

The changes to the waters law were fast-tracked through Slovenian parliament despite strong opposition from environmentalists and experts.

The opponents associated in the Drinking Water Movement criticise the law for prioritising private capital at the expense of people's health and water ecosystems in Slovenia. Their representatives said that they had managed to collect almost 48,500 signatures before the 24 May deadline, while 40,000 would suffice. The National Assembly must now meet to formally call a referendum in seven days.

While the government says the changes to Article 37 narrow the possibilities for construction on the coast and river banks, the opponents claim the opposite.

Miha Stegel from the Danes civil initiative said today the changes were harmful because they facilitated mass construction of simple buildings on the coast.

The law also expands funds for maintenance of bodies of water from the state budget to also include money from the Water Fund, which Stegel also questioned.

"Cleaning rivers is currently funded from the state budget, the Water Fund is meanwhile meant for research and for ensuring drinking water," he said.

Responding to the delivery of signatures, the Environment and Spatial Planning Ministry said in a written statement that "the signatories were unfortunately misled".

They in fact gave their signatures to oppose drinking water protection, better flood safety and stricter conditions for construction in the mentioned areas. It pointed out that the changes narrow construction options by eliminating the option of reducing the coastal area from 15 to zero metres. This means the new law only allows construction of infrastructure that is deemed public good, such as recreation facilities or children's playgrounds. What is more, such infrastructure can be built only if allowed by individual municipal spatial plans, the ministry said, adding there were several other safety measures to prevent a potentially harmful impact on waters.

The ministry had earlier said that by pooling money from the Water Fund, the funds for the maintenance of bodies of water will increase by EUR 17 million to around EUR 25 million this year.

Once the referendum is formally called, it must be held between 30 days and one year after being called. The referendum proponents expect the campaign to be tough, said Uroš Macerl from Eko Krog.

"We expect many attempts to make citizens quarrel, divide them among ours and yours, left and right, red and white ... but I'm convinced citizens will prove we understand what a democracy means and what water means. This referendum will be a test of the citizens' maturity."

Slovenia has enough signatures for referendum on Water Act

The new law will be rejected if a majority of those going to the polls vote against it, yet only if at least 20% of Slovenia's voters go to the polls.

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