



At a West Virginia election rally shortly after the verdict and confession, Trump Manafort and Cohen did not mention a word. (Photo: AP)

Wednesday, August 22, 2018

Interview with US lawyer

"Trump has made a criminal offense"

US President Donald Trump had to witness on Tuesday how two of his former closest confidants were legally brought to justice within a very short time. First, his former campaign spokesman Paul Manafort was found guilty on several charges. Shortly thereafter, his longtime personal lawyer Michael Cohen pleaded guilty in various charges.

That Trump should have known nothing of the illegal machinations of both, seems less and less plausible. Nevertheless, a lawsuit or impeachment against the US president is anything but likely. Law professor Catherine Ross, who teaches at George Washington University in the US capital, answers in an interview with n-tv.de the most important questions about yesterday's events.

n-tv.de: What does Manafort's conviction mean for Trump?

Catherine Ross: It was a terribly bad day for Donald Trump and his government. For the first time since the beginning of investigations by special investigator Robert Mueller, a jury has ruled against a defendant. Manafort was convicted of tax evasion and bank fraud on 8 of the 18 counts. I want to emphasize that he was not declared not guilty in any of the charges. The jury could not agree on the other ten charges. Manafort faces a maximum penalty of up to 80 years. He will most likely die in prison.

However, Manafort is yet another process in which its relationship with the president will play a much bigger role. While the current trial focused on Manafort's personal finances, the second one concerns money laundering, false statements and criminal conspiracy, as well as his contacts with Russia. Today's guilty verdict and trial in September are extremely important in relation to Mueller's further investigations into Russia and Trump.

And what about Cohen's confession of guilt?

This news was even more incredible than the verdict in the Manafort trial. Michael Cohen, the President's longtime personal advocate, pleaded guilty on several counts. The published agreement with the prosecution shows that Cohen was instructed by "one candidate" at national level to violate the campaign finance law. Even though he was not named, it is obvious that this candidate can only be Donald Trump. And the alleged infringement is most likely the hoax that Cohen allegedly paid to a porn actress so that she did not publicize her alleged affair with Trump shortly before the election in 2016. It is hardly clearer. Trump has therefore asked Cohen to commit a crime. He has thus made himself a criminal offense. The US President had just denied this a few months ago to press representatives. That's Trump's word against Cohen's word. This is a very tough situation for Trump. And we do not even know what Cohen has yet entrusted to the prosecutors. More and more evidence shows that Trump was aware of all the events in his campaign team.

What happens next?

These developments should cause the greatest alarm in the White House and White House staff. Even the president's defense team is slowly getting out of options. The only remaining strategy pursued by Rudy Giuliani and the rest of Trump's lawyers is to publicly attack the Mueller investigation, questioning its value and importance. We are in a really serious position. Will today be an important turning point in history? Yes, no question. Does it suggest that more shocking details will come to

us? Yes, without a doubt. But will it make a difference in the end? I can only say, I do not know.

If Trump has committed a criminal offense - will there be an indictment against him?

First of all, it is a legal situation never before heard before the Supreme Court. Therefore we have no precedent to which we can refer. The first question is: Can a President be charged while still in office? There is an internal directive in the US Department of Justice stating that an incumbent president should not be charged, as this could affect the country's political stability. Imagine, the third world war would break out and the president would be in court. I think those who introduced this directive in the Ministry of Justice did not expect us to ever get into such a situation. The second question is: Can a President testify, even under oath, are forced? Again, there is no precedent. There are two ways to hold the US president to account for his actions. One way leads through the American legal system. This, as stated, seems unlikely on the basis of the aforementioned directive. The second way is a political option by the impeachment procedure anchored in the US Constitution.

How likely is an impeachment procedure now?

Today's events were of great importance. However, I can not say with certainty that they will be the main reason for bringing about a turnaround. If I look at the reactions in the news programs, then no change can be seen. Maybe it's Manafort's second trial that makes a difference, or Mueller's final report. Even during the investigation of the Watergate scandal in 1974, it took a long time until the leadership of the Republican Party decided to withdraw the President's support. Only when tape recordings of President Richard Nixon in the Oval Office came to the public, the party leadership deprived him of confidence. Trump's continuous attacks on our justice system,

With Catherine Ross Hansjürgen spoke May