

# German President Wulff resigns

Peter Schwarz  
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German President Christian Wulff tendered his resignation on Friday. He justified his move by saying that he no longer “fully enjoyed the confidence of broad layers of the people,” which he needed to dedicate himself “to the huge national and international challenges.”

Wulff is only the tenth president since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, but the second to resign under the chancellorship of Angela Merkel. The first eight federal presidents all completed one or two full five-year terms of office.

Wulff’s predecessor, Horst Köhler, a finance official and former head of the International Monetary Fund, resigned unexpectedly in May 2010, soon after the start of his second term. He said at the time that he felt misinterpreted and badly treated by the media following a remark he made on foreign deployments of the German military.

Wulff, at that time premier of the state of Lower Saxony and member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) executive, was personally selected by Merkel as Köhler’s successor. He was elected only on the third ballot. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens had put up a rival candidate, Joachim Gauck, the long-time head of the Stasi documentation centre who posed as an East German civil rights activist. Gauck also found support amongst conservative and right-wing forces.

Now, less than two years later, Wulff has resigned following a barrage of charges of corruption and abuse of office.

The immediate trigger for Wulff’s resignation was a request by the prosecutor of the city of Hanover to the German Bundestag to lift the immunity traditionally afforded to the head of state. The prosecutor declared that “after extensive examination of new documents and the evaluation of further media reports” he saw reason to suspect Wulff of “accepting benefits or granting favours.”

The declaration by the prosecutor’s office had been preceded by a two-month campaign in which Wulff was constantly confronted with new allegations of misconduct during his time as premier of Lower Saxony. Last December 13, the *Bild* newspaper reported that Wulff had bought his home with a private loan from a friend and businessman and then failed to reveal the loan to a committee of the state parliament. Since then, Wulff and his wife have dominated the headlines in Germany.

Wulff admitted to having made “mistakes” but denied doing

anything illegal. In his resignation statement, he expressed his belief “that the pending legal clarification will result in complete rehabilitation.” But following the decision of the prosecutor in Hanover to officially investigate the president, a unique event in the history of the Federal Republic, support for Wulff evaporated in his own political camp and he could no longer stay in office.

When one brings together all of the proven and unproved accusations against Wulff, they provide a picture of a politician with close and, on occasion, inappropriate relationships with wealthy businessmen from whom he repeatedly obtained favours. The Wulff family enjoyed a number of holidays in the villas of millionaire friends and benefited from cheap flights, hotels and other kickbacks.

The scale of the offences, however, is rather modest. The investigation by the prosecutor centres on the payment of two hotel stays by the film entrepreneur David Groenewold, who spent some time with the couple on the island of Sylt in 2007. In each case the sum involved was around €1,000.

A film company owned by Groenewold had received a credit guarantee of more than 4 million euros from the state of Lower Saxony some months earlier, leading the prosecutor, according to press reports, to deduce that Wulff was guilty of accepting kickbacks. Wulff says, however, that Groenewold had reserved and merely pre-funded the hotel room and that he had repaid the money in cash.

The close relationship between Wulff and influential entrepreneurs is indecent, but it is by no means unusual in German politics. Quite the opposite. A close and confidential relationship between political and business circles (including the trade unions) was the hallmark of the “German model” after World War II. The intimate relationship between the first post-war chancellor, Konrad Adenauer (CDU), and the Cologne banker Robert Pferdmenges was legendary, as were the roles played by the banker Hermann Josef Abs (Deutsche Bank) and the industrialist Hans Merkle (Bosch), who exercised enormous political influences behind the scenes.

Angela Merkel has held birthday parties for both Deutsche Bank CEO Josef Ackermann and IG Metall leader Berthold Huber in the chancellor’s office without any adverse reaction from the media. Her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD), for many years also a prime minister in Lower Saxony, maintained lucrative relationships with the same business circles as Wulff

without incurring any political or legal recriminations.

In 1998, a financial investor, Carsten Maschmeyer, who is also one of Wulff's patrons, invested 650,000 German marks in Schröder's election campaign. When Schröder retired from office in 2005, Maschmeyer paid him an advance of 1 million euros for his memoirs. Chancellor Schröder also maintained close relations with EnBW energy group CEO Utz Claassen. At the time, Claassen was one of the top executives in the energy industry, which then hired Schröder as a highly paid lobbyist after his resignation from political life.

It is not possible to be determine with certainty why similar relations have become Wulff's undoing. It is often the case that the real reasons behind such mud-slinging in the ranks of the ruling elite emerge in the public domain only many years later, if ever.

One motivation for the *Bild*, which supported Wulff for years, to turn against him could be Wulff's repeated statements calling for the fuller integration of Muslim immigrants into German society.

On the 20th anniversary of German reunification Wulff declared that alongside Christianity and Judaism, Islam was also integral to Germany. This brought him into conflict with right-wing and conservative circles. In his short resignation speech yesterday, Wulff again reiterated that as president it was "his heartfelt desire" that all those who wish to be part of German society "undertake training and work, irrespective of their roots."

The right-wing tabloid *Bild*, part of the Springer group, supports the racist theories of Thilo Sarrazin, a prominent Social Democrat who claims that Muslim immigrants represent a threat to Germany.

The campaign against Wulff was joined, however, by more serious newspapers such as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and by public television stations, which are not necessarily supporters of Sarrazin.

Another motive for the campaign against Wulff may have been the desire, in the face of growing social and economic turmoil, for a stronger and more authoritarian figure at the head of the state than the glamorous Wulff and his wife.

The resignation of two presidents within two years is an expression of growing instability and conflict within the ruling elite. The government coalition that won the 2009 election is in ruins. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) has fallen in the polls from 16 to 3 percent and could fail to reach the vote threshold necessary to gain seats in the Bundestag (federal parliament) in a new election.

The conservative camp is divided over many issues and would break apart were it not for the fact that CDU leader Merkel has rid herself of all potential rivals (including Wulff) by driving them out or moving them to other posts. Under these circumstances, the campaign against Wulff may have spun out of control and gone much further than many desired, including the chancellor.

Merkel is now trying to take advantage of Wulff's resignation to weld the parties in parliament closer together. Half an hour after Wulff's resignation, Merkel thanked him for his efforts in a remarkably brief speech, lasting barely a minute. She announced that she would approach the SPD and the Greens to find a jointly agreed successor.

The SPD and the Greens immediately signaled their support. SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel offered Merkel talks to find a common candidate and told the *Bild*, "It is crucial for the SPD to find a figure who restores to the post of head of state its appropriate respect and dignity." Similar comments were made by senior representatives of the Greens.

The chair of the Left Party, Gesine Löttsch, also spoke out in favour of a joint candidate of all fractions, although Merkel had not made any approaches to the Left Party.

The election of a successor approved by both the government and opposition parties would be a clear signal pointing towards the formation of a formal or informal grand coalition. It would not be the first time in German history that the election of a president prepared the way for a new government coalition. The election of Gustav Heinemann (SPD) with the votes of the SPD and FDP in the summer of 1969 was the preamble to the formation of the first SPD-FDP coalition under Willy Brandt in the autumn of the same year.

As in Italy and Greece, where most of the parliamentary parties support the technocratic regimes of the bankers Mario Monti and Lucas Papademos, closer cooperation between all the parliamentary parties in Germany would be aimed at imposing the consequences of the international economic crisis on the working class in the face of widespread resistance.

A strong, authoritarian figure in the Bellevue Palace could be useful in this regard. One contender for this role is the candidate defeated in 2010, Joachim Gauck, whose staunch anti-communism is very popular in right-wing circles. Other potential candidates include the current defense minister, Thomas de Maizière (CDU), and Labour Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU).



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