

Space chief hopes for 'Kennedy moment' from European leaders

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Director General of the European Space Agency Josef Aschbacher attends a press conference of the ESA as part of the ILA Berlin Air Show in Schoenefeld near Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, June 22, 2022. The Berlin Air Show takes place from June 22 until June 26, 2022 at the Berlin ExpoCenter Airport fairground close to the airport Berlin Brandenburg (BER). Credit: AP Photo/Michael Sohn

Josef Aschbacher recalls gazing at the night sky above his parents' Alpine farm when he was 7, trying to comprehend what he had just seen on the family's black-and-white TV set: the landing of NASA's Apollo 11 on the Moon.

More than half a century later, Aschbacher heads the European Space Agency, a formidable force when it comes to scientific exploration, telecoms and Earth observation. But so far, the agency is still unable to put its own astronauts into orbit, relying on Russia and the United States for crewed spaceflight and some other high-profile missions.

The 59-year-old aims to change that and hopes the recent turmoil caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine will jolt European leaders into action.

"I think the war in Ukraine has made politicians realize that we are a bit vulnerable and we have to make sure that we have our own secured access to space and our space infrastructure," Aschbacher told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday at Berlin's ILA air show.

Within days of the Russian attack on Feb. 24, the European Space Agency [abandoned long-standing plans for a joint mission with Russia](#) to land a rover on Mars.

"The ExoMars situation is a wake up call on how Europe needs to position itself," said Aschbacher. He recently held talks with NASA chief Bill Nelson to find a way of salvaging the mission without Russia, and is "very hopeful" the lander will make it to the red planet.

In the long term, however, Aschbacher said "it is clear that for critical components, for critical missions, we need to make sure that we can do it (ourselves)." Earlier this year he hinted that [this could include crewed launches](#).

He praised a recent speech by Emmanuel Macron—delivered days before Russia invaded Ukraine—in which the French president called for a bolder European space policy.

"That was a bit of a Kennedy moment, but we need to hear this in other countries as well," Aschbacher said, referring to [U.S. President John F. Kennedy's speech in 1962](#)—at the height of the Cold War—detailing plans to land a man on the moon. "I would hope that the same Kennedy moment would happen in Germany and Italy, in the UK and Belgium and so on."

Such ambition is also needed if Europe wants to capitalize on the growing space economy fueled by private ventures such as Elon Musk's SpaceX, he said.

European astronauts at the ILA show spoke of a change in tone when dealing with commercial companies that are focused more on the financial gains to be made in orbit than on the lofty ideals of international cooperation which underpinned collaboration between major space agencies.

"There is a huge growth predicted for the next years in space," said Aschbacher. "That's why private companies are firing it up and investing in it. Europe has to be part of it."

"If we don't increase our investment, we will be thrown out of this race," he said.

With European nations now pumping billions into defense in response to Russia's attack on Ukraine, governments should keep in mind other areas in which their countries are dependent on others and therefore vulnerable, Aschbacher added.

"If there's a war happening in front of our door, we need to be sure that you can get your phone working and you can get your navigation system working," he said. "This is part of security in a wider sense."

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