



PHILIPPE DE BACKER

Minister of Digital Agenda, Telecommunications and Post,
responsible for Administrative Simplification,
the fight against Social fraud, Privacy and the North Sea

Prof. Holger Hoos
Confederation of Laboratories for Artificial Intelligence
Research in Europe (CLAIRE)
Leiden Institute of Advanced Computer Science (LIACS)
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Dear Professor Hoos,

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has made major advances in the recent years. From web search to image recognition, dialog systems, customer and market prediction, verified software and hardware, advanced robots, self-driving cars and superhuman Chess and Go playing systems, AI has demonstrated its game-changing nature and its potential as a major driver of innovation, future growth, competitiveness and societal changes.

In the United States of America and China, huge investments in AI are made by the private and public sector. European countries are struggling to retain their best scientists. Many European companies whose future crucially depends on AI are not perceived as competitive. There is an urgent need for the EU and affiliated countries to react with a coordinated plan for investment in talent, research, technology and innovation in AI. The "Coordinated Plan on AI Made in Europe" currently under preparation by EU authorities is the first top-down approach aimed at applied research. We support its fast implementation.

Recently, two bottom-up initiatives for AI in EU - CLAIRE and ELLIS - have emerged as a solution for Europe to find its way to the forefront of AI, and have within a few months gained support of thousands of AI researchers across all of Europe. They argue for a fast, long-term funding commitment both in basic and applied research, establishing a network of centers of excellence in AI, and competitive conditions for AI researchers in Europe.

Belgium supports these initiatives and their synergy. We support the key points expressed by CLAIRE, including the key focus on AI of AI research, support for AI across all of Europe, and a focus on Human-Centered AI. Belgium is prepared to play a key role in these efforts and set up national Centers of Excellence in Belgium, as well as support a central European hub for world-class AI research and innovation in a suitably chosen location.

In particular:

1. Belgium is ready to commit to AI as a critical research area for future development of EU and our country. Belgium is developing its national AI strategy in addition to the local efforts already in development.
2. Belgium supports the creation of a new, central facility for AI, similar to CERN, in Europe. World-class AI research needs computing and data infrastructure at "Google scale", along with cutting edge testing facilities. For maximum synergy between different areas within AI, efficiency and visibility, these should be located in a single, central facility.
3. Belgium supports the creation of a EU network of several strong Centers of Excellence in AI. Located strategically throughout Europe, they will play decisive roles as regional hubs for AI, providing EU-level support, attractive long-term funding, excellent support staff and a truly outstanding working environment for basic research in AI.

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4. Belgium offers to become a major Center of Excellence of AI research, supporting the central EU facility. With its outstanding track record in AI research, recent investments in AI, stable economic growth and democratic orientation towards EU, Belgium has started to bring back AI talent and promote scientific quality, which can be built upon and further extended.

5. Belgium supports the creation of low-effort, low-overhead mechanisms for funding the most promising AI researchers at all stages. Such mechanisms are critically needed to stem the drain of excellent researchers away from Europe and into non-European industry. Major AI companies (Google, Facebook, ...) and AI initiatives outside of Europe are offering such mechanisms, along with usually much higher salaries than European academia. In order to compete, low-effort, low-overhead mechanisms for funding excellent AI researchers are absolutely crucial.

To find its way to the forefront of AI research and development, the EU and affiliated countries needs to create a fully coordinated European initiative. Belgium is prepared to support such an initiative and to play a key role in setting up an AI research infrastructure in Europe and a central hub, as a visible beacon for European excellence in research and innovation, with the aim of achieving recognition and impact similar to CERN.

Sincerely,

Philippe De Backer,
Belgian Federal Minister of Digital Agenda

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