

The Confederation's communication activities
Summary of the report by the Parliamentary Control of the
Administration for the National Council Control Committee

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Summary

The Confederation's communication activities are, in general, satisfactory. Communication is appropriate and in conformity with the statutory requirements. However, there are some shortcomings with regard to the clarity of guidelines, interdepartmental coordination and cost transparency.

The Federal Council and the Federal Administration are obliged to ensure that the Federal Assembly, the cantons and the general public are suitably informed (Art. 10 of the Government and Administration Organisation Act). In January 2017, the parliamentary control committees (CCs) commissioned the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) to evaluate the way in which the Confederation carries out its communication activities.

At its meeting of 6 July 2017, the responsible sub-committee of the National Council Control Committee (CC-N), namely the FDHA/DETEC sub-committee, decided that the evaluation should consider all federal departments and also look at the issue of costs and external mandates. The evaluation focuses on the Confederation's current communication activities. However, it does not address campaigns or information in relation to popular votes, nor communication in crisis situations.

In order to carry out the evaluation, the PCA conducted around thirty interviews, primarily with heads of the information and communication services in all seven departments, in the Federal Chancellery, and in a number of federal offices, as well as with journalists and communication specialists. Furthermore, the consultancy firm Evaluanda was asked to design and conduct a survey among media correspondents covering activities of the government and administration. Finally, the PCA analysed documentation pertaining to communication activities, in particular to guidelines and to the Federal Administration's expenditure.

Consistent communication despite varying directives and minimal coordination

The guidelines issued within the Federal Administration are very varied in nature and explicit to varying extents. Those guidelines issued by the Federal Chancellery are by and large satisfactory. They contain a minimum of information regarding organisation and the apportioning of responsibilities, their declared aim being the production of high-quality information. In contrast, the departments and the offices under review do not all have guidelines that are sufficient to guarantee coherence in their communication activities. The diverse nature of the guidelines reflects the fact that the way in which communication activities are organised varies considerably from one organisational unit to the next. In general, the more precise a department's guidelines, the less precise those of the offices, and vice versa. When the departments and offices are viewed together, therefore, the picture created is nonetheless a coherent one.

The Federal Chancellery is responsible for coordinating the Federal Administration's information and communication activities. This role involves finding a certain balance between ensuring that information communicated by the Federal Administration is in line with the decisions made by the Federal Council, and respecting the autonomy of the government departments. This assessment highlights the limits to cooperation between the departments, such as the difficulties of pooling

certain responsibilities, for example in the field of audio-visual communication, or of sharing best practices.

Despite the considerable diversity in guidelines and organisation, and minimal coordination overall, the information published by the Federal Administration is judged by media correspondents to be consistent and of high quality.

Moderately transparent costs

The Confederation's declared expenditure on communication activities has not risen since 2010, remaining stable at around CHF 80 million per year. However, the way in which expenditure is recorded is not the same in all organisational units. Furthermore, the electronic media centre in the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, which is heavily involved with communication activities, had not entered all costs in its accounts at the time the evaluation was made, so the actual figure for expenditure on communication activities is considerably higher.

Satisfactory products but complicated access to information

One of the main target audiences of the Confederation's communication is journalists. Generally, journalists find that the Federal Administration's communication products meet their requirements. However, they have a critical view of the use of social media and of the content published. Moreover, access to information can be problematic; for example, it was reported that some services are slow to respond to enquiries, and that it can be difficult to get in touch with specialists. The Federal Administration argues that this is necessary to ensure that all information released is clear, consistent and of high quality.

The full report is available in German, French and Italian (www.parliament.ch)