The consultative referendum to be held on 30 September helps the Macedonian government fulfill the obligation towards Greece stipulated in the Prespa Agreement (that Macedonia will hold a referendum), with reduced risk of unintended consequences (meaning that even if the referendum fails, the Government can still proceed with implementation of the Agreement – yet it is debatable whether this would be accepted by Greece, as with the Agreement Greece has promised to unblock Macedonia's NATO accession only if the referendum is successful). It also allows the Macedonian government to publicly reaffirm its unswerving loyalty towards the EU and NATO through a publicity campaign centered on the prospects of EU and NATO membership, rather than on the Agreement – which in turn helps it tap the most potent source of legitimation – external support. Moreover, the act of holding a referendum itself provides the Government with the possibility to frame it as part of the process of the democratic maturing of Macedonia in the aftermath of the political crisis 2015-2017. Most importantly, however, the referendum provides the Government with an opportunity to set the agenda and dominate the public debate, amplify the messages it wants to send to the public, delay or deflect all other discussions, ultimately paving the way for the forthcoming election campaigns (Macedonia will hold Presidential elections in 2019 and Parliamentary elections in 2020 the latest).

The public campaign for the referendum has been enthusiastically led by the Government of SDSM and DUI, as well as their deputies in the Parliament. SDSM has been particularly active in mobilizing the party membership and its supporters. The top figures of the party have started a tour of Macedonia's towns and held a number of townhall meetings with citizens, trying to convey several points in light of the upcoming referendum.

First, they have focused on the importance of voting on the referendum – even if one votes against. This is a rhetoric formulated as a response to the

growing calls for a boycott to the referendum and the difficulty in reaching the minimum threshold of voters for the referendum to be valid. To convince people to vote, SDSM has developed a discourse that has portrayed the referendum as a historic, make-or-break moment for Macedonia, and has often drawn parallels with the referendum on independence from Yugoslavia of 1991. At the same time, this discourse has been accompanied with a reproduction and reversal of the “patriots vs traitors” polarization that has plagued Macedonian politics in the past decade; this time the “patriotic” duty as defined by the government is to get out and vote.

Second, the SDSM leaders have enthusiastically promised a long list of benefits that Macedonia will have from a prospective EU and NATO membership – the two being presented not as parallel processes, but rather as a comprehensive political trajectory for the country. The discourse has resembled past publicity campaigns that aimed at creating a positive image of EU and NATO in the country; however, this time, the campaign has also had a somewhat of a pre-electoral feel, as many of the promises pertain to the daily life of citizens. Some of the promises, however, have backfired. For example, the SDSM camp promised that upon accession to the EU, the Macedonian children will get the best vaccines – which prompted angry citizens to ask whether nowadays Macedonian children do get low quality vaccines. Moreover, the EU and NATO discourse has been amplified by the external support expressed by European and American politicians for the referendum and the “Yes” camp.

Third, SDSM has portrayed the Prespa Agreement with Greece as an Agreement that protects the Macedonian language and identity. No public materials or debates even talk about the name change and rarely mention the new name of the country (North Macedonia). The Agreement is framed as relatively beneficial; it is often argued that a better agreement could not have been reached because Macedonia, after Gruevski's rule, had found itself in a weak international position. This in itself has been a remarkable publicity

maneuver – pushing for a vote that in essence is about a name change, without talking about the name change itself.

When it comes to other political actors, one notable development is the prolonged silence of the VMRO-DPMNE leadership. At the time of the writing of this paper (September 6, 2018) the party has still not announced its final stance on the referendum – in particular, it has neither called on voting against the Agreement, nor has called for boycott. This uncertainty has led to tensions and splits among its members and supporters. Various party officials and deputies from VMRO-DPMNE have pursued various strategies – for instance, some have joined the movement that calls for boycott of the referendum and do not vote on the day of the referendum, while others have argued that the party members should vote against the Agreement. In the meantime, since the launching of the referendum, the processes against VMRO-DPMNE's officials – including the former leader and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, as well as dozens of the involved in the April 27 events – have continued, and the debate surrounding them has been inevitably politicized. Notably, in a public statement, Gruevski (who has been already sentenced to two years prison sentence for one of the cases of grand corruption) claimed that he believes that he will be imprisoned in the days leading to the referendum in what he considers a political trial against himself. He has often linked the processes against him with the impeding change of the name of the country.

The President of the country, Gjorge Ivanov, on the other hand is likely not to vote on the day of the referendum (he will be in the US, attending the United Nations General Assembly).

Parties of the ethnic Albanians have unanimously supported the referendum, and will vote for the Agreement. A number of extra-parliamentary parties will boycott the referendum – some such as the controversial United Macedonia party are motivated by ethnic nationalist sentiments, and others, such as the far-left Levica are driven by anti-militarism (and consequently anti-NATO attitude) and the overall feeling of deception that the referendum campaign elicits among

them. Notably, the referendum campaign has also seen the emergence of an eclectic and decentralized movement that has called for boycotting the referendum, and this movement, should it continues to be influential in the debate in the weeks to come, may play a decisive role in preventing the minimum threshold to be reached.

### **Conclusion**

In the weeks to come, crucial for the Government would be to convince VMRO-DPMNE and other opponents of the referendum not to boycott, but to vote. To achieve this, the government so far relies on international pressure, as well as on a negative campaign branding the boycott as national treason. However, at some point the Government may embrace a softer stance, or a “divide and conquer” strategy, primarily exploiting the already existing cracks within VMRO-DPMNE. If VMRO-DPMNE decides to support the referendum and calls its supporters to vote “No” instead of boycott, the likelihood of success for the referendum and the “Yes” camp will increase dramatically. The support of VMRO-DPMNE (or parts of it) will be especially needed for the remaining steps of the implementation process. Once the referendum is completed, the next step in the implementation of the Agreement will be the Parliamentary vote on constitutional amendments (of which the scope and volume are still unknown). These amendments can be only brought with a 2/3 majority (80 of 120), meaning that SDSM will need to add at least 12 votes from deputies of VMRO-DPMNE to the existing majority of 68.