

Divisions within ruling elite drive impeachment of Lithuanian president

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In a move that marks a sharp increase in tensions within Lithuania's fractious social elite, the country's parliament has voted narrowly to impeach President Rolandas Paksas. Paksas was removed from office and temporarily replaced by the parliament's speaker—and Paksas's main political rival—Arturas Paulauskas.

Paksas has been mired in controversy since a state security report issued last October accused him of financial impropriety, leaking classified material and giving citizenship to Russian oligarch Yuri Borisov in return for financial support.

The impeachment of the president—who is the head of state but lacks extensive powers, which are largely vested in the prime minister—marks an escalation in the political instability that has plagued Lithuania for more than a decade. Since the 1991 restoration of capitalism across the former Soviet Union, Lithuania has been ruled by no less than 12 governments.

It is just 13 months since Paksas won an unexpected victory over the incumbent Valdas Adamkus. The victory of Paksas, who was previously prime minister on two occasions and a former mayor of the capital Vilnius, was greeted with more than usual hostility by his opponents. Paksas, who had some connections to wealthy figures in Lithuania's Russian-speaking minority, was viewed as not being sufficiently anti-Russian to represent Lithuanian business interests. Throughout the 1990s the country's elite has whipped up Lithuanian chauvinism directed against Russia and the large minority of Russian-speaking Lithuanians.

This anti-Russian propaganda has served to justify Lithuania's deepening subservience to American and European imperialism. The country joined NATO on April 1 and its leading politicians have acted as one of President George W. Bush's firmest supporters in the "war on terrorism" and occupation of Iraq. Lithuania is

about to join the European Union on May 1 and has been instituting a raft of big business policies in preparation.

Paksas is himself a supporter of membership of both NATO and the European Union, and is not above using chauvinism for political ends. However, the anti-Paksas campaign that has portrayed him as subservient to Russian interests is a manifestation of the Lithuanian elite's reliance on anti-Russian scaremongering to compensate for their inability to win popular support for their policies.

It is likely that the state security department, headed by Mercys Laurinkus, began spying on the head of state immediately following his election in an attempt to force him from office. Six months later Laurinkas handed a huge dossier against the president and his officials to Paulauskas. Ironically, the dossier was compiled in conjunction with the Russian state security services, which were looking to neutralise business figures such as Borisov who were considered to be potential rivals to the Putin administration and to this end were prepared to make common cause with the Lithuanian elite.

While Paksas is likely to have engaged in dubious or even criminal activities, the investigation into him and the subsequent impeachment is far from an attempt to clean up political life.

The parliament had to decide on three charges against the president, with impeachment needing the votes of 85 members of the 141-seat parliament (Seimas) on any one charge. Paksas denied any wrongdoing, saying that the impeachment process had been the culmination of a political vendetta against him. He asked, "Are we not destroying the state by using the secret services for political purposes?"

In the end, 86 members of the Seimas voted against

him for unlawfully granting Lithuanian citizenship to Yuri Borisov, Paksas's main financial backer during his election campaign. The same number also voted against him for leaking classified information when he warned Borisov that Lithuanian security agents were tapping his phone. The final charge that he intervened in the privatisation of a road construction firm to illegally divert shares to his friends was supported by 89 parliamentarians.

The closeness of the votes surprised most Lithuanian political commentators who had expected a resounding defeat for the president. The media had suggested that a previous Constitutional Court ruling against Paksas had meant that the impeachment result was a foregone conclusion. Furthermore, the official snub by the Bush administration in December, when his state visit to Washington was cancelled, would have been seen as greatly reducing his ability to remain in office.

The tight vote may be an expression of concern among the ruling class that the impeachment process has only served to increase to dangerous levels the already substantial level of popular antipathy to official politics in Lithuania.

Furthermore, there is a concern that the entire process of ousting Paksas could come to nothing as some opinion polls have shown that should he run for reelection he would stand a strong chance of regaining the presidency. A spokesperson from the Liberal Democrats, the party that Paksas formed in 2002, said the narrow result meant that their leader would remain an active political figure in the country: "I don't think this vote is anything special. If 100 would have voted to remove, then we would have lost."

Valentinas Mazuronis, chairman of the Liberal Democrats, told reporters that the party would encourage Paksas to run in the fresh presidential elections to be held in the summer.

The anti-Paksas section of the Lithuanian ruling class is now looking for a candidate to take over the role of president. This is a task that may prove difficult as few political figures in the country are held in high regard by the population.

Social Democratic Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas, who served as president from 1993 until 1998, has said that he would consider running if Paksas were to stand. Acting President Paulauskas, who has been at the forefront of the moves to impeach,

suggested that his decision to stand would depend on whether the parties other than the Liberal Democrats would rally behind a single candidate.



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