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Germany: Steinmeier's active presidency

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Germany's Federal Assembly will elect Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) as president on 12 February. He will replace Joachim Gauck who is stepping down after his first term. Steinmeier's election is a foregone conclusion given the deal struck by the groupings forming the grand coalition who have a majority in the Federal Assembly as along with support from the Green Party and the FDP.

The German president is elected for a five-year term. The competences of the office are limited and are focused on representational functions. These increase when there is a parliamentary crisis as the president can order a new election to be held if a chancellor loses a vote of confidence. The president has no legislative initiative, and he can only veto laws in case the legislative procedure is formally violated or if a law is contrary to the constitution. The veto has been used eight times since 1949. The impact a German president has on political life mostly depends on their personality.

Commentary

- President Gauck (independent), who is currently supported by 81% of respondents, has brought back confidence in the presidency after Horst Köhler and Christian Wulff (both from the CDU) had stepped down before the end of their terms. At the same time, he has been criticised on numerous occasions, mainly by the post-Communist Left Party, for his engagement in current political debates, including for his objection to their co-operation with other groupings . In his keynote speeches he gave a new impulse to the debate on Germany's stronger international and military engagement and migration policy, calling Germany an immigrant state. Gauck has also been open in his criticism of Russia. Before the end of his term in office he distanced himself from Steinmeier's 'peaceful policy' towards Russia, pointing out that ruling out military solutions *a priori* can only be desirable when all participants of the negotiations insist on this.
- Unlike Gauck, President Steinmeier will be more engaged on one of the sides of the political dispute. The fact that a Social Democrat who is supported by 79% of Germans is taking on the role (for only the third time in history) is a success for the SPD and makes it stronger ahead of the election to the Bundestag in autumn 2017. Using the esteem of the office and setting the tone for the political debate, Steinmeier will be able to support the Social Democratic head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sigmar Gabriel and the SPD's candidate for chancellor, Martin Schulz, during the election campaign. A further factor which will facilitate Steinmeier's active engagement in political life is the presence of

influential officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs whom he intends to employ at the President's Office. Stephan Steinlein, who currently serves as a secretary of state at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and who worked with Steinmeier at the Chancellor's Office when Gerhard Schröder was chancellor, is expected to be nominated as the head of the President's Office.

- Foreign policy and cultural policy, which Steinmeier gave high priority to at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will most likely be the most important field of his activity as president. Unlike Chancellor Merkel, Steinmeier will want to support a vision of the EU concentrated around the 'hard core' in the eurozone. The new German president will traditionally go on his first foreign visit to France (the exceptions were Köhler and Gauck, who visited Poland). Building closer relations with Russia may also be expected, and a meeting with President Putin in Moscow cannot be ruled out, unlike in Gauck's case.