

Evaluation of consular services provided by Swiss representations abroad

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

Key facts

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) audited the consular services of Swiss representations abroad. Changing needs and increasing demands mean that the service offering needs to be adapted. Services can be divided into three groups: services for Swiss citizens residing abroad, support to Swiss travellers and the processing of visa applications. At the end of 2021, around 788,000 Swiss citizens were registered with a consular representation.

The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has 94 consular centres and sections, distributed across the embassies and consulates general. For this purpose, it spends CHF 128 million, or 27% of the costs for its external network. The FDFA devotes around 540 FTEs to consular tasks – 60% for activities for Swiss citizens and 40% for visas. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these services generated revenue of CHF 43 million, of which CHF 34 million from visas.

Overall, the SFAO considers that the FDFA has the strategy, tools and indicators necessary for managing consular services and developing them further. In the SFAO's view, digital transformation efforts should be stepped up by encouraging the public to use digital services and motivating staff to identify more with their development. The regional consular centres can function if the staff are motivated and if management skills are developed.

Strategic vision with potential for digital services to be exploited

Consular services are a key focus area for the FDFA as they are the aspect of its activities that is most visible to the public. The Swiss Abroad Act of 2015 offers much more generous conditions than those in other countries. Covering the cost of services is not a priority and there is no price scaling. The FDFA has drawn up a strategic vision with priorities for developing the digital service offering. However, this is in addition to the existing offerings aimed at meeting the needs of different sections of the population. Usage of the online portal is well below initial expectations.

In the representations, the files of Swiss citizens abroad are kept in paper form. It is difficult to motivate the staff to move to paperless working when there is no electronic storage or digital file management. Moreover, the staff view the development of the digital offering as a threat to their own jobs. They need to be encouraged to identify more with this cultural change. The users also need to be involved right from the initial development stages of an online service, in order ensure greater usage.

As regards matters such as marital status, notification of change of address, pensions or identity documents, the FDFA is reliant on IT projects developed by other administrations. The lack of standardisation in the exchange of data is proving a hindrance. The interfaces are not automated, and as a result documents are sent by post or email.

Regional consular centres can function if there is good coordination with other services, plus management skills and motivated staff

The FDFA has reduced the number of consular representations. Since 2011, it has set up 16 regional consular centres covering several countries. They can function if there is close coordination with the other representations in the consular district and honorary consuls. Likewise, a balance must be sought between online services and walk-in services. The honorary consuls are an important link and often take on more activities than envisaged in the standard remit.

Managing a regional consular centre requires experience as well as behavioural and social skills, which should be developed and taken into consideration during a recruitment. The consular staff are going through a period of uncertainty following the recent developments, closures, regionalisation and digitalisation. The course followed by the headquarters in Bern is perceived as divorced from the realities on the ground.

Service quality, wide variety of requests and commitment to helping Swiss citizens in difficulty

Since 2010, the FDFA has strengthened its customer focus and improved the quality of its services. The number of complaints has decreased. The staff have to provide numerous services. They receive many requests for information through the various available channels. They have to deal with negative reactions from users who expect rapid responses or do not understand why their case is taking time to be processed. This raises the question of the accessibility and clarity of the information available online. Often, users prefer to contact a consular service in person.

Cases of consular protection are more rare, at around 650 a year. They require special handling and rapid intervention. To deal with crisis situations, of which there are around 100 a year, the representations are supported by the FDFA's Crisis Management Centre. The pandemic, one of the greatest crises that the FDFA has had to deal with abroad, revealed a high level of commitment from the different services and well-coordinated actions using an appropriate strategy in the circumstances.

Visas, a risky area bounded by a multiplicity of rules

Before travel was restricted by the pandemic, over 630,000 visa applications were processed each year. This area presents the highest risk of all the consular services, for example as regards corruption. The FDFA is aware of this. Visas are governed by numerous rules, which are defined in the Schengen Agreement. Close collaboration with the representations of Schengen states is ensured, in order to monitor visa issuance practice.

The FDFA's internal audit unit regularly addresses this topic and the European Union conducts its own evaluations. The results are good overall. Among the areas identified by the SFAO as being in need of attention are the regular updating of local risks, procedural controls and the recruitment of "mystery clients".

Original text in French