

Rolandas Paksas, president of Lithuania (2003-2004)

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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

RFE/RL: A great deal has been written about the reasons for your impeachment, and many facts have come to light that can be viewed in different ways. But speaking generally, could we say that de facto you were stripped of your post because of very close relations with Russia?

Rolandas Paksas: I think that would not be the truth, or it would not quite be the truth. Our former deputy and European Parliament member, the late academician Rolandas Pavilionis, put it very well: He said that President Paksas will not serve anyone -- not the Americans, not the Russians -- but only the Lithuanian people. That's not well liked. It is not well liked by those countries that think they rule the world and that their decisions determine what happens to countries that are not very big or to people who do not belong to such big states. I have always tried to give top priority to the affairs of our people, the Lithuanian people, Lithuanian citizens. But it looks like the time has not yet come when every country can autonomously achieve its aims. The world is divided into certain blocs, into certain unions, and perhaps one or another of those unions didn't like what I was doing. Perhaps the desire to have a controllable president lives on. Perhaps that's the case.

RFE/RL: Whose desire?

Paksas: [The desire] of those large states that have global influence over everything.

RFE/RL: In this case, Russia...

Paksas: Of course... But the question was whether good relations with Russia were the weightiest reason [for my impeachment]. I wanted to have good relations with all states -- with the United States, with Germany, and with Russia as well, because many aspects of my life are tied to Russia. But still, a president must serve his people.

RFE/RL: Politics, like history, don't have a subjunctive tense. But still, if you were to return to the times of your presidency, what would you now do differently?

Paksas: I would work a little bit differently.

RFE/RL: For example?

Paksas: Well, for example, the advice I got was: Mr. President, you've become president -- enjoy it! Enjoy it, travel around foreign lands, be grateful to fate that you're president, hang awards

and medals on others' chests, give out prizes. Enjoy life! Why get involved in this, that, and the other? Maybe that was some sort of hint? Maybe it was just friendly advice from one person, or maybe he wasn't alone... Life is beautiful, probably, because you reach your goals and accept it as a lesson, as a test, as some sort of jumping-off point for the future. That's how I feel.

RFE/RL: Yury Borisov, the Russian businessman, basically ruined your career. What lesson did you take away from that? If you could turn back time, would you maintain a relationship with him?

Pakasas: He's now a substantial, wealthy, influential businessman. If he hadn't existed, I think someone would have had to invent him. If it hadn't been Borisov, it would have been Ivanov or some other Russian last name. There was a need to find someone to have either a stick or... someone to hit [me] with. I'll say it again: If he hadn't existed, those who thought up this plot or coup would have had to invent him.

RFE/RL: In your view, how has Russia changed? Has it changed?

Pakasas: I will try to answer your question like this: There is a political scientist and politician I like. He worked in the U.S. presidential administration. It's [former U.S. national security adviser] Zbigniew Brzezinski. He said about Russia – and I support him wholeheartedly – that Russia has always wanted to have a solution for world events. Always. A hundred years ago, and 50 years ago, and now. And over the time period you're asking about, over 11 years, I think that desire has grown a great deal, the desire for a chance to influence the solutions to certain events in certain regions of the world. That's become very obvious.

RFE/RL: Right now Lithuania is in the midst of a conscription drive [after reintroducing the draft earlier this year]. Should Lithuania be wary of Russia? Should it fear Russia?

Pakasas: I oppose this [conscription]. I don't think it's necessary. I think every country needs an army. Every country needs a good professional army. The technology we have today, and what we'll have in the future, is so sophisticated that it's quite difficult to learn in nine months to work it. In terms of patriotism, I don't think this brings a benefit. It is probably more of a gesture.

RFE/RL: You've noted that Lithuania is a small state by comparison to big Russia with its giant military and economic levers of influence. Have you ever feared Russia?

Pakasas: Me personally? I personally have never been afraid. You just have to understand: We can choose a wife, or we think we choose a wife. As I see it, a wife more often is the one who chooses her future husband. But neighbors are given by God, and you have to live with that neighbor in accord and peace. I think Lithuania's power is not just in the distance from its southern to its northern border, in its territory or in the size of its population, but in [its] mobility – that's one component. [I mean] Lithuania's mobility in terms of people's ability to work with Americans, with Russians, with Germany, with Africa if you like. And Lithuania's

power is in its people. There was a time when Lithuania stretched from the Black Sea to the White Sea, and of course every Lithuanian remembers this once in a while. The same goes for our being a basketball country, or people say about Lithuania that people learn to fly before they learn to walk. But being afraid... I personally have never been afraid. Going back to that comment of Brzezinski's, it went on to say that Russia always wanted to have an influence over processes in the world, but never wanted to start a war. Never wanted to start a war.

RFE/RL: Are you in touch now with any Russian politicians? Do you maintain any relationships with them? Whom do you like the most on the current Russian political scene, and whom do you find unpleasant?

Pakas: Very little. But I won't hide that I have many friends in Russia. I graduated from the Civil Aviation Academy, that was my second college degree in St. Petersburg. And I spent six years flying with the Soviet Union's national aerobatics team. I have a lot of friends. I don't really maintain close relations with politicians. I used to like [former Moscow Mayor Yury] Luzhkov as an economic manager. He came here to Lithuania for the 750th anniversary of the coronation of [King] Mindaugas. There are lots of people I remember fondly.

RFE/RL: What about the bad ones?

Pakas: Let's not let the bad ones know they're bad.

RFE/RL: The Lithuanian press has written about you extensively from all angles. You've been called a pro-Russian politician and described as someone with economic interests in Russia. How would you classify your own relationship to Russia? What is it like – your Russia?

Pakas: Here's a photo of Volodya Makagonov with a Lithuanian flag. He's a distinguished Russian test pilot. We flew around the world together in a single-engine plane. I know very many good Russian people and friends and am always happy to see them. Awhile back I performed at an airshow in China. There were Russian pilots there too. We hadn't seen each other for maybe 20 years. And then we met, and talked, and it was like we'd seen each other just yesterday.

RFE/RL: You're a test pilot. And you say Lithuanians learn to fly before they learn to walk. Which profession is more dangerous in your view – pilot or president?

Pakas: That's a hard comparison to make.

RFE/RL: Do they have anything in common?

Pakas: How are politics different from chess? They seem similar, right? But they're not at all! Take a chessboard: You see the pieces. You can think through one, or two, or three, or 10 different possibilities. Politics has lots of figures and many of them, especially the ones holding the strings, you can't see. But in aviation, especially in aerobatics, in aerial acrobatics, there

you're in charge of the plane yourself and you gauge the situation, the wind, the altitude, speed, motion, the power of the motor. You gauge a lot yourself. In politics, you often can't see. Well, and the third thing: "president" is a profession; aviation is a way of life.

RFE/RL: And aviation stays forever?

Paksas: A presidency passes; it's temporary. Aviation stays till the end of your life, at least that's what I think. As long as I'm breathing, I'll keep on flying.

RFE/RL: For Radio Liberty's audience, it's very important to know your point of view on the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict in eastern Ukraine following the Maidan demonstrations in Ukraine. How does this affect or could it affect relations between Lithuania and Russia?

Paksas: When I spoke before the European Parliament, I stressed three things. First, Ukraine was probably not ready to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Second, the European Union itself wasn't ready; it didn't understand the situation in Ukraine. And third, I said then, this was half a year ago, we aren't ready, we don't know how to stop the war in Ukraine. I'm of the opinion that countries' borders are sacred. And it's not time to reconsider those borders, and Ukraine's sovereignty is sacred. And my proposal was then and now remains that the world's most influential political powers must sit down to the table and sit there until this issue is resolved. It's hard to compare probably, but when a new pope is chosen, the cardinals stay behind closed doors in the room until the white smoke appears. I also think it's time, and it was time then, for the U.S. president and the Russian president, the leaders of the EU, and the leaders of the United Nations to sit down at the table and keep negotiating until the war and the bloodshed are stopped.

RFE/RL: You're the only president in Europe removed from your post by impeachment. There is a film called "The Pilot" based on your biography. What plot could you suggest to the filmmakers if they were to make a sequel based on your biography?

Paksas: There's a saying pilots have that I really like: Airplanes rise against the wind.