

The Suspension of Universal Conscription (March 24, 2011)

Abstract

The expected peace dividend after the end of the Cold War vanished quickly and, amid troop reductions and greater military involvement abroad, pressures to modernize the German armed forces led to the end of compulsory military service for men in 2011. It was suspended but not eliminated from the Basic Law, keeping a door open for eventual reinstatement. Key positions of the political parties toward this historical move are summarized in this text.

Source

Suspension of Universal Conscription Decided

German men no longer have to perform military service or alternative civilian service. On Thursday, 24 March 2011, some 55 years after its introduction, the Bundestag suspended universal conscription as of July 1 of this year. In accordance with the resolution recommendation by the Defense Committee (17/5239), the parliamentary groups CDU/CSU, FDP, and Bündnis90/Die Grünen voted in favor of the federal government's Military Law Amendment Act 2011 (17/4821). The act simultaneously creates a voluntary military service of six to twenty-three months, which is equally open to men and women. In the future, up to 15,000 volunteers are supposed to serve in the Bundeswehr alongside the temporary and professional soldiers.

Suspension is part of the reform of the armed forces

The suspension of conscription is part of the planned reform of the armed forces, by which the Bundeswehr is supposed to shrink from currently 255,000 soldiers down to 185,000. However, the end to compulsory service applies only to peace time, in the event of tensions or defense, it can be reactivated. That is why Article 12a of the Basic Law, which states: "Men who have attained the age of eighteen may be required to serve in the Armed Forces, in the Federal Border Police, or in a civil defense organization," remains unchanged.

"I don't see it as a joyous event that we are suspending compulsory military service," emphasized Minister of Defense Thomas de Maizière (CDU) before parliament. However, it could no longer be justified in terms of security policy. Germany needs effective and financially viable military forces. The Minister announced that he will present by June the final numbers and information about the size of the Bundeswehr, and about the structures in the Ministry and in the civilian military administration. De Maizière emphasized the need to make voluntary military service attractive.

"Voluntary military service must be honorable service"

That includes, among other things, an increase in military pay and signup bonuses. However, one must not woo young men and women only with material incentives. "Anyone who joins the Bundeswehr exclusively for the money is perhaps exactly the person we don't want to have," he said. Voluntary military service should be "honorable service, of which the soldier is proud and which our country is proud of."

The federal government pegs the annual costs for voluntary military service at 319 million euro.

However, this would be completely compensated for by the suspension of military service. According to information from the government, one-time costs of up to 65 million euro this year will arise from the payment of signup bonuses to enlisted soldiers to bridge bottlenecks in personnel.

SPD: very close to the edge of the rule of law

SPD member of parliament Hans-Peter Bartels acknowledged vis-à-vis the government that the suspension of conscription and the introduction of voluntary military service was in principle the right decision. However, he found fault with the preparations for and the implementation of the reform of the armed forces.

For example, he stated that it had been a “mockery of the Bundeswehr” to reduce the length of military service once more to six months last year. He sharply attacked the decision of the former Minister of Defense Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg to stop drafting conscripts as early as March 1 of this year. It was “very close to the edge of the rule of law” for the government to make such decisions without prior approval from the Bundestag.

The Social Democrat doubted that it would be possible to recruit the desired 15,000 volunteers. Bartels also cautioned the government not to pursue a reform “based on the available money.”

FDP praises clear concept and a clear schedule

On behalf of the FDP parliamentary group, meanwhile, Rainer Erdel told the Minister of Defense that he had presented a clear concept and a clear schedule for the restructuring of the Bundeswehr. Erdel also rejected concerns that the Bundeswehr could develop into a state within the state.

He said that around 190,000 professional and temporary soldiers were already serving in the armed forces today without the democratic control of the Bundeswehr being in danger. The Liberal explicitly welcomed the suspension of conscription. His parliamentary group had been calling for this move for years.

The Left: law hastily cobbled together

There was heavy criticism from the party group of the Left. Their speaker on defense policy, Paul Schäfer, stated that while the suspension of conscription was “a cause for joy,” that joy was clouded because the government could not bring itself to abolish conscription, that is, delete it from the Basic Law. After the end of the East-West conflict, that step was logical. The law, he maintained, had been “hastily cobbled together” and was a bad start to the reform of the Bundeswehr.

Even though her parliamentary group Bündnis 90/Die Grünen approved the suspension of conscription, member of parliament Agnes Malczak also criticized the concrete provisions in the Act Amending Military Law. However, the greatest shortcoming of the reform of the armed forces, in her view, is that the government to date has failed to present a concept about the future structures and tasks of the Bundeswehr. Malczak emphasized that her parliamentary group would have also preferred abolishing conscription altogether.

CDU/CSU: bidding farewell to conscription with a heavy heart

On behalf of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, member of parliament Ingo Gädechens made it clear once again that they were bidding farewell to conscription only with a heavy heart. The Bundeswehr had been, after all, “a kind of school of the nation.” There, young people had learned for the first time that as citizens they also had to do something for the state and society.

Source: "Aussetzung der allgemeinen Wehrpflicht beschlossen," Deutscher Bundestag, [2011], https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2011/33831649_kw12_de_wehrdienst/204958.

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