

ARTICLE

# Belgium's multilateral policymaking in the age of global uncertainty: the strive for coherence and consistency through network governance

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## Abstract

The effects of globalisation have an impact on Belgium's multilateral policymaking. The nature of foreign policy has evolved, as has the Kingdom's architecture. Several risks then arise, increased by domestic political fragmentation. Coherence and consistency seem difficult to maintain, as exemplified by internal stalemates or assent procedures on free trade agreements.

*Purpose.* The article aims to map the stakes and current developments to offer insight into the forthcoming 2025-2029 legislature.

*Design/methodology/approach.* The article is designed to study key concepts such as federalisation, decentralisation and fragmentation. They each bring a different angle to understanding Belgium's multilateral policymaking. The analysis is built on a mixed approach. Field observations and semi-structured interviews add qualitative insights to the existing literature.

*Findings.* The article shows that Belgium's plural and complex State foster coherence and consistency for its multilateral action through coordination. The Ministry of foreign Affairs takes a central role in what constitutes a network governance linking federated entities and technical ministries. Domestic centres of interest or the role the country takes at the international level certainly have an impact on the process.

*Originality/value.* The article sheds light on Belgium's coordination of its multilateral policymaking through field observations on a little-known structure: Coormulti. Furthermore, the study of network governance adds theoretical background to the existing literature on the analysis of Belgium's foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Multilateral policymaking, Coordination, Network governance, Federalisation, Decentralisation, Fragmentation, Coormulti.

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## Introduction

Globalisation has transformed the way Modern States elaborate their approach towards external relations. In short, autonomous actors increasingly interact through negotiations in a relatively stable and horizontal interdependence. They form a network governance. This bears a lasting impact on the process and the output. Belgium's last three decades of foreign policymaking appear in this regard as an interesting case study. Its unique position between the EU and its federated entities has endowed the Belgian Federal State with elements worth analysing in the age of globalisation and contemporary uncertainty. This article focuses on polity, the group with a collective identity, which is organised by some form of politically institutionalised social relations (Leca, 2012). Due to scope limitations, the study will, however, not analyse a particular policy. Nor will it dwell too much on politics.

At the heart of the analysis lies one central question: *how does Belgium's plural and complex State manage to foster coherence and consistency for its multilateral action?* Due to the framing of the question, the study will mainly focus on the point of view of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). It is the actor in charge of coordinating the different competent actors on multilateral policymaking. However, federated entities and federal technical ministries will not be overlooked; they have become an integral part of the process.

This article builds on existing literature that shaped the theoretical framework. As such, three key concepts emerge around which answering the research question will be articulated. They map the third, fourth and fifth sections of the analysis.

First, *federalisation* is paramount in understanding Belgium's model of foreign policymaking and the risk it entails for coherence and consistency. Fournier & Reuchamps (2009), Beaufrays & Matagne (2009), and Sinardet (2011), for instance, present a precise overview of Belgium's model of governance and its implications for the Kingdom's political machinery. Second, *decentralisation* that result from the federalization of the State underscores the importance of coordination mechanisms to address coherence and consistency issues. The work of Provan & Kenis (2008) and Sørensen & Torfing (2009) is central here. Third, *fragmentation* shows the growing difficulties in achieving a compromise and carrying Belgium's position at the international level. Galer (2009), Renard (2016), and Crikemans (2016) offer welcome insights on the subject, such as the consequences on both internal and external political dynamics, and the diplomacy promoted by the federated entities. Moreover, the analysis encompasses broader literature on the multilateral policy of small States, among which, to cite only a few, Coolsaet (2004), Guilbaud (2016), and Liégeois (2016).

Method-wise, this article adopts a mixed approach to analyse the evolution of Belgium's foreign policymaking. Observations were conducted during a seven-month research stay at the Belgian MFA (September 2023 to March 2024). It proved

instrumental in presenting findings about a particular and little-known coordination structure: Coormulti. Additional qualitative data were gathered through five semi-structured interviews conducted during the same period. They add contextualisation to the theoretical framework.

In this age of renewed global uncertainty, taking a closer look at Belgium's multi-lateral policymaking is key to assessing the Kingdom's ability to tackle the challenges ahead. The new Arizona government has certainly taken full measure of it, as indicated by its pledge to work on reforming the 1994 Cooperation Agreements.

## Globalisation and foreign policy

For centuries, foreign policy was solely handled by the "*Sovereign*"<sup>1</sup>. Its pursuit was delegated to temporary envoys. Companies and religious organisations, for example, proved instrumental in dealings with the outside world. Then, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the rise of the Modern State and foreign policymaking as its specific attribute (Bayly, 2004). A broad network of permanent embassies was established in Europe and the world. An army of diplomats soon manned them. Originally composed of aristocrats, the diplomatic corps, alongside the bureaucratisation of the State, transformed into a group of professional civil servants. Since then, the world has kept evolving through successive waves of globalisation, that is, the process of increasing integration of economies, cultures, and societies on a global scale. Consequently, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the production of foreign policy is no longer centralised. Indeed, the monopole traditionally devoted to the head of State and the Minister of Foreign Affairs is being contested. This impacts on the polity, its politics, and in turn on the final product: the policy.

Democratic ideals have broadly bridged the gap between government and governed. Recent times have seen a growing interest in international affairs from civil society. This trumps the previous view, following which the people and the executive should have strictly differentiated roles with regard to external policy<sup>2</sup>. The

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1 A thorough overview of the evolution of the external action and its consequences can be found in the chapter written by Dubois (2021).

2 Rousseau (2008, p.165) indeed wrote that "The external exercise of Power does not suit the People; the great maxims of State are beyond their reach; they must rely on their leaders for this, who, always more enlightened than they on such matters, have little interest in making foreign treaties that would be disadvantageous to the homeland". This philosophy actually results from the thinking that the external environment brings uncertainty and unpredictable events. A country then needs to react quickly. Such a response does not however fit the characteristics of the people and should therefore be left with the executive. "Foreign policy requires almost none of the qualities inherent to democracy, and instead demands the development of nearly all those it lacks", wrote de Tocqueville, clearly opposing government and governed. De Tocqueville (1981, p.316), cited in Battistella (1996, p.116).

disruption that emerged from the convergence of the information and communications technology into one homogenous system transfigured societies and the international environment (Slaughter, 2017). Connectivity has made the world shrink (Allen & Hamnett, 1996). Citizens intend for more transparency in every aspect of public life, even one arguably best led with discretion (Maley, 2016).

Since the end of the Second World War, foreign policy has also had an increasingly significant impact on national politics (Hey, 2003). Building on democratic ideals, foreign policy soon became the stake of public debates between various parts of society, mainly the political parties. Those greatly influence external action (Galal, 2020). Key questions of external policy are regularly being brought to light as the object of internal discussion. Nowadays, many domestic political measures broadly result from international constraints. This "*interiorisation*" (Coolsaet, 2002) contributes to drastically reducing the monopoly on foreign policy. Although this phenomenon predates 21st-century dynamics, its new scale creates lasting consequences.

Indeed, interdependent economies, multilateralism, and supranationalism have led large parts of the decision-making process to be handled by specific ministers and their administrations. What once constituted domestic policy has increasingly become part of a globalised web of interactions, especially at the regional level of the international system. Due to the transfer of competences, the European Union (EU) constitutes a well-known example of this (Goetschel, 2013). Supranational directives deepen the homogenisation between Member States. This standardisation through norms enhances the porosity of the internal–external threshold by diminishing the need for a central actor linking the national and the EU levels.

Take, for instance, agriculture, health, or regalian functions such as policing and rendering justice. Facing such complex and technical questions far estranged from the traditional expertise of their offices, the Prime Minister (PM) and the Minister of Foreign Affairs willingly share the workload with specialised administrations. In turn, the Ministers of these administrations tend to contact their international counterparts directly, without necessarily going through the once central MFA (Liégeois, 2016).

Ultimately, the distinction between internal and external themes has become blurred. Several authors have explored this transformation. Merle (1994), Stavridis & Hill (1996) and Webber & Smith (2002) give a good overview of the tipping point that the post-Cold War constitutes for foreign policymaking. Specific literature is also devoted to studying small States' foreign policy. In particular, Elman (1995), Tonra (2002), Hey (2003), Carlsnaes (2007), Harald & Keating (2015), and Galal (2020) all highlight in various ways the internal factors that impact the external behaviour of small States.

From their insights emerges one key point on which the rest of the article will build. Decentralisation appears necessary to keep up with the evolving nature of

the world and fragmented State-led foreign policy<sup>3</sup>. Yet, unicity between words and action remains essential to the national interest<sup>4</sup>. Coherence and consistency, therefore, constitute (just as they have always constituted) a major challenge to foreign policy<sup>5</sup>. Their pursuit is delicate in the context of the form the State is taking in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a natural response, States then tend to institute coordination mechanisms.

## Federalisation: the lasting impact of State reforms on foreign policymaking

It is interesting to note that Belgium's conduct of its foreign policy follows the constitutional evolution of the State. In 1831, Belgium's one-year independence led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. The Kingdom's foreign policy was then mainly produced by the King as head of State. After the Second World War and four reigns (Leopold I, Leopold II, Albert I, and Leopold III), the royal function in Belgium changed (Stengers, 2014, pp.259-284; de Wilde d'Estmael, 2014)<sup>6</sup>. The Minister of Foreign Affairs was then solely tasked with the foreign policymaking (Delcorps, 2015). But the *status quo* did not last; as European integration deepened throughout the 1960s, the PM began to play an increasing role. Intergovernmentalism indeed placed the PM under the spotlight, pushing him to extend his role as an arbitrator beyond internal debates to external ones as well (Coolsaet, 2002, p.240)<sup>7</sup>.

In parallel, the Belgian State transitioned from a unitary to a federal arrangement between 1970 and 1993. The successive State reforms have granted more competence to the federated entities (Regions and Communities), including the ability to represent internationally (*ius legationis*) and sign treaties (*ius tractati*) (Galer, 2009). This peculiar functioning is a result of two legal principles. On the one hand, "*in foro interno, in foro externo*" (Van Eeckhoutte & Corthaut, 2022) refers to the principle that each political unit (Regions, Communities, and the Federal State) is solely lawful

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3 Decentralization in the context of this article refers to the coordination process of foreign policy that takes the shape of a network governance (infra). It results from both the federalization of the Belgian State (devolved competences to federated entities) and the evolving nature of foreign policy.

4 National interest can be defined as the key elements indicating what is best for the nation in its relations with other states. On unicity between word and action regarding the national interest, see Roosens (2021, p.72).

5 In the framework of this article, coherence and consistency can be defined as the close and harmonious relationship between plural views and actions on foreign policy to one another or a whole.

6 This evolution results from both external events and the characters of the monarchs.

7 Ministers Leo Tindemans, Henri Simonet, and Mark Eyskens underlined, each in his time, the growing competition animating the duo PM – MFA.

for conducting international relations within its own field of internal competences<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, the delegation of power to subnational entities based on the “*absence of hierarchy of norms*” (Crikemans, 2012) means that all political units are fundamentally equal among each other. Therefore, they are quite free to carry out their policies without obligation to consult either with the federal authority or other federated entities (De Visscher & Laborderie, 2013, p.26). The combination of these two principles is without precedent in the foreign policy of federal States (Crikemans, 2010, p.9).

The Federal State, however, remains the sole entity responsible for Belgium’s actions at the international level and the management of the country’s international relations (De Wilde d’Estmael & Desplanque, 2021). Concurrently, a *modus vivendi* was designed to prevent complete divergence on foreign policy between the federal level and federated entities (Coolsaet *et al.*, 2014, p.384). First, the latter must inform the federal government of their intention to conduct international negotiations. Then, under specific noncumulative conditions, the federal government can suspend a treaty concluded by the federated entities<sup>9</sup>. Finally, the federal government sets the main orientations of Belgium’s foreign policy and is responsible for the organization of consultations between all levels of power.

The new power distribution resulting from the fourth State reform (1992-1993) clearly disrupts the overall coherence and consistency of Belgian foreign policy. “*The concern for continuity prevails over that of coherence*”, writes constitutionalist Francis Delpérée (2017, p.51). Recent examples attest to this. For instance, at the end of the Cold War, Belgium’s foreign policy marked a regained emphasis towards economic diplomacy. However, contrary to other European countries, this strategy appeared rather inefficient and uncompetitive for Belgium (Coolsaet, 2004). This may be partly due to the new institutional structure and the general lack of coordination (Joly & Haesebrouck, 2021).

In fact, mechanisms of coordination do exist. Following the revision of the constitution in 1993, a series of ordinary laws, special laws, and cooperation agreements between the federal State and the federated entities were enacted. Depending on the matter at hand, coordination is consequently either mandatory or optional. For instance, in the domain of international relations, “*mixed competences*”<sup>10</sup> give way

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8 The Belgian Constitution, article 167, §3.

9 Noncumulative conditions are (1) The contracting party of the proposed treaty is a State that Belgium has not recognized. (2) Belgium does not maintain diplomatic relations with the contracting party.

(3) The relations Belgium has with this contracting party are broken, suspended, or severely compromised. (4) The proposed treaty is contrary to Belgium’s international or supranational obligations.

10 In Belgium, a mixed competence (or shared competence) is a competence or area of action where responsibilities are shared between several levels of power. Claes *et al.* (1996).

to formal consultation between competent authorities. Though criticizable from a legal perspective, this pragmatic approach offers an agreed-upon playing field to the diverse political units in Belgium (De Wilde d'Estmael & Desplanque, 2021, p.520). Above all, it respects the two constitutional principles of "*in foro interno, in foro externo*" and the "*absence of a hierarchy of norms*" (Crieckemans, 2012, p.7). The six Belgian governments are henceforth allowed to reach an agreement on the composition of multilateral negotiation delegations and to participate in formulating the substance of the Kingdom's foreign policy.

*Prima facie*, such a platform could bring more political efficiency. Nevertheless, the impossibility for legally non-hierarchical actors to decide outside of consensus greatly hinders the added value. Some analysts even note that these meetings tend to slow down the debate (Jacob & Pasquet, 2004).

In 2016, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) saga demonstrated the complexity of the Belgian foreign policy decision-making process. At the EU level, as a mixed agreement, CETA required the assent of the national parliaments of all EU member states for its full enactment. At the Belgian level, the Walloon Parliament refused to grant the Minister of Foreign Affairs full authority to sign the Treaty. After a ten-day delay, the signature took place, but it covered only the economic aspects (exclusive competence of the EU) (Delcorps, 2019; De Wilde d'Estmael, 2019). Indeed, as a mixed agreement, Belgium's green light required the assent of all domestic parliaments for the Treaty to come into force fully. The Walloon, Brussels and the French Community Parliaments refused to assent to the investment aspects. The declaration of the then President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, depicts the EU's view: "*I invite Belgium to think about how it operated in terms of its international relations*" (Kuczkiewicz, 2016).

Take another example, in 2024, Belgium remains the only member state that fails to ratify the Trade Agreement between the European Union and its Member states, of the one part, and Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, of the other part. Provisionally applied since 2013, this agreement has lately received the assent of both the Walloon Parliament (2018) and the Brussels Parliament (2023). However, the Parliament of the French Community is still not accounted for. Although different from the CETA<sup>11</sup>, this situation might damage Belgium's international image. "*To some extent, our international colleagues compare our country's position on free-trade agreements with Hungary's posture on gender and migration*", eloquently indicates a Belgian diplomat<sup>12</sup>.

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11 There is no political dispute regarding the Trade Agreement with the Andean countries, as both the Walloon and Brussels Parliaments have already given their assent. Parliamentarians in the French Community Parliament indeed originate from these two Parliaments. The challenge rather lies in scheduling parliamentary work.

12 Anonymous interview, Brussels, January 2023.

Ultimately, complexities brought by federalisation imply a risk of abstention at the international level. If one cannot decide, one cannot take a stand. This holds, for instance, at the EU level where (qualified) majorities may depend on Belgium's voice, as suggested by the recent example of the Nature Restoration Law of June 17, 2024. It is also the case within multilateral organisations as exemplified in 2015. Belgium sent six ministers to the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference (COP) in Paris. Since no prior agreement had been internally reached, Belgium could not take any official position on such a fundamental topic. Abstention often means missed opportunities. They, in turn, lead to marginalisation. Yet influence is essential to protect one's national interests in the multilateral order. And authority is precisely built on taking responsibility on the international stage (Verbeke, 2018).

This situation does not reflect the entirety of Belgium's international position in every competence. It is merely a tendency resulting from a unique State architecture. One could even make the point that Belgium's ability to rally internal consensus varies depending on the role that the country takes. For instance, consider Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2024. Member States and European institutions all attest to Belgium's efficiency and high success as an honest broker (De Rynck, 2024). This indicates that Belgium's ability to represent the general interest still overtakes internal turmoil.

Moreover, the Belgian model presents some advantages regarding foreign policy (Liégeois, 2016, p.30). The fact that the federated entities show preferences on some topics diversifies international outreach. Take, for instance, Flanders and Wallonia's interest in development cooperation or Wallonia's focus on culture and education. Having separated regional foreign affairs departments also brings more diplomatic flexibility and a broader network of contacts. The Kingdom's peculiar model may even offer a methodological appeal to small States experiencing internal complexity and pluralism (Guilbaud, 2016, p.16). Having more Ministers available is also helpful to share the workload and to have the country represented at a higher level.

But, as an EU Member State, domestic stalemates keep looming over Belgium's international position. This tendency has been going on for three decades and shows little sign of changing if it is not for some serious reforms. The Arizona government incidentally announced in early 2025 that it would work on this topic. The coming legislature may thus see some in-depth changes that will undoubtedly be worth following.

## **Decentralisation of the foreign policymaking: Belgium's governance put to the test of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The evolution of the nature of foreign policy, coupled with the 1993 State reform, has transformed Belgium's governance. The entrance of federated entities and



technical ministries into foreign policymaking leads to a decentralisation of the decision-making process. It now takes on the structure of a broad network governance.

### **Foreign policymaking as a network governance**

Within post-liberal democracies, decentralisation has led the governing process to take the shape of a *"network governance"* where decision-making, coordination, and implementation of policies or actions involve multiple interconnected stakeholders, such as government agencies and civil society (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Typically, *"network governance"* within the State is structured around a series of *"governance networks"*. In other words, *"the network governance"* refers to the process of governing within the environment of a network. In contrast *"a governance network"* refers to the group of interconnected stakeholders involved in that process.

To clarify, here is a thorough definition of the latter: *"A governance network is a relatively stable horizontal articulation of interdependent, but operationally autonomous actors; who interact through negotiations; which take place within a regulative, normative, cognitive and imaginary framework; that to a certain extent is self-regulating; and which contributes to the production of public purpose within or across particular policy areas"* (Sørensen, E., & Torfing, 2005, p.203).

Four elements may lead stakeholders to structure their interactions within a governance network (Sørensen, E., & Torfing, 2009, p.203).

(1) Self-interest. Stakeholders find it beneficial to collaborate because interdependency means that achieving their objectives often relies on the cooperation of various partners.

(2) Necessity due to globalisation. Globalisation carries many issues that require cooperation across all levels of society to address effectively.

(3) Democratic architecture. The democratic nature of society partly drives the formation of governance networks. Social expectations influence the process, reflecting what is deemed necessary for creating legitimate public policy.

(4) Political equilibrium. Political dynamics may compel State entities to share the decision-making process to (re)gain some level of control or legitimacy.

Interestingly, Belgium's development cooperation has already been identified as a distinct governance network (Vervisch, 2018). Similarly, based on the previous definition, specific areas of Belgium's foreign policy could also be categorised as distinct governance networks. Take, for instance, European Affairs or Multilateral Affairs. From a broader perspective, one could even argue that Belgian foreign policy operates under a network governance framework. Indeed, characteristics of both the

Belgian federalisation and resulting decentralisation led the governing process to include stakeholders from all levels of power and civil society<sup>13</sup>.

Above all, foreign policymaking structured within a network governance framework increases the risk of incoherence and inconsistency, exacerbated by the federalisation of the State. Dilution of the capacity to lead and decide may indeed impair the ability to formulate harmonious international positions. Federalisation, combined with the evolving nature of foreign policy, has contributed to expanding the scope of external affairs, which has become increasingly multidimensional. This juncture led to the coordination process of implementing the policy being absolutely fundamental.

### The role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

In this network governance, the MFA occupies a central position. At the level of foreign policy implementation, with regard to mixed competences, the MFA takes the role of coordinator. This transformation dates from the late 1990s. In 1992, diplomat Marc Vinck, ex-secretary of the *"modernisation unit"*, formulated a series of propositions (Coolsaet *et al.*, 2014, p.388). They were destined to counter the centrifugal dynamics at work. In essence, even if the MFA had lost its monopoly, it could still play a key role in the decision-making process. The aim of coordination was precisely to maintain coherence and consistency. To that end, significant reforms were launched by Ambassador Jan De Bock in 1996<sup>14</sup>. On a side note, twenty-nine years later, the MFA keeps conducting internal discussions on its future role through the SAIL initiative (Strategy and Innovation Lab) and the subsequent *"Synergie"* implementation program<sup>15</sup>.

Three of Vinck's propositions stand out, underscoring the MFA's ambition to remain or solidify its role as the central hub of Belgium's foreign policy network governance.

First, the MFA should oversee communications related to foreign policy, effectively engaging with Belgian civil society. This exercise relates to a certain form of

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13 Writing about post-liberal democracies, Alain Supiot (2020, p.79) acutely States: "The governing machine is no longer conceived on the model of the clock, but on that of the computer. A headless machine where power is no longer localizable and where regulation replaces legislation and governance replaces government".

14 They formally started with the 1997 Royal decree. Derycke (1997).

15 The exercise, known as SAIL, integrates expertise from both the diplomatic corps and internal career agents. With participation from nearly two hundred individuals, SAIL is structured around ten themes. Its primary aim is to reassess the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' functioning and strategize for tomorrow's diplomacy.

public diplomacy<sup>16</sup>. Pedagogically explaining foreign policy is indeed helpful to rally public support for the country's external action. Moreover, it contributes to developing some degree of soft power at the national level<sup>17</sup>. In short, through active engagement with Belgian civil society, the MFA fulfils two roles: relaying information to the public and securing its position in the hierarchy of the network governance. Undoubtedly, digital technology has facilitated this agenda, as evidenced by its important usage in recent years<sup>18</sup>.

Second, the MFA should deliver exceptional expertise across all aspects of its operations to act as the timing belt in shaping foreign policy. Although the regionalisation of competences followed the federalisation of the State, subnational diplomacies initially lacked resources and means of influence. Bound by federal loyalty, the MFA quickly provided its embassy network, communication channels, and multi-lateral diplomatic expertise to assist Regions and Communities in their international representation (Vandenbosch & Dermine, 2019; Cambier, 2019, *cited in* Faniel, 2021, p.223)<sup>19</sup>. The field of European policy was instrumental in fostering collaboration at the domestic level (Robinet, 2021). Through the efforts of the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU and the MFA's Directorate General on European Affairs, federal expertise positioned the MFA at the core of decision-making processes on complex technical issues. *"Anyone who takes on this coordination immediately assumes a central role in the State system"*, insightfully noted Clingendael analyst Alfred van Staden (1998, *cited in* Coolsaet, 2003, p.461).

Third, according to Vinck, to strengthen its coordination leadership, the MFA should establish specialised units dedicated to fostering domestic collaboration on international issues. Following the fourth State reform, the coordination structure of the Federal State was reorganised. Since 1980, the *Concertation Committee* has been

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16 Public diplomacy can be defined as the practice of engaging with public audiences, both national and foreign, to strengthen ties, build trust, and promote cooperation.

17 Soft power, as defined in opposition to hard power, is the capacity of a State to seduce and persuade based on intangible resources such as culture.

18 In recent years, numerous digital communication initiatives have flourished. Clear dissemination of information is indeed a priority at the MFA. The Ministry relays its international engagements and representations through official communique, mailing lists, and social media channels. Additionally, most ambassadors and diplomats actively share their activities and insights through their own social media profiles, further amplifying the MFA's communication efforts. Finally, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Development Cooperation leverage dedicated communication units to enhance their international and national profiles.

19 Inscribed in the new article 143, §1 of the Belgian Constitution, the principle of federal loyalty can be understood as a rule of conduct that must be adopted by all parts of the Federal State to facilitate coexistence and preserve harmony within the State. Prior to the sixth State reform in 2014 and the introduction of the principle of federal loyalty, the Cour constitutionnelle relied on the principle of proportionality to ensure the proper functioning of the Federal State.

the highest coordinating body<sup>20</sup>. Hierarchically subordinate is the newly appointed *Interministerial Foreign Policy Conference* (CIPE) (Dehaene, 1993). The CIPE is chaired by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and comprises political representatives responsible for international relations at all levels of government, both federal and subnational. This permanent body is responsible for facilitating information exchange and resolving any administrative stalemates. Its mission also consists of ensuring coherence in key political issues<sup>21</sup>.

Within the CIPE, several permanent consultation structures were established<sup>22</sup>. Two of these structures are particularly noteworthy. The first oversees European Affairs, while the second is responsible for Multilateral Affairs. Initially referred to as P11 in administrative jargon, the permanent consultation structure on European Affairs was upgraded to the rank of Directorate General on European Affairs and Coordination (DGE) in 2003 (Verhofstadt, 2003). In 2024, within the DGE, E0.0 ensures organisation and follow-up of the coordination meetings, as well as preparation for the European Council and the General Affairs Council. Acting as a coordinator rather than a leader, the new Directorate General safeguards the supranational and federal direction of Belgian European integration. Its activity and importance have increased throughout the years.

As Europe's geopolitical role in the world has grown and EU decisions increasingly impact domestic politics, along with the increasing complexity of EU matters, the need for intra-Belgium coordination has also risen.

### **Coormulti: a permanent consultation structure for Multilateral Affairs**

Alongside the establishment of the Directorate General on European Affairs, Multilateral Affairs have also gained a permanent consultation structure. In 2003, Ambassador Jan Grauls underlined the growing importance of globalisation (Grauls, 2003, *cited in* Coolsaet & Nasra, 2009, p.28). Accordingly, the MFA pursued the ambition to implement a strong coordination structure on global issues to contribute to

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20 Composed of the Prime Minister and the Minister-President of each Community and Region, the Comité de concertation was seldom involved in matters of foreign policy until the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

21 The CIPE rarely convenes. From 2018 to 2023, only three meetings were held. Key political issues discussed include the transposition of European directives, reforms of Belgian Cooperation Agreements, and strategies concerning major powers such as China. Anonymous interview, Brussels, January 2024.

22 Due to the absence of hierarchy of norms principle, the word "consultation" should be interpreted as a "collaborative process". Federal and federated entities represented in the permanent consultation structure wield decision-making authority, thereby progressively transforming the discussions into genuine negotiations. *Infra*.

global governance. By doing so, the MFA reaffirmed its central position (and thus the federal government's) in Belgium's new domain of foreign policymaking, postponing the question of whether the coordination mission would be better served under the PM's authority (Grauls, 2004). In October 2003, a new consultation structure called "*Coormulti*" was formally established within the newly created Directorate General for Multilateral Affairs and Globalisation (DGM) (Coolsaet *et al.*, 2014, p.407). Its administrative call sign was initially M7, later changed to Mo2, and finally to M0.1.

Coormulti, which replaced previous consultation structures, operates under the competences prescribed by the Cooperation Agreement of June 30, 1994 (Claes *et al.*, 1994, November 19). In a nutshell, Coormulti is a service designed to prepare Belgium's position in non-EU international organisations when the topics discussed involve mixed competences<sup>23</sup>. Discussions within Coormulti involve a horizontal and systematic process of political consultations that precede a consensus decision. Its objectives are: (1) to agree on a joint position, (2) to identify the person who will represent Belgium, and (3) to determine the composition of the national delegation to an international summit. "*Coormulti shapes the architecture of Belgium's position. It is the oil in the engine of our country's decision-making process*", a Belgian diplomat prosaically reflected<sup>24</sup>.

Concretely, in 2024, the unit responsible for Coormulti (M0.1) consists of three agents from the MFA: one ambassador who presides over the consultations, one collaborator, and one administrative secretary. Daily, M0.1 takes several roles. First and foremost, it acts as a service provider. Indeed, the initiative to launch a Coormulti belongs to any competent actor from the Belgian State. Typically, a unit within the MFA will need a consultation to develop a Belgian position on a topic on its agenda. For instance, in 2023, the Directorate for International Governance (M4) required Coormulti's assistance to prepare for the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) summit in New Delhi. As a service provider, M0.1 provided M4 with the necessary platform to effectively engage with all domestic stakeholders involved in international relations or technical matters.

In general, participants can be numerous. They include representatives from federal cabinets and administrations, community and regional cabinets and administrations, as well as civil society organisations. For instance, in the GPAI meeting, participants included representatives from the MFA, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Strategy and Support (BOSA), the Flemish Department of Economy,

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23 The targeted international organizations are listed in the Annex of the Cooperation Agreement of June 30, 1994. Some examples are the BENELUX, the Council of Europe, the OECD, the UN (including several agencies), or the FAO and WHO.

24 Anonymous interview, Brussels, September 2023.

Science, and Innovation (EWI), the Brussels Public Administration for Innovation (Innoviris), and the Cabinet of the State Secretary for Digitalization. Concerning matters related to civil society engagement, one could refer to examples such as the Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S – FNRS) in the case of the European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN), or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the case of the UN Global Refugee Forum.

Otherwise, M0.1 acts as a facilitator. While most consultations proceed smoothly, certain topics, such as climate issues, social themes, and the trade-off between business and human rights, can lead debates to an impasse. These discussions between political parties or Communities sometimes arise from divergent political views and conflicting interests. They often result in Belgium's inability to commit to multilateral initiatives fully. An example of this was seen in 2024 with the global coalition on social justice formed by the International Labour Organization (ILO). On another scale, Benelux integration has also suffered from "*intercommunity distrust*" since the 2000s (De Wilde d'Estmael & Desplanque, 2021, p.535).

One should further stress that it is different centres of interest that shape the federated entities' action on multilateral policymaking. As such, EU policy is probably one of the most important components of Flemish foreign policy, with the regional dimension within the EU at its core. Wallonia, while paying great attention to the EU as well, is more oriented towards the Francophonie and the *Interreg* dimension (Coolsaet, 2004)<sup>25</sup>. Also, Flanders is notably more focused on Asia and its expanding markets, while French speakers closely monitor the Great Lakes region of Africa. More recently, debates over sending equipment to Ukraine reminded of the existing divergences.

As a facilitator, M0.1 moderates the consultation meetings constructively, building trust among participants and striving to keep discussions open. The diplomatic experience of Coormulti's president is, in this regard, instrumental in reaching operational conclusions. In recent years, a clear approach has been adopted to tread lightly on delicate matters and avoid polemics. Agree to disagree may be an effective line to toe, but while this helps ease internal difficulties, it also narrows the scope of operational conclusions. "*We are less and less working on the content and more and more on the form*", observes a Belgian diplomat<sup>26</sup>.

The quality of the consultations may depend on the readiness of the participants. In this regard, some disparity in the selected approaches can be observed. While some cabinet members come well-prepared and speak with the endorsement of their hierarchy, others tend to engage less in the debate. Sometimes, representatives

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<sup>25</sup> The reasons are economic, but also cultural.

<sup>26</sup> Anonymous interview, Brussels, October 2023.

from certain entities cannot attend a Coormulti meeting at all. This absence is often due to the heavy workload faced by administrations and cabinets. When this occurs, the entity's position may not be represented, and it falls to the president's diplomatic sensibility and experience to anticipate potential political stalemates.

Finally, M0.1 acts as a notary. The Cooperation Agreement of June 30, 1994, stipulates that Coormulti reports serve as directives for diplomatic posts abroad and are binding on all participants<sup>27</sup>. The quality of the report is thus crucial as it must accurately convey the essence of the debate. Additionally, it must highlight operational conclusions that will guide the subsequent work of the national delegation. The absence of certain representatives at a Coormulti meeting can therefore be detrimental to the agreed-upon Belgian position, as it may not reflect the collective interest of all the competent entities. The absentee may consequently feel that the consensus does not bind them. Nevertheless, once the Coormulti report is approved, all levels of government are legally bound by the consensus, even if a representative could not attend the meeting. One occurrence can be cited: the Global Compact for Migration that led to the federal government's fall in 2018.

### **The 2018 Global Compact for Migration: an unexpected case of political stalemate**

The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) is a non-binding intergovernmental agreement negotiated at the UN level, ratified on December 19, 2018. Given the UN's status among targeted international organisations requiring a consulted Belgian position, the matter was promptly included on the Coormulti agenda. Subsequently, three meetings were held: the first on February 19, which proactively defined a joint position, established priorities, and set red lines. The second meeting on June 4 redefined the Belgian position to ensure consensus. Finally, on September 12, the third Coormulti meeting unanimously approved the UN compact.

However, due to political reasons, the Flemish party *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) opposed the ratification of the GCM after it had already been agreed upon. This sparked heated debates within the federal government, as the N-VA was part of the ruling coalition at the time. Supported by the rest of his government, Prime Minister Charles Michel requested the House of Representatives to endorse Belgium's ratification of the GCM (Flahaux, 2018). Despite opposition from N-VA and Vlaams Belang (VB), another Flemish party, the motion passed, effectively isolating them. In December 2018, the PM travelled to the Marrakech Conference to ratify the Compact, "*emphasising Belgium's commitment to its word and credibility*" (Michel, 2018). The federal government had collapsed the day before.

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27 Article 8 of the Accord-cadre de coopération du 30 juin 1994.

On the technical side, the N-VA attempted to use Coormulti's notary role to distance itself from Belgium's agreement on the Compact. The party first argued that the federal government had not properly consulted it. Yet, it is precisely Coormulti's design to consult with competent entities from all levels of power. The party then argued that Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration Theo Francken had not been involved in Coormulti's decision-making process and could not be bound by the internal consensus. However, reports from Coormulti indicate that Francken's Cabinet was invited to all three meetings.

Although Francken's representative did not participate in the final consultation, Belgian Ambassador Jean-Luc Bodson, Special Envoy for Asylum and Migration, ensured formal agreement on the sidelines of the last meeting (Frères, 2018). In the House of Representatives, Bodson (2018) quoted the report, stating, "*Belgium considers the text to be balanced, reflecting the concerns we have expressed, and a significant diplomatic advancement globally. Therefore, Belgium will approve the text in Marrakech in December and even invites other countries to do the same*". In the end, because the report indicated that all parties concurred with Coormulti's operational conclusion, and despite some ongoing disagreements, this procedure proved sufficient to bind Francken to the consensus effectively. It also underlined that the Belgian system does not provide for an "*empty chair policy*".

The consequences of the GCM crisis on the mechanism of Coormulti are twofold. First, meticulous attention is given to the invitation list to ensure no representative is left out of the loop. In 2018, no wrongdoing was attributed to the MFA, and M0.1 intends to maintain high standards to facilitate the delicate process of internal decision-making and implementation. Second, consultation meetings now exhibit a higher participation rate from cabinet representatives. Moreover, Flemish participants present strictly defined positions previously endorsed by their hierarchy.

The Flemish approach reflects a trend that has been going on for the last three decades. Flemish foreign policy is indeed more centralised, while the Walloon's appears more complex, merged between the Region and the French-Speaking Community (Wallonie-Bruxelles International) (Crikemans, 2006). It offers an interesting insight into Flanders' efforts to verticalize its decision-making process in a new organizational structure that "*ought to improve the coherence and decisiveness*" (Crikemans, 2010, p.12) of its regional foreign policy.

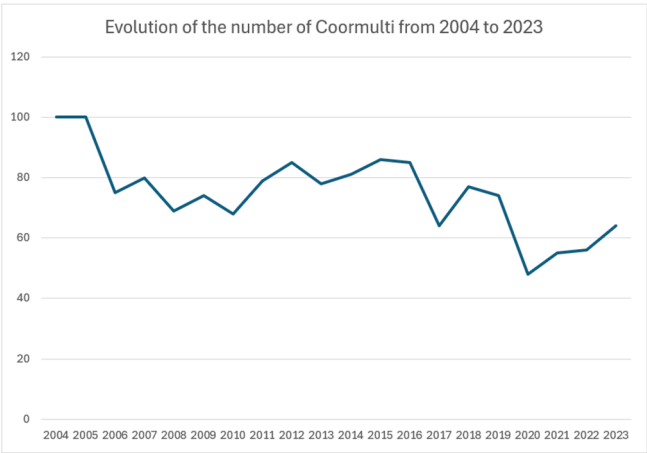
However, while Flanders' approach has enhanced the capacity for decision-making at the federal level, it has also, to some extent, curtailed the freedom of debate. Before the GCM crisis, reaching consensus typically required two or three meetings. Following the crisis, the number of meetings needed has been halved, but discussions now more frequently lead to significant stalemates.



### Belgium’s multilateral coordination today

As indicated by the following graph, a brief analysis of Coormulti’s evolution from 2004 to 2023 indeed reveals a trend toward fewer consultation meetings<sup>28</sup>.

Year	Number of Coormulti
2004	100
2005	100
2006	75
2007	80
2008	69
2009	74
2010	68
2011	79
2012	85
2013	78
2014	81
2015	86
2016	85
2017	64
2018	77
2019	74
2020	48
2021	55
2022	56
2023	64



This decreasing evolution is, however, not necessarily negative as it does not only result from the GCM crisis and should therefore be nuanced by at least three factors.

First, the number of Coormulti meetings partly depends on the international agenda. Periodic conferences or summits monitored by MFA units often prompt these units to turn to M0.1 as a service provider for anticipatory meetings. Nevertheless, special consultations can be scheduled spontaneously if an unforeseen event requires a Belgian position on mixed competences. Second, the COVID-19 crisis introduced an element of modernisation into the decision-making process. When physical meetings became impossible in 2020, the MFA developed digital alternatives. These “*Visio-Coormulti*” meetings allow representatives to save travel time, which improves the quality of the meetings due to a higher attendance rate<sup>29</sup>. Third, the use of written remarks agreed upon through silence procedures (*ad referendum*) has increased due to heavy workloads. During the initial meeting, participants typically

28 The data for this graph were collected during a study stay at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2023.

29 Although relatively rare, diplomats from embassies abroad now have the opportunity to attend Coormulti meetings. As a result, the debates have significantly improved in the quality of information shared.

establish general positions, priorities, and red lines, and then share further details through written comments ("*e-Coormulti*").

Coordination is crucial in a federal State like Belgium. The MFA is acutely aware of this need and clearly links coordination with coherence (Lahbib, 2022, p.8). This raises questions about the resources allocated to such a vital mission. Currently, only three MFA agents are assigned to this role, with just one accredited diplomat among them. While M0.1's role does not involve generating content for its agenda items, this staffing configuration nevertheless imposes a significant workload. In the future, the quality of internal consultations could be jeopardised if the number of multilateral initiatives continues to grow internationally. Simultaneously, the MFA's central role in the governance network of foreign policy could be at risk if domestic fragmentation accelerates.

## **Fragmentation: the growing struggle to achieve compromise**

Belgium's political landscape is quite fragmented, a fact that enhances risks to coherence and consistency in multilateral policymaking. The 1965 general election marked a clear rift, and from then on, Belgium did not return to a two-party system<sup>30</sup>. This fragmentation grew over the next fifty years due to three main factors (Delwit, 2022, p.598; Mabilie, 2000). First, in the late 1960s and 1970s, traditional parties split up into two linguistic aisles. Second, the traditionally dominant parties lost influence. Third, new political entities capitalised on this decline and entered the political sphere. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the nature of the Belgian political fragmentation changed as well (*Ibid.*). Almost every political party is now of medium importance.

Pascal Delwit's work clearly shows this general trend, highlighting two key dimensions of contemporary political fragmentation (Delwit & Lebrun, 2021, pp.35-36). On one hand, votes are spread widely among various political parties, indicating a highly dispersed voter base. On the other hand, the effective number of parties reveals that seats in the federal Parliament are allocated to a rising number of political groups, reflecting a trend toward more pluralistic representation and a diversity of conflicting interests.

This causes several challenges. The most visible is the difficulty in rallying coalitions to form a federal government (Coolsaet, 2016). Between 2007 and 2025, Belgium spent more than 1,600 days under a caretaker government, handling only current affairs. Additionally, forming coalitions to achieve a qualified majority in Parliament has become increasingly complex, often requiring the cooperation of six to eight

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30 Blondel (1968, p.186) designates the Belgian two-party system as "imperfect bipartisanship".

partners. Over the last twenty-five years, these challenges have been impairing Belgium's consociational democracy<sup>31</sup>. A major symptom is the growing struggle to reach compromises, despite it being a decisive mechanism of Belgian governance<sup>32</sup>.

The same obstacles can be observed in Belgium's foreign policymaking, where compromise is increasingly difficult to achieve. *"Today, it is not only about conciliating the Regions and Communities with the Federal government. The axes of division are fundamentally much more political, and if they give the appearance of a 'federal versus federated' dynamic it is because the political majorities are not at all the same"*, relates a Belgian diplomat<sup>33</sup>.

Consequently, extra care is taken at the administrative level to protect Belgium's international image, especially when the country is under scrutiny<sup>34</sup>. For instance, during the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2024, the MFA focused on building consensus rather than getting caught up in every draft and comment. *"Coormulti's role during this Presidency is to fix clear priorities and instructions, not to quibble over every detail and remark. Our job is to prevent any misstep that might badly reflect on Belgium and complicate the work of our colleagues"*, explained another Belgian diplomat<sup>35</sup>.

Political fragmentation also impacts the assent procedure on mixed treaties, as evidenced by cases such as CETA and the Free Trade Agreement between the EU and the Andean countries<sup>36</sup>. Until the 1993 reform of the State, only commercial treaties and treaties *"likely to burden the State or bind Belgians individually"*<sup>37</sup> had to be presented before Parliament. Thirty years later, depending on their competences, seven Parliaments may potentially need to give assent to mixed treaties<sup>38</sup>. However, the number of Parliaments remains a relative complexity as political majorities are not homogeneous across Belgium.

The fourth State reform has equipped Belgium with a tool to address the incoherence caused by prolonged assent procedures: the *"mixed treaties working group"*.

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31 A consociational democracy is a political system where major internal divisions (ethnic, religious, linguistic) are stabilized by consultation among the elites of these groups. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps (2020); Sinardet (2011).

32 Further decentralization between levels of powers will certainly not facilitate the achievement of compromises. Delwit (2022, p.636).

33 Anonymous interview, Brussels, January 2024.

34 At the height of the 2007-2011 political deadlock, Belgium was for instance pointed as a "failed state" or a "dead nation". Renard (2016, p.3).

35 Anonymous interview, Brussels, November 2023.

36 Supra.

37 Former article 68 of the Belgian Constitution.

38 The assemblies in question can be the Chamber of Representatives, the Flemish Parliament, the Walloon Parliament, the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region, the Parliament of the French Community (also known today as the Wallonia-Brussels Federation), the Parliament of the German-speaking Community, and the Assembly of the French Community Commission (COCOF).

However, internal fragmentation has quickly led to complex power dynamics, complicating its utilization. Given the group's primary mission is to identify the competences involved in a treaty and designate the authority to sign it on Belgium's behalf, the stakes are particularly high for treaties where exclusive competence requires only the House of Representatives' assent for ratification. This introduces uncertainty into the ratification process. In 2023, this scenario unfolded with two treaties: the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, Northeast Atlantic, Irish and North Seas (ASCOBANS), and the Agreement on Marine Biodiversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ).

To add a layer of complexity, permanent consultation structures like Coormulti are frequently bypassed in favour of *ad hoc* meetings at the political level. Direct and agile contact between cabinet members is sensible in a fragmented paradigm. However, parallel negotiations in these *Interkabinetten Werkgroepen* (IKWs) sometimes overlook the technical expertise of administrations. IKWs often serve as the initial forum for debates, leading many negotiations to initially fail within this framework (Witmeur, 2015, pp.71-73). Conversely, their strength lies in the solidity of the compromises achieved: once agreed upon in IKWs, they are generally accepted without further questioning in government meetings. They are almost automatically approved by the Council of Ministers. IKWs are often perceived as *black boxes* by the administration. While they can expedite negotiations at a higher level, they also sometimes create frustration among agents who may suddenly feel sidelined from the case.

Ultimately, the dominance of political power in foreign policy matters is evident. The evolution of the Belgian State may have durably transformed the internal equilibrium in foreign policymaking, especially over the past decade. In 2005, a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) already highlighted the crucial importance of intra-Belgian coordination mechanisms. "*Coormulti's strategic importance rises with the increasing competencies of the Communities and Regions, which results in multiple levels of Belgian authorities being represented in international institutions*" (OCDE, 2005, p.239). Twenty years later, while the observation stands, we are now witnessing a shift in balance. Initially designed to foster consensus, consultation structures like Coormulti show federated entities striving to assert their influence on the federal decision-making process by turning it into a co-decision mechanism. This raises many questions about the sustainability of the current model.

Admittedly, the "absence of hierarchy of norms" principle provides an even playing field for all domestic political entities in the domain of mixed competences. Yet, it remains the federal government's prerogative to set the main orientations of Belgium's foreign policy. While internal consultations were once a collaborative process, it must now be acknowledged that their nature inherently involves political

decision-making at every level. Federated entities often seek to tie consensus to formal agreement within their political sphere. This approach may clarify red lines and priorities, but it also complicates compromises based on multiple interests.

Consequently, numerous political stakeholders advocate for streamlining the country's operational framework. However, here also fragmentation remains evident. In 2023, the political landscape outlines the full scope of potential State reforms. On one side, VB<sup>39</sup> campaigns for independence, while N-VA and CD&V advocate for confederalism. On the other side, OpenVLD, Ecolo, and Groen support the refederalisation of specific competences, whereas MR recommends almost complete refederalisation. PTB-PVDA even champions abolishing the absence of a hierarchy of norms favouring the federal level. In the middle ground, PS supports a system based on four Regions.

Since 2009, the Cooperation Agreements of 1994 are also in the line of sight of some reform. Indeed, the functioning relations between federal and federated entities designed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century do not adequately represent today's institutional reality. For this purpose, an *ad hoc* group was formed within the CIPE. Its work has not yet been completed, but the new 2025 Arizona government has made it part of its coalition agreement to restart the negotiations seriously (De Wever, 2025, p.4). In 2016, the first conclusions were brought to the *Concertation Committee*, which gave an unfavourable opinion. The discussions were highly political, and further efforts to reform were slow. In March 2023, however, the CIPE created three new *ad hoc* working groups to resolve flaws in the initial conclusions.

The first group oversees the Cooperation Agreement concerning the representatives of federated entities abroad (Claes *et al.*, 1994, October 26). The second group is tasked with the representation of the international organisations pursuing activities involving mixed competences (Claes *et al.*, 1994, November 19). The third group works on the modalities of Belgium's representation in the Council of the European Union (Claes *et al.*, 1996). In October 2023, the CIPE decided to pursue the work in the framework of an interfederal political working group. The 2024 new legislature will show if capitalisation on this work is possible or if fragmentation will overshadow five more years of Belgian foreign policymaking.

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39 VB stands for "Flemish Interest", N-VA for "New Flemish Alliance", CD&V for "Christian Democratic and Flemish", OpenVLD for "Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats", Ecolo and Groen are the Green parties, MR stands for "Reformist Movement", PTB-PVDA for "Workers' Party of Belgium", and PS for "Socialist Party".

## Conclusion

The last three decades have seen deep transformations in the international system. Consequently, the nature of foreign policy has evolved. Domestic actors are taking an increasing importance in the decision-making process. This article has highlighted Belgium's situation in this regard. The analysis revolved around one central question: *how does Belgium's plural and complex State manage to foster coherence and consistency for its multilateral action?* The answer mainly depends on how Belgium coordinates its policymaking and implementation.

The analysis indeed showed that the federalisation of the State has brought a need for coordination to ensure the good elaboration of multilateral policy. Coordination helps counter risks of incoherence and inconsistency because it leads all components of the State to reach agreement. Yet, daily implementation is difficult, as exemplified by the cases of CETA, COP21 or the free-trade agreement with the Andean countries. Failure to achieve internal consensus leads to abstention at the international level. Influence and authority on global issues suffer from it. However, the analysis has shown that internal agreement partly depends on the role Belgium is taking at the international level. The latest case is the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2024.

The analysis also showed that the reason coordination is key in navigating complexities of multi-level consultations is that foreign policymaking now follows the rules of network governance structured on different governance networks. The evolving nature of foreign policy and the federalisation of the State indeed resulted in a decentralisation of the decision-making process. Multilateral policymaking is one such governance network. In its centre stands the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which coordinates federated entities and technical ministries. Coormulti is the primary mechanism through which coordination is achieved. Field observations revealed that the efficiency of meetings greatly depends on the matter at hand. Domestic actors indeed show different interests and degrees of interest depending on the topic. Risks can be significant when the process goes wrong, as exemplified by the Global Compact on Migration that led to the fall of the federal government in 2018.

The analysis finally showed that political fragmentation weighs heavily on coordination, and thus on the decision-making process. It makes it more difficult to reach a compromise. The divides between different political majorities in various governments of Belgium complicate, for instance, the assent procedure of international treaties. Moreover, informal groups of political discussions increasingly work in parallel with the permanent consultation structure that is Coormulti. These *Interkabinetten Werkgroepen* are designed to ease difficult debates bound to political fragmentation but simultaneously question the institutional architecture. Incoherence and inconsistency may ensue as the administration in charge of coordinating struggles to see beyond the black box.

In the end, the analysis highlighted many difficulties that take root in the State architecture of Belgium created thirty years ago. The political climate certainly required it. However, contemporary uncertainty raises questions about the sustainability of the current model. Difficulties will certainly rise due to diverging views and complex issues, and the probable resulting status quo in coordinating the multilateral policymaking would be costly to the country's external action. The coming years will show if the Arizona government can work on the cooperation framework.

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