

# European Space Agency to vote on record budget, name new astronauts

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The European Space Agency will name its new group of astronauts, one of whom could be headed to the ISS.

The European Space Agency will vote on Wednesday on whether to spend billions more euros to keep up with rising competition in space, as well as unveiling its much-anticipated new crop of astronauts.

The ESA's 22 member states, whose ministers charged with [space](#) duties

have been meeting in Paris since Tuesday, will decide on meeting the agency's request for a record 18.7 billion euros for new programs over the next three years.

The figure is more than 25 percent higher than the 14.5 billion euros agreed at the ESA's last ministerial council in 2019.

ESA director-general Josef Aschbacher told AFP that Europe risks "falling out of the race" in space if it does not expand the budget.

Europe faces an increasingly crowded market in space, with competition coming not just from the long-dominant United States but also from rising powers such as China and private companies like billionaire Elon Musk's SpaceX.

However the request for countries to open their purse strings comes as Europe struggles against high inflation and an energy crisis.

France called for a united Europe in space on Tuesday.

"At the end of these discussions, there must be a single Europe, a single European space policy and unfailing unity in the face of Chinese ambitions and American ambitions," France's economy minister Bruno Le Maire said at the meeting.

"If we want to be independent, we have to put money on the table."

At the opening of the council, Aschbacher stressed that nations would reap a huge economic benefit from their investments.

Each country can choose how much it contributes to the budget, which includes three billion euros for monitoring [climate change](#), 3.3 billion to the Ariane 6 rocket launcher system and three billion to robotic

exploration missions, among others projects.

## **Rocket launcher boost**

Some of the most difficult negotiations have been about rocket launchers, which are crucial for Europe to be able launch missions into space without outside help.

The ESA has struggled to get off the ground since Russia withdrew its Soyuz rockets earlier this year in response to European sanctions over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

The job has been made more difficult by delays to the next-generation Ariane 6, which was supposed to have its maiden flight in 2020 but will now blast off at the end of next year.



ESA chief Josef Aschbacher said Europe risks 'falling out of the race' in space.

The ESA has even had to resort to using the Falcon 9 rockets of its rival SpaceX to launch two upcoming scientific missions.

The subject of launchers is regularly a source of "friction" between European countries, said Philippe Baptiste, head of France's National Centre for Space Studies.

But the talks were given a boost on Tuesday when the ESA's biggest contributors France, Germany and Italy announced their support for Ariane 6 as well as the small Vega-C launcher.

The agreement indicated that the countries recognized their "interdependence" in space and paved the way for the launchers to be paid for, said ESA's director of space transportation Daniel Neuenschwander.

Expected to be less controversial are projects that help monitor the impact of climate change back on Earth.

A poll released by the ESA last week showed that nine of 10 European citizens "want to see space used even more to monitor and mitigate climate change," Aschbacher said.

But trickier could be the ESA's 750-million-euro contribution to the European Union's satellite constellation project Iris, which is planned to provide secure communication throughout the bloc from 2027.

The project is mostly funded by the EU, which has different member states than the ESA—most notably the UK.

## **New astronauts**

Once the budget is adopted, the ESA plans to unveil its latest crop of astronauts—the agency's first new recruits since 2009.

Between four and six people have been chosen out of more than 22,500 applicants after a long selection process.

One of the new recruits could eventually head to the International Space Station.

Training for the new recruits will begin in April 2023 at the European Astronaut Centre in Cologne, Germany, the facility's head Frank De Winne said.

Additionally, the ESA is also expected to announce one or more astronauts with a physical disability—a first in the history of space travel.

More than 250 people applied for the role after the ESA conducted a "parastronaut feasibility study".

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