



## First Launch of the New Research Vessel Belgica

11 February 2020

The future Belgian research vessel *Belgica* was launched for the first time on 11 February 2020 from the Freire Shipyard in Vigo, Spain. An important milestone following the keel laying, the equivalent of the laying of the foundation stone of a building, just under a year ago. The ceremony took place in the presence of the various project partners: the shipyard, the Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO), Defence and the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS). Now the ship will be further finished and provided with all the necessary equipment. The delivery of the ship in Zeebrugge is scheduled for the last quarter of this year. Then it will officially be put into service. The cost of the project amounts to approximately 54 million euros (VAT included).

### *Background and Milestones of the Construction and Naming Process*

After 36 years of service, with more than 1,000 scientific expeditions and more than 900,000 kilometres travelled on the counter (>22.5 times around the earth), the current Belgian oceanographic research vessel A962 *Belgica* (built in 1984) was in need of replacement. Therefore, on 28 October 2016, the federal government decided to build a new modern research vessel. The contract for the design and construction of the ship was awarded by the Minister of Science Policy to the Spanish shipyard Freire Shipyard (Vigo) and the Norwegian ship designer Rolls-Royce Marine AS (which in the meantime became part of the Norwegian Kongsberg Maritime).

The Directorate General Material Resources (DG MR) at the Ministry of Defence has a solid knowledge of tendering procedures. The latest acquisition of two new patrol vessels and the renewal of the mine countermeasure capacity, among other things, fitted nicely with the acquisition of this new research vessel. It therefore went without saying that the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Science continued to work closely together on the acquisition and monitoring of the design and construction process. Since the contract was awarded, a great deal has been achieved: the detailed plans for the vessel were drawn up, scale models were tested, and on 13 February 2019 the cutting of the steel for the construction of the new vessel was started. The keel laying took place on 27 March 2019. Less than a year later, the new RV *Belgica* can be launched for the first time! Afterwards, the ship will be further finished and provided with all the necessary equipment. At the end of 2020, as planned, it will be delivered in its home port of Zeebrugge to support the marine research community for the next thirty years. After 36 years of loyal service, the current RV *Belgica* will then end its research activities for good.

In the meantime, the name of the Belgian oceanographic ship was also determined. After a naming competition with several phases (submission of proposals by secondary schools, first selection of admissible names by a professional jury, followed by a public online vote) it became clear that the new ship will honour the Belgian tradition and will also go through life as RV Belgica. The Federal Minister for Science Policy announced this on 25 April 2019 in the presence of the winning class 1LA of Athénée Maurice Destenay in Liège, after which students and minister could enjoy a sea voyage on the current A 962 Belgica.

### ***Future of the New RV Belgica***

Compared to its predecessor, the new RV Belgica is larger (71.4 m compared to 50 m) and offers more space to the scientists (a doubling of laboratory space with a capacity to take up to 28 scientists on board). The new RV Belgica will guarantee compliance with our country's national and international obligations and ensure continuity in the support of marine sciences. In this way, the new RV Belgica will continue the important role of the current A962 Belgica in monitoring the state of the Belgian and surrounding marine waters, as well as in fundamental scientific research.

The new Belgica will also be equipped with state-of-the-art scientific equipment that will allow samples to be taken up to a depth of 5,000 m. The new vessel will also be a silent vessel (important for fisheries research, among other things) with a light ice reinforcement to be able to conduct research in Arctic areas during the summer. Although the North Sea will remain the main focus area of the new vessel, the research area extends further than that of the current RV Belgica: northwards to above the Arctic Circle, further south including the Mediterranean and Black Seas and westwards to the Atlantic Ocean. The ship will have an autonomy of 30 days and will carry out up to 300 days of research at sea each year.

### ***International Dimension***

The international dimension of science will also be given due attention in the agenda of the new RV Belgica. Just as the current RV Belgica already formed part of the European EUROFLEETS network (in which international scientists can obtain shipping time on foreign research vessels), the new RV Belgica will also remain active within this network. Also under the umbrella of the European Marine Board, Belgium (represented in this dossier by Dr. Lieven Naudts, 'New RV' project manager for RBINS) participated in a study on the status of the European fleet of research vessels, and helped determine the key role these vessels play now and in the future in the pursuit of a better understanding of the oceans, the functions they can perform for us, and the preconditions within which human activities can be permitted. A 'European Marine Board Position Paper' on this theme was published in the autumn of 2019. Since June 2019, Dr. Naudts also assumes the position of chairman of the European Research Vessel Operators group (ERVVO).

Thanks to the new RV Belgica and the European framework, Belgium remains at the forefront of sea-related science and technology, helping to ensure that Europe can remain a world leader in marine science and exploration.

The 'NewRV' project became reality thanks to the collaboration between the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS), the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO). The new Belgica will be owned by the Belgian State, represented by the Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO). Operational management will be provided by the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS) in collaboration with Defence and a private operator.

More information about the 'NewRV' project and the technical specifications of the new ship can be consulted at <http://www.belspo.be/NewRV>, where the construction process can also be followed.