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Balkan boycott

Why the inconclusive referendum in Macedonia poses a challenge to progressive politics in the Western Balkans

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In a referendum held on Sunday, 30 September 2018, the Macedonian population answered the following question: 'Are you in favour of membership in the EU and NATO through adoption of the deal between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?' In favour: 91.61 per cent. Against: 5.64 per cent. The 36.87 per cent voter turnout was well below the symbolic threshold of 50 per cent, as the opponents of the so-called Prespa agreement largely boycotted the referendum.

The referendum in Macedonia neither failed nor succeeded. It was advisory. And the symbolic minimum threshold is based on the assumption that 1.8 million voters in Macedonia and abroad were *able* to vote. This out-dated figure distorts the fact that that probably 50 per cent of the eligible voters living in Macedonia *did* vote – and voted 'Yes'. The result: Those who used the opportunity to vote democratically are overwhelmingly in favour of adopting the agreement with Greece and membership in NATO and the EU, while its simply boycotted the referendum. Fortunately, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev is not letting the inconclusive outcome stop his programme of important reforms.

Now parliament must decide whether to amend the constitution (to change the country's name) by the end of the year. After the polls closed, Hristijan Mickoski, who heads the conservative opposition party VMRO-DPNME, thanked the boycott movement #bojkotiram, which had been raving against the deal with Greece for months. That was democratically questionable and strategically unwise.

A historic chance for EU accession

The referendum was supposed to give Macedonians the chance to express whether they agree to change the country's name to 'Republic of North

Macedonia' with the aim of EU rapprochement and NATO membership. Zaev's social democratic government had one underlying calculation: It wanted to give the opposition, which had positioned itself against the government's reform programme for months, a face-saving opportunity to vote for the constitutional amendment in parliament. VMRO had loudly called the compromise with Greece 'treason' and announced that it could reach a better agreement. So the referendum could have given MPs the chance to comply with 'the people's voice' without betraying their own positions – and go from the EU waiting room into EU accession negotiations and NATO.

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Only by accepting the Prespa Agreement with Greece does Macedonia have a chance to start negotiations on joining the EU, and only by changing its name can Macedonia join NATO. Numerous international visitors went to Skopje in recent weeks to show that the EU welcomes Macedonia's pro-European course and convey the opportunities presented by EU and NATO membership: economic recovery, more jobs, better prospects for young Macedonians and strengthening the rule of law.

The fact that populist and nationalist forces are rejoicing over a Pyrrhic victory – an advisory referendum that had too few voters according to out-dated voter registries – does not just mock the government's and reform forces' efforts to make Macedonia compatible with the European Union. It is also a slap in the face of all the international actors who are working for stability and progress in the Balkans. On top of that, it also disregards the fact that 670,000 people *did* vote. Their votes must count, despite the fact that many of their fellow citizens chose to *not* vote.

The Western Balkans' future

The conservative party leadership in Macedonia is actually telling its countless high-ranking international visitors, including some important representatives of its own party family, such as Angela Merkel, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn, that they are uninterested in seizing the historic opportunity. For weeks in advance, President Gjorge Ivanov had been uttering divisive rhetoric regarding the name change and the government's inclusive 'supra-ethnic' style of politics. Unsurprisingly, he boycotted the referendum.

We must now appeal to pro-European reform forces within VMRO.

Macedonia is receiving a great amount of international attention because the EU needs reforms in the Balkans to succeed. The region is important in terms of migration policy, not least since 2015. Geographically, the Western Balkans are an island in the EU. It is in all EU states' strategic interest to link with it long-term and support peaceful democratisation. For a long time, regional 'stabilocrats' received EU support.

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Finally, however, Macedonia has a government that is a credible partner for carrying out reforms. Zaev and the Macedonian social democrats are the Western Balkans' only reliable ticket to the future: Their programmatic politics are based on values, not ethnicity or nationalistic struggles; they take courageous decisions without just thinking about their own careers, and they clearly have the will to drive change.

The EU should recognise the vote

This particular will must rapidly be substantiated by clear signals in key policy areas. The EU is especially concerned about reforms of the judiciary and secret services. However, most Macedonians will only feel these in the future. The government is therefore well advised to concern itself not just with these important areas that are key to political and long-term economic stability, but also with everyday tangible issues: People expect improvements in Skopje's terrible air pollution, road reconstruction, waste disposal and the underfunded and segregated educational system.

Nevertheless, as long as the dispute about the name and the necessary constitutional amendment are not settled, there can be no real reform process. Ironically, two leftist governments (in Macedonia and in Greece) are hoping to overcome old disputes by agreeing the name change. Should Zaev's government manage to break through the populist groups' reactionary blockade, Greece will have to keep its word and ratify the agreement.

Other European countries should recognise the clear 'Yes' vote by democratic forces in Macedonia as an outstretched hand and a plea for support. After all, in June 2019, the Council of Europe and EU member states will have to decide whether to give Macedonia a date to begin accession negotiations – or not. This decision is also about the EU rewarding progressive politics of the West Balkans – or missing that opportunity and potentially cutting those links. Other powers have long

recognised the region's strategic relevance. They are already standing by, waiting.



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