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# Evaluation of the State Archives (ARA- AGR) of Belgium

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## **Management summary**



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technopolis <sub>group</sub> June 2017

Frank Zuijdam, Technopolis Group

Wilbert Helmus, Helmus Advies

Viola Peter, Technopolis Group

Laura Roman, Technopolis Group

Jasper Schipper, Technopolis Group

Apolline Terrier, Technopolis Group

Geert van der Veen, Technopolis Group

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## Summary

This evaluation report presents the findings of Technopolis Group in the evaluation of the State Archives (ARA-AGR), one of the Federal Scientific Institutes (FSIs) of Belgium. Technopolis Group and Helmus Advies performed the evaluation in the period April 2016 - February 2017, upon commission by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO).

The objective of the evaluation was an integral assessment of the scientific, service and museum functions of the State Archives. The evaluation was based upon a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods; a key component was the review by a panel of international experts.

### Background

The State Archives are one of ten Belgian Federal Scientific Institutes under the responsibility of the Minister of Science, and are by the Law on Public Records the ultimate controlling organisation to preserve documents from most of the public authorities in Belgium, according to the framework of power between the federal level and the other levels of governance (regions, communities, etc.).

Whilst the mission and the tasks of ARA are formally laid down in the Royal Decree<sup>1</sup>, it does have the freedom to design its own strategy via its 'management plan', within the boundaries of its official mission. The management plan 2011–2017 is mentioning seven strategic goals, three goals related to the federal science policy and four specific strategic goals for ARA. For each of these strategic goals a number of operational goals have been defined (approx. 40), each involving a number of actions (in total more than 200 actions, 53 of which are formal projects for organisational improvement). The management plan is perceived as very operational in character and does not serve as a (long term) strategy for the institute as a whole. Both the interviewees and the international peer committee indicated that there is a need for a strategy at institute level. This strategy should contain a clear vision for the future and strategic focal points. Such a strategy must also address the changing environment and ARA's position in it. In this respect, the current management plan is assessed as too ambitious. The available budget and the ambitions of ARA are no longer aligned.

In general, state archives are supporting the legislative requirements of their governing bodies. The responsibilities and the related activities are different for each national archive, depending on the legislative tasks and the funding of these tasks. There are no national archives that cover exactly the same mission, purposes and statutory duties in combination with the national and regional context compared with ARA. The benchmark institutes have similar tasks in relation to the preservation, valorisation of records of their governments and

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Decree June 24, 1955, modified in 2009. Royal Decree of 23 May 2016 about the modalities of incorporation of the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation SEGESOMA into the State Archives and State Archives in the Provinces, art. 9: addition of § 2 to art. 2 of the RD of 3 December 2009.

delivering archival services to the public. All archival institutions are facing the impact of the digitisation of society. The ubiquity of digital information requires earlier intervention in the approach to existing records management and archival processes. Together with ARA, all benchmark institutes defined objectives to ensure the long-term accessibility of analogue and digital collections.

### **Internal governance structure and management**

The State Archives are led by the Director General, who is assisted by the Governing Council in executing the daily governance of the institute. The State Archives are divided into several Operational Directorates (ODs). There are three regional Operational Directorates (ODs): Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia and one OD for support services. The three departments encompass 19 repositories, spread throughout the country. Every repository service is fitted with a public reading room enabling one to consult archival documents in written, printed or digital format.

An additional OD (OD4) within the State Archives is the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (CegeSoma). The centre was founded as a separate entity on 13 December 1967 as Centre for Research and Studies on the History of the Second World War. Its task was “to take all necessary measures to collect, preserve and study documents or archives relating to the Second World War in Belgium, its antecedents, background and consequences”. At the beginning of 2016 CegeSoma was absorbed by ARA.

The current Director General introduced a more modern management style; less hierarchical, more autonomy for Directors and heads of unit, more support and alignment between management and staff, fewer differences between contractual and statutory staff, and increased opportunities to work from home. In this way ARA became a more dynamic organisation, which is better connected to the outside world. ARA is however not there yet.

The international peers noted that the organisation is, on the one hand, based on regionalised infrastructural services (preservation and access) and, on the other hand, on scientific historical research in a stricter sense. The result is a legally defined organogram that mirrors a more politically defined strategy of regional and linguistic diversity rather than a real professional archival orientation. The committee believes that these defining factors limit the efficient organisation of archiving as well as future strategic and organisational development of ARA-AGR. The peer review committee points out that organisation should follow strategy. The starting point for a new organisation is therefore the future strategic orientation. An essential element of this future strategy is a digital strategy (not only digitisation, but also digital infrastructure and digital services) in order to deal with the societal Digital Turn. The digital turn might offer opportunities to examine further concentration of geographical oriented presence. Although geographical coverage must be taken into consideration to some extent, this should not interfere with a professional and reasonable organisational structure.

In the new organisation the ‘transversal’ responsibilities in the current organisation (a regional OD with a special responsibility for the whole ARA) are not sustainable. The new organisation needs strong support units (finance, HR, communication, etc.). These support services could be shared services, e.g. with the Royal Library of Belgium. IT, however, has to be integrated into the professional units and cannot be a support function anymore.

## **Financial management**

The largest source of income for ARA is income from the BELSPO general staff envelope. After a short decline, staff envelope income mostly grows between 2009 and 2013. In 2014, the staff envelope drops by over €1m, with a further decrease in 2015.

The BELSPO general dotation is the second largest source of income for ARA. It is around €5m to €5.5m per year, and does not fluctuate much over the years.

ARA also receives income from research. The fluctuation in total income is mostly caused by the volatility of this form of income. For example, in 2008, about €1m was received while in 2011, almost €3m was acquired.

Income from federal administrations other than BELSPO is limited but the trend shows an increase in recent years to almost the same amount as income from BELSPO projects, with over €1m. Income from regional administrations is modest, and varies between €60k and €0.25m.

Finally, ARA gains some income from the general public, between €0.5m and €1m annually.

Total income increases by almost €3m between 2008 and 2011. After 2011, the total income decreases. From 2013, total income remains relatively stable as staff envelope income declines and research income grows.

In recent years of austerity, FSIs like ARA are not allowed to overspend and the tight controls lead to financial years with a surplus. In addition, FSIs need to put 10–15 per cent of their dotation in a back-up fund (‘reservefonds’). The budget surplus of ARA has been ‘frozen’ since 2014. This means that ARA is not able to use these funds.

## **HRM**

The number of FTEs at ARA has fluctuated through the years. After an increase of about ten FTEs between 2008 and 2011, the number of FTEs decreased for four years in a row, from 252 in 2011 to 208 in 2015. The addition of CegeSoma leads to an increase of about 25 FTEs in 2016. Without CegeSoma, FTEs would have slightly decreased in 2016.

A large part of the staff consists of non-scientific support staff, of which about two-thirds have a contractual status and one-third a statutory status. Scientists make up about one-third of the total number of staff members. These mainly have a statutory status, with the exception of CegeSoma which only has staff members with contractual status. In 2015 and 2016, there is also a small group of scientific support staff part of ARA.

OD Brussels and CegeSoma<sup>2</sup> are managed by *ad interim* directors. There is insufficient budget available to appoint statutory Directors for these ODs. The OD Flanders is *de facto* also managed by an interim Director, because the formal director suffers from a long-term illness. The interim status of the directors hampers the management of the ODs, e.g. as directors *ad interim* have no mandate to develop a management plan.

As stated above, ARA is in urgent need for a digital turn. This demands a change in HR management and employment policy. The federal framework limits the autonomy of ARA on HR policy, which hampers the digital turn. The federal government should facilitate with laws and increased autonomy.

## **Research strategy**

There are more or less two kinds of research within ARA: i) archival research (making inventories, building repositories, etc.) and ii) historical research based on the content of the archives. There is a lot of autonomy for the OD directors and the heads of the provincial depositories to manage their own research activities.

The peer review committee recognised a strong scientific culture within ARA. In recent years ARA conducts research according to academic norms, which is an improvement compared with the past and the quality of ARA's research seems to have been improved. Research topics where ARA is recognised as having good competences are Archival Law, and Archival Management. Besides that, ARA conserves exceptional archives about World War I, which constitute a good base for research and publications.

Linking ARA to the academic world is considered of great importance for further improvement. The integration of the CegeSoma, known for its proximity to the academic world, may help the rest of ARA in this. From this perspective, the fact that ARA is now offering the opportunity for statutory researchers to undertake a PhD at the same time as working for ARA, is seen as a big improvement, and gratifying for the archivists.

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<sup>2</sup> This position was a vacancy at the time of reporting, see [http://www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/doc/Job/20160928\\_ARA\\_nl.pdf](http://www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/doc/Job/20160928_ARA_nl.pdf)

In the current organisation one OD (Wallonia) has the transversal mission of monitoring research e.g. by accompanying and responding to calls for tenders and external solicitations. The peer review committee sees that positive results have been obtained but feels there is a lack of strategy. A revised research strategy should lead to a better definition of the projects before collection takes place, and in conjunction with it. Such a research strategy must be discussed and widely broadcasted to academic partners and other stakeholders and should integrate research common to all OD's. It is important for CegeSoma to remain visible as a part of the ARA and as an individual place of learning.

## **Services and outreach**

The existing services have developed organically over time, based on the established practices and experience of the ARA archivists and senior management team. In general, users and partners are very positive about the level of services, mentioning overall positive experiences.

Several interviewees mentioned the extended regional presence as an asset. The State Archives have 19 repositories spread throughout the country. Every repository service is fitted with a public reading room, enabling visitors to consult archival documents in written, printed or digital format. The reading rooms are open to everyone: researchers, students, amateur historians, genealogists, land surveyors, pensioners, and many more. The number of visits (and reader's cards) is slowly declining over the years and services in the reading rooms are more and more under pressure because of budget cuts in personnel in relation to a growing need for professional trained staffing of the reading rooms.

For the future service strategy it is important to think of archives administration as client-centred, not material-centred. ARA therefore needs to accelerate its transformation to become client-centred and digitally efficient.

ARA is playing a central role in a European portal that gives access to archives throughout European countries: Archives Portal Europe. As part of the online public services, ARA is publishing content in a range of (inter)national platforms and/or thematic websites. In most cases, the content contains descriptive information ('finding aids'); it does not yet provide online access to the text of the documents themselves. The difference in the approach and level of service between the ODs of Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia are a testament for the need for a service strategy and the modernisation of the general approach.

## **Digitisation**

A comparison to similar organisations and feedback from stakeholders suggest that ARA is missing opportunities to deliver better digital services to users, to get the users involved and to potentially generate revenue through fees and licensing of resources to commercial



partners. ARA is encouraged to continue to develop a vision around online services, facilitated by the digitisation of physical records.

ARA should also adapt to the challenge of born-digital archives. While ARA continues to operate in a mostly physical world, continuing to assemble large volumes of paper records, it is clear that in the next decade, like in most other national archives, the balance will begin to swing in the direction of born digital records, which will be accessed by users in new ways that do not align with traditional approaches, even digitisation. ARA must begin to develop its digital capability so it is capable of managing complex, unstructured and diverse digital records at scale.

### **ARA's positioning in the national and international research domain**

ARA is, in general, doing well in terms of collaborations with other national and international research institutes. They are open for collaboration and operate very constructively. Contacts and collaborations are well supported by the management of ARA.

ARA is also well aligned to regional government administrations, Federal Departments, etc. ARA trains staff of these administrations in order to improve archiving, and has long term relationships with key clients (e.g. workings groups at Federal Departments). At a provincial level there seems less alignment; there are still links missing with smaller archives and museums.

ARA has a limited number of international research projects, but is deeply rooted in the European archival community and has been active in various international archival networks.

ARA would benefit from having a clearer articulation of its research priorities, inviting collaboration that fulfils its needs, rather than simply responding to funding opportunities per se. ARA now relies heavily on funding opportunities within Belgium (i.e. BELSPO). Exploring opportunities more widely across Europe and the rest of the world will help ARA help to fully exploit research interests and funding and collaboration opportunities.

### **Overall conclusion**

The State Archives seem to be heading into a 'perfect storm'. The current 'modus operandi' will not be sustainable and even now already ARA is running up to its limits. ARA has to deal with a vast influx of archive documents. The 2009 revision of the Belgian Law on Archives shortened the period of mandatory archives transfers to the SA by 70 years and this resulted in an increasing number of archives document to be processed. Over the next few years important transfers are expected: Ministry of Defence (35 km), War Victims (13 km), Ministry of African Colonies (11 km). ARA faces a huge description backlog, but the funding remains the same. Without additional means ARA will not be able to handle this backlog and deliver archival services up to standards.

On top of that, ARA needs to adapt to the digital turn of society. This means that ARA needs to evolve with regard to the digitisation of archives. ARA is confronted with new challenges, such as the rapid change in digital humanities and the expectations of visitors and the larger public for digitised archives.

The strategy and operations towards born-digital archives will be another challenge that ARA has to face. This digital turn will change the way ARA has to work but also the expertise and competences needed within the organisation.

## Recommendations for ARA

In order to tackle these challenges this evaluation has developed the following recommendations for ARA:

- Develop a **long-term vision for the future of ARA**. Transform the vision into a strategy in close cooperation with (major) stakeholders. The strategy should result into challenging but achievable and prioritised deliverables for the next 5 – 10 years.
- Diminish the complex regional structure and **change ARA into a ‘digital archive’**. Develop an up-to-date **digital infrastructure** and sufficient professional IT-support. Make sure the organisation can facilitate the digital turn; adapt the organisational structure and recruit of a greater variety of in-house scientific and professional competencies.
- Rethink the **research strategy** for ARA: decide if the (more demanding) service tasks can be combined with the ambition to be a (leading) research institute. Consider a **focus** (except for CegeSoma) on the **core business** (collection, classification and provision of archives), like archives abroad.
- If ARA wants to maintain the strong research culture, it must:
  - Formulate a more **detailed research strategy** with a clearer articulation of research priorities.
  - Work more closely with universities and other relevant (academic) stakeholders.
  - Increase the presence and engagement in international research networks and explore the opportunities for attracting international research funds more actively.
- Develop a **broader communication strategy** and multi-year action plan, which includes publications, digitisation, educational and cultural services, etc.
- Keep CegeSoma visible within the ARA structure and build on the Centre’s original mission and acquired expertise. This means a **focus** on the core expertise of the **history and impact of war** and **mass violence on Belgian contemporary history**. Work closer with university research groups, both for common research planning and application, as well as for educational purposes
- ARA needs to modernise its **service delivery** by developing a more **client-centred** evidence led **service strategy**, encompassing:
  - Its service delivery values;
  - Its objectives and targets;
  - A categorisation of its clients on-site and on the web;

- A possible modulation (segmentation) of its deliveries to those clients' categories;
- Its terms of reference regarding service delivery;
- A high-level description of its ways and means.
- Build a **network of supporters** by getting users/clients involved in different activities and make them “champions” for ARA. This will allow ARA to acquire the support and funds needed to face the future challenges.
- Scale up the commercial ambitions. Make a shift from simple cost recovery or minimal commercially viable opportunities to **more profit-generating schemes** that have the potential to deliver real financial benefit to the organisation in the long-term.
- Take a more **strategic approach for international collaboration**. Define the added value of the international collaboration for ARA more clearly. Make sure internalisation is (also) beneficial for ARA's operation, e.g. in term of open access, sharing knowledge and expertise, attracting additional funds, reunification of collections, etc.

### **Recommendations for the federal authorities**

In order to facilitate this process:

- The federal state needs to **create the legal framework** to facilitate organisational changes within ARA and the slim lining of the regional presence.
- The federal government should – within the framework of the Digital Agenda – **work together with ARA on a long-term digital strategy for born-digital archives**. Such a long-term strategy must be supported by sufficient budget.



technopolis |group| The Netherlands  
Spuistraat 283  
1012 VR Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
T +31 20 535 2244  
F +31 20 428 9656  
E [info.nl@technopolis-group.com](mailto:info.nl@technopolis-group.com)  
[www.technopolis-group.com](http://www.technopolis-group.com)

