

Belgium

Rik Coolsaet and Ann-Sofie Voet

(HOCKING, B., SPENCE, D., *Foreign ministries in the European Union. Integrating diplomats*. Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 60-74)

The origins of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) go back to the establishment of a Diplomatic Committee in 1830 - the year in which Belgium emerged as an independent state - by the Belgian revolutionaries in order to gain a voice in the Great Powers' discussions on the *raison d'être* of the newly established state. A fully-fledged Ministry was founded on 25 February 1831 and was reformed for the first time in 1841 when three departments came into existence. The first of these dealt with political affairs, the second with trade and the third grouped together several functions - such as finance, disputes, registry, and accounting. Many reforms of the internal structure of the Ministry followed, mostly as a result of adaptations needed to conduct economic and commercial diplomacy. At the outbreak of World War I, the Ministry consisted of four departments and a secretariat-general. The largest department was Foreign Trade and Consulates (with a staff of fifteen), followed by the Political Department (three officers), Chancellery and Disputes and Protocol. The numerous reforms of the inter-war-period, including changing the name to 'Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade' in 1934, reflected the importance attributed to the economic aspects of foreign policy. Consequently, the number of civil servants inside the Political Department, which encompassed the Office of the League of the Nations and the colonial desk, dwindled whilst the Economic Department expanded.

Organisation and issues

Since its birth, the organisation and reform of the MFA have often been much more influenced by the economic dimension of its tasks than by the purely political aspects of it, including security policy. In economic diplomacy the MFA has often played a decisive role, thus making the MFA at specific moments in its history a *primus inter pares* amongst the ministerial departments of Belgium.

This was however not the case for many decades after 1945. Moreover, in the seventies and the beginning of the eighties there grew a pervasive impression of the MFA as an outdated and largely irrelevant department. Since the MFA's activities in the past concentrated so heavily on dealing bilaterally with foreign countries as to the opening of their markets, the gradual emergence of the EEC, an institutionalised free market encompassing its principal trading partners, relieved the MFA of many of its traditional tasks. This marginalisation of the MFA could not be compensated by a renewed concentration on politico-military matters inside of NATO, since public opinion and parts of the political establishment considered Atlanticism as a somewhat outdated approach. Moreover, as a consequence of the domestic process of State reform, the increased competencies of sub-state entities included the authority to conclude international treaties. At the beginning of the nineties, a real crisis of confidence existed between the public at large and the MFA, but also between the diplomatic corps and the political and economic establishment in Belgium. The main existential question for the MFA undoubtedly was: what purpose do we still serve ?

At the turn of the century however, the MFA had secured a new central position in the international set-up of Belgium, thanks to five interconnected processes, some of which will

be elaborated upon in more detail in this chapter. The first was the loyal acceptance – after much initial hesitation and even outspoken hostility – of the new federal structure of the country. The second was the successful attempt to regain a central position in European decision-making amongst the many different actors involved – Europe now constituting the nucleus of Belgian diplomatic endeavours. The third development was a series of internal reforms capitalising of the inherent strengths of the diplomatic corps and showing these to be worthwhile and thus necessary to all actors involved in diplomatic decision-making. Fourthly, the MFA again re-invented – such as in the UK, Germany, the US and other countries – bilateral economic diplomacy and again developed an aggressive stance, just as its earlier years. The last development was the linkage of the MFA with the new themes in diplomacy, such as human rights, ecology, international law etc. that permitted the MFA to get in direct contact with NGO's as new partners.

The 'renaissance' of the MFA in the nineties was the result of a well thought out strategy by a very small number of officials and political appointees. As a result of it, in 2000 for the first time in more than two decades, the budget of the MFA started to grow again, not only in absolute terms, but also its share in the overall state budget.

The MFA and the beginnings of the European construction

Belgium's post-1945 European policy rested upon a pre-war economic consensus favouring global multilateral free trade, but which was now accompanied by advocacy of deeper regional economic as well as political co-operation. The signing of the Treaty of Rome had major consequences both for the conduct of diplomacy and the organisation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. European co-operation meant that the MFA had to adapt gradually to changes in the international environment as well as the European architecture. More was demanded of national organisational structures, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the gradual abolition of tariffs among the EEC member states implied that the MFA and its diplomats no longer had to enter into protracted bilateral negotiations to ensure access for Belgian products to the vital neighbouring markets. Now, multilateral negotiations concerning the organisation of this free-trade area became the primary task of Belgian economic diplomacy.

Furthermore, although distant overseas markets were never of major importance to Belgium, the development of the common trade policy towards third countries meant that the European Commission took over many of the traditional tasks of the diplomatic service. As a result, export promotion – for long a primary task of Belgian diplomats – faded into the background. Within the MFA, bilateral economic diplomacy was now regarded as a minor task to be performed by the consular corps. This widened the gap between the diplomatic and the consular service. Additionally, after World War II, as diplomacy became increasingly multilateral, the number of Belgian diplomatic missions to international organisations grew, from one in 1946 to five in 1958. (1)¹ The intimacy of bilateral relations had to make way for the openness of multilateral diplomacy and advocates of bilateral diplomacy felt themselves to be on the defensive.²(2)

Between 1939 and 1973, the number of diplomatic posts (i.e. embassies, permanent representations and consulates general) grew gradually from 79 to 136. This resulted from the increase in regional and international organisations and the emerging of new and independent states. The number of diplomats saw an exponential growth as well and increased from 175

officials in 1939 to 379 in the early 1970s. This growth mainly concentrated on Germany, France, UK, the Netherlands and Italy and confirmed once more the importance Belgium attached to its relations with neighbouring countries.³⁽³⁾

On the creation of the EEC, the implementation of the Rome Treaty was not entrusted exclusively to the MFA. In several ministries distinct international divisions were created and a separate coordinating Inter-ministerial Economic Commission (IEC) was set up, headed by the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Within the IEC, specialised task forces were set up to deal with the specific issues concerning the ECSC, the EEC and Euratom. However, the Permanent Representation to the EEC also represented a parallel coordinating structure, creating an obvious risk of contradictory instructions. In the early 1960s, a clearer division of tasks was made. The IEC assumed coordination of more technical issues, whilst coordination of political issues was entrusted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the end of the 1960s, the Service on European Integration – now known as P11 – was established within the MFA, in order to strengthen daily coordination of all European issues. Eventually, all coordinating mechanisms concerning European integration were concentrated within the MFA, thus ending a somewhat confused decision-making process.⁴⁽⁴⁾

European supranationalism and Belgian federalism

However, this concentration of European decision-making within the MFA did not produce the supposed result of strengthening the MFA's role vis-à-vis the other ministries. The reason for this lies in a series of reforms of the Belgian State, whereby the central (federal) level was hollowed out to the benefit of sub-state levels, which in the end even received international treaty making power – probably, a firstling in international law.

During the mid-1960s, federalism at the Belgian and the European levels became intertwined. It was clear that the question of Flemish and Walloon identities and interests had not come to a satisfactory and sustainable solution within the framework of the Belgian State. A broader framework was necessary and some proponents of Walloon and Flemish nationalism saw 'Europe' as the structure that might offer a solution. Thus the revision of the Belgian Constitution can be seen as a twin-track process. In 1970 a devolution movement in Belgium began which was to evolve through consecutive constitutional reforms. The first of these, in 1970, made it possible to transfer national powers to both supranational organisations (thus ending the 'illegality' of the European institutions as seen from the perspective of the Belgian Constitution) and to sub-state levels, called the 'federated entities' (Communities and Regions). In this process, the federal state and the federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs lost power on two fronts: to a lower and to a higher level of policy-making.

In April 1979, a Belgian governmental programme for the first time formally opted in favour of a federal Europe, based on 'peoples', 'persons' and 'regions', without mentioning states. At first sight, the complex constitutional reform in Belgium may give the impression of not being directly linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the opposite is true in at least two respects. First, as noted earlier, in their efforts to legitimise their claims for major power transfers within Belgium, the proponents of devolution discovered that a Europe organised on a regional basis offered an acceptable and even attractive projection of the future political organisation of the European continent. As a result of the constitutional reforms the MFA, as coordinator of European policies, had to adapt to the new structure of the Belgian State and the emergence of new actors. This brought about fundamental changes in the way foreign

policy is conducted and coordinated, which shows itself especially in the complexity of the EU coordination mechanisms under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The federal structure of Belgium and the consequences for foreign policy making

In 1970, Belgian political parties negotiated the first important constitutional reform of the structure of the Belgian State. This first revision acknowledged the existence of three cultural communities (Flemish, French and German) and three regions (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels Region). The powers that were granted to the Communities were cultural policy and (partly) the use of languages and education. The Regions acquired powers over certain aspects of socio-economic policy. In the field of international relations, only a principle was laid down, but one that was to become crucial in later reforms. A new article in the constitution stipulated that the power of the Cultural Communities also included international co-operation in their newly acquired areas of responsibility. The idea of extending these acquired powers to international relations was thus applied from the very beginning of the process of federalisation in Belgium, federal State, although the Belgian government through the MFA, continued to exert Belgian international treaty-making power.

Through further reforms in 1980, 1988 and 1993, the international capacity of the Communities and Regions was expanded. This was focused on the areas of foreign investment and foreign trade. There was a partial regionalisation of foreign trade through a transfer of some of the commercial attachés. Of the 135 national attachés, 28 were divided over the three Regions. Within the MFA the gradually increasing claims of Belgian federalists in the international domain were seen as undesirable and ill-advised. The practical consequences and the international law tradition of recognising only sovereign states as international actors, presented considerable difficulties. But the domestic forces behind the devolution process were more powerful than these considerations. The 1993 reform laid down the architecture of Belgium as a full federal State. In the international domain it set an historic precedent, since the Communities and the Regions now acquired international treaty-making power over matters in which they have exclusive competence. In 2000-2001, the government concluded a series of new agreements, which provided for the transfer of agriculture, foreign trade and co-operation development to the Communities and the Regions. Practical details for the last two domains still have to be worked out, but will undoubtedly have repercussions on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Not least, the State Secretary for Foreign Trade will lose his or her job as this department is transferred to the Regions. It also implies that the federal export agency for foreign trade, the Belgian Foreign Trade Board, will disappear. The decision to hand over large parts of development aid faced more criticism since the work of combating underdevelopment in the least developed states was not taken into account by the negotiators whose attention was focused on domestic symbolism and financial considerations.

The federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to respond to these developments by transferring certain powers to the Regions and the Communities, whilst the latter were required to adapt their structural organisation to their newly acquired powers. As Belgian devolution is evolving, any description of its structures are necessarily likely to be outdated. The sub-state levels now possess the authority to conclude international treaties in the domains for which they have acquired exclusive competencies. In order to deal with their new tasks, they all have set up their specialised agencies, for example for bilateral export promotion or cultural co-operation agreements. An ongoing major overhaul of the Flemish administration will result, in 2002, in a Flemish Ministry for External Policy and European matters, encompassing all

international activities of this particular sub-state actor. All of the federated entities also have their own international representatives, dealing with the specific competencies of the Communities and Regions and operating alongside the diplomats of the MFA. After some initial frictions, the relations between federal diplomats and federated agents in the field, now usually work smoothly.

The consequences for the internal organisation of the (federal) Ministry of Foreign Affairs

As a result of the domestic devolution movement and the delegation of international policy areas to other departments, especially in the framework of enhanced European integration, the MFA in the 1970s faced the danger of becoming marginalised and losing the central role in foreign policy making it had acquired in the preceding decade. There was a fear that, at best, the MFA's role would be diminished, with other ministries using its international infrastructure whilst developing their own autonomous diplomacy. To many in the MFA, this seemed almost inescapable, as the boundaries between domestic and foreign policy diminished, particularly in European affairs, the vital area of Belgian foreign policy. This possibility of marginalisation increased even further when in 1974 the European Council was created, enhancing the role of heads of state and government in European politics.

Eventually, the MFA succeeded in preserving its central place in European decision-making in Belgium by shifting towards an enhanced coordination role. In the end, given the complex constitutional set-up of Belgium, the MFA appeared to many – on the federal as well as on the sub-state level – to be the least ‘dangerous’ arena for co-ordination of European policies. The growing complexity of the European agenda asked for an enhanced co-ordination, especially now that the number of actors in Belgium had grown significantly, lest Belgium would lose its influence within Europe. Co-ordinating within the Prime Minister’s office, as was thought of at a certain moment, was considered as giving the federal head of government too powerful a position vis-à-vis of his peers at the sub-state level.

Since in the end, overcoming its initial hostility, the MFA loyally accepted the consequences of the domestic devolution process, it regained at the same time a central role, by convincing the sub-state levels that the federal MFA was a much better instrument of securing their interests than creating a whole new diplomatic apparatus of their own. Consequently, it was able to present itself as a neutral arena, where the sometimes divergent interests of the numerous actors with a say in international relations, could be discussed and reconciled. Moreover, all parties recognised the expertise of the diplomatic service in handling international negotiations. In the eyes of the newcomers in the Belgian foreign policy decision making architecture, diplomacy often appeared arcane and the MFA offered uniquely qualified personnel to deal with it.

Moreover, in the last couple of years, the MFA has reached out to NGO’s as new partners in international relations. In doing so, the MFA has tried to deflect the criticism that official diplomacy is unrepresentative. There is no doubt that NGOs have acquired more importance in the diplomatic decision-making process. The extent to which they effectively play a role still differs very much on the issue and the occasion. They clearly have an increasing influence in shaping norms, values and moral standards. After the genocide in Rwanda, the Belgian government has been working through NGO’s in order to strengthen the Rwandese judicial system and in Zaire-Congo the latter have provided for a maintained contacts and a

Belgian presence in that country when governmental relations were frozen in the 1990s. These examples were not all that surprising, since NGOs have been privileged partners in co-operation development since the 1970s, the Belgian government co-sponsoring a number of their projects in third world countries. Whilst in economic and commercial areas NGOs have been largely absent, in the preparation of WTO meetings starting with Seattle 1999, the MFA has been consulting with both industry and NGOs. The same can be said of certain ‘niche’ projects, such as the active Belgian participation in the worldwide campaign against landmines. Regular formal and informal meetings are now being held on a wide variety of subjects. In October 2001, Foreign Minister Louis Michel even created a special consultative body in order to structure the dialogue with civil society on topics such as human rights, peace, co-operation development and humanitarian action.

For all this however, a price has been paid. Diplomatic policy making processes have become increasingly complicated in Belgium. This is certainly the case for European policy-making, which now rests upon a complex scheme of interlinked *sui generis* mechanisms, spanning three levels: a coordinating mechanism at the governmental level (the Interministerial Conference on Foreign Policy), at departmental level (European coordination, called P11, within the MFA) and, finally, within the Permanent Representation itself. In 1983 already, a ‘liaison office’ was established at the MFA, as a point of contact for the Communities and the Regions. This desk (S04), under the direct authority of the secretary-general of the MFA, is charged with the role of secretariat for the Interministerial Conference for Foreign Policy and the coordination agreements that have been concluded between the different actors and levels involved.

Many items on the European agenda concern matters that fall within the jurisdiction of the Communities and the Regions. Thus it is obligatory to involve these authorities in shaping the various aspects of Belgium’s European policy, although the federal government retains competence for laying down its basic principles. When the Treaty of Maastricht was negotiated, it was on Belgium’s request – together with Germany – that article 146 of the Treaty was introduced. This article stipulates that ‘the Council shall consist of a representative of each Member State at ministerial level, authorised to commit the government of the Member State’. This means a representative, who is not a member of the federal government, but of one of the federated entities, can commit Belgium as a whole to a given decision. For Belgium, this was a crucial issue relating to its federal structure. As there is no hierarchy between the federal government and the federated entities, it was important to be able to send a representative who does not belong to the federal government but to a federated entity. The problem now was to establish a mechanism in order to decide which entity (the federal or a federate one) could represent the country at meetings. Therefore, the rules and procedures, along with processes for coordination between the different partners, are stipulated in a number of co-operation agreements.

In order to decide who will represent Belgium in the Council meetings, the configurations in which the Council meets were classified into four categories according to whether the subject matter falls:

1. entirely within the federal jurisdiction (category I): General Affairs, Ecofin, Budget, Justice, etc.
2. mainly within the federal jurisdiction, but with some implications for Regions or Communities competencies (category II): agriculture (until 2001), internal market, health, energy, environmental policy, social affairs, transport;

3. mainly within the jurisdiction of the Communities and the Regions (category III): industry and research;
4. entirely within the jurisdiction of the Communities and the Regions (category IV): culture, education, tourism, youth, housing.

In the Councils of the first and second categories, a federal minister represents Belgium, with a Community or a Regional minister attending the second category Council meetings as an 'assessor'. A Community or a Regional minister represents Belgium in the Councils of the third and the fourth category, with a federal minister attending the third category Council meetings as an assessor.

For the Council meetings of categories II, III and IV, the Belgian position needs to be approved beforehand by the Interministerial Conference on Foreign Policy where all actors involved meet at ministerial level and which constitutes the final decision-making body in foreign policy in Belgium, the MFA acting here as secretary. Belgium can only vote in the Council if a consensus among all the partners is reached. If not, the country has to abstain. It sometimes happens that the Belgian position needs to be adapted during a Council meeting or in the Committee of Permanent Representatives. This means that the Belgian delegation present at these meetings has the obligation to consult the relevant federal and federated authorities, as consensus remains the main-principle of Belgian policy. If a domestically negotiated position needs urgent adjustment, the Belgian representative will either consult with the relevant federal or federated authorities or, exceptionally, take a provisional line which has to be confirmed or invalidated by referendum within three days.

Since consensus must be reached before the Council meetings, the MFA, thanks to its now recognised co-ordinating role, plays a crucial role in preparing the official Belgian position and ironing out all possible conflicts between the numerous entities with a say in European decision-making. Indeed, all meetings are prepared within P11, the European coordinating desk within the MFA's directorate-general for multilateral political and thematic affairs. P11 is the linchpin of European policy-making in Belgium, organising and presiding over all coordination meetings. These are attended by representatives of the specialised ministries (both federal and federated) according to their involvement in the topic under discussion, by representatives of the federal Prime Minister and Vice-Prime Minister, of the Minister-Presidents of the Communities and the Regions, of the Minister/State Secretary for European Affairs (if the government has appointed one), of the Community and Regional Ministers of external relations, of the Belgium Permanent Representation to the European Union, as well as the Community and the Regional attachés attached to the Permanent Representation. If the items on the agenda only concern federal matters, representatives of the federated entities are also invited, in order to keep all partners of the Belgian state informed. P11 has a huge workload with some 200 coordination meetings a year handling the most diverse subjects, with the sole exception of environmental policy which is coordinated by the Ministry of the Environment. As a Belgian Permanent Representative once noted, the same 100 persons attend most of these meetings, illustrating the highly-centralised character of European policy-making in Belgium.⁵ (5)

The last level of coordination is within the Permanent Representation itself. It is composed of some twenty diplomats, slightly fewer civil servants from other ministries and some five representatives from the Communities and Regions. As with all Permanent Representations, this staff of thirty-six is supplemented by civil servants and experts from outside who attend specific meetings.

After some initial difficulties, this structure works smoothly. This is due largely to the goodwill and pragmatism of all partners concerned. It also implies, however, a rather weak foundation for the long-term sustainability of Belgian foreign policy decision-making mechanisms. It is doubtful whether the goodwill displayed by the various entities so far will continue, particularly in a situation where the various levels of government are directed by governmental coalitions of a different political composition. Domestic tensions could easily translate into deadlock in the foreign policy field since all partners involved have a *de facto* right of veto. Especially in the so-called 'mixed treaties', where competencies of both national and sub-state actors are involved, decision-making could become hostage to purely domestic policy calculations.

Reforming the MFA

In order to secure its newly acquired role in international decision-making, a reorganisation of the MFA was adopted in 1997. One of its aims was to sustain the MFA's claim of being the major channel for the conduct of international relations. It was carried through between 1997 and 1999. Probably the most visible aspect of this reform was the merging of the bilateral geographical desks of the political and economic directorates-general within a new directorate-general for bilateral relations and international economic relations. In this way, Belgian diplomacy acquired larger desks for simultaneously handling political and, especially, economic bilateral relations.

But this was only the visible part of the 1997 reform. The European desk was somewhat reorganised in order to be able to handle European policy in an integrated way, notwithstanding the pillar structure that came out of the Maastricht negotiations. A number of thematic desks were created or enhanced, in order for the MFA to be able to participate in the new international topics, such as the talks about weapons of mass destruction, environmental issues, human rights and sustainable development. The juridical desk was enhanced as well so as to be able to function as a central reference point for all ministries, federal and sub-state, concerning problems of international law.

This reform was in a certain sense restricted to the corporate culture in the Brussels HQ of the MFA. A follow-on reform, in October 1997, was intended to modernise the activities of the diplomatic posts, by upgrading the tasks of the consular corps. Common to most western diplomatic services, an increased individual assistance to compatriots abroad was one of the leading ideas behind this reform.

At the end of 2000, a new internal reform was adopted as part of a global overhaul of all ministries in Belgium. Amongst the major changes for the MFA was the upgrading of the European desk, which entailed its separation from the directorate-general for multilateral political and functional affairs. This new European directorate-general will be called 'European Affairs and Coordination'. This upgrading grew out of the enhanced importance of Europe in world affairs, the growing domestic impact of decisions taken at the European level and also of the increasing complexity of European issues due to the expansion of Councils, committees and commissions. The new European directorate-general will be organised as three separate desks: European integration and coordination (the P11-function, including agriculture and co-operation development), CFSP, and European bilateral relations (separated from their former directorate-general). This reorganisation will be implemented from 2002 onwards.

The successive reforms of the MFA capitalised of the inherent traditional strengths of this well-oiled machinery for dealing with Belgium's interests in the world at large. The made it possible to overcome the lacklustre image of Belgian diplomacy of the eighties. Nowadays, the MFA again acts as the turning-table for the international relations of Belgium and its federated entities. However, as far as past experiences can serve as a guide, this situation which for now seems to engender good results, will never be iron-clad, since the meanders of domestic politics are sometimes hard to predict and the decisions taken not always as rational as one might have hoped.

Belgium and the CFSP

Belgian political and institutional adaptation to a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) came without major difficulties and was largely unnoticed for two reasons. The first one is very straightforward. Since Belgium took part in CFSP from its very inception as European Political Co-operation (EPC) within the Davignon Committee in 1969, adaptation was incremental and gradual. The second reason lies in its voluntary and declamatory character. The long standing Belgian Permanent Representative to the EU, Philippe de Schoutheete, correctly pointed out that the EPC was the most elaborate attempt at diplomatic coordination between sovereign states. Its importance should not be minimised, but its impact nevertheless remains limited.⁶ (6)Even after Maastricht, when its name changed to CFSP, this remained the case.

After thirty years of co-operating with the other EU member states within the EPC and CFSP frameworks, Belgian foreign policy makers have fully internalised the habits of constantly taking into account the views of others. This relates not only to the practice of informing and consulting all member states (through COREU, bilaterally and, of course, through the EU working groups), but also to the definition of Belgian foreign policy positions in terms of agreed European common positions. Belgian foreign policy-makers still try to convince their partners to accept their views on certain foreign policy issues during the political decision-making process leading to such a common position. But once agreement on a common position has been reached the Belgian government will adopt it as its own national position. Any attempt of 'going it alone', where preference is given to a national position over a common European position, is out of the question.

In Belgian diplomacy, CFSP has never been viewed as a constriction on foreign and security policy-making. Quite the contrary. CFSP clearly has been used by the MFA as a 'multiplier' for Belgian foreign policy opportunities and the projection of influence. Participation in the CFSP has made it possible for Belgian foreign policy-makers to be involved in foreign policy issues without having to elaborate a national position where such a position would have been of little value (Albania, Cambodia, the Western Sahara provide good examples). More importantly, CFSP enables a small country such as Belgium to pursue foreign policy objectives which it would be unable to achieve on its own. In the Ministry, the most obvious institutional change was the more generalised presence of the COREU network and the P11 people in internal brainstorming and decision making procedures. The latest example of this was the designation in 2000 of a deputy to the African director with sole responsibility for the European dimension of Belgian African policy. In the 2002 reform of the MFA, CFSP will become a separate desk in the new European directorate.

Since in Belgium the 'political' aspects of foreign policy – i.e. the domains covered by the CFSP – have traditionally been considered secondary, especially when compared to the

economic dimension, CFSP has not been very helpful for the MFA as a means of securing its place within the overall state bureaucracy or enhancing its prestige within the country.

Conclusion

Contrary to defeatist projections in the eighties, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs survived the ongoing constitutional reform in Belgium and successfully retained its pre-eminence in foreign policy making as it emerged as a key-player in the vital domain of European integration. Moreover, bilateral diplomacy has not disappeared. In three domains at least, a renewed emphasis on bilateralism can be detected, firstly in a field where it was possibly least expected, namely commercial and economic matters. Despite the widespread thesis of economic globalisation and the marginalisation of the state that runs parallel with it, the Belgian MFA has shown since the mid-90s a remarkable aggressiveness with regard to bilateral commercial activities. Economic diplomacy once more gained increased attention and acquired a new dynamism and political acceptability.⁷⁽⁷⁾ Through its 1997 internal reorganisation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs felt itself better equipped for the increased international competition it faced in world markets. The second domain is represented by the apparent preference of the larger member states for the use of contact groups or caucuses - as in the case of Kosovo - rather than EU-based decision-making processes. The third domain is to be found in the continuing need for bilateralism in the preparations for multilateral diplomacy.

In a parallel development based on the conviction that coordination is power, the MFA has concentrated on the enhancement of its coordinating role. The need for an elaborate coordination architecture in foreign policy forced itself upon Belgium as a direct consequence of both the domestic devolution process and the ever widening processes of Europeanisation. Through this, the MFA can steer decision-making, but only up to the point that it retains its image as a neutral 'honest broker' in the eyes of the numerous actors in the process.

The relations between the MFA and the prime minister are somewhat more complex, since they involve cross-cutting interactions between structural factors, personalities and administrations. The bottom line is that the role of the prime minister in European matters is most likely to go on growing. Since prime ministers are usually the ultimate arbitrators in domestic matters, they will increasingly have to assert this role in the European sphere, since the borderline between domestic and foreign policy will continue to wane due to the ever-widening agenda of European integration. The Dutch scholar Alfred van Staden has rightly pointed out that the place where European policy is prepared in the future will become the most important touchstone for the future importance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸⁽⁸⁾ In the case of Belgium, the MFA has built up an undisputed central place in European decision making, since the crucial preparatory and coordination mechanisms are all situated under its umbrella. The planned 2002 upgrading of the European desk within the MFA to the level of a separate directorate shows not only how vital European policy is for Belgium, but also how strongly felt is the need to secure a central role for the MFA within the European decision-making architecture.

APPENDIX

Basic statistics

(as of January 2001)

1. Expenditures (in Belgian Francs)
 - Overall budget (Co-operation Development excluded) 12.123 billion

| | |
|---|--------|
| – Share in federal budget | 1,04 % |
| 2. <u>Diplomatic network</u> | |
| – Embassies | 89 |
| – Non-Resident Ambassadors | 1 |
| – Consulates-General | 28 |
| – Consulates | 7 |
| – Permanent Representations | 13 |
| – Honorary Consuls | 284 |
| 3. <u>Staff numbers</u> | |
| – Personnel abroad | 1809 |
| – Personnel in MFA | 1002 |
| – Number of diplomats | 401 |
| Of which: | |
| – abroad | 251 |
| – in MFA | 100 |
| – special assignments | 50 |
| – Number of Chancellors | 196 |
| Of which: | |
| – abroad | 126 |
| – in MFA | 54 |
| – special assignments | 8 |
| – Number of Co-operation Development Attachés | 23 |
| Of which: | |
| – abroad | 22 |
| – in MFA | 1 |

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