

(English translation of the GERFA's *Diagnostic*, 428 – by DeepL)

SCIENTIFIC ESTABLISHMENTS

THE BICENTENARY AND HORIZON 50-200: PUTTING AN END TO THE MESS

DIn its issues 420 (September 2024), 421 (October 2024) and 424 (January 2025), *Diagnostic* carried out an in-depth analysis of the problematic issue of the alleged redevelopment of the Cinquantenaire/Jubilee site in Brussels, with a view to Belgium's future Bicentenaire in 2030. Let's retrace the history of what can be considered a veritable affair of state, outlining recent developments and concluding with an international comparison.

For the record, it was on 25 April 2022 (Moniteur Belge [Belgian Official Journal] 08.09.2022) that an NGO, Horizon 50-200 (company number 0408916465), was created on the initiative of three Socialist Party ministers: Thomas DERMINE for Science Policy (federal museums and the Royal Institute for Artistic Heritage - IRPA (in French)) and Karine LALIEUX for Beliris, who were joined by Ludivine DEDONDER, then Minister of Defence (for the Royal Army Museum (MRA (in French))), part of the War Heritage Institute).



With a view to this national celebration, the NGO has been tasked with revitalising the site (which also includes the park and its surroundings, but which will not be covered here), including IRPA and the museums located there, namely the federal museums (the Museum of Art and History (MRAH (in French)) and the aforementioned MRA) - as well as the private Autoworld museum.

This creation *ex nihilo* was disguised by integration into a pre-existing NGO (dedicated to the

promotion of the MRAH alone): the name was changed to *Horizon 50-200*, the object was radically altered, the former directors were removed and replaced by the aforementioned ministers of the DE CROO government, including Mathieu MICHEL (MR) for the Régie des Bâtiments, the administration responsible for the buildings on the site. The administrators in the key positions of the NGO were the directors-general of the federal museums (and of IRPA), who were therefore, within the NGO, under the direct supervision of their founding ministers-administrators. To provide a framework, Arnaud VAJDA, Director General of Belspo (the science policy administration overseeing the MRAH and IRPA), took on the role of Chairman of the Board of Directors. As for the Autoworld exhibition centre, the third 'museum' on the site but of a private nature, it was not (yet) represented.

The *master plan* project entrusted by the Régie des Bâtiments to SUM Project with a view to 'revitalising' the museums (and the park) was approved by the federal government of A. De Croo (Open VLD) just before the elections of 9 June 2024, i.e. by deliberately bypassing any debate in Parliament. Rather than strengthening the museums - which is what the pseudo NGO claimed it wanted to do - the ministers' plan in reality consisted of the pure and simple dismantling of the spaces and collections of the MRAH and, above all, the MRA (see *Diagnostic* no. 420). However, a petition gathering 39,726 signatures - an absolute record in terms of heritage -, organised by the Montgomery-Tervueren Residents' Committee with the support of the Art & Heritage NGO and other associations¹, spoke out against a project that would be

¹In particular those of the Friends of the MRA: SRAMA and AELR.

so destructive for the study of history and heritage, and a prelude to the regionalisation of federal collections towards Flanders (above all) and Wallonia (to a lesser extent), which would have deprived Brussels of part of its tourist appeal and of its cultural assets.

It was also, in all likelihood, a first step towards the dislocation of the other federal museums located on the future artery (*museum mile*) linking the Cinquantenaire to the city centre. Beyond this *masterplan*, a vast real estate operation (including the major museum scenographies to be set up there) was in fact being implemented, stripping the federal State of a large part of its museum "jewels in the crown" for the benefit of private interests.

In September 2024, *Diagnostic* pointed out the irregular nature of this association, which acted like a shell company, with its structural opacity, its overrated programming², underpinned by overrated communication, and its serious management shortcomings (failure to file accounts and comply with other legal and statutory provisions). The manifestly illicit nature of this "fabricated" NGO was revealed: on the Board of Directors, a serious conflict of interest concerned (and still concerns) the new Chairman Bruno VAN LIERDE, who is at the same time

²The activities developed by the NGO were limited to "labelling", i.e. the inclusion in its programme of activities organised by other cultural actors.

the CEO of Tempora, a company that deals in museums. As for the minister-administrators, there were serious suspicions that they had been involved in the crimes of collusion and abuse of authority.

In addition, the management of the NGO is proving to be catastrophic (apart from the admission of the above-mentioned conflict of interest), with the Board of Directors manifestly failing in its supervisory role: the Director of Operations ('COO') Yasmina AMIRE was dismissed at the end of June 2023 for having, according to the ministers, wasted the association's money (389.000 per year via Belspo) - an unverifiable fact taken at face value by the press - and the Programming Director, Paul DUJARDIN - the only person with a profile of undisputed cultural competence at national and international levels - resigned, all the while being targeted by the ministers in the press.

A new director was appointed in April 2024, who was supposed to combine the two functions (which was not provided for in the statutes of the organisation at the time), Isabel CASTELEYN, wife of the former Secretary of State (CdH now Les Engagés) Melchior WATHELET Junior. I. CASTELEYN, appointed as the managing director responsible for the day-to-day management of the NGO, claims to have a profile that allows her to carry out "all administrative, management and executive activities", to "advise public services on planning, organisation, performance, control and management information" (a profile defined in an SPRL of which she is a director (company no. 0630.679.251)) and to "advise public services on planning, organisation, performance, control and management information" (a profile defined in an company of which she is a director (company no. 0630.679.251)). She has also worked in the field of public relations (notably as a spokeswoman for her husband and as a CEO of The Merode business club).

Unfortunately, we can see that the NGO is no better off than before: it has come to a virtual standstill (so we've been paying people to do nothing for at least nine months!), the programme and participatory workshops announced

are non-existent and, as we shall see below, major statutory breaches continue to be perpetrated to this day. The alleged profile of the director therefore does not appear to be suited to the reality on the ground...

Following the budgetary slippage, the Managing Director of Belspo, A. VAJDA, boasted in the press that he had "recovered" the staff laid off from the NGO within his institution: the staff who passed the Selor/Travaillerpour exams must have appreciated...

What's new?

Since then, the general managers of the Federal Scientific Institutions (FSI's) have left their key functions within the NGO, although they remain *ex officio* members if they so request, as does A. VAJDA, who has also successively left the functions of president and then of president of the general Assembly to join the category of *ex officio* members.

In the Moniteur Belge of 26.09.2024, the NGO then adapted, late in the process, its statutes, trying to rectify, partially, the many irregularities and deficiencies noted by GERFA. The underhand role played by Autoworld was finally brought to light,



since this purely private museum joins the Board of Directors and is now on the list of beneficiaries in the event of the dissolution of the Horizon 50-200 NGO. The vast network of "connections" - or should we rather talk about "collusion"? - between Autoworld and the car lobby, Horizon 50-200 and other well established institutions (including the King Baudouin Foundation and the Federal State itself) was identified in *Diagnostic* no. 424.

The 2025-2029 Agreement of the new DE WEVER government (N-VA), published

on 12 February 2025, provided two new and important elements: confirming the project to revitalise the Cinquantenaire to host the Bicentenary celebrations, it stated firstly that "*The appropriateness of retaining the Horizon 50-200 NGO will be verified*" (p. 76 in the French version). Next, "*We will enhance the role of the War Heritage Institute [i. e. the MRA] in terms of museums and remembrance by exploring opportunities for collaboration with the public and private sectors to effectively manage the collections and display them in an inspiring way. We are revising the 50th Anniversary Masterplan 2030 so as not to jeopardise the continued existence of the Royal Army Museum*" (p. 186 in the French version). Not only is the question of the relevance of Horizon 50-200 clearly raised, but, above all, the spectre of the dismantling of the MRA seems to be dissipating.

But where are we with this famous evaluation of the NGO? It's worth noting that it shouldn't be complicated, given that there have been neither own activities nor meetings with citizens (although these are provided for in the NGO's statutes of the association) for two years, or even any serious tidying up of the accounts (see below).

But the irregularities continue...

On 16 January 2025, Chairman B. VAN LIERDE, in an attempt to salvage the situations, filed the NGO's 2023 accounts for the first time with the registry of the Belgian Court of Commerce; a legal obligation that the directors and the management delegate had previously dispensed with.

Big deal! The accounts for 2022 are still missing, as are those dating back to 2016 (following the incorporation of the MRAH promotional association), i.e. nine years of unjustified arrears. Surprisingly, however, the Banque Carrefour des Entreprises (BCE (in French) [Central Business Register] - depending of the Ministry of Economy) states on its website that the association is in a "*normal situation*", even though the legal requirements have not been met for a long time.

At the very least, this calls into question the reliability of the BCE's data.

But the mismanagement of Horizon 50-200 does not stop there: the deficit indicated for 2023 amounts to 135,767 euros. Strangely enough, the NGO starts from an unexplained budget carry-forward (given the absence of accounts for 2022) and includes in its assets a promise to pay an unidentified contribution of 40,000 euros. Apart from these anomalies, who would still have an interest in paying money to such an opaque NGO, with no real activities and so badly managed? Could it be Belspo, Beliris, the National Lottery, the European Union or the King Baudouin Foundation? It's a mystery that only parliamentarians will be able to unravel.

In addition, other smoke and mirrors persist: the BCE (consulted in May 2025) continues to mention Y. AMIRE (who left in June 2023) as contact and not I. CASTELEYN, who was appointed a year ago; all without any mention of the contact's data! The NGO is undoubtedly a master at making legal information invisible, working essentially behind the scenes, through personal and political relationships.

We can only be amazed at the lack of management and the impunity enjoyed by the managers of this ineffective association, which operates outside the law. What other association could benefit from such a favourable regime, in a context of supposed budgetary rigour?

With the Socialist Party ministers thrown into opposition after the elections, it was other parties - led by Les Engagés, as the article in *Diagnostic* no. 424 showed - that took over to maintain this NGO at all costs (in the literal sense of the word).

So, when will the parties in the new government decide to stop supporting an entity that is as moribund as it is ineffective, having shown such a complete lack of good management at every stage of its existence?

More fundamentally, behind this mismanagement of the NGO and the public funds allocated to it, with results that are more than mediocre (previously) or non-existent (today), what is striking is the general lack of reaction to the most serious attack ever made on Belgian scientific institutions (the two FSI-museums), whose missions are to conduct research and educate the public through the media of exhibitions, publications and educational activities.

The democratic world is currently outraged by President TRUMP's budget cuts and interference in American universities, and by his desire to erase History in order to rewrite it. Yet this is exactly what the Belgian ministers of the previous government tried to do, through their armed wing Horizon 50-200 and its powerful relays, by trying to reduce our two FSIs to museum lunaparks.

For example, since 2022, all the written press has done is complacently report on the plan to dismantle the FSIs and, once the information had been released by the GERFA, has never wanted to tackle the issue.

The BCE refers to the case as being "in a normal situation" when it has clearly been in breach for a very long time; similarly, the Court of Commerce, despite having been in the know for a long time, is turning a blind eye.

And the Finance Inspectorate - itself a member of the NGO (!) - has approved these various harmful maneuvers and

continues to refuse to see or rectify anything, which would be tantamount to taking an illegal interest.

As for the members of Parliament, after having been scandalously short-circuited, they allow themselves to be given laconic, completely incomplete and imprecise answers, allowing themselves to be misled.

For almost three years now, we have had no reaction to this major democratic challenge.

Wouldn't all of the above merit a closer look at the serious malfunctions of the State and the total impunity still enjoyed by this association?

As for the Bicentenary, which is currently being hijacked as a pretext for juicy property deals under the guise of "revitalisation", it should focus more usefully on current societal issues, inviting historical rigour and the participation of citizens around the most important and worrying questions of today; isn't that precisely the mission of federal museums: to shed light on the present and future of our History in the light of the past and current trends?

