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Germany: The struggle for the presidency

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Defeat for the candidate representing the government team in the presidential election may aggravate the federal government's problems and weaken Angela Merkel's position in the CDU.

On 31 May, German President Horst Köhler (CDU) stepped down from his office with immediate effect following sharp criticism of an interview in which he linked the Bundeswehr's engagement in military missions abroad to the defence of German economic interests. His unprecedented resignation has deepened the problems the Christian Democrat – Liberal government coalition has to face, such as the vast budget deficit and the draining public support for proposed reforms. The early presidential elections come as an additional burden for the coalition. Christian Wulff, who is the candidate supported by the CDU, CSU and FDP, has a serious chance of winning on condition that National Assembly electors observe party discipline. His defeat will worsen the already poor image of the coalition and at the same time will deepen disputes among Christian Democrats and sharpen the criticism of Chancellor Angela Merkel inside the party.

The background of the president's resignation

Although the function of the president is merely ceremonial under the German constitution, Horst Köhler has often participated in public debate on essential issues. His interview given on 22 May for Deutschlandfunk radio station was intended to be precisely this kind of contribution to the internal German debate on the use of the Bundeswehr. The official reason for Horst Köhler's resignation were the allegations that he supported the use of the Bundeswehr for purposes contrary to the German constitution, which were made by the SPD, the Green Party and the Left Party.

Horst Köhler was very popular in Germany. Still more than 80% of German respondents like him and want him to return. However, most of the media and some politicians have criticised the president very sharply, seeing his decision as an act of desertion and an impairment of the German government's position.

In compliance with the constitution, Jens Böhrnsen (SPD), speaker of the Bundesrat and prime minister of Bremen, has stepped in as acting president. He will hold this function until 30 June, when the Federal Assembly - half of whose members are representatives of the Bundestag, the other half being representatives of the federal states - is to elect the new president.

Candidates for the presidency

Considering the balance of forces in the Federal Assembly, two candidates have a realistic chance of winning the election. They are Christian Wulff (CDU), who is supported by the government coalition, and Joachim Gauck (independent), recommended by the SPD and the Green Party. The Left Party and the radical right-wing NPD have also put forward their candidates.
Christian Wulff is the prime minister of Lower Saxony and deputy leader of the CDU. This politician, who belongs to the conservative faction of the CDU, is believed to be a rival of Chancellor Merkel. Wulff, who has ruled Lower Saxony in a coalition with the FDP since 2003, is not a charismatic politician but still enjoys great popularity in this federal state. His serious competitor is the SPD and Green Party candidate, Joachim Gauck, one of the leaders of the democratic opposition in East Germany and the first commissioner for the Stasi archives. Gauck is respected and trusted by both the general public and politicians, including representatives of the government team. Although the CDU, the CSU and the FDP hold an arithmetic majority of 645 out of the 1244 votes, a sufficient number to ensure victory to their candidate, still many electors, especially those from the FDP, may not observe party discipline in the secret vote.

Consequences for domestic policy

Chancellor Merkel is being increasingly criticised as a result of Horst Köhler's resignation, which was preceded by the stepping down of Roland Koch as the deputy leader of the CDU and prime minister of Hesse. These two politicians have a reputation of Christian Democrat specialists in economic policy. Their resignations will significantly weaken the party's 'economic faction', which is recognised as one of its most important pillars, especially at present, when it is necessary to develop and push through a plan for vast budget savings. As a consequence, more and more conservative politicians are starting to openly demand a more decisive style of ruling and adherence to Christian Democratic values from the chancellor. Putting off decisions until the last moment, which is typical of Merkel and which was especially evident during the debate on financial assistance for Greece, the CDU's electoral defeat in North Rhine-Westphalia and the lack of unanimity in the CDU/CSU/FDP government led by her have resulted in lower voter support (a decrease by 10 percentage points in one month) for the chancellor. She is, however, still poll leader.
Köhler's stepping down as president is also likely to add fuel to the debate on the Bundeswehr's participation in military missions abroad, especially the mission in Afghanistan, which is viewed critically by more than 60% of the German public. At this moment, such a debate can do only harm to the image of the government coalition.
If the Christian Democrat/Liberal candidate wins the election, the chancellor will have got rid of a rival in current politics, and the government coalition will have shown itself as an efficient body. In turn, Gauck's victory will not only mean image defeat for the government but also will cause a sharper criticism of Chancellor Merkel, which may eventually lead to questioning her leadership of the CDU.