Investing in Europe’s space ambitions is essential

Written by Monika Hohlmeier on 23 January 2019 in Opinion

The EU can, and should, be a leader in space technology. The right support will make the future a reality, writes Monika Hohlmeier.

Space technology, data and services are the focus of global attention. Annual investments are significantly increasing, as economic and geopolitical interests in space have become priorities on political agendas.

Established competitors like the US and Russia, as well as newcomers like China, are massively enhancing their space programmes on both civil and military levels. In Europe, Brexit is creating uncertainty over the UK’s future participation in the common space policy.

Without an efficient post-Brexit agreement, the highly integrated civil space and aeronautics industry
faces delays and production problems. Moreover, digitalisation is challenging established supply chains while creating new possibilities for services based on satellite infrastructure.

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EU citizens and businesses increasingly rely on these services while expecting faster and more stable mobile connectivity. Automated driving, climate change monitoring, localisation, search and rescue services all depend on space data.

This will be a decisive year for EU space policy and the future of the EU’s autonomous space access. The negotiations for the next MFF 2021-2027 will determine funding for space policy and outline the organisation and regulation of space projects in the coming years.

As an MEP and Chair of the Sky and Space Intergroup, it is my duty to safeguard the interests of the EU in achieving space policy that provides added value.

The complicated institutional landscape for European space governance needs to be simplified. The ESA and the European Global Navigation Satellite Systems Agency (to be renamed EU Agency for the Space Programme) need clearly-defined tasks and competencies to avoid confusion or competition.

Efficient decision-making must be the main priority. Furthermore, the success of the downstream market depends on the timely implementation and continuous evolution of Galileo and Copernicus. Both programmes must be adequately funded to maintain and upgrade their infrastructure.

EU citizens and businesses can only rely on satellite navigation services if the plans for full operational capability progress on time.

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Copernicus, the EU’s Earth Observation programme, ensures leadership in the fight against climate change. In particular, the Copernicus Data and Information Access Services (DIAS) will help SMEs use space data to offer new and valuable services.

I welcome the Commission’s plans to establish an equity instrument via the InvestEU programme aimed at encouraging innovative space-related products and services. It is important that funding is
not solely provided through credits, but that the focus shifts towards grants.

Space exploitation and the protection of the environment are not everyday business models, but they are essential to society. They should be supported as investments for our common future.

It is important that the EU ensures that space technologies and data support European security interests. The focus is on the next generation of Governmental Satellite Communications (GOVSATCOM), which is a main pillar of our space strategy, helping establish secure communication channels for Member States.

Future investments will also promote the performance and autonomy of Space and Situational Awareness (SSA), detecting space objects approaching Earth that may pose a threat to our infrastructure.

The EU's leadership in space will depend on coherent new policies by the next Commission and the on-time implementation of the initiatives already underway. Clearly, EU Space policy is something no Member State can achieve on its own. It is a common undertaking requiring unified actions with a clear long-term vision.

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To reflect the importance of enhancing Europe's competitiveness in the space industry and ensure that the EU and its Member States can provide such services and technologies in the future, EU space policy requires visible funding within the next MFF 2021-2027.

The Parliament proposed €16.7bn for space-related activities, exceeding the Commission’s proposal of €16bn. However, it may be worthwhile to discuss an even higher budget to finance the necessary investments.

It is clear that we cannot accept delays such as those experienced at the start of the current 2014-2020 budgetary period. This would undermine our efforts to strengthen our strategic position in space and remain a global leader.

We must also consider strong partnerships with our competitors. How do we ensure that the US and Chinese space programmes do not work against our interests, but rather create common benefits?

What steps do we need to take to confront private US space undertakings, where major subsidies allow cheaper rocket launches, undermining European efforts?

Developing long-term partnerships will be a pre-condition to finalising our goal of European leadership in space. Space policy must be at the top of the agenda of the EU and Member States.

I am convinced that the “11th Annual Conference on European Space Policy” is an ideal way to start the discussions for 2019.

**About the author**

Monika Hohlmeier (DE, EPP) is chair of Parliament's Sky and Space Intergroup

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