

Macedonian Prime Minister: Our future is in the EU

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News

The Prime Minister of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) Zoran Zaev has told MEPs he believes his country is ready to start negotiations on EU accession.



Zoran Zaev | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Speaking in Parliament in Strasbourg on Thursday, he also said he was optimistic about his countrymen backing a controversial name change for Macedonia.

A referendum at the end of the month will ask citizens whether they are willing to change the country's official name to 'Republic of North Macedonia'.

On 30 September the population will be asked, "Are you in favour of Nato and EU membership, and accepting the name agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece?"

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The deal has been stridently opposed by nationalists on both sides of the border - last Saturday Greeks protesters clashed with riot police - but polls suggest a slim majority are in favour of the deal, boosted by overwhelming support among Macedonia's sizeable ethnic Albanian minority.

The change is the main part of a deal between Macedonia and Greece signed by their respective prime ministers in June. Greece has long blocked Macedonian accession to Nato and the European Union, claiming its northern neighbour's name is an unfair appropriation from the northern Greek region of Macedonia.

But, addressing MEPs, Zaev said that backing the name change would offer a new path forward for the small nation of around two million people, which has struggled since it became independent after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991.

He said, "In 1991 I was a 17-year-old who dreamed of my country joining the EU. I hope that this will now come true."

Zaev's speech focused on securing the support of the public and that of the opposition for both the name change and for the next steps required for the republic's possible accession to the EU.

Greece and FYROM signed a preliminary agreement to rename the latter in June, following a decades-long name dispute, which blocked the country's prospects of joining the European Union and Nato.

In his speech, Zaev said, "We face yet another historic crossroad in our history and this name change is not an easy decision for us.

"We all know what benefits will derive from this and this referendum is a once in a lifetime opportunity - our ticket for entry to the EU and Nato."

Noting that the country celebrated its independence anniversary on 8 September, he spoke of the country's EU credentials, saying, "We do not want to be isolated from the rest of the world and want to be part of the European family where we belong. Our future is in the EU.

"The prospect for EU membership is a mobilizing factor in the implementation of reforms.

"Yes, we have made progress, but this is not enough. We can do better. Struggling with internal conflicts and conflicts with our neighbours.

"We still face great challenges, but we will never stop fighting for a better future and will not stop now. Joining the EU will bring greater stability for us all. We are taking all possible steps to reach EU standards, including the fight against corruption and rule of law.

“There is a long road ahead of us, but the EU idea is the guiding force for us.

“We are proud of the agreement with Greece and Bulgaria. We are a microcosm of Europe and its motto: united in diversity.”

He admitted that the name problem with Greece had been one of the biggest issues facing his country.

But he dismissed this as a “misunderstanding” with Greece and accepted that this had also “not been easy” for the Greeks.

He said there had been “delicate, sensitive” talks in which both made concessions in a bid to put an end to a different to something that has been an obstacle for our countries for 25 years.

He said the talks had “laid the foundations for increased cooperation once and for all” and the deal is one that “could be applied in other countries around the world.”

The Prime Minister said the referendum was “all about our future” and, in terms of its “historic proportions” was on a par with independence in 1991.

Highlighting the prospect of joining the EU, he told members, “EU membership will bring lots of benefits including the chance to strengthen our economy and better standards in education and healthcare.”

After the speech, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani told Zaev, “You will have our support for the stability of the Western Balkans. Stability of the Balkans is key for the EU. You and your country can count on the support of the EU.”

About the author

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