



BULLETIN

No. 86 (162) • June 2, 2010 • © PISM

COMMENTARY

Editors: Jacek Foks (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień,
Łukasz Kulesa, Marek Madej, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

German President's Resignation

by Ryszarda Formuszewicz

The stepping down of Horst Köhler as president may undermine the CDU-liberal coalition in Germany. The ruling parties, in particular the CDU, are faced with the challenge of choosing a candidate to succeed him fast, which means that Chancellor Angela Merkel will concentrate on domestic affairs and Germany's activeness in the EU may be limited in the near future.

Horst Köhler (CDU) unexpectedly stepped down as federal president on 31 May, a year into his second five-year term. The reasons he gave for the decision were disrespect for the authority carried by the highest office in the country in connection with a wave of criticism he had faced following an interview for Deutschlandradio Kultur on 22 May. The president gave the interview in connection with his visit to Afghanistan. Talking about the reasons for Germany's participation in foreign missions, he mentioned not only security, but economic interests as well. This statement was interpreted as condoning the use of the armed forces beyond the confines laid down in the constitution, with the president also under fire for fuelling the public's critical opinion of the Afghan mission.

The Federal Assembly, which will appoint the new president, has been convened in accordance with the requirements laid down by the constitution for 30 June. In light of the anticipated balance of power in this body, the coalition will have a majority. The choice will be made by the CDU, as the CSU and FDP have decided not to put forward their own candidates, but the CDU will likely be ready to consult on this subject with the opposition SPD. Until a new president is appointed, presidential duties are performed by the head of the Bundesrat, social democratic mayor of Bremen Jens Böhrnsen.

Regardless of the reason given by Köhler for his resignation, its roots can also be traced to his belief that he was becoming increasingly isolated in his own political camp, with his own party adopting a disloyal approach to his presidency. Köhler's resignation is a blow first of all to the ruling coalition, which is embroiled in infighting. The departure of a popular president might consolidate the observed decline in public support for the coalition parties. Following elections in North Rhine-Westphalia on 9 May, the CDU and the liberals lost their majority in the Landestag there. They are also bearing the political consequences of the fight against the euro crisis and of the difficult negotiations regarding austerity measures. As a result of Köhler's resignation, the position of Chancellor Angela Merkel may also be shaken. For some time there has been talk of a leadership crisis in the CDU, and Köhler is the second leading CDU politician to leave office prematurely: recently, the premier of Hesse, Roland Koch, has announced that he will be leaving politics at the end of August.

The change at the post of federal president should not lead to major changes in Germany's foreign and European policy. The president's position in German constitutional bodies is relatively weak, and the head of state can be active in foreign policy mainly in the area of *soft power*—something Köhler has been taking advantage of, for instance by becoming involved in developing cooperation with Poland. But the need to appoint a new president fast is a burden on the already tight political agenda in Germany, so Chancellor Merkel, forced to focus on domestic matters, may for the time being be less active in the EU forum.