

Germany: savings plan will set the promised Bundeswehr reform on a faster track

The federal Defence Ministry is to cut expenses by 4 billion euros over 2011–2014 as part of a savings plan. Given the budget cuts, the Defence Ministry has announced a structural reform of the Bundeswehr, which may fundamentally change the German army. The need to reform the German armed forces has already been mentioned in the coalition agreement on the basis of which a special commission has been established to develop the reform guidelines. The current expense cuts in the defence sector could become a convenient excuse for presenting more controversial changes.

The savings plan announced by the government envisages a reduction of the Bundeswehr's personnel to 200,000 soldiers (40,000 contract and professional soldiers will be dismissed) and structural reforms to be presented this autumn by the Defence Ministry and the commission for the reform of the Bundeswehr appointed by the coalition government of CDU-CSU/FDP. The Christian Democrats, contrary to earlier claims, also agreed to discuss the idea of abolishing compulsory military service, which was shortened to 6 months following earlier coalition arrangements.

The concept for a future reform of the Bundeswehr was presented on 26 May in Hamburg by the Federal Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg. Guttenberg said changes would be made in the German army in order to be better prepared for facing current security challenges. The Bundeswehr is to become an expedition army, well-prepared and capable of carrying out different kinds of foreign missions. The promised changes include: the liquidation of the existing division into stabilisation and intervention forces and increasing the number of soldiers participating in foreign missions (currently around 8,000); reforming the procedures for ordering military equipment and arms; a reduction in the number of the Bundeswehr's garrisons in Germany; investing in human resources; and creating the ethos of the German armed forces. Furthermore, the minister supported the idea of holding a public discussion on the role and tasks of the Bundeswehr so as to increase public support for a more offensive model of the armed forces.

If Guttenberg's proposals are accepted, the Bundeswehr – despite the budget cuts – may become a better-managed and more efficient army, owing to which it will maintain or even increase its level of military engagement abroad. <jus>