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THE ESA CONVENTION: 50 YEARS OF SUCCESSFUL REGIONAL COOPERATION IN SPACE

Abstract

The European Space Agency began to function *de facto* on 31 May 1975. To this date, the success of ESA in serving European cooperation and innovation proves that ESA's founding parents were right in their organisational approach.

This paper will address the main legal and organisational features that have enabled ESA to sustain and develop its activities. The reasons and factors of attractiveness of ESA for Member States will be illustrated, such as its robust structure, a resisting degree of institutionalisation combined with a high degree of flexibility in supporting the interests of Member States.

Another contributing factor is the level of trustworthiness that ESA has been able to establish through fostering its relations with its Member States. Also essential to its success is ESA's industrial policy, which aims at improving the world-wide competitiveness of the European industry by maintaining and developing the industrial base and by encouraging the development of an industrial structure appropriate to market requirements. ESA's industrial policy serves common goals of the Members States while enabling their participation in ESA's activities and programmes in an equitable manner, having regard to their financial contribution.

These features have stood the test of time so far: they have been able to respond to new developments, e.g. in the form of a steady increase in membership and to evolving relations with other institutional stakeholders like the European Union. This paper also highlights the most recent developments and anticipates upcoming challenges and possible approaches.

Even though originally tailored to the specificities of its membership, characterised by a certain general political homogeneity and an industrial diversity rightly understood as opportunity for cooperation, the ESA model or some of its main features will continue to provide inspiration for space-faring nations, or aspiring space-faring nations around the globe.