

The issue has sparked a heated debate in the small European Union nation of 2 million people known for its stunningly beautiful Alpine scenery. The right to water was enshrined in the country's constitution in 2016.

Slovenian voters overwhelmingly rejected changes to the country's water management law, a development seen as a blow to the country's right-wing leader.

About 86.5% of people voted against the amendments approved by Prime Minister Janez Jansa's government in March that ecologists claimed threaten the environment and water quality, according to a near-complete count of ballots released by election authorities.

Around 13.5% of the votes were in favor of the government amendments. The turnout was over 45% among Slovenia's 1.7 million eligible voters — the highest in a referendum since 2007, the STA news agency said, showing high public interest in the topic.

"It has been shown that Slovenia is home to compassionate and tolerant people who help each other and fight for the public good and for nature," said Nika Kovač from the Institute 8 March group that campaigned against the changes.

At the center of the dispute was a provision regulating the construction of buildings — including hotels, shops and restaurants— close to rivers, lakes or the sea.

While the government insisted it has tightened the construction rules and provided more water and flood protection funds, opponents said the regulations favored the interests of private investors, limited public access to water and jeopardized its quality.

The water dispute reflected heightened political tensions in Slovenia, where Jansa's government has faced accusations of curbing democratic and media freedoms in the traditionally liberal nation.

Environment Minister Andrej Vizjak told public broadcaster TV Slovenia that the referendum was misused and the government's goals misinterpreted.

"People have reacted emotionally" and encouraged to vote by "some pamphlets that have nothing to do with the legislation's purpose," he said, according to STA.

The referendum came after environmental and civil society groups joined together in a "Movement for Drinkable Water" and collected more than 50,000 signatures demanding the vote.

Jansa also has faced EU scrutiny over his populist ways as Slovenia took over the European Union's six-month rotating presidency earlier this month.

Source: apnews.com