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Honorary consulates

Summary of the report by the Parliamentary Control of the Administration for the attention of the Council of States Control Committee

What is this summary about?



- Honorary consuls (HCs) provide consular representation for a state on an honorary basis, usually in addition to their regular occupation.
 - HCs are granted limited privileges and immunities.
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Swiss honorary consulates abroad: Key findings



Overall, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) deals appropriately with Swiss honorary consulates abroad. The honorary consulates generally provide added value.

The FDFA's directive is clear, but there is a lack of strategic guidelines on the use of Swiss honorary consulates

- The FDFA has issued a directive on HCs that clarifies the relevant international agreement in an appropriate manner. This directive is generally complied with.
- There is a lack of strategic guidelines as to when the use of honorary consulates is appropriate and when it is not.
- In practice, honorary consulates are usually opened to meet a specific need but are slow to be closed, even when that need no longer exists.

Vested interests are not assessed systematically enough when appointing HCs

- Before appointing HCs, the relevant Swiss representation abroad must assess whether the candidates are suitable for the post. When doing so, representations generally comply with the FDFA's guidelines.
- Candidates are not obliged to disclose their vested interests, which means that reputational risks and conflicts of interest, for example due to shareholdings in companies, may not be discovered.
- The assessment carried out when appointing HCs is all the more important given that any subsequent extensions to their mandates are purely a formality.



The support and guidance provided to HCs by their superiors is generally adequate, but heavily dependent on the individuals involved

- The FDFA provides very few guidelines on supporting and guiding HCs. Contact between HCs and their superiors therefore depends heavily on the individual superior, resulting in varied experiences.
- HCs themselves have a positive overall view of the support they receive.
- HCs regard appreciation for their commitment as much more important than financial compensation.

Honorary consulates ensure cost-effective local presence, but they are not a substitute for career consulates or diplomatic representations

- The FDFA uses honorary consulates as cost-effective local contact points within Switzerland's external network.
- Honorary consulates complement career consulates and diplomatic representations, but they do not have the same competencies and carry less political weight.
- However, the added value of HCs is undisputed within the FDFA, even though the specific services they provide vary greatly from place to place.

In the rare cases where problems have arisen, the FDFA has responded appropriately and discreetly

- In general, problems involving Swiss HCs abroad are very rare.
- When such problems have arisen, the FDFA has sought solutions that were as discreet as possible, averting reputational damage to Switzerland.

Foreign honorary consulates in Switzerland: Key findings



The FDFA regards its responsibility towards foreign honorary consulates in Switzerland as very limited and takes a restrained approach in dealings with them.

Out of consideration for bilateral relations, the FDFA exercises its powers with great restraint

- Foreign HCs enjoy certain, albeit limited, privileges and immunities when performing their duties in Switzerland. These should only be granted if the sending state actually requires an honorary consulate and the person in question is trustworthy.
- The FDFA views its role in relation to foreign honorary consulates as very limited.
- Out of consideration for bilateral relations with sending states, it takes a very restrained approach when exercising its powers.





The FDFA's guidelines are largely clear and similar to those in other countries, but they are not legally binding

- For the most part, the FDFA's guidelines for foreign honorary consulates are clearly worded and comparable to those in other countries.
- Some states have stricter guidelines than Switzerland in certain areas, such as those preventing HCs from intervening in internal affairs.
- Ultimately, though, the guidelines issued by all of the countries considered, as well as those issued by Switzerland, are not legally binding.

The FDFA's guidelines are not applied consistently

- In practice, the FDFA does not consistently check compliance with its guidelines for foreign honorary consulates. Specifically, the FDFA only superficially examines whether the sending state actually has a need to establish an honorary consulate.
- It is also unclear by whom and how certain guidelines must be verified.
- The FDFA regularly grants exemptions from its guidelines. In order to avoid placing strain on bilateral relations with sending.

In the rare cases where problems have arisen, the FDFA has been hesitant to respond

- From the FDFA's point of view, sending states are responsible for supervising their HCs. Once the FDFA has admitted an individual as an HC, it rarely carries out any further checks.
- In general, problems with foreign HCs in Switzerland are rare, and the FDFA regards its responsibility in this respect as very limited. For instance, it was very hesitant to take action against a case of immunity abuse.
- Even when problems arise, the FDFA's actions are clearly aimed at minimising any negative impact on relations with other states.

Further information



The full evaluation report by the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) is available in French, German and Italian at www.parlament.ch/de/pvk > Publikationen > Evaluationsberichte der PVK.

