

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 39 (2012)
Heft: 1

Rubrik: Notes from parliament

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Assistance for Swiss abroad and travellers

The FDFA Helpline reduces the workload of the head office in Berne and of Switzerland's network of diplomatic and consular representations abroad. Constant dynamic expansion and four supplementary projects.



Hans-Peter Heiniger

In addition to the embassies and consulates, which are the first port of call for information for Swiss citizens registered or travelling abroad, the FDFA Helpline at the Consular Directorate (CD) has been providing a "single point of contact" for queries concerning consular services since the beginning of 2011. This citizen service

takes in account the growing importance of consular affairs and improves the FDFA's impact and visibility externally. The FDFA Helpline staff answer over a thousand queries a month, which clearly shows just how well citizens have responded to the new service. Most questions can be answered directly by Helpline employees thanks to their high level of expertise. This has freed up back-office resources, which can be used to resolve complex and time-intensive issues. The objective is for the other FDFA directorates and the network abroad to also benefit increasingly from the Helpline. Hans-Peter Heiniger, Head of the FDFA Helpline, spoke to the editorial team about ongoing projects.

"SWISS REVIEW": *The FDFA Helpline has been set up and expanded rapidly since the start of 2011. What phase is it in now?*

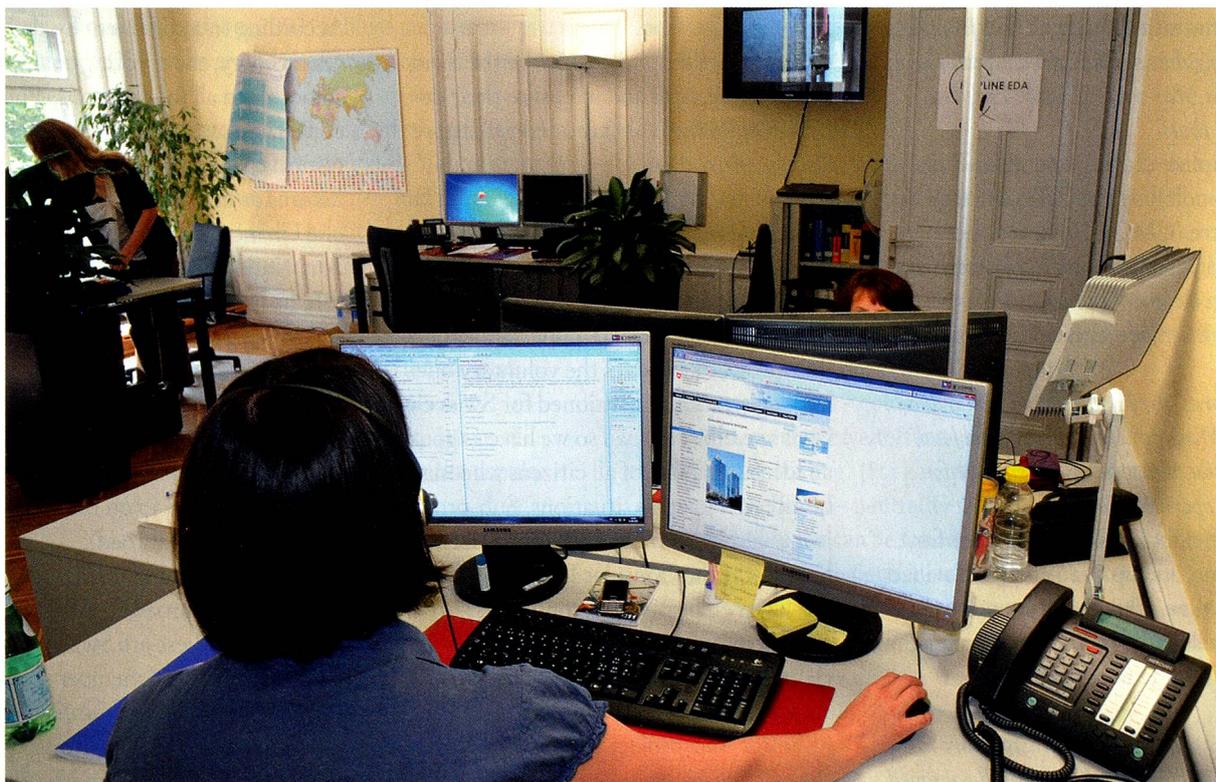
HANS-PETER HEINIGER: People have been able to reach us from Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., since the start of 2011. The first phase was launched with three employees. We have now had eight Helpline staff in place since 1 October 2011 and have moved on to phase two. This means we now answer queries every day from Monday to Sunday between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.

What steps are planned over the coming months?

We will optimise the existing services by, for example, providing further staff training in the various consular affairs. Our goal from the outset was to be able to answer at least 80% of queries to the Helpline directly. We have actually exceeded this target thanks to the outstanding level of expertise of Helpline staff. We answer over 90% of all queries ourselves, without having to pass them on to other offices. In phase three, we will provide 24-hour availability, take over the FDFA's standby service, and receive calls in Berne that are made to representations abroad outside office hours. This will reduce the workload of our colleagues in the embassies and consulates.

Everyone concerned will be pleased about that. However, there are clearly still obstacles to overcome before this objective is achieved...

As I mentioned earlier, our goal is to be available for our customers 24 hours a day. The introduction of such a service depends on technical and organisational capacities as well as resources. Like everywhere else, these are in short supply here too. We are working at full tilt to achieve our objective as quickly as possible despite the challenging framework. However, we



FDFA Helpline employees – supporting the Swiss abroad with advice and practical help



cannot, at the moment, rule out the possibility of delays in the launch of the 24-hour service owing to the resources situation.

What service are you providing at the moment?

Customers from Switzerland and abroad can contact us with questions and approach us about matters relating to consular services. We offer the best possible service in line with our service charter. Our intention is to provide expert consular information. We regard customer friendliness as our top priority.

What are the differences between the Helpline and the FDFA Hotline that is set up in crisis situations?

The Helpline is permanently available to customers for any question relating to consular matters. We also take queries via our Helpline in crisis situations. However, if the Helpline requires support in the event of a major crisis or catastrophe abroad, we can get our Hotline operators ready in next to no time. Customers are then forwarded to the Helpline or the Hotline (for announcements and reports regarding missing persons) depending on their needs. The number (+41 (0) 800 24-7-365) remains the same in any event.

Press reports said that 36,000 SMS messages and e-mails were sent by the FDFA from Berne during the red-shirt demonstrations in Thailand in May 2010. Was the Helpline involved in that?

The Helpline did not exist then. This task was handled by the Crisis Management Centre (CMC). However, messages of this kind will in the future be sent by the Helpline in close cooperation with the CMC and the representations abroad.

In other words, the Helpline will also reduce the Crisis Management Centre's workload. How will you set up the infrastructure for such major operations in the future?

We have eight lines available to us for the Helpline, and up to 16 can be provided for the Hotline. The Helpline and the Hotline are located on the same premises at Bundesgasse 32 in Berne.

What about the technical infrastructure of the Helpline and Hotline? Are you well equipped for the next major emergency?



Yes, we are very well equipped. Not just from a technical perspective but also in terms of our psychological and social preparation. Our Helpline employees and Hotline operators are being given basic and advanced training using various scenarios to prepare them for such events, with annual refresher courses to follow.

What is the planned online counter all about? And how will the Helpline be affected by this?

We still have no means of online registration for Swiss travellers abroad. This is one of the four sub-projects in the Citizen Services division that we plan to implement by spring 2012. We have access to the contact details of the registered Swiss community abroad so that we can send e-mails and SMS messages at any time in an emergency, as described above in connection with Thailand. This is why we use every opportunity to encourage the Swiss abroad to register and to ensure their details held by the embassy or consulate are always up-to-date.

Four Helpline projects are currently underway? What do these involve exactly?

Sub-project 1 aims at expanding and optimising the existing Helpline application. Sub-project 2 involves the voluntary online registration I mentioned for Swiss citizens travelling abroad so we have as good an idea as possible of all citizens who may be affected in crisis situations. Sub-project 3 should enable both Swiss Citizen Services at the Consular Directorate and the Swiss embassies and consulates abroad to send mass SMS messages more efficiently. As the example of Thailand showed, the current solution has reached its limits. Sub-project 4 is about replacing the existing ageing telephone system with a state-of-the-art call centre system.

Smaller projects, such as the availability of the FDFA Helpline via Skype, have already been implemented.

What is the long-term future of the FDFA Helpline?

We have made great progress in terms of customer proximity and customer friendliness after a successful start for the "single point of contact" at the beginning of 2011. With our well trained and highly motivated Helpline team, we will continue to offer customers the best possible service while also reducing the workload of specialist departments at head office and at our embassies and consulates as much as we possibly can.

Interview: Mitarbeiterzeitung EDA
Adaptation: Thomas Kalau

First attempt at electronic voting in national elections

Four cantons successfully carried out e-voting trials during the 2011 National Council elections. 3,562 Swiss citizens abroad eligible to vote from the cantons of Basel-Stadt, St.Gallen, Grisons and Aargau cast their votes electronically.

According to a statement by the Federal Chancellery, the e-voting trials ran smoothly in all four cantons. The cantons concerned overcame the technical and logistical challenges without any technical failures or incidents. According to the Federal Chancellery the use of e-voting at the 2011 National Council elections can therefore be regarded as a success.

Around 22,000 Swiss abroad had the opportunity to cast their votes electronically at the first e-voting trial in national elections. Up to 53.1% took advantage of the new voting method, depending on the canton (see pages 16–17 on the voting behaviour of the Swiss abroad).

With the current legal situation, around 90% of Swiss abroad could take advantage of e-voting. These are Swiss citizens residing in either an EU member state or one of the 45 states that have signed the Wassenaar Arrangement (www.wassenaar.org). Among other things, this arrangement governs the encryption of data transmis-

sion over the Internet, which is fundamental to e-voting.

Milestone in the introduction of electronic voting

The second phase in the implementation of e-voting has been reached with its first deployment in national elections. The project was launched in 2000, and trials have been held in federal referenda since 2004. In 2007, the Federal Council and Parliament approved the gradual introduction of electronic voting. Four development stages were planned:

1. Electronic voting in referenda
2. Electronic voting in elections
3. E-collecting (electronic signature for initiatives and referenda) and
4. Electronic signature for election nominations. Thirteen cantons are currently involved in the project.

The positive experiences with e-voting at the 2011 elections have given the federal

government a boost in its efforts to give most Swiss citizens abroad who are eligible to vote the opportunity to do so via the Internet at the 2015 National Council elections. The experiences of recent years will be evaluated by the Federal Chancellery over the coming months. The Federal Council's next report on electronic voting is scheduled for 2013 (also see page 17: Petition of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad).

The focus of OSCE election observation

A team of nine experts from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observed the elections in Switzerland from 10 to 28 October 2011. The experts were primarily interested in electronic voting because this technology is relatively new and pilot trials are only just being held in a few participating states. The OSCE Report on the 2011 National Council elections is expected to be published approximately two months after the election date (www.osce.org/odihr/elections/Switzerland/83755).

Thank-you from the Consular Directorate

The FDFA's Consular Directorate would like to thank the Swiss abroad who took part in the post-election survey conducted by the Swiss Foundation for Research in Social Sciences (FORS) at the University of Lausanne on the voting behaviour of Swiss voters abroad. The results of this survey will be published in spring 2012. Further information will be provided in this publication.

Important

Please do not forget to provide the embassy or consulate general responsible for you with your valid e-mail address and your mobile phone number.

Register at www.swissabroad.ch to ensure you do not miss out on "Swiss Review" or information and newsletters from your representation. The current edition of "Swiss Review" and previous issues can be read or printed out at any time at www.revue.ch or via the "Review" link on the websites of Swiss embassies and consulates.

ELECTIONS AND REFERENDA

The Federal Council decided at its meeting on 9 November 2011 to put the following proposals to the people on 11 March 2012:

- Popular initiative of 18 December 2007 "Schluss mit uferlosem Bau von Zweitwohnungen!" (Put an end to the unrestricted construction of second homes!)
- Popular initiative of 29 September 2008 "Für ein steuerlich begünstigtes Bausparen zum Erwerb von selbst genutztem Wohneigentum und zur Finanzierung von baulichen Energiespar- und Umweltschutzmassnahmen – Bauspar-Initiative" (Tax benefits on home purchase savings for a property lived in by the owner and for financing structural energy-saving and environmental protection measures – home purchase savings initiative);
- Popular initiative of 26 June 2009 "6 Wochen Ferien für alle" (Six weeks holiday for everyone);
- Federal resolution of 29 September 2011 on the regulation of gambling for charitable purposes (counterproposal to the popular

initiative "Für Geldspiele im Dienste des Gemeinwohls" (Gambling for the common good) and

- Federal Law of 18 March 2011 on fixed book prices (BuPG).

Details of the proposals can be found on page 13. The referendum dates for 2012 are 11 March, 17 June, 23 September and 25 November.

POPULAR INITIATIVES

The following federal popular initiatives have been launched since the last edition of "Swiss Review" (deadlines for the collection of signatures in brackets):

- "Für eine Wirtschaft zum Nutzen aller" (For an economy that benefits everyone) (01.05.2013)
- "Wolf, Bär und Luchs" (Wolf, bear and lynx) (11.04.2013)
- "Rettet unser Schweizer Gold – Gold-Initiative" (Save our Swiss gold – gold initiative) (20.03.2013)
- "Für eine neutrale weltoffene und humanitäre Schweiz – Neutralitätsinitiative" (For a neutral, humanitarian Switzerland that is open to the world – neutrality initiative) (13.03.2013)

The complete list can be found on the Federal Chancellery's website www.bk.admin.ch, in German under Politische Rechte/Volksinitiativen (also available in French and Italian)

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