An Interview with Mr. Stefaan SONCK THIEBAUT

Managing Director of Innoviris



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Could you present the missions and ecosystem of Innoviris?

Our principal mission is to support and strengthen applied research and innovation in our local companies (start-ups, scale-ups, SMEs, and large companies), the research centers (such as the universities), the non-profit sector, and the public sector. Because innovation is crucial for the development of our local economy, our region, and our society.

A complementary mission is the promotion of science. This is especially geared towards young people: to make them understand the importance of science in meeting societal challenges and to encourage them to pursue a career in STEM (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics).

Finally, Innoviris represents the Brussels region at the national and European level. We encourage local companies and research centers to participate in national or European projects and to take advantage of European funding.

What financial aid is available to support the RDI projects of Brussels' academic actors and companies?

The Regional Innovation Plan 2021-2027, with a budget of €400M, allows Innoviris to co-finance research and innovation projects. Innoviris has put in place several programs that respond to the needs of innovators along their journeys: from getting access to experts, cooperating with research centers, validating technologies or innovative

business cases, to applying for patents.

Some programs are open programs, which means that we accept applications continuously. Others take the form of project calls around more specific topics that have been identified as strategically important for Brussels.

Each application is analyzed according to several precise criteria: the scientific or innovative quality, the feasibility, the economic value, and the potential social and environmental impact on the region. In case of a positive evaluation, we propose that the Brussels-Capital Region government grant a subsidy to the project. We receive around 700 applications each year, out of which close to half are financed, but the success rate depends a lot on the individual program.

Could you give us some examples?

“Research & Development Project” is our largest program. It is an open program that co-finances industrial research, experimental development, or process innovation within a company, potentially in cooperation with a research center. In general, smaller companies, cooperative projects, and early-phase projects benefit from a higher co-financing rate, which can go up to 80%.

“Innovative Starters Award” is a yearly program that I am particularly proud of. Three of our most promising young innovative start-ups receive up to 500,000 euros each to implement their strategic innovation plan. For the 2023 edition, 13 candidates competed for this prize with their ambitious projects.

One of the winners in 2023, Sentometrics, was created through an R&D project supported by Innoviris, followed by a spin-off project carried out by the VUB. Sentometrics applies AI to the field of corporate social and environmental responsibility. The company specializes in monitoring the Belgian media landscape to detect ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) events.

But our programs are not only about technology. In recent years, Innoviris has been paying more attention to innovation in the social economy: for example, we recently introduced the program “Prove Your Social Innovation” to help small companies validate the viability of a socially innovative project.

Some of our programs are oriented more towards research centers. “SPIN-OFF” finances research centers on their path towards creating a local spin-off valorizing the results of academic research. And through the program “Research Platform,” we encourage cooperation between local research centers around critical topics such as new approaches in health.

In 2023, the Brussels-Capital Region launched a new tool to facilitate financing and support for innovation to entrepreneurs. Could you tell us more about it?

The new concept is called **Innovation Journey** (innovationjourney.brussels). It is a comprehensive, integrated, and coherent offering pooling the expertise of 10 partners in Brussels. Its aim is to make it easier for businesses to access regional aid for research, development, and innovation.

Aid includes not only financial support but also other forms of free guidance and support. It is part of the regional **“Shifting Economy”** strategy, which aims to direct aid towards economic, social, and ecological transition.

Companies are supported in their research and innovation efforts to meet the societal challenges Brussels is facing. Developing a new idea, getting it validated, and scaling it up: all these stages are covered.



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Three sectors have been identified as part of the Innovation Journey…

That’s right. They are advanced digital technologies (including, of course, AI), circular economy, and social innovation. Health will be added soon. But that’s not all: we have identified certain gaps and decided to fill them by launching new programs and initiatives.

For example, **SustAIn.brussels** now provides free help to enterprises that want to use digital technologies in a sustainable way. It was launched in May 2023 and is part of the new network of European Digital Innovation Hubs dedicated to facilitating business

access to new digital technologies. SustAIn helps businesses to choose the best technologies, to access the right training, to find investors and partners in our local ecosystem.

It is a free service coordinated by business specialists (**Sirris and Agoria**), BeCentral (the digital campus located at Brussels Central Station), and academic partners (**Vrije Universiteit Brussel – VUB** and **Université libre de Bruxelles – ULB**). It is funded 50% by the European Commission and 50% by the Brussels-Capital Region via Innoviris. In addition, SustAIn is working closely with **FARI**, an inter-university institute run by VUB and ULB that aims at enabling the use of artificial intelligence for the common good.



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Any other initiatives to highlight?

We need to adapt continuously to the quickly changing innovation landscape. AI will no doubt play an important role. With **FARI** and **SustAIn**, Brussels now has a central hub around this important technology. In addition, Innoviris has adapted its own programs. We have recently launched a call that supports cooperation between companies and research centers around the application of Artificial Intelligence to physical systems.

We will facilitate and fund the access of small companies to AI experts and will soon

launch a program that will help companies analyze the feasibility of generative AI technologies in their products or services.

We talked a lot about digital and AI, but I want to highlight that Innoviris is financing other organizations that provide free support to our innovative companies in other domains. This includes **Buildwise** in the construction sector, **SIRRIS** in technology, and **CoopCity** in social innovation.

Innoviris is also committed to supporting research into Brussels…

Absolutely. It is important that we help our local policymakers to make informed decisions about the Region: this is **Science for Policy**. Innoviris funds two important initiatives and has a specific program funding research into the Region.

Brussels Studies is an open-access scientific journal with original research on Brussels-related issues, published in French, Dutch, and English. It is quite unique. The journal also aims to be accessible to a broad audience, providing them with the analyses and tools necessary to understand Brussels' societal challenges. It contributes to the promotion of solid and original knowledge about the Region, enabling a better understanding of its dynamics and offering insights for improved governance.

The **Brussels Studies Institute** coordinates the scientific research on Brussels and unites five important academic institutions. It also forms the link between the academic and public ecosystems. In addition, Innoviris has a funding program aimed at research about Brussels: **"Prospective Research Brussels"** can finance academic research projects that apply the prospective approach to urban issues in our Region.

Finally, Innoviris works on linking researchers in Brussels with other urban areas in Europe. The **"Driving Urban Transitions to a Sustainable Future"** European partnership addresses key challenges of urban transitions, engaging and collaborating with the many urban actors to share experience and expertise.

And how to work with Innoviris?

We want to be easily accessible to businesses. To this end, we have created a single access point called **"Test your idea"**: companies are invited to fill in a two-page document to find out whether their project has potential for Innoviris financing or whether they should be redirected to another funding agency. Having been an entrepreneur myself, I can tell you that this is highly appreciated!


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sentometrics
research