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Germany: the Bundestag adopts a key healthcare system reform

On 12 November, the Bundestag voted in favour of a healthcare system reform. The law, which will come into force on 1 January 2011, will impose higher treatment costs on citizens. This is aimed at reducing deficits in the healthcare funds in the longer term. This law is one of the key elements of the welfare state reform which is necessary to carry out due to an ageing German society. The Bundestag's decision is a success for Angela Merkel's government, which mentioned healthcare system reform as one of its priority tasks.

The reform developed by the health minister, Philipp Rössler (FDP), provides for increasing the medical insurance premium and freezing the part of the premium paid by employers. It also allows healthcare funds to collect an additional fixed charge from patients, independent of their incomes, if the money received from regular premiums is not enough to cover the costs of the work being done by the funds.

The German healthcare system already has a deficit of 11 billion euros, which is affecting the quality of service and even leading to the bankruptcies of healthcare funds. The debts, which are expected to increase in the immediate future, will pose further barriers to patients' access to healthcare. The reform has from the very beginning provoked sharp criticism from the opposition, who have branded it an introduction to a complete privatisation of healthcare and a move towards the entrenching of social differences. It was also an element in a political game between the coalition members, the FDP and the CSU, the latter of which had for a long time been blocking the project put forward by the health minister representing the FDP. The adoption of the law is especially important for Angela Merkel's cabinet because it introduces the first of the promised key reforms which it has managed to launch. <zawil>