

FOLLOW-UP: REGIONS AS KEY PLAYERS IN EUROPEAN SPACE POLICY

On March 20, 2023, the IEEC and NEREUS co-organized the event "Regions as Key Players in European Space Policy" at the Delegation of the Government of Catalonia to the European Union. The purpose of the event was to emphasize the role of European regions in Europe's space policy. The discussion was divided into two panels, the first focusing on Catalonia's contribution to space exploration, and the second on regional space activities that impact the European space strategy.

The conference was opened by Mr. Ignasi Centelles, the Representative of the Government of Catalonia to the EU, who discussed the catalytic role of space in the future development of regions. He highlighted Catalonia's position as a significant hub for companies, SMEs, universities, and scientific infrastructures that facilitate technology transfer. Further to this he highlighted the importance his region puts on the digital transition and combining space and digital technologies.

Mr. Thierry Cotellet, Regional Councillor of the Occitanie region and NEREUS President outlined NEREUS's role in promoting the interests of European regions that use space technologies for the benefit of citizens. He discussed NEREUS's core activities, including interregional collaboration and political dialogue, which enhance collaboration among regions and their ecosystem and help them to position themselves strategically in a wide range of European policies such as the Green Deal. With this, he drew attention to the annual NEREUS Regional Symposiums and extended the invitation to the upcoming Regional Symposium 2023 focused on using space data for agriculture and tourism organised in Matera/Basilicata, Italy on 28-29 September 2023.

The first panel, moderated by Mr. Lluís Juncà, DG for Innovation, Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship at the Government of Catalonia, focused on space exploration in the past and present. Mr. Joan Anton Català highlighted the contribution of Joan Oró, a Catalan biochemist associated with NASA's early efforts to find life beyond planet Earth. The other two panellists presented two experiments which are at the forefront of space exploration: Ms. Mariona Badenas discussed The Hypatia I Mission to the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah, emphasizing the need for more women to pursue space-based careers, while Mr. Francesco Gòdia presented the MELISSA Pilot Plant, which develops regenerative life support systems for long-term human space missions. During the Q&A session, it was reported that collaboration between nations is a prerequisite for successful space missions given their high costs and sharing of know-how. Further, the speakers discussed the importance of collaboration between nations for successful space missions and emphasized the need to consider ethical parameters in space exploration.

The second panel of the programme, which focused on how regions can best contribute to the EU's space policy and programmes, was moderated by Ms. Roya Ayazi, the Secretary General of NEREUS. She noted that in recent years, several NEREUS member regions have developed regional space strategies (Catalonia, the Azores and Hesse, and Occitanie's strategy will follow soon), or integrated space into their smart specialisation strategies, while some regions defining data exploitation strategies to tackle challenges like climate change and digital transition.

Ms. Paraskevi Papantoniou, Director for Space at DG DEFIS, European Commission, emphasized in a video message that regions are important users and procurers of space-based services, and the EU's space programmes focus on the needs of citizens to tackle challenges in the public sector. She also highlighted the importance of the new secure connectivity initiative, IRIS2, in combining the dynamics of the space industry and start-ups at the regional level.

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Then, Ms. Isabella Poldrugo, Deputy Head of Unit for Space Policy at the European Commission, emphasized the significance of the regional dimension and synergies in developing a coherent European space policy and identified several initiatives that recognize the crucial contribution of space and the key role of regions. To quote just a few, the next strategy on the uptake of space uses will put an emphasis on all programmes making the best possible use of all data. Further, the role of space becomes more and more prominent for the resilience of critical infrastructures in regions given the recently adopted directive. Next, 2023 has been identified as the European Year of Skills in which regions play a fundamental role given their strong link with universities and synergies to develop the right skills for the upstream and downstream sectors. Finally, she referred to Cassini, another EU initiative supporting start-ups and attracting private investment at regional and local levels.

From the side of the ESA, Mr Xavier Lobao, Head of Future Projects Division at ESA, through his presentation 'the Global Space4Earth Goals of ESA and the New Space Paradigm' illustrated that the phenomenon of NewSpace represents a paradigm in the development of satellites that allows start-ups to develop space-based solutions and contribute to innovation at the regional level.

During the panel discussion, Mr. Cotellet noted that NEREUS empowers regions and their stakeholders to use space-based information and services to address regional challenges. In this regard, the NEREUS joint project with the European Commission and the European Space Agency, Copernicus4regions, showcases how regions already use space programmes, such as Copernicus and are capable to build related businesses, and bringing these regional use cases in concrete policy contexts with Members of the European Parliament and regional politicians.

Next, Mr. Jalil Benabdillah, Vice-President in charge of the Economy, Employment, Innovation and Reindustrialisation of the Occitanie / Pyrénées-Méditerranée Region, elaborated on the Occitanie's space ecosystem and the activities in defining a regional space strategy. Mr. Benabdillah highlighted that the region hosts a rich ecosystem of SMEs, clusters, and research centres whose needs are reflected in their regional policy aligned with the national and the European level. Apart from this he stressed the importance of space technologies for the green, digital, climate and social transition in Europe.

Ms. Fulvia Quagliotti, President of the Piedmont Aerospace District, presented the Piedmont space ecosystem, which is an aerospace district that links member companies with other aerospace districts and clusters across regions and at an EU-scale and is a facilitator for SMEs to help them grow and support them in their projects and interaction with academia and research centres. The Piedmont region is one of the key players in space exploration and economy, hosting large industries like Thales, Airbus, EADS, Boeing, clusters (eg. Altec), the ESA BIC, and a strong group of SMEs in the supply chain. Further, the region entertains collaboration through projects with international space organisations, such as NASA.

Ignasi Ribas, Director of the Institute of Space Studies of Catalonia (IEEC), discussed the Catalan space sector and its relationship with the regional government. He noted that the government and various organizations, including the IEEC, the i2cat Foundation, and the Cartographic and Geological Institute of Catalonia (ICGC), are working together to establish a NewSpace innovation hub in the region by promoting market applications and supporting start-ups. The government acts as the primary customer for these services and issues public procurement offers to encourage industry response. The strategy has identified six key pillars, including the adoption of use cases by the administration, the development of space-based infrastructure, R&D programmes for the industry, talent generation mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and outreach. The event was attended by over 90 participants and was part of a series of events being planned in Europe and the USA to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dr. Joan Oró (1923-2004).