

Follow-up audit on the implementation of a key recommendation – Merger of civil and military air traffic control

Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications and Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport

Key facts

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) followed up on the recommendations it made in its report on the merger of civil and military air traffic control¹. The project, entitled HELCO, combined the air navigation services at Skyguide. It was intended to provide greater flexibility in the use of airspace. It also provided for better integration of the regulatory functions by pooling infrastructure and generating synergies at the technical level. The harmonisation of processes and shared data was intended to ensure better airspace management.

In 2017, the SFAO found that HELCO's was a vision without much thought given to its feasibility, in particular in relation to technical aspects and system compatibility. The expected efficiency gains were not achieved and the inability to set up a joint regulatory authority was a weak point in this project. The SFAO noted differences between the civilian and military authorities in the application of the rules, notably for the use of military equipment for civilian purposes. One recommendation called for clarification on governance issues and the remaining outstanding elements of the HELCO project.

Fifteen years for a strategic project with results expected in the long term

In 2016, the Federal Office of Civil Aviation (FOCA) launched a programme to rethink the strategy for airspace and aviation infrastructure (AVISTRAT-CH). Its aim is to respond to traffic growth and the emergence of new users, and to manage airspace in a more flexible and agile manner. The programme brings together all stakeholders from the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC), the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS) and Skyguide.

In 2019, the various stakeholders agreed on a vision. The next step consists of developing and implementing strategies; the results are expected in six to eight years, i.e. 15 years after the programme was launched. Skyguide, for its part, has also been working on the requirements for collaboration with the Air Force.

¹ "Merger of civil and military air traffic control, implementation and review" (audit mandate 15388), available on the SFAO website (www.sfao.admin.ch)

Project to amend the legal framework and create a military aviation authority

In the absence of a single regulatory authority, a military aviation authority was created in 2018. It is the counterpart to the civilian FOCA. In order to solve the governance problems, the DETEC and the DDPS want to amend the legal framework. Parliament is expected to discuss these proposals in 2022, with the aim of bringing them into force in 2023 at the earliest.

The military aviation authority, which had 35 full-time equivalent positions in 2020, is in a transitional phase. Its ultimate form remains unclear. At the same time, the Federal Council clarified the conditions for the use of military airfields for civilian purposes by amending the ordinance.

Improved cooperation

The key stakeholders believed that cooperation and exchanges had improved. The mandate of the regulatory working group, ANS Regulation Group (ARG), was revised in 2019. As the advisory body for the Director of the FOCA and the head of the Air Force, it proposes concrete regulatory solutions for air navigation and surveillance. It also acts as a dispute resolution body. It established the High Level Airspace Policy Body, which is responsible for strategic airspace management.

The relationship between the FOCA and the military aviation authority, as well as the division of responsibilities and decision-making mechanisms in the area of regulation, are governed by an agreement. The FOCA and Skyguide are members of the military aviation authority advisory board, which provides a broad platform for discussion in the event of ongoing differences of opinion. The final decision rests with the DETEC and the DDPS. Another positive point is that the FOCA is involved in the follow-up meetings regarding projects for the procurement of military equipment that can be used by civilians.

Ongoing weaknesses in data sharing

Data sharing between civilians and the military remains a weak point. The situation has not changed much since 2017: lack of standardisation, insufficient visualisation tools and numerous manual interventions on the interfaces. With flexible airspace use, the compatibility of data exchange systems becomes even more important. This presupposes rapid data sharing.

Military equipment used by civilians must be recognised in accordance with civilian safety standards. Not much progress has been made in this area either. The conditions for validation and financing remain a thorny issue, provoking differences of opinion between civilian and military authorities.

A mixed picture pending future decisions

The federal authorities have launched initiatives and begun the process of adapting the legal basis. The results of the parliamentary deliberations and a better anchoring of the military aviation authority are yet to emerge. The SFAO believes that the federal services should take measures to strengthen synergies in technical matters, data sharing and the validation of military equipment for civilian use. Thus, the recommendation has been only partially implemented and remains open.

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