

Public Diplomacy

The case of Flanders

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Institutional framework

For those readers, who are less familiar with our region, or who have been away from Flanders for some time, it is good to briefly share some basic facts about the institutional framework in which the region of Flanders operates. As the northern part of the Kingdom of Belgium, Flanders enjoys a large degree of autonomy in various policy domains. The region has its own parliament and government. The Flemish Parliament has legislative powers in all policy domains which belong to its competences: from education to science and innovation, from culture to economy, from environment to logistics. The Flemish public service is organised along the lines of 13 homogeneous policy domains:

- Foreign Affairs;
- Public Governance;
- Services for the General Government policy;
- Finance and Budget;
- Economy, Science and Innovation;
- Education and Training;
- Welfare, Public Health and Family,
- Culture, Youth, Sport and Media;
- Work and Social Economy;
- Agriculture and Fisheries;
- Environment, Nature and Energy;
- Mobility and Public Works;
- Town and Country Planning, Housing Policy and Immovable Heritage.

Contrary to what is generally assumed abroad, the Flemish Parliament is not subject to, but equal to the federal Belgian Parliament. The Flemish government concludes its own international agreements; it was one of the first regions worldwide to engage in structural partnerships with multilateral bodies such as UNESCO and UNAIDS. In the donor rankings of international organisations, such as the World Health Organisation and UNAIDS, Flanders is mentioned separately.

Political diplomacy

In 2008 the Flemish Government celebrated the 15th anniversary of its own foreign policy. The Belgian constitution has created the possibility for Flanders to develop its own international strategy in those policy domains for which it is competent, according to the principle “in foro interno, in foro externo”. Over the years Flemish diplomatic representations have been established in The Hague, Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, Pretoria, Warsaw and Madrid. Flanders also runs its own representations at the European Union in Brussels and at the UN organisations in Geneva. Each of these posts is lead by a Representative of the Flemish Government, who is responsible for overseeing political and diplomatic relations between Flanders and the host country. The Representative enjoys full diplomatic status and officially belongs to the Belgian Embassy. The diplomatic network is complemented by a network of economic and tourism representatives, covering more than 70 locations worldwide.

Public diplomacy: a new opportunity

In the 21st century foreign relations are no longer limited to official government-to-government contacts. We are observing an unmistakable trend towards the ‘socialisation’ of foreign policy and increased ‘public participation’ in international matters. This process is influenced by several factors. One can mention the gradual blurring of the distinction between domestic and foreign policy, the growing role of the media, and the emergence of non-governmental organisations (NGO’s). This is where the concept of public diplomacy comes in.

“Public diplomacy” as we see it, is not one of those fancy buzz words, but an operational concept which is currently in the process of being rolled out in Flanders. It stands for the active involvement of non-governmental actors, abroad and in Flanders, in the promotion of Flanders and its image abroad. It also invites contributions by these same actors to the formulation of Flemish foreign policy.

As such, it helps create a broader support for policy and it stimulates dialogue. Our public diplomacy is complementary to classic diplomacy, which is embodied in the current network of 10 diplomatic representations abroad, which has been mentioned earlier. We aim at the active participation of our universities and public research centres, our companies, our artists and fashion icons, as well as the community of Flemish expatriates. Flemish expats are well situated to feel the temperature about the way Flanders and Belgium are perceived abroad. As such they are instrumental for the administration in Brussels in setting up an adequate and targeted communication strategy, which allows to share and put into perspective objective information about Flanders and its institutional framework.

As far as our public diplomacy strategy is concerned, a number of building blocks are already in place. Without being exhaustive, we mention the following:

- Since October 2007 we publish the English-language magazine “Flanders Today”, a free weekly magazine on Flanders which is available both in hard copy (17,000 copies) and in electronic version. Run by an independent board of editors, it updates the reader on current trends and news from our region. It received great acclaim from a panel of readers and it was restyled taking into account their valuable comments. Although the magazine is basically targeting the expat community in Belgium, we will also start distributing it abroad (www.flanderstoday.eu).

- Complementary to Flanders Today, a daily selection of articles from Flemish newspapers is translated into English and French and is sent out to more than 1,800 subscribers.

- The Flemish Centre in Osaka (Japan) and the recently opened Flanders House in New York are physical hubs for public diplomacy. They focus on activities which do not fall under the remit of other public executive agencies, such as Tourism Flanders or Flanders Investment and Trade (FIT). Flanders House in New York has been established in 2008 as an American non-for-profit organisation. It actually serves as the executive branch of the Flemish Department of Foreign Affairs. Its main goal is to promote Flanders in all fields not covered by the two agencies mentioned before. Featuring high on the list of thematic priorities are culture, science and higher education.

- “Vlamingen in de Wereld” is an non-for-profit organisation, which networks Flemish expats from across the globe. Exchange of information basically takes place through the website and the three-monthly magazine. The Flemish government funds the operational costs under conditions set out in a management contract. This has to be renewed by the end of this year, offering an excellent opportunity to align the organisation’s activities to the main strategic goals of our public diplomacy.

- Public diplomacy should also take on board the universities and public research centres. Through their core activities of research and higher education they are deeply immersed in international cooperation. To give an example: between 1992 and 2005 the share of international co-publications by Flemish scientists in peer-reviewed journals in the life sciences, natural sciences and technical sciences increased from 33.7 to 53.1%. Our knowledge centres could and should act as powerful messengers for Flanders, promoting not only the qualities of individual institutes, but also contributing to the broader message of the quality of the Flemish Knowledge Area. With satisfaction we note that our universities and schools for higher education are starting to join forces in their outreach to the international community. The publication and website “Study in Flanders” inform prospective students from abroad about the high-quality range of higher education opportunities in our region. On top of that, the not-for-profit organisation Flamenco has been launched as a vehicle for an integrated international higher education strategy.

- Apart from the knowledge centres, we also count on commercial players to commit themselves to the over-all strategy of public diplomacy. Together we should look for practical tools, which create a win-win for both the government and the commercial world. A special role in this context is reserved for the Flemish harbours of Antwerp, Ghent, Zeebrugge and Ostend. In 2007 they processed a total amount of cargo of over 258 million tons. Obviously the harbours are keen competitors, both amongst themselves and against players from abroad in a global context, but they have taken the unusual, highly commendable step to promote themselves abroad together under the banner of “Flanders Port Area”.

- Finally, the Flemish Government has announced the launching of the “Flanders Inspires” International Visitors Programme. The goal of this programme is to bring invited high-level decision-makers for an exclusive multiple-day visit to Flanders. They will be offered in-depth insight in the domains of their expertise, through workshops with relevant Flemish key players and personalised visits. First invitations should be sent out before the summer of 2009.