

To the members of the Commission of Foreign Affairs

Belgian Chamber of Representatives
1008 Bruxelles

4 December 2024

Subject: urgent appeal on the effects of potential pension & fiscal reforms on Belgium's diplomacy

Dear Chair of the Commission, Ms Van Hoof,

Dear Vice Chairs of the Commission, Mr De Maegd and Mr Metsu,

Dear Permanent Members of the Commission,

We write on behalf of BeFamily, the association representing spouses of Belgian diplomats, to express our significant concerns about the economic reforms surfacing from the ongoing federal government negotiations. We are deeply concerned about the disproportionate impact that potential pension and marital coefficient reforms could have on Belgium's diplomacy. Belgium's ability to defend its interests globally hinges on a thriving diplomatic corps. However, these reforms would further jeopardize the financial well-being of diplomatic families, rendering a career as a Belgian diplomat increasingly unattractive and ultimately undermining Belgian diplomacy.

The success of Belgium's diplomacy — and, by extension, the advancement of its interests abroad — is inextricably linked to the commitment and expertise of its diplomats. The diplomatic corps has changed significantly over the past decades though. The era of a spouse silently following the diplomat is long gone. Today, the corps consists of a diverse array of families, with spouses who have often put their own ambitions on hold in favour of the diplomats'. Moving abroad is therefore a decision made as a family, with the conditions spouses face in foreign postings playing a critical role in that choice.

Recognizing this reality, an increasing number of European countries provide specific pension support to diplomatic spouses, ensuring families are better equipped to take on international assignments. This support is vital, as work permit restrictions and other legal barriers often make it impossible for spouses to earn an income abroad, let alone build their own pension. Countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, Finland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Norway, and the United Kingdom have already implemented measures to address this issue. Belgium, however, still provides no pension support for its diplomatic spouses.

The details that have emerged from the ongoing government negotiations about a potential pension reform do not bode well for the spouses of Belgian diplomats. For instance, the tightening of the link between work performed and pension accrual could mean that a single rotation abroad might already be enough for a spouse to forfeit pension rights. This creates lifelong financial dependence between the spouse and the diplomat, and a significant risk in cases of an early death of the diplomat or a divorce.

Because spouses seldom work abroad, they don't contribute to the household income. The abolition of the marital coefficient would further reduce the household income of diplomatic families, thereby also eroding our ability to save for a pension through the third and fourth pillars.

While we understand that the government agreement is still under negotiation, we urge policymakers to carefully consider the unintended consequences of the proposed reforms. The combination of pension reforms and the abolition of the marital coefficient risks creating a negative spiral. The financial dependence and increased costs will undoubtedly discourage diplomatic families from moving abroad. Despite only being about 500 families, these reforms threaten to harm the entirety of Belgium's diplomatic service, in a time when diplomacy is more important than ever.

As BeFamily, we have been sounding the alarm about the financial dependence of diplomatic spouses and the threat to the future of the career for quite some time within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, this is a challenging issue for the Ministry, as it requires agreement with other departments (not least the Ministry of Pensions). We do not expect negotiators of a government agreement to provide a definitive solution to our specific situation. However, it is our hope — and our request to you to advocate for this within your network — that a future government agreement will acknowledge our situation and create a mandate for the various stakeholders to come together and find a solution. As dedicated partners of Belgium's diplomacy, we hope for your support and that of the Commission as a whole to achieve this in the next legislature.

We sincerely thank you for your attention to this matter, which impacts the well-being of diplomatic families and the future of Belgium's diplomacy. We kindly urge you to advocate for our cause within your networks and ensure a government agreement addresses these concerns. BeFamily is available to engage with the Commission and its members on any further questions. Thank you once again for your attention and commitment to strengthening Belgium's diplomacy.

Yours sincerely,



*On behalf of BeFamily,
Han Pétry, President*