



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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German Presidential Election and Its Consequences

by Ryszarda Formuszewicz

Germany's presidential election procedure has provided a cohesion test for the ruling coalition of Christian Democrats and Liberals, whose candidate, Christian Wulff, gathered the required support only in the third round. This will deepen the crisis within the coalition and strengthen the position of Chancellor Merkel's critics. For Polish-German relations, the new president's links to the expellee community may be a liability.

The presidential election assumed a greater than usual importance due to the ahead-of-time resignation by Horst Köhler and an unfolding crisis within the governing coalition. The requirement of a 30-day cut-off time forced parties to select their candidates quickly. The CDU/CSU/FDP coalition entered Christian Wulff, a CDU vice chairman and prime minister of Lower Saxony. His rival, proposed by the Social Democrats and the Greens, was Joachim Gauck (no party affiliation), a former East German democratic opposition campaigner and the first federal commissioner for the Stasi archives.

The SDP/Green decision was a good shot politically, given that Gauck's views are largely in line with the ruling camp, where some were in effect faced with a real dilemma. The opposition thus managed to weaken the coalition's cohesion, while at the same time benefiting from the widespread respect commanded by Gauck. And the Social Democrats managed to demonstrate a clear difference from the rival Left Party, which put up its own candidate.

The German president is elected by the Federal Assembly, convened specially for that occasion, comprising the Bundestag deputies and the same number of delegates from federal states. In the 1,244-strong body, the CDU/CSU and the FDP had 644 representatives, which acted in Wulff's favor. His failures in the first and second rounds were a blow to the coalition, whose poor mobilization could also be seen in the fact that even in the third round not all its members voted for Wulff. He did score an absolute majority then (even though only a simple majority was required at that stage), but that did not suffice to neutralize the image losses sustained by the Christian Democrats.

Disputes within the coalition and mutual accusations of disloyalty are now expected to intensify, and Wulff's rather unimpressive victory is unlikely to help improve the ruling party's deteriorating standing. The worst hit by the Federal Assembly is the CDU leader, Chancellor Merkel, as discussions within the party about her leadership are going to gather momentum. Unwillingness to support the CDU candidate is widely interpreted as a vote against the party and cabinet chief.

Christian Wulff has already declared interest in international affairs, and Poland was indicated as one of his first destinations. But it is hard to predict how his presidency will influence Polish-German relations. The new president's hands-on experience of contacts with Polish partners—Lower Saxony has for years been cooperating with Dolnośląskie and Wielkopolskie voivodships—is an asset, whereas his links to the community of the so-called expellees are a liability. It is true that Wulff has distanced himself from the Prussian Trust, but he actively supported the idea of commemorating forced migrations, and he backed Erika Steinbach in a dispute over council membership in the Flight-Expulsion-Reconciliation Foundation. And it was under his premiership that the subject was mandatorily incorporated into school curriculums in Lower Saxony. He also greatly contributed to the revival of his federal state's patronage of the Silesian Expellees Organization, and he might emphasize his engagement during celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of this patronage scheduled for September.