The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bulgarians to Vote on Russian Nuclear Plant Project

By The Moscow Times

October 25, 2012



SOFIA — Bulgarians will vote on whether to approve a Russian-built nuclear power plant in the country's first referendum since the fall of communism, the Bulgarian parliament ruled.

Earlier this year, the government abandoned a 2,000-megawatt nuclear project at Belene, citing a lack of Western investors. But Russian state firm Atomstroiexport, which had a contract to build the plant, last month demanded 1 billion euros ($1.3 billion) in compensation for the cancellation.

The opposition Socialists demanded a referendum to challenge the decision to drop the project, which cost the government popularity against a backdrop of rising electricity prices and high unemployment. On Wednesday, parliament voted 106-7 in favor of a referendum.

But the center-right government of Boiko Borisov amended the question to be posed in the plebiscite. It will now ask, "Should we develop nuclear energy in Bulgaria by building a new nuclear power plant?" The new text does not mention Belene specifically.

The original question was: "Should we develop nuclear energy by building a new power plant at the Belene site?" The Socialists abstained from parliament's vote in protest at the change in wording.

"By changing the question, Borisov is already losing support," said Andrey Raichev of pollster Gallup International. "But the referendum is not going to decide next year's elections."

The referendum may be invalidated because of a tough turnout provision requiring that the number of voters match that of the last parliamentary elections. That figure is about 4.25 million out of a population of 7.3 million.

"It is complete nonsense to expect that we will have that many people showing up at any referendum," said Rumiana Kolarova, a political analyst at Sofia University.

Many Bulgarians had hoped the Belene plant would help restrain electricity prices. Bulgaria already has one operational 2,000-megawatt nuclear plant on the Danube River at Kozloduy, and it provides cheap electricity.

The Socialists collected more than 770,000 signatures for a referendum, well above the minimum half a million required.

They said Borisov's GERB party had used its strength in parliament to override a significant degree of popular support for the nuclear project.

The president now has a month to set a date for the vote, which is most likely to be held in January.

Support for GERB has fallen in opinion polls to 21.4 percent, compared with 16.1 percent for the Socialists, according to the latest survey by independent pollster Alpha Research.

Even if GERB remains the largest party in next year's election, it would probably need to strike a coalition deal with other parties to stay in power.

Related articles:

- Forest Being Transferred to Build Nuclear Plant
- Rosatom to Build Nuclear Fuel Plant in Ukraine
- Atomstroiexport Claims $1.3Bln From Bulgaria

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/10/25/bulgarians-to-vote-on-russian-nuclear-plant-project-a18857