**EESC calls on the EU to make every effort to ensure its independence and sovereignty in space over major competitors**

**At its last plenary session, held on 17 October 2018, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted an** [**opinion**](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/european-space-programme) **aiming to improve the EU space programme's outcomes and raise its profile. The EESC supports the EU's efforts to remain a major independent space power, but calls for more investment in research, start-ups and business incubators as well as for a consistent application of the "European preference" principle. Clear emphasis should be placed on space mining research and the benefits that space activities could provide in terms of sustainable development.**

According to its proposal, the European Commission is determined to guarantee the application of the European preference principle and to reaffirm strong European value; however it is not clear how it intends to do that, according to the EESC, which proposes a three-pronged approach:

* support European launcher industries
* invest in space mining
* communicate the benefits to citizens.

An ambitious project requires an ambitious budget. The EESC approves of the budget of EUR 16 billion as a "prime reference amount", but calls on the EU to explore new synergies with the European Investment Bank to support space-related research, design and manufacturing projects by private companies, SMEs and start-ups. Investments in our local industries are essential to reinforce European sovereignty. "At this delicate time, it will be even more important to preserve our independence, especially now that once reliable partners like the US can no longer be considered as such," said Raymond Hencks, rapporteur of this opinion.

One of the essential elements to work on is launchers. Until a few decades ago, Arianespace held 60% of the market. Now Elon Musk's rockets are the market leaders, bringing down prices. Competition on the market has been affected by the American firm SpaceX, which benefits greatly from the huge financial strength of NASA and the Pentagon, making Americans the world leaders in the sector."Europe must support European launcher companies so that they are not disadvantaged by unfair competition from producers in other regions of the world,"saidMr Hencks.

The EESC believes that Europe should ensure Arianespace's continued competitiveness, by supporting next-generation launchers (for example Ariane 6 or Vega C), introduced to achieve reduced production costs and design/build lead times while maintaining the quality and reliability that made Ariane 5 an industry leader.

**Investing in space mining**

The EESC calls on Europe to address the issue of space mining.

According to the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, better known as the "Outer Space Treaty",all nations should have free access to space, but space and celestial bodies cannot be appropriated by any nation. Concerning recent space mining research, the problem arises whether taking minerals from space is a permitted activity or if a new international treaty should be envisaged.

In the meantime, the US has moved independently by adopting a law (U.S. Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act) that allows this. Luxembourg has also voted through a law that allows the removal of minerals from asteroids, following in the footsteps of space companies from the United States, Korea and Saudi Arabia.

"These countries will not wait until new international agreements are put in place. Europe is absent on this front; together with the ESA, it should act soon to ensure clear European value and its involvement in the use of mineral resources,"stressed Mr Hencks.

**Communicating the benefits to citizens**

The discovery of natural resources is not the only benefit of space exploration. For instance, limitless benefits could be provided in terms of sustainable development. The EESC supports the focus of the space programme on monitoring climate change and illegal traffic, as well as the observation of polar areas and forest and water management.

However, it underlines the underestimated potential of Copernicus (the Earth observation programme), especially in the maritime and agricultural sectors. Achievements in space lead to achievements in sustainability: greater efforts should be made to make the most of our resources and programmes.

The EU should make all of this clear to citizens. The Commission should launch communication campaigns to make them aware of the importance of space programmes. People do not seem to know, for instance, how much their daily lives depend on European space programme applications.

It is vital to improve the provision of space science education in schools and of master's degrees in space engineering in order to train European young people and strengthen the reliability of the EU space programme and the international competitiveness of Europe's space industry.

**Background:**

[Commission Proposal for a Regulation establishing the space programme of the Union and the European Union Agency for the space programme](https://webapi.eesc.europa.eu/documentsanonymous/com447-2018_part1_ext-EN.docx)

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