



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia Political briefing:
The Days After Macedonia's Referendum
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The Days After Macedonia's Referendum

Introduction

On September 30, Macedonia held a nation-wide referendum on the proposed change of the constitutional name and on the global orientation of the country. The referendum took place in a tense, stressful and polarized political atmosphere, with Macedonia receiving an unprecedented amount of international attention (see previous briefs). The referendum question read “Are you in favor of European Union and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?” The phrasing of the question reflected the complex situation in which Macedonia has found itself: a compromise with Greece on the long-standing name issue, an immensely complex political operation, was seen as a prerequisite for advancing in the accession to the NATO and EU, which has been proclaimed as major strategic goal by all Macedonian governments since the independence. The referendum ended with a contradictory outcome. On one hand, more than 94% of the voters who turned out, voted in favor of the Prespa Agreement. However, the total turnout was far below the threshold – less than 37% of the registered voters used their right to vote; 63% of the registered voters did not vote at all. Below we discuss the interpretations of the outcome of the referendum, and the next steps that the Macedonian government took in implementing the Prespa Agreement.

Interpreting the Outcome of the Referendum

While before the referendum it was clear that the “Yes” vote will prevail, it was not clear whether there will be sufficient turnout for the referendum to be valid (Macedonia's Constitution requires at least 50% of the eligible voters to turn out for the referendum to be considered successful). The government of SDSM-DUI, supported by a number of domestic and international actors led an

intense campaign in favor of the referendum. The major opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE had not made a final statement, formally allowing its members to freely choose whether or how to vote. Some of their officials publicly proclaimed that they have voted against the Prespa Agreement; others proclaimed that they have abstained from voting. Therefore, the SDSM-DUI government also indirectly led the campaign against the Prespa Agreement – they were encouraging opponents of the agreement, to turn out and vote against.

Aside from the political parties, a major actor on the eve of the referendum was the eclectic grassroots political movement (that was supported by the far right, the far left and a number of moderate and progressive voices) that used the hashtag #Bojkotiram on social media, supported by extra-parliamentary parties and some VMRO-DPMNE members, which openly and emphatically called for a boycott of the referendum. They managed to become viral and popularize the idea of not voting not only as a best political decision for the opponents of the referendum (i.e. people who were against the agreement did not vote “No,” but abstained from voting altogether). In the process, #Bojkotiram managed also link it with the popular culture. For example, one of the narratives they deployed ahead of the referendum that September 30 is a day for making *ajvar* (a traditional Macedonian pepper paste, done collaboratively). For its influence, #Bojkotiram gained a notorious reputation among pro-government and Western voices, and was even framed as part of the Russian influence in Macedonia.

The combination of low turnout and a decisive “Yes” led to contradicting interpretations. The government was quick to announce a victory – according to them, the number of the votes in favor of the Agreement represent a clear majority – even if Macedonia had the regular turnout from the past elections (of around 60%), and even if all the other voters voted against, the “Yes” vote would have still won. The further justified this reasoning by pointing to the fact that the current electoral records contain much higher number of voters than there are in the country (which nevertheless raises the question why the government did not fix this issue before embarking on the referendum). Those

who called for a boycott, as well as VMRO-DPMNE, argued the contrary point: the referendum failed. The President of Macedonia, Gjorge Ivanov, who just before the referendum called for boycott, also deemed the referendum an unsuccessful one and called for the nullification of the Prespa Agreement.

Legally, the referendum failed indeed – the State Electoral Commission, following the Constitution and the laws, confirmed the fact that the referendum did not pass the turnout threshold to be considered successful. The conclusion of the Commission was published in the Official Gazette of Macedonia. Nevertheless, the referendum was not obligatory, but consultative in nature, meaning it had no legal consequence for the further implementation of the Prespa Agreement. Based on their interpretation of the referendum outcome, therefore, the SDSM-DUI government decided to proceed further with the procedure to implement the Prespa Agreement, that is to amend the Constitution with the new name of the country and other changes agreed with Greece. The Greek government, was cautious about responding to the outcome in Macedonia – it nevertheless, greeted the efforts of the government in Skopje to implement the Prespa Agreement.

In the period to follow, the SDSM-DUI government enjoys further the support of the NATO, EU and the governments of US, Germany and other Western countries. All of them have greeted the outcome of the referendum, and decided to focus on the majority of the “Yes” vote, while downplaying the importance of the low turnout. For them, this was a sign that the Prespa Agreement must continue forward. Importantly, however, Russia has voiced a disagreement with how the situation in Macedonia was handled and vowed to use its power in the United Nations Security Council to block the Prespa Agreement from materializing.

The recognition by a significant part of the international community, in that sense, made a significant impact on the course of events after the referendum. It empowered the “Yes” camp and the narrative that *de facto*, the referendum was successful. The interpretation of the referendum as successful, admittedly, leads

to somewhat of a gray zone of when a referendum is considered valid and when not. In other cases, referendums that do not meet the legal requirements are instantly proclaimed as unsuccessful. In the Macedonian, case, what is even more puzzling, is that the referendum did not even matter in the first place – it was a consultative one, or as some analysts put it, and institutionalized survey of the public opinion.

Next Steps

In the aftermath of the referendum, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev was clear: the government proceeds with the proposal for Constitutional changes. The Constitution can only be amended with a vote of the Parliament. However, the Constitution cannot be amended with a simple majority (50%+1); it requires a qualified majority of $\frac{2}{3} + 1$ of the Members of Parliament (MPs), meaning 81 out of the total 120. Currently, the ruling coalition of SDSM-DUI (and minor coalition partners) has the support of about 70 MPs; VMRO-DPMNE remains the largest party in Parliament with about 50 MPs in its coalition group. The numbers are not completely known as there has been party-switching and coalition-switching among the MPs which prevents having a clearer picture. However, in the mainstream discourse, it is now established that to succeed with the Constitutional changes, SDSM will need the support of about 8-10 MPs from VMRO-DPMNE-led group.

According to Prime Minister Zaev, in the course of October, if the ruling coalition manages to secure the $\frac{2}{3}$ support, the Constitutional amendments will be put to vote in Parliament. Otherwise, Macedonia will head for another early elections in which SDSM and DUI, potentially forming a pre-electoral coalition, will seek a mass support from the electorate, in order to secure a $\frac{2}{3}$ “supermajority” which will allow them to change the Constitution. In the meantime, however, there is an intense process of negotiations, bargaining and public skirmishes between the government and the opposition.

On the record, Prime Minister Zaev has called the VMRO-DPMNE MPs to act rationally and responsibly and vote in favor of the Constitutional amendments, and has acted courteously, extending a hand for reconciliation, as said by the Government. However, there are a number of rumors about much more going on in the backstage: the Government is believed to use both sticks and carrots to win over the required number of VMRO-DPMNE MPs. On the record, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE Hristijan Mickoski, has rejected the possibility to support the Prespa Agreement and said he would rather go for the elections. Yet, while on the front stage there has been a typical back-and-forth between the two sides, it seems that the most significant development take place in the backstage of the political debate.

One of the most wide-spread theories is that VMRO-DPMNE collectively, and some of its MPs individually, are bargaining for a pardon or at least less severe punishment in the grand corruption cases led by the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO), and in the cases for the April 27, 2017 violent attacks in the Parliament. The former leader and Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, whose 2 years prison sentence for the illegal purchase of an armored vehicle has been upheld by the Appellate Court, has called his party not to make any compromises, and has said that he prefers to go to prison than to bargain for the name of the country. In the meantime, former Minister of Internal Affairs and Gruevski's close ally, Gordana Jankulovska, was sentenced to 6 years of prison for one of the same case as Gruevski (she has been silent on the political situation). The SPO has opened several other cases in October, which has increased the pressure on VMRO-DPMNE. There have been also a number of rumors about the “carrots” the government has generously offered to some of the VMRO-DPMNE MPs. However, this is believed not to be the most viable strategy for SDSM and DUI as it has caused a backlash, as a number of their supporters are not in favor of treating their political enemies with generosity; while those who are engaged in clientilistic relations with the Government as

their patron seem to be adjusting to the new reality by raising their own “price” in exchange for continued support.

While no one is certain how the new political theatrics will play out even in the month of October, the fear that Macedonia will easily slip to yet another prolonged period of political crisis hovers around the country.