



By Gerry Oberst

Europe's Space Ambitions

The European Commission sponsored a two-day conference in October in Brussels to discuss "The Ambitions of Europe in Space." European big guns Jose Barroso, newly reappointed president of the European Commission; Rainer Wieland, vice president of the European Parliament; and Philippe Maystadt, president of the European Investment Bank, headlined the event.

The focus of the event was strongly political, as speakers emphasized the need to create a space policy that is understood in Europe at the highest political level and this policy needs to be linked to the political identity of Europe.

In what was said to be his first public speech on space issues, Barroso emphasized the many contributions that space assets and infrastructure contribute to Europe's economy and security. But he asked, "Does the EU (European Union) have the ambition to lead in space, or do we leave the leading role to others? A lot depends on where we go from here."

Barroso noted the priorities that he saw for Europe to take that leading role. "First, we must guarantee the success of our flagship projects Galileo and GMES. Second, we must develop a strong, space-based capacity to deal with climate change. Third, we need more security in space and from space."

On that last point, Barroso referred to the need to protect space assets. He argued that the EU "should develop an independent capacity to monitor satellites and debris orbiting the Earth and the space environment and tackle possible hazards." As a bottom line, Barroso repeated what he earlier had presented to the European Parliament for his re-election: "Space is one of the areas where I want to see progress at EU level in the future."

An additional theme was climate change. Almost every panel during the two-day event mentioned the contribution of space assets to environmental policies.

There also was substantial reference to human space exploration. Barroso said, "Space exploration is essential to expand human knowledge and to stimulate innovation." He seemed to endorse exploration of Mars and "possibly the return of humans to the moon." More than coincidentally, the

European Commission and European Space Agency (ESA) were scheduled to hold a conference on human space exploration just a few days later in Prague — an event that Barroso also highlighted.

There was no mention of satellite communications in the opening sessions, a gap noted by a satellite operator representative in the audience during the question-and-answer period. Panelists then scrambled to mention the contribution of satellite communications as the only area fully commercialized in the sector and contributing to regional development.

A thematic panel on the second day also focused on telecommunications, with representatives of satellite operators stressing the contributions that their infrastructure make, including to satellite navigation and monitoring services. During that session, a speaker noted that there are no space applications without some enabling telecommunications support, a point immediately seized upon by the operators.

An impetus to hold this event is the imminent ratification of the EU Lisbon Treaty, which formally creates a role for the EU in space policy. The Commission has been active in formulating such policy and supporting space initiatives but without complete formal authority to do so. Instead, up to now, this authority has rested unilaterally with the EU member states, their national space agencies and ESA.

Now with the Lisbon Treaty on the verge of being ratified, the Commission and the European Parliament are very interested in stressing a European-level role in space policy. A reflection of that eagerness was the event lineup. The Commission shoehorned 11 speakers from its offices, with four speaking twice and one fellow sharing his views in three separate panels. Five separate members of the Parliament participated in the event, with three from ESA.

Precisely one speaker from the European Council was on the program and one speaker from a member state. No national space agencies were on the agenda. It was very much a European show.

During the closing session, a Commission representative noted that "space is not a luxury product" — it is necessary for growth and prosperity. He, and other speakers, echoed the theme that space is about politics and not just research and development.

Bottom line: Europe has ambitions in space. ▮

Gerry Oberst is a partner in the Hogan & Hartson Brussels office.