Lithuanian president faces impeachment

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Following a parliamentary inquiry into allegations of fraud against Lithuanian President Rolandas Paksas, the country's parliament has moved to impeach him.

On December 1 the parliamentary commission investigating alleged links between the president and several of his advisors to organised crime issued a statement calling Paksas a "threat to national security". Paksas and his entourage have been accused of associating with Russian-based mobsters and of being influenced by a Russian public relations firm with close links to the Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB.

Since his surprise election in January 2003, many of Paksas' political opponents had expressed concern that the president had too many ties to Russian interests.

The chairman of the parliamentary commission, Aloyzas Sakalas, urged Paksas to resign. This was echoed by the Social Democratic Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas. Brazauskas had previously distanced himself from those calling for the president to step down.

The accusations originated at the end of October from a state security department report into corruption and breaches of national security by the president.

On December 2, the commission found against Paksas and parliament voted 70 to 16 in favour of accepting its findings. The next day members from the four largest parliamentary factions moved to initiate impeachment proceedings. To begin impeachment requires 36 votes in the 137 seat parliament, with 85 votes required to remove the president from office.

On December 17 the parliamentary speaker and leading opponent of Paksas, Artus Paulauskas, telephoned the president to inform him that 86 parliamentarians had voted for impeachment.

The 22-page impeachment document charges the president with multiple offences including violating his oath of office, posing a threat to national security, leaking secret documents and allowing his aides to abuse their positions.

Prime Minister Brazauskas and the mayor of Vilnius, Arturas Zuokas, met with Paksas soon after parliament initiated proceedings, urging him to resign. The Catholic Church—the main religious organisation in the country—backed those calling for the president's resignation.

Brazauskas, himself president from 1993-1998, told Lithuanian national radio, "If I were president I would resign the same day that intellectuals and the church spoke out against me."

Sections of the Lithuanian elite are worried that the crisis is damaging the country's international standing as it prepares to join both NATO and the European Union. One of the president's main critics, Andrius Kubilius, former prime minister and leader of the conservative anti-Russian chauvinist Homeland Union Party, said: "Lithuania, [before] this crisis, was reported in the European and also in the world press as some kind of Baltic tiger, with a very rapid growth of economy, especially this year. Now it's reported in the world press as a country with a big presidential scandal."

Paksas has stated that he is being set up by his political enemies and that he will fight the impeachment. He told Agence France Presse, "I have no doubt that I will remain as president of Lithuania," accusing his detractors and the state security department that initially investigated his office of being the real danger to Lithuanian national security.

In an interview with the newspaper *Kauno Diena*, Paksas issued a threat to those who would remove him from office: "Why should I resign? Paraphrasing the Bible, I would say, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'"

Paksas has twice before been prime minister and has previous political alliances with many of those now

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calling for his resignation. Many who are currently urging him to stand aside will be concerned that the president might expose other shady deals in Lithuania's corridors of power. Lithuania's tiny political elite—which has tended to swap positions of power between a few individuals since independence—are concerned that an acrimonious parliamentary impeachment could lead to the downfall of several of their number and not just the president.

Thousands of protesters have gathered in the capital, Vilnius, calling for Paksas to quit, while opinion polls have indicated that levels of public trust in the president have fallen from 48 percent prior to the outbreak of the scandal to just 18 percent presently. Confidence in the president has not been helped by the Constitutional Court's review of the citizenship granted by Paksas to his main financial backer and advisor Yuri Borisov, a Russian-based millionaire. Borisov—who stands accused of links to the Russian mafia and of illegal arms trading to Sudan—was granted a Lithuanian passport by Paksas soon after the January presidential election. At the time Paksas cited Borisov's "philanthropy" to Lithuanian good causes as justifying the granting of citizenship in record time. However the Constitutional Court found that the supposed largesse of Borisov was largely invented—except for the more than $600,000 donation to Paksas' own election campaign.

Speaking after the court hearing, Borisov explained the arrangement he had reached with Paksas: "Of course we had an agreement with the president. What do you expect: I give him the money, hello and goodbye?"

Perhaps most damaging of all to Paksas was the official snub he received from the Bush administration. The Lithuanian president had been scheduled for months to pay an official visit to Washington on December 8 where he would be personally thanked by George W. Bush for the contribution of Lithuanian troops to the occupation force in Iraq. However, on November 22 the White House announced that the trip had been cancelled.

For Paksas a meeting with the US president would have provided him with a major boost in the eyes of the Lithuanian political elite, which has functioned as one of Bush's most unswerving supporters in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The cancellation of the visit has effectively anathematised Paksas, and hugely aided those who are seeking his resignation. Like Eduard Shevardnadze, the recently deposed president of Georgia, Paksas is likely to have been viewed by Washington as too closely tied to Russian-based business to serve as a reliable friend of US imperialist interests.

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