

# FLANDERS DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

## MINISTER-PRESIDENT GEERT BOURGEOIS

### ADDRESS CONFERENCE '25 YEARS OF FLEMISH FOREIGN AFFAIRS'

Flemish Parliament, Brussels - 10 December 2018

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Speaker of the Flemish Parliament,

Members of the Flemish Parliament,

Colleagues,

Your excellencies,

And other dignitaries present here,

It is my turn to offer you a warm welcome and to thank you sincerely for your presence.

I am delighted that today we can commemorate and celebrate a quarter of a century of Flemish foreign policy here in our Flemish Parliament, together with so many representatives from the diplomatic community.

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In its history, Flanders has often been the battleground for world conflicts. For the first time, it is now a subject of international law, competent to participate fully in 'the international traffic'. This creates new opportunities, but also new responsibilities. [...] Flanders now has the opportunity and also the formidable challenge to pursue a 'modern' external policy, responding to the new challenges and taking into account its own possibilities and limitations".

That, ladies and gentlemen, was written by my predecessor Luc Van den Brande, Minister-President and Minister of what was then called "External Relations", in the policy letter that he submitted on 17 November 1993 to the Flemish Council, the forerunner to the Flemish Parliament.

Six months earlier, a constitutional amendment, a special act and an ordinary law - all dated 5 May 1993 - had considerably broadened Flanders' means and possibilities to take action on the international level. We could consider those texts as the "birth certificate" and 5 May 1993 as the "date of birth" of Flemish foreign policy.

Flanders was, of course, already present abroad and active internationally before 1993.

The first state reform of 1970-1971 had given the Dutch speaking Cultural Community, the embryo of the federated state of Flanders, the competence for 'international cultural cooperation', which included both the actual cultural matters and educational matters, although the latter were still limited at the time.

However, that competence was rarely used in the seventies. There are two reasons for this.

The cultural communities did not have their own government and the national government interpreted the concept of 'international cultural cooperation' in a rather minimalistic way.

The second reason was that it was not until 20 January 1978 that a special Act clarified how international cooperation could take place. It stipulated, among other things, that the Culture Councils would have to ratify international cultural treaties and no longer the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The second state reform of 1980 extended the "Cultural Communities" into "Communities", and gave them person-linked competences such as health care and family policy. In addition, the Flemish and Walloon Regions were established, and Flanders took the wise decision to merge Community and Region into what we call the federated state of Flanders.

From then on, Flanders was competent for international cooperation in cultural and person-linked matters - but as yet not in regional matters.

The special Act of 8 August 1980 confirmed that international treaties and agreements about cultural and person-linked matters required the approval of the Flemish Council, as the parliament was still known at the time.

What was new was that Flanders also had its own government now - initially called the "Executive" - and that this Flemish government had to be involved in negotiations about treaties dealing with community and regional matters. Concluding these treaties remained, however, the exclusive competence of the federal government.

All this meant that the important Dutch Language Union Treaty of 9 September 1980, which gave shape to the language and cultural unity between Flanders and the Netherlands, was signed on behalf of Flanders by the French-speaking Minister of Foreign Affairs Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb who, credit where credit is due, spoke, and still speaks, almost perfect Dutch.

The fact that only the federal government could conclude treaties did not prevent the Flemish government, in particular its chair Gaston Geens, from developing broader international relations and seeking new foreign partners with which to collaborate, not only in cultural matters, but also to strengthen the Flemish economy.

For the implementation and support of the international policy, the Office of the Commissioner-General for International Cultural Cooperation was established in 1980. This developed into the current Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs. Madam Secretary-General has already outlined its development to us.

Today, complaints are being made - and rightly so - about the under-representation of women in top positions. Well, 38 years ago, the first Commissioner-General was a woman, Diane Verstraeten, who is among us here today.

Until her retirement on 1 March 2008, she defined and implemented our Flemish foreign policy, first as Commissioner-General, then as Secretary-General of the Department of International Affairs of Flanders. She did this for more than a quarter of a century with conviction, with drive, with passion, no matter who the competent Minister was or which party he was affiliated to. I want to offer her my genuine and sincere thanks for this.

I would also like to thank her successor, Koen Verlaeckt. In the ten years that he has been in charge, the Department of International Affairs of Flanders (since 2015 the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs) has further consolidated itself and branched out internationally, and our foreign policy has expanded further and deepened.

I would also like to thank all the civil servants who, whether briefly or for longer periods, have been involved in our foreign policy, both here at home and in our representations abroad.

Since 1 September, the department is once again headed by a woman, Julie Bynens. I am convinced that she, not least thanks to her lengthy and varied experience, will follow in the footsteps of her predecessors and further optimise our foreign policy and strengthen its clout. I wish her every success.

Ladies and gentlemen,

May I once again take you back in time?

In 1988-1989, the organisation and operation of the Belgian State were modified for the third time.

In the first stage of that third state reform, the Communities and Regions were given additional powers.

In a second stage, a new financing system was introduced and the Brussels-Capital Region was created.

Then the third stage presented itself - and things ground to a halt.

According to the coalition agreement concluded at the end of the famous "hundred days" of "formateur" Jean-Luc Dehaene, that third stage consisted of:

- the direct election of the federated state parliaments;
- the allocation of the residuary competence to the federated states;
- and the granting of the right to conclude international treaties to the federated states.

These were three substantial steps on the path of transforming Belgium from a unitary to a federal state.

Three steps that, for some, were too substantial, too far-reaching. I quote from the book *Sire, geef me honderd dagen* (Sire, give me one hundred days) by Hugo de Ridder:

"The dynamics of the negotiations led by Dehaene, the presence of the Volksunie and to a lesser degree that of the PS, apparently transgressed the invisible lines within which the state reform was supposed to have taken place." End of quotation.

That those "invisible lines" were drawn by the Palace, as transpires from De Ridder's book, is confirmed in the Memoirs of Jean-Luc Dehaene. These memoirs included the letter which King Baudouin wrote to Prime Minister Wilfried Martens on 8 July 1988.

In the letter the King expresses concern about the direction in which the state reform was moving. More specifically, he says that he is concerned about, and I quote, "two subjects that will be dealt with at a later stage: Foreign Relations and residual competence".

Other sources also seem to imply that the idea of the federated states gaining competence to conclude treaties was causing trepidation in certain places.

Hugo Schiltz was an important, and we can rightly say, the most important champion of that idea. He was firmly convinced that Flanders should also be able to shape its autonomous powers on the international stage. It would give Flanders international visibility and recognition.

The fact that Flanders was, and still is, focused more on the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon world of culture and everyday life, while Wallonia has always looked more towards France, certainly

played a role in this. And even today we have to conclude that the fault line between Northern and Southern Europe runs straight through our country.

Moreover, since Belgian federalism has no hierarchy of norms, the champions of treaty competence for the federated states wanted to prevent the federal government from hindering or even obstructing the policy of the federated states by concluding international treaties.

The trepidation and the associated pressure was so great that the third stage of the third state reform remained unimplemented. If it hadn't, we would now be celebrating 30 years of Flemish foreign policy instead of 25.

Postponement did not, however, result in cancellation. The train had departed and could no longer be stopped.

Four years later, the unimplemented third phase of 1988-1989 was included in the Sint-Michiël agreement of 29 September 1992 on the fourth state reform - the reform that put our State structure on a federal and even to some degree confederal course.

On 16 July 1992, so even before the Sint-Michiël agreement was finalised, a proposal was submitted to the Senate for a revision of Article 68 of the Constitution. It says much that the explanation to it was written and signed by Hugo Schiltz.

The fact that today we can celebrate the 25th anniversary of autonomous and fully-fledged Flemish foreign policy is not due entirely to Hugo Schiltz, but his contribution was of extreme importance. It is therefore entirely proper to honour him posthumously on this occasion.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With the revision of Article 68 of the constitution - which has since become Article 167 - parliament introduced the principle *in foro interno, in foro externo*. Mrs Bynens has already explained what that principle entails. I would like to delve further into the policy that Flanders has pursued and is still pursuing on the basis of that principle.

But before I do, I would like to pay tribute to Luc Van den Brande. From 1992 to 1999 he was Minister-President and Flemish Minister for Foreign Policy. With the support and cooperation of his colleagues, he made use, from the very start, of the expanded external competence to pursue a strong Flemish foreign policy.

Luc Van den Brande laid down the parameters, created the foundations on which Flemish foreign policy could develop further. I would like to explicitly thank him for this.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since our foreign policy is actually an extension of our domestic policy, the European Union provides the most important framework.

The European Union is both a lever and a touchstone for the foreign policy of Flanders.

More than ever, Flanders closely monitors the European policy.

More than ever, Flanders makes every effort to help shape the European policy.

Since its inception the current Government of Flanders has been keen to assume an active role in reinvigorating the thinking on European integration, both at institutional and policy level.

That is why, two years ago, it adopted, on my proposal, a vision memorandum in which we outline how we believe the EU can increase its clout in the short and medium term.

Flanders has identified ten core themes, ten action points for the future of Europe.

1. We must continue to propagate our shared fundamental values, standards and freedoms.
2. We must reinforce the Schengen zone, with properly-functioning external border controls.
3. We must provide specific support for socio-economic reforms in the Member States and federated States.
4. The EU must generate a reinvigorated investment framework that adheres to the Stability and Growth Pact.
5. The development of a social policy, in particular tackling the phenomena of social dumping and fiscal shopping.
6. The intensification of the EMU with the completion of the Banking Union as first priority.
7. Deepening the internal market with an energy, transport and digital union.
8. Achieving a breakthrough for the most strategic trade agreements with state-of-the-art investment protection in a separate treaty.
9. An ambitious and effective sustainability policy and the expansion of the European Research Area through research programmes aimed at the knowledge and low-carbon economy of tomorrow.
10. A potent foreign, security and defence policy, in particular in the neighbouring European regions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Tomorrow it will be 11 December, and the British Parliament will vote on the draft withdrawal agreement.

Do I need to reiterate that we would much rather that we had kept the United Kingdom within the European Union? As democrats, we must at the same time respect the choice of the British citizens.

Whatever happens, Flanders will feel the consequences of the United Kingdom leaving the EU. With the exception of that of Ireland, our economy will suffer the greatest impact. A hard Brexit will devour 2.6% of the national income of Flanders.

For the past two years the Brexit issue has been the focal point of our foreign policy. We have strengthened the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs and Flanders Investment and Trade to map the consequences of a Brexit for Flanders, to monitor the negotiations and to defend the Flemish interests.

From the outset and in all my political and diplomatic contacts, I have consistently argued for a trade-friendly Brexit, including zero tariffs and intensive customs cooperation, and for a comprehensive and far-reaching cooperation agreement that will also allow low-threshold cooperation in areas such as fisheries, transport, energy, environment, security, research and education.

Even though it may be against our better judgement, we should still hope for a positive vote, tomorrow, in the House of Commons, and for a subsequent agreement with our British neighbours that throws up as few barriers as possible. I call for responsibility and hope that British pragmatism will rule tomorrow.

In this context, I would like to refer to my proposal for a European macro-regional strategy for the North Sea, to further shape the cooperation between the United Kingdom and the countries on the North Sea post-Brexit and offer our trade and cooperation a new perspective.

I am counting on the next Government of Flanders to continue along this path and in particular to strengthen the ties with the Hanseatic States.

It is, in any case, self-evident to me that our bilateral representations in the European Union should be further deepened and diversified, so that we can respond more proactively to the European agenda, with knowledge of the positions of our partners in the Council of Ministers, in which the federated states of our country participate in turn.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Needless to say that Flanders attaches great importance to good relations with foreign governments.

For obvious reasons, we give priority to close collaboration with our neighbouring countries and regions: the Netherlands, Germany, in particular the federated state of North Rhine-Westphalia, France, in particular Northern France, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which we supported upon their accession to the European Union in the nineties, are still among our most important partners.

Furthermore, we work closely together with other strong federated states, such as Scotland, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Quebec.

In addition, we are an active advocate of multilateral cooperation.

Next year, our partnership with the International Labour Organisation, for example, will celebrate its 20th anniversary. Every two years, we contribute an important amount to the operation of the organisation.

For more than ten years, we have had two trust funds with UNESCO: one for general collaboration and one for scientific research, in particular on water and oceanography. The IODE - the International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange - is housed in Ostend. We are among the top 10 voluntary donors to UNESCO.

As part of our development policy, we support multilateral organisations such as the World Health Organisation WHO, UNAIDS and the World Food Programme WFP and provide an annual contribution for emergency aid to the CERF.

We support UNWRA with an annual budget for assistance to the Palestinians in the refugee camps.

We often link our actions in the South to initiatives of international donor organisations, or we make use of their expertise to implement our projects on the ground.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Flanders shall and will continue its efforts to further reduce international poverty.

Since the early nineties, we have pursued our own development policy in those policy areas for which we are competent. This policy is mainly targeted on southern Africa.

The cooperation with South Africa started in 1994. For some time we worked together with Morocco, but for the past ten years we have concentrated on three partner countries.

In South Africa we focus on climate, in Mozambique on health care, in Malawi on agriculture and food safety.

What is new is that with some of our climate resources we are assisting our partner countries in climate adaptation, because they are often the hardest hit by the effects of global warming and climate change.

In a vision memorandum I submitted to the Flemish Parliament last year, we translated the Agenda 2030 and the Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to Flemish policy. We opt for a development policy that focuses on system change, on innovation and on multi-actor partnerships, including private partners.

And in our development policy, we place an important emphasis on gender, good governance and the promotion and respect of human rights - something I would like to stress today, on the International Day of Human Rights.

We receive appreciation for this in wider circles, and our innovative and small-scale projects are imitated by large donors.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Flanders is an open economy. According to the KOF globalisation index of the Swiss Economic Institute in Zurich, we even have the most open economy in the world. We thrive on exports. Not only our large companies, but also our SMEs need foreign markets.

Last year we achieved a magnificent export figure of 317 billion euros. This meant that Flanders with the fifteenth most important trading nation in the world.

Around 70 percent of our exports are achieved in the European Union. Because even the European market is too small, our Flemish foreign policy is resolutely and more than ever before in favour of free and fair trade. Free trade leads to prosperity and welfare. Protectionism only leads to conflicts in the WTO, the World Trade Organisation, and to trade wars.

Concluding free trade agreements, making agreements with our trading partners and supporting our companies when they head abroad: that triptych is central and provides the common thread in the trade policy of this Government of Flanders.

We ask our companies that trade with and export to foreign markets to take into account and show respect for sustainable development, for corporate social responsibility, for the environment, for international labour standards and for human rights.

The ethics policy that we adopt with regard to the export of arms and other strategic items must be viewed in that context as well.

Flanders Investment and Trade, our agency for international business, raises awareness and informs and advises Flemish companies on ethical, social and environmental aspects in their foreign activities.

It goes without saying that we attach considerable importance to developing a level playing field, so that our companies do not experience any disadvantages as a result of their 'corporate social responsibility'.

Ladies and gentlemen,

That federated states have such a degree of autonomy in pursuing their own foreign policy as that in our own federal state structure is not entirely, but still fairly unique.

May I remind you that during the discussion on the approval of the CETA Free Trade Agreement, quite a few European and Canadian diplomats were surprised that the governments of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels had to agree to the deal before Belgium could give its approval.

For us, the people of Flanders, pursuing our own foreign policy is self-evident. Here, nobody is at all surprised when the governments of Flanders and the Netherlands sit together, as they did on 5 November in Middelburg, and Minister-President Mark Rutte and I take some new steps for our bilateral cooperation.

In the spring, a similar joint government meeting will take place with our colleagues from North Rhine-Westphalia. Two years ago we were their guests; this time they are coming to Brussels.

More than one hundred international treaties and dozens of exclusive Flemish bilateral agreements, concluded by consecutive Governments of Flanders and ratified by the Flemish Parliament since 1993, show that Flanders has gained international visibility and recognition.

That international visibility and recognition can also be seen in the ever-increasing number of Ministers and ambassadors from countries in all continents which we meet on the Martelaarsplein.

This international visibility and recognition are further underlined by the many visits of foreign guest to the Flemish Parliament and/or its Speaker. During this term of office, Minister-President Rutte, Prime Minister Bettel, Commission President Juncker and President Lenaerts of the European Court of Justice are among those who have addressed the Flemish Parliament.

The activities of the Flemish Parliament itself, and in particular its Committee on Foreign Policy, also demonstrate the increased weight and importance of our international relations, and the growing attention that our elected representatives have for them.

During this term of office, the Committee on Foreign policy visited all General Representations of the Government of Flanders.

I can also refer to the strong resolutions that are adopted in the committee and to the many questions from the members of parliament about the most diverse topical subjects - questions whereby the members of parliament do not feel in the least connected to the competences of Flanders *sensu stricto*.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With our foreign policy we not only give Flanders international recognition, we also contribute to prosperity and welfare in Flanders. Let me give you a few striking examples.

- We have concluded treaties with the Netherlands about deepening the Scheldt and thus safeguarded economic development opportunities for the Port of Antwerp.
- We also concluded a treaty with the Netherlands about a new sea lock in Terneuzen, with the aim of improving access to Ghent. We made it possible for the ports of Ghent and Zeeland to merge into one larger entity, the North Sea Port.
- By concluding agreements with France on, for example, the Grensleie and on making the bridges over the Leie and Scheldt wider and higher, we are making the Seine-Scheldt link possible.
- Based on active diplomacy, we shall continue to aim for an agreement with the Netherlands, North Rhine-Westphalia and the federal state of Germany about the Iron Rhine; we are now talking about the 3RX section.
- As part of our collaboration with North Rhine-Westphalia and the Netherlands, we are spotlighting our Western European chemical cluster and we are playing our trump card of Antwerp as the second largest chemical cluster in the world.

- As part of the European Vanguard Initiative, we are building partnerships with countries and regions to make the transition to Industry 4.0.

I could go on like this for some time, but we have spent enough time reviewing the past and the present, and it is time to turn to the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Based on an analysis of international developments and megatrends, and thus on everything we know today, the Government of Flanders has drawn up the “VISION 2050” memorandum, in which we state what Flanders should look like in 2050.

In broad lines, the vision for the future states that by 2050 we want a social, open, resilient and above all international Flanders that creates prosperity and welfare in a smart, innovative and sustainable way and where everybody counts.

To achieve that vision, to realise that ambition, we have to change course.

We have defined seven policy areas in which this that transition is of crucial importance if we are to achieve our general vision.

In at least three of these seven policy areas, we cannot achieve the transition alone. In at least three of the seven transitions we are dependent on partners, we have to tackle things in an international context.

These three transitions are the transition to Industry 4.0, the transition to smooth, safe and environmentally friendly mobility and the transition to a circular economy.

My colleagues Philip Muyters and Ben Weyts and Administrator-General Henny De Baets will gladly discuss the international dimension of these three policy areas with you.

We are convinced that we will have to achieve the transition in these three areas in an international context. That we can learn from others.

That we must actively look for partnerships with our trusted partners and with new partners abroad.

That we will have to look at how EU policy and the European programmes for 2021-2027 can act as a lever for the realisation of these transitions. We are looking forward to discussing these matters with you and receiving your reactions, suggestions and proposals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Twenty-five years ago, Minister-President Luc Van den Brande wrote: “Flanders now has the opportunity and also the formidable challenge to pursue a ‘modern’ external policy, responding to the new challenges and taking into account its own possibilities and limitations”.

I do not violate the truth when I say that successive Governments of Flanders, together with the Flemish Parliament and the officials of the departments concerned, have seized that opportunity with both hands, and have pursued a foreign policy which was not only modern, but also and above all powerful and fruitful.

In general, we worked together well with federal diplomats. This is also possible in the inter-federal system, to the extent that the federal level is at the service of the foreign policy which is pursued by the federated states, and our unique constitutional model is consistently defended at home and abroad.

Today, Flanders has a foreign policy that is mature not only in age but also in terms of form and content, and which is in no way less than the foreign policy of medium-sized Member States of the European Union.

Continuing that policy and strengthening it further is the challenge and task we face for tomorrow, and for at least the coming 25 years.

We cannot do that alone. That is another reason why we have invited you here today: to help us shape this future, using the three themes which will be discussed in the panels.

I hope these will provide new triggers and offer new opportunities for cooperation with our foreign or European partners as well as inspiration for contributing to the development of a new European policy for the period 2019-2024 and beyond.

I would like to thank you again for being here today and for your indispensable contribution to the realisation of the international ambitions of Flanders.