

# **Appropriateness of population development scenarios from the Federal Statistical Office**

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

of 8 February 2018

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## Summary

***Despite a certain degree of inaccuracy, the population development scenarios drawn up by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) are, for the most part, satisfactory. The FSO's Demography and Migration Section has the necessary scope to create the scenarios in a professionally independent manner. Only a minority of the cantons use the FSO's cantonal scenarios, since they are classified as inaccurate and are not sufficiently detailed.***

*The population development scenarios provide an essential planning basis in a range of policy sectors. The FSO is preparing three different population development scenarios for the whole of Switzerland and for each canton. The intermediate scenario is based on a balanced assessment of development, while the high scenario assumes stronger growth and the low scenario assumes a slowdown in growth. The periodic changes to these scenarios and the real population development, which often exceeds the high scenario after a short time, cast doubt on the quality of the scenarios. For these reasons, in January 2016 the Federal Assembly's control committees (CCs) commissioned the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) to evaluate the appropriateness of the FSO's population scenarios.*

*At its meeting on 18 November 2016, the relevant FDHA/DETEC sub-committee of the Council of States CC decided that the evaluation should in particular examine the fitness for purpose of the population scenarios and the process used to develop them, as well as the accuracy of the FSO's earlier scenarios.*

*In the evaluation, the PCA carried out a statistical comparison of FSO's national and cantonal population scenarios with real population trends. It also compared the average annual deviation of the population scenarios of Germany, Liechtenstein, Norway and Austria with the deviation for the FSO scenarios. It also held talks with almost 60 people – mainly experts, employees of selected federal offices and cantons, and third parties – and analysed the relevant documents.*

### ***The method for estimating migration flows is adequate despite deviations***

*Since the turn of the millennium, the FSO's scenarios have mostly underestimated population development, mainly due to the fact that immigration was underestimated. After a few years, the real population development had mostly exceeded the highest scenario. The estimation of future migration also proved to be a central challenge in the development of population scenarios in the comparative countries. By means of a written survey in 2015, the FSO involved experts and employees of the federal offices in the development process earlier than in the previous scenarios so that they could provide their estimate of future population development. The parties involved rated the process as satisfactory, and described the calculation method used as adequate and the hypotheses ultimately chosen by the FSO as basically plausible.*

### ***Independent decision at the FSO***

*Although the FSO's independence is laid down by law, it has been regularly criticised in the past for systematically underestimating population development and*

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migration in particular due to political influence. With the support of the Federal Council, certain federal offices would set immigration at an acceptable level in the scenarios, or the FSO would, in anticipation of what was desirable, set the assumptions of migration at a low level. However, the experts consulted by the PCA considered the work of the FSO within the framework of the 2015 scenarios to be fact-based and neutral. This was also confirmed by a document analysis. The accusation of bias in drawing up population development scenarios can at least be refuted for the scenarios drawn up in 2015.

***Federal offices almost invariably use the intermediate scenario***

*Federal offices which use the FSO's national population scenarios to fulfil their tasks almost exclusively use the intermediate scenario. The reason for this is that experts and employees interviewed consider this scenario to be the most balanced; in addition, offices must give specific reasons for choosing the high or low scenarios. Occasionally, however, offices choose the intermediate scenario out of habit and without putting much thought into it. If users tend to choose the intermediate scenario by default, the question arises as to the usefulness of preparing several scenarios. The observed deviations of the scenarios in comparison with real population development illustrate the importance using several scenarios. The FSO recommends taking several scenarios into account if possible in order to address these uncertainties.*

***The FSO's cantonal population scenarios are only partially suitable***

*While the FSO's national scenarios can almost entirely be classified as satisfactory, the cantonal scenarios show a different picture. Most cantons develop their own scenarios.*

*The FSO's cantonal scenarios are only suitable for the cantons to a limited extent for two reasons. Firstly, cantonal peculiarities play only a minor role in the development of these scenarios, which makes these scenarios too inaccurate, especially for small cantons. Secondly, the FSO does not provide data for districts or communes, which is one of the cantons' central needs when using the scenarios (e.g. for spatial planning or school planning).*

*While the FSO emphasises that use of the cantonal scenarios is voluntary, since 2014 the cantons have had to take the scenarios into account in accordance with the requirements of the cantonal structure plan for determining building zone needs. Some cantons are critical of this recommendation since the FSO only involves the cantons to a very limited extent in drawing up the scenarios.*

The full report is available in German and French; the Italian version should be ready around January 2019 ([www.parliament.ch](http://www.parliament.ch)).