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International activities by the Presiding Colleges of the Councils¹: Objectives, focus areas and measures²

1 Background

The presidents of Switzerland's two parliamentary chambers – the National Council and the Council of States – play an important role in inter-parliamentary and international relations, even though their term of office is limited to one year. They welcome foreign delegations or government representatives on official visits to Switzerland in Bern, receiving six to eight foreign delegations led by their respective parliamentary president each year. When abroad, they pay official visits to their foreign counterparts, usually accompanied by a parliamentary delegation, and participate in European or international inter-parliamentary conferences.

These activities allow the Councils' presidents to deepen their knowledge of the political, social and economic situation of a country, to understand current international and regional issues, and to gain an insight into Switzerland's activities in a particular country.

The presidents' international contacts also play an important role in parliamentary diplomacy. In exchanges with their international partners, they explain the political system of Switzerland, promote the country's foreign policy interests and represent the Federal Council's foreign policy.

The presidents face various challenges when carrying out their international work:

Their one-year mandate and the rotation system are obstacles for forging networks and maintaining relationships with foreign parliamentary partners.

¹ The term 'Presiding Colleges of the Councils' refers to the supreme management body in each of the two Councils of the Federal Assembly, comprising the President and the first and second Vice-Presidents of the respective Council.

² Approved by the Office of the Council of States in February 2022 and by the Presiding College of the National Council in May 2022.



- During their presidential year, the presidents are confronted with a multitude of obligations, which can make it difficult to gain a long-term, strategic perspective of foreign relations.
- At the same time, international relations are becoming increasingly complex. Switzerland is facing various challenges at present, particularly with regard to European policy and in its relationship with its neighbours, where cultivating relations at parliamentary level is important.

In view of these challenges, the Office of the Council of States commissioned the Parliamentary Services to prepare a document illustrating ways in which the presidents' international activities can be systematically planned and coordinated with the activities of other bodies of the Federal Assembly active at international level. This document is the result of that mandate.

2 Objectives

- Set priorities: In order to help plan the presidents' international activities, thematic and geographical priorities should be based on Switzerland's foreign policy interests.
- Plan activities: This document contains measures for planning the presidents' international contacts more systematically and for making a greater contribution to safeguarding Switzerland's foreign policy interests through parliamentary diplomacy. This is to ensure that time, personnel and financial resources are used effectively for Parliament's international activities.
- Ensure the continuity of personal contacts: This document defines measures for strengthening continuity in the presidents' foreign relations with the aim of establishing stable and long-term relationships with contact persons from other parliaments. These contact persons should be made acquainted with Switzerland's political system and its foreign policy interests.
- <u>Coordinate activities</u>: This document shows how the content and planning of the presidents' international activities can be better coordinated with other parliamentary bodies involved in foreign policy and with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

3 Focus areas

The presidents of the National Council and the Council of States represent the Swiss Parliament at home and abroad. It is their decision which countries to visit, taking into account Switzerland's foreign policy interests. This document seeks to provide a guiding framework by defining thematic and geographical priorities. The objective of these visits is to strengthen relations with partner states through parliamentary diplomacy.

3.1 European Union

Switzerland is situated at the heart of Europe and has close cultural, social and economic ties with the other European nations. Switzerland earns one in every three francs through trade with the EU, by far its most important economic partner. Economic trade amounts to more than CHF 1 billion per working day. That is why access to the EU internal market is crucial for an

internationally competitive economy and for maintaining jobs. A stable and structured relationship with the EU is particularly important, as is securing extensive access to the EU's internal market.

After the breakdown of negotiations on the institutional framework agreement, the question of future relations between Switzerland and the EU remains a key foreign policy issue. Within the scope of its contacts with the institutions of the EU and in particular with the European Parliament, the Swiss Parliament can make a contribution to stable, contractual and future-oriented relations.

In addition to the efforts of the Federal Council, Parliament should continue and intensify its dialogue with the European Parliament and the parliaments of the EU Member States:

- An annual meeting of the Presiding Colleges of the Councils with the president of the European Parliament should be sought. The President of the EFTA/EU Delegation should also attend.
- The presidents of the National Council and the Council of States should participate regularly in the Conference of Speakers of the EU Parliaments.

3.2 EU Member States

Switzerland's economic integration with its neighbours is particularly important. Economic and living spaces are converging across borders, thanks to cross-border supply and production chains and increasingly interconnected transport networks, energy supplies and healthcare systems. Switzerland's annual economic trade with Germany's border regions considerably exceeds its trade with China. Trade with France's and Italy's border regions is much greater than that with Japan. In addition, there are more than 340,000 cross-border commuter workers every day.

Parliament has permanent delegations to maintain relations with the parliaments of neighbouring countries. If possible, these relations should be supplemented by regular contacts by the Presiding Colleges of the Councils, including participation by the presidents of the relevant permanent delegations. The annual meeting of the German-speaking parliamentary presidents provides a useful format for contacts with the parliaments of neighbouring Germany and Austria. Also, the annual participation in the swearing-in ceremony of the Swiss Guard could be used to forge bilateral contacts with the presidents of Italy's Senate of the Republic and Chamber of Deputies.

Promoting contacts with the parliaments of other EU member states is a further way of making them more attuned to Switzerland's European policy. Here, the focus could be on the EU Council Presidency or the recipient countries of Switzerland's cohesion contributions.

3.3 Switzerland's free trade partners

Free trade agreements are an important instrument of Swiss foreign economic policy for developing overseas markets. Switzerland currently has 33 free trade agreements with 43 partners and is working to conclude further agreements as well as update existing ones.

Negotiations are currently being held on new agreements with India, Malaysia, Vietnam and Moldova, while efforts are being undertaken to initiate negotiations with Thailand and Kosovo. Updates to existing agreements are being negotiated with Chile, Mexico and the Southern African Customs Union. And bilateral trade relations with the United Kingdom are to be expanded and developed further in the future.

Cultivating contacts with these partner countries can provide an opportunity for reaffirming Switzerland's position also at the parliamentary level and for obtaining first-hand information about trading partners' interests.

3.4 Multilateral organisations

As a medium-sized, highly globalised country, cooperation with multilateral organisations is essential for Switzerland. In view of the challenges facing the rules-based international order and increasing geopolitical tensions, Switzerland is committed to strengthening the multilateral system. As a host country, Switzerland benefits from the impact of International Geneva as the European headquarters of the UN and from being home to numerous other international organisations.

Regular visits by the Presiding Colleges of the Councils to international organisations in Geneva can contribute to multilateral processes being better rooted in parliamentary procedures and to a greater awareness of the importance of International Geneva for Swiss foreign policy. In view of Switzerland's candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2023-2024, visits by the Presiding Colleges of the Councils to the UN headquarters in New York could also underpin Switzerland's multilateral commitment from a parliamentary perspective.

3.5 Peacebuilding and security

Switzerland's commitment in the areas of peacebuilding, conflict prevention and respect for human rights is a further pillar of its foreign policy. This commitment is enshrined in the Federal Constitution and focuses on four priority regions: North Africa and the Middle East; Sub-Saharan Africa; Central, South and Southeast Asia; and Eastern Europe.

Due to its reputation as a discreet and neutral mediator, Switzerland's 'good offices' are an important part of its foreign policy, acting as a mediator to help resolve conflicts or facilitating dialogue or the necessary processes. Through a protecting power mandate, it also performs diplomatic tasks and provides consular services on behalf of countries that have broken off diplomatic relations with other states.

- Cultivating contacts with priority countries in the areas of peace and security enable the presidents of the Councils to:
 - reaffirm at parliamentary level Switzerland's foreign policy commitment to preventing and resolving conflicts, promoting democracy and respecting human rights;
 - gain an insight into the impact of Swiss projects abroad and assess the effective use of resources.



3.6 Development and sustainability

Switzerland's commitment to alleviating suffering and poverty in the world and to preserving natural resources is based on a constitutional mandate. Within the framework of international cooperation, Switzerland promotes the creation of decent working conditions. It also invests in high-quality and reliable basic services, particularly in the areas of healthcare and education, and in sustainable agriculture and the nutrition industry as a foundation for fighting poverty and promoting economic development. The FDFA's bilateral development cooperation focuses on the four priority regions of North Africa and the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central, South and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe.

In contrast, Switzerland's humanitarian mandate has no geographical restrictions. Humanitarian aid focuses on the lives of people affected by crises, violence, armed conflict and natural disasters.

- Cultivating contacts with priority countries in the areas of development and sustainability enable the presidents of the Councils to:
 - reaffirm at parliamentary level Switzerland's foreign policy commitment to sustainable development and a stable international order;
 - gain an insight into the impact of Swiss projects abroad and assess the effective use of resources.

3.7 Working visits on behalf of the Federal Council

The Presiding Colleges of the Councils participate regularly in international events on behalf of the head of the FDFA or the President of the Confederation, such as conferences, commemorative events, the opening of embassies, etc. These activities are planned and organised in close consultation with the FDFA.

4 Measures

With a view to the objectives mentioned in section 2 of this document, the Parliamentary Services propose the following measures:

4.1 Systematic planning of international activities

An initial contact with the Councils' presidents of the following year should take place after the summer break. The occasion should be used to discuss the most important (annually recurring) dates and international conferences, the various types of visits, the designated presidents' wishes with respect to their visits, and the support provided by the Parliamentary Services. To systemise planning, the following measures could be considered:

This first exchange with the Councils' presidents should take place before or during the autumn session, either in a joint meeting between the presidents of the National Council



and the Council of States, or in two individual meetings. Based on the thematic priorities defined in this document, the Parliamentary Services will use this opportunity to submit concrete proposals to the designated presidents for international activities during their presidential year. The first Vice-Presidents can also be invited to these meetings with the aim of medium-term planning.

- Following this planning meeting, the FDFA and, if necessary, the diplomatic adviser to the President of the Confederation will be consulted.
- In the course of the winter session, the Parliamentary Services provide the new presidents of the Councils with feedback on the consolidated plans, contact the foreign representations concerned and send out the invitations for foreign delegations visiting Switzerland.

4.2 Greater collaboration with the Foreign Affairs Committees

The Foreign Affairs Committees are the competent committees for specific areas of foreign policy and therefore have a claim to taking the lead in the foreign relations of Parliament. By virtue of their right to participate in the foreign policy of the Confederation and the relative continuity in their composition, they have the relevant experience and expertise.

- In order to strengthen coordination in terms of content and planning between the international activities of the Councils' presidents and the focus areas of the Foreign Affairs Committees, there should be at least one annual meeting between the Councils' presidents and the Foreign Affairs Committees. The Councils' vice-presidents could also attend.
- The meeting should take place at the latest during the Councils' winter or spring session. The invitation is issued by the Presiding Colleges of the Councils. If necessary, participants from other foreign policy organs of Parliament may also be invited.

4.3 Ongoing consultation with the Federal Council and the FDFA

Various formats exist for an ongoing coordination of foreign policy with the executive; these could be prepared and used in a more focused manner For example, the presidents of the Councils and first vice-presidents hold quarterly meetings with the President of the Confederation, the Vice-President of the Federal Council and the Federal Chancellor. In addition, the presidents of the Councils meet with the head of the FDFA approximately three times a year. The Parliamentary Services, for their part, are in constant contact with the relevant sections at the FDFA.

The quarterly meetings with the President of the Confederation, the Vice-President of the Federal Council and the Federal Chancellor have a standard item on the agenda dealing with current foreign policy priorities. The meetings are intended to provide an opportunity for an in-depth and structured discussion on foreign policy priorities (primarily on the development of relations with the EU) and on the visits planned by the Presiding Colleges of the Councils and the President of the Confederation. The Parliamentary Services should be responsible for ensuring any necessary follow-up action from these discussions.

The meetings of the Councils' presidents with the FDFA head should serve the same purpose. If possible, the meetings should be more structured (e.g. topics and documents should be prepared in advance and there should be a brief summary of the topics discussed). The Parliamentary Services should also ensure the follow-up of these meetings.

4.4 Cultivating bilateral relations at international conferences

The presidents of the Councils may participate in various international conferences, including:

- the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos
- the annual Conference of Speakers of the EU Parliaments
- the annual meeting of parliamentary presidents of the German-speaking countries (National Council president only)
- the annual meeting of the presidents of Europe's senates (Council of States president only)
- the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments (takes place biennially within the framework of the Council of Europe)
- the World Conference of Speakers of Parliament (takes place every five years within the framework of the Inter-Parliamentary Union IPU)

These conferences provide opportunities for cultivating focused bilateral contacts and should be used accordingly.

- The presidents of the Councils should attend these conferences whenever possible. The Parliamentary Services should forward the dates of the conferences as soon as possible. Should the presidents be unable to attend, they should be represented by another member of the Presiding Colleges.
- Prior to these conferences, the Parliamentary Services should identify possible dialogue partners and put forward their names to the presidents of the Councils while taking account of their other international engagements at home and abroad. If possible, requests for bilateral meetings should be made ahead of the conferences. If necessary, the Parliamentary Services should organise oral briefings by the appropriate sections of the FDFA in preparation for these meetings.
- It would be desirable to expand the scope of the Swiss delegation by including the vicepresidents (provided that the host does not restrict participation to the presidents).

4.5 Carefully selected delegations

The composition of the delegations accompanying the Council president in the course of their international activities should take greater account of continuity and expertise in the relevant field.

The first vice-presidents should systematically be part of the delegation, both on working visits abroad and when receiving foreign delegations in Switzerland.

In addition, the Presiding Colleges and/or the members of the special committees and international delegations should be invited to participate in international activities, depending on the topics and foreign policy interests at the forefront of a particular visit. The delegations should be made up of representatives from different political parties.

4.6 Greater substantive exchange on key foreign policy issues

Under the Federal Assembly Ordinance on International Parliamentary Relations, the presidents of the delegations and of the Foreign Affairs Committees should coordinate the activities of the delegations and committees in an annual conference (Art. 8 para. 5).

Based on this provision, five meetings of the Foreign Policy Coordination Conference have been held in the last four years under the lead of the presidents of the Foreign Affairs Committees.

In September 2021, a 'Parliamentary Foreign Policy Day' was held for the first time. The annual event is open to all bodies active in parliamentary foreign policy and is dedicated to a foreign policy topic that is of particular relevance to Parliament. The event is held under the patronage of the two presidents of the Foreign Affairs Committees.

> In future, the Presiding Colleges of the Councils will be invited to attend this event.

5 Review of this document

This document shall be reviewed every two years. If necessary, it shall be supplemented and resubmitted to the Presiding Colleges of the Councils for approval.

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Appendix

Overview of the Federal Assembly organs responsible for parliamentary foreign policy

- Foreign Affairs Committees (FAC):
 - o are informed by the Federal Council about key foreign policy developments;
 - are consulted by the Federal Council on major activities as well as on the guidelines and directives of mandates for important international negotiations;
 - are responsible for maintaining relations with the parliaments of other countries, unless there is a permanent delegation for this purpose. They are also the contact for the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.
- Permanent delegations to international parliamentary assemblies or organisations:
 - IPU, Council of Europe, EFTA/EU, International Organisation of La Francophonie, OSCE, NATO, OECD;
 - orient their activities largely towards the activities of the respective international parliamentary assemblies or organisations.
- Permanent delegations to maintain relations with the parliaments of Switzerland's neighbouring countries:
 - $\circ~$ plan their activities in consultation with their sister delegations from the respective parliaments of the neighbouring states.
- Non-permanent delegations:
 - o presidents of the Councils, usually with delegations.
 - delegations of the Foreign Affairs Committees or other committees, usually formed for information-gathering missions abroad. Approval for the mission is granted by the relevant Office of the Council.
 - individual members of parliament as representatives of the Swiss Parliament. Approval is granted by the relevant Council president.