An interview with Ms Vanessa MATZ,

Federal Minister for Science Policy

How do you view the position of Belgian research in Europe?

Belgium is a very small country, but its strength lies in the very strong links it has forged with other countries in scientific research. In fact, nearly 69% of the research carried out in Belgian universities is done in collaboration with foreign partners, making Belgium one of the most active countries in the world in terms of cross-border collaboration.

As Minister for Science Policy, I am actively seeking to strengthen international scientific collaboration, with a particular focus on collaboration at European level.

Very recently, Belgium's application was selected to host an artificial intelligence antenna as part of the European EuroHPC network. In addition to making artificial intelligence computing power available to researchers, SMEs and public services, the antenna will also give them access to AI factories in Finland and Germany. This antenna marks a strategic turning point for Belgium, allowing us to integrate into the European AI network.

Ms Vanessa Matz, Federal Minister for Science Policy. © Ms Matz's cabinet

The space sector is not to be outdone. Belgium is a pioneer in Europe and a founding member of the ESA. It has built a solid space ecosystem, both scientific and industrial. The results of this involvement are tangible. Just a few weeks ago, the ESA launched the new Sentinel-1D Earth observation satellite. Both the satellite itself and the Ariane 6 launcher, which put it into orbit,

contain crucial high-tech components developed by Belgian companies.

For me, it is important that Belgium continues this tradition of European cooperation. This is how we can pool our knowledge and resources to achieve remarkable scientific results.

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What are your priorities as the person responsible for science policy?

I want Belgium to maintain its leading position in the space sector, even in a difficult budgetary context. In Belgium, this sector plays a driving role in the economy and science. In ten years, employment has increased by 31%, private sector turnover has doubled, and for every €1 we invest in the ESA, we see an average return of €4.35 on our economy.

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It is also worth remembering that, in the current geopolitical context, this sector has also become highly strategic. It is with this new perspective that we are seeking synergies with Defence. Take the images provided by Earth observation satellites. They help us to better understand and

anticipate global warming. When a natural disaster strikes, they enable rescue services to organise themselves more effectively. But today, it is clear that these images can also be of great use for defence purposes. We must see these investments in space as a strategic opportunity for our economy and our technological sovereignty.

I also want to promote our federal scientific establishments, whether they be museums or scientific institutions. My policy aims to make them more dynamic. I am working with them to strengthen their internal cohesion by encouraging them to pool support services such as accounting, human resources and IT. This will enable the institutions to focus more on their scientific work, while benefiting from a support service with centralised expertise. An initial pilot project is underway at the Royal Library and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts.

How does the federal government support the participation of Belgian researchers in European research programmes?

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Together with my administration, the Federal Science Policy Service, we strive to promote and facilitate access for Belgian researchers to European initiatives. My administration has extensive experience in this area, enabling it to support federal institutions in developing or joining interdisciplinary research networks and partnerships that bring together researchers, innovators and other professionals based in Europe. In addition, information, expert advice and individual assistance regarding potential European Union funding are offered to federal research institutions, with the aim of helping researchers maximise the excellence and impact of their projects.

Could you give us some examples of research projects supported by federal funding?

We support an exceptionally wide range of research. To name just a few examples, we could mention studies on pollution, practical applications aimed at reducing industrial emissions, and research into the origins of the ethnographic collections of federal museums. With the support of the European Union, projects are underway to improve the health of the seas and oceans. Another project aims to develop a quantum communication infrastructure in Belgium linked to infrastructures in other European countries. This is an important area of research in which our country cannot afford to remain on the sidelines.

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You are also in charge of Digital Technology. How is this transition being implemented in the Federal Scientific Institutions?

Digitisation offers advantages for many public services, and certainly also for federal scientific institutions. There is currently an ad hoc programme for the digitisation of scientific and cultural heritage. The preservation and promotion of cultural and scientific heritage in digital form is essential, as it guarantees its conservation, accessibility and transmission to future generations. The disadvantage is that, for the time being, this is always a temporary measure, which leaves institutions in a state of uncertainty about the future. I would therefore like to set up a structural initiative to ensure the sustainability of digitisation efforts.

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What do you think are the main challenges to be overcome in order for Belgian research to remain dynamic and attractive at European and international level?

As a government, we must continue to invest in research and development. In a difficult budgetary context, many expenditures are being called into question, but we must not forget that research contributes to our sovereignty and independence. Europe cannot rely on third parties forever. We must ensure that we have our own strengths in the fields of research, space and the development of AI systems. I will therefore continue to advocate for investment in research at the Belgian level.

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Another challenge is to encourage young people to pursue scientific careers. Young women are still significantly under-represented. Statistics show an improvement, especially in the highest positions. The representation of women in professorial positions has increased from 16% to 23% in five years. The work is therefore not in vain, but it is not finished. Unfortunately, statistics on

the proportion of women in scientific studies and as researchers are only increasing very slowly. I will continue to encourage the younger generations, especially young girls, to invest their abilities in the scientific field.

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