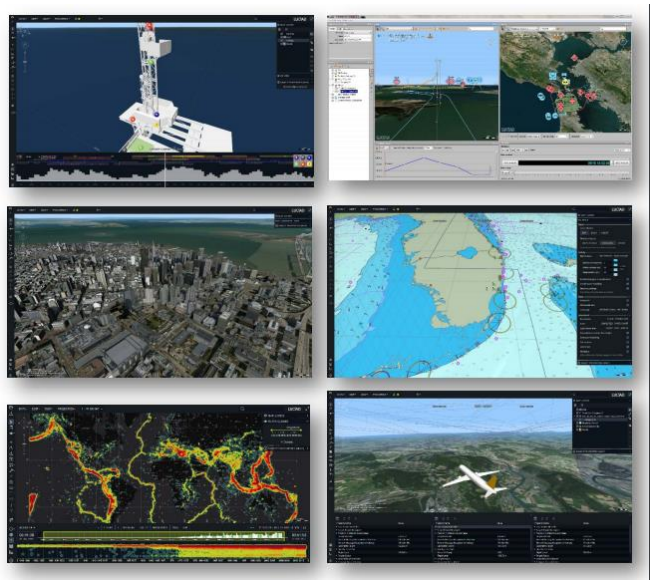
In the picture

Luciad - Geospatial software for mission-critical operations

By Nico Deblauwe



Founded in 1999, Luciad serves clients in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Though it recently was acquired by Hexagon Geospatial, they kept an agile SME mindset. Thousands of end users work directly with Luciad's geospatial applications, and major systems integrators (think Airbus Defense and Space, Lufthansa Systems, NATO, Thales…) incorporate its software in their own products. NCP Flanders went to Leuven to interview Frederic Houbie, the Research Projects Manager at Luciad, about how he sees Horizon 2020.

How did you get involved in H2020?

For the Marisa project, which is now halfway, we were invited by an existing consortium. As Luciad is a software vendor, we cooperate a lot with system integrators – to blend our visualization components into their solutions. So they know what we can deliver and when such a feature is needed in a project, they know who to call.

H2020 is about innovation – how do they know that you are interested in collaborative research?

At least 20% of our annual budget is invested in research and our sales department is very aware of this mindset. We position Luciad as a company that has both great components and stays open to further improving them through innovation.

There are fields where the state-of-the-art is continually evolving; thereforend-user feedback is a unique opportunity to detect where it is relevant to improve our products. Recent examples are software-hardware interaction, advances of new screen technologies like high resolution and high dynamic range…

How open are you about your roadmap?

There is a soft tension between what we want to achive in the long-term and the more pragmatic requests from our customers, who have their focus rather on the short term.

This happens to match very good with H2020 projects. Topics are announced well in advance, which allows to think things through. Between the submission and decision are another 3 months and then it takes at least 3 more until the actual project start. This allows us to align our roadmap and schedule the different items into the different releases of our products.

It's important to mention as well that the public funded research projects (like H2020) make up less than 10% of our research budget – it's a kind of "cherry on the cake" rather than a structural financing source.

How do you prepare a project submission?

First of all, it's important to know what you can and cannot do. Luciad is too small to coordinate a collaborative project. We prefer to take up a more technical role as task leader.

We typically are invited into a project and only accept it if there is enough time to prepare the proposal. Up to 6 months is feasible, but ideally there is 1 year left before the call deadline. Joining a proposal with less than 3 months for drafting always is a no-go, as all efforts to prepare it would only mean a loss of time.

It is key to have a physical meeting with all the project partners. One can exchange information using e-mail and other collaboration tools, but this is inferior to spending some actual time together. Standing around a whiteboard and discuss for 1 or 2 days has indeed a

cost, but when you believe in the proposal it's important to make this investment.

Horizon 2020 is a competitive scheme, typically no more than 10-15% is funded. Do these numbers scare you?

Last year we applied with 4 projects and won 2, so we cannot complain about our approach. Sometimes SMEs or startups say that "the success rate is too low to motivate the effort." But this is not the full picture.

If the coordination is done well, it takes 5 to 15 days (depending on the size) to prepare your parts of a proposal. Some parts can easily be reused later on. I'm talking about the general administrative stuff, if you apply for more than one project. But also the technical effort is never completely lost when the project is in line with your roadmap.

But yes, it's painful if you are not selected, this is why it is utterly important to be selective from the start.

How do you deal with the IP issues?

For exploiting the project results, we need access to the generated IP. The provided template of the EU (DESCA) is, for now, sound enough to make things work.

Concerning our software, we provide licenses to our project partners during the project and extend this typically for 6 to 12 more months to keep the demos going.

Not all project results are of direct use to us. Universities and research centers tend to focus on scientific publications that often are rather theoretical. But they are interested as well in leveraging their fundamental research outcomes by doing some joint applied research in follow-up projects – which facilitates both the technology take-up and the IP negotiations afterwards.

You are asked to join projects… How does the eco-system of Luciad look like?

In a previous job, I used the network around ESA a lot, but for Luciad it is rather our customer base that is at the core of our eco-system. We are well known for our visualization components, and quite some of the companies that are interested in H2020 topics in our fields are already customers or know us by name.
And we are actively involved in standardization, we help shaping standards and can push the knowledge from new standards into the projects.

Do you have some last thoughts?

The dissemination and exploitation parts of a project are often undervalued by enterprises. You can use a project to increase your visibility, credibility and thus leverage your marketing. It also works the other way around: several times a project partner became a customer after seeing our technology in action. We even gained customers from non-funded projects!

Luciad delivers geospatial software solutions that power the world's mission critical operations. Their applications simplify the lives of developers and end-users with advanced visual analytics that allow them to unlock the potential of real time location intelligence and create the foundations for next generation geospatial systems. From safeguarding critical assets to creating the digital infrastructure for smart cities, Luciad helps users implement intuitive command and control systems.

Luciad was founded in 1999. Currently it employs 80 persons in Belgium and has some sales offices around the world. It was acquired by Hexagon Geospatial in 2018, but the ambition to continue to grow stay alive and kicking… More info can be found on luciad.com.

MARISA – Maritime Integrated Surveillance Awareness

This 2.5 year project unites 22 partners from 9 countries (Italy, France, Spain, The Netherlands, Greece, Germany, Belgium, Portugal and Finland) and has a budget of almost 8 million EUR.

Europe is very open about the projects funded with public money under Horizon 2020. Facts about the MARISA project can be found in CORDIS (database with info on all EU-supported R&D). In addition, there are tools that build upon this raw data and present visualizations, see e.g. the Vinnova tool. More interesting, probably, is the project's website, https://www.marisaproject.eu/ , where you find more about the research challenges and partners.