

Conference MERI 6 October 9:00-9:15 – Speech president BELSPO

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, dear guests,

It is my great pleasure, as President of the Belgian Science Policy Office – BELSPO – to welcome you all to today's conference, "New World, New Rules? Rethinking Science Policy in a Fragmenting World."

We meet at a time of profound uncertainty and transformation. The past decade has been marked by disruptions that were once considered unthinkable: shifting military alliances, contested trade agreements, geopolitical tensions with global reverberations, and the ever more tangible consequences of climate change. The international order that was established in the aftermath of the Second World War no longer offers the same degree of stability or predictability.

These changes are not merely events in the headlines; they are part of a broader historical cycle in which societies, when confronted with new social, technological, and environmental challenges, search for alternative answers. Science and innovation are central to these answers. Yet, they are also deeply affected by the very transformations we are witnessing.

For decades, research, technology, and innovation policy operated under the assumption that international collaboration was both natural and indispensable. Shared knowledge, open networks, and global mobility were seen as the very engines of progress. Today, while this conviction remains, it is increasingly tested by new realities. Nations are acutely aware of their dependencies on others: in supply chains, in access to critical raw materials, in advanced technological products, and in the digital infrastructure that underpins our economies.

This is where the notion of technological sovereignty – sometimes framed as digital sovereignty – has entered public debate. What was once a concern limited to cybersecurity now extends to energy, raw materials, semiconductors, green technologies, and global value chains. The defence sector highlights this most starkly, where strategic autonomy is inseparable from national security. But the issue goes far beyond defence. It is about how we as societies ensure that we can innovate, produce, and govern in ways that are not excessively vulnerable to external shocks or geopolitical pressures.

At the same time, let us not imagine that the answer is to turn inward. Science has always thrived on openness, exchange, and collaboration. The task before us, therefore, is not to retreat into isolation but to carefully navigate between interdependence and autonomy; between the opportunities of globalisation and the risks of fragmentation.

BELSPO, as Belgium's central science policy actor, plays a role in this balancing act. With more than 2,500 colleagues – across four directorates and ten federal scientific institutions – we work every day to stimulate research and innovation across a wide array of fields, with the ultimate aim of securing a better future for all of us. Our scope is broad: from space research and applications, to climate science, to support for national and international research networks.

We manage some of the country's most renowned cultural and scientific collections. This diversity reflects a conviction that science and culture are not separate domains, but deeply intertwined. Together, they contribute to a society that is more informed and more sustainable. Through validated evidence and scientific expertise, we assist the federal government in shaping policies to address climate change, biodiversity loss, digitalisation, heritage preservation, and the many other challenges that define our era.

But as today's theme reminds us, the future cannot be taken for granted. The global economy is undergoing rapid shifts driven by digitalisation, green transitions, and technological innovation. Strategic autonomy is increasingly viewed as essential for safeguarding competitiveness, ensuring resilience, and protecting societal values. How, then, can science and innovation policies respond to these pressures? How can we sustain openness and collaboration while also reinforcing the foundations of sovereignty and security?

These questions demand more than technocratic answers. They require us to disentangle the geopolitical from the economic dimensions, to examine them independently, and then to explore how they interact. Only by doing so can we truly understand the modes of coordination, the controversies, and the objectives at stake. This conference is a step in that direction.

We are fortunate today to have with us distinguished speakers who will guide us through different perspectives: Professor Koen Schoors will reflect on the “big change – for the better,” while colleagues from the European Commission will present the EU's position and policy responses in the face of these global challenges. Later, we will also look back, with the help of our own colleagues at BELSPO, at what history can teach us about managing uncertainty and navigating change.

Let me conclude with this thought: the fragmentation of the world order is a challenge, but it is also an opportunity. It forces us to rethink the assumptions that have guided science policy for decades. It invites us to reconsider the meaning of sovereignty in an interconnected age. And it reminds us that research and innovation are not abstract endeavours, but tools to build resilience, prosperity, and hope for societies in transition.

I wish you all an inspiring and thought-provoking day, and I look forward to the discussions ahead.

Thank you.