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THE WORKING PAPER SERIES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AT UCLouvain

N°3 - ANNÉE 2025

**BELGIUM'S FOREIGN POLICY AMID FEDERALIZATION, DECENTRALIZATION,
AND FRAGMENTATION: THE STRIVE FOR COHERENCE**

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BELGIUM'S FOREIGN POLICY AMID FEDERALIZATION, DECENTRALIZATION, AND FRAGMENTATION: THE STRIVE FOR COHERENCE

Abstract : Federalization, decentralization, and fragmentation each pose a distinct risk to the coherence of Belgium's foreign policy. They complicate its formulation, disrupt its coordination mechanisms, and diminish the scope for compromises. Among other effects, this incoherence tends to lead Belgium to abstain on the international stage. Yet, having the ability to concretely exert influence and gain authority is crucial in the contemporary global system. Indeed, without influence, a state risks the marginalization of its interests. This paper analyses Belgium's multilateral policymaking process and governance of the last three decades. Building on a seven-month research stay at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the study highlights the role of one particular Belgian consultation structure: Coormulti

Résumé : La fédéralisation, la décentralisation et la fragmentation posent chacune un défi majeur à la cohérence de la politique étrangère belge. Elles complexifient son élaboration, perturbent les mécanismes de coordination et de concertation, et réduisent les marges de compromis. Entre autres conséquences, ce risque d'incohérence pousse souvent la Belgique à adopter une posture d'abstention sur la scène internationale. La capacité à exercer une influence concrète et à asseoir son autorité est pourtant essentielle dans le système international contemporain ; dépourvu d'influence, un État risque de voir ses intérêts marginalisés. Cet article analyse la gouvernance en matière de politique étrangère et le processus d'élaboration des politiques multilatérales de la Belgique des trois dernières décennies. Fondée sur un séjour de recherche de sept mois au sein du ministère des Affaires étrangères, l'étude met en lumière le rôle central d'une structure de concertation belge : Coormulti.

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Citation : Xia Edouard. (2025). *Belgium's foreign policy amid federalization, decentralization, and fragmentation: the strive for coherence*. Cahiers ISPOLE, 3, Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut de Sciences Politiques Louvain-Europe, UCLouvain.

1. Globalization and foreign policy

Foreign policy can be defined as a government's strategy in dealing with external actors beyond its borders. Diplomacy refers to the implementation of the foreign policy through the actions of diplomats.

For centuries, foreign policy was solely handled by the "Sovereign"¹. Its pursuit was delegated to temporary envoys. Companies and religious, for example, proved instrumental in dealings with the outside world. Then, the 19th and 20th 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. They were soon manned by an army of diplomats. Originally composed by aristocrats, the diplomatic corps, alongside the bureaucratisation of the state, transformed into a group of professional civil servants. Since then, the world kept evolving through successive waves of globalization. Consequentially, in the 21st century, the production of foreign policy is no longer centralized. Indeed, the monopoly traditionally devoted to the head of state and the Minister of Foreign Affairs is being contested.

Democratic ideals have broadly bridged the gap between government and governed. Recent times have seen a gaining interest in the international affairs from civil society. This trumps the previous view following which the people and the executive should have strictly differentiated roles with regards to external policy². The 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 the public life, even one that is arguably best led with discretion (Maley, 2016).

Since the end of the Second World War, foreign policy has had an increasingly significant impact on national politics. Building on the democratic ideals, foreign policy soon became the stake of public debates between various parts of society, mainly the political parties. Those greatly influence the external action. Key questions of external policy are regularly

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 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*". (Rousseau, 2008, p.165). 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).

being brought to the light as object of internal discussion. Nowadays, many domestic political measures broadly result from international constraints. This “*interiorisation*” (Coolsaet, 2002, pp.235-236) contributes to drastically reduce the monopoly on foreign policy. Although this phenomenon predates 21st century dynamics, its new scale creates lasting consequences on the elaboration of foreign policy.

Indeed, interdependent economies, multilateralism and supranationalism 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 globalized web of interactions, especially at the regional level. Due to the transfer of competences, the EU constitutes a well-known example of this. Supranational directives deepen the homogenization between member states. This standardization 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 judicial 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 specialized administrations. In turn, the Ministers of these administrations tend to contact their international counterparts directly, without necessarily going through the once central Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

In the end, the distinction between internal and external themes has become blurred. Additionally, the decentralization of the foreign policymaking appears necessary to keep up with the evolving nature of the world and fragmented state-led foreign policy. Yet, unity between words and action remains essential to the national interest (Roosens, 2021, p.72). Coherence therefore constitutes (just as it has always constituted) a major challenge to foreign policy. Its pursuit is delicate in the context of the form the state is taking in this 21st century. As a natural response, states then tend to institute coordination mechanisms.

This paper analyses Belgium’s last three decades of foreign policymaking. Due to its unique position between the EU and its federated entities, the Belgian State constitutes an interesting case study of the evolution of the decision-making process in foreign policy. Dynamics of federalization and its resulting decentralization indeed concur to deeply alter the traditional schema. The subsequent political fragmentation in turn complexifies what appears to be a network governance. In fact, the federal level finds itself sometimes overtaken. Depending on the theme, it may either be simply consulted by the supranational institutions or left to consult with the subnational actors.

In these circumstances, how does Belgium's plural and complex state manage to foster coherence for its external action? This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to analyze the evolution of Belgium's foreign policymaking. First, we analyse the general impact of Belgium's recent state reforms on its foreign policymaking. Special attention on coordination mechanisms is then brought in the context of the decentralization of the foreign policymaking. Through the example of Coormulti, one of said mechanisms, we highlight the central role played by the MFA in this regard. Observations were conducted during a seven-month research stay at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (September 2023 to March 2024). Additional qualitative data were gathered through five semi-structured interviews conducted during the same period, providing a contextualized perspective to the reflections. Finally, we reflect on the contemporary struggle to achieve consensus due to lasting political fragmentation.

2. Federalization: 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 establishing 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 changed³. The Minister of Foreign Affairs was then solely tasked with the foreign policymaking (Delcorps, 2015). But the *status quo* did not last; as the European integration deepened throughout the 1960's, the PM became 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 well⁴.

In parallel, the Belgian State transitioned from a unitary to a federal arrangement between 1970 and 1993. The successive state reforms have granted more competences to the federated entities (Regions and Communities), including the ability to represent internationally (*ius legationis*) and sign treaties (*ius tractati*). This peculiar functioning is a result of two legal principal. 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 responsible for conducting international relations within its own field of internal competences (The Belgian Constitution, article

³ This evolution results from both external events and the characters of the monarchs. (Stengers, 2014; de Wilde d'Estmael, 2014).

⁴ Ministers Leo Tindemans, Henri Simonet, and Mark Eyskens underlined, each in his time, the growing competition animating the duo PM – MFA. (Coolsaet, 2002, p.240).

167, §3). On the other hand, the delegation of power to subnational entities based on the “*absence of hierarchy of norms*” (Criekemans, 2012) means that political units are quite free to carry out their policies without obligation to consult either with the federal authority or with other federated entities (De Visscher & Laborderie, 2013, p.26).

The Federal State however remains the sole entity responsible for Belgium’s actions at the international level (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, Roosens & Dujardin, 2014, p.384). First, the latter must inform the federal government of their intention to carry out international negotiations. Then, under specific conditions, the federal government can suspend a treaty concluded by the federated entities. 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) entails a clear disruption to the overall coherence of Belgian foreign policy⁵. 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, p.61-65). 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*”⁶ give way to formal consultation between competent authorities. Though criticisable in 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). *Prima facie*, such platform could bring more political efficiency. Nevertheless, the impossibility for legally non hierarchized 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

5 « *The concern for continuity prevails over that of coherence* » (Delpérée, 2017, p.51).

6 In Belgium, a mixed competence (or shared competence) is a competence or area of action where responsibilities are shared between several levels of power. Accord de coopération du 8 mars 1994 entre l’Etat fédéral, les Communautés et les Régions, relatif aux modalités de conclusion des traités mixtes, M.B., July 19, 1996, p. 31337.

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 full authority to the Minister of Foreign Affairs 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 fully come into force. The Walloon, Brussels and the French Community Parliaments refused to give their assent to the investment aspects. Then President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker declared « *I invite Belgium to think about how it operated in terms of its international relations* » (Kuczkiewicz, 2016).

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 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 for the CETA⁷, 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 diplomat⁸.

In the end, complexities brought by federalization imply a risk of abstention at the international level. If one cannot decide, one cannot take a stand. In 2015, Belgium sent six ministers at the 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 marginalization. Yet in fact, 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).

Now, this situation obviously does not reflect the entirety of Belgium's international position in every competence. It is merely a tendency resulting from a unique state architecture. In fact, one could even make the point that Belgium's ability to rally internal consensus varies depending on the role that the country takes. Look for instance at 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).

⁷ 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.

⁸ Anonymous interview, Brussels, January 2023.

This indicates that Belgium's proficiency to represent the general interest still overtakes internal turmoil. But, as a member state, domestic stalemates keep looming over the country'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.

3. Decentralization of the foreign policymaking: Belgium's governance put to the test of the 21st century

The evolution of the nature of foreign policy, coupled with the 1993 state reform, has transformed Belgium's governance. The entrance of technical ministries into foreign policymaking shows a decentralization of the decision-making process. It now takes the structure of a broad network governance.

3.1. Foreign policymaking as a network governance

Within post-liberal democracies, decentralization has led the process of governing 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, "*network governance*" refers to the process of governing within the environment of a network, while "*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 & Torfing, 2005, p.203).

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

- (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 globalization. Globalization carries many issues that require cooperation across all levels of society to address effectively.
- (3) Democratic architecture. The formation of governance networks is partly driven by

the democratic nature of society. 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 clearly identified as a distinct governance network (Vervisch *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, based on the previous definition, specific areas of Belgium's foreign policy could also be categorized as distinct governance networks. Take for instance the European Affairs or the Multilateral Affairs. From a broader perspective, one could even argue that Belgian foreign policy as a whole operates under a framework of network governance. Indeed, characteristics of the Belgian federalization lead the governing process to include stakeholders from all levels of power and civil society⁹.

Foreign policymaking structured within a network governance framework increases the risk of incoherence, exacerbated by the federalization of the state. Dilution of the capacity to lead and decide may indeed impair the ability to formulate harmonious international positions. Federalization combined with the evolving nature of foreign policy has contributed to expand the scope of foreign policy, which become increasingly multidimensional. It led to the decentralization of the coordination process.

3.2. The role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

In this network governance, the MFA occupies a central position. At the level of foreign policymaking, with regards to mixed competences, the MFA takes the role of coordinator. This transformation dates from the late 1990's. In 1992, diplomat Marc Vinck, ex-secretary of the "*modernization 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 to maintain coherence. To that end, great reforms were launched by Ambassador Jan De Bock in 1996¹⁰. On a side note, seventeen years later, the MFA keeps conducting internal discussions on its future role through the SAIL initiative (Strategy and Innovation Lab)¹¹.

⁹ Writing about post-liberal democracies, Alain Supiot 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*" (Supiot, 2020, p.79).

¹⁰ They formally started with the 1997 Royal decree. Arrêté royal du 8 septembre 1997 modifiant l'arrêté royal du 14 janvier 1954 portant règlement organique du ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Commerce extérieur, *M.B.*, September 13, 1997, p. 23865.

¹¹ 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.

Among Vinck's propositions, three 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 public diplomacy. Explaining foreign policy in a pedagogic way is indeed important to rally public support for the country's external action. Moreover, it contributes to develop some degree of soft power at the national level. 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 network governance. Undoubtedly, digital technology has facilitated this agenda, as evidenced by its important usage in recent years¹².

Second, the MFA should deliver exceptional expertise across all aspects of its operations to act as the timing belt in foreign policymaking. Although the federalization of the state was followed by the regionalization of competences in foreign policy, subnational diplomacies initially lacked resources and means of influence. Bound by federal loyalty, the MFA quickly provided its embassy network, communication channels, and multilateral diplomatic expertise to assist Regions and Communities in their international representation¹³. 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 (Van Staden, 1998, pp.121-122 cited in Coolsaet, 2003, p.461).

Third, according to Vinck, to strengthen its leadership in coordination, the MFA should establish specialized units dedicated to fostering domestic collaboration on international issues. Following the fourth state reform, the coordination structure of the Federal State was reorganized. Since 1980, the *Concertation Committee* is the highest coordinating

12 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.

13 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 (Vandenbosch & Dermine, 2019 ; Cambier, 2019 ; Faniel, 2021).

body¹⁴. Hierarchically subordinate is the newly appointed Interministerial Foreign Policy Conference (CIPE)¹⁵. 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 in ensuring coherence on key political issues¹⁶. Within the CIPE, several permanent consultation structures were established¹⁷. 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 coordination 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, preparation of 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.

3.3. Coormulti: a permanent coordination structure for Multilateral Affairs

Alongside the establishment of the Directorate General on European Affairs, Multilateral Affairs have also gained a permanent coordination structure. In 2003, Ambassador Jan Grauls underlined the growing importance of globalization (Grauls, 2003 cited in Coolsaet & Nasra, 2009, p.28). Accordingly, the MFA pursued the ambition to put in place a strong coordination structure on global issues to contribute to global governance. By doing so, the MFA reaffirmed its central position on Belgium's new domain of foreign policymaking, postponing the question to know whether the coordination mission would be better

¹⁴ Composed of the Prime Minister and the Minister-President of each Community and Region, the *Concertation Committee* was seldom involved in matters of foreign policy until the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

¹⁵ Loi du 5 mai 1993 sur les relations internationales des Communautés et des Régions, M.B., May 8, 1993, p. 10562.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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. To minimize ambiguity, the term "*consultation*" will henceforth be translated as "*coordination*".

served under the PM's authority (Grauls, 2004). In October 2003, a new coordination 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 coordination structures, operates under the competences prescribed by the Cooperation Agreement of June 30, 1994¹⁸. In a nutshell, Coormulti is a service designed to prepare Belgium's position in non-EU international organizations when the topics discussed involve mixed competences¹⁹. Discussions within Coormulti involve a horizontal and systematic process of political concertations 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. “Coormulti shapes the architecture of Belgium's position. It is the oil in the engine of our country's decision-making process”, prosaically reflected a Belgian diplomat²⁰.

Concretely, in 2024, the unit responsible for Coormulti (M0.1) consists of three agents from the MFA: one ambassador who presides the coordination, 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 party from the Belgian State. Typically, a unit within the MFA will need a coordination to develop a Belgian position on a topic on its agenda. For instance, this was the case when the Directorate for International Governance (M4) required Coormulti's assistance to prepare for the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) summit in New Delhi in December 2023. 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.

Generally, these participants can be numerous. They include representatives from federal cabinets and administrations, community and regional cabinets and administrations, as well as civil society organizations. 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, Science, and Innovation (EWI), the Brussels Public Administration for Innovation (Innoviris), and the Cabinet of the State

18 Accord-cadre de coopération du 30 juin 1994 entre l'Etat fédéral, les Communautés et les Régions portant sur la représentation du Royaume de Belgique auprès des organisations internationales poursuivant des activités relevant de compétences mixtes, *M.B.*, November 19, 1994, p. 28706.

19 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.

20 Anonymous interview, Brussels, September 2023.

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 coordination proceed smoothly, certain topics, such as climate issues, commerce, agriculture, 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 (Tsebelis, 1999). They often result in Belgium's inability to fully commit to multilateral initiatives. An example of this was seen in 2024 with the global coalition on social justice formed by the International Labour Organization.

As a facilitator, M0.1 moderates the coordination meetings in a constructive manner, 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"*, largely observes a Belgian diplomat²¹.

In fact, 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, no representative from certain entities is even able to 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 the reports of the Coormulti serve as directives for diplomatic posts abroad and are binding on all participants²². 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 from a Coormulti meeting can therefore be detrimental to the agreed-upon Belgian position, as they may not be bound by the consensus. One example of such

²¹ Anonymous interview, Brussels, October 2023.

²² Article 8 of the Accord-cadre de coopération du 30 juin 1994, M.B., November 19, 1994, p. 28706.

an event can be cited: the Global Compact for Migration that led to the fall of the federal government in 2018.

3.4. 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 United Nations level, ratified on December 19, 2018. Given the UN's status among targeted international organizations 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 GCM²³. The motion passed, despite opposition from N-VA and the Flemish party *Vlaams Belang* (VB), effectively isolating them. In December 2018, the PM travelled to the Marrakech Conference to ratify the Compact, "*emphasizing Belgium's commitment to its word and credibility*" (Michel, 2018). The federal government had collapsed the day before.

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 it had not been properly consulted by the federal government. Yet, it is precisely Coormulti's design to coordinate 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 therefore 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). Despite some ongoing disagreements, this procedure proved sufficient to effectively bind Francken to the

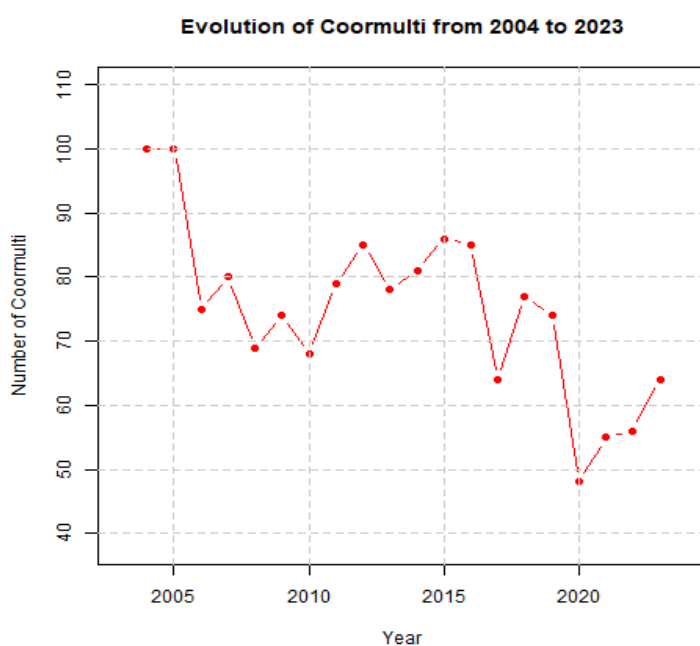
²³ Proposition de résolution appelant le gouvernement fédéral à soutenir sans réserve le Pacte mondial sur les migrations, *Trav. Parl.*, Ch. repr., sess. ord. 2018-2019, séance du 6 décembre 2018, doc. 54-3385/005.

consensus because, ultimately, the report indicates that all parties concurred with Coormulti's operational conclusion. In the House of Representatives, Bodson 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"* (Bodson, 2018).

The consequences of the GCM crisis for the mechanism of Coormulti are twofold. First, meticulous attention is given to the invitation list to ensure that 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. Second, coordination meetings now exhibit a higher participation rate from cabinet representatives. Moreover, Flemish participants present strictly defined positions that have been previously endorsed by their hierarchy. While this approach has enhanced the capacity for decision-making, it has also 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.

3.5. What future for Belgium's multilateral coordination?

As indicated by the following graph, a brief analysis of Coormulti's evolution from 2004 to 2023 indeed reveals a trend toward fewer consultation meetings²⁴.



²⁴ The data for this graph were collected during a study stay at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2023.

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 MO.1 as a service provider for anticipatory meetings. Nevertheless, special coordination can be scheduled spontaneously if an unforeseen event requires a Belgian position on mixed competences. Second, the COVID-19 crisis introduced an element of modernization 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 improved the quality of the meetings due to a higher attendance rate²⁵. Third, the use of written remarks agreed upon through silence procedures (*ad referendum*) has been increasing due to heavy workloads. Participants typically establish general positions, priorities, and red lines during the initial meeting, and then share further details through written comments (“e-Coormulti”).

In a federal state like Belgium, coordination is crucial. The MFA is acutely aware of this need. As highlighted in its 2021-2024 strategic plan (Lahbib, 2022, p.8), the MFA has specifically tasked Coormulti with ensuring the coherence of Belgium’s multilateral positions. 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 MO.1’s exemplary 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 coordination could be jeopardized if the number of multilateral initiatives continues to grow at the international level. Simultaneously, the MFA’s central role in the governance network of foreign policy could be at risk if domestic fragmentation accelerates.

4. Fragmentation: the growing struggle to achieve compromise

Belgium’s political landscape is quite fragmented. The 1965 general election marked a clear rift, and from then on, Belgium did not return to a two-party system²⁶. Over the next fifty years, this fragmentation grew due to three main factors (Delwit, 2022, p.598). 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 capitalized on

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Jean Blondel designates the Belgian two-party system as “*imperfect bipartisanship*” (Blondel, 1968; 186).

this decline and entered the political sphere. In the 21st century, the nature of the Belgian political fragmentation changed as well (Delwit, 2022, p.598). 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 (De Winter & Dumont, 2022). Since 2007, Belgium has spent 1,367 days under a caretaker government, handling only current affairs. Additionally, forming coalitions to achieve a qualified majority in Parliament has become increasingly difficult, often requiring the cooperation of six to eight partners. Over the last twenty-five years, these challenges have been impairing Belgium's consociational democracy (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020). A major symptom is the growing struggle to reach compromises, despite it being a decisive mechanism of Belgian governance (Delwit, 2022, p.636).

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 diplomat²⁷.

Consequently, extra care is taken at the administrative level to protect Belgium's international image, especially when the country is under scrutiny. 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 diplomat²⁸.

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 countries²⁹. Until the 1993 reform of the state, only commercial treaties and treaties *"likely to burden the State or bind Belgians individually"* (Former article 68 of the Belgian Constitution) had to be presented before Parliament. Thirty years later, depending on

²⁷ Anonymous interview, Brussels, January 2024.

²⁸ Anonymous interview, Brussels, November 2023.

²⁹ Supra.

their competences, seven Parliaments may potentially need to give assent to mixed treaties³⁰. However, the sheer number of Parliaments remains a relative complexity as political majorities are indeed not homogeneous across Belgium.

The fourth state reform has equipped Belgium with a tool aimed at addressing the incoherence caused by prolonged assent procedures: the “*mixed treaties working group*”. However, internal fragmentation has quickly led to complex power dynamics complicating its utilization. Given the group’s primary mission to identify the competences involved in a treaty and designate the authority competent 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.

Surely, an aggrieved political entity can appeal to the Council of State under some conditions³¹. However, 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, p.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 and are almost automatically approved during 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. In fact, the evolution of the Belgian State may have durably transformed the internal equilibrium in foreign policymaking, especially over the past decade. Initially designed to foster consensus, consultation structures like Coormulti are now witnessing subnational entities striving to assert their influence on the federal decision-making process by turning it into a co-decision mechanism.

³⁰ 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).

³¹ Accord-cadre de coopération du 30 juin 1994, *op. cit.*

Admittedly, the absence of a 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. Subnational 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 that are based on multiple interests.

As a consequence, 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 campaigns for independence, while N-VA and CD&V advocate for a form of confederalism. On the other side, OpenVLD, Ecolo, and Groen support the refederalization of certain competences, whereas MR recommends almost complete refederalization. PTB-PVDA even champions abolishing the absence of a hierarchy of norms in favour of 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 sights of some reform. Indeed, the functioning relations between federal and subnational entities designed in the late 20th century does 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. In 2016, first conclusions were brought to the *Comité de concertation* which gave an unfavourable opinion. The discussions being highly political, further efforts to reform were slow. In March 2023 however, the CIPE decided to create three new ad hoc working groups to resolve flaws in the initial conclusions.

The first group oversees the Cooperation Agreement concerning the representatives of subnational entities abroad³². The second group is tasked with the representation to the international organizations pursuing activities involving mixed competences³³. The third group works on the modalities of Belgium's representation in the Council of the European Union³⁴. 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 capitalization

32 Accord de coopération du 17 juin 1994 entre l'État fédéral, la Région flamande, la Région wallonne et la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale relatif aux attachés économiques et commerciaux régionaux et aux modalités de promotion des exportations, *M.B.*, October 26, 1994, p. 26889.

33 Accord de coopération du 30 juin 1994 entre l'État fédéral, les Communautés et les Régions portant sur la représentation du Royaume de Belgique auprès des organisations internationales poursuivant des activités relevant de compétences mixtes, *M.B.*, November 19, 1994, p. 28706.

34 Accord de coopération du 8 mars 1994 entre l'État fédéral, les Communautés et les Régions relatif à la représentation du Royaume de Belgique au sein du Conseil des Ministres de l'Union européenne, *M.B.*, November 17, 1994, p. 28209.

on this work is possible or if fragmentation will overshadow five more years of Belgian foreign policymaking.

5. Conclusion: which way forward?

Federalization, decentralization, and fragmentation each pose a distinct risk to the coherence of Belgium's foreign policy. They complicate its formulation, disrupt its coordination mechanisms, and diminish the scope for compromises. Among other effects, this incoherence tends to lead Belgium to abstain on the international stage. Yet, having the ability to concretely exert influence and gain authority is crucial in the contemporary global system. Indeed, without influence, a state risks the marginalization of its interests. This holds true at both the EU level and within multilateral organizations where (qualified) majorities may depend on Belgium's voice, as suggested by the recent example of the Nature Restoration Law (June 17, 2024).

The analysis has shown the central role of the MFA within the decentralized network governance of foreign policy. This centrality results from both the Ministry's desire to maintain its domestic position, and the necessity to coordinate the different levels of government and technical administrations. While this *modus vivendi* seems to function broadly, what would happen if the intricate processes of federalization, decentralization, and fragmentation were to accelerate? Are potential state reforms conceivable? Are they even desirable? What about the reforms of the Cooperation Agreements currently under discussion by the CIPE working groups?

In 2005, an OECD report already highlighted the crucial importance played by 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. Subnational entities are indeed 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.

In parallel, the role of the federal diplomats may also have changed alongside that of the MFA. Upon their return to the central administration, Belgian diplomats increasingly tend to take on an internal facilitator role. While their primary focus remains external, their skill set is increasingly utilized for internal arbitration. Furthermore, their representation function has gradually evolved as other officials speak on behalf of Belgium in international forums. Diplomats must now often work in pairs, concentrating on negotiation and the overall situation, while leaving technical expertise to other agents. Thus, "*our qualities now*

also include expertise in international relations management”, smiles a Belgian diplomat³⁵.

Ultimately, federalization, decentralization, and fragmentation impact both the decision-making process and the product of Belgium’s foreign policy. Different sensitivities arise depending on the issues at hand. Flanders is notably more focused on Asia and its expanding markets, while French speakers keep a close eye on the Great Lakes region in Africa. Meanwhile, Benelux integration has suffered from “*intercommunity distrust*” since the 2000s (De Wilde d’Estmael & Desplanque, 2021, p.535). More recently, debates over sending materials to Ukraine underscored existing divergences.

Admittedly, the Belgian model for foreign policymaking has endured for thirty years. And it is only when internal disagreements arise that the intricate nature of the system becomes evident. Yet, in the face of global uncertainty and ongoing redefinition, the strive for coherence must be elevated as a primary concern among the numerous complex issues confronting us.

³⁵ Anonymous interview, Brussels, January 2024.

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