Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 10.12.2025 www.osw.waw.pl

Germany's military service reform: voluntarism at its core

Lidia Gibadło , Jacek Tarociński

On 5 December, the Bundestag passed a law reforming military service. From 2026, the new regulations will require male German citizens residing in Germany who have reached the age of 18 to complete a questionnaire, including questions about their willingness to serve. For women, participation will remain voluntary. The process will initially apply to those born in 2008. From July 2027, men born in 2008 and thereafter will be required to undergo medical examinations. To facilitate this, the government intends to establish 24 military assessment centres.

The legislation also sets annual minimum and maximum numbers for active-duty soldiers and members of the trained reserve (see table). The Ministry of Defence will be required to submit biannual reports to the Bundestag on the implementation of these targets. If the quotas are not met, or if Germany's 'defence situation' so requires, parliament may introduce a compulsory draft based on a lottery to fill the shortfall. This would apply to those who have completed the questionnaire, undergone a medical examination, and been deemed fit for service (*Bedarfswehrpflicht*).

The final text of the law represents the lowest common denominator acceptable to all parties in the ruling coalition. While the new legislation may help increase the number of voluntary service members and potentially pave the way for a future mandatory service model, it does not address the problem of the persistently low number of professional and contract soldiers. It is therefore unlikely to result in a significant increase in the size of the Bundeswehr.

Commentary

- **The law is the result of a long-negotiated compromise between the coalition parties.** The Christian Democrats advocated the introduction of mandatory military or civilian service, while the SPD favoured retaining the voluntary model (see '*Plans for a new model of military service in Germany*'). Among opposition parties, the AfD remains opposed to the law, stating that it would consider introducing compulsory military service only under its own government. Otherwise, it argues, young people could fall victim to the confrontational policies of a CDU/CSU and SPD-led government – for example, by being sent to Ukraine. Although the Greens support strengthening the Bundeswehr, they believe the legislation should be accompanied by measures such as reinforcing civil services. The Left Party likewise opposed the changes. According to a September report by the Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences, 53% of respondents – including 45% of men aged 16 to 29 – consider the introduction of a new military service

model for young people necessary. The idea is also supported by a majority of voters of parties represented in the Bundestag, except for supporters of the Greens and the Left Party.

- **The new law will make it possible to assess motivation and fitness for service across different age cohorts.** There is also a chance that the incentives envisaged under the legislation will increase interest in voluntary military service, which lasts between 6 and 11 months. These incentives include, among others, a monthly allowance which has been raised to around €2,600 gross. For comparison, Germany's minimum wage in 2025 stood at approximately €2,220 gross per month, while the median salary for full-time employees was €3,061 gross. Individuals who choose to remain in the armed forces after completing 11 months of voluntary service will be granted the status of contract soldier (*Soldat auf Zeit*). According to the Ministry of Defence, the reform is intended to encourage professional careers in the armed forces and support the rebuilding of the trained reserve.
- **The adopted plans to expand the Bundeswehr are not particularly ambitious.** They envisage an annual rise of only 3,000 to 6,000 active-duty soldiers (and 20,000 trained reservists). This rate is expected to accelerate between 2031 and 2035, reaching 8,000 to 15,000 additional soldiers per year. Germany has so far failed to meet **its** long-standing target of 203,000 troops. At present, the Bundeswehr consists of 184,330 soldiers – just 2,750 more than a year ago – along with approximately 60,000 trained reservists. The armed forces are projected to reach the previously set target only around the turn of 2029 and 2030, and to continue expanding to approximately 260,000 by 2035. This is to be complemented by 200,000 trained reservists with crisis and mobilisation assignments, which, according to current plans, should be achieved by 2033. Factors contributing to the stagnation in Bundeswehr personnel numbers in recent years include unattractive service conditions – such as material and infrastructure shortages and relatively low pay – as well as the situation on the labour market. Personnel shortages remain the most serious obstacle to meeting Germany's NATO defence planning commitments.

Table. Planned number of active-duty soldiers and reservists in the Bundeswehr by 2035

Year	Active-duty soldiers	Reservists
2026	186,000 – 190,000	70,000 – 80,000
2027	190,000 – 193,000	80,000 – 100,000
2028	193,000 – 198,000	100,000 – 120,000
2029	198,000 – 205,000	120,000 – 140,000
2030	204,000 – 212,000	140,000 – 160,000
2031	210,000 – 220,000	160,000 – 180,000
2032	218,000 – 230,000	180,000 – 200,000
2033	228,000 – 242,000	at least 200,000
2034	240,000 – 256,000	at least 200,000
2035	255,000 – 270,000	at least 200,000

Source: *Beschlussempfehlung und Bericht des Verteidigungsausschusses (12. Ausschuss)*, Bundestag, Drucksache 21/3076, 3 December 2025, p. 35, bundestag.de.