

Evaluation of inter-departmental cooperation in foreign affairs

Summary of the report of the Parliamentary Control of the Administration for the attention of the National Council Control Committee

of 19 June 2013

Overview

Barely a day goes by without there being some report on Swiss foreign affairs in the media, e.g. Switzerland taking part in an international conference, negotiations with the EU, an agreement being concluded with another country or a Federal Councillor on an official visit abroad. These reports often mention difficulties or conflicts of some kind, giving the impression that Switzerland has difficulty in asserting itself and defending its interests. It is also noticeable that negotiations on the Swiss side are often not led by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) but by other federal departments. Yet the task of the FDFA is to work with the other departments to ensure that Switzerland's interests are well represented and that foreign policy is presented coherently. To achieve this end, the various federal bodies need to cooperate closely and coordinate their work.

Back in the 1990s, the parliamentary control committees (CCs) considered the issue of coordination in Swiss foreign policy and concluded that, as the result of internationalisation, this was becoming both more difficult and more urgent. Some time has passed since, during which Switzerland has come under considerable pressure in terms of its foreign affairs – taxation matters and the dispute with Germany over Zurich airport being just two examples of this. The CCs have therefore requested the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) to investigate inter-departmental cooperation in foreign affairs. To this end, the PCA surveyed a large number of people involved in inter-departmental cooperation in various federal offices and at various levels of the hierarchy.

The results in brief

The good news first: those surveyed believe that inter-departmental cooperation in foreign affairs functions well by and large, apart from various minor conflicts and certain isolated policy areas in which there appear to be problems of some magnitude. The departments are keen to work together and the positions and solutions defined to this end are appropriate, broadly supported and well established.

However, it is also evident that the framework for cooperation is not well defined and there are few regulations or guidelines to which to refer in cases of conflict or when problems arise, and which would limit the dependence on a particular person.

The PCA criticizes the fact that there is no coherent overview and that certain cooperative procedures in foreign affairs are stretched to their limits.

Insufficient overview

In Swiss foreign policy there is no basic outline which allows the main interests to be identified and balanced against each other when necessary. This can lead to incoherence and contradictory positions being taken. But in particular there is the risk that overlap between individual dossiers may remain undetected, so that opportunities to promote major interests by means of cross-sector bargaining are missed.

The federal departments currently have considerable autonomy in pursuing their sector-specific interests. The FDFA, which according to its organisational regulations should protect Switzerland's foreign policy interests and play a coordinating role in foreign policy, is not involved systematically or early enough in these processes. However, this is exactly what is required to create a better overview. This would allow the FDFA to identify major topics and interests, indicate to the administrative offices concerned any possible synergies with other themes and support those offices in drawing up solutions and positions or in negotiations. This would ensure that when foreign policy decisions are made, the interests of the various federal offices are known and can be compared in important cases and, if appropriate, concessions can be made on behalf of others. However, it is not the FDFA's task to make this comparison or prescribe the topics.

As it is not sufficiently clear who is responsible for cooperation in the area of foreign policy and what form it should take, this cooperation is currently unsatisfactory. In the field of EU policy, there is an approach which creates a good overview and allows the various interests to be aligned: it may be possible to apply this approach to relations with other countries or organisations which are of particular importance to Switzerland.

Slow cooperative procedures

There is effective interdepartmental cooperation and it generally generates broad-based, appropriate positions. However, it can take a very long time for solutions to be found and an optimum position is of no use if it comes too late and, due to time pressure or the emergence of other problems, other solutions are found in the meantime.

The reason for this sluggishness lies in the numerous consultation mechanisms in Switzerland's political system. As has been said, the consultation mechanisms lead to broad-based, appropriate positions and are still very suitable for many items of business. However, in terms of interdepartmental cooperation in foreign affairs, many of those surveyed feel that in certain circumstances they are cumbersome and slow. The PCA shares the view of those surveyed that Switzerland's flexibility and ability to react must be improved. It should be investigated whether coordination processes can be adapted under certain circumstances.

With regard to the slowness of procedures, the issue of the time required to consult the cantons and parliament was cited: in discussions about how to speed up the time it takes to respond to developments in foreign affairs in certain situations, those surveyed felt that this was an issue that needed to be addressed.

The full report is already available in German and French; the Italian version should be ready in May 2014: <http://www.parlament.ch> > Bodies and council members > Committees > Parliamentary Control of the Administration