

A world-class foreign service – A more flexible foreign representation

On Tuesday 27 April, the Inquiry Chair appointed by the Swedish Government, Peter Egardt, presented the interim report of the Swedish Foreign Service Inquiry (UD 2009:01), 'A world-class foreign service – A more flexible foreign representation'.

The full text of the interim report is available in Swedish on the website:

<http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/14/47/85/f2cde180.pdf>

More information in Swedish about the Inquiry can be found on the website:

<http://www.sou.gov.se/ufu>

Summary and proposals

Changes in the international environment and new possibilities are placing increasing demands on Sweden's foreign policy and foreign representation. Sweden must have a presence where Swedish interests need promoting or defending, where Swedish companies have operations, where Swedish nationals are present, where development cooperation is conducted – and where peace and democracy are under threat. Sweden works for its interests in the European Union.

It is in this context that the Riksdag has requested a comprehensive review of the Swedish Foreign Service and the Government has appointed an inquiry.

The Inquiry has a broad remit. It will report its conclusions and proposals by 1 November 2010. These will concern the role of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the foreign representation in relation to the Government Offices, security policy, development cooperation, free trade policy, migration matters and consular affairs, the image of Sweden, public diplomacy and business promotion, as well as other international relations and events that affect Sweden's security. The final report will also address issues involved in the management of these varied activities and their effectiveness and efficiency, skills and knowledge and the need for cross-cutting cooperation in the Government Offices.

This interim report deals with the organisation abroad as such. Consequently, it does not discuss the Swedish Foreign Service in its entirety but instead concentrates on the possibility of finding more flexible yet long-term ways to ensure that the Swedish foreign representation is present when and where it is needed and in the forms that are of most use. What is meant by flexibility is that a Swedish diplomatic presence must be able to adapt more smoothly to developments in the international environment, Swedish interests, operational requirements and local conditions.

The Inquiry finds that for its activities the Swedish Government needs a well-placed, active and smoothly operating international network serving Swedish interests. The task of the foreign representation has essentially always been to protect Swedish interests and provide various forms of service to Swedish nationals. The main tasks and geographical focus, however, have varied over the years. Missions abroad deal with a broad range of assignments on behalf of the Ministry, administrative tasks and supporting activities. In some respects they can be regarded as a branch of Government Offices political operations, while in other respects they are independent entities with administrative responsibilities towards individual people.

The foreign representation has varied in size. At its largest, in 1981, it comprised 116 missions abroad. Since 1990, approximately 30 embassies have opened and about as many have closed, while 8 career consulates have opened and 25 have closed. Nonetheless, the number of missions abroad has remained relatively stable during the period. There have been around 100 in total. In terms of costs, the organisation abroad accounts for 70–75 per cent of the MFA's budget. The location of and changes in Sweden's presence have been governed mainly by various conditions in the international environment that have affected Swedish interests and by budget limitations.

The size of the Swedish foreign representation cannot be considered disproportionately large compared with other countries. The Inquiry notes that the proportion of staff serving abroad is lower than in the foreign services of many other countries. Comparing the foreign services of the Nordic countries, Sweden's costs do not differ in absolute numbers, but in relative terms Sweden puts less resources into its foreign service.

To adjust to international conditions and pace of change encountered today and in tomorrow's world, a foreign representation has to be flexible. This means it must be able to make use of a greater variety of forms of representation – honorary consulates, career consulates (consulates-general), embassies, mini-embassies, section offices, envoys, regional solutions, local cooperation, etc. This presupposes an ability to simplify and limit the activities and support functions performed in the organisation abroad. Certain tasks should be centralised, regionalised or outsourced to a greater extent. There are also other means of simplifying Sweden's representation: by abolishing the status of the missions abroad as government agencies, by guaranteeing access to modern communications solutions, and by broadening opportunities for locally employed staff to participate in various activities. The interim report goes over these conditions and presents proposals. The work is rounded off in the concluding chapter with a presentation of possible forms of diplomatic representation and proposals for criteria to support decisions on the presence abroad.

The proposals in the interim report, which aim to open up possibilities for more flexible forms of representation, are summarised in the following paragraphs.

The Inquiry proposes that *the status of the missions abroad as government agencies be abolished* and that the foreign representation be incorporated into the Government

Offices as part of the Swedish Foreign Service. The main reasons are to create legal clarity by moving away from the dual status that the missions abroad de facto have at present and opening the way for greater flexibility in terms of organisation and activities. The Inquiry sees considerable advantages in abolishing the present status, and finds no essential functional reasons to maintain agency barriers between the Government Offices and its organisation abroad or between the different missions abroad. The Inquiry has made a preliminary legal examination and general assessment of the potential consequences of a change for greater flexibility. Further preparation will be required in various areas in order to implement the reform.

Locally employed staff should be able to perform more core tasks in the organisation abroad. A more rational division of labour between the categories of staff at missions abroad will be achieved if there is wider recruitment than previously of locally employed staff with roots in the host country. In operational terms, it is highly valuable to integrate officials who are well established in the host country's language and culture in more areas of business. There are also advantages in terms of flexibility and efficiency, and it can be a way to considerably reduce the vulnerability of small missions. The use of a project form by missions abroad when working on certain activities should open the way for more project appointments.

A number of measures are needed in the IT area. *A modern IT environment tailored to operational needs is essential* for the Government Offices/MFA to function effectively and to make optimal use of the foreign representation. IT tools must be given improved mobility, security and simplicity to make it possible to make use of smaller and more flexible forms of Swedish diplomatic presence, to limit the tasks for which missions are responsible and to enable support functions to be moved away from the missions abroad.

The added value of a presence abroad is greatest in outward operations. Removing duties that are not dependent on geographical proximity will free up resources for core tasks. The Inquiry believes that some operations carried out by the foreign representation can be centralised, regionalised or outsourced to private actors. It is primarily support functions that should be able to be moved from missions abroad, but other tasks can also be handled more efficiently by doing so. Concentrating operations in this way will make it possible to avoid fragmentation and skills dispersal, and to improve quality assurance.

The MFA and the Office for Administrative Affairs should test *increased centralisation of administrative tasks*, in areas such as financial administration, staff housing allocation and management of locally employed staff, as well as centralised server capacity. It should be possible to extend the existing central consular emergency telephone line to include the entire foreign representation. The Department for Consular Affairs and Civil Law should also be able to provide increased support, above all to small missions abroad. In the visa area, decisions for all missions abroad dealing with few applications should be centralised to the Swedish Migration Board.

For certain operations, *regionalisation* should be pursued. In a region that is of interest to Sweden from a particular policy perspective (patterns of conflict, promotion potential,

environmental and climate advocacy, and so on), it becomes relevant to station a regional specialist/adviser/support function there. This is a way of enhancing regional flexibility in operations abroad. This also applies to the general promotion of greater mobility of staff between missions and the use of regional projects. Furthermore, certain missions abroad should be given regional responsibility as support points in the consular area for business of a more ongoing nature. It should also be possible to regionalise passport processing in suitable regions, while expanding the use of mobile photo stations. Migration attachés will continue to have an important role as regional support points for migration operations.

The Inquiry is of the opinion that the MFA and the Office for Administrative Affairs (of the Government Offices) should jointly endeavour to *outsource some support functions* in the longer term. This applies, for example, to financial administration and various types of maintenance services. Several countries' foreign services are moving in this direction. Outsourcing often requires well-defined processes and customised IT support, so that a development in this direction may need to be started by centralising services. Real rationalisation gains may be difficult to achieve with such limited volumes as Sweden's, which would indicate that cooperation with another Nordic country, for example, may be appropriate. The Government Offices and the Swedish Migration Board should work actively to enable possibilities for local outsourcing of some parts of visa processing to be developed in accordance with the EU Code on Visas and respect for the requirements of legal certainty.

Another way to create flexibility and efficiency in the organisation abroad is to expand *cooperation with other countries*. The establishment of EU delegations offers new opportunities for both sharing of premises and increased cooperation on political issues so as to give the EU foreign policy a greater impact. Sweden should actively use these opportunities. Sweden should also work for the EU's new foreign service to assume a stronger role in consular cooperation in the longer term. In the area of migration, increased burden-sharing should be sought within the Schengen framework, with a view to having just one mission per location deal with applications. The opportunities for burden-sharing in the migration area offered by Nordic cooperation should also be used, and in the Nordic circle the MFA should raise the issue of expanding consular cooperation in some locations. The deeper cooperation that has been initiated between the Nordic foreign services offers good opportunities for synergies and cooperative arrangements in many areas. Sweden should make active use of these opportunities, including in various policy areas in certain locations. To strengthen administrative cooperation between the foreign services of the different countries, the proposal is to establish a Nordic task force.

In addition to narrowing the range of tasks performed by the organisation abroad, various *simplifications* are also required. Regulations and routines for various operations must be streamlined and modernised. The work the MFA has initiated in this area is welcome and must continue to receive priority. The other ministries should similarly review regulations in their areas of responsibility that give missions abroad duties that are obsolete, can be

simplified, can be made subject to fees or can be performed by other actors. A function should be set up at the MFA for supervising regulations.

If the status of the missions abroad as government agencies can be abolished, their range of tasks narrowed and duties simplified, IT support modernised and locally employed staff given responsibility for more core tasks, this will enable *more varied use of different forms of diplomatic representation*. Tasks and formats should be based on what benefits operations. It must be possible to have some embassies whose remit essentially comprises only trade and business promotion, while others have a clear focus on migration activities. It must become easier to move resources within operations and regions. It must be possible to make broader use of operations carried out by a single posted official or a section office and to achieve synergies by sharing premises and engaging in local cooperation with other countries or EU delegations. It is proposed that a general concept for mini-embassies be developed. A form of support for preparation of decisions on Swedish diplomatic presence abroad, a list of factors to consider, is presented in the interim report.