

# Strategic policy steering by the Federal Council

## Summary of a Report by the Parliamentary Control of the Administration for the National Council Control Committee

15 October 2009

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### Summary

*The National Council Control Committee mandated the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) to examine the Federal Council's strategic policy steering. The aim of this mandate was to identify and evaluate management information provided for and by the Federal Council, the instruments used, the actors and their various roles as well as actual strategic policy steering procedures applied at federal level. The investigation did not touch on the use of information for short-term steering, for example during a crisis.*

*The investigation centred around the following main questions (see Section 1.3):*

- What instruments for strategic policy steering exist at federal level?*
- How do strategic policy planning and steering at federal level work in practice?*
- What is the assessment of strategic policy planning and steering at federal level?*

*The Federal Constitution, the Parliament Act and the Federal Finance Act provide the framework for the main instruments of strategic policy steering, which consist of the legislative programme, the financial plan, the Federal Council's annual objectives and the federal budget, and the business report and financial statements (see Section 3.1). In addition to these instruments, sector-related planning and Federal Council reports on strategic issues are also used for policy steering (e.g. dispatch on education, research and innovation; see Section 3.2.6). Moreover, legislation appears to have become an important strategic steering instrument, particularly in the field of transport (see Section 3.4).*

*Strategic policy planning in the form of the legislative programme and the legislative financial plan runs over four years, while the annual financial plan, the federal budget and the Federal Council's annual targets are valid for one year. The Federal Council submits its business report and financial statements to parliament each year. Other plans and reports drawn up by the Federal Council are of varying importance depending on the particular policy area, and their relevance in relation to the legislative programme is not always clear (see Sections 3.2.6, 3.3.6).*

*The results of the study show that there is no consensus in the Federal Council and within the federal administration as to the purpose and importance of the various strategic policy steering instruments; a consistent doctrine is therefore lacking (see Sections 3.2.1, 3.3.1). Strategic policy steering centres around particular cases or sectors. Strategic management information is relevant principally for departmental managers within the federal administration. The Federal Council tends to consider the process of strategic policy steering of minor importance and is overloaded by the*

large number of parliamentary procedural requests. The practical importance of the management instruments varies (see Section 5.3).

For the most part the legislative programme serves as a kind of timetable for legislative proposals and in practice therefore constitutes a 4-year work plan for parliament, the Federal Council and the administration. The financial consequences are set out in the financial plan for the legislative period. This means that the legislative programme does not fulfil its aim of setting out a strategic political perspective and a coherent policy based on developments and priorities. In relation to global policy planning, the reports drawn up by the Forward Planning Staff on future challenges and trends are consequently of little importance (see Sections 3.2.2, 3.3.2).

The Federal Council and the federal administration place great value on the financial plan and the budget. They are among the key financial steering instruments. There is no consistent link between financial planning and the planning of tasks (see Sections 3.2.3, 3.3.3).

As is the case with the legislative programme, the 1-year aims essentially constitute a programme of dispatches and bills for the year. They contain practically no new material aims. As a result, the 1-year aims cannot be considered to fulfil their intended purpose of serving as a vehicle for the Federal Council to outline the government's activities for the coming year (3.2.4, 3.3.4).

The business report and the financial statements are recognised and accepted reporting tools. However, the federal administration draws little information from them as it tends to use information from the current year's controlling reports for short-term steering. The Federal Council places particular value on the business report as it is important for the organs of parliamentary control (see Sections 3.2.5, 3.3.5).

Based on the results of the study and on information about developments in other countries, at a cantonal level and in scientific circles (see Section 4) there is an urgent need for action. Strategic policy steering at a federal level requires a clear direction and structure. To that end, Section 5.2 sets out six guidelines. In brief, strategic policy steering should provide the country and its population with a coherent political agenda which takes account of the particularities of consensus-oriented democracy based on stability and continuity, as well as of the advantages, the political feasibility and the practicability of strategic political planning.

The study concludes that the Federal Council enjoys considerable scope to optimise its strategic policy steering within the confines of current legislation (see Section 5.4): strengthen the strategic perspective of its policy, coordinate the strategic steering of tasks and resources, and disentangle the annual steering of the aims of the Federal Council and of the Federal Departments respectively. To this end, it is important that parliament respects the Federal Council's scope in relation to its strategic policy steering. At the same time, the role of the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Chancellor should be strengthened and refocused on tasks aimed at supporting the Federal Council in its functions as a governing body (see Section 5.6).

Parliament and the Federal Council could create additional scope for optimising strategic policy steering by changing the legal prerequisites (see Section 5.5). Joint strategic policy steering, while maintaining the respective responsibilities of

*parliament and the Federal Council, could help provide a coherent, legitimate and broad-based policy for both the legislative and the executive bodies. The effects (why?), tasks (what?) and resources (how?) would need to be managed in the long, medium and short term. At the same time strategic policy management information would have to be distilled through the use of coordinated steering, communication and analysis instruments adapted to the appropriate level.*

*The PCA conducted its study in close cooperation with PuMaConsult GmbH in Bern. It is based on the triangulation of various methods (see Section 2). In addition to the analysis of documents and existing legislation, interviews with senior managers in the federal administration and representatives of cantonal authorities formed a major basis for this study. The study also incorporates the opinions of members of the Federal Council and the Federal Chancellor, expressed in spring 2009 during an interview with the two Control Committees on the subject of the 2008 business report.*

*The full report is already available in German and French and the Italian version should be ready around June 2010: <http://www.parlament.ch>> Kommissionen> Parlamentarische Verwaltungskontrolle.*