

German army 'could recruit EU citizens'



Germany has pledged to spend increasingly more of its budget on its military -
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Seven years after Germany scrapped conscription, its defence chief has said employing EU citizens is “an option” to fill expert posts.

Army general inspector Eberhard Zorn said the forces had to “look in all directions in times of a lack of qualified personnel”, such as doctors and IT specialists.

The armed forces have been beset by years of under-investment.

Germany aims to increase its military by 21,000 personnel by 2025.

It has also pledged to raise its defence budget from 1.2% to to 1.5% of its gross domestic product by 2024, in the face of criticism from President Donald Trump that it does not meet the Nato target of 2% of GDP.

Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen said in an interview on Thursday that 182,000 uniformed soldiers were now employed by the army, a rise of 6,500 in

two years. Within seven years, that should reach 203,000.

She said the army was now made up of 12% women and this year alone one in three people applying to be an officer was a woman.

What does the defence chief propose?

Gen Zorn told the Funke newspaper group that “of course the Bundeswehr needs personnel” and the army had to “push hard for a suitable new generation”, although EU citizens in uniform were “an option” to be examined only in specialist fields.

The media group said the government had already consulted EU partners and that most had reacted cautiously, particularly in Eastern Europe.

- ‘Big gaps’ in German army, report says
- Germany: Reluctant military giant?
- Reality Check: Which countries have military service?

Under post-World War Two laws, soldiers in the German military have to be German.

Parliament’s commissioner for the armed forces, Hans-Peter Bartels, said recruiting EU citizens was already a “kind of normality” as many soldiers already had dual nationality or an immigrant background.

According to the Funke group, more than 900 foreign citizens are already employed by the military in civilian roles.

Last month the UK said more foreign nationals would be able to join its armed forces without having lived in the country in a bid to meet a shortfall of 8,200 soldiers, sailors and air personnel.

How unprepared is the German army?

Germany aims to have 70% of its fighting capacity ready for combat at any time, but recent reports show it is falling short:

- Only about a third of 97 newly manufactured tanks, fighter jets and

- helicopters was combat-ready, Die Zeit reported in October (in German)
- No submarines or large transport planes were available for deployment at the end of last year, a military report said in February
 - The same report said existing fighter planes, tanks, helicopters and ships were in “dramatically bad” condition
 - About 21,000 officer posts remained unfilled, Deutsche Welle reported

How did shortages hit Merkel’s G20 trip?

The spotlight fell on military shortages late last month when Chancellor Angela Merkel had to fly to the G20 summit in Argentina by passenger plane because of a technical failure involving one of the military’s two long-haul planes.



Image caption Chancellor Merkel’s plane lost radio control as it flew over the Netherlands on 29 November and had to land in Cologne – Image copyright AFP

Ms Von der Leyen said one or two new long-haul planes would be bought, as the two existing planes aged 18 and 19 were too few.

- Merkel’s nightmare journey to the G20

The technical failure involving Mrs Merkel’s government plane has been blamed on German airline Lufthansa, according to a report in Der Spiegel.

When the pilots tried to reboot the A340's electronics during an in-flight power failure they were unable to restart the radio.

According to a confidential report cited by Spiegel, the pilots had not been informed of new instructions to restart the radio after Lufthansa's technical subsidiary installed a digital communications system in 2009.

Why is the military underfunded?

For such a big country it may appear strange to have a relatively ill-equipped army.

But after reunification the Bundeswehr gradually shrank in size from 486,000 in 1990 to 168,000 in 2015.

There was no perceived military threat after the Cold War and cuts to defence spending continued until 2014.

German forces played key but limited Nato roles in Kosovo and Afghanistan, but that was before two key developments: a resurgent Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and so-called Islamic State seized territory in Syria in 2013.

The culture of underfunding changed and last month an opinion poll suggested 43% of Germans agreed on the need for greater defence spending, up from 32% in 2017.

How big should Germany's army be?

The defence minister says that all depends on the security situation.

Germany pledged hundreds of troops for a Nato presence in the Baltics and Poland this year, but it faces other threats too.

A month ago the army was targeted by cyber-attackers, possibly emanating from Russia, and some of the new spending will go on cyber security.

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