

## Merging of civil and military air traffic control Implementation and review

### Key facts

---

In 2001, the Federal Council decided to combine air traffic control for civil and military aviation in a bid to improve airspace management and increase efficiency. A new entity known as skyguide was formed, with almost 8% of its total headcount, i.e. around one hundred jobs, dedicated to carrying out monitoring activities in the military field. Skyguide provides services which are essential for the exercises and operations of the Swiss Air Force. The costs incurred by the Swiss Air Force amount to approximately CHF 36 million per year.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined the implementation of this project, which was called HELCO at the time. This pooling of civil and military air traffic control services is unique in Europe. It enabled operational activities previously undertaken by the Swiss Air Force to be transferred to skyguide. Airspace is now managed jointly. The Swiss Air Force is supplied with the necessary services for air surveillance, even in exceptional circumstances. In 2012, skyguide and the Swiss Air Force revised their service agreement in order to clarify the distribution of responsibilities and the terms and conditions of their cooperation. Despite these positive points, significant weaknesses still remain.

#### **No feasibility study and considerable underestimation of costs**

The SFAO noted that the Federal Council had originally approved a vision rather than a specific project. Preparation took place from the top down, without taking into account the operational consequences. The technical aspects were not explored in detail, particularly with regard to compatibility between civil and military systems. Given that a feasibility study was not carried out, the Federal Council adopted a concept with many unknowns. Finally, project designers assumed that a merger would generate cost savings.

The cost estimates proved to be very approximate. The fact that the integration of Swiss Air Force controllers into skyguide required additional funding is a prime example. They received an average salary increase of 25% under the skyguide collective employment contract. Whereas the authorities had estimated in 2000 that annual operating expenses would amount to CHF 15 million, the figure had to be adjusted to almost CHF 35 million one year later.

#### **A non-existent supervisory body and ineffective intermediate reviews**

The Federal Council tasked skyguide with the implementation of the integration project at the end of 2000. It was intended that this new entity should fulfil its objectives by 2003. However, the federal authorities failed to set up a supervisory body for the project to ensure that the objectives would be met. In addition, some of the goals, such as the creation of a joint regulatory body, do not fall within the remit of skyguide, but come under the responsibility of the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC) and of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS).

Skyguide conducted an intermediate review in 2003, concluding that around half of the objectives had been achieved to a satisfactory level. A number of weaknesses were identified, including a lack of harmonised regulation, the absence of infrastructure synergies, and unsuccessful cultural



integration of military air traffic controllers. A second review was carried out in 2006, and a third in 2014. The results remained mixed. The SFAO found no trace of any reaction by the federal authorities to these intermediate reviews. Not only did they fail to take any corrective measures, they did not finalise a review of the integration process from an objectives or financial perspective either.

### **The main problem: the absence of a joint regulatory body**

The objective set out in the HELCO project to establish a joint regulatory body has not been reached. Discrepancies sometimes occur in the way in which directives are applied by the Swiss Air Force and the Federal Office of Civil Aviation (FOCA). There are certain grey areas, such as the use of military airfields for civil air traffic. Should civil regulations, which tend to be stricter, be applied to the military sector, thus generating extra costs? This situation causes considerable uncertainty for the work of skyguide air traffic controllers. The problem is that there is no official body to make decisions if differences of opinion persist.

At the international level, Switzerland is committed to the single European sky, and finds itself facing increasingly restrictive civil regulations. These regulations not only involve processes, but also concern controllers' licences and equipment-related procedures. Before military equipment such as approach radars can be used for civil purposes, it must meet civil standards. This can lead to additional costs and hinder project development.

### **Unrealised efficiency gains and integration difficulties for military air traffic controllers**

Technical synergies proved to be very poor. Civil and military systems are either incompatible or require too much investment in order to be adapted. In addition, the current trend is towards separating civil and military systems. Consequently, the promised efficiency gains were not achieved.

The lack of air traffic controllers has been a major problem in the past few years, and can have an impact on Swiss Air Force operations. The profession was seen as unappealing, and not many students were attracted. The Swiss Air Force was left with employees who did not meet its requirements and who had no affinity with the military environment. Skyguide addressed this problem in 2014 by making military air traffic control activities more attractive.

Even though the merger has not met all of the initial objectives, the SFAO is not calling it into question. It believes that it is time for the federal authorities to bring the HELCO project to a close. It is necessary to identify what can still be achieved, particularly in regulatory terms. The fact that the Federal Council has called for continued integration and increased civil use of military airfields makes it even more important for the problems to be solved. These issues remain pertinent with the advent of the permanent monitoring of airspace.

### **Original text in French**