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Internship provider:

Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
Kosmonavtov street 62a,
Astana 010000
Kazakhstan

INTERNSHIP REPORT

Between September 19 and November 11, 2022, I had the pleasure of working as an intern at the Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose offices are located in Astana. I found this opportunity through the web portal of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Having already spent some time in other countries of the former Soviet Union, I was really interested in getting to know Central Asia a little better; I immediately decided to apply, and after a phone interview with the embassy's First Secretary, F. L'Heureux, I was accepted for a two-month unpaid internship in the political section.

I knew very little about Kazakhstan before moving there, but I had only peripherally followed the events of January 2022 and their impact on national politics. I also knew that the country had attracted the interest of Western countries after publicly speaking out against the war in Ukraine, so I was eager to see what Belgium and other like-minded countries were doing to further their relations with Kazakhstan. Coincidentally, 2022 was the 30th anniversary of all diplomatic relations with the country: I could not have picked a better time to start my internship. That being said, I did not really know what to expect - I had very little idea about how an embassy works, especially the Belgian one, which has its own unique way of dealing with different tasks due to our country's complicated federal system. I expected to learn about Belgium's role in international relations, how we cooperate with other European or like-minded countries, and what our bilateral relations with Kazakhstan entail, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Another event that made my stay particularly exciting was the fact that it coincided with the Belgian-Kazakh political consultations, which take place only once every two years. The Belgian Director General for Bilateral Affairs, Jeroen Cooreman, and the Desk Officer for Central Asia, Guillaume Choquet, came to Astana to hold consultations with Kazakhstan's Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vassilenko. In connection with this event, several other meetings were planned, such as with like-minded ambassadors and representatives of EU and UN delegations, a visit to the State Museum, and a short trip to our trade office in Almaty. Much of my work consisted of drafting reports in preparation for J. Cooreman's arrival on a wide range of issues, from energy production and consumption in the country to women's rights and media freedom.

In addition, my daily duties consisted of the following:

- Drafting political reports for the Ambassador, particularly on the October 2022 Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict, the fallout from the January 2022 events, the demonstrations around the Kempir-Abad negotiations and subsequent arrests, and the crackdown on the media in Kyrgyzstan
- Assisting with the daily running of the embassy
- Taking notes at meetings with the EU delegation and UN agencies
- Monitoring the media
- Translating and interpreting from Russian into French and vice versa

Since the Embassy was very small - it consisted of only two Belgian diplomats and four local staff - the atmosphere was very relaxed and friendly. However, the size of the embassy also resulted in a lack of actual work, so the daily routine was much less exciting daily life than I had expected. I also quickly learned that Belgian embassies are muzzled by our federal system: many responsibilities fall under the purview of regional representations, which are all separate entities. Unfortunately, this meant, for example, that we could not organize cultural events. I also learned that government representation can be quite constraining, especially when it comes to a region in which you have a special interest. I concluded that diplomacy, or at least diplomacy as a Belgian citizen, may not be the best path for an expert in regional studies.

However, I learned a lot about Belgium's interests in Kazakhstan and about the three countries in our jurisdiction. Both the Ambassador and the First Secretary gave me a free hand in writing reports, so I was able to use my knowledge of Soviet history to contextualize current conflicts and political events. I was able to make good use of the analytical skills we are taught at the East European Institute. I was able to broaden my understanding of the post-Soviet space and learned how national representations strengthen their relationships not only with the host country, but also with other states represented in that country. In conclusion, I would definitely recommend doing an internship in the political section of a national embassy: Even in countries where embassies may have smaller representation, this is a great way to gain deeper knowledge about a specific region and better understand how bilateral relations work.