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Swedish Inspiration, German Design

Policy Travel and Military Service Reform in Germany

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a case study of the policy development and adaptations leading to the New Military Service policy in Germany through a policy travel lens. It follows the policy process over three phases between 2024 and 2025. Moving from policy transfer to policy translation, a framework building on framing vocabulary is developed and guides the analytical focus on how the policy has been adapted over time and in relation to foreign policy models. The policy development is examined through the German Ministry of Defense, drawing on the ministry's public communications and interviews with policy experts. The findings show that the policy was inspired by the Swedish conscription system. Similarities include a mix of voluntary and obligatory aspects. However, differences exist, e.g., regarding gender inclusion. While the broad policy approach has not fundamentally changed between the initial phase and the political decision in December 2025, the meanings and instruments have been adapted over time, reflecting, among other factors, the change in government in spring 2025. The paper also discusses the position of the German case within the broader European trend of restrengthening and modernizing multifaceted military services and finds that, despite German particularities, it is well situated within this trend.

Key words: Policy Translation, Policy Transfer, Military Service, Framing, Modernized Conscription

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1 Introduction

“Mach, was wirklich zählt” – “Do what really matters”. An appeal that every German 18-year-old is now confronted with by the Bundeswehr, the German Armed Forces. In other countries, young adults increasingly face similar appeals. After the end of the Cold War, many countries had turned away from large conscripted forces. In recent years, some countries, including Sweden, Latvia, and Serbia, have reintroduced conscription. Others that had it continuously have restrengthened and modernized military services. Conscription is never just a military and defense policy. It is multifaceted and strongly interacts with other societal debates, such as civic duty, gender, and youth welfare.

Identifying a trend toward modernizing and restrengthening military services across Europe, this study examines how countries within this trend draw on one another’s models to develop policy. The idea that policy travels is not new, and in public debates, other countries’ policies are frequently cited as role models, inspiration, or blueprints.

The German Ministry of Defense (MoD), responsible for developing the new policy, and especially its Minister, Boris Pistorius, repeatedly cited Sweden as a role model for Germany in developing a new military service act. Both countries had suspended conscription within a year of each other, between 2010 and 2011. Sweden already reactivated a modernized system in 2017, and Germany’s current development can be understood as a move in that direction. This study investigates policy travel through an original policy translation lens, highlighting adaptations over time.

The Armed Forces sends out letters to young adults to promote its *New Military Service*. The *Military Service Modernization Act* reimplements broad military registration. In 2011, mandatory conscription for men was suspended, but not abolished. Article 12a (1) states that “[m]en 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” (Federal Office of Justice, n.d.). The fact that this article remained in the Basic Law, Germany’s Constitution, preserved the institutional basis upon which a reactivation would become possible. However, military registration and mandatory service were set inactive until a state of defense was declared. Conscription has historically carried a particular democratic meaning in the Federal Republic of Germany, where the soldier as “citizen in uniform” was understood as a cornerstone of a strong relationship between democratic civil society and the military. For 15 years, young men and women were not obligated to interact with the Armed Forces in any capacity. Now, around one half of all new adults are mandated, and the other half is encouraged to consider whether they can imagine serving in the army – and will most likely encounter the slogan above.

Young men must complete a digital questionnaire that asks about their physical constitution, educational background, and willingness to serve in the military. People of other genders receive the same letter and are encouraged to fill it out, but cannot be

obligated to do so. The slogan “do what really matters” appears, for example, when a potential recruit completes the questionnaire. It emphasizes that the service in the Armed Forces “matters”, that it means something. This study investigates the meaning-making that led to the “modernized” military service implemented on 1st January 2026.

Aims and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to gain in-depth insight into how policy in a traditionally nation-bound policy area is developed and shaped by inspiration from other countries. As the policy process is still recent, dedicated scholarly work on the case remains limited. However, this study aims to go beyond mere gap-spotting by developing a framework to analyze how the empirically observable European trend of strengthening military service is, at least partially, an interconnected phenomenon on the policy level. Contributing to the conversation between policy travel theories, namely policy transfer and policy translation, an analytical framework integrating a framing perspective is developed and applied to understand how German policymaking was inspired by foreign policy models and adapted to domestic conditions. Using the German Ministry of Defense as an example, this study examines how military service policy is developed and adapted over time, drawing on the MoD’s communications and expert interviews.

The Research Questions examined are:

How has the German Ministry of Defense developed and adapted the new military service policy over time?

What role have foreign policies played in the development?

Following the main analysis of policy development and policy travel, the German case’s position within the European trend is discussed based on the findings.

The thesis proceeds as follows. First, the background chapter contextualizes the German case, providing an overview of historical meanings and political developments of conscription. Subsequently, the literature review situates the case within broader scholarly debates on the historical relationship between conscription and welfare, recent European trends, and the changing, multifaceted nature of modern military service. The theoretical section develops the analytical framework, tracing the move from positivist policy transfer approaches to a constructivist understanding through policy translation (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021). Policy translation is brought into analytical practice by incorporating Van Hulst and Yanow’s (2016) framing perspective. This allows examining the actor dimension, the discursive dimension, and the institutional dimension of translation. After outlining the methodology, the analysis examines policy development across three phases, focusing on changes, before the discussion synthesizes the policy translation and situates the case within the European trend. The conclusion summarizes the findings in relation to the research questions.

2 Background – Conscription in Germany

This section offers an overview of the historical and political background onto which the policy developments studied in this paper build.

The militaristic history during the German Empire and Nazi Germany makes discussion around the military sensitive to this day. After World War II, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was reimagined as “liberal democratic, inherently peaceful, and an integral part of the West” (Stengel, 2025, p. 418). The “radical break” rejecting militarism was also supported by the Western Allies and was implemented in the German Constitution (ibid.). While initially that meant a complete abstention of Armed Forces, a constitutional amendment in 1955 allowed the establishment of a defensive military, the *Bundeswehr* (Stengel, 2025, p. 419). From the beginning, universal (male) conscription was an integral part of the democratized and parliamentary-controlled military rebuild (Werkner, 2023, p. 28). The core principle was to anchor the Armed Forces deeply in the society to prevent the development of a “state within the state” (Werkner, 2023, p. 29). This was envisioned through two pillars. The principle of *inner guidance* [*Innere Führung*]¹ through the realization of soldiers as *citizens in uniform*. And secondly, recruiting soldiers through *universal conscription*. It should connect society as a whole with the Bundeswehr and ensure loyalty and democratic legitimacy through an inherent societal willingness to defend the democratic society. For example, the first president of the FRG, Theodor Heuss, called conscription “the legitimate child of democracy” (cited in Werkner, 2023, p. 29, translated). During the Cold War, the system remained largely universal, but after German reunification in 1990, the situation had changed dramatically. A military threat became less realistic, and as part of reunification, Germany had agreed to substantially reduce its military personnel (Werkner, 2025, p. 6). Furthermore, the broader (European) trend towards All-Volunteer Forces (AVF) and the respective arguments were also picked up in Germany. With a reduction in conscript numbers, the question of *defense-burden-justice* [*Wehrgerechtigkeit*] becomes a driving one, as only parts of an age cohort had to serve in the military (Werkner, 2023, p. 24). After a longstanding debate with strong disagreements across the political spectrum, conscription was set dormant in 2011. The decision was somewhat “surprising” (p.51), especially in its quick enactment, as the former Minister of Defense zu Guttenberg and his Christian Democratic Party had been the strongest proponents of conscription (Werkner, 2023, p. 30). However, mandatory service and mustering were halted until the parliament declares a defense crisis. The constitutional and statutory foundations of conscription remained untouched (Werkner, 2023, p. 32). Instead, a voluntary military service was introduced (ibid.). Before 2022, debates revolved around mandatory, universal services to improve

¹ The Basic principle is that, in contrast to historical realities, society controls the military, not vice versa (Werkner, 2023, p. 29). Further information in English: <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/bundeswehr-innere-fuehrung>

social cohesion. But after the Russian invasion, debates over conscription or integrated services regained traction (Dietz, 2025, p. 18). This was part of the declared *turn of times* [Zeitenwende] in German military policy, which aimed to rebuild a stronger, better-equipped military. The continued struggle to find sufficient volunteers for military service led to discussions about reintroducing conscription (Werkner, 2025, p. 10). In January 2023, Minister of Defense Christine Lambrecht stepped down and was replaced by Boris Pistorius. Pistorius had previously served as Minister of the Interior in Lower Saxony at the state level for 10 years. After taking office, he created a task force within the ministry to develop ideas for modernized military recruitment (Werkner, 2025, p. 11).

Literature on German Conscription

Earlier in time, studies have explored why Germany was, for a long time, reluctant to abolish conscription after others had already done so (Longhurst, 2003) as well as the strategic rationale and effects of the suspension of the previous conscription system in 2011 (Bacolod & Koenigsmark, 2017; Kosnik, 2017).

The more recent debate on conscription has once again awakened scholarly interest. For example, the discourse and the public's attitudes towards it have been studied (Jäckle, 2023) followed by another study that investigated post-Zeitenwende attitudes towards compulsory service (Schleehauf et al., 2025). In broader terms, the change of German (foreign) policy after the invasion of Ukraine and the proclaimed Zeitenwende has been discussed from different angles (e.g., Blumenau, 2022; Stengel, 2025).

Also, the gendered representation of recruitment advertisements for the former voluntary military service has been explored, delving into the role of masculinity in a contemporary Bundeswehr (Stengel & Shim, 2022).

The notion that Sweden or Scandinavia could serve as inspiration or role models for German conscription policy also came up in policy-oriented academic discussion. The idea of drawing on Scandinavian conscription emerged relatively early (Besch & Westgaard, 2024). Werkner (2023) discussed the new requirements for the German Armed Forces in light of the reorganization of national and allied defense efforts. She proposed to “revisit” conscription and develop a selective conscription system, similar to Norway and Sweden, as it has the potential to align structural changes in the Armed Forces with societal and personnel demands (Werkner, 2023, pp. 112–113).

3 Literature Review – Multifaceted Conscription

This literature review shows that conscription has long been closely connected to societal and welfare questions. Furthermore, conscription and military service policies should be understood as multifaceted institutions that evolve and adapt to societal expectations and needs. In times of strong rearmament and growing military tensions, it is highly relevant for welfare policy scholars to understand the relationship between defense and welfare and how multifaceted defense policies are constructed, justified, and embedded in modern welfare societies. This study contributes to a growing, intersectional conversation that aims to understand social and political meaning.

Welfare and Defense Nexus

In public discussions, welfare and defense are often displayed as opposing fields of policy that directly compete for budget and relevance. The question of “guns versus butter” has been studied, for example, in relation to economic and fiscal competition (Mintz & Huang, 1991), regime competition (Obinger & Schmitt, 2011) and economic growth (Saba & Ngendah, 2022).

Another stream focuses on the relationship between welfare and warfare, with a focus on how welfare states developed during war preparation, mobilization, and the post-war period (Obinger et al., 2018; Obinger & Petersen, 2017). Obinger et al. (2018, p. 2) highlight that it is normatively “almost repulsive” to connect the two fields, but they argue that, as in other fields, warfare has had a strong, long-term influence on the development of modern Western welfare states. It is contested whether warfare and defense were the “pacemaker” of the welfare state, or whether the trade-off between “guns and butter” should be emphasized (Obinger & Petersen, 2017, p. 203). Still, conscription has historically been directly linked to welfare development.

During war-preparation phases, the spread of mass conscription systems was linked to public health issues, as many potential conscripts lacked the health prerequisites, partly due to poor labor protection (Obinger et al., 2018, p. 14). Additionally, with mass duty for the nations, the discussion of individual rights also developed, especially around citizenship and suffrage (Obinger et al., 2018, p. 15). For example, in Sweden, conscription was closely associated with the development of the welfare state (Strand, 2024, p. 1181) and the slogan “one man, one vote, one gun” was popular in suffrage debates (Bendix, 1977, as cited in Obinger et al., 2018, p. 15). Even education policy was found to improve through conscription, as the military and the nation had an interest in a skilled and educated population (Obinger & Petersen, 2017, p. 207). In particular, the application of technology and literacy was a key concern in that field, as they were closely linked to the capabilities of the mass army. Furthermore, during times of war,

governments relied on their citizens' loyalty, which was addressed through several social policies, as well as the promise of a better, more socially equal post-war future (Obinger & Petersen, 2017, pp. 209–211).

Conscription Trends

Many European countries maintained mass military, staffed through conscription, after the two World Wars. This was deemed necessary from a security perspective, as the Cold War continued to threaten large-scale military escalation. After the Cold War ended in 1990, many countries reconsidered conscription because it was expensive and fewer soldiers were needed, and questions about its timeliness in modern societies arose.

As Werkner (2023, p. 26) shows, between 1990 and 2022, a majority of Western countries that had some form of conscription army at the end of the Cold War shifted towards abolishing conscription. Even among those who have not abolished conscription fully, most have reduced the number of conscripts. Noteworthy exceptions are Denmark, Switzerland, and Estonia. Estonia even increased its conscription rate until 2022. Furthermore, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden have reversed the trend and reintroduced conscription within the referenced time span.

This trend towards what is referred to as All-Volunteer Forces (AVF) has been studied by scholars across many countries and contexts. The reasons for the shift varied, but the absence of a direct military state-to-state threat was arguably prevalent in most cases (Jonsson et al., 2024, p. 20). Additionally, conscription was deemed inefficient, outdated, incapable of recruiting motivated and skilled personnel, and therefore, unfit for expeditionary missions and non-state threats (ibid.). Also, social changes toward more individualistic motivations and neoliberal thinking, along with a decreasing personal attachment to the nation-state, contributed to the suspension or abolition of conscription (Szvircsev Tresch et al., 2025, p. 6). The countries that maintained conscription the longest before abolishing it were Sweden (2010), Serbia (2011), Germany (2011), and Ukraine (2013). Shortly after, in 2014, Ukraine reinstated conscription when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula. However, the trend expanded to countries without direct military conflict. Lithuania (2015), Sweden (2017), Latvia (2023), and Serbia (2024) implemented new conscription models (ibid.). Nevertheless, the “rebirth” of conscription systems is characterized by a wide spectrum and heterogeneity of service and recruitment (ibid.). One rather broad typology is between universal and selective systems. Universal conscription is often based on traditional, broad forms, in which all young men have a general obligation to serve in the military. This is often also connected to arguments of national solidarity (Szvircsev Tresch et al., 2025, p. 9). Selective conscription, typically adapted to post-modern militaries, selects young people either based on selection criteria such as capabilities or motivation, or through randomized lottery drafts (ibid.).

Conscription as a Multifaceted Institution

While conscription is mostly discussed as a military and defense institution, it strongly interacts with and has implications for several other policy fields. Arguably, it is closely

connected to questions around labor markets and recruitment, youth welfare policy, citizenship and national solidarity, gender equality, and economic considerations. Some of those connections have long traditions, but some are rather unique to the recent comeback and modernization of military services. Overall, in the move to restrengthening military services, conscription “has evolved and adapted to changing societies and security situations instead of merely retaining its traditional form” (Jonsson et al., 2024, p. 19).

Specifically, the relationship between conscription and general labor market regulation has been found to work both ways (Cohn & Toronto, 2017). Conscription is always a form of youth welfare policy. It structures how young adults enter further education and the job market. Furthermore, it raises questions about generational justice, as it determines who, in the case of a war, will be sent to the front and will have to defend the country with their life. It is a very significant policy to distribute the burden of defense, which includes many considerations about justice, equality, and well-being (Altenburger, 2025).

How countries that have reinstated or maintained conscription have addressed societal changes through adaptations to their military recruitment systems and service designs has been studied across several cases and with varying foci (Banka & Zalāns, 2025; Ben-Ari et al., 2023; Jonsson et al., 2024; Lillemäe et al., 2024a, 2024b; Rostoks & Gavrilko, 2025; Sava, 2026; Stachowitsch & Strand, 2024; Strand, 2024; Xharo & Lami, 2020).

Discourses that evolved and renegotiated what conscription means were structured around questions of obligation, individual benefits, gender equality, and embeddedness, and thereby often connected to a broader neo-liberal shift.

Voluntarism

Historically, conscription has been tied to notions of national loyalty and citizenship. Universal male conscription has been seen as a mode that shows that citizens are not only holders of rights but also of duties towards the state (Krebs et al., 2026, p. 55). Nowadays, the variation across countries is significant, whether the image of an intrinsically motivated patriotic citizen soldier is still prevalent in society’s perception (Krebs et al., 2026, p. 56).

For example, in France, a view of intrinsic motivations remains strong (Krebs et al., 2026, p. 56) and the attempt to reintroduce mandatory national service was justified as a return to republican ideals (Gheciu, 2020, p. 34). Eventually, it was also implemented as a volunteer program (Schofield, 2025). In countries where discussions of individual duty towards the nation fail to convince, other arguments are needed and are often connected to a more voluntaristic notion (Strand, 2024, p. 1178). Therefore, discourse around conscription is also a dispute between the narratives that civic duty justifies mandatory service, or whether the freedom of citizens has to play a central role (Szvircsev Tresch et al., 2025, pp. 8–9)

Ben-Ari et al. (2023, p. 138) showed in the case of Israel that modernized conscription models can be hybrid and “volunteer-ized” through broad exemption rules and additional forms of voluntary service. And indeed, as mentioned earlier, systems in which the vast majority of an age cohort are drafted have become the exception, even if only among men.

In Sweden, voluntarism was framed to be the primary logic of the new draft system, where hard pressure should only appear as an ultima ratio (Strand, 2024, p. 1183). Strand (2024, pp. 1183–1184) highlights the contradictory rhetoric in presenting mandatory conscription as voluntary. On the other hand, if only a relatively small share of a cohort is actually obligated to pursue the service, it is incorrect to speak of a general obligation. Therefore, the Swedish recruitment system is attentive to motivation and prioritizes volunteers where possible and mandatory aspects are seen as an “insurance policy against the failures of voluntarism” (Strand, 2024, p. 1185).

Individual Benefits

One way to prevent having to resort to force to find enough conscripts is to make military service a competitive option for young people and make it beneficial for individuals to participate. The idea that providing material benefits and, especially, transferable skills to conscripts is a phenomenon that is evident in Estonia and well-studied by Lillemäe et al. (2024b, 2024a). In this thinking, gaining skills and certification, such as driver's licenses, that are useful for the military but can also be transferred to the civilian sector after finishing one's duty, are important to handle the tension between neo-liberal market orientation and the duty (Lillemäe et al., 2024b, p. 911). A study across six countries also found that individual benefits play an important role across most of the systems (Szvircsev Tresch et al., 2025). In Sweden, benefits and transferable skills were also part of the reimagining of conscription, aimed at making it a “merit” for individuals (Strand, 2024, p. 1186). This discursive focus on individual benefits was not even linked to societal benefits or other non-military benefits (Strand, 2024, p. 1186), which is different from, e.g., Estonia, where it was described as a “two-way process” between military and civilian spheres (Lillemäe et al., 2024a, p. 911).

Gender Equality

The third overarching topic that revolved across several countries was gender equality. Historically, conscription has been strongly male-coded across countries. Even today, this legacy persists in many cases. However, with Sweden and Norway in Europe, two cases have made conscription gender-neutral yet selective (Kasearu, Jonsson, et al., 2025, p. 289). Other countries have gradually opened to women volunteers (ibid.).

The opening of the military sphere had two main drivers. First, promoting gender equality by including all genders in all aspects of society, and second, addressing personnel shortages by broadening the pool of potential recruits (ibid.).

Nevertheless, discussions around gender in military conscription varied strongly between countries. A study found that discourses in Sweden and Austria drew on strongly different

images of conscription. While in Sweden it was connected to neoliberal and individualistic notions, Austria, still sticking to a male-only conscription, drew on conservative communitarian images (Stachowitsch & Strand, 2024, p. 489). In Latvia, which reintroduced conscription in 2023, service is still mandatory only for men, but discussions evolve around a possible extension to women (Banka & Zalāns, 2025). An analysis of the discourse showed significant societal and ideological factors that are persistent and make short-term inclusion unlikely (Banka & Zalāns, 2025, p. 67). Overall, the literature suggests that, more than with the other aspects, discussions of gender are firmly embedded in broader national discourses on gender.

Total Defense

Additionally to these debates, conscription is often seen as part of total defense or whole-of-society defense approaches that are formulated in most Nordic and Baltic states (Kasearu, Lillemäe, et al., 2025; Salo & Sederholm, 2025).

Policy Perspectives on Conscription

Research specifically focusing on the description and explanation of recent conscription policy reforms remains sparse. Some large-N efforts over extended periods of time have been made to identify determinants of conscription (Asal et al., 2017; Cohn & Toronto, 2017; Margulies, 2018). Consistent across studies is that the military threat is a key factor (Asal et al., 2017; Cohn & Toronto, 2017). Furthermore, they have shown that threat level, culture, and labor market regulation play an important role in determining whether to adopt a mandatory or voluntary system (Cohn & Toronto, 2017, p. 452). Additionally, history and polity matter. For example, British colonial past and democracies are less likely to implement conscription (Asal et al., 2017). This literature helps to understand the broad patterns of conscription policy globally. However, it can only very limitedly help explain and describe the recent comeback of conscription in Europe. It underlines the arguably not very surprising, but still important, notions that military threat and historical factors partially determine whether conscription is implemented. Approaching policy success, Kosonen and Mälkki (2022, p. 456) depict the Finnish conscription model as a policy that constitutes the “enduring bedrock” of Finnish defense. It maps the historical process the system underwent and argues that its adaptability is one of the key explanations for its persistence, alongside its deep-rootedness in society (Kosonen & Mälkki, 2022, pp. 468–470).

The most comprehensive interpretive study to date has been conducted by Strand (2024) on the case of Sweden. Strand (2024) argues that conscription was “profoundly *reimagined* in its process of reactivation” (p. 1182, emphasis in original) and shows that new meanings were assigned on the levels of voluntarism vs. obligation, individualism vs. obligation, and gender equality vs. all-male military. The article is particularly relevant because it analyzes Sweden, which served as the model for the development of the German model.

In conclusion, scholars have shown that military recruitment and service have historically been, and remain, multifaceted policies that interact with broader societal debates. Over time, conscription has undergone great changes. From conscription armies to All-Volunteer Forces and, most recently, to hybrid forms. Debates have evolved around obligation and voluntarism, gender equality, and the role of the individual. This study contributes to this literature by showing how policy in the case of Germany has been developed. Strand (2024, p. 1190) has called for more “in-depth country case studies [...] to better understand how conscription is ascribed meaning in ways which ultimately enable its emergence, transformation, survival, and return”. Based on those findings, Germany's position in European developments is discussed. Furthermore, this thesis adopts a new perspective that analyzes how policy travels, thereby showing that, within the European trend, at least in this case, countries are drawing on foreign examples seen as front-runners.

Approaches theorizing policy travel and learning grew in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Lesson-drawing, mainly put forward by Rose (1991, p. 4, see also 2005), was asking “[u]nder what circumstances and to what extent would a programme now in effect elsewhere also work here” and was thereby focusing on the transferability of concrete policy programs. Another stream was policy diffusion, which focuses on patterns of adoption (Pojani, 2020, p. 10). More recently, a significant number of approaches have been developed, such as policy mobilities (Peck & Theodore, 2010) or policy circulation. For overviews of the theoretical approaches in the field, see Pojani (2020) and Haupt (2023).

4 Theory – How Policy Travels and Changes

Building on the idea that policy development in one place builds on experiences in other places, theories of policy travel have been developed. This study argues that, when on the move, policy inevitably changes. It contributes to a theoretical conversation between policy transfer and policy translation scholars by developing and applying a translation framework that focuses on the framing and reframing of policy. This translation process helps explain how policy changes while traveling. Both studying policy travel, the strength of policy transfer lies in evaluating the degree of transfer and transferability. Translation, rather than applying a positivist, mechanistic logic, enables the interpretation and understanding of how policy change develops. Here, a translation framework is developed that focuses on adaptation in policy development, while also relating the meanings assigned during importation to the original meanings. The framing perspective

ties the actor, institutional, and discursive dimensions together and is adapted into an original framework that is attentive to the theoretical demands of translation.

4.1 From Policy Transfer...

Inspired, but distinguishing from lesson-drawing and diffusion, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000) established policy transfer theory. The core idea is that there is a “process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 5). The framework includes questions on who is involved in the transfer, what is transferred, and from where (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, pp. 8–13). Also, questions about whether it was voluntary or coercive are raised, and the motivations are studied (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, pp. 14–18). Additionally, the authors were also explicit that the degrees of similarity vary and even hypothesized that politicians might be drawn to copy quick-fix solutions while bureaucrats tend more towards mixtures, and that the degree of similarity might change over the policy process, since in the agenda-setting, the proposed solution might look different than in the implementation phase (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 13).

Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 21) claim that policy transfer can help explain policy processes and outcomes, but that it can not be the sole explanation for any policy development.

However, their framework received considerable attention, especially in the early 2000s, and is seen as one of the key pieces to this day. Some critiques were fundamentally challenging the usefulness of policy transfer (and lesson-drawing) (James & Lodge, 2003). The main criticisms are that it struggles to distinguish itself from other policy-making approaches, to synthesize opposing theoretical perspectives, and to sufficiently explain why transfer works or does not work (James & Lodge, 2003). Another core criticism that appeared from several sides was that it is too positivist (e.g., Clarke et al., 2015). Even Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) themselves perceived a too strong focus on positivism in the policy transfer stream. However, other scholars perceived it as a useful means to study policy processes and extended the concept. For example, Evans (2009) introduced a more critical perspective, and Stone (2012) added a focus on context and the notion of *translation*. She also focused on the role of international organizations in transfer processes (Stone, 2012, p. 491ff.). More recently, Porto de Oliveira (2021) edited the “Handbook of Policy Transfer, Diffusion and Circulation” that brings together several perspectives from the field. In this work, Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021) propose viewing translation as complementary to the transfer perspective.

Overall, policy transfer can be applied to test whether a transfer occurred and to describe the conditions surrounding the process. Also, it can help to evaluate the degree of transfer in empirical cases or the transferability of policies under consideration. However politically relevant, the analytical value may be relatively low, as it struggles to observe *how and why* policies typically do not travel as copies.

4.2 ... To Policy Translation

As mentioned above, the notion of translation has been incorporated into the policy transfer stream. However, it is fair to say that it has developed as a stream that is partially strongly delimited from transfer theory. The core difference between the two lies in their ontological and epistemological approaches. Translation is characterized by a more anti-foundationalist and constructivist view that opposed the positivist view of (early) transfer studies. The notion of translation has its origins in fields other than political science, not least in linguistics. In this tradition, translation means a transformation, reinvention, and interpretation of the original text (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021, p. 59).

In a policy context, translation scholars agree with other approaches that policy moves. Their key argument is that policy “is made to mean something in its new context” through translation (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 9). From this perspective, policy is seen as a “meaning-making process” (Lendvai & Stubbs, 2007, p. 174; Clarke et al., 2015; Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021). The question of the relationship between translation theory and transfer theory has been prevalent virtually since it arrived in policy studies. Lendvai and Stubbs (2007, p. 174) saw translation as “contrast” to transfer, while Freeman (2009, p. 430) perceived translation as the potential “key to transfer” and Stone (2012) connected it to knowledge transfer. Mukhtarov (2014, p. 76) advocated a distinct yet narrow use of translation, but his work was perceived as bringing a translation perspective to transfer processes (Clarke et al., 2015; Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021). Clarke et al. (2015, p. 13), however, deemed the transfer literature as “extremely problematic”. They instead propose a shift towards translation and assemblage (Clarke et al., 2015). Most recently, Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021, p. 64) proposed that translation should be treated as a “complementary perspective to policy transfer providing analytical displacements”.

Common to all these approaches is a focus on meaning, moving beyond an objectivist view of policy, and rejecting policy processes as linear and finite. Additionally, the notion of rational policymaking is challenged. Overall, translation theory leads to the expectation that policy inevitably changes when moving as it is translated. This also connects to organizational studies (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021, p. 63), where scholars theorized organizational change as translation (see Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996) and connected it to knowledge transfer (Røvik, 2016, 2023). Those insights make clear that translation does not only take place when policy travels across countries but also within

jurisdictions and organizations. However, policy translation as a process leading to policy transfer between countries is a phenomenon informed by, but distinct from, organizational translation theory. Therefore, this study adopts an approach that, in many respects, follows the idea that translation helps understand how policy travels across countries.

However, as shown above, the relation to transfer varies strongly among translation scholars. Therefore, I will briefly outline my position before presenting the analytical framework.

The more transfer-skeptical side specifically criticized the linear, objectivist view of policy, which they see as dominating transfer studies. Clarke et al. (2015, pp. 14–15) apply the metaphor that “[p]olicy ideas or models are rendered as ‘objects’ to be loaded up on a truck at point A and unloaded at point B. Those doing the loading and unloading, and the truck itself, are of little scholarly interest. The terrain on which the truck travels is largely seen as smooth and unproblematic. The truck only moves from A to B, never back the other way”. However, I see this critique as, first, partially overstated and, secondly, solvable without detaching translation from transfer.

It is overstated insofar as Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 13) indeed explicitly acknowledged that the policy being transferred is usually not transferred in its entirety, but to varying degrees. This is even more true for approaches that applied more critical perspectives. Nevertheless, the analytical focus remains insufficient to describe, let alone explain, how and why adaptations occur. The authors state that different types of actors might prefer different degrees of transfer and that the degree of transfer might change over time (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 13). Constraining factors for transfer are mainly policy attributes, structural, and institutional characteristics (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 9). Also, the role of the actors included in the process is mentioned but not elaborated upon (ibid.).

Therefore, I argue that transfer, although not fully blind to adaptation, has underpronounced this aspect of policy travel and misses a significant share of the analytical value that can be realized by applying a translation perspective.

Furthermore, in line with translation theory, it is not assumed that ideas and policies spread independently or are pushed around by global trends (Mukhtarov, 2014, p. 76). Instead, it is pursued by policy actors that serve as translators and typically follow a certain agency. Still, this does not mean policymakers are immune to global trends, but rather that they will translate them to fit their respective contexts.

Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021, pp. 65–66) carry out analytical displacements from transfer theory to combine the advantages of both transfer and translation approaches. At the core is the shift to a fluid, complex, and contingent understanding of policy processes, a focus on the actors’ agency and meaning-making through discourses.

Overall, the phenomenon in which policy in one place draws on policy in another can be described as policy transfer and is especially relevant to evaluating policy outcomes.

However, policy translation helps in understanding how policy changes within a transfer and is of particular analytical interest for understanding policy development and adaptation. Therefore, the following framework builds a foundation for examining how the policy was translated and reframed in the policy process. Snapshots within the continuous process can be used to evaluate the relation to the inspirational policy.

4.2.1 Actors / Institutions / Discourse

To analytically access translation, this approach builds on Hassenteufel and Zeigermann's (2021, p. 58) proposal to shift the focus towards "a constructivist and relational perspective stressing the role of agency". Their framework combines three dimensions that are the core analytical units and are visualized in *Figure 1*. The discursive dimension, the actor's dimension, and the institutional dimension can help explain policy change through translation (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021, p. 59). All three dimensions are necessary for a thorough analysis of the translation process (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021, p. 66).

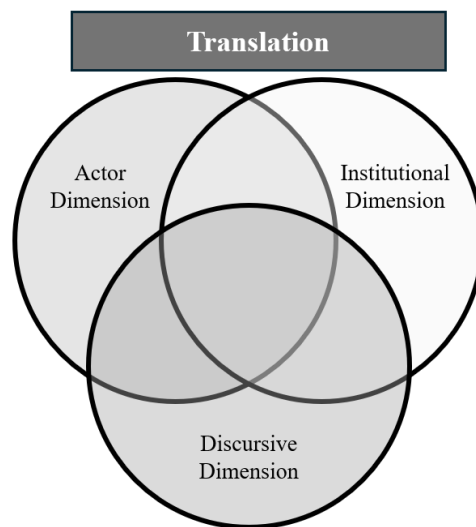


Figure 1: Policy Translation Dimension based on Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021); Own visualization

The Actor Dimension

This dimension requires analyzing the translators and their agency. Generally, these actors can be exporters and/or importers of policy. Here, the focus lies on the importing role. Especially the actor's understanding of the problem, situation, and solution is of core interest. An important aspect is the interaction between the translators and other actors on the various levels involved.

The Institutional Dimension

The analytical value of the institutional dimensions manifests primarily in the embeddedness of the translated policy, ideas, design, and instruments within existing institutions and in the institutional resources used by different actors in the process. However, it also enables insights into the implementation and the scope of the policy change.

The Discursive Dimension

This dimension is “corresponding to the analysis of the reformulation and reframing of policy problems, policy ideas, policy designs, policy instruments” drawn from foreign sources. It contributes to understanding the content of policy transfer and the rhetorical meaning of policy through language.

4.2.2 Framing

In their remarks on methodological operationalization, Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021, p. 67) noted that frame analysis is particularly suitable for combining the three dimensions, but did not elaborate on a concrete approach. This is where the present study contributes. This section briefly outlines the theoretical foundation of framing processes, which is subsequently combined with translation into an original analytical framework.

Martin Rein and Donald Schön, individually and in several collaborations, were the key scholars who brought frame analysis into public policy. It allows one to go “beyond the mere description of multiple meanings” and to critically analyze “assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations” that lead to a particular policy proposal (Wagenaar, 2015, p. 82). Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) later aimed to revisit and extend the work and develop a lens for policy process analysis, emphasizing the dynamic and political framing process. In this approach, framing is distinguished from frames as framing is the process “through which frames are constructed” (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 93). Framing becomes especially important in policy controversies that are “relatively immune to resolution by reference to evidence” (Rein & Schön, 1993, p. 145). The normative and political questions raised in a debate on whether and how (young) citizens should be forced to conduct a service in the military clearly fall into this category.

Van Hulst and Yanow (2016, p. 97) argue that framing “is carried out through three distinctive acts”, emphasizing the dynamic, political character. First, *sense-making* is a process in which policy actors construct the meaning of the situation and evaluate ambiguous and uncertain circumstances. The second act is *selecting, categorizing, and naming*, in which certain aspects of the situation and possible actions are communicated, and others are not. The third part is *storytelling*, which aims to make the situation appear less ambiguous and the action a coherent whole. This more process-oriented approach allows for moving beyond a static taxonomy of fixed frames (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016,

p. 105). Subject to framing can, besides the substance of policy issues, also be the policy process itself (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, pp. 102–103).

4.2.3 Analytical Framework

This study takes the three translation dimensions as analytical units. As visualized in *Figure 2*, the overlap is accessed through the analytical framework, which builds on Van Hulst and Yanow's (2016) vocabulary, but is adjusted to meet translation demands. This original lens allows for the study of translation as it is receptive to agency, the political use of language, the role of institutions, and the dynamic understanding of the policy process. It is open to a variety of aspects of the process, especially change, and allows combining knowledge acquired through publicly available communication with contextual and internal knowledge gained through interviews.

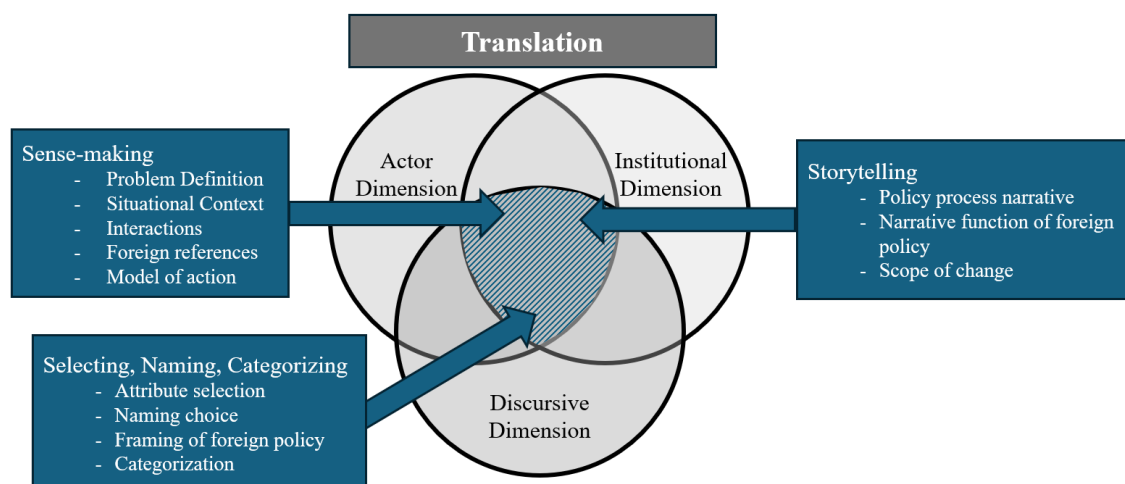


Figure 2: Original Analytical Framework utilizing Van Hulst and Yanow's vocabulary (2016) to analyze policy translation; Own visualization

Sense-making

The first analyzed act is sense-making. It shows how a translator interprets a situation and defines the problem. Turning a situation into a problem is work conducted by the actor (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 97). Underlying cognitive processes are, in most cases, arguably hard to examine reliably. Instead, the problem definition can serve as an approximation of how the actor makes sense of the problem they face. The analysis of the “framing of the situation” entails interpreting the actor’s “model of the world” and a “model for subsequent action in that world” (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 98, italics in original). An important aspect of this is the “conversation with the situation” that occurs through interactions (ibid.). It is an interactive and iterative process in which an actor attributes meaning to the situation (ibid.). Additionally, the focus is on how the translator makes sense of the origin’s and the receptor’s situation. While this is not specified by

Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021), insight into how the translator makes sense of the situation is essential for understanding what problem the translated policy is intended to solve and which situational perception it needs to be adapted to. Sense-making entails aspects relevant to all three translation dimensions, particularly to a comprehensive analysis of the translator's understanding and agency, and of the perceived institutional surroundings.

Selecting, Naming, and Categorizing

Van Hulst and Yanow (2016, pp. 99–100) describe the work done through selecting, naming, and categorizing as a highly political act that highlights certain aspects “while occluding and even silencing others”. This is, however, not necessarily a strategic move but a practical necessity to reduce the complexity of an issue. The selection process involves choosing among the virtually infinite features that could get attention. Naming means to verbalize this selection, and categorizing means to put it in a certain perspective. In the translation process, this means analyzing which aspects of the inspiration are selected and named, and subsequently how the policy is categorized. Through an analysis of the highlighted aspects, assertions can be made about which meaning an actor assigns to the policy.

While it is impossible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of what has been silenced, as the potential aspects tend to be infinite, an interesting focus could be whether aspects named in one context or at one point in time are not named in another. This change in framing is central to understanding the discursive dimension of translation. It is an iterative process where meaning is discursively constructed and changed.

Storytelling

Studying translation processes, storytelling about the policy process is the analytical focus. The actor explains to an audience “what has been going on, what is going on, and, often, what needs to be done—past, present, and future corresponding to the plot line of a policy story” (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 100). This narrative aspect has a strong persuasive component to it through which discursive power can manifest (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 101). In translation studies, it is especially important to understand how foreign references are embedded in this story. It also includes an analysis of the scope of change.

The analysis of the narration in the translation process informs about the actor's perception of the process and the institutional boundaries and resources relevant to policy construction.

The Processual Component

In this study's case, in addition to those analytical categories, a processual mapping of the Ministry of Defense's internal and relevant external events will, for each phase, provide background information and help understand the translation within broader developments.

5 Methodology

The chosen interpretivist methodology allows for tracing meaning-making over time. It analyzes how problems were defined, how foreign references were used, and how policy content shifted across phases. This section outlines the research design, including the scope of the case, the data, and the analytical strategy that brings the analytical framework into practice.

5.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative single-case study design to examine, in depth, the policy development and change over time of the new military service policy in Germany. As a qualitative case study, this work does not aim for statistical generalizability. Rather, it aims to contribute to scientific development through “the force of example” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228), using this case as an empirically grounded instance of how policy travel and translation operate in practice.

Empirically, the German case is puzzling. Germany is reemphasizing its military and is changing much of its defense-related policy. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how this is done in specific instances and how it is connected to or disconnected from other societal developments. Secondly, the case explicitly draws on foreign models. A phenomenon that has not yet been examined, although similarities across countries in the modernization trend are apparent. As part of the broader European trend, this study offers in-depth insights into how meaning is assigned to and shapes policy in Germany. While Germany has not reintroduced conscription for now, it has significantly strengthened recruitment, drawing on Sweden, a country that has formally reintroduced conscription. Understanding those changes is empirically interesting and additionally relevant to the theoretical discussion of policy travel.

The translation perspective highlights the changes policies undergo when on the move. It helps to understand how policy in one country can inspire policy in another. Theoretically, this study contributes to the conversation between transfer and translation theory by developing a translation framework informed by framing vocabulary. The outcomes can inform and refine the theoretical framework applied here.

Within the German case, the Ministry of Defense was chosen as the subject of investigation because the law was developed centrally there. All advanced policy proposals originated from the Ministry. As the responsible ministry for the Armed Forces, it holds the institutional control and expertise and is also responsible for the subsequent implementation. Although officially the main actor, other actors arguably played a role in

shaping the policy. Nevertheless, many of those debates are channeled and represented in the Ministry. For this study, the communication on the website, as well as the press statements and speeches by Minister Boris Pistorius, are treated as official statements that represent the outcome of internal discourse. Additionally, the interview with a Ministry official is treated as an insight into internal procedures and perceptions that help understand the process.

The time scope of this study spans from 2024, when the Ministry began to prepare the policy, to December 2025, when the political decision was made. It should be noted that, in line with constructivist theory, policy processes are understood as non-linear and continuous. In practice, this is reflected in previous debates and ideas around conscription that had appeared. Also, the process has not been finished by the political decision, but has entered the implementation phase, which will lead to further policy change. However, for the practicability of the study, this time period is chosen as it arguably constitutes the most active phases of policy development and change.

To make change and stability over time visible and to identify the variety in interpretation and translation, the analysis is divided into three phases. *Figure 3* provides an overview of the time span, government constellation, as well as key events and focus points identified in the data. The phases are understood as formative rounds, each of which includes a policy draft or political decision. The breaks are therefore empirically motivated. The first phase ends with the breakdown of the former government and the subsequent snap elections. The second phase follows up with the new government until the MoD's policy draft is contested in parliament, forcing a reconsideration.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
January 2024 – January 2025	February 2025 – September 2025	October 2025 – December 2025
SPD (Social Democrats), Green Party, FDP (Liberals; until Nov 2025) Chancellor: Olaf Scholz (SPD) MoD: Boris Pistorius (SPD)	CDU/CSU (Christian Democrats), SPD Chancellor: Friedrich Merz (CDU) MoD: Boris Pistorius (SPD)	CDU/CSU, SPD Chancellor: Friedrich Merz (CDU) MoD: Boris Pistorius (SPD)
05.-07.03.2024: Pistorius visits Sweden, Norway, and Finland 12.06.2024: First presentation of the concept “New Military Service” 17.10.2024: First official policy draft 06.11.2024: Government agrees on the proposal, but terminates the coalition later that day - The policy process is officially discontinued because of the snap election	23.02.2025: Snap elections are held 09.04.2025: Coalition agreement and treaty are presented 06.05.2025: Government is inaugurated, Pistorius stays MoD 14.05.2024: Pistorius presents his priorities in the parliament 27.08.2025: The MoD’s new proposal is agreed upon by the cabinet 23.09.2025: Swedish MoD Jonson visits Berlin 29.09.2025: The policy proposal is sent to the parliament	- Early to mid-October: Controversial debates about the proposal among members of parliament of the government parties 16.10.2025: First debate in the parliament 13.11.2025: Agreement on common proposal 18.11.2025: Pistorius holds a speech at the Berlin Security Conference, 05.12.2025: The law is discussed and passed in the parliament 01.01.2026: The law becomes active

Figure 3: Overview of policy process phases with time span, governmental constellation, and important events

5.2 Data

For this project, two overarching categories of data are analyzed. First, the public communication of the MoD, including reports, publications, and policy drafts on the Ministry’s website and speeches of the Minister, typically in the form of press conferences or parliamentary speeches. The second type of data is two policy expert interviews conducted for this study. All data sources are listed and, when possible, linked in the Appendix.

All collected data is in German. Although an English-language website exists, the MoD’s publications are available only in German. Also, the Minister’s speeches and press conferences were held in German. To ensure interview accessibility and avoid uncertainty in translations and interpretations, the interviews were also conducted in German. All translations and interpretations of the German texts in this work are done by the researcher. This is especially relevant, as the study emphasizes the use of language and text as an

important aspect of meaning-making. Having only German data enabled consistent translation across data sources and the identification of rhetorical nuances that otherwise might have been lost in translation. To show nuances and connotations that could not be directly translated, some important terms and formulations are footnoted with explanations. It is acknowledged that this translation work is interpretive in itself.

Data Collection

The communication data was collected based on a query of the ministry's website. For the time span between the beginning of 2024 and the end of 2025, all entries for the terms "military service" ["Wehrdienst"] and "conscription" ["Wehrpflicht"] were explored. All entries that were not or only peripherally connected to the policy process that led to the new military service policy were omitted. The remaining 24 publications and 9 linked speeches and press conferences build the main body of the communication data. For the first phase, under the old government, no speeches of the Minister were available on the website. Therefore, the two central speeches from that time were acquired from other available sources. As the MoD is the studied actor, the communication that is available on its website constitutes the most relevant data for the meaning-making process. While the communication formats vary across the data, they are all intended for external, public purposes.

Besides the parliamentary speeches, for which official transcripts exist, the author transcribed the speeches and interviews.

In planning, preparing, and conducting the policy expert interviews, Kaiser's (2024) guidelines were followed. As the author points out, policy expert interviews are always necessary when operational and contextual information is required that is not available in public documents (Kaiser, 2024, p. 13). Also, Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021, p. 67) highlight that „[c]onducting interviews is essential to understand in greater detail and beyond the formal discourse presented in publicly available official documents” when investigating translation. The information gained from the interviews is mainly used to get insights into not publicly documented procedures, contextualize the analysis, and critically discuss the results. In other words, all three dimensions of knowledge, operational, context, and interpretive knowledge (Kaiser, 2024, p. 23), play a specific role in the study.

In requesting and planning the interviews, ethical guidelines have been followed. The interviewees have given informed consent (Kaiser, 2024, p. 25) to participate in the interviews and agreed to a voice recording for purposes of transcription and subsequent analysis. Consent to publish the full transcripts was not given. Anonymity is secured, as only the broad role within the institution is disclosed below. The two interviews were conducted semi-structured, with the interviewees receiving a list of questions and topics beforehand.

The selection of the interview partners was based on the respective organizations. The Ministry of Defense, as the main focus, was a straightforward choice to gain insights into

the different levels of knowledge from a Ministry representative. The interview partner was part of the project group tasked with developing a new military service law between July 2024 and December 2025 and therefore had profound knowledge of the procedures and ministerial context. The project group reported to the deputy minister and state secretary Nils Hilmer. The task was to plan and coordinate the ministry's regular departments in policy development.

The German Armed Forces Association [“Deutscher Bundeswehrverband”] (DBwV) is an interest group and union-like association for all people (previously) working in the Armed Forces, or with close personal relations to the Bundeswehr. It has about 205.000 members. On political questions, there is a steady exchange with the MoD, and they are part of a European network of interest groups (DBwV, n.d.). From this association, a policy analyst was interviewed who followed the expert discourse from the association's perspective. This interview was mainly used to contextualize and discuss the findings.

5.3 Analytical Process

To bring the developed analytical framework into practice, a codebook based on the analytical categories was developed deductively and used as a scheme to classify instances in NVivo software for qualitative data analysis. NVivo was used to support the analysis and to identify a broader range of nuances (Bazeley, 2013, p. 139), as the framework entailed a relatively large number of subcategories. It is understood as a means of querying data (Bazeley, 2013, p. 125). The categories are theoretically derived, but the content that fills them is discovered inductively from the data.

An initial codebook that closely followed the categories outlined by Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) was used to code a part of the selected data. After that, the codebook was revised, mainly to be more attentive to notions of translation and to focus on translation-relevant aspects. This included adjusting the categories and the questions asked of the data, and shows the iterative nature of the qualitative research process.

After the final codebook was established, the data were coded chronologically. A coded instance could be coded into several categories.

Table 1 gives an overview of the analytical categories and subcategories. *Sense-making* is primarily used to analyze the MoD's situational and problem understanding, drawing on its public expressions, interactions, and use of foreign references in this context. It also gives an idea of how further action was envisioned. Through *selecting, naming, and categorizing*, the discursive meanings assigned to the proposed policy are mainly analyzed. Attribute selection and naming allow identification of core attributes and their changes over time. Framing of foreign references and categorization gives an understanding of the policy in relation to other models and broader debates. Lastly,

storytelling focuses on the ministry's narrative of the policy process, with a particular emphasis on the role of foreign policy. Furthermore, it analyzed the perceived scope of change.

Table 1: Analytical categories and subcategories

Sense-making	Selecting, Naming, Categorizing	Storytelling
- Problem Definition - Situational Context - Interactions - Foreign references - Model of Action	- Attribute selection - Naming choice - Framing of foreign policy - Categorization	- Policy process narrative - Narrative function of foreign policy - Scope of change

This structure is applied to all three phases individually. The first phase is considered a baseline that outlines key findings in the initial stage. In the following two phases, the focus is on changes and important continuities in the framing process. These insights allow tracing how the policy's meaning shifted during its travel over time and in relation to foreign models. Generally, the phases are treated as time units. However, when an important change occurred within a phase, this is mentioned. The interpretative approach allows one to read between the lines and identify nuances and changes in meaning. To trace changes, memos were written during the coding of the second and third phases, documenting the adaptations found. Those findings were later supported by the coded instances.

5.4 Limitations

With the qualitative, interpretative research design, an interpretative subjectivity is introduced. As the sole interpreter, the researcher's positionality is important. As a German native speaker, taking the role of translator and interpreter offers the advantage of maintaining control over consistency and nuanced rhetorical analysis, as discussed earlier, but also entails the risk that terms are taken as self-evident and not sufficiently contextualized for non-German-speaking readers.

Also, the temporal limits at both ends limit the study. As mentioned, even before 2024, considerations about conscription were apparent. This is addressed by contextual and background information. At the other end, when the law came into force in 2026, the implementation phase became central. In translation theory, it is typically a significant stage, as adaptations are assumed to occur (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021, p. 65). However, the scope of this study is limited to the policy development phase and to the use of foreign references in that stage.

Furthermore, the small sample of interviews can not fully capture the range of perspectives involved. For the MoD official, there is a risk that their account reflects official or retrospectively rationalized narratives rather than the full complexity of internal debates. The DBwV analyst provides an outside perspective, but from a pro-military constituency, which is inherently not neutral.

The data corpus is limited to studying the translation by the MoD. This arguably underplays the role of other actors but offers the opportunity to study this one actor in greater detail. However, the MoD, like any collective actor, consists of a multitude of perspectives and agencies. The combination of public communication and the interviews cannot offer a comprehensive view of the diverse agencies within the ministry, but together they approximate a unitary-treated MoD.

6 Analysis – Policy Development and Adaptation

The following analysis applies the established framework to the German case of policy development. It shows that the Military Service Modernization Act has indeed traveled on uneven terrain and, despite many consistencies, has changed over time and in relation to the Swedish model, which the MoD translated into a policy approach to modernize and reshape the meaning of military service in Germany.

The first phase is characterized by the emergence of the “Sweden idea” around Pistorius’ visit to Scandinavia and by a first translation under the former government. In the second phase, the new government picked up on the previous policy draft but integrated a new direction for the future. Lastly, the third phase is marked by contestation of the MoD’s policy proposal in the parliamentary debate and by a final resolution that still allowed the MoD to largely maintain its translation.

6.1 Phase 1 – The Initial Inspiration from Sweden

Background and Process

As mentioned above, ideas about conscription and service models had been looming before and especially after the Russian invasion. The policy process entered a more concrete phase when, in December 2023, Pistorius publicly considered reactivating conscription in some form (Witting, 2023). He reportedly tasked the Ministry with drafting various options, and specified Sweden as a potential role model (ibid.). In March

2024, Pistorius went on a trip to Scandinavia. He visited Sweden, Norway, and Finland and met with his respective counterparts. During this trip, Pistorius expressed his preference for the Swedish model for the first time (Pistorius, 05.03.2024). Subsequently, the regular departments within the ministry began developing an initial concept for a new military service (Interview MoD). This culminated in the first concept the minister presented on 12th June 2024. Pistorius outlined the design and goals of the approach, but the concept paper was not published. After the presentation in July 2024, an internal project group was established within the MoD with the mission to lead and develop the new military service (Interview MoD). The project group reported directly to the state secretary, Nils Hilmer, the deputy of the minister, and could issue orders to other departments and divisions within the ministry (ibid.). Soon, organizational preparations started to be put forward. In the broader shift toward greater focus on national and alliance defense, the structure behind military registration and mustering was strengthened to enable the administration to handle a possible return to conscription (MoD, 02.08.2024). In October 2024, the ministry published a first-draft bill introducing a new military service. That draft was discussed in the cabinet on 6th November 2024 and was supposed to be passed to parliamentary procedures in the following months. However, the agreement on military service was the last agreement of that government. After the Liberals were excluded from the government, the government lost its parliamentary majority. The remaining minority coalition unsuccessfully tried to continue the process. Also, the MoD tried to continue the work on the law (Interview MoD). Nevertheless, it was never discussed in parliament, and the official policy process was eventually “discontinued” because unfinished proposals cannot be carried across legislative periods.

Sense-making

In this first phase, sense-making played a particularly prominent role. Especially to make sense of the problem and situation. The MoD's understanding of the problem and situation is essential to grasping what they sought to address with their subsequent policy proposal.

The first important aspects that was seen as a problem are increased military tensions in Europe. Referencing military experts, Pistorius argues that Russia could in “five to eight years” be capable of attacking NATO territory, which is why the MoD sees a need for “Germany and its allies” to be ready for deterrence (MoD, 12.06.2024a). Pistorius also argued that Russia is planning to increase military pressure on Europe in the long term and has rebuilt its economy into a “war economy” (Pistorius, 12.06.2024). Similarly, in the first official policy draft, the “massive escalation of the threat situation” in which Russia remains the “biggest danger” in the “foreseeable future” is framed as the key problem the law seeks to address (Policy Draft, 17.10.2024).

The problem of military threat was connected to the significant decrease in active personnel, reserve soldiers, and the capacity to recruit new personnel. Pistorius emphasized the necessity to improve the Armed Forces' ability to scale up personnel in the event of a defense crisis (Pistorius 12.06.2024).

In the context of the trip to Scandinavia, Pistorius made clear that he sees Germany and the Nordic countries in a similar security situation but better equipped. Germany, however, is “far away” from a reactivation of conscription (MoD, 06.03.2024). He connected the observation that it is “impressive” how conscripts in Norway take responsibility for the defense of their country to the necessity of discussing conscription in Germany, since society as a whole needs to take responsibility for defense (MoD, 07.03.2024). In Finland, he formulated that some Germans would need to leave their “comfort zone” as defense is a duty for every man and woman (MoD, 08.03.2024). These statements imply that Pistorius perceived the problem not only as a matter of technicalities but also as one of societal and individual mindset. The MoD official confirmed that the notion was an important consideration (Interview MoD). The perception was that the general society had a “politely indifferent” stance toward the Armed Forces, which had started to change with the Russian invasion, but, in tendency, less so in the younger generation who had grown up under very comfortable conditions where the questions of responsibility and duty for the country played a subordinate role (Interview MoD).

Overall, the identified overarching problems are an increased military threat, an insufficient personnel situation, and a non-resilient mindset. The threat situation had led to a reevaluation of the status quo of practices. For example, one realization was that military registration documents have not been updated for almost 15 years and are practically useless (Interview MoD). Therefore, it was not only a problem of personnel availability but also of documenting availability. Outdated databases and the registration gap were also key drivers in rethinking the military registration system (ibid.).

In the institutional surroundings, the notion that the conscription article in the constitution still exists was repeatedly mentioned. Conscription “remains anchored” in the constitution, but is put inactive through a regular law, which can be changed again through a regular law (MoD, 23.05.2024). Those processes remained inactive only as long as there was no official change to the threat definition (Interview MoD). During his visit to Sweden, Pistorius stated that his ministry is considering taking a step that “Sweden already took” (Pistorius, 05.03.2024). Sweden had made its conscription dormant in 2010, and “a year later Germany followed along” (MoD, 06.03.2024). Pistorius also identified that the current state of the constitution article only obligates men to participate in any form of conscription. In his statement in Sweden, he commented that reactivating the article only for men is “hardly imaginable” in today’s times (Pistorius 05.03.2024). The notion of “defense-burden-justice” occurred as a challenge only once and was not elaborated upon (Pistorius, 05.03.2024). Another institutional boundary the ministry emphasizes is the Armed Forces’ limited capacity to take in new recruits (Pistorius, 12.06.2024; Interview MoD and DBwV).

Politically, he deemed the timing for broad discussions as unsuitable. In the press conference in June 2024, Pistorius said that it is only a bit over a year until the parliamentary elections, and discussions about changing the constitution would cost too

much “time, political energy” and would most likely not lead to a start before the election (Pistorius, 12.06.2024).

In terms of interactions, the trip to the three Scandinavian countries enabled interaction at different levels. In addition to talks with the three Ministers of Defense, he interacted with conscripts, visited facilities where Swedish conscripts are examined before selection, and received detailed information about the Swedish model (Pistorius, 05.03.2024; MoD, 06.03.2024). The project group tasked with developing the policy did not have direct interactions with Sweden, but drew on aspects that the Minister had encountered during his visit to Sweden (Interview MoD).

In making sense of the situation and the normative leap from is to ought-to-be, Pistorius began to formulate a model for subsequent action. After expressing that Germany is far from conscription, he said it is about “finding an entry point” to the topic (Pistorius, 05.03.2024). In that context, he named the Swedish model his personal favorite, offering a sense of what action could look like. Most importantly, as expressed in the statement “Important: It is not about reinstating the old conscription system” (MoD, 12.06.2024a), a path for action is laid out that is supposed to diverge fundamentally from previous mandatory military service. This very clear stance, distinguishing the new service model from the old conscription, was also highlighted by the MoD official (Interview MoD). This indicates that inspiration for action was to be drawn from foreign examples rather than one's own national experiences.

Action should take place through a regular law to avoid delays. Implicitly, this also negated the ambition to amend the article in the constitution, which manifests that only men can be obligated to participate in any form of draft. Which, in his remarks in Sweden, Pistorius deemed as unsuitable in modern times.

Selecting, Naming, and Categorizing

The first advanced policy concept, presented in June 2024, emphasized that the new military service should be based on “selection and voluntarism” (MoD, 12.06.2024a). The selection should be based on “ability” and “motivation”, choosing the best according to given “quality standards” for fitness and motivation. Therefore, it is based “primarily on voluntarism” (ibid.). Those notions are emphasized. However, it is communicated that, if necessary, it may include mandatory components. In practice, everyone turning 18 should be asked to complete a questionnaire indicating a more gender-neutral stance, but due to institutional limits reflected in the constitution, only young men are mandated to complete it. For persons of other genders, even this part remains fully voluntary. Those selected are called to a mustering at a Bundeswehr facility where their health status is examined. While this is also mandatory, this has “hardly any effect” because it is intended to examine only those who have indicated motivation to join the military (Pistorius, 12.06.2024). The actual basic service lasts six months. The voluntary service can be extended to up to 23 months. Inscribing for more than six months is incentivized by educational opportunities available to recruits. Furthermore, in the communication following the cabinet discussion,

the service design is described as being “attractive, meaningful, and varied military service that opens up new horizons”. Already, in June 2024, Pistorius emphasized the importance of making the new service meaningful and including qualifications.

In his remarks during the trip in March 2024, Pistorius referred to initiating debates on conscription [“Wehrpflicht”; literally: Defense duty]. In the following, he and the MoD preferred to use the term military service [“Wehrdienst”; literally: Defense service]. This is coherent with the focus on voluntarism. The model was named the “New Military Service.”² However, during his presentation at the press conference, Pistorius called it “Auswahlwehrdienst” [“selective military service”]. Especially the first name distinguishes it from the old conscription system, as the term “New” highlights the distinction between the new and the old. This aligns closely with the Swedish idea. Strand (2024, p. 1185, emphasis in original) has analyzed that in Sweden “conscription is ascribed meaning and appeal through a division between what ‘it’ was *before* with what ‘it’ is *now*”.

Additionally, he also expressed his preference for the “Swedish model”, which was often referenced as a name in public debates (Pistorius, 05.03.2024).

From a translation perspective, it is essential to analyze how the translators understood and framed the inspiration model. While the conscription models of all three Scandinavian countries Pistorius visited in March 2024 are mentioned, only Sweden’s is discussed in detail. In later remarks, neither the Finnish nor the Norwegian model came up explicitly again. The statements and remarks surrounding the visit to Sweden highlight the selective character that focuses on “the best”. For example, the headline of the section reporting about the Swedish model is “Conscription: Sweden takes only the best”. Furthermore, the gender-neutral and mostly voluntary character is named. Pistorius, in the press statement, also comments that the Swedish model is especially suitable, as it “creates a connection” between a generation and the armed forces without conscripting everyone, which relates to the identified mindset problem (Pistorius 05.03.2024).

The MoD mentioned Sweden as a role model on different levels. Generally, the concept is “modeled on what the Swedes do”, as it selects the best and most motivated, and in exchange, the service should offer something to the young soldiers (Pistorius, 12.06.2024). However, Pistorius also formulates a limitation. In Sweden, the Armed Forces “euphemistically” promise “the best year of your life so far”. That is something that “does not fit for Germany” (ibid.). More concretely, the questionnaire was named as a transferable instrument. There, young people should indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 how interested they are in conducting the service.

How the translation worked in practice can also be exemplified by the questionnaire. The interviewed MoD official also underlined that the online questionnaire that Pistorius was presented with in Sweden was an important component he wanted to include in the

² It was mostly written as “Neuer Wehrdienst”. The capital N at the adjective “Neuer” [“New”] indicated that this is supposed to be a fixed term/name.

German system, as he saw it as a “very accessible possibility” for addressing young people. The project group then also acquired the questionnaire and selected and adapted suitable parts. One limitation was that the Swedish questionnaire included „very detailed health questions” and questions about other family members that were deemed to be too invasive in the individual's personality and incompatible with German data protection rules (Interview MoD).

Overall, the Swedish model is framed as selective, gender-neutral, based on voluntarism, beneficial for the recruits, and a connector between young people and the Armed Forces. Furthermore, specific parts and instruments are considered efficient and practical, while others are deemed unsuitable. The framing is overall in line with the presentation of the reimagined system as represented by Strand (2024).

The main category into which the policy was placed is personnel build-up [“Aufwuchs”] to ensure defense capabilities. This highlights the importance of the policy from a security and defense policy perspective. Societal preparedness is also a revolving category through the mindset notion. This is also closely related to defense questions, as it primarily concerns the mindset of (young) people regarding defense and the Armed Forces. More encompassing discussions of the general relationship between citizen and state, and of gendered duty, are not emphasized. It aims to be a “modernization,” but is only connected to a limited set of questions about conscription, thereby emphasizing the policy's technical and defense-centered aspects.

The main insights from this part are that the core attributes of the policy proposal, selective and voluntary, are also part of the framing of the Swedish model. However, the gender-neutral aspect was acknowledged in the Swedish policy, but was not an attribute of the proposal for Germany. Furthermore, especially through its name, the “new” modernized policy draft is clearly distinguished from previous German conscription models.

Storytelling

This last part analyzes which story was told about the policy process and the narrative function of foreign models.

Based on the problem definition and with the situational conditions and institutional constraints, an “entry” into a gradual personnel build-up should be formulated. The solution should be a regular law, as finding constitutional solutions would take too much time. This is somewhat contradictory to the notion that the discussion, which has been “ongoing already before the presentation” of the policy concept, should be “wide-ranging, controversial,” and “reach deep into society” (MoD 12.06.2024a). After the whole government had agreed on the proposal in November 2024, the MoD declared that it was “on schedule” with the law (MoD, 06.11.2024). The parliament and its committees should have worked on the law in January and February 2025 so that the law could have been put into practice before mid 2025.

Sweden was narrated as an example that is, in many regards, similar to Germany, not least because it had made its conscription system dormant around the same time. The notion that Germany plans to take a step that Sweden has already taken implies that the minister saw Sweden as acting from a similar situation. Sweden was portrayed as being a general inspiration and concrete role model in certain aspects.

At the press conference in Sweden, Pistorius explicitly named Sweden a potential model and envisioned learning from Sweden in two steps. First, he wanted to understand how the model works, what experiences they had, whether it is transferable at all, and which legal and organizational resources need to be created in Germany. Secondly, a political discussion needs to take place in Germany. Later, in the concept presentation, he stated that the ministry has “looked at Scandinavian models on site and [has] now come up with this proposal” (Pistorius, 05.03.2024).

To summarize the first phase, the MoD, as the translator, understood the problem as a combination of military threat, personnel shortages, and mindset. Sweden, with its selective, gender-neutral, and mostly voluntary system, should offer guidelines and specific instruments to help construct policy. The Minister’s visit to Sweden was the key interaction with the foreign model. The new service model was discursively constructed as selective, attractive, and voluntarist. However, certain aspects, most prominently the gender-neutrality, were lost in translation due to institutional boundaries. Potentially difficult and far-reaching discussions were rather avoided than addressed. The process was proceeding as planned until the coalition’s sudden breakdown halted it.

6.2 Phase 2 – Reselecting Attributes – from Sweden?

Background and Process

On 6th November 2024, the same day the government coalition collapsed, Donald Trump was elected President of the US. After his inauguration in January 2025, he steadily increased pressure on European countries to contribute more militarily to NATO and support Ukraine. In Germany, early 2025 was characterized by election campaigns leading up to the snap election scheduled for the 23rd February 2025. As mentioned, the Ministry of Defense had sought to continue the policy process, but was unable to do so with the remaining minority government. In its election manifestos, the Social Democrats (SPD), the party that Boris Pistorius is a member of, argued for a “new, flexible military service” that is based on voluntarism, attentive to the demands of the Armed Forces, and builds a foundation for military registration (SPD, 2025, p. 58). This was deemed necessary because of the changed security situation and had the goal of stockpiling the military reserve. The Christian Democratic Party (CDU), so far the largest opposition party, called for an “increasing conscription” that should prospectively be turned into a mandatory “society year” (CDU/CSU, 2025, p. 50). It connected it to a need for

deterrence and alliance requirements, and stressed that soldiers, as citizens in uniform, should be valued (ibid.). The CDU won the election and was set to lead the next government with Friedrich Merz as chancellor. The SPD, which had led the government before, agreed to a coalition. All former SPD ministers and the chancellor were replaced in the new government, except for Boris Pistorius, who was again assigned the Ministry of Defense. The new coalition laid out a framework for a new military service in its coalition treaty, the guiding document for future government action. There, they describe their plans as:

“We are creating a new, attractive military service that will initially be voluntary. The guiding principles for the new structure of this service are attractiveness, meaningfulness, and contribution to development capabilities. Recognition through challenging service, combined with opportunities for skill development, will permanently increase willingness to perform military service. We are modeling this on the Swedish military service model. We will establish the requirements for military registration and monitoring before the end of this year” (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2025, p. 130).

The new government was inaugurated on 6th May 2025. The existing project group within the MoD tasked with the conception of a new military service continued its work (Interview MoD). However, the ministry was restructured and strengthened to support the planned personnel build-up (MoD, 01.08.2025). The first official proposal was published, discussed by the cabinet, and presented on 27th August 2025. The official handover to the parliament was on 29th September 2025.

Sense-making

Despite the domestic power shift, the problem construction remained largely the same, with Russian military pressure and insufficient personnel numbers. However, while the demand for personnel gained relevance, mainly connected to NATO, the mindset problem became less visible in public communication.

In defining the problem, the MoD largely built on the previous problem construction. In his first speech as minister of the new government, Pistorius said that security and peace are not given, but need to be achieved through “hard, consequent and, mainly collective efforts” (Pistorius, 14.05.2025). Therefore, it needs people, “men and women, that are ready to take responsibility for all our security,” and continues that there is not yet enough personnel in the Armed Forces for this task (ibid.). In presenting the policy proposal, Pistorius stated that the security situation, caused by Russian aggression, requires a personnel build-up (Pistorius, 27.08.2025).

Compared to the first phase, Germany has increasingly pledged to contribute more to NATO capabilities (e.g., MoD, 27.08.2025b). Both interviewed policy experts also highlighted the increased pressure on recruitment in a NATO context. Although Trump’s policies are not directly mentioned by the MoD, this can arguably be traced back to the increased pressure within the alliance. Furthermore, the missing knowledge and

monitoring of who is available was increasingly problematized. The individual and societal mindset was mentioned less frequently and was only implicitly framed in a problematic context. In his presentation of the policy proposal, Pistorius named a mindset change as a main goal, indicating that he and the ministry saw it as a persistent problem that needed to be addressed.

One new situational aspect was that the Ministry observed a trend shift in recruitment numbers across all job types. For example, the number of volunteers in military service increased by 15% compared to the previous year (MoD, 31.07.2025), despite the service model remaining unchanged. Despite this positive trend, the urgency of the personnel problem was even further emphasized.

The construction of the legal conditions remained largely the same. As both policy experts noted, the political conditions after the election had made it even less likely to achieve a constitutional adaptation, as the far-left or extreme-right party would need to agree to achieve the required two-thirds majority (Interview MoD, DBwV).

No further personal interactions between the minister or project group and foreign representatives were identified for this phase. Notably, on 23rd September 2025, Minister of Defense Pistorius met with his Swedish counterpart, Pål Jonson, in Berlin. Though the policy content had already been agreed upon, Pistorius used the occasion to emphasize German-Swedish friendship, shared security interests, and named Sweden “not only a good partner, but also a country from which we can learn something” (Pistorius, 23.09.2025). He then specifies the ministry's model of action consistent with its prior framing in the coalition treaty.

Despite the government change with Pistorius remaining head of the MoD, the sense-making did not fundamentally diverge from the previous phase. The problem was defined similarly, with an emphasis on the personnel shortage. The model of action, building on the Swedish model, continued to guide the direction.

Naming, Selecting, and Categorizing

The design and attribute selection were also built on the policy proposal developed under the former government. The interviewed MoD official perceived no fundamental differences between the proposals of the new and old governments. Most adaptations were of a technical and legal nature, and the naming has also slightly changed (Interview MoD). However, the changes in terminology are arguably further reaching, as was superficially visible.

Implementing a non-voluntary option is communicatively and regulatorily prepared. While in the first phase, “voluntary” stood unconditional and next to “selective”, this has changed in the MoD’s communication. Instead of “voluntary” in most instances, the word “initially” was put in front. The formulation “initially voluntary” [“zunächst freiwillig”]³ implies a sequence in which the system is voluntary at first, but will become mandatory

³ Could also be translated as voluntary “at first” or “for now”.

in the future. In Pistorius's first speech in parliament as Minister of the new government, he pointed out that “the emphasis is on 'initially,' in case we are unable to recruit enough volunteers” (Pistorius, 14.05.2025). This is, at first, not a major divergence, but it leads one to expect a future in which voluntarism is no longer the policy's exclusive or dominant attribute. The official policy proposal included “the option for the federal government to introduce, by statutory order, a requirement for basic military service even outside of a state of emergency or a state of defense, provided the [parliament] approves it” (Policy Draft, 29.09.2025).

This development can also be understood as a step towards the Swedish model, although this is not explicitly communicated. In Sweden, conscription is effectively voluntary as long as enough young adults apply for service. Forcing young individuals to conduct military service is only a “last resort option” (Strand, 2024, p. 1183).

The second change was that the term “selective” virtually vanished from the MoD's communication. In the first phase, the notion that the Bundeswehr would choose the most capable and willing constituted a core aspect, but the ministry did not follow up on this under the new government. It was not proactively announced that this aspect was dropped, but this change also signals a decrease in emphasis on voluntarism and confidence in recruiting enough volunteers. For the military to be able to choose only capable volunteers requires a large pool of candidates. Whether this change was due to less confidence in high volunteer numbers or because of a decrease in interest in selecting only the most capable and willing can not be determined, but in any case, the notion of the conscript as being a “chosen subject” (Strand, 2024, p. 1187), as in Sweden, was not communicatively continued.

In place of “selective”, the terms “attractive” and “attractivity” gained prominence. Furthermore, the idea that the service should be meaningful was continuously mentioned, contributing to the attractiveness. The term “attractive” underscores that the Armed Forces are responsible for offering something to individuals in return for their service. It appears to be a tool to avoid resorting to more forceful approaches. For example, when Minister Pistorius presented the government's agreement on his Ministry's proposal, he said that “we achieve this voluntary nature primarily through the attractiveness of the service” (Pistorius, 27.08.2025).

Attractivity was to be achieved through “optimizing the education”, adding opportunities for qualifications, increasing flexibility, and significantly increasing the payment. The monthly payment should be 2300€ (ca. 25,000 SEK) after taxes and qualifying modules like driver's licenses, language courses, and IT education (ibid.). This emphasis on transactional benefits goes further than what Sweden offers its conscripts. For example, in 2025, the remuneration a Swedish conscript receives is only ca. 400€ (4,380 SEK), with the possibility of being doubled retroactively after 9 months of service (Plikt- och Prövningsverket, n.d.-b).

One additional change in policy design was that, under the new proposal, all young men starting in July 2027 will be called for an in-person mustering. So not only those who indicated willingness to conduct a service in the questionnaire have to visit a Bundeswehr facility for physical and psychological examinations. This constitutes another mandatory part for young men. In Sweden, only ca. 25% of an age cohort are called to physical mustering (Plikt- och Prövningsverket, n.d.-a).

Regarding gender, the Ministry's communication, including the minister's speeches, most often included both men and women when discussing military service and who it targets. In the press conference on 27th August 2025, Pistorius explained concerning women, "we do not have mandatory conscription for women in Germany. We can not mandate women to conduct military service", and not even to fill out the questionnaire. If conscription is extended, "we inevitably reach the point where we have to talk about women", but at that point, no time could be lost to aim for a constitutional adaptation (Pistorius, 27.08.2025).

The insight that the emphasis of the attributes shifted but remained continuously associated with the Swedish model supports the assumption that, within a translation process, foreign policy is reframed and adjusted. The selection of the highlighted attributes can be understood as a political process in which the MoD has shifted to a less unconditionally voluntary approach, reflecting the preference of the new coalition partner, the Christian Democrats.

The model's name was consistently New Military Service. The official policy was known as the "Wehrdienstmodernisierungsgesetz" [Military Service Modernization Act]. Although the name has changed slightly, the implications arguably remain the same, as the terms "New" and "modernization" highlight the distinct construction of the new versus the old conscription model and the timeliness of the new in modern times.

The categorization also stayed rather similar, but arguably the military function through the emphasis on personnel build-up increased even further. The problem was constructed as even more pressing because of Trump's pressure on the European NATO members. The mindset category appears less prominently. For example, in the introduction of the policy proposal, the military importance of a resilient army with a well-stocked reserve is laid out in detail, while the questionnaire, alongside information about career opportunities, "is to be expected" to increase interest in and voluntary applications for military service (Policy Draft, 29.09.2025). This, however, also circles right back to questions of recruitment and underlines the finding from the first phase that the policy was rather detached from than connected to broader societal and legal questions.

The changes in policy attributes were not obvious and rather silently adjusted, but changed what the policy, and especially the future development, means. While previously the military chose the most capable and motivated candidates, the service now needs to be attractive to young men and women for them to choose it. Additionally, the notion that it will be "initially" voluntary underscores the emphasis on getting young people into the military, preferably voluntarily, but also more open to using more forceful measures.

Storytelling

The new military service should be the beginning of a gradual personnel growth (Pistorius, 14.05.2025). When Pistorius presented the policy proposal to the press in August 2025, he said, “big events [...] cast their shadow before them, and this is especially true for the new military service, which has certainly been the subject of lively debate in recent weeks and months. But this isn’t just any law; it’s a real step forward—a giant step forward—because it makes it clear that we need to expand the Bundeswehr, sooner rather than later, but that this must be a long-term effort and must be sustainable” (Pistorius 27.08.2025). This section shows clearly within which contradictory field the Ministry navigated when creating the policy. On the one hand, it was seen as a major and sensitive issue, intensively debated in public. On the other hand, especially perceived time pressure and also institutional and infrastructure conditions limited the realistic scope of change.

Sweden had become the exclusive reference in the second phase. After it had been prominently placed as a role model in the coalition treaty, it had become a regular companion when the ministry presented the New Military Service. In two aspects, the Swedish model even made its way into the policy proposal. The questionnaire, in general and particularly the idea of asking about the degree of motivation, is “modeled on the Swedish conscription system” (Policy Draft, 29.09.2025, p. 68). In the context of the Swedish MoD Pål Jonson's visit to Berlin, Pistorius told the press that after his last visit to Sweden, where he had intensively studied the Swedish model and was “convinced”. Therefore, “we will introduce a new military service in Germany based on the Swedish model. We are drawing strongly on that model. There are one or two differences due to constitutional requirements. But at its core, we are following the Swedish model” (Pistorius 23.09.2025). This signals a continued important role of the Swedish model in German policy development, tracing back to Pistorius' visit almost one and a half years earlier.

6.3 Phase 3 – Defending the Translation

With the shift from the MoD as main arena to parliament, and especially the defense committee, the Ministry had to give up a large share of control over its translation. Other actors got the opportunity to express and integrate their respective translations. In this process, the ministerial version became strongly contested. A leading group of four expert members of parliament (MPs) from the governing parties developed a proposal that builds on, but significantly changes, the ministry’s version⁴. Most notably, they proposed a “Danish model” that would select only part of the male age cohort for mustering on a randomized basis, rather than the MoD’s universal solution. Among those drafted, if not

⁴ The opposition also contested the approach. However, the fact that the government’s own MPs contested the draft forced the MoD to adapt to reach a parliamentary majority.

enough volunteers were found, a randomized draft should also decide who would be conscripted for military service (Ismar & Roßmann, 2025)⁵. The dispute escalated in the days leading up to the first parliamentary debate on the 16th October 2025. The four MPs met with Minister Pistorius on Monday, the 13th of October, to find a common solution. On Tuesday, Pistorius was cited to have said that “[i]t may not be the best solution, but it is one” (ibid.). Later that day, at the Social Democratic parliamentary party group meeting, other MPs strongly criticized the compromise and reportedly announced they would withhold their approval. Pistorius was said to have then strongly disapproved of the compromise from the common meeting. An announced press conference to present the solution was canceled. On the 16th, the initial ministerial proposal from September was debated in parliament, although the dispute remained unsolved. After this first debate, the talks between the MPs and the ministry were continued. On the 13th of November, a solution was announced and presented. On the 18th, the Berlin Security Conference took place, where Sweden was the year’s main partner country. There, Pistorius, after having found a solution, presented his experiences with the process. Eventually, on the 3rd of December, a final policy proposal was published by the parliament, where it was ultimately debated and voted on on the 5th of December. Subsequently, formal legal processes, such as approval by the second federal chamber on the 19th of December and the President’s signing of the bill, took place, enabling the law to take effect on the 1st of January 2026.

Sense-making

The only instance of external communication that the MoD published during the controversial, formative moments in the first half of October was Minister Pistorius’s speech in parliament. There, he mentioned the debates that have evolved among the MPs and in the broader public, but did not frame them as a problem. For example, he said that “the discussion over the past few days has shown that there are various other alternatives and ideas for mustering. I think that’s okay; I’m open to it. The parliamentary process is there precisely to discuss these matters” (Pistorius, 16.10.2025). He even claimed that “[a]nything less than a passionate, open, and even heated debate on such a question would have been a disappointment” to him (ibid.).

This is interesting in the light of the reported upheavals that Pistorius has been involved in. Also, the interviewed MoD official described the situation as one of high uncertainty and that he personally was “shocked” that fundamental questions were brought up again, especially as further delays would constitute a real problem (Interview MoD). He also highlighted that the Minister personally “fought very hard for this. It was, of course, a matter close to his heart; he recognized this himself and decided for himself that, yes, it is important—we must take action now. And that is why he fought so hard for it” (Interview MoD). Especially on the question of the Danish model, the debates were controversial and contentious. In this context, doubts arose whether the policy could be realized at all. Even the continuity of the government could have been endangered, had

⁵ An official draft was never published. Therefore, media coverage is used.

the disputes continued with such intensity (Interview MoD). Those insights show that despite the rhetorical indication, the developments in the parliament were indeed seen as a challenge and a problem for the translation developed in the MoD. The contesting idea of the Danish system proposed by the MPs did not resonate well with the Ministry, which favored maintaining its translation of the Swedish model.

Besides that, and even later in the phase, the problem definition played a notably smaller role. Most of the communication centered on the approach and the policy process. The general security situation and Russia were consistently cited as the main reasons for the personnel buildup (e.g., MoD, 19.12.2025b). Regarding the problem and the broader situation, the differences between the ministry and the MPs were arguably relatively small, and most issues revolved around how to address them.

Before the final parliamentary vote, Pistorius stated, referencing his interactions with young people, that far more people are “willing to take on responsibility than parts of parliament or the public would have us believe. There is a sense of responsibility” (Pistorius, 05.12.2025). This is arguably a new nuance to previous notions that argued for a change in mindset and that this could be addressed by policy.

At the Berlin Security Conference, Pistorius emphasized the relationship to Sweden. Germany and Sweden “stand shoulder to shoulder in these stormy times” and the “cooperation is closer and more encompassing than ever” (Pistorius, 18.11.2025). Furthermore, in the context of military service, he said that “[w]e, in Germany, are also taking this path - a little later than Sweden - but we are taking it” (ibid.). This implies that he made sense of the situation in Germany and Sweden similarly, but that Sweden had already found a path that Germany could subsequently follow.

The MoD’s model of action prioritized certain objectives. It emphasized the importance of universal male military registration and of finding a solution that is implemented at the beginning of 2026 by reaching a compromise with the MPs.

Selecting, Naming, Categorizing

In light of the political upheavals early in the third phase, changes were made to the attribute selection. However, regarding the fundamental questions raised from within the government parties, the Ministry’s overall attribute selection remained surprisingly close to the initial Ministry proposal.

In his parliamentary speech in mid-October, Pistorius still followed the notion of “initially voluntary” military service. After the agreement with the MPs on 13th November 2025, this notion either did not appear, or in a way that explicitly does not indicate an unavoidable sequencing. For example, in the parliamentary speech before the final vote Pistorius said: “Yes, this is all about voluntary participation. No one is forcing us to do anything, except fill out a questionnaire [...] and undergo a physical examination that doesn’t hurt anyone” and goes on that “[t]his military service is voluntary, and it will remain so if everything goes as well as we expect. But yes, part of the truth is – and that

is what I stand for here this morning – it means this: If current measures are not enough and if the security situation continues to deteriorate or worsens, we will have no choice but to introduce mandatory conscription, or partial conscription, in order to protect this country” (Pistorius, 05.12.2025). In contrast to the second phase, where the pathway from initially voluntary to later partially mandatory seemed intended and more or less unavoidable, this new formulation does not let it appear as a plan to change the voluntary core. Still, it is not excluded, but refers to conditions that are largely outside the Ministry’s reach, which would then have “no choice”. This reemphasizes the model’s voluntary character and is very similar to Sweden’s “last resort” notion.

In continuity with the second phase, throughout the third phase, “attractivity” remained the main adjective used to describe the service. The increase in attractiveness is connected to financial benefits, educational qualifications, flexibility, modernization, and meaningfulness. Especially, “meaningful” increasingly stood alongside “attractive”. A young person who chooses to participate in the military service “should later say: That was worth it. I have learned something” (Pistorius, 05.12.2025).

A “flexible” service design strengthens the role of the young adult in determining the terms and duration of the service they conduct. This is a departure from earlier times, when the service length was regulated, and the general choices of a conscript were rather limited. This is connected to the broader notion that the policy reform should be understood as a modernization.

This is also continuously reflected in the naming choice. Military Service Modernization Act was maintained as the official title.

After the bill was passed, the MoD placed Germany alongside “Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia,” which have, in response to Russia’s threat, “reformed” their military service models (MoD, 05.12.2025b). Earlier, on the occasion of the agreement with the MPs, Pistorius said that “other European countries, especially in the North” show that a combination of voluntarism and attractiveness works (Pistorius, 13.11.2025). Additionally, at the Berlin Security Conference, which took place five days after the important agreement with the MPs, Pistorius highlighted Sweden’s role in German policy reform and expanded the scope of what Germany could learn from Sweden and Scandinavia. He expressed his impression of the Swedish “Totalförsvar” [Total Defense] system, where “not only a part of the state or a part of society” carries the responsibility for defense but a collaboration of state, economy and society (Pistorius, 18.11.2025).

Further in his speech, he categorized the newly developed military service as the “cornerstone” of a German total defense system. His “wish is that the new military service will bring our Bundeswehr back to the kitchen tables and living rooms of our country”. This is the first instance in which the two notions of societal change and defense capabilities are brought together into a coherent system. This is not to say that they have previously been strictly rhetorically decoupled, but that they are, as the main reasons for military service, connected to broader policy shifts, and building on Swedish experiences.

First, this clear connection between societal and defense efforts is a rhetorical move away from the more defense-oriented, technical communication that had dominated in the earlier phase. Second, the connection of this thought to Sweden is new and indicates that Sweden could serve as a role model not only for a policy but also as a societal approach.

Storytelling

This directly transitions to the questions of which narrative function Sweden takes in the policy process. In the same speech, Pistorius said that for the introduction of the New Military Service, “our Swedish partners have literally served as a model for us. They gave us insights into their organization, processes, and training, and I can tell you, it was more than just an inspiration” (Pistorius, 18.11.2025). This explicitly highlights the importance of Sweden’s role and the Minister’s personal insights gained during his visit to Sweden.

As mentioned above, the story of the policy's contestation in October was narrated as a positive and natural development of an inherently controversial topic. After reaching a compromise, Pistorius used a sports metaphor to narrate the dispute with the MPs. “As a new team, we sort of jumped right into it without warming up. That can sometimes lead to the occasional strain. We got past that, and then, I’d say, moved on to some very in-depth discussions with ease. And I’m very grateful for how things went, but also for the outcome in the end” (Pistorius 13.11.2025). This acknowledges the turmoil from a month earlier but argues that a common translation has been found, where two formulations had been competing.

7 Discussion

Both interviewed policy experts concluded that Sweden was an “inspiration” in the development of the German policy, while Pistorius called it “more than an inspiration” (Pistorius, 18.11.2025). Returning to the broad policy transfer definition that says that policy in one place is used to develop policy in another place, allows concluding that some form of policy transfer from Sweden to Germany has taken place, as the general idea and certain instruments, for example, the questionnaire, closely resemble the Swedish approach. However, following the policy across the phases demonstrated that changes occurred. First, the case’s insights for translation are discussed, followed by how the German policy case fits into the European trend of military service revival.

7.1 Policy Translation

In the analysis, several changes over time and deviations from the Swedish system were identified. The applied framework focuses on those changes and problematizes transfer through copying, while emphasizing adaptation through translation. The findings overall underscore that Sweden served as a guideline in developing German policy. This entails a direction of influence, with Germany as an importer of Swedish policy.

Actor Dimension

The Ministry of Defense was studied as the main importing translator in the policy travel from Sweden to Germany. The analysis delivered insights into the MoD's problem definition, situational understanding, and interactions, as well as the imagined solution and how it was narrated.

Overall, the MoD's understanding appears to have stayed relatively stable, despite major external changes. Geopolitically, Trump's second term as President of the US, and domestically, the breakdown of the government and the subsequent formation of a new government were reflected in the process, but did not fundamentally alter the direction. This is arguably largely due to the continuity in the ministry's head. It appears that the Minister was personally strongly driving the idea of learning from Swedish experiences and policies. Throughout, the notions of learning from Sweden were especially emphasized in his personal communication, i.e., his speeches and press conferences. Furthermore, the trip to Sweden, including, for example, a visit to a mustering facility, seems to have been the core interaction in which the understanding of the Swedish model of the ministry was developed, which later guided policymaking. Already on his visit, Pistorius had laid out the pathway from understanding the Swedish model, to evaluating the feasibility and need for adaptation, to discussing, deciding, and implementing policy in Germany (Pistorius, 05.03.2024). Even after the final compromise had been reached, Pistorius rhetorically returned to his visit to Sweden and the high value and important role that on-site learning has played (Pistorius, 18.11.2025). This becomes especially plausible because the interviewed MoD official also sees the Swedish policy as "inspiration" in the policy's conceptualization, although no direct exchange between the project group and Swedish entities had taken place (Interview MoD). This indicates that the broader political umbrella was based on the Minister's understanding of the Swedish model, and the project group was tasked with translating this into policy rather than developing its own understanding of the Swedish model and translating it. However, on a more technical level, this was necessary. This can be exemplified by the registration questionnaire. Pistorius expressed his preference for the approach, both publicly and internally to the project group. As the interviewed member of the project group reported, the Swedish questionnaire was requested, analyzed, and then adapted to meet, for example, German data protection requirements. This is in line with translation theory, which assumes that policy not only changes across countries but also within organizations. However, due to

the research design, focused on cross-country travel, insights into how the policy was translated within the Ministry remain limited. Still, viewing policy translation as a cross-country process, the interpretation of high-level translators is arguably especially relevant.

The Minister's important role is also underscored through his personal engagement when the parliament became involved. The Minister tried to defend the ministry's proposal against alternative translations proposed by MPs, including those advocating the Danish model.

The MoD's problem definition evolved around a combination of military threats, personnel shortages, and societal mindset issues. With the new government and Trump in power, the personnel build-up took on even greater urgency despite a positive trend in recruitment. Furthermore, time and timing were revolving issues. In the first phase, the timing was deemed unsuitable to raise broad societal questions so close to an election. Later, the interrupted process after the breakdown was seen as having cost too much time, and the priority was to start with an "entry" as soon as possible. Sweden had continuously been seen as a model for action by the ministry, despite obvious differences, e.g., in the constitutional conditions. Still, it paved the way for entry into the prioritized areas of military registration and voluntary recruitment improvement.

Institutional Dimension

This offers a transition to the institutional dimension. The main institutional guideline into which the policy had been embedded was the legal and constitutional conditions. The constitution allowed the ministry to make conscription and preparatory steps, such as registration, mandatory, but only for men. Beyond that, virtually all regulations could be enacted under ordinary law, provided they did not conflict with any constitutional norms.

Furthermore, the societal and political conditions had changed over the 15 years since the last 18-year-olds were conscripted. A modernization of societal values was acknowledged, and therefore, a "modernized" system should fit. However, the tension between societal progress and the constitutional condition and limited educational infrastructure within the Armed Forces enabled only a limited scope of change. However, on several occasions, it became clear that the initial policy, with a limited scope, should help to gradually build up further and be the starting point to a more fundamental change. This is the case for the more technical issues of personnel recruitment and military capability, as well as the societal change in mindset. However, where resistance to change was too high, the areas were postponed in a trade-off to achieve a quicker policy result.

Discursive Dimension

On the discursive dimension, the selection and change in attributes are most interesting to analyze in terms of meaning-making. The core attributes assigned to the German service are "voluntary" and "attractive". However, the assigned attributes have been reframed over the process. In the initial translation of the first phase, the terms "selective" and "voluntary" were central and aligned with the Swedish model's framing. In the

communication, the MoD rhetorically targeted the service for young men and women across all phases, but in the policy formulation, mandatory components, such as the questionnaire and mustering, were required only for males. However, gender neutrality was acknowledged as a core concept of the Swedish model. It was a conscious and non-hidden deviation from the Swedish model. Especially the interviewed MoD official, highlighted that equal treatment “is lived” in the Armed Forces. Service requirements are independent of gender. The gender-based distinction in obligations is a result of the constitutional conditions. Any change in this regard would require a broad societal debate and a subsequent amendment to the Constitution, which would require a parliamentary two-thirds majority (Interview MoD). This indicates that the ministry attempted to construct the service as ungendered as possible within the institutional constraints. The gendered separation of obligations was seen more as an institutional path dependency than an active choice.

The formulation of the “selecting” actor has changed over time. Strand (2024, p. 1187, *italics in original*) noted for Sweden that a conscript was “not only a choosing but a *chosen* subject” as the military would only select the most motivated and capable individuals. This notion was also initially tried to be translated into Germany. However, it appears that it was eventually deemed infeasible or unfavorable, as it had disappeared with the new government in the second phase. Potentially, the increased urgency in personnel demand also made a situation with too many applications unrealistic. In any case, it is interesting as it highlights the highly political character of selection in a translation process and the close relation between the framing of the foreign model and the design of the German policy proposal. It is obvious that the German MoD understood the Swedish system to be “selective”, as it had named it proactively at the outset. However, it later silenced this aspect.

The idea that the service should be “attractive” emerged early in the process and aligns with the Swedish approach of recruiting volunteers to avoid more forceful measures. In Sweden, mandatory conscription was seen as “an insurance policy against the potential failure of voluntarism, and no longer an end in itself” when conscription was reimaged in 2017 (Strand, 2024, p. 1184). In Germany, the fundamental idea was similar, but instead of directly activating the option for mandatory recruitment, it was formulated as being “voluntary at first”. This could be interpreted either as a looming threat of what happens if not enough young people volunteer or as unfortunate unavoidability in that case.

Overall, the meanings are similar, but the concrete approach differed, which again aligns with translation assumptions. The same holds for the means used to achieve attractiveness. In Sweden, the military's high reputation among the broad public and many employers creates a situation in which military service is a more abstract “merit” for young people (Strand, 2024, p. 1186). In Germany, where this kind of reputation is more limited (Interview DBwV, MoD), this was compensated with more transactional benefits, including a relatively high salary. The goal of making service meaningful and

modernizing conscription education was also a recurring theme that should arguably help make the service more highly regarded by other employers and society as a whole.

This was also supported by the naming choice that distanced the “new”, “modernized” military service from the “old”, “unmodern” conscription scheme. This hard communicative break from the previous tradition is also something found in the reintroduction of Swedish conscription (Strand, 2024, pp. 1176–1177). This also means that previously important meanings, such as the democratic value of conscription, were not explicitly taken up in the development of the new policy.

Reflections on the Approach

Although the interviews are used to contextualize and critically view the analyzed public communication, and the interpretive approach allows reading between the lines, much reliance is placed on the assumption that the Minister and Ministry really mean what they expressed. For example, one aspect that stood out was that the Ministry and Pistorius, in particular, emphasized Sweden’s role, especially when Swedish representatives were present. This could also be interpreted as a rhetorical strategy to please the other country in a diplomatic arena. Nevertheless, the Ministry published those communications on its website, thereby moving them from the diplomatic arena to the Ministry's public communication on military service policy-making. To address this issue more fundamentally, methodologies need to be applied that observe the translation process from within.

7.2 The German Case in the European Trend

As established in the literature review, conscription is a multifaceted institution, and in the recent revival trend, it is typically modernized or even “reimagined”. The New Military Service in Germany can, in many respects, be understood as part of this trend. Nevertheless, it differs strongly from other models. To begin with, the term conscription would be misleading in the German case, as, at least for now, there is no active legal basis for involuntary conscription. It is essentially still an all-volunteer recruitment system. However, the strong emphasis on recruiting more young recruits, the explicit possibility of mandatory service in the future, and the partial mandatory reactivation of military registration qualify as a significant policy change that aligns with the European trend to strengthen military recruitment. In relation to Sweden, one can conclude that the German MoD has experienced a similarly tense debate between voluntarism and obligation. Still, the outcome is different. While mandatory conscription is legally possible in Sweden, in practice, the recruits are virtually all volunteers. In Germany, this “insurance policy” does not exist, but is envisaged to be implemented if voluntarism fails.

Individual benefits and the attractiveness of service in a broader sense played a key role in the German policy development. It was constructed as a service that means something and should be an opportunity for the individual. While also mindset questions were addressed, the transactional function in the relationship between the Armed Forces and the recruit was strengthened. Both sides give and take. In the end, both sides should visibly and directly profit from it. It is a departure from previous authoritative relations, in which the individual had to serve with only minimal compensation. This aligns with the findings summarized in the literature review. However, while, for example, in Estonia the educational function and benefits are emphasized, in Germany the high monetary benefits stand out compared to other countries. This is arguably a move to market the Armed Forces and construct them as an attractive employer and “brand”, which falls under a neoliberal logic of public authorities, also observed in Sweden (Strand, 2024, p. 1185).

Gender equality was a strongly debated topic in the German discussions. The MoD was also aware of the issue, but decided to avoid making it a condition for a reform in favor of a quicker political solution. Speaking of a general trend towards gender neutrality in military service in Europe would also be overstated. Sweden, Norway, and Denmark remain the only countries that conscript gender neutrally. That the topic was important and, at least in advertising and addressing, a relatively gender-neutral approach was followed, indicates that the MoD saw it as a potential part of a modernization constrained by institutional restrictions.

Lastly, although it was not initially emphasized, Minister Pistorius emphasized that conscription can be a cornerstone of total defense efforts. This would align well with other Nordic and Baltic examples, which have made this connection (Kasearu, Lillemäe, et al., 2025; Krisinformation, 2025; Salo & Sederholm, 2025).

Overall, while clearly showing national particularities, the German case can be viewed as part of the European trend towards strengthening military recruitment. While not (yet) reintroducing mandatory conscription, the Military Service Modernization Act constitutes a significant policy change, and the process has reassigned meanings to service and recruitment that are largely reflected elsewhere, most prominently in Sweden.

8 Conclusion and Outlook

This thesis set out to examine how the German Ministry of Defense developed its new military service policy and how it has been adapted over time, with particular attention to the role of foreign policy models and the German case’s place within the broader European trend of restrengthening military services.

The analysis showed that the MoD mainly developed the policy as a solution to address external security threats and to solve the insufficient success of former voluntary recruitment schemes. Beyond the focus on a personnel build-up, it sought to address a societal mindset that did not align with the MoD's understanding of citizens' duty and of a defense-ready society, especially among the younger generation. This produced a contradictory field from the outset. On the one hand, the ministry wanted to spark a discussion about military service, while on the other, it aimed to find a solution that could be implemented as soon as possible. It therefore had to walk a fine line between engaging young individuals with the topic and simultaneously minimizing the opposition that such a debate might provoke to avoid delays.

To navigate this tension, Sweden was used as an "inspiration". The analysis has shown that the MoD's communication was broadly oriented toward the debates that helped reimagine conscription in Sweden. In line with the applied theoretical lens, the policy was translated and reframed to match the translator's agency and to be suitable for the institutional conditions of the German context.

During the process, significant external and domestic power shifts occurred, including a government shift that changed the entire set of Ministers, except Pistorius, who remained Minister of Defense. While changes to the approach were apparent and significant, no major overall overhaul was observed. Still, the analysis was divided into three formative phases based on empirical focal points.

The first phase was characterized by a focus on voluntarism and the selection of the best applicants, both of which are indeed important parts of the Swedish model. In the second phase, a future switch towards a more obligatory recruitment was rhetorically and regulatorily prepared. In exchange for, and in the hope of avoiding, a potentially more forceful approach, attractiveness was emphasized. The aspects of attractiveness and the contradictory relationship between voluntarism and obligation are also present in the Swedish model; however, in a different composition than in the first phase, underlining the iterative process of selecting and reselecting aspects that characterizes a translation process. In the final phase, after being strongly contested by members of parliament, the ministry tried to maintain its translation as far as possible. The voluntary character was reemphasized, and Minister Pistorius also explicitly narrated the development as a translation process, while beginning to connect it to societal resilience and to frame it as a cornerstone of a future total defense system.

With regard to the issues the MoD engaged with, the German case largely aligns with the European trend of restrengthening military services, including the shared debates on voluntarism and obligation, gender neutrality, and personal benefits. It aligns, particularly with the Swedish model, although some outcomes differ significantly. The German model is not gender-neutral, remains formally voluntary rather than practically so, and offers considerably higher transactional personal benefits.

In conclusion, derived from the idea that within the European movement, policy travel is part of policy development, Germany was chosen as a case because it had explicitly drawn on Sweden. This study showed that policy idea and instrument transfer occurred, but that Germany did not blindly follow Sweden and copy their approach. This study enhances the understanding of policy translation by developing a framework that examines how policy has been reframed over time and incorporates a perspective attentive to the translator's problem definition, the discursive reselection of attributes, the adaptation to institutional constraints, and the narration of the policy process.

Following the policy's implementation, which is currently in its early stage, will be an interesting subject for future study as the policy is further adapted. The MoD (2026) published that 86% of men responded in time, leaving a significant share who did not reply. The Ministry plans to introduce a fine of up to 250€ for young men who are reluctant to comply (*ibid.*). Among people of other genders, the response share is around 3% (*ibid.*), highlighting the challenges of a gender neutral implementation.

Translatability and Total Defense?

While the democratic meaning of collective defense efforts, previously mainly realized through universal (male) conscription, was not at the core of this policy development case, the idea of a whole-of-society, "total defense" system could reconnect those ideas as proposed by Pistorius (18.11.2025). However, this would require a much deeper and explicit debate about the citizen-state relations. In Nordic countries, not only is the defense burden shared universally, but public welfare is also distributed more universally (Esping-Andersen, 1990). This creates a relationship in which everyone contributes to and benefits from the state. However, in Germany, this would necessitate a departure from the more neoliberal path grounded in individualism, as reflected in current policy development.

Drawing on political interest in learning from Nordic total defense schemes and the theoretical insight that policy inevitably changes when moved across jurisdictions, the question of the "translatability" of policies gains relevance. "Transferability" has been an important aspect of early transfer theories, but it has not yet been addressed by policy translation scholars who study cross-country travel. However, Røvik (2016, 2023, pp. 110–117) coming from an organizational studies and knowledge transfer perspective, develops an approach to evaluate the translatability of practices with respect to the variables "complexity, embeddedness, and explicitness". Revisiting transferability informed by neighboring disciplines' theories of translatability could be an interesting theoretical contribution to the conversation on policy travel in this empirical field and beyond.

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Appendix – Data Overview

Interviews

In-text reference	Organization	Interviewee	Date	Duration
Interview MoD	German Federal Ministry of Defense (MoD)	Anonymized senior official; Member of the Military Service Policy project group	27.03.2026	Ca. 1 h 40 min
Interview DBwV	Deutscher Bundeswehrverband [German Armed Forces association]	Anonymized policy analyst	27.03.2026	Ca. 1 h

MoD Communication and Policy Drafts

In-text reference (Source, Date)	Type	Link, Comments	Retrieved on
Phase 1			
MoD, 19.02.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/bevoelkerungsbefragung-2023-hohe-zustimmung-zu-bundeswehr-nato-5744796	15.04.2026
MoD, 05.03.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/wichtige-partner-buendnis-pistorius-reist-nach-skandinavien	15.04.2026
Pistorius, 05.03.2024	Press conference	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0fBq2mtW_I Own transcript; Pistorius only	15.04.2026
MoD, 06.03.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/deutschland-schweden-staerken-militaerische-zusammenarbeit-5752956	15.04.2026
MoD, 07.03.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/pistorius-besucht-nato-grenze-zu-russland-5753448	15.04.2026
MoD, 08.03.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/deutschland-norwegen-unterstuetzen-ukraine-bei-luftverteidigung-5753450	15.04.2026
MoD, 23.05.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/wehrverfassung-die-bundeswehr-im-grundgesetz-5784788	15.04.2026
MoD, 12.06.2024a	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/minister-pistorius-stellt-neuen-wehrdienst-vor-5791920	15.04.2026
MoD, 12.06.2024b	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/bundesminister-verteidigung-stellt-neues-wehrdienstmodell-vor-5803944	15.04.2026

Pistorius, 12.06.2024	Press conference statement	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nz_IpYCAXH0&list=PLuQE_zb4awhV8JxSNeJzUnHskCx0eyjVj&index=231 Own transcript; Introductory Presentation of the concept (initial ca. 19 minutes)	15.04.2026
MoD, 02.08.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/reorganisation-bundeswehr-grobstruktur-neue-kommandos-steht-5824538	15.04.2026
Policy Draft, 17.10.2024	Policy Draft	https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/5849548/cba7f7ff29fe1187a743b058ac6bfe9b/en/twurf-modernisierung-wehersatzrechtlicher-vorschriften-data.pdf	15.04.2026
MoD, 06.11.2024	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/kabinetttberatung-zum-neuen-wehrdienst-5856372	15.04.2026
Phase 2			
Pistorius, 14.05.2025	Parliamentary Speech	https://www.bmvg.de/de/mediathek/pistorius-bundeswehr-muss-vorbereitet-sein-5940472 (Video MoD) https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/21/21003.pdf?utm_source=copilot.com Official Transcript; Pages 129-132)	23.04.2026
MoD, 14.05.2025	Online Report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/minister-kuendigt-kuenftige-schwerpunkte-an-5939340	23.04.2026
MoD, 05.06.2025	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/nato-treffen-beschluss-neuer-faehigkeitsziele-5952596	23.04.2026
MoD, 31.07.2025	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/positiver-personaltrend-bundeswehr-setzt-sich-fort-5980446	23.04.2026
MoD, 01.08.2025	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/struktur-anpassungen-verteidigungsministerium-geplant-5980372	23.04.2026
MoD, 27.08.2025a	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/pistorius-empfaengt-kabinettsmitglieder-im-bendlerblock	23.04.2026
MoD, 27.08.2025b	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/gesetzentwurf-modernisierung-wehrdienst-bundeskabinett-5988944	23.04.2026
Pistorius, 27.08.2025	Press conference	https://www.bmvg.de/de/mediathek/verteidigung-im-fokus-bundeskabinett-tagt-im-bendlerblock-5987086 Own transcript; Pistorius only	23.04.2026
Pistorius, 23.09.2025	Press conference	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/deutschland-schweden-verteidigungskooperation-intensivieren-5996670 (Video embedded in report) Own transcript; Pistorius only	23.04.2026

Policy Draft, 29.09.2025	Policy Draft	https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/21/018/2101853.pdf	24.04.2026
Phase 3			
Pistorius, 16.10.2025	Parliamentary Speech	https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/21/21034.pdf Official transcript; Pages 3723-3724 https://www.bmvg.de/de/mediathek/neuer-wehrdienst-pistorius-bundestag-6033530 (Video MoD)	23.04.2026
Pistorius, 13.11.2025	Press statement	https://www.bmvg.de/de/mediathek/statement-pistorius-zur-einigung-beim-neuen-wehrdienst-6033668 Own transcript; Pistorius only	27.04.2026
MoD, 18.11.2025	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/berliner-sicherheitskonferenz-kooperation-schweden-6041812	23.04.2026
Pistorius, 18.11.2025	Speech	https://www.bmvg.de/de/mediathek/kooperation-schweden-deutschland-sicherheitskonferenz-6042036 Own transcript	23.04.2026
MoD, 05.12.2025a	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/gesetzentwurf-zur-modernisierung-des-wehrdienstes-6049090	23.04.2026
MoD, 05.12.2025b	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/bundestag-beschliesst-neuen-wehrdienst-6048520	23.04.2026
Pistorius, 05.12.2025	Parliamentary Speech	https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/21/21048.pdf Official transcript; Pages 5622-2623 https://www.bmvg.de/de/mediathek/pistorius-spricht-im-bundestag-zum-neuen-wehrdienst-6048728 (Video MoD)	23.04.2026
MoD, 19.12.2025a	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/neuer-wehrdienst-6054404	23.04.2026
MoD, 19.12.2025b	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/laenderkammer-billigt-wichtige-gesetze-fuer-die-truppe-6053456	23.04.2026
MoD, 23.12.2025	Online report	https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/bmvg-jahresrueckblick-jahr-2025-im-verteidigungsministerium-6053186	23.04.2026