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End of draft hits German charities

Paul Hockenos | Feb. 28, 2011

Christoph Marstaller, as part of his compulsory civilian service instead of military service, checks the blood pressure of a patient in a hospital in Stuttgart, Germany, Nov. 4, 2009. (AP/Thomas Kienxle)

BERLIN -- With bureaucratic speed and little fanfare, Germany wound down 50 years of military conscription early this year. It was just six short weeks from the announcement in November to when the last drafted cadet had his head shorn in a Bundeswehr barracks.

Also gone is the compulsory civilian service for conscientious objectors that has supplied free labor to social service agencies, including those sponsored by Catholic and Protestant churches.

Germany?s Zivildienst had a long and storied history, coming into being when the draft did, in 1961, to provide young German conscientious objectors with an alternative to military duty. For decades their ranks -- which swelled during the 1970s and 1980s -- provided crucial staff for hospitals, elderly homes, first-aid stations and soup kitchens. At its height in 1998, some 138,000 ?Zivis? were posted around the country.

German charities and social agencies are wondering where they will find the numbers to fill these slots.

In recent years, conscription had become a shadow of what it once was. The duty period had dwindled from 12 months to nine to six. Draftees were not sent abroad, and so played no role, for instance, in Germany?s controversial engagement in Afghanistan. Last year 68,000 young men underwent conscription while 90,000 opted for compulsory civilian service.

Chancellor Angela Merkel?s landmark decision to drop the draft was largely a money-saving measure, designed to relieve the nation?s pressing deficit. However, observers here say little thought was given to what an estimated 160,000 liberated young men would do.

?It came as a surprise, and not just to us,? said Uwe Nagel, vice president of Berlin?s Humboldt University, referring to the first serious talk of lifting the draft last summer. ?We didn?t have a say in it and we certainly weren?t given significant time to prepare in a sensible manner.?

German universities, already swamped by admission applications, are bracing for an additional 50,000 more

applicants this academic year.

To help the needs of the social agencies and to provide a way station for young people waiting for university studies, Germany is creating a federally funded Voluntary Civilian Service, which will commence this summer when the last Zivi has left his station.

The new, 30 million-euro civilian corps differs from Zivildienst in that service could last up to two years. It is open to both men and women, as well as people of all ages.

The Voluntary Civilian Service is the brainchild of 33-year-old Kristina Schröder, Germany?s minister for family affairs, senior citizens, women and youth. She said the volunteer service is not meant primarily as a waiting room for would-be students, but a way to capture youthful idealism and promote social solidarity, in addition to filling the void left by Zivildienst.

?The decision to do away with conscription presented us with a challenge,? Schröder told the newspaper Die Zeit. ?How do we underpin social solidarity, how do we link men and women, old and young? Individual young people profit from this type of social activism, because they gather lots of positive experiences, and at the same time society benefits, too.?

?There?s obviously interest,? said Peter Kosic, whose Web site provides information about community service opportunities in Germany. ?It?s still an open question, though, how many of these volunteers there will be. If it?s only 35,000, as currently planned, that?s not enough to compensate for the 90,000 that did the compulsory service.?

Martina Richter of Caritas, a Catholic charity that relies heavily on the compulsory civilian service, is skeptical that the volume of volunteers will match the number of young men who did compulsory service in the past.

?Our Zivis tell us frankly that if they didn?t have to work for us, they wouldn?t be here,? she said.

?The main motivation will be those who are hoping to get a place in the universities but haven?t yet,? she said. ?The voluntary year would be a meaningful, productive way to bridge a few semesters.?

The federally-run Voluntary Civilian Service will join two long-existing programs implemented by the federal states: the Voluntary Social Year and the Voluntary Ecological Year. Both are tailored to young people, 16-27 years of age, who want to donate a year of their life, usually before heading on to higher education.

The young idealists are placed in institutions that range from nursery schools to sports clubs to wildlife preserves, earning 180-250 euros a month, along with room, board and health insurance. While the number of young men doing Zivildienst has declined over the years -- as the numbers drafted for military duty declined -- those electing to do the Voluntary Social Year has shot up from 10,000 to 40,000 since the late 1990s.

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