

# Follow-up audit of the recommendations – diplomatic activities of small Swiss representations abroad

## Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

### Key facts

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The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) conducted a follow-up audit of the recommendations made in its evaluation of the diplomatic activities of small Swiss representations abroad, published in 2018<sup>1</sup>. At that time, these made up 31 of Switzerland's hundred or so embassies with an annual cost of around CHF 25 million. Each employs only one diplomat.

At the time, the SFAO noted that these embassies maintained a low profile, with objectives based on short-term results and routine activities. Their added value was difficult to demonstrate and their visibility low. More than half their resources were devoted to administrative and management tasks. There was no country-specific strategy for improving bilateral relations, and no framework for action with multi-year objectives. Employees were under significant pressure, and it was difficult for them to appreciate the role of the heads of mission in these representations. Local employees did not always feel adequately supported, particularly when problems arose. The SFAO made four recommendations to the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

Since then, the FDFA has initiated measures to address the recommendations made in 2018. Two have been implemented, while two others have been partially implemented. The situation has improved with regard to local employees and social media. However, it is too early to judge the results and to observe any change concerning the other points, in particular the added value, usefulness and visibility of the small representations. The SFAO expects a commitment from the FDFA to continue and complete the steps already taken.

#### **Analyse needs and raise the profile of embassies before increasing resources**

The FDFA agreed with the SFAO's assessment of the functional limitations of small representations. In 2020, it decided to strengthen the external network and transfer some 35 posts from its headquarters in Bern to the representations abroad. This will be done gradually between 2021 and 2023. Most of the smaller representations will receive an additional diplomat. The FDFA has favoured increasing resources over other possible solutions such as regionalisation or closure. This reinforcement will make it possible to step up activities on the ground and ensure ongoing management of operations.

The SFAO regrets that this increase in resources was not preceded by a reflection on the need to raise the profile of each of the former small representations and the expectations with regard to the development of bilateral relations. Moreover, it is too early to discern any changes and assess whether the option chosen by the FDFA has been a success. In the former small representations in the European Union, the SFAO did not receive any evidence

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<sup>1</sup> The report for audit mandate 17565 is available on the SFAO website ([www.sfao.admin.ch](http://www.sfao.admin.ch)).

of a significant improvement in the situation compared with 2018. In this respect, the recommendation made at the time has been partially implemented.

### **A multi-year action framework to be developed for the representations**

Since 2020, the FDFA has developed a cascade approach to implementing its foreign policy strategy. The priorities are broken down into thematic and regional sub-strategies and then integrated into operational activities. Four regional strategies exist, but they do not cover European or Asian countries, except for China.

The FDFA has set priorities for large embassies located in countries that are priorities for Switzerland. There is no such framework for other representations. The FDFA would like to continue in this direction by, for example, giving a mandate to newly appointed heads of mission. The COVID-19 crisis forced the FDFA to review its priorities, resulting in delays in implementing measures. Here again, the SFAO's recommendation has been partially implemented. According to the FDFA, the future Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–2027 will provide a multi-year framework for action for all representations.

### **Better framework for local employees**

The FDFA adopted a new code of conduct in 2018, laying down the foundations and principles to be respected by all employees. In 2020, it conducted a satisfaction survey among local employees for the first time. The results were satisfactory. The FDFA adopted new guidelines for local employees in 2021. Particular emphasis is placed on developing skills, as well as on information and advice, and specific attention is being paid to training for local employees.

In November 2021, the FDFA set up an anonymous reporting platform for identifying irregularities and serious problems such as abuses of authority and harassment. The FDFA Compliance Office also carries out awareness-raising and prevention activities. It is constantly working to create a climate of trust and identify problems. The FDFA must continue its efforts in this area. In the SFAO's view, the recommendation made at the time has been implemented.

### **Development of strategies and guidelines for using social media**

The FDFA revised its social media guidelines in 2018. They are based on the principles set out in the international communications strategy. In 2021, the Department revised its social media concept. This clarifies the division of responsibilities and account management. The Swiss representations should have a local strategy on objectives and target audience. The FDFA has the tools to adapt to changing trends and has defined success factors.

The representations have become more active. The posts show that a wide variety of information is provided, depending on the representation. The countries where the former small embassies are located are not monitored in terms of communication. There is therefore no assessment of the effects of these activities in terms of visibility and public diplomacy. Despite this, the SFAO's recommendation has been implemented.

**Original text in French**