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The role of embassies and consulates



Keystone

There has been a Swiss embassy in the Cuban capital of Havana since 1957.

Around the world, Switzerland operates 300 representations (embassies, missions, general consulates, consular agencies etc.). What precisely are the tasks, services and limits of the support offered by Swiss foreign representations to Swiss Abroad communities? The following should serve as a reminder:

Embassies and consulates are essential instruments of foreign policy; they facilitate the protection and expansion of Swiss interests. Issues which affect relations between two countries can only be resolved quickly by a local presence. Often it is the country's representation which initiates or coordinates agreements between states or monitors their implementation. No telephone call or e-mail between the capitals can take the place of personal contact or per-

sonal intervention on the spot, nor can any newspaper reports written in Switzerland equal the professional reports drawn up by representations on the basis of contacts with government authorities.

Embassies and consulates do not perform the same tasks. Embassies focus on problems, issues and ways of encouraging interstate relations (political reports, export promotion, promotion of a country's cultural presence in Switzerland, political intervention in favour of Swiss interests etc.). On the other hand, the remit of consulates extends to the distribution and concerns of Swiss communities abroad. In principle, consulates are subordinate to the embassy which is responsible for the host country. Every embassy is assigned a consular department which performs the tasks of a consulate for Swiss Abroad registered at the embassy.

Point of contact

Currently, almost one Swiss national in ten lives abroad. For this segment of the population the relevant general consulate (or consular department of an embassy) provides a link with Switzerland and a point of contact in emergencies. The registration, issue or extension of travel permits, military records, voluntary AHV/IV, marital status and civil rights queries, personal, family and inheritance issues, welfare questions etc. are among the areas where our consulates can offer Swiss Abroad advice and assistance. In addition, with the entry into force of Switzerland's sectoral bilateral agreements with the European Community (where approximately 60 percent of all Swiss Abroad reside), this list is supplemented by a range of questions (on free movement of persons, social security etc.) which consulates can either answer directly or forward

to the relevant office in Switzerland.

It is important for Swiss citizens who intend to live abroad for only a few years (for instance to study or for vocational training) to obtain information before their departure on their rights and obligations as a Swiss Abroad and on living conditions in the relevant country, in order to avoid any nasty shocks on arrival. Anyone who comes to the Swiss consulate to complain about long queues at the host country's government offices is at the wrong address. Swiss representations are a place of work for Swiss authorities and not a *priori* a substitute for a social club, bank or post office.

Support in emergencies

Swiss representations are increasingly called on to assist in emergencies involving Swiss citizens. In 2000 the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (Political Depart- →

ment VI, Swiss Abroad) processed over 900 dossiers on so-called consular needy cases. This included 360 cases of detainment, 55 investigations, 40 kidnappings (28 involving children), 64 accidents, 237 deaths and other incidents. It is up to the consulates to provide unbureaucratic and efficient assistance in such cases. This takes the form of visits to prisons and intervention at penal institutions if the conditions of imprisonment are inadequate; taking care of victims of severe accidents and their relatives; arranging the return of deceased nationals; intervening in the case of children who have been kidnapped by a parent; preliminary discussions with the relevant authorities to find a missing person etc.

At the same time, Swiss citizens naturally are not entitled to services for which they would not receive state support in similar situations in Switzerland. Moreover, the government is not liable for the legal costs of Swiss Abroad or of Swiss tourists involved in judicial proceedings abroad (although the representation can help them find a lawyer and always endeavours to arrange a defence lawyer for any Swiss citizen tried in a foreign country, even if the accused person is destitute). Switzerland is not responsible for paying ransom money in the case of kidnapping, since apart from anything else it

The history of Swiss representations

The oldest representation is the one in Paris (April 1798). Shortly after this, in July 1798, the government of the Helvetic Republic sent a second ambassador to Milan to represent the interests of the cisalpine republic. This was followed in 1802 by an embassy in Vienna. Around the same time a number of honorary consulates was established (1798 in Bordeaux, 1799 in Marseilles, 1801 in Nantes and 1802 in Trieste).

What appears to be a rapid expansion in Swiss representations abroad is deceptive. In 1900 Switzerland operated only seven legations (compared to Belgium's 28 embassies at the same period). The Department of Foreign Affairs at that time had a staff of 20 officials and accounted for 0.7 percent of all government expenditure. Since 1957, when the Federal Council decided to convert all legations into embassies, the number of representations has substantially risen.

Switzerland now boasts over 167 professional representations, including 92 embassies, 10 missions to international organisations, 46 general consulates, 3 consulates, a liaison office and 15 SCD (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) co-ordination offices.

would jeopardise the safety of other Swiss Abroad or Swiss tourists. For those affected, needy cases are often the result of harsh reversals of fortune, and the staff of consulates and embassies are well aware of this. All the more gratifying, then, is the solidarity exhibited by Swiss Abroad in providing practical assistance to the consulate or embassy when caring for such cases. This solidarity is also reflected in the large number of relief organisations which support our compatriots in financial need.


Service operation

Finally, among the tasks of all representations abroad is the promotion of relations among Swiss Abroad and with Switzerland. It is a well-known fact that Swiss Abroad have the same political rights at federal level as "inland Swiss". In addition to acquiring information from the "Swiss Re-

view" and the media, around 750 Swiss associations around the world take advantage of their embassy or consular representative

to keep abreast of current Swiss affairs. Consulates and embassies are also committed to strengthening ties in the Swiss Abroad community through social events. In many areas, they operate their own service organisations, even if some of these services are subject to a statutory fee. Technical innovations are currently being introduced in Swiss representations which will cut down on red tape for Swiss Abroad (for example, for registering a change of address in another consular area or for issuing a new passport). Doubtless there are other areas where improvements could be made. The Service for the Swiss Abroad (Political Department VI) therefore welcomes your questions or suggestions (Service for the Swiss Abroad, EDA, Bundesgasse 32, CH - 3003 Berne, pa6-auslandch@eda.admin.ch).

The addresses of all Swiss representations abroad are given under: www.eda.admin.ch

Walter Thurnherr
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Current popular initiatives

The following popular initiatives are still open for signature:

"For a minimum basic insurance at affordable health insurance premiums ('minimax' Initiative)"
(until 9 July 2002)

Federal Democratic Union, EDU,
Central Secretariat,
PO Box, CH-3607 Thun

Free movement for Swiss Abroad

In co-operation with the Integration Office and the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad, the Service for the Swiss Abroad has published an information leaflet on the implications for Swiss Abroad of the Switzerland-EU agreement on free movement of persons. The leaflet provides an overview of the effects the agreement will bring about. You can order the leaflet from the Service for the Swiss Abroad EDA, Bundesgasse 32, CH-3003 Berne, or from your Swiss representative. Please enclose a self-addressed adhesive label.

The leaflet can also be downloaded from the Internet under www.europa.admin.ch/neue_site/d/index_bilat.html. www.europa.admin.ch, the home page of the Integration Office, contains additional useful information on the bilateral accords.

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