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Giving responsibility to the troops - time for internal reform

The report for the year 2019 I am presenting today is my fifth annual report and the 61st report since this office was established.

I wish I could report a sweeping and noticeable improvement in the conditions our servicewomen and men are serving under. But the "trend reversals" that have been initiated for the very most part are still not being felt.

All the problems that need to be solved are well known; they have been described, analysed, evaluated and conceptually factored in one way or another.

But every time the Parliamentary Commissioner visits the troops, every time members of parliament, heads of ministries and the chiefs of staff of the military organisational elements visit the troops, servicewomen and men repeatedly raise the same concerns: too little materiel, too few personnel, too much bureaucracy.

In the December 2019 edition of the magazine "Die Bundeswehr" published by the German Bundeswehr Association, a first sergeant from the CBRN corps comments on my annual reports. In the interview he recalls the film "Groundhog Day". He says that anyone who reads the report and hears the proposed solutions will wonder, "Why is this not being tackled?"

The troops are used to being patient. But this is truly urgent! For years now, our Bundeswehr has been required to perform the very tasks it is not supposed to be fully

resourced and equipped for until 2031: ready for collective defence in Europe whilst simultaneously engaged in a dozen out-of-area missions worldwide.

- More than 20,000 posts above junior-rank level still remain vacant, as before.
- The number of new servicewomen and men recruited annually remains at an all-time low. (In 2019 the figure was 20,172, in 2018: 20,012, in 2017: 23,410).
- Regarding the materiel situation, the Federal Ministry of Defence reports that "so far it has not been possible to significantly improve the materiel readiness of the major weapon systems." Materiel readiness, the Ministry states, is at the level of 2017 and 2018 - and those were very poor years.
- From the increasing budget for spending on defence investments, €1.1 billion were not disbursed as budgeted for in the year under review, *inter alia* because major defence projects continue to be subject to delays.
- And with regard to the problem of "excessive organisation", which I already addressed in last year's annual report, the command of a flying unit wrote to me: "Increasing bureaucratisation in all areas is restricting operational flexibility to an ever-greater degree. Strict process execution has become more important than the [...] goal of providing trained crews with operationally ready aircraft in time for the deployment."

While the strain on the Bundeswehr is high and is set to rise further (for instance due to the new NRI commitment), servicewomen and men are waiting for a noticeable improvement in the conditions under which they serve.

The changes needed in order to achieve this require new decisions: competencies and responsibility for resources need to be put back in the hands of those who bear responsibility for accomplishing the military mandate. The radical centralisation that hails back to the era of downsizing has become counterproductive in times that demand full operational readiness of the entire Bundeswehr. Not only is additional money needed,

internal reform is just as important. Without internal reform, the trend reversals risk failing.

In 2017, the Federal Ministry of Defence itself launched a project entitled "*Innere Führung - Today*" (Leadership development and civic education - Today), which - with the exemplary involvement of 770 servicewomen and men from all major organisational elements and ranks - staged 41 workshops to put forward proposals for the internal reform of the Bundeswehr. The servicewomen and men's proposals should be implemented! Decentralised, holistic assumption of responsibility in battalions, brigades and squadrons is what is required. The "Final Report" of the "*Innere Führung - Today*" project from February 2019 is still being kept under lock and key. The new leadership should release it and use it for the necessary internal reform, now. I particularly recommend reading pages 12 to 14 of my annual report on this.

Change is also needed in the - partly now dysfunctional - procurement system. This is not a criticism of the Bundeswehr staff working there! The step-by-step organisational changes that have been initiated may indeed be useful. But there are structures and processes that very fundamentally no longer fit.

Most of the equipment our armed forces need, from rucksacks to light-weight liaison helicopters, does not always first need to be defined abstractly in complicated "functional capability requirements", then put out to a Europe-wide tender, reinvented, awarded, tested, certified and finally "introduced" at the Bundeswehr in small tranches over a period of 15 years. It is also possible to just buy it. This means moving away from the principle that everything must always be "designer" for the German military because otherwise it is no good and moving towards the "IKEA principle": choose, pay and take it with you! And then, for top-end cutting-edge technology, from the new battle tank to missile defence, you use the designer solution to supplement this! A dual procurement channel of this kind, "IKEA or designer", has the potential to save time, money and personnel, to accelerate full resourcing and spare the nerves of soldiers who continue to suffer under the strain of "dynamic availability management".

It should not be considered normal for armoured infantry soldiers, instead of practicing with their armoured infantry fighting vehicle, to step out onto the terrain from a VW-Bully from the Bundeswehr's vehicle fleet company. There have to be limits to "pretending". On deployments soldiers have to master the real equipment after all. This can mean the difference between life and death, health and injury.

Occasionally I am asked why I speak so critically about the state of the Bundeswehr. The answer is: my annual report, which is prescribed by law, is a report on shortcomings, it is not the Federal Ministry of Defence's annual report. Under the German Basic Law, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces is responsible for ensuring the basic rights of servicewomen and men are respected and contributing to the parliamentary oversight of the armed forces. This is why he or she is independent, elected for five years, not government, not opposition. To me this seems to be a good arrangement.

It would be positive, incidentally, if there were some kind of official annual report issued by the Bundeswehr. If you are on top of your figures, you can manage things better. Let us not forget that the Federal Ministry of Defence is responsible for managing 260,000 uniformed and civilian members of the largest body of personnel in the Federal Republic of Germany and a budget of €45 billion. In the past, this kind of holistic accountability used to be in place in the form of the regular White Papers. Today, this no longer exists. Many important figures are now only publicly available in the annual report of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces. Not exactly ideal.

That is why I also believe that the Military Counterintelligence Service should inform the public itself on an annual basis about the Bundeswehr's findings on the phenomenon of right-wing extremism.

It is now a higher federal authority just like the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

My figures, at any rate, are not my own findings, the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner does not work in an intelligence capacity, we base our work on requests for information submitted to the Ministry. According to this information, the number of relevant "reportable events" rose again slightly to 197. The Military Counterintelligence Service processed a total of 363 new suspected cases in the year under review. 45 soldiers were dismissed prematurely from service. My impression is that the Bundeswehr is sensitive to this issue. Extremists cannot rely on their fellow soldiers pretending not to have heard or looking the other way.

In cases of Nazi propaganda, anti-Semitism, racism and discriminatory conduct, addressing the issue and where appropriate reporting the behaviour is a matter of honour.

This also holds true for sexual harassment and assault. The number of incidents reported here has also increased, from 288 in 2018 to 345 in the year under review. The rules governing how the sexes behave towards each other still need to be worked on. The increasing proportion of women in the Bundeswehr alone will not solve the problem.

In the year under review, the number of cases processed at the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces dropped slightly from 3,939 in 2018 to 3,835, as did the number of personal submissions from 2,534 to 2,459. This trend may be evidence that some of the uncertainties and insecurities resulting from the restructuring and site closures during the last downsizing reform have become a thing of the past for the Bundeswehr, which is now growing once more. A growing organisation offers new opportunities, at least in principle. Legally, socially and financially there have also been improvements. Other concerns continue to exist: operational strain, working hours issues and, for instance, commuting becoming a way of life for temporary-career volunteers and career soldiers.

Often, not always, submissions help the servicewomen and men. The Parliamentary Commissioner can caution and call for action, but he cannot decide anything. But

admonishing and encouraging is often already half the battle. This report also serves this purpose.