

# Axiom launches third mission to ISS, carrying European space hopes

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A four-member, all-European crew are poised to blast off in a SpaceX Crew Dragon capsule fixed to the top of a Falcon 9 rocket at 4:49 pm local time (2111 GMT) on Thursday from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

An all-European crew including Turkey's first astronaut launched for the International Space Station on Thursday with Axiom Space, as countries increasingly look to the private sector to fulfill their ambitions in the cosmos.

A SpaceX Crew Dragon fixed to the top of a Falcon 9 rocket blasted off Kennedy Space Center in Florida at 4:49 pm local time (2149 GMT), and should reach its destination early Saturday.

Dubbed Axiom Mission 3 (Ax-3), it is the company's third launch to the space laboratory and the first where all three of the paid seats were bought by national agencies, rather than wealthy individuals.

"I'm really excited as it allows us to do more space activities, it allows us to serve ultimately more member states of the European Space Agency," Daniel Neuenschwander, the European Space Agency's director of human and robotic exploration said Thursday.

Turkish pilot and air force colonel Alper Gezeravci is joined by Walter Villadei, an Italian air force colonel who has previously flown to the edge of space on a Virgin Galactic space plane, and by Marcus Wandt from Sweden, who is also representing ESA.

They are led by Axiom's Chief Astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria, a Spanish and US citizen and former NASA astronaut.

The exact costs haven't been disclosed, but in 2018 when the company first announced the program, which involves chartering SpaceX hardware and paying NASA for services, it set a price tag of \$55 million per seat.

More recently, Hungary was reported by [spacenews.com](https://spacenews.com) to be planning a \$100 million deal with Axiom for a future mission involving one

astronaut.



Left to right: Axiom Space's chief astronaut and former NASA astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria, Walter Villadei of Italy, European Space Agency project astronaut Marcus Wandt of Sweden and Turkish Astronaut Alper Gezeravci.

## **"Stronger' Turkey**

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has displayed a keen interest in the mission, presenting Gezeravci to the Turkish public in the run-up to his reelection last year.

"For a country like Turkey, it's important, it's opening a curtain that has always been blocking the dreams of our children," Gezeravci said of his mission.

Sweden's Marcus Wandt, meanwhile, applied for the European Space Agency (ESA) astronaut class of 2022 but was made a reserve. The Axiom-3 mission will therefore allow Sweden to put its second national in space.

Britain, which is striving to build a post-Brexit space strategy, has also signed an agreement for a future mission carrying UK astronauts.

The Axiom-3 team will join seven crew members currently aboard the ISS—from Japan, Denmark, the United States and Russia—and carry out 30 experiments, learning more about the impact of microgravity on the human body, advancing industrial processes and more.

Axiom Space was founded in 2016 by Michael Suffredini, a former ISS program manager for NASA, and entrepreneur Kam Ghaffarian.

In addition to organizing private missions to the orbital outpost, the company is developing spacesuits for future NASA missions to the Moon, and building a commercial space station that it intends to initially attach to the ISS, then separate and orbit independently sometime before the ISS is retired.

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