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Frank-Walter Steinmeier will succeed Joachim Gauck as the CDU/CSU-SPD candidate in the German Presidential election on 12th February

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On 6th June last the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Joachim Gauck announced that he would not ask for a second term in 2017. On 14th November after several months of negotiation the Christian Democratic Union/Social Christian Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the two biggest political parties in the country which also form the government "grand coalition" came to an agreement on the name of the successor to Joachim Gauck. This will be Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), the present Foreign Affairs Minister.

Failure for the CDU?

On the announcement that Joachim Gauck would not be standing again, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) had planned to put forward the names of several personalities for the Presidency of the Republic: Marianne Birthler (Alliance 90/Greens, B90/DG), who declined the proposal, the present leader of the Bundestag Norbert Lammert (CDU) or the President of the Constitutional Court, Andreas Vosskuhle. The names of Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) were also put forward.

Moreover the Christian Social Union vetoed the candidacy of Winfried Kretschmann (B90/DG), the present Minister President of Baden-Württemberg, due to his support for the implementation of a wealth tax.

Angela Merkel did not however succeed in imposing a CDU candidate.

However the Chancellor's support to the candidacy of Frank-Walter Steinmeier shows the stability of her government coalition and enables her to repel any possible rivals in the race for the Chancellorship.

"It is choice guided by reason" declared Ms Merkel.

"Frank-Walter Steinmeier is a man of the centre,

respected by business leaders and by civil society in Germany as well as abroad. In these times of uncertainty and instability our support to Frank-Walter Steinmeier is a sign of stability; this is wise and important," she added.

"Frank-Walter Steinmeier has shown in the past that he seeks to smooth out differences and works towards a compromise even in difficult times," indicated Peter Tauber, the CDU's General Secretary.

Success for the Social Democrats?

The Social Democratic Party succeeded in having the last word and imposed its candidate in the negotiations. According to the polls, Frank-Walter Steinmeier is the Germans' most popular figure. A poll by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen for the TV channel ZDF at the beginning of November showed that the Foreign Affairs Minister is the most popular figure amongst the Germans, ahead of Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and Chancellor Angela Merkel. According to Forsa 58% of the SPD supporters want Frank-Walter Steinmeier to represent the party in the general elections on 24th September next. Only 20% of them say they want the present leader of the party, Vice-Chancellor and Economy and Energy Minister Sigmar

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Gabriel, who has now rid himself of a more popular rival. Three other people are running for the presidential seat: Christoph Butterwegge, a political expert from the University of Cologne appointed on 21st November by the Left Party (Die Linke, DL); Albrecht Glaser, Deputy Chair of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), appointed on 30th April and finally Alexander Holt, judge and TV personality, who is being put forward by the Free Voters (Freie Wähler, FW) led by Hubert Aiwanger.

The Presidential office

The president of the Federal Republic of Germany is elected by the German Federal Assembly (*Bundesversammlung*) comprising 1,260 members: the 630 members of the Bundestag, the lower chamber in Parliament and an equal number of representatives from the 16 Länder, MPs of the regional parliaments and personalities from civil society. The election is a secret ballot, according to an absolute majority vote in both the first and second rounds. If none of the candidates achieves this majority (ie 631 votes), a third round is organised during which the person who rallies the most votes is elected.

In Germany the presidential office is honorific: the head of State is however a moral authority for his fellow countrymen, since his role goes beyond the prerogatives given to him by the Fundamental Law. Elected for five

years the German President represents his country in the international arena. He is the guardian of the law and of the Constitution, he appoints and dismisses the judges and the federal civil servants, officers and sub-officers. He can also dissolve the Bundestag in two precise instances: when the latter fails to elect a Chancellor (ie if none of the candidates manage to rally a majority of MPs votes after three days, article 63 of the Fundamental Law) or when a vote of no confidence put forward by the Chancellor in office does not win the approval of the majority of the members of the Lower Chamber (article 68). Legislative elections must then be convened within the 60 days following dissolution (article 39). The Bundestag has been dissolved on three occasions: 23rd September 1972, 6th January 1983 and 21st July 2005.

All candidates for the presidential office must be aged at least 40 and can only be re-elected once. According to the Fundamental Law the head of State cannot belong to the government or to a legislative body of the Federation (Bund) or to one of the sixteen *Länder*. He can exercise no other paid public (or private) function and is not allowed to belong to the management or the board of a business pursuing activities for profit.

Joachim Gauck's successor to the Presidency of the Federal Republic of Germany will enter office on 18th March next.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, elected President of the Federal Republic of Germany

Results

As expected, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) was elected President of the Federal Republic of Germany on 12th February, after the first round of voting. Supported by the SPD, Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU), he collected 931 votes of the 1,260 members of the Federal Assembly (Bundesversammlung), which includes the 630 members of the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, and an equal number of representatives from the country's sixteen Länder and personalities from civil society.

He will take over from Joachim Gauck, who had decided not to stand again, on 18th March.

"As President of the Republic I want to be a counterweight to those who simplify without limit, quite the contrary to being a president who simplifies everything. That is the best antidote to populism" declared the new Head of State, whom some reproach for his positions sometimes seen as too favourable with regard to Vladimir Putin's Russia. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, former Foreign Minister, also criticised NATO's policy with regard to Moscow, which he saw as "hawkish". A generally moderate man, he also came out of his reserve in the summer of 2016, referring to Donald Trump, at the time the Republican candidate for the US presidency, as "a hate preacher".

The position of President of Germany is essentially honorific, although the Head of State can refuse to sign a text that he considers to be contrary to Fundamental Law (in this case the matter is brought before the Constitutional Court and, if it gives its green light, the president is forced to sign it). This happened at the time of the signature of the Maastricht Treaty, and that of Lisbon. He also has the power to dissolve the Bundestag in two specific cases: when it does not succeed in electing a Chancellor (i.e. if no candidate manages to gather a majority of members' votes after three days, in accordance with article 63 of Fundamental Law) or when a

vote of confidence, proposed by the chancellor in office, does not obtain approval from the majority of members of the lower house of parliament (article 68).

Aged 61, Frank-Walter Steinmeier is originally from Detmold (North Rhine-Westphalia). A law graduate, he joined the SPD at a young age. At the beginning of the nineties he worked with Gerhard Schröder (SPD), at the time Prime Minister of the Land of Lower Saxony. As Secretary of State and Director of the Chancellery of Lower Saxony, he followed Gerhard Schröder when the latter became Chancellor after elections held on 27th September 1998. The following year, Frank-Walter Steinmeier was appointed Chief of Staff of the Chancellery. He was to be one of the architects of the most remarkable reforms implemented by Gerhard Schröder, known as Agenda 2010 (reforms of the pension system, healthcare system and the employment market).

He specialised in foreign policy, which caused Chancellor Angela Merkel, who succeeded Gerhard Schröder in 2005 to appoint him as Minister for Foreign Affairs. In 2009 Frank-Walter Steinmeier led the SPD list in the general elections of 27th September. He suffered a severe defeat, with the SPD collecting its lowest result since

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the end of the Second World War, with 23% of the vote. He was nevertheless appointed President of his party at the Bundestag, a position which he abandoned a few months later in order to give one of his kidneys to his wife, who was seriously ill and was waiting for a transplant, a

move that made him very popular amongst the German people.

At the end of 2013, Frank-Walter Steinmeier returned to his post as Minister for Foreign Affairs, which he held until January of this year.

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