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Many aspects of society – from telecommunications to television, weather forecasting to global financial systems – rely on space systems or space-based technologies.

However, the sheer scale of space projects makes it impossible for most countries to attempt them alone. So European countries have pooled their technological and financial resources to manage space policy through the European Commission – in cooperation with the European Space Agency.

European space policy has three main strands:

- Copernicus Earth observation system;
- Galileo/EGNOS satellite programmes;
- space exploration.

Copernicus is the most ambitious civil Earth observation programme ever. It is a set of complex systems that gather data about the earth through satellites and sensors on the ground, in the sky and at sea. Copernicus will give policy-makers, businesses and the public up-to-date and reliable information about how the planet and its climate are changing. This data will help to predict future climate trends.

Galileo is the EU's global navigation satellite system. Galileo is the first civilian-run satellite navigation system. It will be compatible with the American and Russian systems, but independent from them. With real-time positioning of 1 metre or less, it will be much more accurate than GPS. There will be 30 satellites in the network (including 6 active spares), which will be completed by 2020. The first Galileo services will become available in 2016.

EGNOS is a European satellite-based system that improves GPS accuracy to within 2 metres (95%) instead of the 10 metres typically provided by GPS. It also warns users of problems with GPS signals. It was the precursor to the Galileo programme. EGNOS uses 3 satellites to correct GPS errors and provide more precise positioning data. Unlike Galileo, EGNOS is pan-European (not global) and is dependent on GPS.

Space exploration is a driver of technological innovation and scientific discovery in fields such as recycling, health, bio-technology, energy management and environmental monitoring. Space programmes are very costly, so international cooperation is vital.