

French authorities step up financial probe of conservative presidential candidate François Fillon

By Stéphane Hugues and Alex Lantier
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The French national financial prosecutors' office (PNF) announced yesterday that it would continue investigations into conservative *Les Républicains* (LR) presidential candidate François Fillon. Fillon has collapsed in the polls and has come under escalating pressure since the *Canard Enchaîné* weekly published an article three weeks ago, accusing him of creating no-show jobs for his wife and their children, accumulating a total bill of around one million euros.

“As the authority tasked with bringing charges, it is my duty to affirm that the numerous pieces of evidence that have already been gathered do not allow us currently to consider the possibility of ending the investigation,” prosecutor Éliane Houlette wrote in a statement. This suggests that the PNF is either considering bringing charges against Fillon or handing the case to a specialized investigating judge, setting the stage for a longer judicial battle.

Fillon's legal team issued a statement declaring that “after three weeks of investigations and numerous interrogations, there is insufficient evidence to bring charges,” while Fillon said that he would rely on “the judgment of universal suffrage alone from now on.”

What is taking place is a vicious faction fight inside the French ruling elite, as the judiciary, under the watchful eyes of the Socialist Party (PS) executive, mounts a devastating offensive against the LR campaign. With Fillon relatively isolated in his pro-Russian views on foreign policy, he is now caught up in swirling conflicts over ties to Russia inside the NATO alliance.

This campaign already claimed the Trump administration's national security advisor, Michael Flynn, who was accused of inappropriately discussing

US sanctions on Russia with Russian officials.

Fillon's campaign is badly damaged, as he has been unable to explain away the charges in public, claiming that he had the right to employ his family, as it is something that is legal in the French Parliament. However, he refused to talk about the jobs being no-show ones, which is illegal. Over a week after the story had come out, he finally claimed that only he could determine that his wife and his children had carried out the tasks he had set them, and no one else.

The unrelenting media and judicial assault on the LR campaign is continuing and escalating, extending well beyond Fillon himself. The day before the PNF released its statement on Fillon, a further article appeared in the *Canard Enchaîné*, accusing MP Thierry Solère, the Fillon campaign's press spokesman, of fiscal fraud.

Furthermore, former President Nicolas Sarkozy has recently been indicted on “illegal financing of an electoral campaign.” His campaign spent €20 million over the legal limit of €22.5 million in the 2012 presidential elections. Sarkozy has also faced investigations in a long list of other scandals, including charges that he financed his 2007 campaign with funds from the late Libyan head of state, Muammar Gaddafi—whom France and NATO forces murdered at the end of the 2011 Libyan war.

The finances of LR, which have provoked countless scandals in recent decades, are undoubtedly corrupt. Alain Juppé, the final major candidate in last year's LR presidential primaries alongside Fillon and Sarkozy, was already found guilty in 2004 of creating no-show jobs under Jacques Chirac as Mayor of Paris. This is not the driving force behind the charges, however.

The attempt to wreck Fillon's campaign is based on opposition to Fillon's program, and notably his foreign policy orientation to President Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia. Revelations of irregularities in the employment conditions of Fillon's wife and children emerged less than a week after he traveled to Berlin to meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and called for an alliance with Germany and Russia directed against the Trump administration.

This trip crossed not only powerful forces in Washington, but also the PS government and the candidate closest to President François Hollande, nominally independent banker Emmanuel Macron, who has called for continuing Paris's close relations with both Berlin and Washington.

It appears that the material that the *Canard Enchaîné* published in its exposé on Fillon had been prepared long ago, well before widespread media coverage of its allegations began last month.

Mediapart, a French investigative journalism web site, had already revealed elements contained in the *Canard Enchaîné's* article last September: namely, that an official complaint had been lodged by French financial authorities with the judiciary. At that point, no details were available. However, the complaint first had to pass muster in the Commission of Tax Offenses, an independent body, which took place during the summer of 2016. Thus, the process has been ongoing and the material involved had been known to key authorities since at least September 2016.

It was in the wake of Fillon's trip to Berlin, however, that this material suddenly appeared in the *Canard Enchaîné* and became the focal point of a media campaign aimed at discrediting the presidential candidate.

This campaign reflects deep tensions inside the NATO alliance over the controversial pro-Russian positions Fillon has repeatedly taken during major international crises in recent years.

Fillon was prime minister under Sarkozy's presidency in the winter of 2010, during the initial stages of the Franco-German confrontation over the Greek debt crisis, when France concluded a sale of four Mistral-class helicopter carriers to Russia. This was part of a strategy of trying to rival Germany for political and commercial influence in Russia, and German officials strongly objected to the sale behind

the scenes. Heavy pressure from Germany and Eastern Europe subsequently led to the cancellation of the sale; Hollande later sold the warships to Egypt.

When Obama backed down from a war in Syria in September 2013, embarrassing the Hollande government, which had aggressively pressed for the war, Fillon reacted by flying directly to Moscow and meeting with Putin, the Syrian regime's main ally. Addressing the Valdai Club with Putin, whom he referred to as "dear Vladimir," Fillon criticized Hollande's alignment on Washington: "I hope that on this issue that France will return to its independence and freedom of judgment and action that alone give it moral authority in this crisis."

After Fillon won the LR nomination last November, papers including the *Canard Enchaîné* were already investigating reports that Fillon's 2F consulting firm had taken Russian funds. According to the *Canard's* initial report, it was this investigation that led it to publish its first piece on Fillon's wife and children last month.

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