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'Politically explosive and risky'

Knut Dethlefsen in Washington on the impeachment procedure against Trump and what the Ukraine affair has to do with it

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The US president is suspected of having abused his office to harm his rival Joe Biden. This was revealed by a whistleblower complaint and a White House telephone transcript between Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky. How should the whistleblower's report be evaluated? And why does Trump publish a document that incriminates him?

On Wednesday, it became clear that the transcript doesn't yet contain all the details. Apparently, the American secret services know even more. Since Thursday, we know that Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, published the internal whistleblower complaint and the Acting Director of the National Intelligence, Joseph Maguire, had to testify before the House Intelligence Committee. It was this complaint that triggered the whole process and that Members of Congress described as explosive and disturbing.

The intelligence officer makes serious allegations in the complaint: on the one hand, the US President abused the power of his office. He had demanded the help of another country to interfere in the US elections in 2020 in order to incriminate a political rival – Joe Biden. This represents a risk to the security of the United States. Moreover, the White House has taken steps to keep the content of the telephone conversation under lock and key. The verbatim transcript was stored on a computer system that is otherwise solely intended for highly confidential documents in the interest of US national security. So it was clear to White House staff that publication would be a heavy burden on the President. Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and his Minister of Justice, William Barr, were also involved.

The White House had obviously underestimated the impact of the published telephone notes. Their transparency was intended to

suggest that the President had done or said nothing illegal. A Democratic Member of Congress provided the explanation that the President and his advisers had already become so involved in corruption that they were unaware of how incriminating the content of the phone call would be. Trump and his supporters are now trying to question the whistleblower's credibility. Trump even compared the whistlerblower to a spy who needed to be punished. The whistleblower was, according to the document, not a personal witness. However, all statements in the complaint coincided with the content of the phone call and there are at least six government officials who, in the last four months, have confirmed details of the report and expressed concern about the activities of the President and his closest advisers.

The Democrats therefore have more than enough witnesses and clues for their impeachment procedure. It's unclear whether this will pay off politically. It's clear, however, that no one wants a president who asks for support from a foreign power in order to gain advantages in political disputes at home. Trump's approach is even publicly compared to that of a mafia boss.

Can the Democrats' impeachment procedure against Trump be successful without a majority in the Senate?

It's no longer a question of whether the proceedings can ultimately be successful. The obstacles that the American Constitution sets for a successful removal from office are very high. In fact, the situation is as follows: Nancy Pelosi, the chairwoman of the House of Representatives, already has sufficient support for the impeachment process. She has 218 votes in the House of Representatives. But the Senate acts as a judge in the proceedings; only if two-thirds of the Senators agree to the impeachment can it become valid. 53 of the 100 senators are Republicans. Therefore, it's unlikely that 67 senators will end Trump's presidency. The Democrats would have to pull 20 Republican senators to their side. The Democrats know that, that's why they want something else from the proceedings.

Congress is the body supervising the president and it's precisely this constitutional role that they want to fulfil. It's a question of protecting the country from a man who is obviously not a suitable president, who violates the dignity of the office and puts the security of the country at risk. Ultimately, however, the Democrats also want to put a stop to possible foreign influence in the 2020 elections. Trump and his people have crossed the Rubicon.

To what extent does such a procedure play into Trump's hands during the election campaign? Are there any risks associated with the

Democrats' strategy?

The procedure is politically explosive and risky, it's fuel to conflict and the mood in the country. At the moment, dismissing the president isn't popular among the public. But the procedure is also putting pressure on Republican senators. They will have to ask themselves what is more important: loyalty to Trump or the American Constitution and the security of the country and its institutions. The Republicans are trying to play the whole thing down, so they will try to portray the process as politically motivated.

The White House does not yet seem to be aware of the severity of the situation. The President is trying to distract from his misdeeds with disinformation and directing blame on others. He tries frenetically to portray himself as a victim of a witch hunt and publicly pities himself. But these appearances also show under how much pressure he is. It's not clear whether he's able to stand his ground in this conflict.

Even the so-called Mueller report had not acquitted him of having obstructed the judiciary and of having known of Russian influence in the 2016 elections. The proceedings that have now been initiated will presumably show that the President is prepared to cooperate with foreign powers in order to gain political advantages in his own country. And that he trusts dodgy lawyers more than the institutions of the American Constitution. He believes he's above the law. Nancy Pelosi makes it clear that this is not the case. Since it's a matter of principle, political strategising is out of the question.

What does this all mean for the election campaign of the democratic candidates for the 2020 presidency?

The impeachment procedure will, of course, influence the debates of democratic candidates. Every candidate will have to and want to comment on this. Ultimately, Democrats believe that Trump himself is a threat to democracy and the United States. They will therefore fight it with all legal and political means. This will increase the severity of the conflict. The Democrats want to win America back and shape it in the future. It's increasingly difficult to do this responsibly and debate the way forward in an atmosphere of political populism and agitation.

It's not yet clear whether the impeachment procedure will benefit a particular candidate. But one thing is clear: Trump is the symbol of political and economic corruption in the country. And there's one candidate who puts exactly this corruption at the centre of her campaign. That is Senator Elizabeth Warren.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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