

## Space policy

### Should ESA fall under EU authority? Debate kicks off

By Isabelle Smets | Wednesday 12 December 2012

Member states are far from unanimously backing the idea of placing the European Space Agency (ESA) under EU authority. Discussions on this idea have only just begun, at the Competitiveness Council on 11 December, on the basis of a communication on EU-ESA relations (see *Europolitics*<sup>4531</sup>) presented a few weeks earlier by the European Commission. This communication presented three possible scenarios for the future of the agency: that ESA should become an EU agency; that it should be placed under the authority of the EU in its capacity as an intergovernmental organisation (similar to the European Defence Agency); or that relations between the two would be reconsidered in a sort of institutional status quo. These are long-term scenarios, since the Commission has set a deadline of 2020-2025.

The debate has therefore only just begun. According to a source, at this stage discussions at the Council have divided member states into three groups. First, those in favour of a scenario where the ESA would fall under the authority of the EU; France and Belgium are most clearly in favour of this idea, saying it would improve synergy and lead to more logical use of funding. Opposed to this suggestion are member states that are happy with the institutional status quo (including the United Kingdom and Germany): after all, the ESA has already notched up considerable successes for the EU (eg Galileo), so where is the need for change? The third group comprises the large majority of member states, which are as yet undecided, and are calling for a more in-depth analysis by the Commission before moving forward. At this stage of the debate, and considering what is at stake, this is quite normal. The Commission intends to further develop these scenarios in a communication, which will appear before the end of 2013.

The same discussions are currently underway at the ESA. During the agency's Ministerial Council, at the end of November in Naples, the ESA member states adopted a political declaration on a "European Space Agency that best serves Europe" (a declaration also supported by the seven EU member states that are not members of the ESA: Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Slovakia). The text gives a mandate to the Director-General of the ESA, Jean-Jacques Dordain (France), to work with the European Commission to analyse the situation in the European space sector and to develop "a common vision on its evolution, aiming at building coherence, convergence and complementarity among the different actors". Dordain has been asked to develop different scenarios for the evolution of the agency, and to present the results of his reflections and proposals at the next ESA Ministerial Council in 2014.

This is therefore the beginning of a process. The future Irish Presidency will present conclusions it intends to adopt by the end of its half-year at the EU's helm.