

Europe narrows hunt for next astronauts, eyes crewed flights

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Astronaut Luca Parmitano of Italy, seen on screen, flashes a thumbs up, as he controls the Space Rover, rear, which successfully picked up a rock during a training exercise of the European Space Agency, ESA, in Katwijk, near The Hague, Netherlands, Monday, Nov. 25, 2019. The agency announced last year that it had received a record number of 22,589 applicants from people hoping to become the continent's next generation of space travelers. ESA said Tuesday it has reduced these to fewer than 1,400—including 29 of whom have a physical

disability—and hoped to cut the shortlist down to several tens of candidates by the end of the year for the four to six positions on its astronaut training program. Credit: AP Photo/Peter Dejong

The European Space Agency has narrowed the candidate list for its next generation of astronauts, including dozens who have a physical disability.

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The agency's director-general, Josef Aschbacher, said the selection process would be accompanied by a feasibility study to determine the implications of choosing candidates with disabilities "but, yes, we are committed at ESA to open space to everyone."

ESA has for decades relied on its Russian and American counterparts to launch astronauts into space. Currently the agency has several places booked on American commercial launches. But Aschbacher said Europe may finally get its own crewed spacecraft if ESA member states approve the idea at a meeting later this year.

"We are not only talking of launches, we are talking of human exploration," he said, adding that future missions would seek to send astronauts to the moon "and beyond."

In the meantime, the agency will continue to develop its robotic capability, including a spacecraft capable of carrying large loads to the Moon that would support joint missions with partners such as NASA.

ESA is also in the early stages of working on a probe that would fly to an ice moon, such as Saturn's Enceladus, to recover a sample and bring it back to Earth.

"It could be that there's very simple, primitive life in the water underneath the ice cover," said Aschbacher.

One challenge is that with current technology, the round-trip could take decades to complete.

Time is also a factor in the replacement of one of ESA's science satellites, Sentinel 1-B, which stopped functioning properly in late December.

Simonetta Cheli, the agency's director of Earth observation, said the root cause of the malfunction was still being investigated and it was too soon to say whether the successor model, Sentinel 1-C, will need to be modified to avoid suffering a similar fate.

Any delay in replacing Sentinel 1-B could cause problems for scientists who rely on the satellite's data for their research, including into climate change.

"Of course, we would need to try and look for options to launch the satellite as soon as possible if 1-B terminates its own lifetime," said Cheli.

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