

# For Brussels, Macedonia by any name must be European

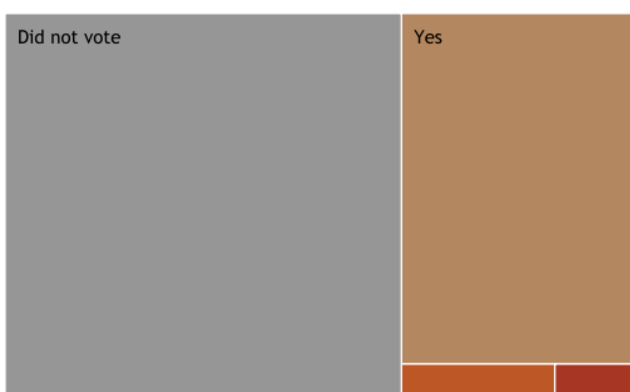
Blog post by Practice Lead Alexander Smotrov, 2 October 2018

The long-anticipated constitutional referendum in Macedonia on Sunday has been watched carefully both in Brussels and in Moscow. The seemingly convoluted question in ballot papers - "Do you support EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between Macedonia and Greece?" - in fact provided an unequivocal direction for 1.8 million voters in the Balkan nation. The resulting 91% vote in favour of the proposal by the pro-EU government led by social democrat Zoran Zaev looked very good on paper but turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory.

The EU enlargement commissioner Johannes Hahn was quick to congratulate the Macedonians on the "very significant 'yes' vote"<sup>i</sup> to settle the name dispute with Greece which, in his opinion, showed a broad support to the Euro-Atlantic path of the newly rebranded Republic of North Macedonia. The political reaction from Moscow was very different echoing the opponents of the plebiscite, including Macedonia's opposition party VMRO-DPMNE and nationalist president Gjorge Ivanov. The Russian foreign ministry pointed out that the low turnout - just 36.8% - shows that "Macedonian voters preferred to boycott the decisions aggressively imposed on Skopje and Athens from the outside"<sup>ii</sup>.

## The result of the Macedonian referendum

% of total registered voters



Source: State Election Commission of the Republic of Macedonia

However, the bold statements about the decisive results of the advisory vote seem a bit premature. In reality, there have been no winners so far. Moreover, the debate around the referendum has reignited deep internal divisions in the country and further destabilised fragile political stability achieved in the last couple of years. Without credible popular support, Zaev and his government will now face a nearly impossible task to win support for the name-changing deal in the parliament.

The nationalist opposition holds enough seats to block the two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution. This could easily cause a fresh political crisis and lead to a new election.

The strong foreign angle in this debate just shows that Macedonia - like several other Western Balkan nations - remains a battleground for geopolitical and economic influence between Russia and the west. This may also explain why western politicians and officials are so eager to accelerate the process to make sure the country is committed to its Euro-Atlantic vocation.

The EU will definitely benefit from the resolution of the name dispute with Greece and bringing Macedonia closer. This would help better protect the union's southern frontier from the migration flows from the Middle East and the Mediterranean. This would also shift the geopolitical dynamics and contain Russian influence in the Western Balkans. In its fear of NATO expansion, Moscow has reportedly been very active in its attempts to derail the referendum throwing its support behind VMRO-DPMNE and anti-western information campaigns. A potential EU enlargement also threatens Russian economic interests in the region as Macedonia would be a key transit country for Russian natural gas through an extension of the TurkStream pipeline from Turkey to central Europe.

At the end of the day, the fate of the proposed deal and the future path of country's development can only be decided by Macedonians themselves. But policymakers in Brussels and Washington are now confronted by a difficult dilemma on how not to lose the gathered momentum and reiterate the strategic benefits of the deal both for Skopje and Athens. With so many vested interests and external influences involved, they are aware that the current window of opportunity for the Republic of Macedonia, its Euro-Atlantic vocation and related foreign investment could close quickly, leaving it in the "former Yugoslav" limbo for way too long.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://twitter.com/JHahnEU/status/1046472062678773760>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3363368](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3363368)