



EGDMONT'S SEVENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY AMBASSADOR ANICK VAN CALSTER, DIRECTOR GENERAL OF BILATERAL RELATIONS, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF BELGIUM

M. Minister,
M First Deputy president of the European Commission
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

In this group of distinguished speakers, I have been asked to represent the "traditional diplomacy", *the bilateral diplomacy* : where do we stand today? What is the role of this national diplomacy in these days of globalization, social media, the world wide web. What is our added value? How do we relate to multilateralism and European diplomacy? How do we adapt to the changes around us?

When I started my career the role of diplomacy was described as "report, represent, negotiate", and this still is quite a good description. Added to that, there are also growing expectations in the field of consular services and developments in international cooperation, on which I will not elaborate now.

Diplomatic reporting is a core element of policy development and preparation. Not everything is out on the internet, or in the press, and these days, you even have to be very careful with what you read. "Fake news" has been an important issue in the international arena lately. Being in another country and having regular, privileged contacts with the people who matter : officials, but also businessmen, journalists and civil society with their national interest in mind, allows diplomats to bring true added value. The "Belgian interest" we take into account, is broad. It is not only about mere material interests but also about ideas, values we cherish, such

as peace and security, orderly migrations, human dignity and human rights, sustainable development, rule of law...

We analyze in which fields can we do more, where can we build alliances, why a certain position is unacceptable for a country, what are the sensitivities, what are the avenues to explore for a dynamic bilateral and multilateral foreign policy...

Thus, we do not content ourselves with reporting the facts, but we contextualize, we sketch possible ways forward, we suggest positions: we bring building blocks for policy development.

Diplomats also represent their country, this is probably the most visible part of the work: old school receptions, networking events, but recently, it has also taken the form of "public diplomacy", getting the broader audience know Belgium better, building bridges. Public diplomacy, working on Belgium's image is a field in which cultural diplomacy comes in, M. Dujardin will speak about this. But also parliamentarians can play a role in this and for a Belgian investor or businessperson, an introduction by an official representative of his country can mean a lot.

The third pillar, negotiations, is very broad, and touches almost all fields of our activities, but especially the multilateral branch of it. From the bilateral department, we provide input for our colleagues. In the United Nations and other multilateral organizations and through the EU consensus or agreements can be made with many countries. Imagine what it would mean for an exporting country such as Belgium to negotiate trade agreements with all its commercial partners, one by one. Imagine defending human rights in a world without the "universal declaration of Human Rights",

We believe that global issues need to be dealt with globally and we believe in effective multilateralism. We want to be a responsible player in, i.a. the UN. This is why we are running for a non-permanent seat in the Security Council for 2019-2020.

Changes are not only external: the different rounds of state reform have had their influence on our representation abroad. Counting everybody together, with regions, communities, police, army, we usually stand the comparison with countries of a similar size easily. I even think that we are more than before.

Still, budgetary cuts have also touched us. How did we react? In our usual, pragmatic way:

- by reviewing *our network*, , *not only in one direction, not only by closing representations, but also by looking where we have to open or reinforce*

- by unifying the different careers in our house, it gives us a more flexible corps, with people with a broader view and experience in diplomatic, consular and development fields.

- by looking for collaborations:

With the EEAS, for example, even if I would tend to say that we have not yet fully established how to work together in the best possible way with this young partner. There is an excellent collaboration, but it has hardly affected our network, as in many places national interests are simply too important to give up on our own representation and rely fully on EEAS.

Another natural partner for collaboration are the Netherlands, our neighbors, very similar in many fields (although we like to deny this); This collaboration goes very deep: we dispatch

diplomats in each other's HQs, who get the same access as our own diplomats and in Tirana and Yaounde, the deputy head of mission belongs to the other BENE nation. So sometimes, the Netherlands are represented by a Belgian chargé in Albania and Belgium by a Dutch one in Cameroon. And the reflection on further cooperation continues.

To conclude, you see that our level of ambition remains high, and while our "core business" remains the same, yet the way we execute it has changed. We keep on adapting to the changing world, working to remain a knowledge center, a hub in Belgian's foreign relations, defending our interests, creating opportunities abroad: we are clearly within the "executive branch" of diplomacy.

For reflection, also, we have partners. The Egmont institute, whose 70th anniversary we celebrate today is an important one; during 70 years already, they have been in the "academic branch of diplomacy", reflecting - independently, that's crucial, even if that's not always comfortable. They have provided training, also to foreign diplomats and provided us food for thought.

I want to congratulate them on this occasion, for all the outstanding work done, for the good collaborating and friendship and I am looking forward to their future activities;