Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 14.06.2024 www.osw.waw.pl

Plans for a new model of military service in Germany

Lidia Gibadło , Piotr Szymański

On 12 June, the German defence minister Boris Pistorius (SPD) presented a plan to introduce a 'new military service'. According to the plan, German male and female citizens will receive a questionnaire at the age of 18 to assess their motivation for this new type of military service and their physical fitness. Feedback will be compulsory only for men. Based on the questionnaire, some of them (around 50,000) will receive a call for medical examination, which was abolished in 2011 with the suspension of conscription. In the first year, around 5000 volunteers will be accepted for military service lasting between 6 and 23 months. The cost of the programme with the initial number of enlistments is estimated at €1.4 bn annually (around 2% of the 2023 defence budget). The ministry would like to see the required legal changes enacted before the Bundestag elections in the autumn of 2025.

Commentary

- Pistorius's plan is the result of a compromise within the SPD. The minister's initial proposal to reintroduce compulsory military service has been opposed by key SPD politicians such as the party's leader Lars Klingbeil and parliamentary group chairman Rolf Mützenich. The defence minister's ideas have also been openly downplayed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz who claimed that a return to a mass army – with the inflow of large numbers of conscripts – would be impossible due to the Bundeswehr's infrastructure gap. The coalition partners from the FDP and the Greens were also reluctant: in their view, compulsory service would be costly, fail to address the armed forces' manpower problems, and infringe on personal freedoms. Therefore, the ministry has decided to start with a voluntary model, while not ruling out mandatory service if the sign-up numbers are insufficient. The opposition Christian Democrats have adopted a different stance, supporting the introduction of one compulsory year of community service in the Bundeswehr or in social organisations (see '*A return to conservatism: the CDU's new platform*'). The far-right AfD has a similar vision: it wants men aged 18-25 to undergo basic military training.
- The defence ministry's proposal follows the Swedish model, based on training a small number of conscripts annually, almost all of whom are volunteers. At this stage, the 'new military service' is envisaged as fully voluntary, aiming to encourage military careers and rebuild the reserve. The proposed solutions align with the regional trend of reintroducing conscription (Latvia, Sweden, Lithuania) or introducing various forms of voluntary engagement (Poland). The plan expands on the voluntary service in the Bundeswehr (FWDL) introduced in 2021. It lasts up to 23 months (including six months of basic training), and is geared towards attracting professional and contract service, although

volunteers can also opt for joining the territorial reserve after the basic training. Members of the FWDL receive a monthly allowance of €1800–2300 plus bonuses. Currently, over 10,000 volunteers serve in the FWDL. The new military service proposal includes merging it with FWDL.

- The Bundeswehr currently numbers around 181,000 troops, including 10,000 volunteers (FWDL), 57,000 professional soldiers and 112,000 contract soldiers. Germany has not been able to increase this number to the target of 203,000 set a few years ago. The regular forces are to be reinforced by around 260,000 trained reservists with crisis and mobilisation assignments (currently there are around 60,000 reserve soldiers). The unattractive service conditions (matériel and infrastructure shortages, the relatively low pay) and the ineffective recruitment campaigns have contributed to the armed forces' personnel stagnation. Manpower problems will become increasingly evident as the demands on the Bundeswehr grow with the need to meet Germany's obligations under NATO's regional defence planning. That includes the deployment of a German brigade to Lithuania and the tailored expansion of the country's military capabilities. The implementation of the new form of military service will also be hampered by infrastructural constraints resulting from the training of Ukrainian soldiers and carrying out allied exercises in Germany, as well as the limited number of available instructors among professional soldiers. To achieve its personnel goals, the Bundeswehr will have to expand voluntary service well beyond the initial 5000 annual trainees. This was indicated by Minister Pistorius, who suggested a target of 20,000.