



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Political briefing:**  
**The Parliamentary Vote on Constitutional Changes and its**  
**Consequences**  
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# **The Parliamentary Vote on Constitutional Changes and its Consequences**

## **Introduction**

The nation-wide Referendum of the Prespa Agreement held on September 30 had a contradicting outcome, whereby the overwhelming majority of those who voted, voted in favor of the Agreement (94.18%); nevertheless the turnout of the voters did not meet the legal threshold (36.89% of the voters used their right to vote where 50% were needed for the Referendum to be considered successful; for a detailed examination of the Referendum see past reports). While the referendum legally was considered inconclusive, the government led by SDSM and DUI interpreted its result as a green light to proceed further with the implementation of the Prespa Agreement. In the process, they had the support from the US, the EU and a number of Western European governments. The next step for the referendum was the voting in Parliament regarding the Constitutional amendments that referred to the change of the name of the country, and a number of other changes stipulated with the Prespa Agreement.

According to the Constitution of the Republic, Constitutional changes can be only valid if 2/3 of the members of parliament (that is 80 out of a total of 120 MPs) vote in favor of these changes. The coalition led by SDSM and DUI, by early October 2018 had a total of no more than 72 votes in the Parliament secured. This implied that for the vote on the Constitutional amendments to be valid, they needed to secure at least 8 more votes from members of the Parliament that hail from the main opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, and its smaller coalition partners. As a self-proclaimed nationalist party, VMRO-DPMNE opposed the Prespa Agreement, but had an unclear attitude towards the referendum (a large number of its members did not vote; and a small number voted against the agreement); yet in the days after the referendum, the VMRO-

DPMNE leadership claimed that the will of the people was not to adopt the Prespa Agreement and said they will not vote in favor the Agreement. At the same time, a number of current and former officials of VMRO-DPMNE had been investigated, prosecuted or sentenced for various crimes, most notably grand corruption based on the evidence from the leaked wiretaps, as well as the violence in the Parliament on April 27, 2017. The highest profile cases are the ones against the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who had been already sentenced to two years of prison for violating the procedures in procurement of an armored vehicle. Rumors have been that under the pretense of inter-party negotiations on proceeding with the Prespa Agreement, VMRO-DPMNE's leadership, but also some of its presecuted officials have bargained for pardoning or softening the legal sanctions against them. By the date of the voting, October 19, 2018, it became clear: eight members of parliament of VMRO-DPMNE dissented from the party, and voted in favor of the Constitutional amendments, which when added to the 72 MPs of the ruling coalition, made up a 2/3 majority that rendered the vote successful. This was followed by dramatic developments inside VMRO-DPMNE. This report looks at how these MPs were persuaded to vote against the will of the party; and then examines the consequences for VMRO-DPMNE and the Macedonian political stage.

### **The Eight Dissenters from VMRO-DPMNE**

Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, in the aftermath of the referendum, offered an opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness to his political opponents. This was immediately interpreted as an offer for pardoning of some VMRO-DPMNE MPs in exchange for their vote in the Parliament. This caused a heated discussion among the supporters of SDSM, as to whether a deal with representatives of the “former regime” that have been accused for serious crimes is worthwhile and legitimate. In the meantime, SDSM proceeded with a strategy that was said to employ sticks and carrots in order to “persuade” MPs from

VMRO-DPMNE to cooperate. In response, the political rumor mill started working with a full speed – there were a number of contradicting reports so as to whether SDSM will manage to secure the votes at all, who will be the “traitors” among VMRO-DPMNE, what will be the reward offered in return for a vote, and so on. The process was full of tensions and yet again polarized the public. The Former Prime Minister Gruevski has himself addressed the public via a lengthy Facebook post, arguing that him being sentenced to two years of prison and his appeal being rejected, was a result of a political process and him rejecting to support the Constitutional Amendments. He appealed to all of his fellow VMRO-DPMNE MPs to follow his example and resist the pressures, and argued that it is more honorable to go to prison than to betray the country. His appeals were mocked by his opponents.

Nevertheless, despite the pressure, the leadership of VMRO-DPMNE seemed quite reassured that SDSM will not be able to secure the prerequisite number of votes. In fact, this was the attitude of VMRO-DPMNE up until the day of the voting – they have therefore refrained from lengthy discussion of the topic in the Parliament in order to speed up the motion towards voting, and expose what they saw a failure of SDSM in securing the necessary votes. SDSM's MPs, on the other hand, tried to extend the process longer and delay the vote, trying to buy more time to persuade the remaining VMRO-DPMNE MPs needed.

On October 19 it was clear – SDSM was finally ready to proceed with the voting. However, while all the MPs and the public were eagerly waiting to see the outcome since the early morning of that day, the voting only took place in the evening. Allegedly, in the meantime, highly ranked SDSM officials, including Prime Minister Zaev were still persuading the last couple of VMRO-DPMNE MPs. There were a number of rumors so as to how this process looked like – with one account suggesting that the MPs were locked in the Cabinet of the Parliament Speaker, their communication with the rest of VMRO-DPMNE being cut off. There were reports of one VMRO-DPMNE MP being rushed to

hospital with a heart condition from all the stress endured. Once the voting proceeded, it was clear that SDSM's strategy of persuasion succeeded: the screen showed that 80 MPs voted in favor of the Constitutional changes.

Eight MPs from VMRO-DPMNE had thus split from the party. This split was visualized: at the time of the voting, the majority of parliamentary group of VMRO-DPMNE stood up from the seats, and moved to the sides of the parliamentary hall. Only the eight MPs who voted remained seating. Then, VMRO-DPMNE representatives demanded a manual, name-by-name listing of the votes. This process revealed the names of the eight dissenters: Emilija Aleksandrova, Ljuben Arnaudov, Vladanka Arvirovikj, Sasho Vasilevski, Elizabeta Kanchevska – Milevska, Krsto Mukovski, Zekir Ramchilovikj and Nola Ismailovska - Starova. At least few of these MPs have been either charged themselves for various investigations, or have had members of their family being under investigation. Most notable is the example of Krsto Mukoski, who has been charged for participation in the April 27 events – he was the Member of Parliament who opened the doors of the building and allowed the angry mob to attack his colleagues. He was despised for these acts; however, it seems that SDSM and its supporters have by now forgiven him: on the social media, they endearingly argued that Mukoski has again opened the doors – this time the doors towards the EU and NATO. Kanchevska – Milevska, on the other hand, is the former Minister of Culture who oversaw the process of construction of Skopje 2014 and is under investigations by the Special Prosecution. The son of Vladanka Arvirovikj is charged in another corruption case.

Finally, the drama in the Macedonian Parliament did not end with this vote. There will be few more votes as part of the processes of the amending of the Constitution in the following months. Therefore, this will be one of the main threads of discussion in the period to come.

## **Political Consequences**

The vote on the Constitutional Amendments was a surprise and shock to many, and in particular to the members and supporters of VMRO-DPMNE. While they further advanced the implementation of the Prespa Agreement and thus advanced Macedonia's pro-EU and pro-NATO agenda, they at the same time had an earthquake effect on the Macedonian political stage. After the vote, VMRO-DPMNE found itself in an ever deeper crisis. An urgent measure in the aftermath of the vote was the exclusion of the eight dissenting MPs from the Party. In Parliament, the MPs proceeded to form their own, new parliamentary group. They also started engaging with the ruling majority regarding on how to proceed with forming a Commission on Reconciliation, which is believed to be an euphemism for pardoning which would be granted to those that are charged in return for their support in the Parliament. Therefore, on the short term there are two implications for VMRO-DPMNE: first, and most obvious, their power in Parliament has been reduced, and moreover the ruling coalition, if assumed that will keep the support of the eight dissenters from VMRO-DPMNE, will technically command a “supermajority” that is able to further amend the Constitution – which in theory is not only restricted to the Prespa Agreement. Second, should there is really an agreement to pardon the VMRO-DPMNE MPs who are charged on various accounts, it is possible that they may also serve as witnesses in the processes against the other VMRO-DPMNE officials.

Furthermore, in addition to denouncing the eight dissenters, the VMRO-DPMNE leadership also announced that it has removed and suspended other high-level party officials, since they believed they were involved in the process of splitting the party and plotting a coup. Three big names were singled out: Sasho Mijalkov, Mitko Janchevski and Nikola Todorov. Sasho Mijalkov, the first cousin of the former Prime Minister Gruevski, is a former head of the State Security Commission, and was believed to be the security czar of VMRO-DPMNE, overseeing a number of operations including the illegal wire-tapping. Mijalkov has also amassed huge fortune and remains one of the most powerful

figures in Macedonia. He is also charged by the SPO on a number of accounts. According to the VMRO-DPMNE leadership, Mijalkov has switched sides and now closely cooperates with SDSM – and was instrumental in securing the eight votes in Parliament. Mitko Janchev is a mayor of Kavadarci and at the time of denouncement was Vice-President of VMRO-DPMNE. He is a tycoon who is also charged by the SPO, and believed to have switched sides and working with SDSM. Finally, Nikola Todorov used to be a Minister in the Gruevski government, and is also charged by the SPO.

The removal of the high fliers from the party took place during an urgent session of the Party's Executive Committee, during which the members expressed support in the leader Hristijan Mickoski. Nevertheless, these developments suggests that VMRO-DPMNE is undergoing a period of internal turbulences and splits. Moreover, Mijalkov and Janchev used to be some of the more resourceful individuals inside VMRO-DPMNE, as a party that has possessed considerable wealth and has been used to operating at high costs, this may be a significant blow. In fact, in the aftermath of these events, there were news of financial and property issues within the party, while Mickoski announced that the party may be soon selling its lavish headquarters building – only to be countered by the authorities, who said that the building, and other estate owned by the party, have been temporarily frozen. Thus it seems, the hardest for VMRO-DPMNE is yet to come.