

Evaluation of staff in the diplomatic service

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

of 10 August 2015

Overview

The diplomatic service in the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) is responsible for protecting and safeguarding Switzerland's foreign policy interests. In recent years, doubts have been expressed regarding the employees in the diplomatic service. For this reason, in January 2014 the control committees of the Federal Assembly (CCs) tasked the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) with conducting an evaluation of the diplomatic service staff.

On 20 August 2014 the FDFA/DDPS sub-committee of the Council of State's Control Committee decided that the evaluation should focus on skills in the diplomatic service. The PCA thus looked at which skills are defined and the role they play in processes and instruments to recruit and retain staff. It analysed the legal requirements and administrative documents on this subject. It also held about 25 interviews with FDFA staff and external experts, and conducted a survey among all members of the diplomatic service. The PCA also considered existing data from the FDFA, the Federal Office of Personnel and the 'Association du Corps diplomatique Suisse'. Scientific expertise was provided by Professor Cédric Dupont from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva.

Overview of findings

The overall findings of the evaluation suggest that the systems for recruiting and retaining staff function well and there are no fundamental shortcomings that might call into question the ability of the diplomatic service to function efficiently. However, the PCA did identify certain weaknesses, some of which may be systemic. The present evaluation does not allow us to judge whether the diplomatic service should be changed from a career service to a functional structure.

Defined competencies not sufficiently tailored to diplomatic service

The Directorate for Resources is responsible for staff in the diplomatic service. Based on the Competency Model of the Federal Administration, it has defined four standard requirement profiles for diplomatic staff at various levels. These standard requirement profiles correspond to different levels of management and, according to the specifications, should provide an important basis for diplomatic staff appointments and career development.

However, there are weaknesses in the way in which competencies are defined in the diplomatic service. The required level of competencies in the areas of leadership, social and personal skills is extremely high. What is more, the competencies are not

defined on the basis of actual tasks, so the standard requirement profiles do not contain competencies specifically required in diplomacy. Subject, methodology and language skills are barely mentioned. The PCA believes that it is possible to define these, even though the standard requirement profiles must be appropriate for several job positions.

Flexible recruitment process

The vast majority of the employees in the diplomatic service are recruited in a competitive recruitment process. Overall this is a suitable instrument for recruiting staff. The evaluation showed that the interview with the recruitment committee plays a particularly valuable role in this process. However, criticism was raised over the fact that the recruitment committee predominantly comprises members of the Federal Administration, and there are too few representatives from the fields of politics, culture and academia. Furthermore, the names of those on the committee are not published, resulting in a lack of transparency.

Just 2% of the current members of the diplomatic service were appointed without having undergone the competitive process. These employees are thus in a considerable minority in the service. More frequently, positions in the diplomatic service which involve safeguarding Switzerland's interests (Interessenwahrungsstellen) are occupied by persons coming from other sections in the FDFA. The PCA views this as appropriate, as it ensures that the positions are filled by the persons best qualified for them. The diplomatic service staff, however, fear that they may be denied interesting positions, and this can have a negative effect on their motivation levels. These fears are apparently fed by the fact that the employees appear to be poorly informed about the way in which positions are filled in the diplomatic service.

Automatic promotions and lack of transparency in the promotion process

With regard to staff retention, the PCA identified weaknesses in the promotion process in particular. Employees are promoted on the basis of a recommendation from the promotion committee. To a large extent they are promoted practically automatically within a job band.

When employees are promoted beyond their job band, their promotion dossiers are examined more closely. However, the dossiers on individual employees contain documents of varying relevance and quality. For example, the assessments of potential, in which superiors must assess the skills of their staff, are completed in very differing ways. The decisions for promotion are based on the skills assessment only to a certain extent. It is therefore not always transparent how the promotion committee reaches its recommendations on the basis of the available documentation. Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency in the process for selecting heads of mission.

Difficulty in reconciling professional and private life

Diplomatic staff generally receive a new posting every four years. From the point of view of staff retention, this transfer regime involves certain risks, as it makes it harder for staff to reconcile their professional and private lives. In recent years the FDFA has recognised that this is a problem and has introduced a range of measures to improve the situation of accompanying persons. These measures were not looked at in detail in the evaluation, but there are indications that they involve some weaknesses. Furthermore, the evaluation showed that part-time positions in the

diplomatic service, particularly abroad, are very rare. According to those responsible, although the possibility of employing external staff exists, a stock of transferable diplomatic staff is required if all diplomatic posts are to be filled going forward. Finding and retaining employees with suitable skills for the diplomatic service thus remains a key challenge.

Weaknesses in staff monitoring

In the evaluation process the PCA asked for details of staff in the diplomatic service and those in positions safeguarding interests (Interessenwahrungsstellen). Despite the efforts of the relevant persons in the Directorate for Resources, no definitive figures could be provided, as there are different, unconnected data systems. This makes it complex to carry out analysis. Furthermore, no systematic records are kept of the reasons given for resigning from the diplomatic service. There are thus considerable gaps in the data on staff monitoring.

The full report is available in German and French; the Italian version should be ready around April 2016 (www.parliament.ch).