



“Die Nederlanders kom je ook overal tegen”

Consular services to citizens abroad:
insights from an international comparative study

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Preface

This document includes the summary and a chapter containing relevant insights of an international comparative study on consular services to citizens abroad. The original report “*Die Nederlanders kom je ook overal tegen*” (“Dutch people, you’ll find them anywhere”) is written in Dutch.

This study has been commissioned by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Dutch House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*). It involves an international comparison of consular services with a view to identifying opportunities to improve consular services for Dutch citizens abroad. Characteristics of consular services are explored in eight countries: The Netherlands, Australia, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, United Kingdom and the United States. The summary provides a brief overview of the approach, the context in the eight countries and the insights in five thematic areas. The insights chapter presents these findings in more detail. A number of references to the other chapters are made in the text, yet these are only available in the main report in Dutch. The detailed country profiles are available in English in a separate annex.

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Summary

Consular services include a wide range of services that countries provide for their citizens residing or traveling abroad. Usually, these services are provided by diplomatic and consular officers working at representations abroad – under the direction of their respective ministries of foreign affairs. Consular services often include the issuance of travel documents, provision of travel advice and assistance in emergency situations abroad (for example in case of hospitalisation, death, child abduction and incarceration) to citizens abroad and issuing entry visas to foreign tourists, businessmen and students.

In an era of increased mobility, internationalisation and a multipolar geopolitical climate, the demand for consular services has grown and consular affairs have become more complex. Moreover, ministries of foreign affairs are confronted with increasing expectations from travellers and expatriates whose access to information has grown dramatically. As a result, the provision of timely and appropriate consular services has become increasingly important to ministries of foreign affairs. This certainly applies to the Dutch consular service and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ).

The coalition agreement of Mark Rutte's third government (Rutte III) states that the Dutch government aims to make the internationally oriented country a "world leader" in consular services. Some of the budget cuts made in the years following the financial crisis of 2007-2008 have now become reversed, and government investment in expanding and strengthening the Dutch consular networks has increased.

Objective and scope

Against this background, the Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Lower House of Parliament (*Tweede Kamer*) agreed that issues relating to "Dutch citizens abroad and consular services" deserved special attention. As the provision of consular services inherently takes place in the international arena, it can be expected that other countries face challenges and opportunities that are similar to consular trends observed in the Netherlands. For this reason, the Committee commissioned an international comparative study exploring the ways in which other countries have organised their consular services.

This study aims to identify insights regarding practices that other countries have adopted in organising and implementing their consular services, and outlines ways in which the Dutch can consider in improving the provision of these services to their citizens abroad. Taking into account the national contexts and policy frameworks of different countries that shape their engagement with citizens abroad, insights and possibilities in this context are understood as practices, experiences and ideas from other countries. These could potentially be used in a meaningful exchange of views between the House of Representatives and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Even though the study does not seek to draw specific

conclusions or make policy recommendations, its findings can contribute to a (further) improvement of Dutch consular services. As this study focuses on consular services to citizens abroad, services to foreign citizens associated with consular affairs, such as processing visa applications, are not included in the scope of this study.

Methodology

The steering committee of this study determined which countries were to be included in the international comparison. These are Australia, Germany, Estonia, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States. In consultation with the steering committee, the research team identified a number of topics relating to the provision of consular services, which guided data collection in the Netherlands and the seven comparison countries. Relevant information was obtained from sources in the public domain and through interviews with experts and representatives of the consular services in the countries concerned. Completed “country profiles” were then validated by representatives of the relevant consular services. This analysis provided the basis for the identification of insights for the Netherlands per topic.

Insights

Our comparative analysis provided insights with regard to various aspects of consular services to citizens abroad.

Policy and legal frameworks

The international legal basis for consular services is afforded by the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. In terms of domestic legislation, we identified different ways in which countries engage with their citizens abroad, for example through a legal framework or a policy framework. Estonia and Germany have adopted acts that relate to consular services, consolidating regulation on services that will be provided to citizens abroad. These acts normally define eligibility to support and clearly set out the duties and responsibilities of consular officers. In some other countries, such as the United States, consular responsibilities arise from a number of laws. In order to ensure that consular services are provided consistently and coherently, the country has developed policy documents that lay out the agreed procedures relating to consular cases. There are also a number of countries, including the Netherlands, in which the ministry of foreign affairs determines whether consular services should be provided. These countries also use policy frameworks to guide the provision of consular services. This allows the authorities to act more flexibly when they determine what assistance is provided, and to whom. In order to shape their citizens’ expectations on the services that are offered abroad, some of these countries, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland and Australia, have developed Consular Charters documents.

Policy and legal frameworks

- Consular responsibilities can be codified and consolidated in legislation, clarifying the conditions under which citizens are entitled to assistance.
- In some countries, consular responsibilities arise from multiple laws.
- Where consular services are not determined by law, consular services are provided upon discretion. Instead, policy frameworks are used to define the country's consular services, providing the countries with more flexibility to respond to the needs of their citizens.
- Some countries have introduced Consular Charters to communicate and clarify to their citizens which consular services they may expect to receive.

Organisation of the consular network

We also discerned practices that relate to the organisation of consular networks. For example, the United States uses a variety of flexible staffing arrangements to facilitate its global presence, including maintaining a number of consular agencies and volunteer networks. Similarly, France uses flexible structures in its consular network, allowing the country to install and terminate temporary representations in accordance with the consular needs of citizens abroad. Others, such as the United Kingdom, have moved to centralise the provision of customer services to call centres, which can resolve standard problems and escalate more complex cases to the attention of specialist consular officers. Countries that have limited networks of representations abroad, such as Estonia, rely on their honorary consulates in providing a basic level of services to their citizens abroad. Ireland and Australia have increased their consular capabilities by opening new representations, typically driven by commercial motivations.

Functioning and use of consular staff

- Some countries offer standardised "core" training to all consular staff in order to achieve consistent service, as well as tailor-made training, depending on the specific needs of consular staff.
- Assigning multiple tasks to diplomatic staff, including the provision of consular assistance, can improve efficiency and resilience.
- Employing multidisciplinary employees at the headquarters facilitates a more comprehensive approach to consular cases.
- Flexible staffing arrangements can heighten a country's global presence.

Organisation of the diplomatic network

- Some countries use their headquarters as a hub for information-sharing and the flexible allocation of resources.
- The centralisation of customer service in call centres can contribute to improved availability.
- An expansion of the diplomatic network with a view to boosting trade relations can offer opportunities for intensifying consular services.
- Flexible or temporary missions help to close gaps in diplomatic networks.

Financial aspects

- Several countries request a financial contribution for notarial services.
- Some countries maintain a specific emergency fund to finance crisis operations in emergency situations.

Travel advice and travel documents

Looking at practices related to travel advice, we identified a number of ways that countries use to communicate with nationals abroad, particularly those who are considered most at risk. A number of countries under consideration such as the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom disseminate travel advice tailored to specific target groups such as the LGBTQ community, women or student travellers. Countries such as Estonia and Ireland also conduct branded campaigns, employ mobile applications and undertake other communications activities to reach different target groups.

Some countries have also attempted to make procedures related to the issuance of travel documents easier. For example, online passport applications are becoming increasingly common. This makes it easier for citizens to file applications, particularly where the reach of the consular network is limited (e.g. in the case of Estonia). It can also shorten application processing times (e.g. in Ireland) or make them cheaper for citizens residing overseas (e.g. in the United Kingdom). In these countries, physical presence is generally no longer required to renew a passport.

Travel advice

- Some countries use targeted communication tools and activities to reach different target groups and communities that they believe are more at risk when traveling abroad or settling there.
- Several countries have also started to use digital means of communication in new ways.

Travel documents

- Offering citizens abroad the possibility to apply for a new passport online decreases the number of in-person visits to a mission.
- Organisational reforms with regard to the issuance of travel documents abroad can lead to longer processing times or higher prices.
- Some countries ensure the safe delivery of travel documents by sending them using electronic tracking to follow postal processes.
- Special emphasis may be placed on practices that combat passport fraud.

Support to distressed citizens

Although support to distressed citizens is a core consular function, we found that the Netherlands and the comparator countries often defined this in different ways. In some countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, the consular officers expressly prioritise cases that are considered most vulnerable. Such cases may relate to bereavement, crime, serious illness or a crisis situation. In order to ensure that vulnerability is assessed according to the same criteria at all consular posts, Australia has developed a dedicated vulnerability matrix.

Several countries such as the United States, France and Estonia, also provide financial assistance for repatriation in the form of loans. Support is normally available on a case-by-case basis and only to the nationals that have become vulnerable due to a severe emergency.

Assistance towards dual citizens varies greatly. The French authorities guarantee the same consular assistance to dual citizens like all other French citizens abroad, including detainees who are nationals of the country in which they are detained, provided the host country allows it. This is a contrast to other

countries such as Australia and Germany, where citizens with dual nationality are not guaranteed consular assistance.

Some countries maintain dedicated units that tackle specific and often complex consular cases. For example, the United Kingdom has a dedicated Forced Marriage Unit, which is jointly operated by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office. Additionally, the United Kingdom's consular response team at the headquarters has in-house multidisciplinary expertise, including a social worker, an international human rights lawyer and a police officer.

Our study also looked at consular services to citizens in detention abroad. Some countries have made agreements with others that allow them to protect their nationals' rights more extensively than what is afforded by established international practice. For example, a treaty between China and Australia allows Chinese partners to visit Australian citizens detained in China.

Partnerships

- Some countries engage in bilateral and/or multilateral cooperation with neighbouring states.
- Extensive collaboration with NGOs during and after the repatriation of distressed citizens may facilitate assistance to the most vulnerable citizens.

Vulnerability assessments

- Some countries systematically assess citizens' levels of vulnerability and support needs.

Crisis response

- Crisis preparedness of individual missions can be improved by developing crisis response plans.
- Some countries introduce dedicated units to tackle specific and often complex (consular) cases.

Repatriation

- Several countries provide financial assistance for repatriation (in the form of loans).

Support to citizens in detention

- French citizens with dual citizenship are guaranteed consular assistance abroad.
- Some countries entered into bilateral agreements with other countries to improve the conditions of citizens in detention abroad.
- Countries have adopted different practices to ensure the welfare of their citizens who are detained abroad.

Other services

Finally, we identified a number of practices relating to voting in elections from abroad and cultural events organised by missions abroad. Consular officers often facilitate their nationals' voting in domestic elections. In France, citizens abroad can also vote for consular representatives who represent them in the Assembly for French citizens abroad. The French consular service also maintains grant programmes for associations that organise cultural events promoting France's presence abroad. It also manages a dedicated fund that finances educational, charity and cultural initiatives. Ireland, which is known for its engagement with its citizens and large diaspora abroad, considers organising cultural events a key strand of consular work and is used to promote the country overseas. In several other countries, cultural or public diplomacy activities are not carried out by the consular service but overseen by other parts of their ministries of foreign affairs.

Voting in elections from abroad

- Online voting allows citizens abroad to vote from a location and at a time that suits them.
- Citizens from countries where elections are constituency-based can sometimes elect representatives who represent the interests of citizens abroad.
- Once every six years, French citizens abroad can participate in elections for the “parliament” for French citizens abroad, which is a body that advises the French government on consular services.

Cultural events

- In some countries, organising cultural events is an essential part of consular work.

Insights from abroad

This chapter presents a number of insights that have been identified on the basis of our comparison of consular services between different countries. The analysis conducted in the Netherlands and seven other countries reveals considerable differences. In many cases, these differences are due to the national context in which these consular services are being offered or different historical circumstances that have led to their diverse development. Chapter 3 of the main report showed, for instance, that the extent to which the Estonian consular services have been digitalised corresponds with the strong reputation of this Baltic state with regards to e-government.

When government services in other countries appear more extensive or ambitious than in the Netherlands, it does not necessarily mean that these practices can be transferred and implemented from abroad. Context is important. Moreover, there are considerable differences in the available resources between countries. The United States, for instance, has a budget for consular services of more than 2 billion U.S. dollars, whilst the total budget for the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is just over 70 million euros. Chapter 3, as well as the separate annex appended to this report, provides more detailed information about these differences.

Nonetheless, without attempting to make any recommendations or drawing conclusions about their acceptability or feasibility, the insights presented in this chapter may offer the building blocks for a conversation between parliament and the minister for foreign affairs. This meaningful exchange of ideas may contribute to a further improvement of consular services in the Netherlands.

Box 1. Structure of the chapter

The insights in this chapter are being discussed in a series of five thematic areas: policy and legal frameworks; organisational aspects; travel advice and travel documents; support to distressed citizens; and other services provided. For each insight, we include a reference (in parentheses) to the country profile in the appendix that offers further details. Appendices A to H of the main report contain the country profiles with detailed information. For example:

Allowing citizens living or traveling abroad to extend or apply for a new passport online reduces the need to show up in person

For Estonia, using online passport services makes it easier for citizens to file applications as its network of consular missions is particularly limited. (D14, 15)

INSIGHT

MORE INFORMATION IN ANNEX D, CEL 14 & 15

1.1. Insights relating to policy and legal frameworks

Legal frameworks define consular duties and clarify citizens’ eligibility for support. When consular services are codified in law, this can help countries clearly set out consular officers’ duties and responsibilities, as well as clarifying eligibility criteria for consular assistance. Some countries have consolidated regulations relating to consular services in dedicated legislation.

In **Estonia**, the legal basis for the provision of consular services is found in the country’s constitution. Article 13, under the Chapter on Fundamental Rights, guarantees the protection of Estonian citizens abroad. Further, the country has a consolidated regulation related to consular services in its Consular Services Act, last adopted in 2009. The Act regulates how Estonian authorities protect the interests and rights of the Estonian citizens, legal persons and the state abroad; the extent to which this assistance can be given to non-Estonians; how Estonian consular posts function; and the status of Estonian consular officers.¹ (D1a)

In **Germany**, the Consular Law states that consulate officers provide advice and assistance to German nationals and national bodies at their discretion. It does not define consular assistance as a citizen’s right. The law delineates eligibility for consular assistance in a range of areas, such as citizens in detention, forced marriages, citizens in distress. Yet, it also allows for flexibility: the law states that the nature of consular assistance depends on prevailing conditions in the receiving state and the vital needs of the German citizens in the region.² (C1a)

In some other countries, consular responsibilities arise from a number of laws. In the United States, the legal obligations of the authorities relevant to the assistance of U.S. nationals abroad are governed by at least 50 different pieces of legislation. In response to this regulatory complexity, the Department of State has developed two detailed policy documents, the Foreign Affairs Manual and the Foreign Affairs Handbook, which include information on processes and procedures relating to different

¹ Riigik Teataja (2019)

² Bundesministeriums der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz und für Verbraucherschutz sowie des Bundesamts für Justiz. 2019.

consular cases. Following this guidance, U.S. officers, both at headquarters in Washington D.C. as well as in representations abroad, will be able to provide a uniform level of service. (H1a,b,c)

In countries *without* express legal codification, the provision of consular service is governed by a policy framework. This is the case in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia. It is argued that a policy-based framework allows countries more flexibility in responding to citizens' needs. In the absence of a legal framework, for instance, there are no legal barriers to helping non-citizens, which may be desirable in certain circumstances. In some cases, these countries offer alternative policy frameworks and instruments, such as a 'consular charter'. These frameworks are typically laid out in policy documents that delineate the services that may be offered to citizens abroad, how they will be offered and under which conditions.

Similarly, **Ireland's** consular assistance charter clarifies and communicates which services can and cannot be provided to Irish citizens in distress abroad, and which guiding principles underlie these commitments. In the absence of legal codification of consular services, the Irish authorities do not have a formal duty of care. However, the consular assistance charter provides a political guarantee to the Irish citizens that the authorities are taking their responsibility to help. Moreover, the Irish authorities believe that a legal base could impede possible help to persons on humanitarian grounds. They argue that they are able to respond to people's needs much more flexibly and appropriately without a legal framework. For example, it allows them to extend consular assistance to people who do not have Irish citizenship. Another reason for not wanting to enshrine conditions for consular assistance into law is the sensitive case of the Northern Irish identifying as Irish, whom Ireland may wish to support in certain cases. (F1e)

Australia's consular services charter includes lists of all the different consular services that may be provided, as well as a list of those issues that fall beyond the scope of Australia's consular services. The document has also been translated into Arabic, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Indonesian, Thai and Vietnamese, thus making it broadly accessible.³ (B1a, B12)

In some other cases, a charter document is used to manage citizens' expectations relating to the level of customer service that they can expect from the consular officers. For example, while the **United Kingdom** pledges to ensure a professional and courteous approach to all cases, they also clarify which cases will be handled as a priority.⁴ (G1b) **Ireland** also has a similar customer service charter, in addition to its consular assistance charter. **France** has adopted a specific framework, 'Marianne', to assure the quality of consular services. This framework is based on the principle that assistance should be prompt and provided in a courteous fashion. Customer satisfaction should also be routinely evaluated. (27E)

Although France does not have a legal framework for consular services, **French citizens abroad have been represented as a constituency in the National Assembly since 2008**, which was already the case in the Senate. Eleven parliamentarians represent an electoral district, consisting of a specific region abroad. In addition, French citizens abroad can **participate once every six years in the elections for the**

³ DFAT (2019c)

⁴ FCO (2014)

‘parliament for French citizens abroad’ (*Assemblée des Français de l'étranger*). This body advises the French government on consular services. (E9)

1.2. Insights relating to organisational aspects

Whilst consular services typically fall within the remit of a country's ministry of foreign affairs, there are different approaches to governing, organising, and resourcing support to citizens abroad. This section distinguishes insights relating to the functioning and use of consular staff and insights relating to the organisation of the diplomatic network.

1.2.1. Insights related to the functioning and use of consular staff

The analysis offers some insights regarding the training and career development of the staff responsible for consular support. Some countries offer **standardised ‘core’ training for all consular staff in support of consistent service delivery with additional training tailored to address specific consular needs.**

In the **United States**, almost all foreign officers with generalist profiles spend their first years of diplomatic service as consular officers. Consequently, the vast majority of U.S. diplomats have first-hand experience of consular services, while institutional knowledge of consular affairs is mainstreamed throughout the organisation. In addition, the Department of State has a specific career track for consular officers who specialise in developing and implementing consular services offered to U.S. nationals at representations abroad.⁵ The Department also maintains a Consular Fellows Programme, which allows it to employ those proficient in foreign languages for fixed-duration contracts.⁶ (n/a)

In **France**, a similar thorough and tailored introductory training is given to all consular staff. The ministry operates an Administrative and Consular Affairs Training Institute (UFAAC), which serves as a centre of excellence providing training for all incoming generalist staff, as well as specialist training. All consular staff is required to complete a twelve-week course introducing them to the French policies and practices regarding consular affairs. In addition, continuous movement between under-departments ensures that the consular staff is trained in all matters pertaining to the needs of citizens abroad. (n/a)

The **Australian** Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade implements training programmes for staff serving overseas, during which training officers visit different representations. This ensures that the staff is well trained and prepared to deal with different cases.⁷ In addition, all officers serving in a consular capacity and heads of missions are required to attend a course on consular services (scenarios), so that a “consistent message is given across the board.”⁸ (n/a)

Giving diplomatic staff a role in consular support may offer efficiencies and resilience. In Ireland, all diplomatic staff (including the ambassador) operates as consular officers. Consular services are therefore

⁵ U.S. Department of State (2019c)

⁶ U.S. Department of State (2019d)

⁷ RAND Europe interview with an Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade official, 30 July 2019.

⁸ RAND Europe interview with an Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade official, 30 July 2019.

not run as a separate stream of work. This can both improve efficiency and enable staff to be more adaptable across different areas. This may come at the expense of the degree of specialisation. (F3)

Multidisciplinary staff in the headquarters may facilitate a more comprehensive approach to consular cases. In the **United Kingdom**, the consular team at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London also employs social workers, a police officer, and a human rights lawyer that advise the generalist consular officers on how to approach complex cases in the most effective way. This ensures that consular officers' responses reflect perspectives of social welfare, civil crisis management and legal factors. (n/a)

Flexible arrangements for consular staff may facilitate a more global presence. In addition to embassies and consulates, the **United States** employs locally engaged staff as consular agents, ensuring that the U.S. is capable of providing services even in remote areas. In total, there are 44 consular agencies in different parts of the world. Even though the services that consular agents offer are limited, they support the U.S. representations in "accepting passport applications and welfare and whereabouts visits." By doing so, they significantly reduce the caseload that the U.S. consular officers need to handle, allowing them to better allocate their time and resources on more complex cases. Further, they provide the U.S. consular officers with information on local developments and consequently facilitate more efficient information management. In addition, the United States maintains a network of citizen liaison volunteers, managed locally by the U.S. consular officers in their respective regions. These volunteers can assist the consular officers by "information-sharing during the crisis, and by occasionally visiting incarcerated or hospitalised U.S. citizens when a consular officer or consular agent is unavailable."¹⁰ The U.S. consular officers engage with these networks through numerous community management activities, including trainings and conferences. (H3)

Similarly, **Estonia** maintains a network of honorary consuls that complements its limited number of representations abroad. While the country manages a network of only 44 representations abroad with staff sent from Estonia, it has a network of 200 honorary consulates that provides Estonians with consular services in areas where there is no Estonian representation. For example, while Estonia only has one embassy on the African continent, its network of honorary consuls allows it to provide consular services in five other African countries. Similarly, the country does not have any representations in Latin America, but still maintains 19 honorary consulates in the region.¹¹ Honorary consulates may, for example, deliver travel documents to Estonian citizens abroad, assist travellers in distress, and provide certifications and documents. They are fully integrated into the country's network of foreign representations, as they have access to consular databases managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Honorary consuls also monitor local developments and report on them as required. This allows the headquarters in Tallinn to have a good situational understanding of different trends that may require its attention in planning and

⁹ Written input from the Department of State, 30 August 2019.

¹⁰ Written input from the Department of State, 20 August 2019.

¹¹ Valisministeerium (2017)

implementing policy. Due to their extensive role, honorary consuls are selected through an interview process before they assume their roles upon appointment by the Prime Minister of Estonia.¹² (D3,29)

Like some of the countries included in this analysis, **the Netherlands** also maintains an extensive network of 288 honorary consuls. However, the responsibilities assumed by honorary consuls vary across the countries. For example, the Dutch honorary consuls assist the Ministry of Foreign Affairs “especially in the area of economic diplomacy”, may “step in during emergencies” to assist Dutch citizens abroad, or – in consultation with the relevant embassy or consulate-general – are “authorised to accept applications for a laissez-passer if a Dutch travel document has been lost or stolen abroad”.¹³ In contrast, and as discussed above, the Estonian honorary consuls’ duties are more extensive and defined in a more detailed way, going beyond stakeholder management or provision of ad hoc assistance. Their responsibilities are also codified in the country’s Consular Act. Although they are not ‘structural units of the Ministry,’ the Estonian honorary consuls’ access to the country’s consular databases also suggests that they occupy integral roles in the country’s engagement with its citizens abroad.¹⁴ Some of the other countries included in this study such as the Netherlands, maintain more extensive networks of bilateral representations abroad. Consequently, they may have less need to delegate some of the responsibilities related to assistance and citizen services to their honorary consuls.

1.2.2. Insights related to the organisation of the diplomatic network

A number of comparator countries have implemented organisational measures aimed at improving the efficiency and/or effectiveness of their diplomatic network.

Firstly, some countries consider the role of headquarters as a crucial hub for information-sharing and flexible allocation of resources. The **United States** maintains a significant number of consular staff at the Department of State. The Bureau of Consular Affairs, which comprises around 1,600 staff members, is the Department of State’s “largest Bureau in terms of domestic personnel.”¹⁵ These officers provide guidance to staff serving overseas, oversee their work, and monitor emerging trends. Some of this staff can be sent abroad to support smaller posts if needed.¹⁶ (H2)

Australia has recently established a ‘Global Watch Office’, centralising intelligence and monitoring functions at the headquarters, thus ensuring a high level of crisis preparedness. (B24)

Other countries such as **Ireland** have also centralised expertise and oversight in their ministerial headquarters. They also emphasise that missions should be able to deal autonomously with consular cases as much as possible. Solutions are usually better acquired locally with local knowledge.¹⁷ (n/a)

At the Ministry in **the Netherlands**, the Consular Service Organisation (CSO) also provides guidance and oversight and assumes a coordinating role in crisis situations. In addition, many administrative

¹² RAND Europe interview with an Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, 29 July 2019.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018, pp. 20, 24, 57)

¹⁴ Riigi Teataja (2019a)

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State 2019e; RAND Europe interview with a former Department of State official, 23 July 2019.

¹⁶ RAND Europe interview with a former Department of State official, 23 July 2019.

¹⁷ RAND Europe interview with representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 25 July 2019.

embassy processes have been centralised in The Hague in recent years. However, no processes related to consular assistance are involved, as the specifics of each case dictate the situational requirements to which the consular assistance provided should be tailored. Instead, it is predominantly the work processes related to visa services that are involved and, to a lesser degree, those related to issuing travel documents. (A1c, 3, 26)

Secondly, centralisation of customer service in call centres may improve efficiency. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in **the Netherlands** has gradually centralised its communication channels with citizens abroad, opening a 24/7 Contact Centre in 2016. Dutch citizens abroad can reach BZ by phone, website, email, Twitter and WhatsApp (as well as an online live-chat service in the near future). This contact centre is already the main communication hub for Dutch citizens abroad, and is currently used as a foundation for the future *Loket Buitenland*. The service can answer questions (referring to where more information can be found), plan an appointment for an application or, where possible, provide assistance in emergency situations. (A3, 13)

The **United Kingdom** also operates consolidated call centres abroad where the staff is trained to solve standard cases and flag cases requiring a more complex response for the headquarters.¹⁸ Operating staff in these three time zones ensures that support is stand-by around the clock. With the consolidation of these customer service functions into customer centres, the consular officers serving at overseas representations are ‘freed up’ to focus on handling cases that require special attention. Call centres staff also monitors incoming traffic. Notifying any emergent trends, they may advise on reformulating and redrafting travel advice and other external communications, making them more reflective of the travellers’ and expatriates’ needs.¹⁹ (G16)

Thirdly, the extension of diplomatic networks provides increasing outreach opportunities for consular services in the slipstream. After a period of budget cuts and a subsequent reduction in the number of embassies and consulates, the extent of **the Netherlands’** diplomatic network has remained relatively stable, closing and opening around the same number of posts in recent years. (A4)

Ireland has been significantly scaling up its global presence (from 80 diplomatic posts in 2018 to 106 in 2025) in order to facilitate trade and promote other commercial interests overseas. As all officers employed in the missions abroad take part in consular work, the expansion of the network will also increase the country’s consular capacities. (F3) **Australia** has also expanded its network with 12 new representations in recent years, which has been “the single largest expansion of the network in 40 years.”²⁰ In addition, some of the Australian consulates are not run by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, but instead by their trade and investment authority, Austrade, which is in charge of the country’s export promotion. The government is therefore capable of providing consular services at locations in which it has major business interests. Currently, Austrade operates 14 consulates.²¹ (n/a)

¹⁸ UK Houses of Parliament (2014)

¹⁹ UK Houses of Parliament (2014)

²⁰ Australian Government (2017)

²¹ Australian Trade and Investment Commission (2018)

Flexible or temporary missions help cover gaps in diplomatic networks of certain countries.

France's consular network includes flexible structures that can be installed or removed according to the needs of citizens abroad, called *chancellerie détachée* or *antenne consulaire*. These can be set up when a significant number of nationals are temporarily relocated to another country for work purposes. This enables them to access consular services if needed. For instance, there is currently one in Adelaide in Australia where a defence contract was signed between the French and Australian defence ministries for the construction of submarines. This will involve multiple French workers temporarily relocating to Australia. While this occasion would not justify the establishment of a permanent consulate, the smaller structure can provide administrative services to the temporary French expats. (E3)

France also regularly organises consular tours (*tournées consulaires*) in regions with a French presence within geographically-large countries where there is no consular post. These tours take place at regular intervals (usually monthly), and at a higher frequency in periods before elections. Specific material was developed to fit this format of consular services. For instance, they use a portable briefcase with the necessary electronic material to record biometrical data for passports. This allows French citizens to apply for passports with minimum travel. Additionally, honorary consuls are increasingly tasked to deliver passports in places with gaps in the consular network when possible (only honorary consuls who are French nationals are allowed to deliver passports). (E5)

Other countries have pursued deepened cooperation with third countries to ensure that their citizens have access to consular services even in countries where they remain unrepresented. This is discussed in greater detail, under 'distressed citizens' (4.4).

1.2.3. Insights related to financial aspects

A comparison between government services in different countries is only useful when their budgets are taken into consideration. After all, the intensity and reach of service provision will be to a large extent dependent on the available resources. The separate appendix of this report provides more information about the instruments, budgets and other financial aspects of consular services in the eight countries analysed. There are considerable differences between these countries in the information available about the costs. Therefore, it is impossible to link them to the services provided and, subsequently, to offer a meaningful comparison about the (relative) allocation of resources for these services. Moreover, given the dissimilar conceptualisations of consular services in different countries, as well as the diversity of financial instruments that are used to fund their provision, it is difficult to compare resource allocation. The Netherlands, for instance, spends over 50 million euros on consular services, whilst the United States has a budget of more than 2 billion U.S. dollars. However, staff costs are excluded in this figure for the Netherlands, whereas it is included for the U.S. Furthermore, countries such as Germany or Estonia do not report on financial aspects of its consular support.

Nonetheless, we may identify some insights with regard to the financial aspects. For example, a number of practices were identified in relation to how consular services are funded. In many countries, **some consular services that relate to notarial activities are chargeable**, and consequently, provide a source of

funding for consular services. In the **United Kingdom**, consular services are also funded by a premium that is “included in the price of every British passport.”²² Some countries, such as the **United States** and **France** also maintain **specific budget lines to fund crisis management operations for consular emergencies**. (A9, B9, C9, D9, E9, F9, G9, H9).

1.3. Insights related to travel advice and travel documents

Although individuals have a responsibility to ensure their own safety whilst abroad, governments typically aim to ensure their citizens are well-prepared and -informed when travelling or residing abroad. In order to facilitate this, consular services tend to offer travel advice about individual countries for their citizens, usually via a dedicated website. The ministry of foreign affairs is usually responsible for (re)issuing travel documents, and citizens may appeal to their consulate-general or embassy when residing and traveling abroad. In case these documents are lost or stolen, the ministry typically helps its citizens to return home.

1.3.1. Travel advice

All countries included in this study offer travel advice to their citizens via a centralised website. Nonetheless, **several different approaches to presenting or targeting such travel advice and engagement can be identified**. Some countries have deployed targeted communication and outreach activities to reach different groups and communities that they consider to face a higher risk when travelling and residing abroad.

Many countries have produced travel advice focussing on the risks that specifically relate to certain demographic or professional groups. For example, the **United States** offers special guidance to “travellers with special considerations”, which include journalists, faith-based travellers, pilgrimage travellers, LGBTQ travellers, women travellers, travellers with disabilities, volunteer travellers, elderly travellers and travellers with firearms.²³ (H12)

Responding to changing patterns in travelling and residing abroad, **Australia’s** 2017-2019 Consular Strategy stresses the need to find new ways to communicate with school students and young travellers, those retirees who reside abroad, and cruise passengers. This has led to the production of targeted information materials, disseminated both online and offline.²⁴ (n/a)

Recognising the risks that relate to youth travel, representatives of the **Estonian** Ministry of Foreign Affairs also tour the country’s schools, disseminating information relating to travelling and the provision of consular services. The country has also cooperated with a neighbouring country, Finland, in producing information materials disseminated to both Finnish and Estonian travellers online through social media platforms.²⁵ (n/a)

²² FCO (2014)

²³ U.S. Department of State (2019f)

²⁴ DFAT (2017b)

²⁵ RAND Europe interview with an Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, 29 July 2019.

Furthermore, countries have also moved to find new ways to use digital communications. **Estonia, France, Ireland, Germany** and the **U.S.**²⁶ have developed mobile applications that facilitate the dissemination of travel alerts, notifications and other information. These applications normally allow their users to register their travel with their respective governments so that they can be easily reached in case of an emergency. Typically, the app allows the user to receive automatic push notifications on any changes in the travel advice for a given region. To this end, the German app also uses location services, when users have enabled these for the application. The **United Kingdom** does not have an official smartphone app but, instead, feeds an edited or cached version of FCO’s travel advice to third parties to use on their websites or mobile applications (through RSS feeds).²⁷ (D13, 25; F1e, 10, 13; C25)

In targeting travel advice communication activities, the **United Kingdom** focuses on those citizens who are least likely to inform themselves before travelling. These groups include young travellers or vulnerable socio-economic groups. In contrast to some of the other countries, the United Kingdom has discontinued registering the travel and residence of its nationals abroad. This decision was prompted by the FCO’s attempts at mapping out the whereabouts of British nationals affected by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. According to an FCO official, the British consular officers ended up “chasing people who were not in that country”, as the registry had not been kept updated.²⁸ (n/a)

The Netherlands also provides travel advice to specific demographic groups, as do most other countries included in this study. However, in the Netherlands, this is mostly incorporated into travel advice for each destination, whereas the U.S., for example, offers dedicated fact sheets to a large number of groups regardless of where they are travelling to or residing. Similarly, other countries have engagement strategies with specific communities independent from travel advice for a particular country. As for most of the comparator countries, the Netherlands has developed an app to disseminate travel advice. (A12)

1.3.2. Travel documents

Allowing citizens living or traveling abroad to extend or apply for a new passport online reduces the need to show up in person. An increasing number of countries are phasing out the need for a face-to-face visit to the consulate. Nevertheless, one could argue that there are limits to the digitalisation of consular services. In the context of a citizen-centric approach, consular services must remain accessible to a wide and sometimes digitally-challenged public.

For **Estonia**, using online passport services makes it easier for citizens to file applications as its network of consular missions is particularly limited. If applicants have valid Estonian ID cards with PIN codes, they can apply via email for ID documents such as passports from the Estonian Police and Border Guard. The email needs to be signed electronically using the government’s electronic identification system. Applications can also be sent by post. Nevertheless, there are some limitations. If it has been more than five years since the applicant’s fingerprint data was recorded, the application needs to be filed in person at

²⁶ Archived website, and no longer promoted on the current web page, but the app is still being updated in the app stores. Source: U.S. State Department (2014)

²⁷ FCO (2019d)

²⁸ RAND Europe interview with an official of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 29 July 2019.

an Estonian embassy or consulate. Honorary consulates do not access passport nor ID applications. Creating a digital infrastructure that allows Estonian travellers and expatriates to “do many things by themselves” enables these Estonian citizens to handle administrative issues at their own convenience. As a result, Estonian consular officers feel free to allocate their resources and time to more complex cases.²⁹ (D14, 15)

In **Ireland**, passports can be renewed online, both domestically and from abroad. For citizens, it is the cheapest option for renewing a passport. Ireland also encourages its applicants to use the online service where possible. Processing times are quicker and passports are sent by post. Where postal services are unreliable, passports are sent to the applicant's nearest mission via a diplomatic bag for onward dispatch. First-time passport applications for Irish citizens residing outside of Ireland or the UK must be submitted through an Irish Embassy or consulate in the applicant's country of residence (or accredited Embassy where there is no direct representation). Embassies and consulates receive most of their paper applications via post. Ireland will eventually move the application process for all passports online, including first time applications. (F14, 15) In the **United Kingdom**, citizens can generally apply for passports online and are delivered by post. If applicants have not held a UK passport before, they may be required to attend an interview in a passport office in the UK.³⁰ (G14, 15, 21, 27)

Organisational reform relating to the provision of travel documents abroad may lead to increased time or price efficiency. In the **United Kingdom**, the responsibility for the provision of identification and travel documents for expatriates has been transferred from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Home Office, which now houses the HM Passport Office. The Passport Office became operational at the end of 2013 and has occasionally been severely overloaded.³¹ Nevertheless, travel documents are now issued against a lower price for citizens residing overseas. (G14, 15, 21, 27)

If Irish citizens lose their passport abroad, they can receive assistance from embassies, consulates and honorary consuls. By contrast, the honorary consuls of the **Netherlands** are no longer authorised to issue travel documents. Providing each honorary consul with the required equipment such as a fingerprint scanner was not considered to be sufficiently cost-efficient by the government. **Ireland**, meanwhile, does not use fingerprints as biometric data but relies exclusively on (digital) photos for face recognition. Therefore, in-person presence is not required at any time during the application process and the applications are processed centrally in Ireland. According to the responsible Irish department, photos are more secure than fingerprints. The Dutch government holds the opposite view, considering fingerprints more reliable and secure.³² Optimising passport issuance to Dutch citizens abroad is currently being explored in two internal government studies. (A14)

Electronic tracking can ensure the secure delivery of travel documentation. In **France**, the application process for a passport always requires the physical presence of the applicant. However, French citizens living in some countries can receive their passports by secure mail if they can cover the costs. This

²⁹ RAND Europe interview with an Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, 29 July 2019.

³⁰ Government of the United Kingdom (2019b)

³¹ UK Houses of Parliament (2014b)

³² BZK (2018)

departure from standard French practice aims at avoiding multiple travels. It is only available in countries that can offer optimal conditions for secure mail. An electronic tracking system, which respects privacy rules, allows the agency delivering passports and the ministry of foreign affairs (MEAF) to ensure that passports are safely delivered. Countries where this service is available are the EU member states, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, U.S., Japan, Norway, New Zealand and Switzerland. (E14)

Particular emphasis is placed on practices to counter passport fraud in some cases. Each French consular post abroad has a point of contact for anti-fraud practices, which works in cooperation with other government stakeholders to raise wider staff awareness of document fraud. This is carried out in cooperation with other involved services within the French government. Increasing digitalisation of consular services resulting in a diminution of the workload for consular officers has freed up French resources to focus on fraud prevention. (E9, E28)

Other countries such as the **United States**, and the **United Kingdom**, also use specific fraud detection programmes. For the United Kingdom, these fraud prevention practices also include a specific focus on fraudulent activities internal to the FCO using, for example, specific data analytics software helping to “identify potential problems.”³³ (n/a)

1.4. Insights relating to support to distressed citizens

The consular service typically offers support to distressed citizens abroad. There is a multitude of potential emergency situations. In some circumstances, a government can support citizens in case of medical care, for example after an accident that requires repatriation. When citizens are not or insufficiently insured, consular services may offer financial support or mediation. Similarly, in case of a crisis or calamity that involves its citizens, such as a terrorist attack or an earthquake, a ministry of foreign affairs may facilitate evacuation. Finally, citizens in extraordinary situations abroad, such as forced marriages or child abductions, can be supported by the consular services.

Consular assistance to citizens in distress can take many forms. This section discusses insights concerning partnerships, vulnerability assessments, crisis response, repatriation and citizens in detention abroad.

1.4.1. Partnerships

Partnerships with private organisations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may facilitate the delivery of support to distressed citizens. Some countries also engage in bilateral and/or multilateral cooperation with neighbouring states. Specifically, **harnessing EU consular cooperation can help widen the geographical scope of consular protection.** EU consular cooperation seeks to offer ‘unrepresented’ EU citizens outside the EU the same level of (emergency) assistance as that enjoyed by EU citizens that are ‘represented’ by their embassy or consulate outside the EU.

Many EU countries have established legal frameworks for the assistance of citizens of other countries in territories where they remain unrepresented. These frameworks tend to go further than the EU consular cooperation. For example, **Estonia** has an international agreement with Latvia and Lithuania on the

³³ UK National Audit Office (2018); Department of State (2019i)

provision of consular services. This greatly increases the ability of Estonian citizens to seek consular protection, as the Estonian network of consular representations is comparatively limited. The country's cooperation with Finland – home to the largest Estonian expatriate population – goes beyond mere collaboration. Rather, the two countries have created structured data exchange platforms, for example in the area of civil registries. When any data concerning an Estonian is registered in Finland, the information will be automatically available for the Estonian authorities and vice versa. (D6, 7)

Whilst the Netherlands also engages in partnerships with civil society, the **United Kingdom, Ireland and France (as discussed under 1.4.4) extensively collaborate with NGOs during and after the repatriation of distressed citizens.** The **United Kingdom**, in particular, works together with NGOs so that its consular officers are best positioned to assist even the most vulnerable clients. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has set up various contractual engagements with organisations that provide specialist assistance, for example to victims of sexual assault. Moreover, as the FCO does not generally conduct whereabouts searches, it funds a 'missing persons charity'. The FCO also works with organisations that support families of those who have been incarcerated abroad. The rationale for these partnerships is that although the consular officers are not trained in counselling, the FCO recognises the need to provide support to citizens who have faced issues that are potentially destabilising.³⁴ (G16)

Ireland cooperates with Irish civil society partners such as the 'Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust' (KBRT) to increase the scope of assistance Irish citizens abroad can receive. The Department's role is to provide the family with KBRT's contact details in cases where the deceased Irish citizen did not have travel insurance. (F21)

1.4.2. Vulnerability assessments

Some countries systematically assess citizens' levels of vulnerability and their needs for support. For example, **Australia** uses an assessment matrix to determine individual vulnerability and eligibility for support. The matrix was developed to ensure that all consular officers evaluate the immediate needs of a case in a similar way, thus enabling Australia to provide uniform services across all the consular representations. Using the matrix is in line with Australia's overall aim of prioritising those consular cases that need the most attention. It also concentrates limited resources on assisting those most vulnerable. (B18, 19)

In **the Netherlands**, vulnerability also plays a role in assessing whether a citizen qualifies for consular assistance. In addition, when embassy workers visit detainees abroad, they use a checklist developed by BZ to determine the Dutch national's vulnerability. The assessment framework developed by Australia, however, seems to be applied to consular assistance more widely than the identified Dutch practices. (A17, 19)

1.4.3. Crisis response

Crisis preparedness of individual missions can be improved by developing crisis response plans. For example, each **Irish** mission has its own Consular Emergency Response Plan (CERP) to guide it through

³⁴ RAND Europe interview with a Foreign and Commonwealth Office official, 29 July 2019.

ten priority steps for crisis response steps to be taken in the event of a major crisis. In addition, the mission will provide the department in Dublin with situation reports and a crisis centre can be opened at the department in Dublin if the situation so requires. Capacity can be increased or decreased as appropriate. (F25)

In **the Netherlands**, BZ has attempted to improve its crisis preparedness in recent years, including through the development of a crisis protocol similar to the one implemented by Ireland in 2018.³⁵ In the Dutch situation, embassies or consulates-general are responsible for the country's crisis response abroad, with the ministry in The Hague providing support and coordinating efforts. In case of insufficient capacity, a '*Snel-inzetbaar Consular OndersteuningsTeam*' (Rapid Deployment Crisis Support Team, SCOT) can be dispatched. (A24)

Some countries introduce dedicated units to tackle specific and often complex (consular) cases. For example, the **United Kingdom** has a dedicated Forced Marriage Unit. The unit is jointly operated by the FCO and the Home Office. The unit "leads on the government's forced marriage policy, outreach and casework", and is responsible for forced marriage cases both in the United Kingdom and abroad, if they concern a UK national.³⁶ The unit is also in charge of mainstreaming knowledge relating to forced marriage practices across the different branches of the UK government and other public authorities.³⁷ (G22)

In some countries, there are processes in place to ensure that citizens who have been victims of a crime or a forced marriage receive assistance upon return to their home country. In **Australia**, police officers take over victim care in the case of child abduction or forced marriage in consultation with consular staff. Upon the victim's return, primary assistance will be provided by the Australian Federal Police, who will "receive them at the airport upon their return", assess "whether they are eligible for the Support for Trafficked People Programme and [make] appropriate referrals to other agencies."³⁸ (B23) In the **United Kingdom**, there are specific laws concerning female genital mutilation, similar to those concerning forced marriage which can enable the FCO to assist alleged victims to return to the UK. (G16)

1.4.4. Repatriation

The Netherlands and several other countries included in this study do not provide financial assistance for repatriation (save for financial mediation). However, **some countries have established practices of providing financial assistance** in the form of loans. (A20, 21)

For the **United States**, the U.S. Code 4802 Responsibility of the Secretary of State requires the Department of State to evacuate U.S. citizens "when their lives are endangered."³⁹ Repatriation will normally be organised through the administration of an emergency loan, but under exceptional consequences evacuation or repatriation can be done 'free of charge', mostly if the U.S. national has

³⁵ BZ (2019c)

³⁶ Government of the United Kingdom (2019c)

³⁷ Government of the United Kingdom (2014)

³⁸ Email correspondence with an Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade official, 17 July 2019.

³⁹ Legal Information Institute (2019c)

become vulnerable due to a crisis or has been a victim of a grave crime.⁴⁰ Repatriating a U.S. national is always considered on a case-by-case basis, but reasons may include family or travel crises, job loss, bankruptcy or medical and mental health issues. In 2018, the budget allocation for repatriation loans was 789,000 USD.⁴¹ In addition, the Department of State had 7,900,000 USD allocated for “unforeseen emergency requirements” such as “evacuations of personnel, and their families overseas (...), private U.S. citizens and third-country nationals.”⁴² (H21)

France supported 206 repatriations in 2017 amounting to an expenditure of around 600,000 euros. Repatriations can be carried out for medical reasons or financial reasons such as the loss of a job. No single policy or legal basis governs the approach to be taken, as circumstances often vary. Instead, consular officers will follow a case-by-case approach to determine the level of intervention. First, it is established whether a citizen is covered by insurance. If not, then the financial situation of the citizen is assessed. If he or she cannot cover the expenses, France may (partially) bear the costs of repatriation or emergency medical support, on the condition that the citizen will reimburse these expenses (unless it is an evacuation). Repatriations typically involve logistical support and ensuring appropriate return conditions (including medical support). The NGO ‘France Horizon’ plays a key role in ensuring a functioning return system for citizens repatriated urgently. (E21)

Estonia also provides repatriation for its citizens, mostly on a repayable basis. In the event of a crisis, the country may organise the evacuation of its citizens to Estonia. In response to the 2008 Georgian War, Estonia evacuated most of its citizens, as well as some Finnish citizens, from the area.⁴³ The responsibilities to repatriate and evacuate distressed citizens are also included in the country’s cooperation agreement with Lithuania and Latvia. (D26)

1.4.5. Support to citizens in detention

Article 36 of the Vienna Convention states that local authorities have to inform the relevant diplomatic post immediately when an arrested foreign citizen has made this request.⁴⁴ Depending on the legal framework on consular affairs, the detainee’s home country may be obliged to provide consular assistance, or may decide to provide it. **France always offers consular support to citizens with dual citizenship.** The Netherlands aims to provide assistance as discreetly as possible. Moreover, BZ says it respects the viewpoints of countries that do not recognise dual citizenship and that treat dual nationals as being their subjects, limiting the scope of consular services that the Netherlands can offer. (A19)

Other countries take varying approaches towards assistance for citizens with dual nationality. **French** citizens with dual citizenship are guaranteed consular assistance. This assistance is sometimes offered to French citizens who are also nationals of the country in which they are detained. In countries where many citizens also hold the French nationality, such as Morocco, these situations are solved on a case-by-case

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State (2019g)

⁴¹ U.S. Department of State (2019h)

⁴² U.S. Department of State (2019h)

⁴³ Written input from an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 31 July 2019; YLE (2008)

⁴⁴ Overheid.nl (2019)

basis, in concertation with the local authorities. This approach is similar to the Dutch one, albeit slightly more ambitious. (n/a)

The French approach contrasts with the practices of other countries such as **Australia** and **Germany**, which do not guarantee consular assistance to citizens with dual nationality. (B12, 19; C19)

Some countries sign bilateral agreements with other countries to improve the conditions of citizens in detention abroad. Bilateral agreements may allow a country to provide a higher level of protection to its citizens in detention abroad. **Australia**, for example, has signed a treaty with China providing for increased frequency of visits to Australian citizens in prison. These visits may also be carried out by a Chinese partner organisation. (B7)

Countries have adopted different practices to ensure the welfare of their citizens who are detained abroad. **Germany**, for example, provides social welfare to its citizens in detention after 2 months from the beginning of their detention. German social assistance agencies and the German consular service cooperate in delivering such welfare assistance. (C2) Similarly, **the United States** supports its citizens by providing reading materials and vitamin supplements. The U.S. can organise visits by a clergyman belonging to a denomination of the detainee's choice. The United States also maintains a policy of visiting *every* U.S. citizen who is incarcerated abroad – a policy enabled by its extensive network of representations, consular agencies and citizen liaison volunteers. (H19)

1.5. Insights relating to other services provided

Online voting facilitates participation in elections from abroad. It is offered by some countries as one service among a range of options which also includes postal voting and in-person voting at polling stations. **The Netherlands** offers a number of ways to vote from abroad, but since the '*Kiezen op afstand*' pilot for the parliamentary elections in 2006, it has not offered online voting for citizens abroad. (A29)

Estonia has gained international recognition as a digitally advanced society and is a front-runner in implementing e-enabled services. Since 2005, **Estonian** citizens can use the country's online voting system in all local, national and European elections, even if they are residing or traveling abroad.⁴⁵ Online voting allows them to vote at a location and time of their choosing. At the same time, Estonia also offers the more traditional methods of voting at a polling station, which remain available to voters who are not equipped with the right skills, or simply prefer not to vote online. In order to vote, Estonian citizens who reside in a foreign country permanently need to register in an electoral district based on where they (or their parents or ancestors) used to live in Estonia. An Estonian ID-card and a card reader or a Mobile-ID with two different sets of PIN codes are also needed to vote. Given (potential) vulnerabilities in internet voting systems and wider cybersecurity concerns, many governments around the world have opposed moving elections online. Previous experiments in the Netherlands with online voting have all been discontinued.⁴⁶ Independent evaluators have even advised (in 2014) to stop using the established Estonian

⁴⁵ Faulí, C. et al. (Forthcoming)

⁴⁶ Faulí, C. et al. (Forthcoming)

system due to security concerns.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the system is still in use today, while the Netherlands and other countries continue (albeit slowly) to explore the possibilities and feasibility of (reintroducing) online voting.⁴⁸ (D29)

Similarly in **France**, online voting was available to citizens abroad on some occasions, but it has been suspended in 2017 due to security concerns. French citizens abroad could choose to vote online for parliamentary and consular elections. The French government aims at facilitating internet voting again for the 2020 consular elections. Looking at the future, it is expected that online voting may become available only for French parliamentary and/or consular elections, whilst minimising the security risks for the presidential elections. (E29)

Moreover, **France** organises its elections of the National Assembly into electoral districts and **French citizens abroad are represented by 11 constituencies**, each covering a region of the world. French citizens abroad can participate in these elections, as well as in **elections for the Assembly for French citizens abroad** (*Assemblée des Français de l'étranger*) once every six years. This is an advisory body to the French government on consular services issues. (E9)

Organising cultural events is a key strand of consular work in some countries. For example, **Ireland** uses 'cultural diplomacy' to strengthen the 'Irish brand' overseas. Organising cultural events is perceived as a standard function of Irish embassies. In addition to the efforts of its missions, Ireland introduced a new state agency called 'Culture Ireland' to promote Irish arts worldwide, using a strategic and curate approach, ultimately aiming to improve Ireland's international reputation and to help it punch above its weight in international affairs. (F31)

French consular services manage scholarship programmes for French citizens studying at French institutions abroad, as well as grant programmes for NGOs and associations that organise cultural events. France promotes its worldwide cultural presence through a fund that finances educational, charity and cultural initiatives. Ensuring that all French students abroad have access to French education is one of the main tasks of the consular service, representing 90 per cent of the budget. In other countries, consular services, cultural affairs and other public diplomacy activities tend to be dealt with as separate tracks. (E31)

1.6. In sum

This chapter presented a number of insights that have been identified in five thematic areas. The analysis is based on a comparative analysis of consular services in eight countries. Every insight in this chapter referred to the location of that topic in the annex(es). The country profiles in these annexes provide further context and detail about the various aspects of consular services in the Netherlands and the seven countries discussed above. Rather than providing all background information, this chapter focuses on a number of striking insights and differences that have emerged from the international comparison. The annexes can be consulted for more in-depth information.

⁴⁷ Springall et al. (2014)

⁴⁸ Verdonck, Klooster & Associates (2016)

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