

Evaluation of the deployment of people subject to service in the Armed Forces, civil protection and civilian service during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Key facts

During the COVID-19 pandemic, those subject to service in the Armed Forces, civil protection and civilian service were deployed simultaneously. They provided support in numerous ways, especially for healthcare and social services. In total, those subject to service worked more than 800,000 service days between March 2020 and the end of May 2021. Most of these were service days that could be offset against service obligations. Whereas the Armed Forces deployment and the emergency civilian service deployment were completed in spring 2021, members of the civil protection service are still deployed in the cantons. The loss of earnings compensation for these deployment days amounts to around CHF 120 million. In addition, the Confederation is facing costs of approximately CHF 20 million as a result of compensation for civil protection deployment days or compensation over and above the compensation payments to the deployed conscript soldiers for loss of earnings.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) decided to examine the deployment of people subject to service during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as regards the coordination and rational use of the available resources. All three services were deployed again during the second wave. The SFAO took the experience gained into account. Case studies were conducted in several cantons. The SFAO concluded that during the first wave of the pandemic, coordination at federal level did not work sufficiently well. Improvements were achieved over time. However, there must be a binding clarification of cooperation, to ensure more favourable conditions for the difficult and uncertain initial handling of a future crisis.

Unfavourable conditions for simultaneous deployment

The legal bases for civil protection, the Armed Forces and civilian service make provision for their deployment to support the civilian authorities during catastrophes and emergencies. However, the services are structured differently. Civil protection is organised on a cantonal basis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Council invoked the Civil Protection and Civil Defence Act for the first time to call up civil protection staff; the operational call-up and deployment decisions were taken at cantonal level. The Armed Forces and the civilian service are both federal resources, but they are located in different departments. This constellation makes simple and effective coordination difficult.

Federal decision-making processes for requests by the civilian authorities were not defined clearly enough in advance. During the first wave, this led to discussions about the division of responsibilities, and ultimately to a situation in which decisions on deploying the Armed Forces and the civilian service were not coordinated. This had no serious consequences as

enough people subject to service were available. However, it is not clear to the SFAO why there was still a need for action in this regard, since this had already been demonstrated by the Swiss Security Network exercise back in 2014.

There was no a priori shared understanding of the subsidiarity principle, which states that people subject to service should be deployed only if no other resources are available locally. There is a need to clarify how compliance with subsidiarity should be ensured in civil protection deployments, especially if civil protection staff are called up by the Federal Council. The Federal Office for Civil Protection did not perform any effective checks in this regard. As the pandemic wore on, civil protection staff took on additional, long-term, plannable tasks in connection with cantonal vaccination strategies, for example. However, these activities could also be performed by the private sector. In addition, the SFAO recommends that the civilian service's contribution during catastrophes and emergencies be more clearly defined.

Initially not enough information on needs when authorising deployments

Uncertainty was high at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly with regard to the impact on health services. The Confederation and cantons prepared themselves for worst-case scenarios, for example through the wide-scale mobilisation of the Armed Forces' healthcare resources, the national call-up of civil protection staff and emergency deployments of the civilian service.

The civilian authorities submitted requests to the Confederation in very different situations. A high degree of uncertainty about what course the pandemic would take, different levels of caution among cantons and emotional factors all played a role. Moreover, there are financial disincentives as, for the deployment organisations and cantons, there are virtually no costs associated with the deployment of people subject to service – especially when compared to private alternatives.

This constellation was initially not taken sufficiently into account at federal level during the checking of requests. Clear deployment criteria and reliable information on the local situation were lacking during the first wave. Ultimately, the authorisation of deployments was too generous, also as a result of the uncertainty at the start of the pandemic. If the pandemic had taken a severe turn, with the available resources no longer sufficient to meet all requests, the situation could have become problematic. In the second wave, both the coordination between the Armed Forces and the civilian service and the checking of requests was better, thanks to criteria on subsidiarity, for instance. It should be noted that the deployment of the Armed Forces in the second wave was deliberately scaled down.

The need for action in preparations for future events should be taken seriously

There is a need for clarification as regards future catastrophes and emergencies that might involve the use of the various services. For example, during the first wave the Armed Forces took on some tasks that could also have been performed by civil protection staff or the private sector. In the SFAO's view, the different strengths and weaknesses, and the overlaps existing between the deployment options, demand improved crisis preparation and cooperation in future events. The cooperation between the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport and the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research must be better structured and binding agreements reached in that respect.

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