

FLANDERS DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

ADDRESS MRS JULIE BYNENS

CONFERENCE “25 YEARS OF FLEMISH FOREIGN POLICY”

Flemish Parliament, De Schelp – 10 December 2018

.....

* welcome speech, your excellencies ...

For centuries, Flanders has been a backdrop to world politics, a centre of international trade, and a crossroads of cultures. It remains so today. Both the European Union and NATO headquarters are based here, we are the 15th exporter worldwide, 166 different nationalities live in Flanders, and our art cities remain a stage for top artistic performances.

We owe the fact that we have retained this central place through the centuries to our entrepreneurship, our adaptability and our ambition. But we also owe it to our level-headedness and realism. We know that we are dependent on the world around us for our prosperity and development. Flanders is either international or it is not ...

Our international solidarity means that we invest fully in an active foreign policy. We do this in different ways and in multiple areas in order to represent our own interests. But without losing sight of global interests. After all, what is good for the world is good for Flanders.

These are but a few of the reasons why Flanders has to be active internationally and why our Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs so actively focuses on it.

Within the framework of the 4th Belgian state reform in 1993, Flanders has received important instruments to further develop its own foreign policy. This had already been encouraged in the previous state reforms, but from that date onwards the federated states became fully competent for the foreign part of their internal competences. In the spring of 1993, the federal parliament introduced the principle “in foro interno, in foro externo” via Article 167 of the Constitution. Paragraph 1 of this Article reads: *“The King is in charge of foreign relationships, without prejudice to the competence of the Communities and Regions to regulate international cooperation, including the conclusion of treaties, for matters for which they are competent by or pursuant to the Constitution.”* Since then, Flanders and the other Communities and Regions have thus been competent for both the internal (domestic) and external (foreign) aspects of their policies. Put differently: since 1993, each federated state policy area has a foreign dimension. This

important innovation is the reason we are here today to look back on 25 years of Flemish Foreign Policy.

The competence of the federated states, in implementation of Article 167 of the Constitution, “to regulate international cooperation including the conclusion of treaties, for matters for which they are competent by or pursuant to the Constitution” covers three aspects:

1. The right of the federated states to regulate international cooperation for their competences themselves and to attach the necessary administrative organisation to it.
2. The *ius tractandi*. the right to conclude treaties and agreements with other states and other federated states on matters for which they are competent.
3. The *ius legationis*. the federated states can send their own diplomatic representatives abroad. They thus have a diplomatic status and are included on the Belgian diplomatic list.

The Minister-President will sketch the constitutional framework in a few moments and tell us something about the institutional history of Flemish foreign policy. I would like to talk about how we have implemented the foreign policy and where our current focus lies.

Flanders has made active use of the possibilities offered by the new framework of 1993.

The decision had already been taken in 1980 to set up a public institution called “Office of the Commissioner-General of the Dutch speaking Cultural Community in Belgium for Foreign Cultural Cooperation”. Mrs Diane Verstraeten was appointed Commissioner-General. This organisation was the predecessor of our current Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs. This Office of the Commissioner-General was embedded in the Flemish administration and was developed further into a fully-fledged department that currently has around 150 staff, some 40 of which are stationed in our offices abroad.

Behind me you see a picture of a meeting of the Flemish diplomatic network in the mid-nineties with our first diplomatic representatives, the representatives of our colleagues from what was then called Export Vlaanderen and the service ‘Investeren in Vlaanderen’, the forerunners of the current FIT and in addition also the foreign representatives of VISITFLANDERS and VVOB, the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance.

Flanders does, after all, make active use of the opportunity to appoint its own diplomatic representatives abroad. The first diplomatic representatives were:

- Jos Aelvoet, who was appointed to The Hague in the Netherlands, our priority partner from the very start.
- Frank Ingelaere was appointed as Flemish representative to the European Union and
- Luc Truyens was selected to put Flanders on the map in Vienna.

A representative was also appointed to Washington. Shortly afterwards, a representation was added in Japan (David Maenhout now posted to Vienna) and in South Africa (Yves Wantens, currently stationed in Warsaw, but shortly moving to New York). These were the pioneers of the current Flemish diplomacy, but prior to them liaison officers had already been appointed within the Flemish administration to maintain relationships with, for example, the EU and the multilateral organisations; they did not, however, have a formal diplomatic status. I am thinking of Bert Otten and Lieve van Woensel for the EU, Pierre Ruyffelaere - still employed by our department - for the international organisations, and Rita Omwall and Françoise Maertens who were active in the United States.

Since 1993, we have made active use of the right to conclude treaties. Flanders has concluded 38 exclusive treaties and is currently involved in 654 mixed treaties together with the federal government and/or the other federated states.

If you look back at those early years of Flemish foreign policy and pause for a moment at our current focus, you could say that the seeds that were sown back then are still growing and bearing fruit and still form part of our current foreign policy.

- The demand for direct access to and contact with Europe and the international organisations which was formulated right from the early years, is still one of the priority angles of our current foreign policy. The European Union is both the lever and touchstone of our foreign policy.
- Developing active bilateral relations with our neighbouring countries, especially with the Netherlands, but also maintaining relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and cooperation with important regions such as Quebec, but also the German Länder- especially North Rhine-Westphalia - and a number of other strong European regions or nations such as Scotland, Catalonia and the Basque Country.
- Gaston Geens, the chair of the first Flemish Executive, focused on strengthening international contacts to help shape his third industrial revolution. Today we actively focus on international and European collaboration to help shape Industry 4.0. This will be the subject of one of the panel discussions with Minister Muylers.
- The international cultural policy is still an important part of our international policy.
- The impetus for cooperation with South Africa in 1994 has formed the basis for expanding our own policy concerning Development Cooperation, which has now been extended to the region of Southern Africa and our other partner countries of Mozambique and Malawi.
- Our diplomatic network has been expanded to 12 diplomatic representations of the Government of Flanders abroad and in February we will be opening a new diplomatic representation in Rome.
- The regionalisation of the export policy has led to the development of a high-performance agency for international business called FIT, which now has a

network of nearly 100 economic representations which our companies can call upon in more than 70 countries around the world.

Europe has always been the cornerstone of Flemish foreign policy and will continue to be so. We focus actively on monitoring and influencing European policy.

- In addition to our department, we have set up the Liaison Agency Flanders-Europe (Vleva) to bring Flemish citizens, organisations and businesses closer to Europe, but also to build bridges to European partners.
- We have actively expanded and strengthened our General Representation within the Belgian Permanent Representation to the European Union. Nearly 30 people currently work there, from each of the policy areas of the Government of Flanders.
- The members of the Government of Flanders assume their role in the European Councils of Ministers when, according to the rotation system in Belgium, it is our turn to represent our country in the EU Councils of Ministers.
- We actively participate in European programmes such as Erasmus or Horizon 2020 and we have designed our own annual Flemish Reform Programme to implement the European Semester.

In addition to the cooperation with and within the EU and the direct cooperation with other countries and regions, Flanders is also partner to a large number of multilateral organisations. Needless to say, various UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO and WHO are extremely important, as are other international organisations such as OECD or the Council of Europe. The multilateral channel is eminently suitable for setting special policy emphases such as ensuring decent work, children's rights and gender equality.

Although this task does not come under the remit of the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs, I must also mention in this context that, with the 1993 state reform, the sales and export policy was transferred to the Regions.

The Flemish Foreign Trade Service was established in 1991. It later became Export Vlaanderen, and is now Flanders Investment and Trade or simply FIT. FIT promotes Flemish exports and offers assistance to Flemish exporters in and to foreign markets. A network of 96 offices in 70 countries helps our companies market their products and services in all corners of the world. But this wide network is also responsible for attracting foreign investors to Flanders and offering assistance to them.

Our colleagues from FIT and their partner organisations are working together to implement the internationalisation strategy 'Vlaanderen Versnelt!' (Flanders Accelerates!).

- They offer a broad range of services for companies with regard to international business.
- They facilitate international entrepreneurship by formulating proposals for improvements of laws and regulations.
- They assist start-ups in their internationalisation plans.

- They optimise their services to international companies in Flanders.
- They focus more strongly on top sectors in Flanders: pharma & biotech, food and beverage, engineering and technology, smart logistics and sustainable raw materials, materials and chemistry.

In addition, our partners from VISITFLANDERS make efforts to attract foreign tourists to Flanders; with 9.5 million arrivals and 24.5 million overnight stays last year, they are focusing on our art cities, our coast and the Flemish regions and are supporting Flemish tourist entrepreneurs in strengthening the tourism provision for foreign tourists.

As Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs we want to be a partner for you in the next 25 years. Together with you, with our network, with our foreign partners, with broad Flemish civil society, with our colleagues at FIT and VISITFLANDERS we want to promote the strengths of Flanders, making our services, knowledge and network available to our citizens, companies and organisations. We want the Flemish foreign policy to make a valuable contribution to our society, especially now in these turbulent times, with tensions between East and West, trade conflicts and pressure on the European cohesion and on the European borders. We want to be a reliable partner for you and a clear point of contact and help you achieve your international projects. Because Flanders is international!

I would now like to give the floor to Minister-President Geert Bourgeois.