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Kirkilas threatens to quit

Oct 03, 2007
 By Kimberly Kweder



VILNIUS - In the most chaotic week in Lithuanian politics for years, Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas threatened to resign over legislation that would dole out hundreds of millions of litas to pensions and destabilize the Baltic state's already fragile economy. But despite the threat, many observers, including President Valdas Adamkus, have questioned whether Kirkilas was genuine in his threats.

At issue are the cash payments promised to but withheld from elderly pensioners between 1995 and 2002. On Sept. 25, opposition parliamentarian Edmundas Pupins from the Homeland Union (Conservatives) presented a proposal to return the unpaid working pensions at a cost of about 560 million litas (162 million euros). The proposal will be voted upon at a future sitting of Parliament, but Kirkilas — who leads a minority government — immediately threatened to leave his post if the proposal is passed. Such a huge injection of cash into the economy would destroy the government's attempts to rein in inflation, which has approached the 5 percent threshold.

"I believe that the government will not agree to operate under the conditions as they are now when nearly every meeting of Parliament adopts decisions that fully unbalance state finances. A new majority is forming or has already formed, and it makes decisions without even thinking that someday they may have to be put into practice," Kirkilas said Sept. 26 during the government's weekly question-and-answer session.

Kirkilas said the government could not take responsibility for ruining state finances and the budget by increasing pensions. Money given to older people would likely be spent in short order, and this in turn would drive up consumer prices. "I see who votes for populist decisions — the Conservatives, the Labor Party and the Liberal Democrats," said Kirkilas, the leader of the Social Democrats.

The three opposition groups agreed last week to support each other in all parliamentary ballots on major legislation. Until recently, the Conservatives had been supporting the government's operations, but terminated their support on Sept. 8 due to what they said were high levels of corruption and problems at the State Security Department. President Valdas Adamkus, who met with Kirkilas to discuss his concerns, said he did not believe the prime minister would leave office.

"I suppose that the statement has no grounds whatsoever. The Seimas (Lithuanian parliament) and the prime minister must settle the issue once and for all," Adamkus told Lithuanian radio on Oct. 2. Adamkus said people were entitled to their pensions, but the method of returning the money must be discussed. Political experts said they were skeptical about Kirkilas' resignation threat. Vytautas Radzvilas, professor of political science at Vilnius University, said the political system would be thrown into chaos if Kirkilas stepped aside.

"I think that the statements from the prime minister should not be taken seriously... Everybody who sits in Parliament understands very well that if he would resign, Lithuania would fall into a political crisis. The process of creating a new government would be quite problematic," Radzvilas said.

With parliamentary elections a year away, Radzvilas said it is important to be aware of political games and motives of party members.

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