



## Weekly Briefing

**The plenary session on constitutional amendments has been  
scheduled for August 18  
Gjorgjioska Marija Adela**

### China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

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### **Summary**

*In the summer of 2022, contrary to popular will the so-called French proposal was passed in the Macedonian parliament. Amongst else, it includes the requirement for Constitutional amendments to be passed, which would enable the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority as a constituent people in the preamble of the Macedonian Constitution. This is only one of the conditions set forth by Bulgaria in exchange for lifting its EU veto against Macedonia. This condition, in addition to the French proposal overall, is opposed by over 80% of the Macedonian population. At the same time however, the Government with the support of the EU has continued to pressure the country into accepting the conditions. In the spring and summer of 2023, EU leaders and bureaucrats intensified their efforts, holding meetings with political parties to secure approval for the amendments. Although the political parties Levica and VMRO-DPMNE remain opposed, there are speculations that MPs from VMRO-DPMNE might eventually vote in favor of the constitutional changes, parliamentary discussion on which commences on August 18.*

The plenary session on the constitutional amendments has been scheduled for August 18. According to the President of the Assembly, Talat Xhaferi, there is no deadline for voting on the proposal, but the deadline for completing the procedure for adopting the constitutional amendments is November: “The act of voting is not tied to the last day. This is provided for in the Rules of Procedure, this is also shown by previous practice from similar initiatives for constitutional amendments, because the Assembly decides if it has the necessary majority for decision-making. In that context, the Parliament will formally start work on the 18th, and the act of voting, whether it will be after the end of the discussion or will be postponed, depends on the specific situation on those days.”<sup>1</sup> President Stevo Pendarovski does not believe that the

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<sup>1</sup> November is the deadline for constitutional amendments, otherwise self-blockade, published on 28.07.2023, available at

<https://telma.com.mk/2023/07/28/noemvri-e-kraen-rok-za-ustavnite-izmeni-vo-sprotivno-samoblokada/> accessed on 01.08.2023

vote on the constitutional amendments will take place in August, but said that the deadline for voting is November 30, when the EU screening ends. If we do not change the Constitution by that moment, says Pendarovski, a self-blockade will come into force. “My assessment is that either a serious attempt will be made to ensure a two-thirds majority or there is no reason to force a quick vote, when at this moment it is clear that there is no two-thirds majority in the Parliament,” said Pendarovski.<sup>2</sup> At the moment, according to him, there is no plan B, except to compromise on the constitutional amendments. Similarly, according to Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski, constitutional amendments are a task that can be completed only by Macedonian politicians, regardless of which political party they belong to. If they are not approved, for the first time the block for European integration will not come from outside, but from inside.<sup>3</sup>

The government and the opposition (at least in public) both maintain their stances on the constitutional amendments. The government sees these amendments as a pathway to EU accession and emphasizes that this matter should not be exploited for party interests. On the other hand, the opposition, opposing the constitutional amendments, insists on subjecting them to a vote and holding elections on the issue. The largest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE issued a statement which confirmed that it remains in the position of non-acceptance of the constitutional amendments. "Over 80 percent of the citizens are against the constitutional amendments imposed by Bulgaria, which this government is trying to enforce. In a state, the ultimate authority lies with the people, and they should have the final say. However, SDS (referring to the ruling party) seems unwilling to acknowledge this fact and is going against the will of the vast majority of citizens. Furthermore, they have been avoiding elections and facing the people, similar to how the devil avoids incense” says VMRO-DPMNE's statement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pendarovski: If we do not change the Constitution, only a blockade will come into force, published on 27.07.2023, available at

<https://faktor.mk/pendarovski-ako-ne-go-promenime-ustavot-vo-sila-stapuva-samo-blokada-> accessed on 01.08.2023

<sup>3</sup> KOVACHEVSKI: For the first time, the blockade comes from within, to enter the EU by 2030, published on 12.07.2023, available at

<https://denesen.mk/kovachevski-za-prv-pat-blokadata-doagja-od-vnatre-da-vlezeme-vo-eu-do-2030-godina/> accessed on 01.08.2023

<sup>4</sup> It is good for the government that the debate on the constitutional amendments has started, the opposition remains against it, published on 31.07.2023, available at

At the same time however, the EU has continued to pressure the VMRO-DPMNE into accepting the conditions. In the spring and summer of 2023, EU leaders and bureaucrats intensified their efforts, holding meetings with the political party in order to secure approval for the amendments. On July 13th, ministers from three EU member-states (Slovakia, Austria, and the Czech Republic) visited Skopje with the aim of exerting pressure on political parties to endorse the constitutional changes. "There is no time to lose. We urge you to proceed with the necessary constitutional amendments to initiate membership negotiations. Postponing the adoption of these amendments would delay North Macedonia's accession to the EU and pose a risk of isolation," said the foreign ministers of Austria, Alexander Schallenberg, the Czech Republic, Jan Lipavsky, and Slovakia, Miroslav Lajcak, speaking on behalf of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs of the European Union, Josep Borrell. "When I speak, I always say that NATO guarantees security, and the EU guarantees prosperity." I wish the same for North Macedonia. You are already a member of NATO. We consider North Macedonia as part of the European family already and the process simply needs to be completed," Lipavsky said.<sup>5</sup> After the visit, additional pressure arrived from the USA. Derek Schole, an adviser at the US State Department, emphasized that MPs were elected to make challenging decisions. He stated, 'As dynamic democracies, we elect our representatives to face tough choices and make decisions. While political disagreements and point-scoring are inherent in the democratic process, their choices should not undermine essential reforms and the rule of law. Ultimately, I am confident that the people's representatives will act in the best interest of the country and propel it forward,' according to his statement.<sup>6</sup>

The diplomatic offensive continued on the 17th of July when the Ministers for Europe from Germany, France, and Poland visited Skopje. The so-called "Weimar Troika," consisting of Anna Leermann, Minister for Europe of the Federal Republic of Germany, Laurence Boon,

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<https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/za-vlasta-dobro-e-shto-e-zapochnata-debatata-za-ustavnite-izmeni-opozicijata-ostanuva-protiv/> accessed on 01.08.2023

<sup>5</sup>European troika in Skopje: There is no time to lose, published on 13.07.2023, available at

<https://www.dw.com/mk/evropska-trojka-vo-skopje-obid-da-se-zabrzaat-ustavnite-izmeni/a-66214460> accessed on 01.08.2023

<sup>6</sup> Continued pressure for constitutional changes, Mickoski says he will not give in, published on 14.07.2023, available at

<https://sitet.com.mk/prodolzhen-pritek-za-ustavni-izmeni-mickoski-veli-deka-nema-da-popushti> accessed on 01.08.2023

State Secretary in charge of Europe at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of France, and Szymon Shinkowski vel Senk, Minister of the EU of the Republic of Poland, were hosted by the Vice Prime Minister for European Affairs, Bojan Maricic. A delegation of VMRO-DPMNE also held a meeting with the high delegation. The meeting was clearly focused on pressuring the party into accepting the constitutional changes. Following the meeting vice-president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski wrote a post on Facebook: "Today, three Ministers for Europe from France, Germany, and Poland visited us. They shared their perspectives, and we expressed gratitude for their visit. We made it clear and direct, stating, "YES for Macedonia's membership in the EU, but NO for constitutional changes under Bulgarian dictation." Our stance remains clear, straightforward, and dignified!"<sup>7</sup> However, not everyone was convinced that VMRO-DPMNE will be able to withstand this pressure, considering the party's close ties to the Collective West and their historical track record of voting against the popular will on matters of national interest. Namely, in spite of their rhetoric in opposition to the name change, 8 MPs from VMRO-DPMNE voted to support the country's name change and were instrumental in pushing through this hugely unpopular and undemocratic decision. Many feared that recent history will repeat itself in the context of the constitutional changes.

The only party that remains vehemently opposed to the Constitutional Changes and the French Proposal is Levica. During a Parliamentary debate on the Constitutional amendments, MP and party leader, Dimitar Apasiev, delivered a passionate political speech, criticizing both the domestic government and the EU. He emphasized that Bulgaria is not the sole problem in this geopolitical issue. Although his speech was not covered by the mass media, it garnered huge viewership on Facebook, indicating strong popular support for Apasiev and his political party.<sup>8</sup> This indicates that if VMRO-DPMNE were to betray their electorate once again, it could lead to a considerable shift of votes towards Levica, potentially impacting the overall political system and strengthening Levica, an anti-NATO and an anti-US imperialism force on the Macedonian political landscape.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/nikoloski-na-ministrice-za-evropa-na-frantsija-germanija-i-polska-im-kazhavme-da-za-chlenstvoto-na-makedonija-vo-eu-ama-ne-za-ustavni-izmeni-pod-bugariski-diktat/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://antropol.mk/2023/07/25/apasiev-eu-ima-kriza-na-liderstvo/>

As Macedonia faces the critical issue of constitutional amendments, the political landscape is filled with tensions and pressures from both internal and external forces. The plenary session scheduled for August 18 is expected to be a pivotal moment in this process. The government, with EU support, advocates for the amendments, viewing them as a pathway to EU membership. However, over 80% of the Macedonian population opposes these changes. The largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, maintains its rhetoric against the amendments and asserts that the citizens should have the final say in such matters. However, as the date of the plenary session approaches, uncertainty looms over whether VMRO-DPMNE will succumb to the mounting pressure or maintain its resistance. The party's past decisions, including voting in favor of the country's name change, have raised doubts about its steadfastness in opposing the constitutional amendments. Levica stands as the sole party vehemently opposing both the Constitutional Changes and the French Proposal. The outcome of the upcoming session could have profound implications for Macedonia's political landscape. Should VMRO-DPMNE betray its electorate, Levica could experience a surge in support, potentially altering the political system and strengthening anti-NATO and anti-US imperialism forces in the country.