An interview with Mr Thomas DERMINE

State Secretary for Economic Recovery and Strategic Investments, Science Policy, attached to the Minister for the Economy and Labour

What are Belgium’s strengths in terms of R&D?

By 2022, Belgium’s investments in R&D have reached 3.43% of its GDP, putting it in the lead in the EU, and just behind Israel, South Korea, Taiwan and the United States worldwide. This success is the result of great public investment and the efforts of businesses. It is also based on a strong belief, shared by public and private players, that these investments improve the quality of life and create meaningful jobs.

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Belgium has positioned itself as a competitive player in the biopharmaceutical sector, being the world’s third largest exporter with an annual export amounting to €78 billion in 2023. The sector employs more than 40,000 people directly, with an even more substantial indirect impact. Collaboration between industry and the public sector is a key factor for success, and the RFF plan has allowed us to make progress on a number of projects such as VirusBank and the eHealth platform. We have also supported the BiotechValley of the Future initiative to strengthen our position in biopharmaceutical R&D and production. Every year, my administration approves hundreds of research projects, attracting talent and companies to the pharmaceutical sector in Belgium.

The Einstein Telescope Project

Last May, the federal government earmarked more than €4 million for the preparatory

phase of the Einstein telescope project. Belgium, the Netherlands, and North Rhine-Westphalia are jointly preparing their bids to host the Einstein Telescope in the tri-border region. The budget set aside by the federal government is financing geological feasibility and civil engineering studies, as well as preparing the legal, environmental, and international communication aspects. The engineering and environmental studies are progressing well, and the initial geological results are promising. This will pave the way for the next government’s decision on the feasibility and cost of this infrastructure.

Space and Defence Collaboration

Signed last April, the Belspo/Defence protocol earmarks €100 million for the development of dual-use applications for ESA space programmes. Dual-use applications in the space sector cover a wide range of fields, such as earth observation and space safety, which have been selected as the main areas of focus by Belgian Defence. The first activities consist of defining the future space missions of the Belgian Defence and identifying the necessary technologies, such as artificial intelligence, microelectronics, and radar and optical imaging. This collaboration with Defence is enabling Belgium to remain a major contributor to ESA, despite budgetary constraints.

© Thomas Dermine’s cabinet - The Belgian astronaut Raphaël Liegeois together with ESA’s managing director

© Thomas Dermine’s cabinet - The Porte de Hal now houses a permanent exhibition devoted to the medieval city of Brussels. The 169 steps of the grand interior staircase lead to a magnificent panoramic view of the capital from the outside. for Economy

Renovating and Redeploying Museums

The Belgian and international public continues to visit the federal scientific establishments, but the infrastructures of certain museums, with the exception of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, have not been renovated for 25 years. Since the beginning of the legislature, we have launched renovation projects to revitalise federal museums, such as the upgrading of the Parc du Cinquantenaire and the renovation of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. I can also mention the recent partnership with local actors in Brussels aiming at converting the Porte de Hal / Hallepoort into a hotspot for intangible cultural heritage. These initiatives aim to preserve our heritage and attract new visitors. Museums are places for reflection and debate on identity and cultural diversity, playing a crucial role in education and social cohesion.

Future Science Policy Strategy

We must continue to invest in science policy, with a 2024 budget of €630 million, including €250 million for the ESA. Our space strategy must be one of continuity, as Belgium is a key player in the ESA. Our investments guarantee a fair return for our companies and strengthen our position in the international space ecosystem. We must also continue our efforts to develop STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Future generations will need to be well equipped to meet the challenges of tomorrow, and the State has a role to play.

Initiatives such as the Bing Bang conferences have already produced encouraging results, particularly in encouraging young girls to take up technical and scientific subjects. This is an important step towards a more egalitarian society, and science, like culture, is a driving force for change. I hope that the next government will continue the efforts already underway to strengthen our space ecosystem and encourage high added-value R&D activities.

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