German President Gauck visits Turkey—the arrogance of German imperialism

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German President Joachim Gauck provoked a bitter public row during an official state visit to Turkey with sharp criticism of the government of Recip Tayyip Erdogan.

In a speech at the Metu Technical University in Ankara, Gauck said that he was watching with concern a tendency in Turkey to undermine the rule of law and balance of powers. He wondered "here and now, if the independence of the judiciary is still secure when the government replaces a large number of lawyers and police officers, preventing them from uncovering abuses of power without consideration for those affected."

The right to comprehensive information was a precondition for a free and democratic society, Gauck told hundreds of students. Only in this way could abuses of power be uncovered and those in power be held to account. Where freedom to express opinions and citizen involvement was limited, dissatisfaction, distrust and a willingness to commit violence grew.

As a democrat who has experienced a totalitarian state like the GDR (East Germany), said Gauck, he would raise his voice if he saw the rule of law endangered, even when his own country was not affected. "My plea is on behalf of the people, for their dignity, their freedom and their physical integrity."

The conservative daily *Die Welt* described Gauck's performance, which it praised, as a "dressing down" and a "provocation". He had deliberately chosen the location. Metu is among the strongholds of the Turkish student movement and was a centre of the Gezi Park protest movement.

The following day, Erdogan accused the German head of state, who was still in Turkey, of "interfering in the internal affairs of our country". Gauck still considered himself a pastor, which he once was, said Erdogan, and advised Gauck to keep his words to himself.

Gauck retorted promptly, "I did my duty, which is to engage with the conflicts currently taking place in society." He had actually been restrained in his remarks, he added.

Gauck was fully supported by the German media and politicians. His attack on the Turkish government met with widespread praise, while Erdogan's response met with a hostile reception. On Wednesday, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* appeared with the headline, "Erdogan ridicules Gauck."

The deputy president of the German parliament, Claudia Roth of the Greens, was enraged, commenting, "Erdogan insulted the President in an offensive manner. It makes clear that Mr. Erdogan's political style is lacking in civility and democratic culture."

European parliament members Alexander Graf Lambsdorff (Free Democratic Party) and Markus Ferber (Christian Social Union) demanded an immediate end to Turkey's accession talks with the European Union. "The country is increasingly distancing itself from Europe and fundamental European values," Ferber remarked.

Erdogan is the representative of a right-wing bourgeois regime, which is responding to the growing political and social tensions in the country by trampling on democratic rights. But the German head of state is the last person to lecture him about democratic values.

The German government played a significant part in producing the crisis to which Erdogan has responded with authoritarian measures. This is particularly the case with the civil war in neighbouring Syria, which has destabilised the entire region and caused almost a million Syrians to flee to Turkey, where they languish in overcrowded refugee camps.

Berlin systematically supported the pro-imperialist Syrian opposition, which provoked the civil war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and encouraged the Turkish government to do likewise.

This was the purpose of the stationing of 300 German

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army soldiers to protect airspace on the Turkish-Syrian border with patriot missiles. While Islamist militias with the support of the Turkish government bring weapons over the border and use Turkey as a retreat, German soldiers ensure by their presence that they cannot be attacked by the Syrian air force.

The US government also supports the Syrian rebels and worked closely together with Ankara. But Erdogan fell out with Washington after the military coup in Egypt deposed the Muslim Brotherhood, which is aligned with Erdogan's AKP, and Obama called off a military attack on Syria at the last minute. As the well-known investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported, the gas attack in Ghouta, near Damascus, which was to serve as the pretext for such an assault, was organised by Turkish intelligence in alliance with Islamist groups.

Since then, a bitter struggle has been raging between Erdogan's AKP and the Hizmat movement of US-based preacher Fetullah Gülen, who previously backed Erdogan.

Gauck said not a word about this context. Instead he made clear with undisguised cynicism that Berlin was maintaining its support for the civil war in Syria. Before meeting with Turkish politicians, he visited the German army unit on the border, praised them and claimed, "With your service you have contributed to preventing the conflict in Syria from spilling over into Turkey."

Afterwards he visited a Syrian refugee camp for a photo op with Syrian families. He hailed Turkey because it had taken in almost a million refugees. So far, Germany has declared its willingness to accept a maximum of 10,000. Only four months ago the EU, at Germany's insistence, reached an agreement with Turkey which obligates Ankara to take back all refugees who manage to overcome almost insurmountable barriers to reach the EU from Turkish territory.

Thus, while Gauck promoted in Ankara "the dignity, the freedom and the physical integrity" of the people, the German government is deeply implicated in the Turkish government's conspiracy in Syria and the brutal treatment of refugees from the war.

Gauck's record as a "democrat in the GDR", which he displays at every opportunity, is also a myth. Gauck was less of an advocate of citizens' rights than a resolute anti-communist. He stems from a family with strong connections to the Nazis. His mother joined the NSDAP in 1932, his father in 1934, and his uncle Gerhard Schmitt, who strongly influenced Gauck, in 1931.

Gauck's father was arrested by Soviet authorities after the war and sentenced to a camp in Siberia without his family knowing anything about his whereabouts. This had a major impact on his son. He rejected the GDR regime and studied theology because this provided him a certain degree of individual freedom.

But Gauck never belonged to the organised opposition in the GDR. He was even allowed to travel to the west, which was not possible for active oppositionists. Only during the transition to capitalism, as the end of the SED (Stalinist Socialist Unity Party) regime became clear, did he jump "on the bandwagon", as Hans Jochen Tschiche, a pastor active in the opposition in the GDR, wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2012. After reunification Gauck made a career for himself as head of the Stasi information authority.

Gauck was drawn to the federal republic not by any hankering after democracy, but rather by German imperialism. He has since become one of the most militant advocates of German great power politics. His carefully prepared speech on the day of German reunification in 2013 had programmatic significance.

At the heart of the speech was the call for Germany to once again play a role in Europe and internationally, commensurate with its economic power. In a world full of crises and unrest, Gauck demanded an active and militarist foreign policy. "Our country is not an island. We should not succumb to the illusion that we can remain unaffected by the economic, political and military conflicts if we don't take part in solving them", he warned. "Our most important concern is to maintain the political and military order and ready it for the future, particularly in times of uncertainty."

The German government has since implemented this programme in practice with its support for the uprising in Ukraine backed by fascists, and its aggressive course towards Russia. Gauck's appearance in Turkey was similarly characterised by the revived arrogance of German imperialism.

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