

22nd IAA SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE DEBRIS (A6)
Policy, Legal, Institutional, Economic and Security Aspects of Debris Mitigation, Debris Remediation and
STM (8-E9.1)

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THE ZERO DEBRIS CHARTER: A SUCCESSFUL DEMONSTRATION OF OPEN AND
COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF SPACE SUSTAINABILITY TARGETS FOR 2030

Abstract

The Zero Debris Charter is the world's most ambitious community commitment to space debris mitigation and remediation to-date. The proliferation of space debris, fuelled by the sharp increase of space traffic and the lack of implementation of existing debris mitigation guidelines, is one of the major space challenges of our time. Formally encouraged by its twenty-two Member States and determined to impulse a strong and positive dynamic in the European and global space sectors, the European Space Agency (ESA) launched in the spring of 2023 the Zero Debris Charter initiative, facilitated by the Protect Accelerator. It built on ESA's own commitment to leave no debris in valuable orbits after 2030 – the ESA Zero Debris approach, capitalising on the knowledge and technologies developed by the Space Safety Programme. To guarantee the relevance of the Charter for the space community and the ownership of future signatories, ESA decided to set up an innovative open and collaborative development process, by which all interested entities – public and private alike – would be able to participate on an equal footing in the joint drafting of the Charter and its targets.

Recognising the pioneering nature of the Zero Debris Charter's open and collaborative drafting process and its value as inspiration for future space and non-space initiatives aiming at driving meaningful change around ambitious objectives, this article provides a detailed account of the inception and rationale behind the initiative. Drawing inter alia from international regime theory, it also proposes a critical analysis of the Charter's development process and of the uniqueness of its nature and positioning in the variety of existing international instruments on space debris mitigation and remediation.