

Media campaign targets German president

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A scandal surrounding the German president has dominated the German media for the past four weeks. On December 13 the tabloid newspaper *Bild* announced that in 2008 President Christian Wulff and his wife had financed their new home with a private loan put up by the wife of a businessman and friend of Wulff. Since then the affair has filled the news pages, editorials and headlines of the German media.

Soon *Bild* was joined by other magazines and newspapers such as *Der Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which began passing the ball to one another. Their coverage was supplemented by an endless stream of news reports and talk shows on public television. Even the information that nothing new had emerged about the affair was diligently and extensively reported.

When one draws a balance-sheet of all the revelations of the past four weeks, the result is threadbare. The president had close and cozy relations in certain business and media circles. However, most of the facts were already public knowledge from his time as prime minister of Lower Saxony.

Wulff and his family had enjoyed several holidays in the villas of friendly entrepreneurs and enjoyed free upgrades when flying; Wulff was economical with the truth about his personal business connections in the Parliament of Lower Saxony, and obtained a credit on extremely favourable terms from BW-Bank. There is no indication, however, that he violated any law.

Media attention quickly shifted from the affair itself to the way Wulff reacted to the allegations. The media demanded he answer hundreds of questions about his financial and personal relationships. When Wulff promised “transparency”, but still held back on some details, he was subsequently accused of cover-up.

Wulff’s attempts to influence reports on his personal finances by the *Bild* newspaper, in phone calls to its editor Kai Diekmann and Springer CEO Mathias Döpfner, were declared to be an attack on press freedom. Ironically, the *Bild* newspaper—which had kicked off the campaign and passed on details to other newspapers of a private phone call made by Wulff to Diekmann—was able to pose as the victim.

The bizarre climax of the campaign came on January 13 at the New Year’s reception of another Springer newspaper, the *Berliner Morgenpost*. Three hundred guests from the world of politics and business, plus other celebrities, gathered in the headquarters of the Axel Springer building to curry favour with the right-wing publishing house.

Among the guests were several members of the German government—Ilse Aigner (Christian Social Union, CSU), Ronald Pofalla (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Philipp Rösler (Free Democratic Party, FDP), Norbert Röttgen (CDU), Annette Schavan (CDU) and Guido Westerwelle (FDP).

The Social Democratic Party was represented by Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit, business interests by Rüdiger Grube (CEO of German Railways, DB), Hartmut Mehdorn (Air Berlin), Catrine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann (Dussmann) and the designer Wolfgang Joop. The field of culture was represented by conductor Christian Thielemann, Bayreuth Festival director Katharina Wagner and the writer Ferdinand von Schirach.

In front of the assembled guests, Springer CEO Mathias Döpfner praised the founder of the publishing house Axel Springer as the embodiment of “freedom, anti-communism, German unification, the market economy and support for Israel and America”, and then pounced on the president: “I’m not going to talk today about the last four weeks of continuous self-destruction on the part of the German head of state. The matter—and this takes a lot—has left me speechless.”

The head of the publishing house, whose tabloid *Bild* has taken the lead for the past four weeks in the campaign against the president, now accused him of “self-destruction”!

The Wulff affair and the way it has been hyped by the media raises serious issues. The argument that journalists have only done their duty and cast a critical eye on a prominent politician is implausible—the discrepancy between Wulff’s alleged misconduct and its media echo is too great.

Also there is little evidence that the media campaign has struck a chord with the public. Apart from a small demonstration of self-appointed “angry citizens”, obviously

staged for the television cameras in front of the presidential palace, there is no evidence of public support. Excitement over the affair is largely confined to the media itself.

Some commentators have spoken of a power struggle, “a kind of showdown” between Wulff and the *Bild* newspaper. This is closer to the truth.

The German media have never been a bastion of democracy and pluralism. As in other countries, it is dominated by a handful of financially powerful publishers who enjoy close relations with other business interests. The spectrum of opinion they permit is extremely limited.

But until now Germany has avoided the type of media concentration which took place in Great Britain where, since the 1990s, nobody became prime minister without first making a deal with the Murdoch press, or in Italy where former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi controls most of the media. The German media also permitted a somewhat broader range of opinion than its equivalent in America which barely allows dissenting voice.

The Wulff affair has changed all that. The fact that *Bild* sets the pace and the so-called “quality” press follows behind is unprecedented. The campaign was directed against an office which has traditionally enjoyed some immunity from such attacks. The German Penal Code even contains a section which threatens those found guilty of defaming the president with a prison sentence of between three months and five years.

The message directed during the last four weeks at Bellevue Palace, where the president resides, was unmistakable: “Either you play by our rules and do what we say or we will drive you out of office!”

Wulff is neither an especially independent nor progressive president. Quite the opposite. It was precisely because he made his career due in large measure to media support (with *Bild* to the fore) that he was such a suitable candidate to set an example.

Born in 1959, Wulff comes from a deeply conservative Catholic background. As a student he joined the youth movement of the conservative CDU and made his entire political career in Lower Saxony, where he was elected as state premier in 2008. Within the CDU, he was aligned with the so-called Andean Pact, a group of young right wingers in the party.

Support from the *Bild* newspaper in 2008 was decisive in preserving his career when the Catholic Wulff separated from his long-time wife and married a woman 14 years his junior. Reporters from the tabloid were given exclusive access to the private life of the couple and reported gushingly on the new

love in his life, her pregnancy and childbirth. All of this took place with the support of chief editor Kai Diekmann, one of the closest friends of former Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU), whose memoirs he has co-authored.

The reasons for *Bild*'s decision to junk Wulff are not entirely clear. Wulff evidently was taken off guard by the whole affair. In the presidential election of 2010, the paper favoured Wulff's rival Joachim Gauck. The militant anti-communism of the former head of the Stasi Records Authority was more in tune with the priorities of the Springer-Verlag than the adaptable Wulff. Gauck advocated the direct election of the president by the people and praised the anti-Muslim diatribes of SPD politician Thilo Sarrazin.

This is likely to be another reason for the paper's break with Wulff. *Bild* threw its weight behind Sarrazin and supported his racist theses, while Wulff spoke out repeatedly for the necessity to integrate Muslims into German society. In particular Wulff's statement on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of German unification: “Islam is now part of Germany”, met with fierce opposition in conservative circles.

Once triggered, however, the Wulff affair developed a dynamic of its own. Given the general loss of support for all political parties, the ruling elite is seeking new methods to secure its rule: a small clique of power brokers, spin doctors and editors are to develop the political line to be followed by all others – up to and including the German president. The Wulff affair was an ideal opportunity to advance this agenda.

Once that campaign was in full swing, the media were most agitated over the weakness and spinelessness of Wulff's reaction. They would be quite prepared to overlook corruption and nepotism and give their unstinting support to a strong and authoritarian figure sitting in Bellevue Palace.



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