

TIME online article February 18, 2012 The Mess In Angela Merkel's Own Backyard: In Search of President No.3

By Claudia Himmelreich / Berlin Saturday, Feb. 18, 2012

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The job of the President of Germany is to cut ribbons, welcome heads of states and sign legislation into law. The post is occasionally ridiculed for its insignificance with the German word Frühstücksdirektor (literally, breakfast director). Germans are not used to hearing much about their presidents, who are usually senior-statesmen at or near retirement age. In Germany, it is the Chancellor — in this case Angela Merkel — who runs the show. But the holder of the Presidency is expected, at least, to be a role model, provide moral guidance and to look good in a suit. The president is also expected to know that, for any civil servant, accepting even small favors is verboten. Which is why, after months of relentless criticism and allegations, President Christian Wulff has resigned — leaving his ally Merkel sideswiped by the after-effects of a financial and ethical scandal she did not need even as she hectored Greece and other countries in the eurozone about the necessity for economic discipline and austerity. While serving as premier of the state of Lower Saxony, Wulff allegedly had friends pay for his vacations to Spain and the German coast and give him favorable bank loans and rental cars. As president, when the allegations started to unfold, he rushed to repay his friends, in cash. More embarrassingly, he pressured a German newspaper not to publish a story about a private loan he had accepted. Because he could not reach the editor, he left an angry voice message to this effect in which he managed to drop the fact that he was visiting Kuwait and "I'm just on my way to the Emir." The incident led to the coining of a new German verb: Wulffen which now stands for leaving an insufferable message on someone's answering machine. Its meaning has since expanded to include being evasive when asked to tell the truth — and for accepting favors. (German President Quits in Favors Scandal) As he resigned, Wulff said, "I have lost the people's trust and for that reason I can no longer fulfil the role of President at home and abroad." For her part, Merkel cancelled a trip to Italy on Friday to deal with the crisis. She accepted his resignation "with respect but also with regret," saying he "had dedicated himself to the interests of Germany. She insisted, however, that Wulff had "acted legally and correctly." Indeed, none of the allegations against Wulff involve illegalities. But, if true, they were unseemly: a 500,000 euro, low interest home loan in exchange for allowing a friend to tag along on an official foreign trip, for instance. And the alleged misdeeds are all said to have taken place back when he was governor of Lower Saxony. But the sheer number of favors and freebies, and his reluctance to confront the accusations, made remaining in the presidential Bellevue Palace, and needless to say, in office, untenable. No German president has ever been subject to a corruption probe and that would have been especially bad publicity for Berlin as it deals with fellow EU countries in bankruptcy and liquidity crises. How fair would it have been, for example, to scold Greece for mismanagement when Wulff remained in office in Germany? "The resignation shows the self-purification powers of German politics and society," insists Gerd Langguth, a professor of political science at Bonn University. "It also shows the public that there are no different standards for the president than for any other citizen." But, he notes, because it took Wulff so long to decide to resign, "it is a huge setback for Merkel." Heinrich Oberreuter, who teaches political science at Passau University contends that "for Merkel, the damage is mostly a domestic one. German political culture has taken a blow. Germans

have lost trust in politics, politicians and political parties." (MORE: Is Germany's Government Headed for a Breakdown?) Wulff's departure returns Merkel to a perpetual problem: who will be President? The Chancellor lost political capital getting Wulff elected in the first place. It took three rounds of voting to get him through in July 2010, the failure to secure a majority showing up cracks in her ruling coalition. Indeed, Wulff is the second of the presidents under her watch to resign. Horst Köhler resigned in May 2010 when he came under heavy criticism for saying Germany might have to consider military deployment to protect the country's economic interests. With Wulff losing his presidential immunity from prosecution, an investigation into the allegations surrounding him is expected to begin next week in Lower Saxony. On Sunday night, in a press conference in the chancellery, Merkel officially nominated and endorsed former East German civil rights activist Joachim Gauck as Wulff's successor. Gauck will be the joint candidate for president for the governing conservatives and liberals (CDU, CSU and FDP), the opposition social democrats (SPD) and Greens — the entire political spectrum minus the far left. In a rare show of power, the liberals (FDP), Merkel's junior government partner, had persuaded the Chancellor on Sunday night to give up her resistance against Gauck, the opposition's candidate who narrowly lost to Christian Wulff in the 2010 presidential elections. To Merkel, acceptance of Gauck would be equal to admitting that she bet on the wrong horse the last time around. But in the interest of putting the presidential debacle behind her and going back to more pressing issues, Merkel agreed to a genuine consensus candidate. Joachim Gauck, a former pastor and ex-president of the Stasi Files Authority (which was named the Gauck Behörde after him), is widely respected and enjoys the support of all political parties but the far left. Politically, he is close to Merkel and not expected to challenge her. But Merkel's longtime rejection and final acceptance of Gauck under her junior partner's pressure is another scratch on the chancellor's so far shiny armor (she is still by far Germany's most popular politician). If Gauck is elected in March — and there is little doubt that he will — Germany will for the first time be run by two East Germans. At Sunday's press conference, Gauck expressed how moved he was that a "person who lived 50 years of his life under a dictatorship could be appointed the head of German government."

Comments deleted by **TIME online** later in 2012:

A commentator: *'It also shows the public that there are no different standards for the president[Wulff] than for any other citizen...'*

Another commentator in response:

"Don't you say, I am moved to tears. It simply shows that now, after his immunity has been repealed, the standard applying to the German president as well as to any other German citizen does not apply to legions of German officials and politicians in between that remain subject to immunity. Merkel's connection to the Stasi is quite obvious since she has *verboten* to publish fotos showing her in action as a confidential informant of the Stasi.

'All this stupid crap about 'No executions' and 'No death penalty', it's all rubbish, execute humans without laws, law suits, jurisdiction and so forth.'

This is an address of [Erich Mielke](#) , head of East Germany's Stasi from 1957 - 1989, to his cadre. The means of choice was a so - called *'unexpected potshot into the backhead'*.

Probably a German chancellor with such questionable connections, history and background does not mind to be accompanied by a president like the East German Gauck, whose connection to the Stasi is not completely clarified yet and who was, as former head of the corresponding German federal authority named after him, in control of the Stasi files after the GDR had perished.

...

At the end of 2011, as soon as Wulff allowed himself to voice public criticism about Merkel's europolitical agenda of building sort of an EUSSR he was toast and declared open season on. Whereas his misconducts, if any, are absolutely ridiculous compared to what, for instance, chancellor Kohl and his amigos had afforded when they made the German prosecution look like a fool struggling with his party donation scandals. The same applies to former secretary of defense Wolfgang Schaeuble, currently serving as secretary of finance.

He most weakly claimed that he couldn't remember that he had received a donation of 100.000 DM cash: *I don't know what I know. I don't know what you know. Nobody knows something he doesn't know.* Chancellor Kohl's private life as well as his political life was such a mess that his wife Hannelore declared in public that *'The Kohl System will be my death'* which proved to be true when she committed suicide some years later. Chancellor Kohl introduced Teflon - Merkel, a former confidential informant of GDR's Stasi, into German politics as *'My Girl'*. There you go. It will be interesting to see whether Merkel, as *'The Most Powerful Woman In The World'* unfolding executive omnipotence without any inhibitions or limitations, finally will be able to unite both the office of the German president as well as the office of the German chancellor in her person. This happened last time when Hitler did so on August 2, 1934.

It looks pretty much like Germany feels entitled to let its *Maedel* do today what its *Buben* did some seventy years ago, and an increasing faction considers the office of the German president dispensable, if only because Merkel claims omnipotence anyway. And again, the Germans and their chancellor care little about what their European neighbors feel and think. The situation in Europe being focused on Germany is becoming increasingly disturbing.

Germany along with Japan, Myanmar, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, North Korea and Syria belongs to a group of states not willing to effectively join the UN Convention against Corruption, other than 159 nations that have already done so as of January 2012. German former president Wulff's profits from this legal loophole certainly are negligible compared to the profits of many of his political colleagues in Germany.

[Poland](#)

[Netherlands](#)

[England](#)

[Turkey](#)

[Germany](#)

[Italy](#)

Greece

Ireland

Russia

Israel

Once more England (in 2007 btw)

United States

United States (1944, Germany's New World Order, World Export Champion)

...and the list goes on and on."