

Joachim Gauck is elected President of the Federal Republic of Germany

From **Corinne Deloy**
translated by Helen Levy

RESULTS

Joachim Gauck, a non-aligned candidate, who enjoyed the support of five political parties represented in the German parliament (Christian Democratic Union, CDU, the Social Democratic Union CSU, the Social Democratic Party SPD, the Liberal Democratic Party FDP and the Greens), was elected on 18th March last as President of the Federal Republic of Germany in the first round of voting 991 of the 1,240 votes cast by the German Federal Assembly (*Bundesversammlung*). This body comprising 1,240 delegates (620 members of the Bundestag, the lower Chamber of Parliament, and an equal number of representatives from the 16 Länder MPs of the Regional Parliaments or personalities from civil society) is responsible for the appointment of the Head of State in Germany.

The Left Party (Die Linke) chose to put its own candidate forward, Beate Klarsfeld, who won 126 votes.

Finally the far right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), put its candidate forward – a revisionist historian, Olaf Rose, who won three votes.

The presidential election on 18th March came after the resignation on 17th February last of Christian Wulff, who is suspected of having taking advantage of his position as Minister President of the Land of Lower Saxony (2003-2010) to win various financial favours and of then having tried to suffocate the scandal.

In his speech that he delivered after his election the new president Joachim Gauck recalled that the first and last free elections in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) took place on the very same day 22 years earlier. «*I shall never forget those elections. Never!*» he declared adding, «*for the first time in my life, at the age of nearly 50, I could decide in a free, honest, secret election who was going to govern.*»

Born in 1946 in Rostock in the eastern part of Germany, Joachim Gauck, like Chancellor Angela Merkel, grew up under the communist dictatorship. During his childhood his father was imprisoned for five years in Siberia by the Soviet secret services accused of anti-Soviet agitation. The regime in power did not allow young Joachim to study literature as he wanted to, since the Pre-Selection Study Committee issued a

«reserved judgement». Later he had to give up journalism because he refused to join the Free German Youth (FDJ, Freie Deutsche Jugend). He chose to study theology and become a Pastor.

In 1989, he became the spokesperson of the collective of opponents in the New Forum for Democracy in Rostock before chairing, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the committee for the dissolution of the Ministry for State Security (Stasi), the political police department in the former GDR. In October 1990 he took over the centre for the conservation and use of the Stasi archives. A symbol of the work in memory of Germany under the former communist dictatorship, Joachim Gauck heads the association Against Forgetting-For Democracy.

«*I am neither Superman nor perfect,*» says the new president whose nickname is «*the shepherd of freedom*» who defines himself as being a «*conservative social democrat with a liberal tendency*». He has set himself the goal of «*getting the Germans to understand that they are living in a country that they can love*». «*I can promise you one thing, that I will say «yes» with all of my strength and heart to the responsibilities that you have given me,*» he stressed. Qualified as «*the president of hearts*» two years ago during his first attempt at the Presidency of the Federal Republic, Joachim Gauck is greatly appreciated by his fellow countrymen. «*In this period of crisis, popula-*

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tions expect a new type of leader, who is not bright and shiny but who has intellectual rigour in the same way it is occurring in Italy, where Mario Monti took over from Silvio Berlusconi,» indicated Marc Lazar, an historian and sociologist.

On 8th March Christian Wulff made his official withdrawal as President of the Republic during a traditional ceremony which was boycotted by a major share of the political class and the media. Opposition leaders called to boycott this ceremony (*Zapfenstreik*). The four former Presidents of the Republic launched the movement that was followed by 160 people, notably the former chiefs of staff and the high ranking officers in the Bundeswehr (the German army) which declined Christian Wulff's invitation.

The latter indicated that he wanted to take advantage of all of the benefits associated with the function of federal president. Hence he has asked to receive an «honorary salary» of 200,000€ per year (paid for life)

as well as having a chauffeur driven car and the provision of an office and a team to work with him.

The Social Democratic Party has asked that these advantages now be suspended when a head of State dishonours his office. Former Chancellor (1974-1982) Helmut Schmidt (SPD) declared that Christian Wulff had «*severely damaged the presidential office. He had even damaged the entire political class*». When asked by the polls, 44% of Germans believe that the outgoing Head of State had caused permanent damage to the Presidential office.

After the election of Joachim Gauck as President of the Republic Germany now has two heads who come from the former GDR and who are also both Protestants. «*Paradoxically the rejection of the Catholic Rhineland elite is a result of Germany's secularisation. Voters have greater esteem for Protestant politicians because their line of thought is not dictated by the Church,*» stressed Gerd Langguth, professor political science at the University of Bonn.

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