EU space strategy: ESA ready to deliver

Written by Johann-Dietrich Worner on 26 January 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

The EU can confidently rely on the ESA in implementing its space programmes and activities, writes Johann-Dietrich Worner.

I'd like to begin this article by thanking Vice-President Maroš Šefčovic and Commissioner Elżbieta Bieńkowska for ensuring Europe's space strategy was high up on the political agenda throughout 2016.

The European Space Agency (ESA) has been active for more than 50 years and covers all the different space sectors such as Earth observation, navigation, telecommunication, space science, exploration, launchers, operations and space situational awareness, technology development, outreach and transfer.
In order for Europe to join forces on space, it is important that the different players don't work against each other but use their special competences based on respective experiences and expertise.

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With this understanding, last October, I signed, along with Commissioner Bienkowska, a joint statement on developing a ‘shared vision and goals for the future of Europe in space by the EU and ESA’, focusing on integrating space in European society, fostering a globally competitive European space sector and securing Europe's autonomous access and use of space.

In this joint statement we stated that, "to achieve these goals, the EU and ESA emphasise their intention to reinforce their cooperation in the future".

In addition, the revitalisation of the 2004 framework ESA-EU agreement is mentioned in the statement, leading to the resumption of the Space Council. In this context, we also welcomed the Commission's communication, outlining the specific objectives they would like to see the EU undertake in contributing to the ESA - EU shared goals.

The proposals, particularly those focussing on data and services, are important steps towards market uptake, are indispensable in ensuring that Galileo, EGNOS and Copernicus are fully exploited, and in guaranteeing that space fully delivers its socioeconomic benefits. The declaration of the initial services for Galileo, launched at the end of 2016 was, for both ESA and the Commission, a great success.

In its communication, the Commission underlined the relevance of space for the EU economy. Indeed, space data should play an essential role in better defining and implementing EU policies, allowing for more growth and consequently, more jobs in Europe.

The Commission will have an important role to play, setting up policies and proposing legislation to boost the use and the processing of space-related data into new products and services delivered globally by European companies.

The communication's emphasis on new user needs, meeting the priorities of EU sectorial policies and on new business opportunities are welcome. I also note that the communication addressed European autonomy, through critical technologies non-dependence, and the protection of ground and space infrastructure as important priorities.

Regarding Europe's autonomous access to space, I take this opportunity to recall that contracts' riders were signed in early November allowing for the fully-fledged development of the Ariane 6 and Vega-C launchers.
The ESA's space strategy, adopted by ESA member states in December in Lucerne, will ensure that we are prepared to tackle the challenges of Space 4.0, the new era of space, by adapting to current and future challenges.

ESA member states have also agreed to fund a variety of ambitious space projects in areas such as science, telecommunications, Earth observation, satellite navigation, space traffic management, launchers, exploration and technology. At Lucerne, ESA member states put €10.3bn on the table, a major financial success.

With these three elements - the joint statement on shared vision and goals, the EU specific objectives and the ESA objectives - to which we could add national plans - Europe is set to be fully equipped with the plans and tools it needs to achieve its ambitions in space.

ESA is a world-class space agency that addresses, through the strong and steady investments of its member states, the full spectrum of space activities. Now, continuity is the key to success.

I welcome the introduction, in the Commission's 2017 work programme, of the 'implementation of the space strategy' initiative. Ensuring continuity in applying a policy is indeed essential and long-term commitments are essential when dealing with long-cycled undertakings such as space activities. And the Space Council as the common platform for interaction should be resumed as soon as possible.

Continuity and sustainability of course require more than just strategy and policy documents. They require budgetary means. Following the €10.3bn commitment by ESA member states, a consolidated budget for space in the next multi-annual financial framework will be a key objective in meeting the EU's renewed ambitions.

In this respect I welcome the Commission's statement in its communication that it will continue to rely on the ESA and that it is examining potential improvements in governance and simplification measures for future cooperation.

As such, we are committed to implementing the EU space programmes and activities, offering our internationally recognised programme management expertise, as we do to our own member states and assume our role as the space agency for Europe. We believe the EU can confidently commit to and rely on the ESA for the implementation of its space programmes and activities.

Both the ESA and the Commission need to ensure coherence between their respective programmes and set up a more efficient and sustainable framework for the implementation of EU space programmes and activities.

Space is one of the key sectors which can rely on being 'appealing' to its citizens. Space stands for a Europe that works; a Europe that brings more economic growth allowing more jobs to be created. A Europe that involves its universities, research centres, industries and operators. A Europe that works economically, socially and institutionally. Let's make more space for a better Europe and more Europe for a better space.

About the author

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