

Transitions in the Space field

Organised by the junior laboratory *Space Ages*

University Toulouse Jean Jaurès

9-10 November 2026

Call for Papers

Interest in space reached its peak during the Cold War, when the United States and the USSR competed in the Space Race. Control of outer space became an extension of 'earthly rivalries', turning it into a territory for symbolic and ideological confrontation between the two superpowers (Sourbès-Verger, 2022, 2024). As a result, a country's space capabilities have become a marker of its greatness on the international stage (Sourbès-Verger, 2019, 2022, 2024). Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the space sector and the introduction of new private actors. The space sector has thus undergone a number of transitions, which this symposium aims to examine.

Indeed, the advent of New Space has led to the emergence and proliferation of new players in the private sector and, consequently, a profound transformation of the space sector and the dynamics at play between the private and public sectors (Dufay, 2021). Thus, a significant increase in investment in the private sector has been at work, promoting 'the growth of a start-up ecosystem' in the United States and more recently in Europe (Saint-Martin, 2021). This has also gone hand in hand with the emergence of new 'philanthrocapitalist' figures such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk (Saint-Martin, 2021).

This phenomenon of increased private involvement and financial interest in space activities is also reflected in the strategies implemented by European countries. Luxembourg's investment and strategy regarding to space activities have for instance changed significantly in recent years. Driven by New Space and the financial opportunities associated with space exploitation, Luxembourg established a space agency in 2018. The particularity of this agency is that it focuses exclusively on the commercial and legal sides of space activities. Luxembourg has therefore set itself the goal of becoming the European platform for activities related to the commercialisation and exploitation of space resources (Serres, 2019). The United Kingdom, meanwhile, is experiencing a phenomenon of regionalization of its activities through the emergence of the 'Space Glen' triangle in Scotland, which is characterized by the construction of an 'SME ecosystem' around three major hubs (Edinburgh, Dundee and Glasgow) (Vidmar, 2020). The United Kingdom is also marking a turning point in its space policy with its decision to reinvest in the launch sector.

The role of space activities in Europe has also taken on a more political and military dimension in recent years. Although the 1967 Outer Space Treaty guarantees non-appropriation, free circulation and peaceful use of space, it does not prevent its use for military purposes (Sourbès-Verger, 2002, 2022). This involves the implementation of policies, programmes and bodies focused on defence and security, both at national and

European level (Klimburg-Witjes, 2024; Lamy and Saint-Martin, 2013; Sourbès-Verger, 2024). Political discourse emphasises the need for independent access to space, which is seen as a means of guaranteeing Europe's strategic autonomy – a discourse that has become more prominent in view of the current geopolitical situation – and so its position as a major player (Klimburg-Witjes, 2024). It was with this aim in mind that the Ariane 6 launcher programme was set up in 2014. The socio-technical imagination surrounding the development of Ariane 6 was thus partly built on a vision of antagonism towards other space powers, with the fear that Europe would lose its power (Klimburg-Witjes, 2024).

Historical public actors also remain important players, but their activities and organizations have also changed through the years. For example, with a view to renewing the central role of the European Space Agency, the Horizon 2000 programme was launched in 1985. This was accompanied by a significant increase in the agency's budget and more structured planning of activities, with precise estimates of expenditure (Bonnet and Manno, 1994). The Horizon 2000 programme therefore marked a turning point in European space activities and was followed by Horizon 2000 Plus and finally by the Cosmic Vision programme in 2004. The new ambition in terms of the scientific missions developed by ESA has led to their increasing complexity in scientific, technical and technological, but also in organisational terms.

This conference will therefore focus on the thematic of the different “**transitions in the space field**”. The conference will gather different sessions of 1h30 each. Each one will begin by three 20-min talks which will be followed by a time for questions and answers. The number and content of the sessions will ultimately depend on the proposals but we foresee that they could be dedicated to these different (non-exhaustive) topics:

- ***Economic transitions*** will aim to examine the economic transition at play within the space sector and to apprehend their consequences within space activities.
- ***Juridical and geopolitical transitions***. As previously mentioned, the Outer Space Treaty (1967) enshrines the principles of non-appropriation, free access, and the peaceful use of outer space. Nevertheless, recent strategies and projects have challenged the foundations of this treaty. The aim will therefore be to examine their ramifications, both from a legal and a geopolitical perspective. Organisational and governance transitions. Since its creation, the ESA's position has continued to grow stronger and it has become the main medium through which countries invest in space in Europe. This has been accompanied by an increase in the complexity of scientific missions. This theme aims to understand how these changes lead to transitions in terms of organisation and governance (e.g. the role of national space agencies).
- ***Inclusivity, democracy and ethics***. The question of inclusivity in the space field is a well-known fact that is being addressed by actors, who are multiplying efforts and measures to promote women and encourage them to join the field. However, the space sector continues to be a man-dominated world.
- ***Sustainability and space activities*** will aim to understand how, and to what extent, sustainability issues have been taken into account in the space domain.
- ***Aeronautics and Space***, this theme will seek to question the relationship between space and aeronautical activities, notably in light of the development of horizontal launch systems.

Organised by the junior laboratory “Space Ages”, the conference will take place on the 9th and 10th of November at the University Toulouse Jean Jaurès. Proposals will be based on an abstract of 1000 characters maximum. They will be examined by a scientific committee and should be sent by email (simoulin@univ-tlse2.fr, aksel.vanhaecke@gmail.com, helefourcade@gmail.com) before the 28th of August.

Scientific committee:

- Céline Calleya (CNES)
- Hélène Fourcade (FRAMESPA)
- Jérôme Lamy (CESSP)
- Stéphanie Lizy-destrez (ISAE-SUPAERO)
- Jean marc Olivier (FRAMESPA)
- Vincent Simoulin (UTOPI)
- Axelle Vanhaecke (UTOPI)

Bonnet, R.-M. et Manno, V. (1994). *International Cooperation in Space: The Example of the European Space Agency*. Harvard University Press.

Dufay, A. (2021). Acceptabilité des efforts spatiaux : enseignements et conséquences de l'arrivée à maturité du New Space sur la bataille du faire-savoir. *Stratégique*, 126- 127(2-3), 65-73. <https://doi.org/10.3917/strat.126.0065>

Klimburg-Witjes, N. (2024). A Rocket to Protect? Sociotechnical Imaginaries of Strategic Autonomy in Controversies About the European Rocket Program. *Geopolitics*, 29(3), 821-848. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2177157>

Lamy, J. et Saint-Martin, A. (2013). Faire politique d'un système d'observation de la Terre: l'élaboration du programme européen Copernicus/GMES (Global monitoring for environment and security). *Année sociologique*, 63(2), 429-472. <https://doi.org/10.3917/anso.132.0429>

Saint-Martin, A. (2021). Un nouvel esprit du capital-risque spatial ? Sur quelques tendances récentes du financement de l'industrie spatiale américaine. *Entreprises et histoire*, 102(1), 120-139. <https://doi.org/10.3917/eh.102.0120>

Serres, M. (2019). How Luxembourg becomes Europe's commercial space exploration hub. *Annales des Mines - Réalités industrielles*, Mai 2019(2), 69-72. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rindu1.192.0069>

Sourbès-Verger, I. (2002). Mythes et réalités de l'espace militaire. *Hermès, La Revue*, 34(2), 169-182. <https://doi.org/10.4267/2042/14452>

Sourbès-Verger, I. (2022). L'espace, lieu particulier des rivalités politiques et technologiques. *Revue Défense Nationale*, 851(6), 73-78. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.851.0073>

Sourbès-Verger, I. (2024). La puissance spatiale, permanences et changements. *L'Espace Politique. Revue en ligne de géographie politique et de géopolitique*, (51-52). <https://doi.org/10.4000/12ddu>

Vidmar, M. (2020). New Space and Innovation Policy: Scotland's Emerging "Space Glen".

New Space, 8(1), 31-51. <https://doi.org/10.1089/space.2019.0032>