

# European Space Agency appoints Austrian scientist new chief

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In this Friday, Oct. 19, 2016 file photo Josef Aschbacher attends a press conference in Rome, Italy. The European Space Agency said Thursday that Josef Aschbacher, an Austrian scientist who leads its Earth observation program, has been appointed as the organization's next head. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia, file)

Austrian scientist Josef Aschbacher has been appointed to head the European Space Agency as the organization grapples with the fallout from Brexit and the rise of commercial rivals outside of Europe.

The agency's 22 member states elected Aschbacher, who leads ESA's Earth observation program, to succeed current director general Jan Woerner when his term ends on June 30, 2021.

Aschbacher currently oversees the ESA's center for Earth Observation, near Rome, and has been deeply involved in some of the agency's most high-profile missions including the Copernicus fleet of satellites collecting environmental data about the planet from space.

Nineteen of the agency's member states are part of the European Union, while Switzerland, Norway and—since this year—Britain are not. This has made for complicated politics within the organization, particularly when it comes to control of key programs and awarding lucrative contracts to commercial partners.

While ESA developed the Copernicus fleet and the Galileo network of navigation satellites, the programs formally belong to the European Commission, leaving Britain as a third-party user after Brexit.

Aschbacher said determining the future relationship between ESA and the EU was the "top" priority he wants to tackle.

With an eye toward SpaceX and others, the 58-year-old said Europe needs to take "very seriously" the development of a commercially competitive space industry.

Member states agreed this week to provide a further 280 million euros (\$343 million) for the development of the next-generation Ariane 6 launch system, with more than half the funds coming from France and

Germany.

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