Position Paper on space research in view of the the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)

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Executive Summary

The preparation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) takes place in a context of increasing geopolitical tensions and intensifying global competition in the space sector. The space powers are significantly expanding their investments and capabilities. In this evolving landscape, space has become a strategic domain for Europe's economic competitiveness, technological sovereignty and security.

Recent policy discussions at European level, including the reports by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta, have highlighted the need to strengthen Europe's industrial competitiveness and strategic autonomy. Space systems play a central role in this context, enabling services essential for climate monitoring, digital transformation, mobility, secure communications, and defence. As European defence becomes a growing priority, space technologies with dual-use applications are increasingly important for both civil and security purposes.

While this position paper focuses on the upcoming MFF, it is also closely linked to the preparation of Framework Programme 10 (FP10), which will remain the main instrument supporting collaborative research and innovation in Europe. Ensuring strong support for space-related research within FP10 will be essential to maintain Europe's scientific excellence, strengthen industrial competitiveness, and secure long-term technological sovereignty.

A key message of this paper is the need to maintain a balanced investment strategy across the entire innovation chain. While higher Technology Readiness Level (TRL) activities and demonstration programmes are crucial for industrial deployment, the long-term strength of the European space sector also depends on the fundamental low-TRL research carried out by universities and research organisations. These activities generate breakthrough ideas, enable disruptive innovation and contribute to the development of Europe's future scientific and engineering workforce.

At the same time, Europe must strengthen the structure of its space research ecosystem. Greater coordination between universities, research institutions, and industry will be necessary to reduce fragmentation and maximise the impact of European research efforts. Mechanisms inspired by earlier European collaborative instruments, improved access to research infrastructures and stronger support for education and training programmes can play a key role in this process.

Looking ahead to FP10, the proposed European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) may become an important instrument supporting applied research and innovation. While this represents a significant opportunity for the competitiveness of European industries, including the space sector, it will be important to ensure that European space research programmes remain appropriately connected to the ECF while preserving their strategic coherence and long-term research vision.

Strengthening the European space research ecosystem through sustained investment, improved coordination and stronger support for talent development will be essential to maintain Europe's leadership in the global space sector. The European Aerospace Science Network (EASN) stands ready to contribute to the ongoing discussions on the next MFF and FP10 and to support the definition of effective research and innovation priorities for the European space domain.

Key Policy Messages

- The preparation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework takes place in a context of intense global competition in the space sector. Strengthening Europe's space capabilities is essential for economic resilience, technological sovereignty and security.
- Space research must remain a strong component of the future Framework Programme 10, ensuring continued support for collaborative research and scientific excellence across European universities, research institutions and industry.
- A balanced investment strategy is required across the entire innovation chain, supporting both higher Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs) and the fundamental low-TRL research carried out by European academia, which provides the foundation for long-term technological breakthroughs.
- The European space research ecosystem should be strengthened through improved coordination between institutions, the development of collaborative structures similar to the FP6 Networks of Excellence, and better access to shared research infrastructures for researchers and SMEs.
- The development of Europe's future space workforce must be supported through stronger investment in education, doctoral training, mobility schemes and closer cooperation between academia and industry.
- Emerging funding instruments such as the European Competitiveness Fund should support the competitiveness of the European space sector while maintaining the strategic coherence, long-term vision and governance autonomy of European space research programmes.

1. Strategic Context: The Role of Space in the Next MFF

The preparation and implementation of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) coincide with major geopolitical challenges, including increasing competition from the United States, China, Russia, and other emerging space powers, which impose new strategic directions and investments on the European Union.

The space sector has been recognized as one of the premier domains where Europe must invest, following Draghi's and Letta's reports and the statements already made by the European Commission.

European Defence is becoming a priority, and the Space domain represents a fundamental component of the Defence strategy. Space technologies should also prioritise dual-use applications, benefiting both civil and defence sectors. EASN supports stronger dual-use synergies while preserving the distinct mandates and rules of civil and defence funding instruments and encouraging complementarity rather than duplication.

While this position paper refers primarily to the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework, the discussion is also closely linked to the preparation of the next European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, commonly referred to as Framework Programme 10 (FP10). As the main instrument supporting collaborative research across Europe, FP10 will play a decisive role in shaping the future of European space research and innovation. Ensuring strong and sustained support for space-related research within FP10 will therefore be essential to maintain Europe's scientific leadership, strengthen its industrial competitiveness, and secure long-term technological sovereignty in the space domain.

EASN fully supports the European Union's vision of a secure, sustainable, and autonomous space ecosystem. EASN agrees that Space is vital for Europe's resilience and for advancing climate monitoring,

digital transformation, mobility, and defence. In addition, while EASN acknowledges and endorses the EU's strategic priorities, it stresses that the success of these ambitions depends on a balanced investment strategy, supporting both higher Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs), as well as integration and demonstration activities, and the fundamental, low TRL research carried out by European universities and research institutes. This strategy should explicitly link to ESA programmes, Horizon Europe, and Digital Europe initiatives to maximize synergy.

In this scenario, the MFF should strengthen and support efforts to strengthen the European Space industry and research efforts. In the industrial sector, a recent memorandum of understanding among major upstream players and national acts to improve operators' economic and financial resilience will undoubtedly be corroborated with appropriate actions in the incoming MFF.

2. Strengthening the European Space Research Ecosystem

European Research in the Space sector has demonstrated an unprecedented vitality, by proposing new approaches, ideas, and state-of-the-art solutions. However, such world-class positioning needs to be maintained and properly supported by specific and long-term actions, allowing the creation of a Space-specialized research ecosystem. Low-TRL and high-risk disruptive research projects should be funded over multiple years to ensure continuity, reduce fragmentation, and encourage breakthrough innovation.

Several directions should be pursued and appropriately implemented in the next MFF.

First, Innovation Actions (IA), forming the basis for industry-driven exploitation and increased competitiveness, should be adequately prepared and supported by an increasing number of Research and Innovation Actions (RIA), targeting low-TRL topics and applications.
The latter actions will undoubtedly benefit from the contribution of Academia and Research bodies, allowing European industries (both LSI and SME) to compete globally and to match the significant support received by their competitors in the US and China with national authorities.

Low TRL activities represent the foundation of innovation. They cultivate breakthrough ideas, train highly skilled young researchers, and provide the seeds for disruptive technologies that can reshape the European space industry in the decades to come. From an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) perspective, through low TRL activities, the sustainable support of young scientists promotes inclusive talent development, equal access to high-quality research careers and the transfer of knowledge between generations in European institutions.

Low TRL funding contributes to human capital development by strengthening Europe's research and innovation talent basis, which is essential for maintaining strategic independence in the global space sector. By supporting PhD and postdoctoral research in emerging space technologies while enabling the early integration of Bachelor's and Master's students, student researchers, and research assistants into exploratory and experimental development, it ensures a sustainable pipeline of highly skilled scientists and engineers capable of advancing scientific and technological leadership. Together, these groups form the intellectual backbone and future workforce of Europe's aerospace ecosystem, supporting long-term competitiveness, innovation capacity, and strategic autonomy.

Examples of low TRL fields that warrant targeted support include in-orbit servicing and manufacturing, reusable propulsion systems, artificial intelligence for autonomous operations, advanced composite materials, advanced electronic front-end systems and concepts and sustainable orbital infrastructures.

These areas demand long-term research investments that universities and research institutions can provide and sustain effectively.

3. Structuring European Research Cooperation

European Research in the space domain suffers from a high level of fragmentation: high-level competences, distributed across among Member States' academic institutions, necessitate the creation of a structured research ecosystem.

To achieve this, specific instruments have to be put in place in the MFF, mimicking the FP6 "Network of Excellence" ones. The latter instrument has proven to be quite effective in structuring the European Research in specific research areas and may be proposed for a series of key research domains, e.g., Propellants, Materials, Robotics in Space, Artificial Intelligence, Front-End Electronics and others.

The Networks of Excellence may then evolve further into stable entities, as it has been proven to be feasible for some of them in FP6.

Major results of the setup and evolution of Networks of Excellence are the creation of shared roadmaps, the implementation of regular staff exchanges, the identification of common test/qualification protocols, together with interoperability/standardization.

4. Research Infrastructures and Talent Development

Research establishments and academia, part of the European Space ecosystem, actually run and maintain world-class facilities. These facilities are seldom accessible to external users and, more importantly, the relevant access costs may actually prevent SMEs from benefiting from them.

A possible solution to facilate the use of such testing or manufacturing facilities is the adoption of 'Integrated Infrastructure' initiatives. Such an instrument, fruitfully used for large basic research networks (e.g., Radio astronomy, Nuclear Particle Physics …), has to be opened up to encompass Space research infrastructures. Furthermore, in this type of instrument, coordinated research can be programmed and carried out, thus further strengthening collaboration between Academia/Research Institutions and Industry.
Coordinated efforts are necessary to form the new generation of European talents, which will form the basis of the future European Industry and Academia. There is a compelling need for new young talents and operators, and their comprehensive build-up should rely on a closer relationship between academic and industrial partners. New competences should be spread across Europe, attained via new ways to educate and train. To this goal, appropriate networks have to be formed, and the actual support from the Commission is to be increased, e.g. appropriately focusing MSCA initiatives. Mentorship programmes, international mobility opportunities, and vocational/technical training for engineers and technicians should complement doctoral and postdoctoral programmes.

5. FP10, the European Competitiveness Fund and Long-Term Actions

Looking ahead to FP10, the establishment of the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) is expected to become a major instrument supporting applied research and innovation in Europe. This development represents a significant opportunity to strengthen the competitiveness of European industries, including the space sector. At the same time, the governance structure and operational mechanisms of the fund are

still under discussion, which raises important questions within the research community. It will therefore be important to ensure that European space research programmes remain appropriately connected to the ECF where relevant, while preserving their strategic coherence, long-term vision, and independence in governance and priority setting. Maintaining a balanced relationship between sector-specific programmes and cross-cutting funding instruments will be essential to safeguard Europe's research excellence and innovation capacity in the space domain.

In addition, to support a sustainable and long-term vision, some key long-term actions should be envisaged, including:

- The creation of space-focused doctoral networks and fellowships to form a new generation of researchers aligned with EU space priorities, including climate, defence, and AI applications.
- The definition of impact assessment metrics to include indicators related to knowledge creation, talent development, and long-term innovation potential. Metrics should also measure the number of patents, spin-offs, contributions to climate and sustainability goals, and Europe's global competitiveness in space technologies.
- The promotion of academia-industry-agency consortia that ensure smooth knowledge transfer from early-stage concepts to demonstrable technologies. Those consortia should also facilitate Europe-wide collaboration and monitor long-term impact.
- Coordination and maintenance of a space-related research infrastructure network available from different universities and research institutions across Europe to provide access to LSI, SME and researchers.

6. Conclusion

Europe possesses the scientific expertise, industrial capacity, and research infrastructure necessary to remain a global leader in the space sector. However, maintaining this position will require sustained and well-coordinated investments in research, innovation, and human capital within the next Multiannual Financial Framework.
Strengthening low-TRL research, structuring European research communities, improving access to infrastructures and developing the next generation of space professionals will be essential to support Europe's long-term competitiveness and technological sovereignty.

The European Aerospace Science Network (EASN), representing the European academic aerospace community, is actively contributing to the Globally Competitive Space Systems Partnership in the present MFF and stands ready to contribute to the ongoing discussions on the next MFF and FP10 and to support the definition of effective research and innovation priorities for the European space sector.