

Germany's Defense Shift: Merz, NATO, and Rearmament

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When newly elected German Chancellor Friedrich Merz delivered his first major address to the Bundestag in May 2025, following a closely fought election that ultimately saw Merz's CDU (Christian Democratic Union) forge an alliance with the SPD (Socialist Democratic Party of Germany), the subject of rearmament increased in importance on his party's agenda.

Merz's pledge to build the "strongest conventional army in Europe"¹ marked a turning point for domestic and foreign policy alike, and was met with some resistance across the Republic. Nearly 80 years after the conclusion of World War II, and close to 40 after the country's reunification, major reinvestment in defense remains a delicate issue in Berlin's fractious political landscape, as well as in the public conversation.

However, with the Russia-Ukraine war continuing just 1500km from the country's eastern borders, and America's historical support of NATO uncertain once again under a re-elected Trump administration, Merz had undoubtedly taken advantage of a prescient moment in his attempt to shift the national conversation.

Merz's pledge that Germany spend a total of 5 percent of GDP on defense, meeting the demands of NATO secretary Mark Rutte,² was equaled in ambition by a commitment to increase troop numbers by up to 25 percent by 2031, as well as sweeping replacements of aging tanks, aircraft, and ships. Estimated spending on defense is estimated to reach €215 billion (\$242 billion) by 2035, a result of military funding now being exempted from the country's "debt-brake," a rigid constitutional rule limiting net borrowing. First established by Angela Merkel in 2009, it was unpicked by her CDU successor, in deeply controversial reforms that followed Merz's victory in 2025.

Despite the neighboring conflicts and rapidly shifting political realities cited as the foundation for this comparatively radical shift in priorities for Germany, the evidence in the 15 months since suggests that Merz may struggle to achieve his ambitions while in office. There has been progress; his partners in the SPD, traditionally a party averse to defense investment, now largely share Merz's perspective.³

And while the tangible, public effects of the Russia-Ukraine war seen in 2022, such as chilled public swimming pools to save on gas,⁴ may have faded into memory, the threat of Russia's aggression continues to make itself known. In August 2026, a drone carrying explosives was intercepted at Leipzig airport,⁵ an incident widely accepted in the media to be an act of sabotage directed by Moscow.

Polling by YouGov as recently as July 2026⁶ suggests that 40 percent of German citizens believe the government is spending "too little" on defense and security, while 24 percent feel that the expenditure is "about the right amount" and a further 17 percent believe the country is spending too much. Meanwhile, 66 percent of citizens have a broadly favorable view of NATO as an organization, a figure greater than the approval for other major international organizations, including the United Nations (54 percent) and the European Union (60 percent).

Nonetheless, the measures proposed by the parliament to redress this perceived imbalance have sometimes proved challenging in a country with a still fragile relationship with its military history, and where mandatory conscription was only suspended in 2011. A national scandal erupted in April 2026, when it became known that legislation had passed featuring a clause that all German men between 17 and 45 are required to seek permission from the armed forces should they wish to leave Germany for work or travel purposes totaling more than three months of absence.⁷

The change had not been publicly communicated by the Bundestag, nor the Bundeswehr, discovered only in fine print by journalists some months following its legally binding introduction.

Amid much confusion, a spokesperson quickly clarified that the change was made only in anticipation of a potential return to conscription, stressing that, “the regulation already applied during the Cold War and had no practical relevance; in particular, it is not subject to sanction.”⁸ But the news triggered a fresh wave of alarm. Only a month earlier, 50,000 German schoolchildren walked out of schools nationwide,⁹ a swiftly organized response to the more widely communicated news that all male German citizens born after 2008 will undergo a medical exam determining their fitness to serve. In Berlin, children waved placards that addressed the chancellor directly: “Friedrich Merz to the front.”¹⁰

In 2024, the German military consisted of approximately 186,000 active military members in the Bundeswehr, including around 64,000 active soldiers and a further 81,000 civilian personnel.¹¹

As well as legal changes made to anticipate expanded manpower in the German military, attempts at a more direct recruitment drive have also taken place. Throughout the first half of 2026, the Bundeswehr distributed more than 300,000 questionnaires to young Germans, including 153,200 to men, who were legally obliged to respond. Despite a 96 percent response rate, as well as one in five asked reporting an interest in a role in military service, the enrollment rate associated with the campaign was just 530 people by the end of June 2026.¹²

News of this meagre figure proved a significant nexus of conversation across the German media. Underscoring what the press described as an emerging generational divide, it was revealed weeks later that the number of German men seeking the status of conscientious objector, a fundamental right in Germany's post-war constitution when based on either moral or religious grounds, had reached a greater number of applications in the previous six months than the entirety of 2025; 5,862, versus 3,879. In the case of a wider, more critical conflict, this fundamental right could prove challenging to recruitment, even with a legally mandated draft.

In parallel, the Bundeswehr has attempted to render military service more appealing to young people within the context of a challenging German economy, which is

currently stagnating for the seventh consecutive year, despite a slight, resilient GDP growth of 0.2 percent reported in Q2 of 2026. Rising costs associated with healthcare, pensions, and travel loom over the everyday finances of young Germans. New recruits are promised a base salary of €2,600 before tax, free train travel, and a subsidized driver's license. The current minimum wage in Germany is €13.90 per hour, which translates to roughly €2,400 gross per month.¹³

These figures are not particularly competitive in comparison to Germany's private sector. However, the career does offer the promise of professional stability and security, something reaffirmed by the direction in which Merz is driving the military sector.

Germany's history as a divided state, as well as its geographic location, has resulted in an anxiety concerning Russia that runs deeper than in some other Northern European countries. Since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Germany has welcomed more than 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees,¹⁴ each able to access standard social welfare, healthcare, and integration programs.¹⁵ This wave of migration has proven less controversial than Merkel's decision to welcome a similar number of Syrian refugees in 2015, a decision Merz is attempting to reverse, claiming in March 2026 that 80 percent of these individuals will be expected to return to their home country within three years.¹⁶

Although both cultural and security issues could be cited as differentiating these two migrations, the hosting of Ukrainian refugees instead provided a moment of shared purpose and pride, with spontaneous gatherings of Berliners waiting at train stations to provide shelter for fleeing citizens. These unifying images provided a template for a compassionate politics amongst Germans, standing against the brutality of what was emerging across the continent.

Still, the unique political landscape of a reunified Germany will call for a more targeted and nuanced approach in communicating the importance of defense. Traditionally, many voters in the former East Germany favor a more dialogue-focused approach to Russian relations, rather than military engagement or investment, retaining generational skepticism towards the transatlantic relationship with the United States, as well as NATO.

Since their foundation in 2013, the far-right AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) has consistently made

notable gains in both local and national election cycles. In July 2026, the party's overall support in eastern states such as Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg tracked between 36 percent and 41 percent, contributing a nationwide figure of 41 percent support.¹⁷ In Saxony-Anhalt on Sept. 6, the AfD won 43.8 percent of the vote, more than doubling its 2021 result, while the CDU fell to 17.2 percent, its worst-ever result in the state. Two weeks later, the AfD also finished first in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania with 38.2 percent, while the CDU won just 4.9 percent and, for the first time in its post-war history, failed to enter a state parliament. The same weekend brought another setback in Berlin, where the CDU lost control of the city government as Die Linke emerged as the largest party and the AfD substantially increased its vote share.¹⁸ The historic "firewall" approach agreed upon by Germany's main leading parties, with each refusing to form coalitions with the party, has so far kept the AfD outside of significant, mainstream governance, even as they finished second behind the CDU/CSU in the 2025 federal election, collecting 20.8 percent of the national vote¹⁹. After September's election results, it is clear that the "firewall" is leaking and that Germany's strategy to hold populists at bay may need adjustment.

While the AfD's principal nationwide focus is a stance of anti-immigration, the party's positive stance toward Russia is a key focus in these former Soviet states, many of which have not seen the economic benefits and upturn that have come to characterize Berlin. In these regions, the AfD won voters by criticizing Germany's financial and military support for Ukraine and through voicing support for resuming cheap Russian energy exports to Germany. Heavy industry has been particularly hard hit by sustained elevated energy prices that resulted from Europe's decision to turn its back on Russian energy supplies.

The German interior secret service have previously labelled the AfD as an extremist group, a designation that is currently suspended pending legal challenges.²⁰ AfD co-leader Alice Weidel has called for the rebuilding of the sabotaged Nord Stream pipelines, returning cheaper energy from Russia to Germany, while the party's most recent manifesto notably omitted any stance on Russia's aggression toward Ukraine.²¹ In July 2026, Weidel reaffirmed her party's intention to remove all military aid to the country and immediately begin direct negotiations for peace with Moscow.²²

While state elections are not straightforward referendums on federal policy, taken together these

results underscore the increasingly difficult political environment in which Merz is attempting to implement an ambitious program of economic reform and military rearmament. They also highlight a central challenge for his defense agenda: some of the strongest electoral gains for parties skeptical of military support for Ukraine and favoring closer relations with Moscow are occurring in the eastern states where the government must also build public support for Germany's new security posture.

Germany's rearmament is thus far more complicated than increasing defense spending. Merz has succeeded in breaking one of the most important political taboos of the postwar era, committing Germany to take a leading role in continental security and financing this transformation. The more difficult task will be converting that commitment into lasting military capability while maintaining public support in an increasingly fragmented political landscape. In the guns versus butter debate, Germans who are accustomed to enjoying a wealth of social provisions may be reluctant to make the required tradeoffs. Recruiting the personnel the Bundeswehr needs, rebuilding confidence in national defense, and sustaining consensus across generations and regions may ultimately prove as consequential as procuring new weapons systems. For the United States and Germany's other NATO allies, the stakes are significant: a stronger European pillar of the alliance increasingly depends on whether Germany can translate its new willingness to spend into the political and societal commitment required to lead. 🦋

This report is part of an ongoing series on transatlantic relations created in partnership with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung USA.

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