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The candidate for German president as a concession made by Merkel to FDP and the opposition

Marta Zawilska-Florczuk

On 17 February German President Christian Wulff (CDU) handed in his resignation after the prosecutor's office of Lower Saxony had announced it would launch an investigation into accusations of graft in connection with befriended businessmen when Wulff held the post of prime minister of this federal state (2003-2010). The Federal Convention – the body which elects the head of state and is composed of the Members of the Bundestag and an equal number of the representatives of the federal states – will meet on 18 March. A joint candidate of the coalition and the largest opposition parties will be elected new president – Joachim Gauck (aged 72), pastor, one of the leaders of the democratic opposition in the German Democratic Republic and the first head of the agency of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi records Gauck was the candidate of the SPD and the Green Party in the presidential election of 2010. The large support he enjoyed saw him lose to Wulff only in the third round.

Commentary

- Christian Wulff is the second president in two years who has been endorsed by the Christian Democrats and who left office before completing the term (in 2010 Horst Köhler resigned). Wulff's resignation deals a blow to Chancellor Merkel who pushed for his election as president in 2010 against the support his counter candidate enjoyed in the society and among politicians representing all political options. Due to an insignificant majority of coalition votes in the Federal Convention (approximately 4 votes) and the support pledged for the candidacy of Gauck by the FDP, Merkel could not risk pushing the election of her candidate this time.

- There are two reasons for Merkel's initial lack of support for Gauck. Above all it is the consequence of the position which the Christian Democrats took in the presidential election in 2010 but it also stems from the fact that a section of the Catholic CDU is reluctant to accept the candidacy of a Protestant clergyman for the highest post in the state. The fact that the chancellor agreed to the appointment of Gauck is a clear concession made by the CDU in the face of blackmail from the Liberals who insisted on this candidature. Thus the FDP expressed its objection to the alternative candidatures put forward by the Christian Democrats which were a clear signal sent by the CDU of its readiness to co-operate with the Green Party and the SPD in the context of next year's

parliamentary election. Both the former German environment minister Klaus Töpfer – put forward by the CDU – and Petra Roth – the mayor of Frankfurt am Main – have good experience in co-operation with the Green Party and the SPD and could be accepted by these opposition parties. The adamant stance taken by the Liberals can be interpreted as an attempt at exerting their influence on the coalition's politics, despite the ever-falling support for the FDP (now standing at approximately 3%). This temporary success will probably not improve the position of the Liberals in a sustainable manner.

- Despite his lack of political experience Gauck, due to this biography and social backing (69% of those surveyed support his candidature), is perceived as a good candidate for president. Up to now Gauck has participated in debates over internal issues, he has not been involved in discussions on European and foreign policies. He is seen as a person with very conservative views, in parts diverging far from the mainstream dominant in the SPD and the Green Party. For example Gauck has supported the anti-immigrant views of the SPD's controversial politician Thilo Sarrazin, he criticises the way Germany has withdrawn from the use of nuclear energy and is a proponent of a market-oriented policy. The head of state in Germany does not have a real impact on politics. As an active participant in public debate Gauck can however prove to be a difficult president for both Chancellor Merkel and the left-wing parties which support him.