

ESA chief vows to restore Europe's access to space

January 25 2023, by Samuel Petrequin



The European Space Agency Director General Josef Aschbacher speaks during a panel discussion at the 15th European Space Conference 2023 in Brussels, Wednesday, Jan. 25, 2023. Aschbacher says he wants to rebuild Europe's access to space following the botched launch of a European rocket carrying two Earth observation satellites last year and the delayed introduction of the Ariane 6 launcher. Credit: AP Photo/Geert Vanden Wijngaert

The European Space Agency's director general says it's crucial to rebuild Europe's access to space following the botched launch of a European rocket carrying two Earth observation satellites last year and the delayed introduction of the Ariane 6 launcher.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday, Josef Aschbacher said his "priority is to reinstall access to space, guaranteed access to space for Europe. And I will work on that in all dimensions."

Until then, he said, Europe must look at alternative solutions outside the continent—including Elon Musk's SpaceX.

Aschbacher said the ESA is working at identifying the causes of the failure of the Vega-C rocket launch in French Guiana, with the results of the investigation expected in less than a month.

The launch of Vega C was meant to take two Earth observation satellites made by Airbus, Pleiades Neo 5 and 6, into orbit. The satellites would have been part of a constellation capable of taking images of any point on the globe with a resolution of 30 centimeters (11.8 inches).

"Having three failures in two years is not good," Aschbacher said, referring to previous Vega misfirings. "And this is something where we really need to look into how we need to change some of the practices or quality management processes that we have in place in order to make sure when Vega C gets back on the launchpad it is safe, but also as quick as possible."

Meanwhile, with Ariane 5 preparing to retire, the delayed launch of Ariane 6 is further denting Europe's capacity to send satellites into space amid fierce competition from SpaceX and other rocket programs in the U.S. and China.



Italian European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti speaks during a panel discussion at the 15th European Space Conference 2023 in Brussels, Wednesday, Jan. 25, 2023. The European Space Agency Director General Josef Aschbacher said Wednesday he wants to rebuild Europe's access to space following the botched launch of a European rocket carrying two Earth observation satellites last year and the delayed introduction of the Ariane 6 launcher. Credit: AP Photo/Geert Vanden Wijngaert

The maiden flight of the medium-to-heavy Ariane 6 rocket was planned for mid-2020 but following several delays its first launch is not expected before the fourth quarter of this year.

"Of course, top priority is getting Ariane 6 onto the launchpad," Aschbacher said. "We still have some [technical issues](#) to resolve and I

am not hiding them. They are serious, and we have to really work through."

In addition, the Russian space agency has terminated Soyuz launches at the European spaceport in French Guiana, in retaliation for ESA's decision to implement sanctions imposed by its members on Russia over its war in Ukraine, leaving Europe with even fewer options.

Until proper access to space is regained, Aschbacher said Europe needs to look at alternative solutions outside the continent.

"Could be SpaceX, could also be somebody else," he said. "We may need an interim solution in the next one, or maybe maximum two years."

Asked about Musk's competition, Aschbacher said "he is putting facts on the table which you have to take into account in how you develop."

"And in a way, it's also helping us in our argumentation because you have one clear player who is developing," he added. "In some domains we have to catch up. ... But I think it also energizes and reinforces our engineers and our scientists to make sure that we have good solutions to make progress on this. So overall, I think this really helps the [space](#) sector altogether."

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Citation: ESA chief vows to restore Europe's access to space (2023, January 25) retrieved 7 June 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-01-esa-chief-vows-europe-access.html>

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