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Joachim Gauck: Obama's German Interpreter

by Anne Connell

On October 7, German President Joachim Gauck will join US President Barack Obama to mark the 25th anniversary of German reunification. It will be the first time in 18 years that the White House receives a German president, which is indicative of the special nature of this president and this moment in time for US-German relations. While the meeting may commemorate history, the two leaders will be focused on the urgency of the present: tense relations between Russia and the West, a landmark transatlantic trade deal and a European refugee crisis.

Few figures are as equipped to interpret the *zeitgeist* for Obama as Gauck, a former Lutheran pastor shaped by the darker chapters of German history and committed to the promise of a prosperous and open Germany in the 21st century.

The President of German Hearts

If one word were to encompass Gauck's role in Germany, perhaps it is *Seelsorger*. A term given to pastors or counsel-givers, it literally means the caretaker of souls and has biblical connotations of watchful shepherds in the fields. Fitting for a man who, as the German magazine Bild put it, is "the president of [German] hearts."

Gauck's childhood under Nazi rule and the subsequent Soviet occupation of East Germany shaped his life's work. As a school-aged boy, he saw his own father arrested by Soviet forces and sent to a Siberian gulag. Later refused entry to public universities because of his lack of involvement with the communist youth movement, Gauck found his way to theology. He studied in the Protestant church and became active in peaceful protest movements against communist rule (warranting him years of harassment by the notorious Stasi security apparatus). By 1989, he was a prominent member of the democratic opposition movement and was elected to the People's Chamber in March of 1990 in the first free elections after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Gauck was nominated for president in 2012 as scandal engulfed then-President Christian Wulff and, for the second time in several years, a German president resigned

his office. Widely respected among the political community and the public, Gauck became the type of president Germany needed.

More than a Figurehead

Gauck's background and reputation are an anomaly in the office he holds. The German president is chosen by a special assembly consisting of Bundestag members and delegates from each of the 16 German states and, once elected, plays a largely ceremonial role in addition to signing Federal laws (with limited impact on content).

Though convention holds that the post stands above party politics, and in fact has little effect on policymaking, Gauck has been a far more influential figure than many presidents before him. He has assumed a familiar position: as unofficial pastor for the German people, using the pulpit of his position and his gift of persuasion to drive national debate on critical policy issues. While Chancellor Angela Merkel may be the political power-broker of the German state, Gauck has carved out an instrumental role for himself as a philosophical heavyweight.

In this week's meeting with Obama, he serves as America's interpreter of the daunting new challenges on the other side of the Atlantic.

Pushing Through an Ambitious Trade Deal

Obama has found strong allies on trade policy in Merkel and Gauck. The agenda set out in current negotiations over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) could harmonize regulations internationally and lift tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers. And – as Gauck has expressed – it is a confidence-building mechanism for a trans-Atlantic relationship marred in recent years by the NSA spying scandal.

However, TTIP has sparked heated public debate, particularly in Europe. Criticisms on both sides of the Atlantic have arisen about the closed-door nature of negotiations. In the European Union, many are concerned over the lowering of product standards. The German media have reported on public outcry over the threat of hormone-laden meat and dairy, genetically modified produce, and chlorine-washed chicken penetrating the German market. Gauck has squared off against free trade critics at home, arguing that "freedom in society and freedom in the economy belong together." He and Obama will discuss a shared strategy to overcome criticism and stalled talks to push forward an ambitious trade agenda.

Geopolitical Chess with Russia

Another item at the top of the docket for the Obama-Gauck meeting is Russia. Furthering a dialogue that Obama and Merkel began before the Group of Seven conference in June, the two presidents will likely discuss the current situation in Ukraine and the efficacy of Western sanctions.

But the situation has an evolving geopolitical dimension. Russia's increased involvement in Syria not only threatens to prolong the conflict but has implications for settling the situation in Ukraine. Putin has staunchly defended his military support of the Assad regime – a number of Russian forces have been deployed and Russia has intensified airstrikes on targets within Syria. Many see this as strategic maneuvering to strengthen the Russian foothold in the conflict and to potentially gain leverage over the West on other issues. Military-to-military cooperation with respect to combatting the Islamic State group could lend Putin a tactical bargaining chip.

Gauck has advocated for Germany's greater engagement in international affairs. The meeting between Gauck and Obama thus represents an opportunity for the United States and Germany to solidify a common response to Moscow and to shift the status quo in Syria – this may mean involving Putin and Assad in talks, as Merkel recently suggested, or forming a tacit agreement between Russia and the West.

A Defining Moment for Germany

The most pressing issue for discussion between Obama and Gauck is the refugee crisis unfolding in Europe. Germany has emerged as a moral and political leader in the European Union (EU), poised to accept 800,000 refugees this year and as many as 500,000 annually for years to come. The issue has become a litmus test for EU nations' commitment to human rights, democratic values and the European project.

EU policymakers have struggled to reach a consensus on a unified policy approach; leaders in an emergency summit overrode objections from Eastern European states to relocate 120,000 refugees across the EU through a quota system. Political battles will continue as the EU grapples with the details of any permanent redistribution system.

Even before the present crisis, Gauck served as a voice of conscience on issues of cultural diversity in Germany. He spoke of *Dunkeldeutschland*, the specter of xenophobia and racism in Germany that has long marred acceptance of immigrants. One of Gauck's most powerful moments as president was at the 2015 "Stand Together" rally in Berlin for a tolerant Germany in response to the dark undercurrent of virulently anti-immigrant political movements. In freezing January weather, the former civil rights

activist took the podium before a congregation of thousands to denounce anti-immigrant and anti-Islam rhetoric as “shameful.”

At unification celebrations in Frankfurt this month, Gauck compared the integration of scores of refugees now to the reunification of East and West Germany 25 years ago: “Like in 1990, a challenge awaits us that will keep future generations busy,” he said, but that all in the country shall “grow together.” When Obama meets with Gauck, it is clearly not only with a political figurehead. It is with the moral compass of today’s Germany.

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