

EU launches its first satellite navigation system

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In this photo provided by the European Space Agency (ESA), Russia's Soyuz VS01 rocket sits on its launching pad, Wednesday, Oct. 19, 2011, in the space base of Kourou, French Guiana . The Russian Federal Space Agency and Arianespace, the commercial arm of the 13-country European Space Agency, will launch tomorrow, Thursday, Oct. 20, 2011, the Soyuz rocket from the European spaceport in South America, carrying two Galileo navigation satellites in its maiden flight. (AP Photo/ESA, S. Corvaja) EDITORIAL USE ONLY, NO SALES

A Russian rocket launched the first two satellites of the European Union's Galileo navigation system Friday after years of waiting for the start of the program billed as the main rival to the ubiquitous American GPS network.

The launch of the Soyuz from French Guiana, on the northern coast of

South America, marks the maiden voyage of the Russian rocket outside the former Soviet Union, with European and Russian authorities cheering at liftoff in relief after the launch was pushed back by a day.

Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said it is the first time that two teams work together on the launch of the Soyuz.

"We have been able to combine the best spacial activity aspects of both governments, that of France and that of Russia," he said. "I am convinced that will yield us good results."

The Galileo system has become for some a symbol of EU infighting, inefficiency and delay. Now, officials are hoping it will kick off a trans-Atlantic competition with the American GPS network.

Antonio Tajani, the EU's industry and enterprise commissioner, even linked it to Sunday's crucial summit of EU leaders struggling to put their financial house in order. "Europe shows that she is capable of managing a big project just days from the European economic summit," he said.

The rocket is expected to place into orbit the Galileo IOV-1 PFM and FM2 satellites during a nearly four-hour mission. The two satellites will be released in opposite directions.

The mission was delayed for 24 hours because of a leaky valve, and there was much relief at EU headquarters Friday that the project finally was off into space. The first part of the launch was successful, with the rocket expected to travel over Asia, Indonesia and the Indian Ocean, said Jean-Yves Le Gall, chairman and CEO of Arianespace, the commercial arm of the European Space Agency.

GPS has become the global consumer standard in satellite navigation over the past decade, reducing the need for awkward oversized maps and

arguments with back seat drivers about whether to turn left or right.

Laurent Wauquiez, France's higher education minister and former deputy minister for European affairs, said Europe should not depend on a U.S. military-based GPS system that could be shut down at any time for security reasons.

"It means overnight we could lose our autonomy," he said. "There is an issue of sovereignty. We must not neglect this aspect even in a period of globalization."

The EU wants Galileo to dominate the future with a system that is more precise and more reliable than GPS, while controlled by civil authorities. It foresees applications ranging from precision seeding on farmland to pinpoint positioning for search-and-rescue missions. On top of that, the EU hopes it will reap a financial windfall.

"If Europe wants to be competitive and independent in the future, the EU needs to have its own satellite navigation system to also create new economic opportunities", said Herbert Reul, head of the EU parliament's industry, research and energy committee.

There are still several more years to wait, but the satellite launch is a major step in getting Galileo on track. It will start operating in 2014 as a free consumer navigation service, with more specialized services to be rolled out until 2020, when it should be fully operational.

After the initial launch, two satellites will go up every quarter as of the end of 2012 until all 30 satellites are up.

The EU hopes its economic impact will stand at about euro90 billion (\$125 billion) in industrial revenues and public benefits over the next two decades.

The idea for the program first rallied support in the late 1990s, and its development has been pushed back with delays ever since. When it became clear in 2008 that private investors weren't lining up to finance Galileo, the EU decided taxpayers would underwrite most of the program.

The European Commission said development and deployment since 2003 is estimated at well over euro5 billion (\$6.8 billion). Maintaining and completing the system is expected to cost euro1 billion (\$1.35 billion) a year.

Critics have said the cost overruns were much higher.

"Far from celebrating," officials "who have supported Galileo should be making a public apology to taxpayers for this shocking waste of time, effort and resources," EU legislator Marta Andreasen of the anti-Euro UKIP party said.

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