

Germany's new defence minister faces old challenges

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On 17 January, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced he was appointing Boris Pistorius (SPD), previously Lower Saxony's interior minister, as Germany's new defence minister. The day before, the defence ministry issued a statement by the previous minister, Christine Lambrecht (SPD), saying that she had resigned from her post. She justified her decision by pointing to the media's months-long focus on herself, which was overshadowing discussions on changes in the Bundeswehr and Germany's security policy. Lambrecht was one of the worst-rated ministers in the Scholz cabinet, and recently she had also been losing support within the SPD's ranks. In a poll taken in early January (for the public broadcaster ZDF), 60 percent of those surveyed were in favour of her resignation, while only 25 percent were against it. Among supporters of the SPD, 50 percent of respondents wanted her to quit (while only 38 percent wanted her to stay).

Pistorius has served as Lower Saxony's interior minister since 2013. He has no experience in foreign and security policy or in federal government. He is considered to belong to the SPD's conservative wing. He has called for Germany's migration policy to be tightened, at the risk of alienating party members. He was considered as a possible head of the federal interior ministry on several occasions. He has good relations with the media and the internal security services. In 2018, he made critical remarks about the sanctions imposed on Russia and called for their overhaul. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, he argued that they had cost the German economy billions of euros, which in his view had strengthened President Vladimir Putin. In 2022, he unequivocally condemned the aggression against Ukraine and spoke out forcefully against pro-Russian sympathisers demonstrating in Hanover and other places. He was in favour of adding the 'Z' symbol to the list of banned signs in Lower Saxony.

Commentary

- Lambrecht's decision to step down as defence minister is the result of widespread and justified criticism of her actions: not making enough progress in the process of modernising and reforming the Bundeswehr, the German government's strategy of providing military aid to Ukraine, the management style within the ministry itself, and its methods of strategic communication. In particular, Lambrecht has been called out for the numerous slip-ups she has made in recent months, which often made the ministry the subject of ridicule. A low point came on New Year's Eve, when she recorded a New Year's greetings message that referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but were not appropriate in either form or content for the office she held. Earlier, the minister was vague about the reasons why she travelled together with her adult son in a government

helicopter; she also postponed official duties for private reasons. Media reports indicate that the Chancellor had been aware of her intention to resign since early January, even though he had generally favoured retaining her as the minister. The delay in appointing a successor stemmed from the difficulty in finding a candidate who was suitable from Scholz's perspective.

- The appointment of Pistorius has generally been met with approval by the coalition partners. However, the FDP insists that the new minister must make effective use of the modernisation fund. The Greens and some elements of the SPD, meanwhile, have pointed out that gender parity will no longer be preserved in the Scholz government following the appointment of a male politician. The opposition has accused Pistorius of being unfamiliar with military and security issues. The Christian Democrats also claim that by appointing a second-tier politician with no federal experience as a minister, the Chancellor has shown that he does not take the *Zeitenwende* he announced seriously. Most media outlets have reported the decision in a relatively favourable light, while highlighting the extent of the challenges facing Pistorius and how little time he has to adapt to the new tasks.
- The new minister will have to meet the challenges that Lambrecht failed to deal with. These primarily involve speeding up the modernisation of the Bundeswehr, cutting red tape and streamlining the arms procurement process. The swift preparation of the projects that will be financed from the €100-billion armed forces modernisation fund, as well as from the defence ministry's regular budget, will test the effectiveness of the new minister. Another important issue will be the long-awaited reform of the Bundeswehr to better prepare it for carrying out collective defence tasks. The German army needs structural changes after years of adaptation to conducting crisis management operations. Such plans were drawn up in autumn 2021 by Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU), the former defence minister in the grand coalition government, but they were put on hold by minister Lambrecht, on whose watch (according to the German media) the defence ministry drafted a rather superficial reform package that did not correspond to the radically changed security situation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Another task for Pistorius will be to hold talks with officials from the German defence industry on the long-term switch of arms production from peacetime to crisis mode. The Chancellery will remain in charge of Germany's strategy for arms supplies to Ukraine. So far, the defence ministry has been implementing the decisions taken by Scholz; this is unlikely to change, but the public will expect better and more coherent communication from the new minister.