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Swiss Confederation

# CONSULAR STRATEGY 2026–2029



# Foreword

Consular affairs are not always front and centre of the diplomatic stage. There are no high-profile treaties and no historic photographs. And yet nothing has more practical significance, or immediate relevance to members of the public.

After all, when a Swiss national loses their travel documents or is caught up in an incident or accident abroad, or when a Swiss retiree is in need of guidance in their host country, assistance comes not from diplomatic summits but from our consulates.

Since taking office, I have witnessed for myself, on every continent, how consular services are the human interface between the state and individuals. With diligence and discretion, they embody Switzerland's commitment to its 826,700 nationals living abroad – a number equivalent to the entire population of the canton of Vaud.

I always enjoy meeting the Swiss abroad, whether they live there or are just passing through, whether at a Swiss National Day celebration or in a Swiss school, or when hearing from the dynamic and perceptive Swiss business community.

For over two centuries, consulates have represented the Swiss state beyond Switzerland's borders. Historically, they predated permanent embassies. Long before salon diplomacy, there was the diplomacy of the docks and trading posts, of the consuls responsible for protecting travellers, merchants and expatriate families. That tradition lives on today. The means and resources may have changed, but the vocation remains the same: **to serve**.

The strategy that follows is the **first** of its kind. It sets out the issues in an orderly way, charts a course and establishes priorities. It is born of the simple belief that in an increasingly uncertain, mobile and digital world, we need to anticipate, serve and respond more effectively.



It reaffirms the fundamental principle of **personal responsibility** that is a cornerstone of the Swiss Abroad Act. Furthermore, it is a reminder that consular action is a matter of **public policy**, serving the interest of individuals, of course, but also of Switzerland's reputation, credibility and influence in the world.

This strategy includes clear guidelines, specific objectives and practical tools. But what you will find in it above all is a simple and consistent message: **Switzerland leaves no one behind**, no matter where they are.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Cassis'.

Ignazio Cassis  
Federal Councillor  
Head of the Federal Department  
of Foreign Affairs

# Summary

In a world undergoing profound change, marked by the return of war to Europe, the erosion of the multilateral order and the fragmentation of alliances, consular action is taking on a new importance. The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the need for rapid and coordinated responses to crises. Whether it be assistance to Swiss nationals, administrative services or visa processing, consular action remains a key lever of Switzerland's presence abroad.

This, Switzerland's first **consular strategy**, offers a clear and coherent response to these challenges. It sets specific priorities, tailored to the expectations of the relevant stakeholder groups, and is geared towards effective implementation. Based on the principles of personal responsibility and subsidiarity laid down in Articles 5 and 42 of the Swiss Abroad Act (SAA), it marks an important step in the development of our consular policy for the benefit of Swiss citizens. In line with Article 8 of the SAA, it is a thematic follow-up to the foreign policy objectives set out in the Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–27.

**Over 12 million trips** with at least one overnight stay are made by Swiss citizens outside Switzerland each year, while there are **826,700 Swiss** living abroad. The representations have processed around **700,000 visa applications annually** in recent years. In a fragmented global environment, where public expectations are growing and responsibilities are shared between multiple federal, cantonal and private actors, structuring consular action in a coherent way is becoming a necessity. This strategy sets out a clear policy framework based on **four priorities**: prevention; emergency protection and assistance; administrative services; and visa application management.

1. **Prevention** aims to strengthen the personal responsibility of Swiss nationals travelling or living abroad through proactive communication, targeted information and digital tools. This means ensuring that everyone heading abroad is better prepared before they leave in order to minimise the need for **subsidiary action** by the state.
2. **Emergency protection and assistance** are a key pillar of consular action, aimed at providing rapid, targeted support to Swiss nationals in **critical situations** such as accidents, deaths, detentions, repatriations, security crises or natural disasters. The goal is to enhance the effectiveness of the response through well-defined cooperation arrangements and continually improved operational systems.
3. **Administrative services** cover tasks such as registering Swiss citizens and their political rights, issuing identity documents (Swiss passports and identity cards) and managing civil status documents or notarial deeds, the aim being to make these processes simpler, quicker and more accessible. In line with the **digital first** principle, the objective is to modernise these services through digitalisation and the use of innovative technologies.
4. **Visa application management** is the fourth priority of this strategy. Issued by our consulates, visas allow foreign nationals to enter Switzerland. The aim here is to **optimise procedures** by making them faster and more efficient while ensuring rigorous controls in accordance with legal requirements to safeguard the security of Switzerland and the Schengen area.

This consular strategy applies the principles of the Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–27 in the specific area of public services. It translates the guidelines into specific actions and is intended as a **compass** for all the actors involved, to make our external action more **coherent**. Its implementation relies on close collaboration with international partners, local authorities and Swiss communities abroad, in order to boost efficiency while streamlining resources through **synergies** and **innovation**.

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# 1. Introduction

Historically, consular services have always been a cornerstone of Swiss foreign policy, particularly since the early 19th century when they supported the Swiss economy by facilitating trade and emigration. The expatriate community has changed considerably over the centuries in terms of profiles and numbers, reflecting in particular the country's economic situation.

Whereas there were 207,000 Swiss living abroad in 1950, that number has increased dramatically since then, reaching a total of 580,936 in 2000, and by the end of 2024 it had reached 826,700, or more than one in ten Swiss citizens.

As this community has grown, from 2000 the public authorities have developed a legal framework and institutions to regulate the rights and duties of Swiss nationals abroad, while respecting the principles of subsidiarity and personal responsibility.

The Swiss Abroad Act (SAA, SR 195.1), which came into force in 2015, merged various pieces of legislation and modernised the legal basis for the assistance provided to Swiss citizens abroad by the Confederation, introducing the principle of personal responsibility. Prior to this legislative work, services had been brought together in a new federal office within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). This Consular Directorate (CD) was tasked with acting as a central contact point for Swiss nationals abroad. The SAA also strengthened Switzerland's cooperation with the institutions representing the interests of the Swiss abroad vis-à-vis Switzerland.

Switzerland's consular action provides services for 826,700 Swiss expatriates as well as subsidiary consular assistance to Swiss nationals travelling abroad. It also contributes to border security and the security of the Schengen area, while preserving Switzerland's attractiveness as a tourist destination and business location, within the framework of visa policy. In addition, the Swiss consular network is an asset for the various services of the federal and cantonal administrations, which can benefit from its assistance in many areas.

We live in an age of disruptive technological advances, significant societal change and geopolitical upheavals, and this is impacting the lives of Swiss nationals abroad. Accordingly, as provided for in Article 8 SAA, the Federal Council also considers the interests of Swiss persons and institutions abroad when defining its foreign policy strategy.

The Consular Strategy 2026–29, as a thematic follow-up to the foreign policy strategy, therefore takes a structured, forward-looking approach in order to coherently prioritise and frame Switzerland's actions in this important area, which mobilises resources at more than 160 representations on five continents and generates annual fee revenue of over CHF 50 million.



## 2. Background

### 2.1 History

#### Switzerland – land of emigration

In terms of population flows, emigration was the dominant trend in Switzerland from the mid-16th century until the 20th century. Demographic pressure, poverty and underemployment were among the main factors driving this movement, which peaked at times of economic crisis and war. While mercenary activity played a key role until the 18th century, migration has always been as diverse as the profiles of those emigrating, encompassing everything from economic and commercial activities in neighbouring countries to agricultural emigration overseas.

Since the 1950s, migration has radically changed and accelerated. Most people no longer leave Switzerland permanently, but rather engage in circular migration. While almost 30,000 Swiss still leave the country each year, over 20,000 return

home. Today, this migration is motivated by work or family reasons and is facilitated by the free movement agreements with the European Union, where 64% of the Swiss abroad live. House prices and the cost of living in the Geneva, Basel and Ticino metropolitan areas have also had an impact on cross-border migration. Lastly, there has also been a growing trend towards retirement-age migration to Southern Europe and some overseas destinations (Thailand, Brazil, South Africa).

While some Swiss nationals living abroad have emigrated recently, the majority were born outside Switzerland. The diversity of the Swiss community abroad thus also includes generations who may never have lived in Switzerland, being descendants of the original expatriates.

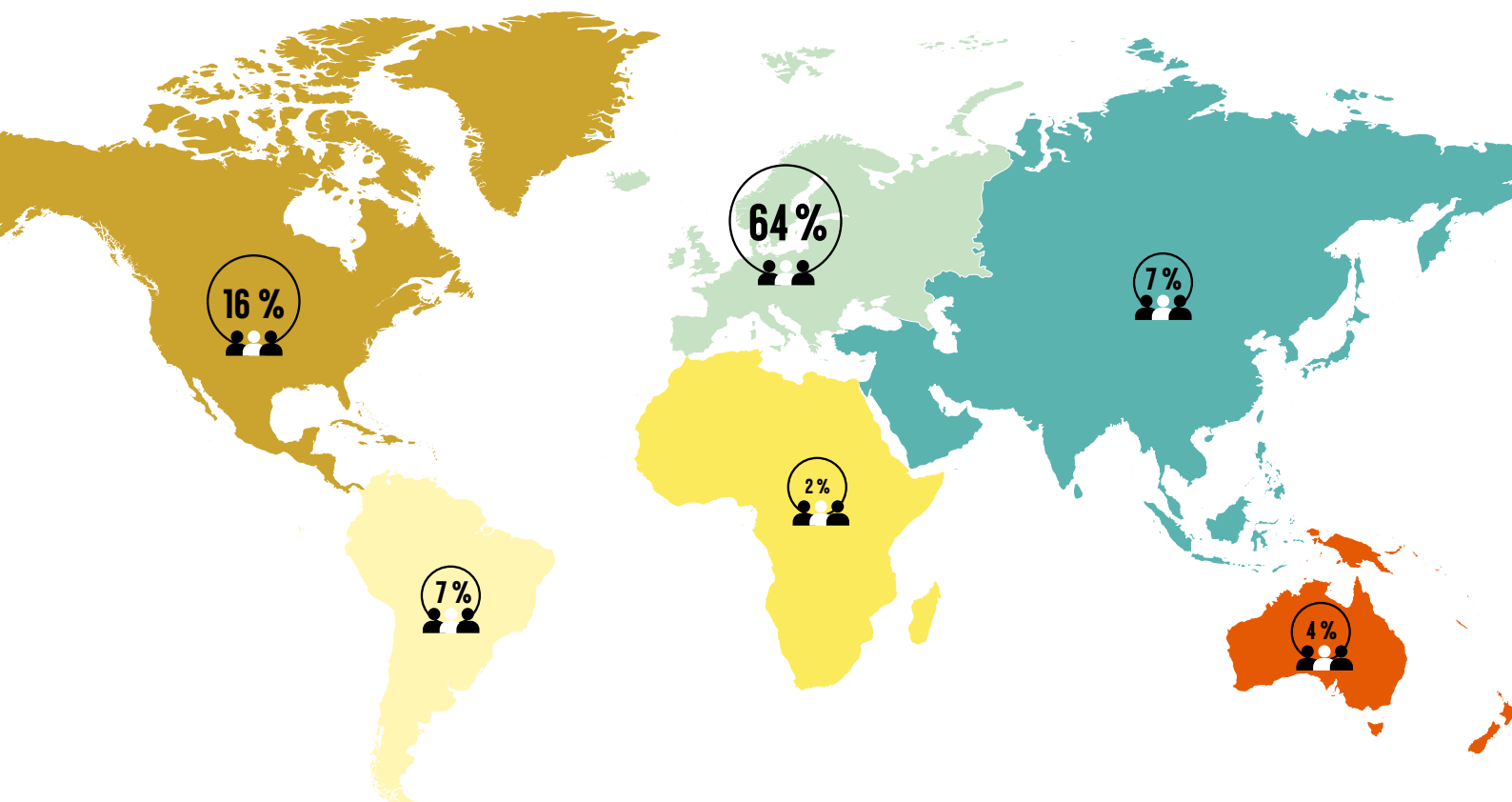


Figure 1: Proportion of Swiss abroad by continent of residence in 2024 © Federal Statistical Office (FSO) – Statistics on the Swiss Abroad

## The changing face of consular services

While diplomatic tasks were once the responsibility of the Federal Diet and the cantons, which regularly sent representatives abroad, the Helvetic Republic marked a turning point in Switzerland's foreign affairs. The first Swiss legation was established in Paris on 27 April 1798, followed by the opening of the first Swiss consulate in Bordeaux on 20 December of the same year.<sup>1</sup> The consular network then expanded rapidly, with the appointment of honorary consuls in Marseille, Genoa, Nantes and Trieste. These first consulates were mainly located in major port and trading cities in Europe and the Americas. Their role was initially limited to protecting Swiss commercial interests and assisting Swiss merchants abroad. A permanent diplomatic presence was slower to develop alongside this, with the Diet preferring to send delegations rather than establish a permanent presence.

Under the Swiss Constitution of 1848, the entire consular service was transferred to the Confederation and given a tighter organisational structure. The 'Regulations for Swiss Consuls' were adopted in 1851, and later revised in 1875 following a proposal from the Federal Assembly itself. During the economic crisis of 1888, which saw the creation of the Federal Office of Emigration, the consulates extended their support to include Swiss emigrants, and the network continued to expand with the establishment of more than 40 new posts by 1910.

Fresh impetus to reorganise the network of representations abroad came after the First World War. During the conflict, legations and consulates had been overwhelmed with requests for help. In 1915, the Federal Council agreed to represent the interests of certain friendly countries, which led the foreign service to increase its workforce. Sometimes, legations and consulates would also visit prison and internment camps. New consular regulations were adopted in 1919 and revised in 1923, creating a fully-fledged consular service for the first time. The function and status of representations and expatriate personnel were regulated for the first time internationally by the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, which remains in force today.

In 1966, the Swiss people endorsed Article 45<sup>bis</sup> of the Federal Constitution of 1874 (Cst.),<sup>2</sup> which gave the Confederation the power to promote relations between the Swiss abroad and their homeland and to provide financial support to institutions furthering this goal. In 1976, this article was supplemented by a federal Act aimed at boosting Switzerland's presence abroad and increasing the effectiveness of cooperation between all organisations active in this field. The Swiss abroad have had political rights at federal level since

1977, and have been able to exercise these rights by post since 1992. More recently, the Federal Act on Swiss Persons and Institutions Abroad (SAA) came into force in 2015.

The past 15 years have also seen a major reorganisation of consular services. As a cost-cutting measure, many consular sections, mostly in Europe, have been closed and the services regionalised. At the same time, cooperation arrangements with other actors have been developed to leverage synergies. Another feature of this period has been the development of the first digital services to facilitate access to consular services.

## Contribution of the Swiss abroad

The Swiss have left their mark across the world in a very wide range of fields. Ticino architect and sculptor Pietro Antonio Solari (1445–93) worked on the walls of the Kremlin in Moscow, and in 1894 Alexandre Emile Jean Yersin (1863–1943), originally from the canton of Vaud, discovered the pathogen responsible for bubonic plague in what is now Vietnam. Bertha Lutz (1894–1976), the granddaughter of Swiss emigrants to Brazil, became a renowned herpetologist and politician in that country. She gave her name to the Bertha Lutz diploma, awarded since 2002 by the Brazilian Federal Senate to individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the defence of women's rights. Many towns and cities in North and South America also bear proud testimony to the origins of their founding communities, among them Geneva in the United States and Nova Friburgo in Brazil. Switzerland's influence can be found not only in architecture, science and place names, but also in landmark documents such as the Australian Constitution and the Turkish Civil Code, the result of the Swiss abroad incorporating elements of the Swiss state structure into the institutional bodies of their host countries. During the First World War, the return of 25,000 fit-for-service expatriates was a much-lauded act that strengthened relations with the Swiss abroad and contributed to the founding of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) in 1916. More generally, through their contributions to the societies in which they live, Swiss citizens abroad help to promote Switzerland beyond its borders, often passing on Swiss values in their day-to-day activities.

1 [Les Suisses dans le vaste monde](#), report published by the New Helvetic Society in 1931. Page 15 ff.

2 In the current Federal Constitution of 18 April 1999, in force since 1 January 2000, this provision is contained in Article 40.



## 2.2 Observed trends

While the legal framework governing consular services has remained virtually unchanged since the signing of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations in 1963, these services have been shaped by numerous societal and technological developments.

### More frequent crises linked to long-running conflicts and climate change

2024 saw the highest number of armed conflicts since 1946. According to the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), there were 61 conflicts worldwide in 2024, almost half of them in Africa (28). After Africa, the regions most affected by armed conflict were Asia (17), the Middle East (10), Europe (3) and the Americas (2).

The consequences of climate change are also having a significant impact on the number of disasters and extreme weather phenomena affecting the planet. Floods, storms, wildfires, forest fires and earthquakes are on the rise, and are increasingly affecting destinations popular with Swiss tourists, leading to a surge in requests for assistance.

These phenomena are having a growing impact on expatriate communities and on travellers, who expect to receive support from the Swiss authorities. For instance, the security situation of Swiss nationals has deteriorated considerably in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, Lebanon, Sudan, Haiti and Niger in recent years. Meanwhile, many parts of the world were hit hard by the extreme weather events of summer 2023, affecting thousands of Swiss travellers.

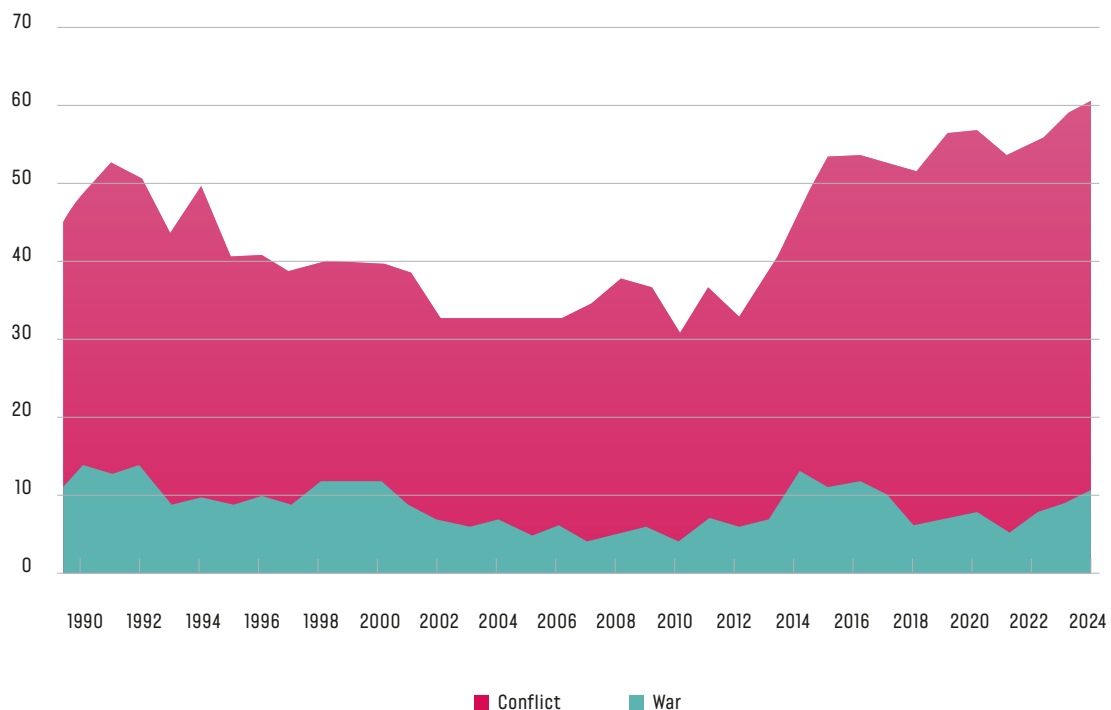


Figure 2: Number of conflicts and wars, 1989–2024.

Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset and UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (Pettersson et al, 2025)

Growth of the Swiss diaspora, driven in particular by the over-65s

The Swiss expatriate community is growing all the time. Increasing by an average of almost 1.7% per year, it has expanded by a third in the space of a generation.<sup>3</sup> While the departure of under-40s has slowed, the proportion of people over the age of 65 choosing to leave Switzerland has risen significantly since 2017. This age group grew by 4.2% in 2024,<sup>4</sup> more than twice as fast as the rest of the community.

3 25 years  
4 FSO: [Statistics](#) on the Swiss Abroad 2024

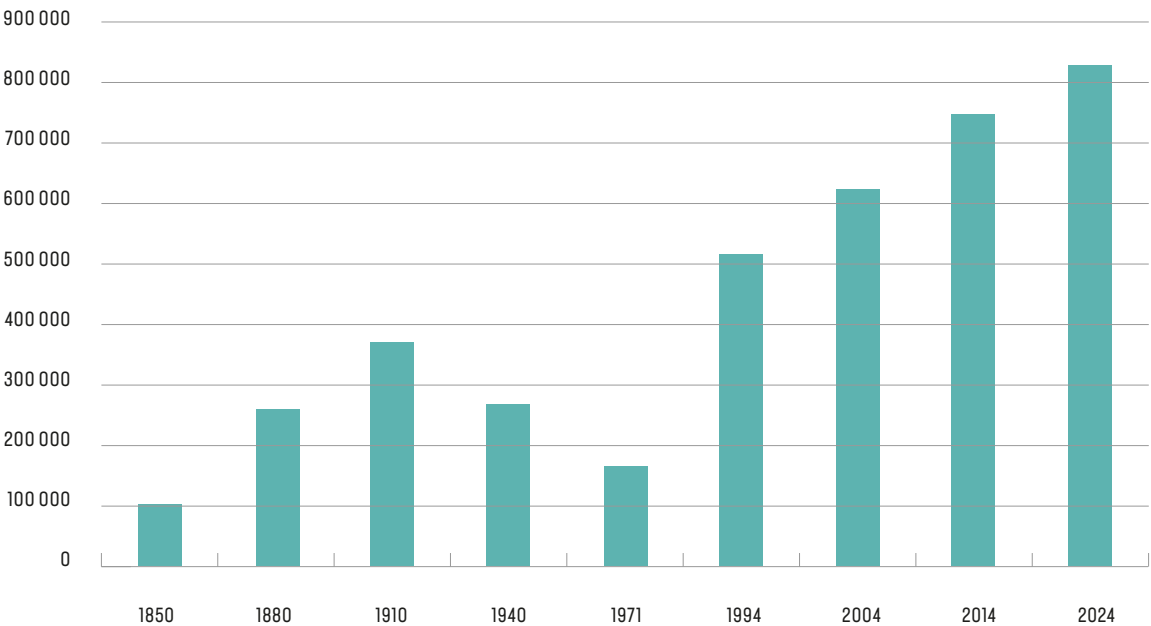


Figure 3: Number of Swiss nationals abroad, 1850–2024. FSO and HSSO – Historical Statistics of Switzerland, E28 and E29

## Accelerated changes in expectations, behaviour and social models

Swiss society is highly multicultural, with 36% of the country's residents in 2023 born abroad.<sup>5</sup> Societal changes in recent years have seen an increase in the percentage of people with multiple nationalities and a growth in the percentage of mixed marriages. Meanwhile, 75% of Swiss citizens living abroad have more than one nationality.

The number of international trips has also grown significantly, as evidenced by the 55% increase in passengers passing through Swiss airports between 2000 and 2023. The Swiss population makes over 12 million trips abroad including overnight stays every year.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, travel outside Europe has doubled. The way these trips outside Switzerland are booked has also changed, with most bookings now made directly online, without the involvement of travel agents. This change in consumption patterns means that there is a specific need for information to ensure that travellers have the right advice.

Still a relatively rare phenomenon 15 years ago, there are now more than 35 million digital nomads worldwide. This term refers to people who work while travelling around the world, something made possible by the rise of remote working. International student migration has also grown substantially over the past 20 years.

These changes in society, mobility and tourism trends have had a significant influence on the complexity of the services provided while increasing the need for assistance services.

5 FSO – Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS) and Population and Households Statistics (STATPOP)

6 FSO: [Statistics](#) on the number of trips per person, 2019–23.

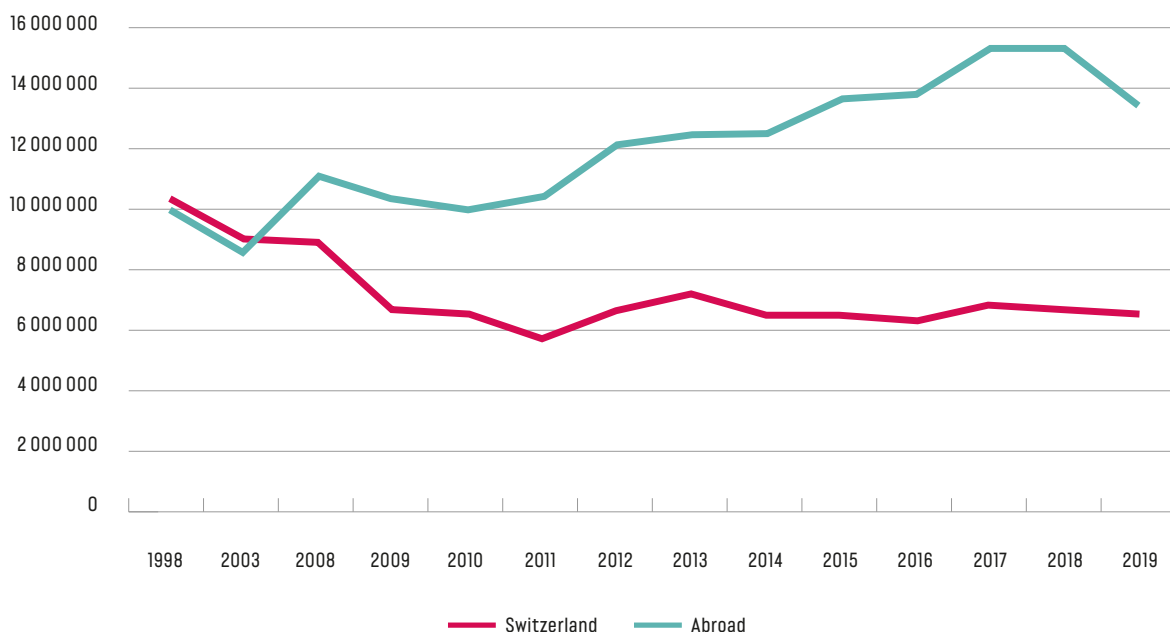


Figure 4: Destination of trips including overnight stays made by Swiss residents

Growth in tourism from countries subject to visa requirements

The substantial growth of some Asian and Middle Eastern economies over the past two decades has boosted the purchasing power of tens of millions of people in these countries. As a result, Swiss consulates in China, India, South East Asia and the Gulf states have seen a significant increase in the number of applications for tourist visas.

While 11.3 million visa applications were processed by the consulates of Schengen countries in 2009, this had risen to over 16.9 million by 2019.<sup>7</sup> To cope with this influx of tourists, European countries have outsourced some visa-related administrative tasks to private service providers, thereby increasing the number of cities where applications can be submitted.

The sector was hit hard by coronavirus restrictions but has bounced back in recent years. This is also true of Switzerland, with Swiss consulates seeing a sharp increase in visa applications following a decline due to the pandemic. The number of visa applications processed by Swiss representations abroad in 2024 already exceeded pre-pandemic levels, and the trend is continuing.

7 The years 2020 to 2023 were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and are not representative.

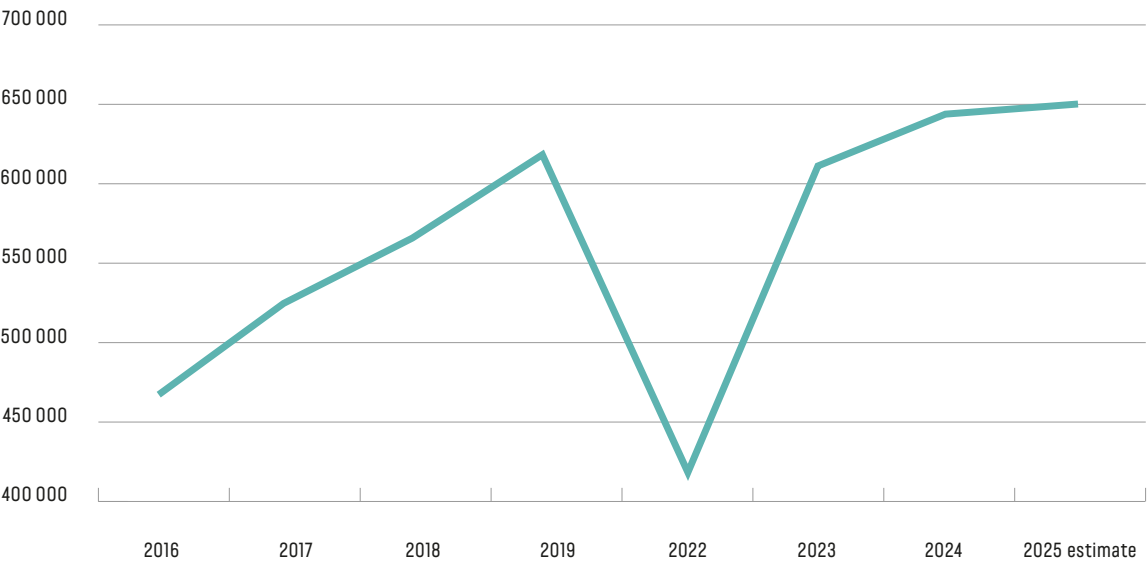


Figure 5: Number of short-stay visas processed by Swiss consulates

## Strengthened partnerships

Ensuring effective global coverage to deal with all emergencies and provide consular services everywhere would come at a cost that few countries could afford. Faced with this challenge, many countries are seeking to step up their cooperation.

When it comes to **visas**, Schengen legislation allows member and associated states to represent each other. Such cooperation is increasing as it allows for efficiency gains (by avoiding the need for very small visa sections) while enabling people who require a Schengen visa to make use of an extensive network of representations. Switzerland has concluded 57 agreements in which other countries represent it, and 64 agreements in which it represents other countries. This cooperation facilitates access to International Geneva and is also a boon for business and tourism.

Another area that has seen growing interest in cooperation between countries is that of **services and assistance** for individuals. This trend has been fairly strong at European level since the Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2009. Other countries, such as Canada and Australia, the Nordic countries and the Benelux countries, have strengthened consular cooperation. Switzerland has concluded a cooperation agreement with Austria and collaborates regularly and informally with countries sharing comparable approaches in relation to crises, crisis management and rescue operations (organised departures, COVID-19 evacuations, etc.).

**Cooperation with other Swiss stakeholders** has been stepped up to improve the efficiency of state action. One example of this is the ability for Swiss citizens abroad to apply for identity documents (Swiss passports and identity cards) at cantonal passport offices as well as at the representation where they are registered, an arrangement that has been in place since 2010. Another is an initiative whereby the OSA, the FDFA, swissinfo and Soliswiss develop joint communication measures.

## Digital transformation

The digital transformation of the past 25 years has led to significant changes in the way Swiss representations interact with their users, as well as revolutionising access to information and the speed of its transmission. Something that happens in Asia in the morning can be making headlines in Europe within minutes.

The digital transformation has also helped to boost document and visa security through the use of biometric identifiers. In addition, access to certain services has been made easier thanks to the online desk. At the same time, this transformation requires continuous investment in infrastructure and human resources to ensure the security, reliability and speed of the IT networks serving consular representations.

Last but not least, artificial intelligence (AI) is having a significant impact on how administrative services are delivered. While the many unresolved legal issues are holding back its adoption in the public domain, the private sector is finding new ways of using this technology on an almost daily basis. However, the democratisation of AI poses new risks (deep-fakes, document fraud, etc.), for both providers and users of consular services.

# 3. Legal and operational basis

## 3.1 Mission

As highlighted in section 2.1 History, Switzerland recognised very early on the need for and importance of efficient and effective consular services. Over the years, the consular mission has been clarified and formalised in both international and domestic law.

Internationally, the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, which came into force in 1967 and has now been ratified by more than 180 countries, lays down extensive rules governing consular services and the conditions under which consular functions are performed.

In domestic law, a specific constitutional provision for the Swiss abroad was introduced in 1966, stipulating that the Confederation should promote relations between Swiss nationals living abroad and with the home country. This constitutional provision was translated into numerous pieces of legislation, which were brought together in the SAA in 2015. The SAA governs measures aimed at supporting, informing and promoting links between the Swiss abroad, their political rights, the social assistance that may be granted to them, consular protection, other administrative services and the support offered to specific institutions.

### Personal responsibility and subsidiarity as cardinal principles

The SAA makes **personal responsibility a fundamental principle** in relations between Switzerland and persons to whom it may guarantee rights or grant assistance (Art. 5 SAA). By law, therefore, everyone is expected to exercise personal responsibility when planning or undertaking a stay abroad or when working abroad, to behave in accordance with the risks and to try to overcome any difficulties that may arise with their own resources. In principle, then, Switzerland can only assist persons abroad if they cannot reasonably, or are not in a position to, safeguard their interests on their own or with the help of third parties (subsidiarity, Art. 42 SAA). Furthermore, **there is no legal entitlement to consular** protection. Rather, this is a discretionary provision. For example, Switzerland may refuse to provide assistance if there is a risk that it could be detrimental to Switzerland's foreign policy interests or if a person behaves negligently or if the assistance would put other people, in particular FDFA employees, in danger (Art. 43 SAA). Also, **consular services are subject to payment**, unless otherwise specified (Art. 60 SAA).

Through various measures, Switzerland helps Swiss nationals abroad to exercise personal responsibility first and foremost, and thus to minimise risks as early as possible, so that they are not dependent on help from third parties or, on a subsidiary basis, from Switzerland.

### Users of consular services

Consular services are provided primarily to Swiss nationals, but also to Liechtenstein nationals on the basis of the relevant international treaties. Some consular services are also offered to people with recognised refugee or stateless status (Art. 39 SAA).

### Specific services for foreign nationals

Swiss representations also provide visa-related services in order to promote border security while facilitating the entry into Switzerland of groups important to our national interests. Whether you are looking to settle in Switzerland, explore its attractions as a tourist, do business with a Swiss export company or attend a conference in Geneva, the visa application procedure is often your first point of contact with the Swiss administration.

Services are also provided by the representations in conjunction with various federal and cantonal authorities as part of family reunification or naturalisation procedures, for the recognition of foreign civil status documents or for the transmission of administrative or judicial decisions.

## 3.2 Coherence

Under Article 54 Cst., the conduct of foreign policy is the responsibility of the Federal Council.

Many domestic policy issues currently also have an international dimension, which is why the Federal Council has adopted a **foreign policy strategy** systematically since 2012. The first structured strategy was adopted for 2000–03, in a post-Cold War context of Europeanisation. The 2020–23 strategy marked a turning point, incorporating for the first time the concept of "coherence of external action" by means of thematic and geographical follow-up strategies. The 2024–27 strategy follows the same model. It provides the current guidelines for Switzerland's foreign policy for a four-year period and defines priorities and objectives in a world that is becoming less global, less influenced by the West and



less democratic. It also sets out how Switzerland intends to safeguard its security, prosperity and independence in the face of these challenges.

Foreign policy is about interests. The Federal Council therefore considers the need to safeguard the interests of Swiss citizens and institutions abroad when developing its foreign policy strategy, as stipulated in Article 8 SAA. With this in mind, the Federal Council is adopting a thematic follow-up to its foreign policy strategy in the form of this consular strategy.

This thematic strategy fits with the "central contact point" rationale set out in Article 7 SAA. Indeed, in an area where many of the services provided abroad are the responsibility of different departments and authorities, a consular strategy enables the Federal Council to offer a vision, a coherent framework and clear priorities for the development of service provision.

Switzerland is aware of the special importance of consular tasks as a foreign policy instrument. After all, providing efficient and effective services is often a critical success factor in achieving higher objectives in terms of diplomacy, safeguarding of interests, export promotion, bilateral and multilateral partnerships, and good offices. One notable example is Switzerland's role as host state in International Geneva – a role it can only fulfil if an efficient visa procedure gives visitors from all over the world easy access to our country, whether they be politicians, businesspeople, scientists or representatives of NGOs.

Efficient consular services provide added value for all Swiss citizens, whether they live in Switzerland or abroad, ensuring that they can benefit from efficient and effective support within the limits of the principles of personal responsibility and subsidiarity. Foreign policy is therefore always, ultimately, domestic policy.

### 3.3 Implementation partners

The diversity of services provided to Swiss citizens is wide. So too are the contexts in which consular action takes place. This calls for a wide range of partners.

#### Authorities

Consular services are the equivalent of a communal or cantonal administration for Swiss nationals abroad. Services offered include registering life events, issuing permits, providing support with procedures (naturalisation, adoption), registering applications for identity documents (Swiss passports and identity cards), and handling marriage and family reunification procedures. Consular services also assist the communal and cantonal authorities with updating registers (elections and votes, OASI) and passing on decisions to the persons concerned. These services are provided in

close collaboration with a wide range of other authorities, from the Federal Chancellery (political rights), for example, to the State Secretariat for Migration and cantons (migration), as well as communes (residents' services).

Digital transformation means integrating a growing number of applications into Switzerland's IT environment. This requires close collaboration with the Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunication (FOITT), Digital Public Services Switzerland (DPSS), the Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner (FDPIC) and the Federal Chancellery, as well as effective coordination with all the authorities concerned.

#### Institutions supported by Switzerland

Promoting links between and informing and representing the interests of Swiss communities abroad is not undertaken by the FDFA alone, but also by private institutions with financial support from Switzerland under the provisions of the SAA. This complementary action generates significant synergies with the Swiss authorities. The collaboration framework and the terms of financial support are formalised in such a way as to promote complementarity rather than competition between the different institutions. Of particular note here is the [OSA](#), which brings together over 600 clubs and associations outside Switzerland and speaks on behalf of the Swiss abroad in the Swiss parliament. Other institutions focus on particular areas, such as the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA) and the Area for the Swiss Abroad Foundation. Abroad, there are many Swiss charities that directly assist people in need of consular protection. Close cooperation also exists with [Switzerland Tourism](#), particularly in relation to visas.

#### Private partners

There are various collaborations with independent institutions in the form of public-private partnerships (PPPs), where the partners consider the common interest in working together to be sufficiently important in itself. This approach applies particularly to consular protection, with institutions working in prevention or support (Swiss Air-Rescue [Rega], Touring Club Switzerland [TCS], International Social Service).

With regard to visas, Switzerland has been working since 2013 with a system of outsourcing some application submission and processing tasks. Paid for directly by visa applicants, this approach relieves the representations of administrative tasks, freeing them up to focus on formal decision-making, for which they are solely responsible. This collaboration also allows applications to be submitted in more locations and extends the geographical coverage, thereby reducing travel and making the visa process easier for applicants.

## International collaboration

Consular activities have some special characteristics that make international collaboration essential: international mobility, national populations subject to the rules and laws of foreign states, global tourist destinations, a common legal basis (Vienna Convention), external networks operating on the territory of sovereign states, and communities of interest (Schengen).

Accordingly, the FDFA attaches great importance to dialogue and cooperation with foreign consular services. Formal cooperation has existed with Austria for a number of years, and there are ongoing discussions with other countries. The main aim is to offer additional points of access to people in a crisis requiring rapid assistance from a representation in countries where one of the two parties does not have a representation. This practice extends the geographical coverage of service provision.

At the same time, consular consultations are held regularly with countries that are tourist destinations or home to a large Swiss community. Exchanges of this kind enable us to directly address the issues or problems affecting our citizens in the countries concerned and, as far as possible, to identify possible solutions or courses of action. Such meetings also contribute directly to the overall development of Switzerland's bilateral relations with the countries in question.

Lastly, regarding visas, as previously mentioned the Schengen area provides a framework conducive to international collaboration, in the interests of Switzerland and travellers visiting our country. For example, if Switzerland does not have consular services in a given country, it is possible to mandate another Schengen state to deal with visa applications falling within Switzerland's remit, thereby ensuring local service. In a spirit of balance between partner states, Switzerland also provides such support for other Schengen area countries.

more than 200 honorary consulates. A map of the network can be found in section 7.

To ensure **full global coverage** and efficient support for Swiss nationals wherever they may be, the 91 representations responsible for consular affairs work closely with representations that do not have a consular section, as well as with the **honorary consulates** accredited within their consular district, who can be mandated as required. In this way, assistance services (issuing emergency documents, visiting Swiss citizens in prison, dealing with the authorities, etc.) and crisis support can be provided at a large number of representations.

The consular centres also have **mobile facilities** enabling them to undertake regular and targeted consular tours to meet remote Swiss communities or to be present at events (e.g. the Olympics) that are likely to be attended by many Swiss nationals, who may need assistance.

## 3.4 Instruments

Consular services are provided abroad on behalf of authorities based in Switzerland. Whether digital, hybrid or face to face, their provision is based on four pillars: a network of professional and honorary representations, digital tools, a central structure in Bern and local, transferable teams in the field.

### Professional and honorary representations abroad

Switzerland currently (as at 2025) has a network of more than 160 professional representations. Some services, in particular visas and administrative services, are concentrated at 91 of these representations, which offer the public a full range of consular services. These representations are supported by

## Honorary consulates

In addition to its embassies and consulates general, Switzerland has a dense network of honorary consulates, each headed on a voluntary basis by an honorary consul. Honorary personnel are not directly employed by the FDFA and fall under the jurisdiction of the higher representation.

Honorary consuls have a network of local contacts and are very familiar with the economic, cultural and political practices of the region. This enables them to provide invaluable support to the higher representations, particularly when it comes to **safeguarding Switzerland's interests**. They also maintain contact with the Swiss community abroad. In agreement with the relevant representation, they provide assistance to Swiss nationals passing through or living in the country. Lastly, in emergencies affecting Swiss citizens, whether a case involving consular protection or a major crisis, they provide local support to the representation concerned.

The location of an honorary consular post is determined first and foremost by the interests of the service as well as by Switzerland's political, economic, tourism, trade and cultural priorities and the size of the local Swiss community. Swiss interests **in the local context** are the primary factor involved in the opening or closing of an honorary consulate.

With a view to strategic planning of resources and tasks, higher representations – generally embassies – are required to **regularly assess** the usefulness of an honorary consular appointment in their consular district. This assessment is based on a (non-exhaustive) set of key questions designed to assess the post's potential contribution to safeguarding Switzerland's interests:

- a) Does the honorary consul bring added value, particularly in **relations** with the local authorities and cultural, scientific or business communities?
- b) Does the honorary consul help to provide relevant, locally contextualised **information** that benefits Switzerland and its businesses and organisations?
- c) Does the honorary consul facilitate **access to decision-makers** for official Swiss delegations, whether political, economic or scientific?
- d) Can the honorary consul provide targeted and **effective support** to the higher representation in specific consular tasks provided for in the SAA (consular protection, crisis management, prevention, links with the local Swiss community)?
- e) If the Swiss community abroad is growing or tourism from Switzerland is increasing, can an appropriate local network provide more effective **support for the region concerned** than the higher representation alone?

Based on the analyses by the higher representations, the FDFA's head office can assess whether an honorary consulate should be opened, retained or closed. This assessment is based as far as

possible on **quantified needs** and is supplemented by an internal consultation to ensure **consistency** with Switzerland's objectives and strategies. If necessary, a proposal is then submitted to the head of the FDFA for decision.

Candidates for an honorary consulship must now systematically declare their private and professional **interests**. If appointed, they are required, in accordance with the FDFA's code of conduct, to avoid any **conflict of interest** and to report any suspected or actual conflict of interest immediately to the higher representation. These interests must be reviewed regularly, and at the latest upon renewal of the consulship.

## Digital tools

In line with the Digital Switzerland Strategy's 'digital first' principle, the FDFA prioritises digital solutions wherever possible and appropriate. In the future, many administrative services will be available via a digital platform (virtual front desk) that is currently under development. The 'digital first' principle also applies to communication and prevention tools. The latest apps can already be used to register trips abroad and receive alerts or specific information about representations' activities.

However, there are **two areas where digitalisation remains limited**. Firstly, many services still require in-person attendance for biometric identification purposes (passports, visas), and, secondly, assistance services in response to unforeseen life events or crises affecting a large number of people also require a physical presence. However, digital tools make it easier to coordinate the actors involved, to access information quickly and to provide targeted information to the individuals concerned.

In a context of growing needs, the expansion of **e-government** aims to lighten the administrative burden by freeing up resources for emergency assistance and to improve access to services for remote users. At the same time, it requires **ongoing efforts** to ensure the speed, reliability and security of an increasingly exposed digital environment.

## A professional structure at head office

The FDFA's Consular Directorate (**CD**) based in Bern actively supports the network of Swiss representations abroad by supplying the operational foundations, digital tools and guidelines needed for the efficient delivery of consular services. It provides direct support to the consular sections, ensures the smooth flow of information and coordinates exchanges with the Swiss and foreign authorities and international partners.

It also runs the **FDFA Helpline**, which operates 24/7. This is the first point of contact for consular enquiries from the public and provides emergency cover for representations outside working hours.

The CD plays a key role in **crisis management** abroad in the form of prevention (travel advice), preparation (staff training) and response. Its Crisis Management Centre (**KMZ**) prepares representations to deal with critical situations and assists them directly in the event of conflicts, disasters or major incidents. It coordinates, on behalf of head office, the resources deployed by Switzerland. Thanks to the FDFA's intervention pool, it can rapidly deploy targeted resources to support representations and institutions on the ground.

Human resources

In 2024, the FDFA relied on the services of 3,883 full-time equivalents (FTEs) at its 164 Swiss representations abroad,<sup>8</sup> with 15% of representations' human resources being engaged in the provision of consular services. Of these, 30% had an employment contract under Swiss law and 70% were hired locally.

Employees hired under Swiss law are in principle transferable and change their posting every four years. Deployed at small or medium-sized representations, they carry out a range of tasks and have a variety of professional profiles. As career consular officers, specialists and managers provide consular services (consular protection, citizen services, communication with Swiss communities), oversee the administrative running of representations (property management, finance, staffing, etc.) and set up the security and crisis management system. At small embassies and consulates general, they also perform tasks related to economic and cultural promotion or communication.

Employees hired under local law play an essential role thanks to their knowledge of the local context and languages. Their tasks, which are mainly administrative and support-related, do not generally include decisions involving the exercise of public authority, such as granting or refusing visas, which remain the responsibility of transferable staff.

The diversity of postings and tasks is reflected in the **variety of consular profiles**, whose hallmarks are a high level of adaptability, language skills and a commitment to serving the Swiss abroad. Regular job rotation and the rapidly evolving nature of the consular profession mean that employees need to be constantly updating their skills. The digitalisation of services is increasing the need for digital skills, while the growing volume of emergency protection and assistance tasks requires an ability to handle highly sensitive situations with empathy.

8 Average headcount in 2024

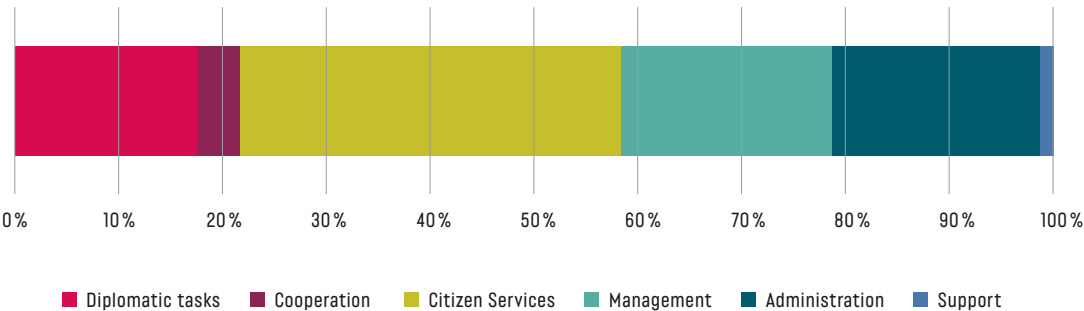


Figure 6: Tasks performed by transferable consular staff abroad (including general services).  
Source: FDFA Task List 2024

# 4. Thematic priorities

So far, we have seen how consular services are taking place in an increasingly complex environment characterised by crises, media exposure and social changes as well as digitalisation, AI and international mobility. The volume of service users continues to grow, at a time when budgets are under acute pressure. Thus, there is a need to redefine the contours of consular action and its priorities by answering a central question: **what services should be provided, where, through which channels and with what objectives?**

The aim is not to cast aside the current systems, which have been consolidated over a period of years. However, it is vital to **get ahead of the changes** under way so as to preserve what works and adapt what needs to be adapted. In particular, this means striking the right balance between **automating** services and maintaining the **human connection**. Digitalisation should serve to optimise processes in order to free up resources for situations where personal interaction is essential.

One final point to note is that this strategic approach is part of a clear political commitment: to ensure that consular action generates **real public value**, whether in terms of subsidiary support for Swiss citizens, Switzerland's attractiveness as a tourist destination, science hub and business location, or the reputation and influence of International Geneva. This strategy has identified four thematic priorities that will guide the necessary and expected developments over the next few years.

## 4.1 Prevention

*"Every individual shall exercise personal responsibility when planning or undertaking a stay abroad or when working abroad."* This core statement, enshrined in law, posits personal responsibility as a cardinal principle in Switzerland's relationship with Swiss citizens abroad (Art. 5 SAA). The law provides for the possibility of support from Switzerland abroad only if persons in need of assistance are no longer able to safeguard their interests themselves or with the help of third parties (subsidiarity, Art. 42 SAA).

While not all the risks associated with a stay abroad can be eliminated, there are some steps that can be taken to **reduce their likelihood** and consequences. On average, only one in every 2,600 stays abroad results in action by Switzerland – a clear indicator of the high level of preparedness and responsibility of Swiss citizens. However, given the increase in travel outside Europe and the growing number of crises, it is becoming essential to strengthen preventive measures in order to

limit emergency interventions and their costs, both for the individuals concerned and for the public purse.

In accordance with its duty to inform under Article 10 SAA, Switzerland provides a **wide range of useful information** for those travelling or settling abroad. This includes country-specific advice (in German, French and Italian) for 176 destinations, health recommendations (at [healthytravel.ch](https://healthytravel.ch)) and practical guides for expatriates. The popularity of this content, which is among the **most visited of any published by the Federal Administration**, confirms its relevance and usefulness. In view of the ageing of the Swiss community abroad, preventive measures are also being widened to include raising awareness of old-age provision, specifically access to healthcare, care in the event of loss of independence and arrangements in the event of death. These are all situations that require advance planning, based on the right information and personal responsibility.

## Objectives

### Objective P1 – Promote personal responsibility

Information technology has revolutionised the travel industry, and the number of trips booked directly has increased over the past generation: 68% of trips are now booked without the involvement of a travel agency or tour operator, with just one in five arranged through an offline travel agency. As a result, a large proportion of tourists no longer benefit from the advice of travel agents and lack the support of a tour operator agent at their holiday destination. Another trend examined in section 2.1 is the growth in travel outside Europe, often to destinations that can be more challenging. These trends are having a negative impact on traveller preparedness, risk levels and expectations. Against this backdrop, it is in Switzerland's interest to step up preventive measures, to provide travellers with more information about the general measures they need to take, and to make them aware of certain specific risks and of the limits of state action.

#### Measures:

1. Convey specific and relevant information to members of the public, e.g. when issuing identity documents.
2. Seek partnerships with major travel industry players and engage in targeted media messaging ahead of peak tourist seasons.
3. Increase the visibility of travel advice on the FDFA's social media channels and those of its partners.
4. Use the network of honorary consulates as well as Swiss organisations abroad to relay official information (OSA, umbrella organisations, Swiss clubs, Council of the Swiss Abroad delegates).

### Objective P2 – Promote the use of digital prevention tools

Nowadays, many Swiss travellers are more mobile and often venture off the beaten track, far from mass tourism destinations. Particularly – but not exclusively – on trips like these, situations can develop quickly. Should an emergency situation arise in this context, it is essential to have tools that facilitate targeted communication, giving the Confederation's offices a clear overview of the situation so that they can accurately determine and prioritise the action to be taken by the state.

The Travel Admin mobile app offers an invaluable service for travellers and was used by more than 98,000 people in 2024. It provides specific information on country risks, simplifies communication with the representation and gives access to local emergency numbers. It also allows the FDFA to inform travellers quickly in the event of major incidents so that they can adapt their behaviour accordingly. The app has proved its worth in numerous crises abroad, as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic. This tool must be continuously improved and further promoted in order to harness its full potential.

#### Measures:

1. Promote use of the Travel Admin app.
2. Adapt the functionalities of digital solutions to changing needs.



### Objective P3 – Strengthen skills to cope with exceptional events

The frequency, duration and complexity of crises, whether natural disasters, conflicts, attacks or accidents, are increasing. In the face of such unpredictable events, Swiss representations abroad must be able to remain functional, rapidly mobilise the necessary resources and implement effective measures. This requires specific skills: anticipating risks, managing operations in a deteriorating environment, maintaining service provision and adopting appropriate communication with affected individuals and the wider public. These skills cannot be improvised: they must be acquired and reinforced through regular training and simulation exercises.

To respond effectively to major crises affecting Swiss citizens abroad, the FDFA must be able to quickly mobilise the resources available within the Federal Administration (including the FDFA and other departments). This may involve the temporary reassignment of staff within the external network or head office, as well as the use of specialists from other departments. To this end, the CD has a pool of volunteer staff (hotline, intervention pool) ready to be deployed as backup. Depending on the nature and location of the crisis, honorary consuls can also play a valuable role thanks to their in-depth knowledge of the local context.

#### Measures:

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1. Harness the skills available within the Federal Administration, in particular the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS), to anticipate and monitor crises.
  2. Train and support staff at Swiss representations to ensure the continuity of consular services, including under difficult conditions.
  3. Maintain a wide range of crisis management training (courses, digital modules, webinars, missions).
  4. Provide representations with a set of crisis management exercises for them to use independently.
- 

### Objective P4 – Provide targeted information to people retiring abroad

According to the 2024 Statistics on the Swiss Abroad, 23.9% of Swiss nationals living abroad are aged over 64. This category of expatriates is growing at a rate of 4.2% per year, compared with an average growth rate of 1.6% for the Swiss abroad as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

People who retire abroad often have less information and support than those who emigrate for family or academic reasons. However, moving abroad raises a host of questions – whether related to banking, tax, insurance or residency – which, without proper planning, can leave those concerned in a vulnerable position and generate costs for society. Against this backdrop, a targeted prevention campaign was launched in 2023. Efforts will be stepped up between 2026 and 2029 in collaboration with partner institutions to maximise the impact of prevention measures.

#### Measures:

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1. Enhance information channels for retirees leaving Switzerland, prior to their departure.
  2. Expand cooperation with the OSA and partners such as Pro Senectute to disseminate targeted and relevant information.
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<sup>9</sup> [Statistics](#) on the Swiss Abroad 2024.

## 4.2 Emergency protection and assistance

Even if they are well prepared and behave responsibly, Swiss citizens may find themselves facing an emergency situation abroad in which they are no longer able to safeguard their interests alone or with the help of family and friends. While the vast majority of trips go smoothly, on average Switzerland provides assistance to one in every 2,600 Swiss nationals travelling abroad.

The services provided by Switzerland in emergency situations affecting Swiss nationals abroad can take many forms, including offering general assistance in case of illness or accident, issuing replacement documents in an emergency, providing consular protection to people in prison, working with the authorities in the event of abductions, informing next of kin or facilitating procedures in the event of death, providing a repayable loan to enable someone to return to Switzerland, and granting social assistance. Switzerland can also take part in rescue operations to facilitate the organised departure of people in crisis situations abroad.

To be effective, consular assistance requires a human presence as close as possible to the events in order to reach the individuals affected and harness local resources. It relies on experienced staff and, in many cases, the support of specialists in various fields, whose involvement must be perfectly coordinated. Flexibility within the system as a whole is also essential.

The trends described in section 2.2 suggest that the number of people requiring assistance from Switzerland is likely to increase. Moreover, these services will continue to command a high level of public attention, as consular assistance is provided at critical times and in often fragile contexts. The expectations are clear: swift, effective and people-centred action.

The media coverage surrounding many cases underlines the fact that consular protection is a showcase for Switzerland's external action and, as such, justifies the investment of appropriate resources.

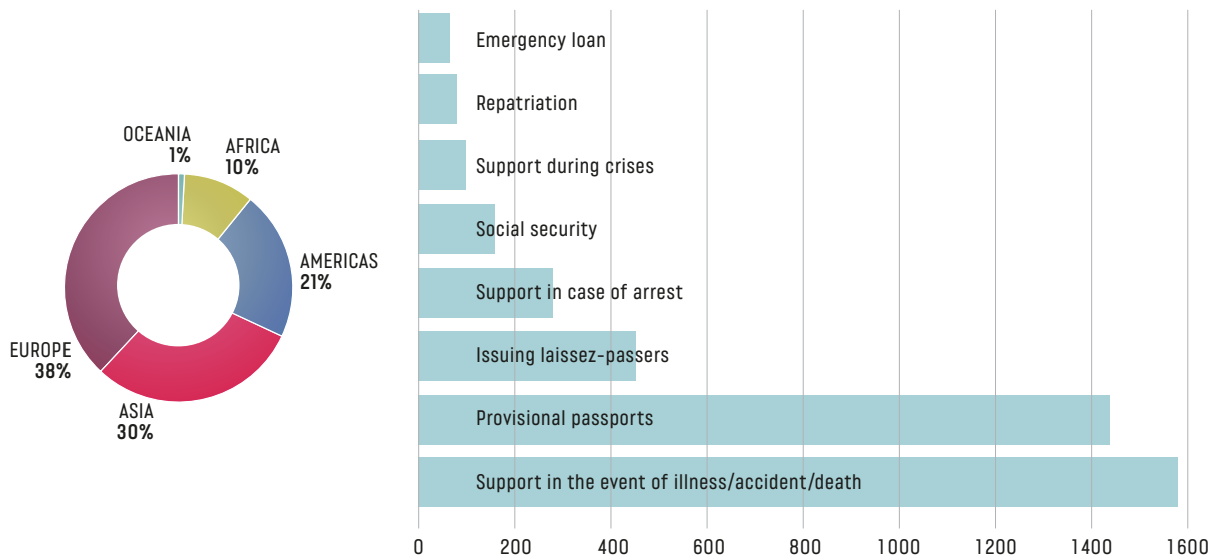


Figure 7: Emergency protection and assistance services provided to citizens in 2024 and breakdown by continent

## Objectives

### Objective A1 – Strengthen international cooperation

In the event of a crisis, being able to assess the situation quickly and have immediate access to the individuals affected and the local authorities is vital to ensure the effectiveness of consular services. While Switzerland's external network covers most needs, its absence in certain regions limits what can be done, mainly because of a lack of pre-existing contacts. This is where cooperation agreements with other countries – often with complementary networks – come into their own, enabling more effective action to be taken at no extra cost. In major crises, multilateral cooperation is the only way to deploy large-scale equipment such as military transport aircraft and meet expectations.

#### Measures:

1. Expand the number of consular partnerships.
2. Step up consular exchanges with the countries identified in the regional follow-up strategies to the Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–27.
3. Develop a network of contacts with crisis response centres in partner countries and participate in informal multinational groups.

### Objective A2 – Expand the remit of honorary consuls

In addition to its network of representations, Switzerland has over 200 honorary consulates. Embedded in their respective regions, these posts have an extensive network of contacts and support Switzerland's activities in an unpaid capacity. In addition to their main role of representing Switzerland, they can provide invaluable assistance in meeting the specific needs of Swiss citizens. In some geographical areas where the professional network is sparse and there is a regular need for assistance, the targeted adjustment of some job descriptions would enhance the effectiveness and responsiveness of consular work.

#### Measures:

1. Identify specific needs and make targeted adjustments to the job descriptions of some honorary consulates.
2. Implement training, support and monitoring measures tailored to honorary consulates.

### Objective A3 – Modernise instruments

Assistance abroad is underpinned by the FDFA Helpline, a contact centre available worldwide and free of charge 24 hours a day, and a single point of contact for consular enquiries. Given the ever-increasing number of requests, automating the handling of simple requests would enable human resources to be concentrated on complex cases. The gradual integration of AI solutions will assist with this change.

Recent crises have highlighted the changing nature of data and the burden of manual processing. To boost efficiency, it is essential that the portals enabling users to manage their data themselves be upgraded and that the systems for processing and cross-referencing information be optimised.

In normal circumstances, the flow of requests is relatively stable. However, a crisis can trigger a surge in enquiries within a few hours, and at these times mobilising enough trained staff at short notice is difficult. Technological solutions must be developed to bolster this response capacity.

#### Measures:

1. Automate the processing of simple requests using digital solutions and AI.
2. Upgrade the FDFA's internal tools (EDAssist+, KMZ Digital) to improve collaboration.
3. Bolster the FDFA Helpline's response capacity in crisis situations.

Objective A4 – Step up collaboration with Swiss actors

Highly complex consular protection and social assistance cases demanding a multidisciplinary approach are on the rise. Cases of parental child abduction, repatriation of persons incapable of judgement, and medical repatriations require the involvement of an extensive network of specialists. In this context, cooperation with child and adult protection authorities, the police, the International Social Service and the Swiss Conference for Social Welfare as well as insurance companies, Rega and TCS has become essential. This cooperation must be further expanded in the future, while respecting the specific characteristics and remits of each actor.

Measures:

- 1. Where absolutely necessary, provide for targeted participation in rescue operations.
- 2. Strengthen cooperation with the Swiss Conference for Social Welfare.
- 3. Step up collaboration with public and private assistance services.

4.3 Administrative services

Some 826,700 Swiss citizens abroad regularly use the representations' services, which to some extent are similar to those provided by a communal administration. With annual growth of almost 1.7%, that number is set to exceed one million by 2036.

Among the Swiss community abroad, 240,298 people – 36.29% of over-18s – wanted to be included in the electoral registers. For the Swiss abroad to exercise their political rights, the electoral registers therefore have to be kept up to date and the relevant information on registration, deregistration and changes of address<sup>10</sup> exchanged quickly and securely between Swiss representations and the relevant cantons.

The Digital Switzerland Strategy establishes the principle of 'digital first', something also advocated by the OSA, which is calling for the expansion of e-government.

<sup>10</sup> There are over 200,000 changes of address each year.

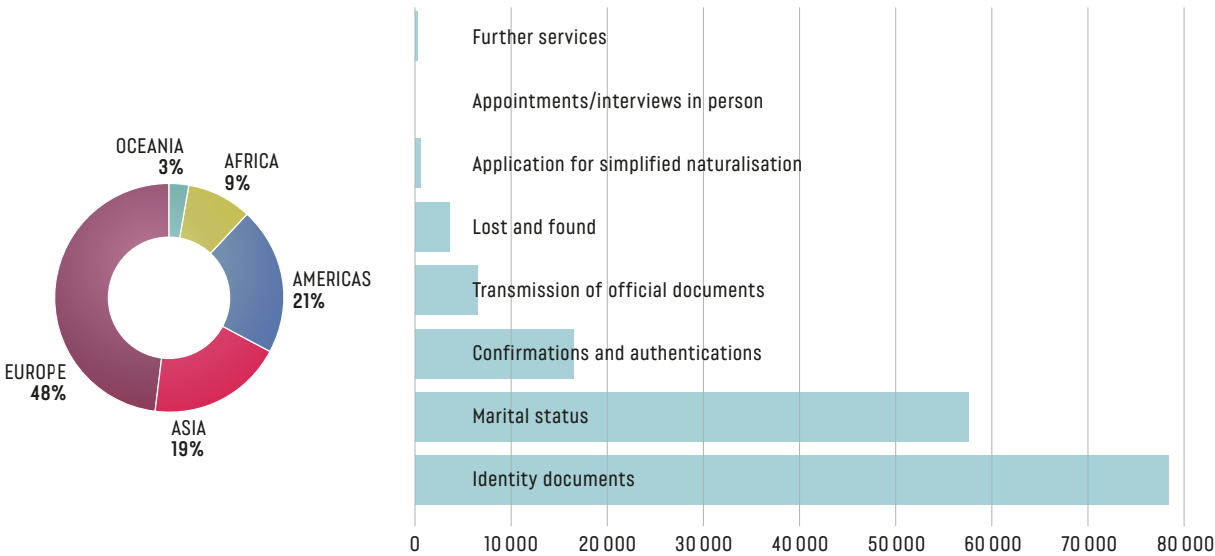


Figure 8: Administrative services provided to citizens in 2024

## Objectives

### Objective C1 – Expand e-government

Over 365,000 administrative consular services were provided in 2024. The volumes handled are increasing all the time, reflecting the size of the Swiss expatriate community. The introduction of the FDFA's online portal in 2016 has made it possible to expand the provision of digital services and digitalise all registration procedures (arrival, departure, change of address, entry in the electoral registers), as well as make it easier to order certain documents.

Digitisation of the records of Swiss nationals abroad will continue, including the introduction of an online appointment booking system for services where this is not yet in place. The current portal will be fully replaced by 2027 as part of the Consular Hub project. Rather than just being a replacement, this new system aims to digitalise a greater number of procedures and work processes, with priority being given to civil status. The platform will also be designed to facilitate exchanges, particularly with the cantonal and communal authorities.

#### Measures:

1. Digitise new personal records of Swiss citizens abroad by 2025.
2. Roll out the Consular Hub by 2027.
3. Digitalise procedures for civil status.
4. Develop standardised interfaces to facilitate exchanges with cantonal and communal authorities.

### Objective C2 – Strengthen links between the Swiss abroad and Switzerland

Article 9 SAA states that the Confederation must maintain contact with the Swiss community abroad and with institutions that promote relations between the Swiss abroad. The hundreds of Swiss clubs and associations active abroad are one of the pillars of Switzerland's presence in the world as well as being key contacts for the consular network. The OSA, which brings together many of these associations and which reaches out to all Swiss abroad via the Swiss Review and its other information channels, is thus a close partner of the FDFA.

That said, this network of associations does not encompass the majority of what is an extremely mobile population: almost one in four Swiss abroad changed address in 2023. Migration has become circular, with expatriation no longer being the permanent move it once was. Maintaining contact with a highly mobile and ultra-connected population has become more challenging and requires innovative and

dynamic approaches. The success of the SwissInTouch app, which won two prizes at the Best of Swiss Apps Awards in 2023, shows that alternatives to traditional communication are meeting a need.

Similarly, it is particularly important to ensure that the 172,437 young people under the age of 18 take an interest in Switzerland and maintain a link with the country, so that they are aware of their rights and obligations and the opportunities for studying and working in Switzerland. Generally multilingual and well educated, young Swiss abroad also represent a potential workforce for the future, albeit one that is very hard to reach.

Federal subsidies are awarded to various organisations with a view to fostering relations between the Swiss abroad. Swissinfo, the OSA, educationsuisse, the FYSA and many other organisations are active in this area.

As a central contact point, the FDFA's Consular Directorate helps to identify synergies and promotes collaboration between the various stakeholders.

#### Measures:

1. Support the OSA, in particular by supporting the direct election of delegates to the Council of the Swiss Abroad.
2. Working with partner organisations, develop information for young Swiss abroad.
3. Promote information channels that are digital (SwissInTouch) and interactive (webinars at head office and in the external network and honorary representations).
4. Strengthen synergies between partners to consolidate links between Switzerland and its nationals living abroad.

### Objective C3 – Ensure a flexible physical presence

The regionalisation of consular services, particularly in Europe, has increased the distance between expatriates and the representations offering consular services. To maintain a direct link and deal pragmatically with certain requests, the regional consular centres and the consular sections regularly organise tours within their districts. These visits are an opportunity to meet the public and strengthen ties with local authorities, associations and honorary representatives. The many administrative services provided on site are complemented by the use of biometric kits, which enable the biometric data of Swiss citizens to be recorded in connection with applications for identity documents.

#### Measures:

1. Maintain consular visits tailored to the needs in consular districts.
2. Ensure a consular presence at major sporting and cultural events.
3. Involve honorary consuls regularly in exchanges with Swiss communities and adapt their mandates if necessary.

### Objective C4 – Aim to cover the cost of services

In 2024, Swiss representations collected almost CHF 55 million in fees, based on the General Fees Ordinance (GFeeO, SR 172.041.1) and other specific ordinances. This figure has been rising steadily for several years as the number of services on offer has steadily increased. Under Article 2 GFeeO, anyone using a service or requesting a decision is required to pay a fee. This is calculated on the basis of actual costs, not exceeding those incurred by the administrative unit concerned (staff, infrastructure, equipment). Against a backdrop of digital transformation, which is changing both the nature and the cost of services, it is important to ensure that the fees system continues to comply with legal requirements.

#### Measures:

1. Conduct an analysis of the coverage of consular service costs with a view to adjusting fees if necessary.

## 4.4 Visas

Assessing applications and issuing visas is an important consular service that contributes to Switzerland's domestic security and that of the Schengen area. At the same time, consulates must take into account the interests of the tourism sector, export industries, and research and training institutes. Visa management is also key to ensuring that access to International Geneva is as unbureaucratic as possible.

Since 2008, Switzerland has been a member of the Schengen area, which now comprises 29 European countries. In the face of growing migration and security challenges, the EU has launched numerous initiatives since 2015 to strengthen external border controls and combat irregular migration. These efforts have led to the implementation of major IT projects designed to modernise border management. Led by the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP), these projects will be rolled out at pace over the coming years and supported by the FDFA, in particular with regard to their implementation abroad.

By 2028–29, the visa system will have to meet a number of challenges: growing migration flows, increasing threats to public safety and security, the rapidity of Schengen reforms and technological pressure on operational processes. These changes, which are directly linked to the trends set out in section 2.2, will have a significant impact on consular services.

There is also a financial issue to consider, given that the EUR 90 visa application fee generated over CHF 47 million for Switzerland in 2024.<sup>11</sup> It should however be noted that these revenues do not cover the costs of the visa services provided by the Confederation.

<sup>11</sup> Revenue is initially recorded in the FDFA's accounts. The SEM receives a percentage of visa fees (representing approximately CHF 4.2 million in 2024). It also funds the costs associated with the maintenance and development of IT systems.





## Objectives

### Objective V1 – Collaborate closely on transformation projects

The visa system is set to undergo fundamental change over the next few years. While the general framework is set by the Schengen governance bodies (decision-making), Switzerland, as an associated state, has the opportunity to make its voice heard (decision-shaping). Given its operative role within the system, it is vital that the consular network relays local factors and requirements and that these are actively taken into account in transformation projects.

#### Measures:

1. Set up in-service training for the competent authorities and a change management programme for visa staff abroad.
2. Ensure that the specific characteristics and requirements of the external network and the needs of users are integrated into transformation projects.
3. Clearly and actively inform target groups abroad about forthcoming developments.

### Objective V2 – Implement the 2025–30 call for tenders for outsourcing

Outsourcing non-governmental tasks – reception, receiving applications, taking biometric data, collecting fees – lightens the administrative burden on Swiss representations and enables an improved service to be offered to the public. For example, the visa department at the Swiss embassy in New Delhi receives applications via 13 collection centres run by an external service provider. The latter has no influence whatsoever on decisions, which are the sole responsibility of qualified consular staff.

On 3 September 2024, Switzerland launched a call for tenders for the period 2025–30. This has resulted in an increase in the use of external service providers at a growing number of representations, as well as changes of operator in certain regions, entailing significant challenges in terms of training, supervision and monitoring.

#### Measures:

1. Train and coach staff in operational management within the representations.
2. Ensure quality control and regular monitoring of the services provided.

### Objective V3 – Set up specific programmes to facilitate Schengen visa procedures

Switzerland is a popular destination for many tourists from countries that are subject to visa requirements. It also welcomes visitors invited in connection with economic partnerships, scientific exchanges and official conferences, particularly in the context of International Geneva.

Visitors subject to visa requirements generate several billion francs for the Swiss economy each year, particularly in the tourism, transport and services sectors. For many, the visa procedure is their first contact with the Swiss administration. As such, it must be safe and secure while also projecting the image of an efficient and welcoming Switzerland.

Therefore, within the national and Schengen frameworks, it is in Switzerland's interest to have visa processes that are as efficient as possible.

#### Measures:

1. Develop specific procedures for certain priority groups in accordance with Schengen requirements.
2. Set up programmes facilitating access to the visa procedure in close collaboration with Switzerland Tourism and in accordance with Schengen requirements.

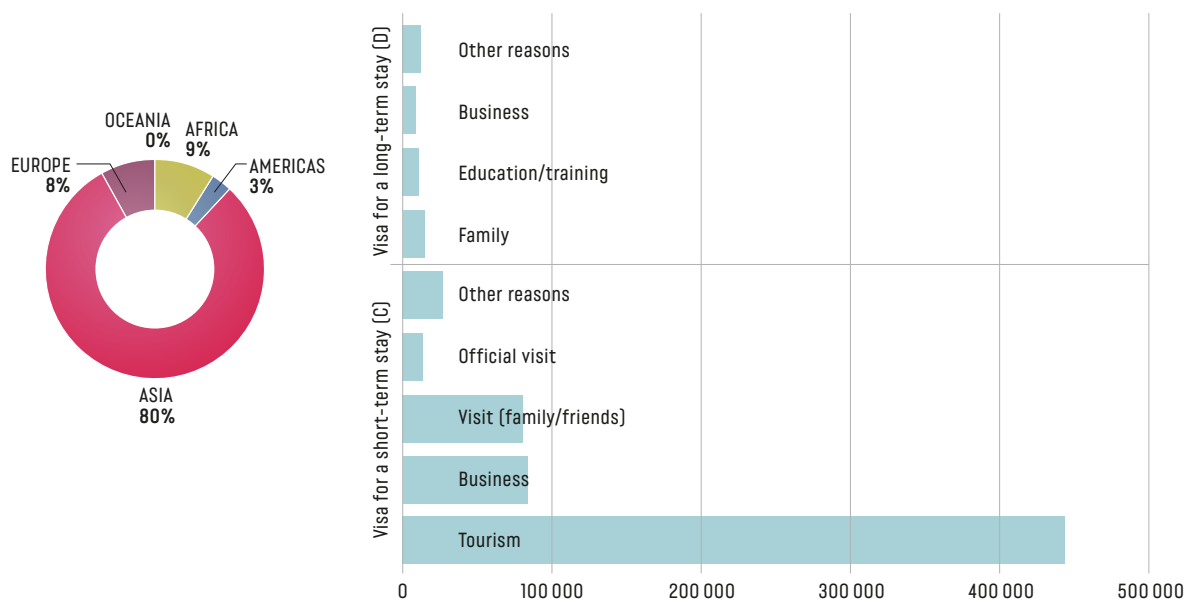


Figure 10: Breakdown of visas processed by main purpose of visit and by continent

#### Objective V4 – Optimise the processing of national visa applications

Some categories of national long-stay visas require specific steps to be taken in the applicant's country of origin, particularly for the purposes of security checks. Others involve the cantonal migration, civil status or labour market authorities. It is in the interests of everyone concerned that these procedures are carried out as quickly, securely and efficiently as possible. Digitalisation of some stages will help with this.

##### Measures:

1. Optimise processing procedures for national visas within the Visa Steering Group (SEM, CD, Association of Cantonal Migration Services [VKM]).
2. Strengthen processing and response capacity in the event of a significant increase in the volume of applications.

#### Objective V5 – Enhance cooperation with Schengen area actors

Since it is not efficient to have a visa section in every country, Switzerland makes active use of representation agreements with other Schengen member states. To date, there are 64 agreements enabling Switzerland to represent other countries, and 57 agreements enabling other countries to represent Switzerland. This reciprocity-based system fosters cooperation and a balanced commitment of resources. It optimises synergies, ensures a critical mass for visa sections and limits travel by applicants. This enhanced cooperation means that applications can be processed more efficiently while improving the service for users.

##### Measures:

1. Continuously adjust the Schengen representation system to ensure efficient global coverage.

# 5. Vision for 2035

## Why look beyond 2029?

The current strategy charts a course through to 2029. However, in view of geopolitical, technological and societal changes, anticipating the long-term challenges that will affect consular work up to 2035 is vital.

International tensions, increasing global mobility, the ageing of the Swiss community abroad and the rapid development of technologies (especially AI) require continuous adaptation. Widening gaps between the digital transformation of the public and private sectors, as well as obsolete legal frameworks, could restrict operational capability. It is therefore important to identify the necessary adjustments now.

The current strategy lays the foundations for this transformation. The choices made between now and 2029 in terms of digitalisation, cooperation, specialisation and training will determine the consular system's ability to meet the requirements of 2035.

## Technological advances requiring supervision

The widespread roll-out of digital identity (e-ID), due to begin in 2026, and the development of trusted infrastructure will make it possible to offer more consular services online. These will be supplemented by an on-site identity verification service required to obtain an e-ID for registered citizens who have opted out of the online process. AI and automated processes will boost efficiency and enable growing needs to be met, while allowing staff to focus on more complex cases.

However, this change requires system security and responsible data management to be safeguarded. It also demands that staff skills keep up with the changes, which means that in-service training will become key. Developing cross-disciplinary skills – crisis management, digital technology, intercultural communication – will strengthen the resilience of the consular network. Early planning of the profiles to be trained and mobilised should be put in place immediately.

## A profession with a renewed focus on people

Paradoxically, digitalisation will make the consular function more visible. While administrative processes will be largely automated, assistance will remain very much a human affair: helping a person in distress, organising a repatriation and supporting a family are all examples of situations that require empathy, proximity and responsiveness. The public's

expectations of emergency assistance will continue to grow, as will the need for a flexible and accessible consular presence.

In an increasingly unstable world, consular work is also a vehicle for trust and confidence in the state. Its effectiveness, availability and transparency at critical times enhance not only individual safety and security but also the cohesion and legitimacy of public services abroad.

The skills required will evolve accordingly, and the challenge will be to anticipate these changes now, both by adjusting the profiles of recruited staff and by adapting and upgrading training systems.

## Enhanced cooperation

The challenges facing consular work are shared by many countries with budgetary constraints making it difficult to expand networks. Bilateral cooperation arrangements, infrastructure sharing and representation agreements will be key levers in this regard. At the same time, partnerships with specialised private actors, particularly in the fields of repatriation, health and safety/security, will help to strengthen operational capability at speed and at reduced cost.

This increasing specialisation will enable each actor, public or private, to deploy its strengths where it can offer the greatest value, in a spirit of complementarity and collective efficiency.

## Prevention and personal responsibility

Last but not least, given the increasingly complex context, prevention and information will remain top priorities. The principle of personal responsibility, already central to the SAA, will take on even greater importance, with user self-reliance helping to ensure that consular services can remain targeted, responsive and sustainable.

# 6. Implementation and monitoring

Switzerland's Consular Strategy 2026–29 is based on four thematic areas, with objectives and measures defined for each one. Its implementation will be coordinated by the FDFA's Consular Directorate, which will act as the central contact point under Article 7 SAA, and by the other federal offices and organisations concerned.

Regular audits in the field and in Bern by FDFA Internal Audit assess the quality of services provided and the conformity of operations. The Consular Directorate also has a statistical cockpit enabling it to analyse developments in services, revenues and other key indicators and take corrective action where necessary.

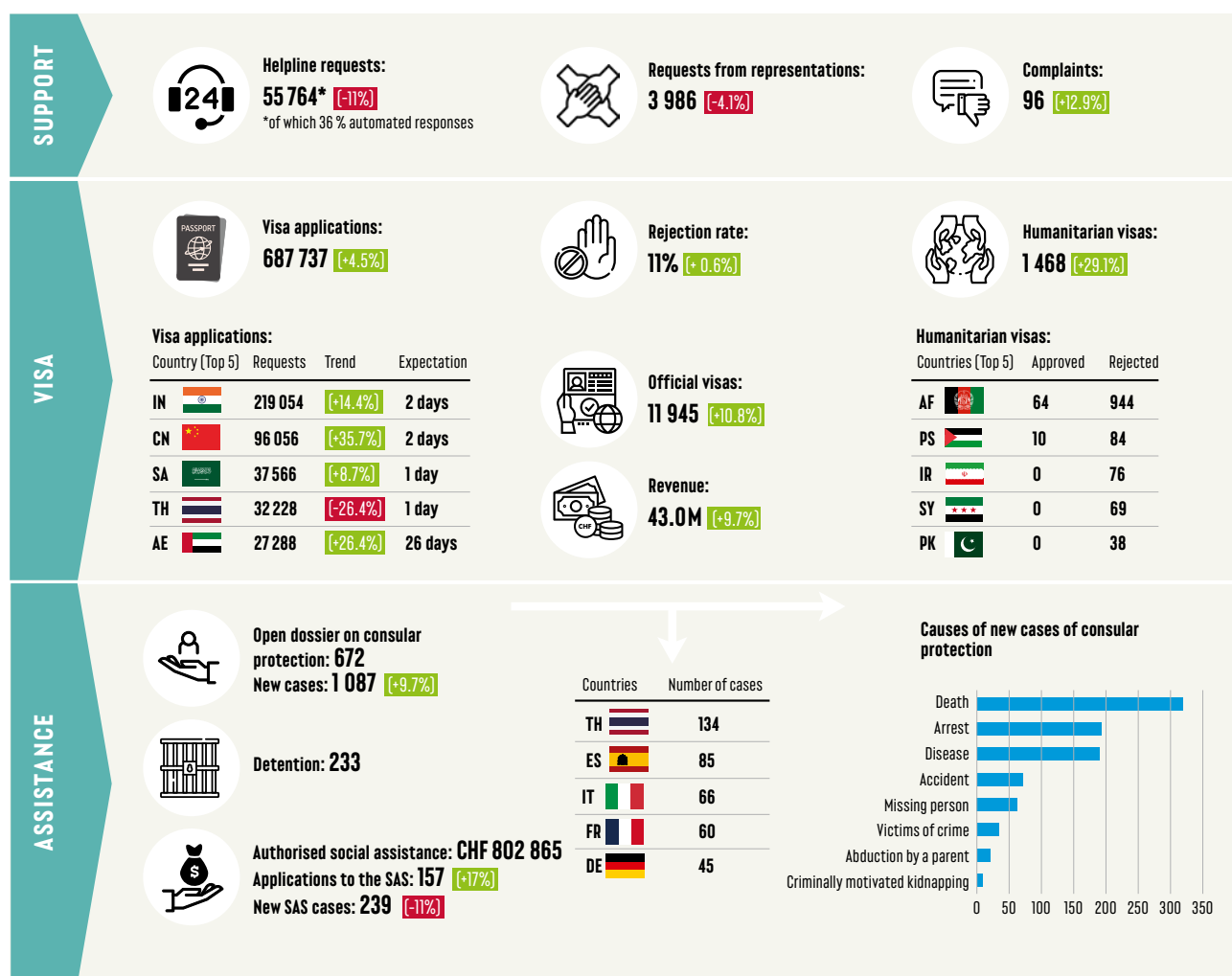


Figure 11: The FDFA Consular Directorate's statistical cockpit – Fourth edition 2024 <sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Each quarter, the Consular Department produces a statistical cockpit containing key figures on its services (year to date). The percentages in the table provide a comparison with data from the same period in the previous year.

Some key indicators and contextual information regarding consular services are also monitored annually in connection with the budget dispatch and the dispatch on the state financial statements, specifically transaction groups 2 'Conduct of foreign policy' and 3 'External network'.

This strategy has identified four thematic areas. 'Prevention' aims to reduce the number of state interventions in relation to the number of Swiss nationals abroad. 'Emergency protection and assistance' is about increasing the effectiveness of consular protection services. 'Administrative services' aims to enhance service efficiency, while 'Visas' seeks to improve the management of this multidimensional field.

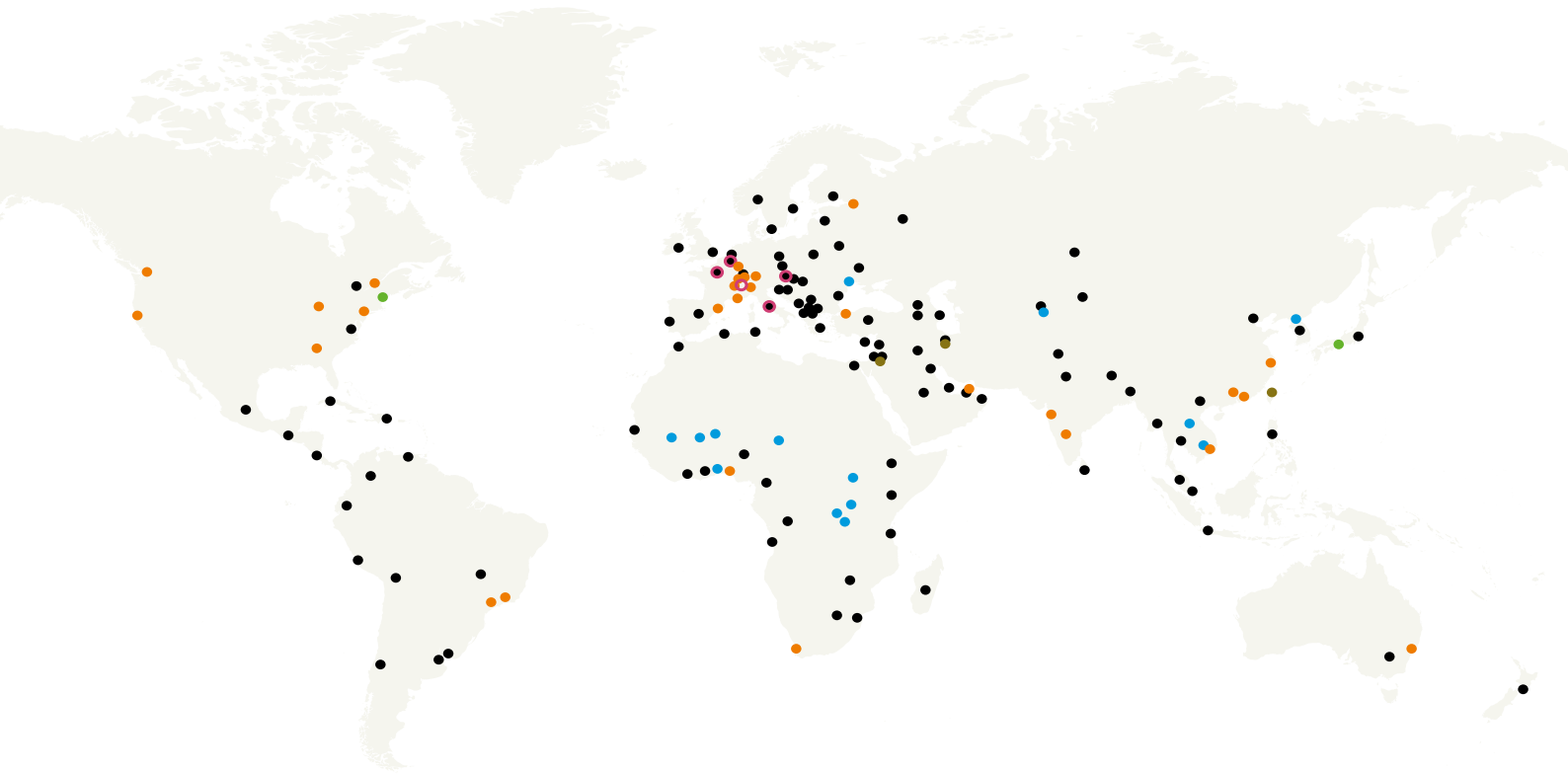
Thematic area	Number of objectives	Number of measures	Page
Prevention	4	12	19
Emergency protection and assistance	4	11	22
Administrative services	4	12	24
Visas	5	10	26

To achieve all of the above, objectives and measures have been defined for each of these thematic areas in section 4. These objectives and measures will be monitored by the FDFA's Consular Directorate, which will incorporate them into its annual objectives. These will then be monitored regularly by senior management at CD and departmental levels. A mid-term review in early 2028 will inform the Federal Council of progress in implementing the various objectives and measures.



# 7. Overview map

Map showing representations



## SWISS REPRESENTATION NETWORK

- Embassies [103]
- Consulates general [28]
- Swiss cooperation offices [14]
- UN Permanent Missions [12]
- Consulates [2]
- Other representations [3]

\*07/2025

# 8. Annexes

## 8.1 Abbreviations

Cst.	Federal Constitution
CD	Consular Directorate
DDPS	Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport
DPSS	Digital Public Services Switzerland
FDFA	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
FDJP	Federal Department of Justice and Police
FDPIC	Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner
fedpol	Federal Office of Police
FOITT	Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunication
FSO	Federal Statistical Office
FTE	Full-time equivalent
FYSA	Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad
GFeeO	General Fees Ordinance
KMZ	Crisis Management Centre
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OASI	Old-age and survivors' insurance
OSA	Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
PPP	Public-private partnership
Rega	Swiss Air-Rescue
SAA	Swiss Abroad Act
SEM	State Secretariat for Migration
SR	Classified Compilation of Federal Legislation
TCS	Touring Club Switzerland
VKM	Association of Cantonal Migration Services

## 8.2 Glossary

The FDFA website features a regularly updated [glossary](#) of foreign policy terms, designed to promote a common understanding of the terminology used.



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