

Interview with Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb: Brussels and the Community institutions (Luxembourg, 9 July 2002)

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[Etienne Deschamps] Does the fact that most of the Community institutions are located in Brussels represent an advantage for the Belgian capital and for the country's foreign policy? How does this work in practice?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] It is obviously an advantage. It gives our diplomats a technical edge, as they are closer to information that is not necessarily distributed; and in terms of daily life, social life, meetings with senior European officials, the presence of a large number of diplomats, representing a wide range of friendly countries — and of course all the countries in the world — who are there for Belgium's sake, but also for the European Union, for NATO; all that creates a diplomatic environment — some have claimed it is second only to Washington — and all that represents a major advantage. One does not always make the distinction between an ambassador to the King, to the European Union, to NATO. This all comes together, everyone talks to everyone else and we are right in the middle of this crucible. Secondly Belgium is still playing its traditional role, which fits in very well. Our country is easily accessible, diversity is part of our political and cultural approach — part of our political culture — and I think that has a positive impact on Belgium, and also for Europe: we can play our part properly. When I was Foreign Minister there was still some tension with the French over the seat of the European Parliament. Sometimes people got very annoyed, which seemed pointless to me. Quite clearly it had been a difficult issue for some time, with Belgium building a European Parliament without saying anything and the French rigorously defending the position of Strasbourg. But that is only a detail, on the sidelines; it is not without importance, but ... I think Belgium benefits, I think it was a good move for the Van den Boeynants government to agree to host the [NATO] supreme headquarters, when General de Gaulle decided to expel it from French territory. It was only natural that it should move to a positive, friendly country, with no complexes about the North Atlantic Alliance.