

# Evaluation of the diplomatic activities of small Swiss representations abroad

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

## Key facts

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The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined the functionality and utility of small Swiss embassies abroad. These are representations with a single diplomat supported by three to four local employees. Switzerland has a dense network by international standards, similar in size to that of the Netherlands. Among its 169 representations, the Confederation has about 100 embassies. 31 are small representations. Their annual costs are around CHF 25 million. Most of them are located in European Union (EU) countries.

In the absence of additional resources, small representations are a response by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) to the expansion of the network in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and emerging countries. It is a way of maintaining universality, one of the three principles of managing the external network coherently and efficiently. Small representations do not offer consular services, which is the most visible part of the activities for citizens, who have to contact regional centres.

Overall, the SFAO considers it necessary to review the strategy for small representations. Their growing numbers lead to a dispersion of resources. This model should not be extended. The FDFA has to examine the needs and give a better profile to embassies with more ambitious objectives. For representations providing limited added value, the FDFA must consider alternative solutions, e.g. regionalisation or the ambassador-in-residence in Bern, along the lines of the solutions developed by other countries.

### **Embassies with inconspicuous results due to a lack of strategic vision**

These small representations have a poor profile and serve primarily to maintain bilateral relations. Logically, recently opened representations have a main theme guiding their activities. Medium- and long-term actions are rare and in most cases are in connection with development cooperation projects.

For the FDFA, added value is focused on immediate results, in line with responsiveness, specifications and annual objectives, e.g. the drafting of requested reports, the number of contacts made or events organised. It is more difficult to track the impact of these activities. The SFAO found little concrete evidence of small embassies' impact on the bilateral dossier with the EU.

### **Rather unambitious generic objectives**

Not all embassies provide the same services, perform the same tasks or deal with the same issues. The FDFA introduced a modular approach for embassies in order to focus on certain tasks such as diplomatic activities, consular services and development cooperation. In small representations, heads of mission generally do not have the means to explore topics in depth. However, they have a lot of leeway for defining their priorities and objectives.

Objectives are defined on an annual basis. Their rationale usually concerns maintaining existing bilateral relations and they mention the analyses and reports to be provided. There are no multi-year objectives or country strategies for small representations, as they are not among the FDFA's priority countries. There is little reflection on the challenges and opportunities for improving bilateral relations after a four-year mandate.

### **Burden of administrative tasks and difficult continuity in representation tasks**

These small representations devote more than half of their resources to administrative and management tasks. This share is very high and limits the viability of the organisational model. This explains the low added value of these representations. The head of mission has to become personally involved in this time-consuming management and solve logistical problems.

Routine tasks constitute the bulk of operational activities. They include monitoring, observation and analysis activities, as well as the maintenance of a network of contacts. They are based on the short term. Embassies also have to respond to ad hoc requests such as the visit of a delegation. Few representations have developed medium-term actions. Their visibility is low. Moreover, the continuity of actions is not ensured when the ambassador changes, nor is the transmission of information and the network of contacts.

### **Positions that are demanding and even frustrating for staff**

Dealing with a small representation requires special skills and considerable adaptability. You have to be multifunctional and ready to face unusual situations. Although there is a high degree of autonomy, it is necessary to face loneliness in case management and decision-making. This can be complicated in countries that operate differently from the Swiss standard. It is difficult to enhance the value of these positions, as the issues and responsibilities are less important. There is a risk of frustration due to a lack of resources. A dynamic head of mission will have difficulty turning his or her ideas into reality.

Local employees provide vital support, including for diplomatic activities. Their skill level varies from country to country. Absence management is a real headache for a small team. There is a risk of a work overload for local employees due to the multitude of tasks. Sometimes, they feel they have little support and do not always know whom to contact if they have problems.

**Original text in French**