

EU worried that China could upstage Galileo

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by Martyn Warwick

A Czech member of the European Parliament (MEP), Vladimir Remek, says the European Union (EU) must get the much-vaunted and oft-delayed Galileo satellite GPS system off the drawing board and into orbit as soon as possible or risk China getting there beforehand — with the consequent loss of billions of euros worth of investment and revenues.

The project is falling further and further behind schedule while EU officials prevaricate over how the system will operate and who will eventually own it. One proposal even goes so far as to call for public funding but private operation of the system.

Galileo is already years behind schedule as its consortium of private backers bicker over deployment terms. The net result is that launch of the satellite constellation, held up by Europe as a viable and vitally necessary alternative to the US GPS system now in use, may now be delayed until 2012. However, a proposed and strikingly similar Chinese system may be put to orbit as early as next year.

Vladimir Remek, somewhat optimistically says, "At this point the delay is still not a catastrophe, it's more of a nuisance. A problem can occur in this stage of a major project, that's not unheard of, but if the protraction continues, it'll be a massive disgrace for Europe. China is a phenomenon which the world has not quite grasped. If their system is as professional as GPS and comes much cheaper, a European one will not be necessary and Europe will continue to depend on others."

Galileo was originally designed to rival (and in some instances even replace) the US GPS constellation, which, post 9/11 offers a degraded service because of concerns by the US military and the Bush administration that it could be used by terrorists to pinpoint strategic targets.

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Galileo will comprise of a constellation of some 30 satellites of which precisely one has been successfully launched to date.

Over the weekend another EU official broke ranks and weighed-in to support of Mr. Remek. Wolfgang Tiefensee , the German transport minister, said the private consortium tasked with manufacturing and managing the deployment of Galileo has failed and that , as a direct result, additional public funding of the project will now be necessary. He says, "The concession-based model is heading nowhere. For that reason we want to try out all the possibilities of public sector financing including financing via the European Space Agency."

Herr Tiefensee adds that private funding remains a "possibility" but declines to reveal how much of the official 3.66 billion euros budget shortfall might be required to be covered by injections of public cash. Independent estimates say the sums needed could easily top 8 billion euros.

If a decision is made to rescue the Galileo project with public money, it would almost certainly come from the EU central budget although some member states, including Germany, the Netherlands and the UK are calling for individual EU member states to increase their contributions to the European Space Agency.

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