

Audit of the key ICT project Armed Forces voice system

Defence Group – Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport

Key facts

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) audited the Armed Forces voice system (VSdA) project for the first time in the first quarter of 2018. The Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS) wishes to support the command capability of the Armed Forces in all situations with this project. To this end, it is procuring a telephony solution for a dedicated group of Armed Forces participants and is investing around CHF 32 million, including personnel costs. That amount does not include the additional costs for expanding real estate, dismantling the old systems and operating the solution on the command network.

The solution has been validated by the Armed Forces command environment. Synergies with the federal standard service Unified Communication & Collaboration (UCC) were examined, but they were rejected due to the operating costs and the confidentiality and availability requirements.

At the time of the audit, the VSdA project was in the concept phase, shortly before the end of the tender process. The requirement was a solution based on a standard product.

Expedient project steering and management, situation of the network to be replaced has to be clarified

The project was initiated in 2010. The requirements were reduced to what was necessary in 2015. The new content has since included only wireline voice telephony. The locations and the users to be connected have been reduced by more than half relative to the original plan.

Project steering and management, including quality and risk management, are defined in an expedient and operational manner. The stakeholders are either represented in the project committee and/or are working in the core team. Between three and five specialists still have to be recruited for future operations, which is proving difficult. Consequently, human resources are still regarded as a key risk.

The SFAO was unable to identify a person clearly responsible for the operation of the automatic telecommunications network to be replaced (AF network) even though it has been in use since 1995. An operating concept was drawn up, but no formal transfer to operation took place. The "confidential" security level had not been reached at the time of the audit and no formal notice of discontinuation was provided.

An overarching strategy for the entire Federal Administration for telecommunications equipment in crisis situations is necessary

The Armed Forces command and the subordinate implementation commands contain the specifications for ensuring the prerequisites for Armed Forces deployment in all situations. The Armed Forces voice system should guarantee part of the command capability of the Armed Forces in all situations.

The specific requirements of the Federal Chancellery with regard to telephony in the command facilities of the Federal Council are also taken into account. However, a complete and comprehensive view of the subject of "leadership in extraordinary situations" does not exist. This is despite the fact that the final report on the "2014 exercise of the Swiss Security Network" already unequivocally indicated the weaknesses of the existing ICT systems and the consequences for leadership in crises.

At the time of the audit, there was no strategic basis for telecommunications equipment in crisis situations covering the civilian and military sectors either. Although the Federal Office for Civil Protection is developing a basis with the National secure data network (SDVN+), this includes only civil communication. In order to implement consistent communication infrastructures and tools that use synergies, it is necessary to have an overarching view of services, capabilities and technologies concerning the subject of "leadership in extraordinary situations".

In a joint statement, the DDPS General Secretariat, the Federal Chancellery and the Federal IT Steering Unit state that they consider the potential benefit of an overall strategy to be plausible in principle, but that it cannot be drawn up until the end of 2023. The SFAO then asked the Federal Council to have a binding roadmap drawn up for the development of an overall strategy by the end of 2018. In its reply, the latter specifies the assessment of the aforementioned administrative units. It also considers an overall strategy to be advisable and envisages an initial roadmap by the end of 2020.

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