

The German mission in Afghanistan depends on local elections

On 12 January, the German government brought a motion to the Bundestag for extending the mandate for the Bundeswehr's contingent in Afghanistan for another year. If the situation allows, the Bundeswehr will be gradually withdrawing from Afghanistan from the end of 2011. Furthermore, the government turned down NATO's request and did not mention in its motion a possibility for sending German soldiers to Afghanistan from the NATO airborne early warning and control force *E-3A Component*. This decision and the discussions the motion has provoked have proven once again that Germany's activity in NATO is determined to a large extent by domestic policy.

Local parliamentary elections are to be held in seven federal states in 2011. For this reason, the German government does not wish to make the extension and the change of the Bundeswehr's mandate in Afghanistan a political issue and wants a cross-party agreement in this area. The FDP, a member of the government coalition, and the opposition SPD have made their support in the Bundestag dependent on the inclusion of provisions under which the contingent would start being reduced already at the end of this year (at present it consists of 5,350 soldiers *de jure*, which means under 5,000 *de facto*). Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU) opposed the automatic reduction of staff. He would like to make it dependent on the level of safety in the Afghan provinces. The defence ministry's stance seems to have won finally since the German forces will be withdrawing slowly and depending on the level of security in Regional Command North, where they are stationed. However, the government did not provide in its motion for the possibility of sending those Bundeswehr soldiers to Afghanistan who serve in NATO E-3A Component force, which uses AWACS aircraft. To do so, the government would have to formally increase the contingent, which would not be supported by the opposition and would provoke criticism in the run-up to the local elections. However, for NATO's activity in Afghanistan, this will mean that AWACS aircraft, which are to supervise the security of flights over Afghanistan since the middle of this January, will have to operate without German personnel. Since one third of this force's staff is German, the efficient operation of AWACS in Afghanistan may turn out to be problematic in the long run. <jus>