

19th October 2020

The European Space Agency (ESA) has cancelled the ESA Medium Class M5 mission candidate SPICA (SPace Infrared telescope for Cosmology and Astrophysics) just a few months before the final Mission Selection Review (MSR). The nature of this cancellation leaves us with no confidence in the decision-making processes at the highest levels of ESA.

The scientific and technological communities of ESA members and collaborating countries have invested substantial resources in developing SPICA within the competitive ESA/JAXA process under the expectation that ESA guarantees a transparent and fair process for all competitors. For SPICA, the lack of negotiation, discussion, and communication before cancellation, justified by an opaque and unaccountable costing process, led to decision-making very far from this expectation.

Why did costings become a problem only after successful completion of many reviews, most recently the Mission Consolidation Review? Why did ESA propose a de-scoping solution, only to reject it by cancelling the project just one month later? Why was there no opportunity for the project to work out a solution? Why was SPICA cancelled just a few months before MSR, instead of the costings forming part of that review where they could be properly analysed? Without answers, we will never know if this process was fair, and if equal opportunities were given to all candidate missions.

Nothing under the current system would stop other ESA projects ending this way. The Scientific Programme Committee (SPC) should be the body to make drastic decisions such as the cancellation of a candidate mission before selection review, not the executive.

Transparency and accountability in ESA decision-making must be substantially improved from those experienced by SPICA if the European and worldwide scientific community is to continue investing the work of hundreds of people over many years to create scientific and technical cases for space missions. The specific decision to exclude SPICA from the M5 process, and the manner in which it was made, must also be reviewed.

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