

Beat: Politics

PM LECORNU PLACES THE FOUNDATION STONE AT VERNON FOR MAIASPACE FACTORY

WITH PRES. REGION NORMANDIE H.MORIN

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USPA NEWS - PRIME MINISTER SEBASTIEN LECORNU LINKED VERNON'S INDUSTRIAL REVIVAL TO FRANCE'S DRIVE FOR AUTONOMOUS ACCESS TO SPACE

On 4 September 2026, Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu travelled to Vernon, in Normandy's Eure department, to lay the foundation stone for MaiaSpace's future MaiaFactory. The visit preceded his closing address at the Giverny International Space Forum, turning a local industrial event into a wider political moment about France's and Europe's place in space.

This report was produced on location with HandyJournalists, an agency committed to disability inclusion, accessibility and the equal representation of disabled journalists in public-interest reporting. Journalists were offered collective transport for the two-stage programme from Matignon to Vernon and Giverny. However, the only wheelchair-using reporter covering both sequences had to travel independently in her assistant's vehicle, as no ramp-equipped shuttle was made available. She therefore incurred transport costs that other accredited journalists did not have to bear. The situation did not overshadow the quality of the welcome received on site. Staff from the Prime Minister's Office & MaiaSpace were attentive.

A NORMANDY FACTORY FOR SPACE SOVEREIGNTY: MAIASPACE STARTS ITS NEXT CHAPTER

A former brownfield, is a new industrial promise. The ceremony was held at MaiaSpace's Campus de l'Espace in Vernon, a territory with a long history in aerospace, defence and scientific research. Before the Prime Minister spoke, visitors were shown a film presenting the Maia launcher, its propulsion system and the company's industrial roadmap. Journalists were not able to enter the production area, but the hangar itself offered a concrete view of the project's scale: engineers, prototypes, technical models and a European workforce preparing a new generation of launch vehicles.

Sebastien Lecornu opened by speaking as a local elected representative before addressing the crowd as Prime Minister. "I will first speak as Vernon's first deputy mayor, vice-president of the inter-municipal authority and departmental elected representative, and then on behalf of the State," he said.

Prime Minister Lecornu's personal tie to Vernon gave his words particular weight. Lecornu, a former mayor of the town and former Minister for the Armed Forces, described the rebirth of the site after the closure of the LRBA, the Ballistic and Aerodynamic Research Laboratory. "We have come a long way on this site," he said. "In 2014 and 2015, this was a brownfield. Ten years later, it is no longer a brownfield."

For the Prime Minister Lecornu, the factory is not only a building project. It is part of a local strategy for jobs, skills, training and industrial continuity. He paid tribute to Hervé Morin, President of the Normandy Regional Council, for supporting the territory's recovery and for helping transform a difficult industrial legacy into a new opportunity.

A MODERN NORMAND FACTOR DEISGNEED FOR REUSABLE LAUNCH

MaiaSpace, created in 2022, is a wholly owned subsidiary of ArianeGroup, the Airbus-Safran joint venture. Its future MaiaFactory in Vernon is described by the company as a nearly 10,000-square-metre production and assembly facility for the Maia launch vehicle. It is expected to employ about 160 people in the long term and is designed to support a target of up to 20 launchers a year by 2030.

The Maia programme aims to combine the agility of a start-up with the industrial experience of Europe's established space sector. The launcher is planned in both reusable and expendable configurations. Its reusable version is designed to recover its first stage through a vertical landing on a barge at sea, a technological model central to the new economics of space launch.

Yohann Leroy, Chief Executive of MaiaSpace, said the company had announced its Vernon factory ambition one year earlier. The aim, he explained, is to establish a series-production base for Europe's first mini-launcher incorporating vertical recovery at sea.

The project also has a distinctly European dimension. Leroy said industrial contributors and teams working on Maia come from France, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Poland and Spain. Components will be produced in Vernon, transferred by road towards Le Havre, then shipped to French Guiana for operations from Kourou.

FROM VERNON TO KOUROU, MAIASPACE EMBODIES EUROPE'S NEW SPACE AMBITION WITH ANTIC SYMBOLIC NAMES FOR THE GAMECHANGERS ENGINES : PROMOTHEUS, COLIBRI & QUASIMODO

At the heart of the programme is Prometheus, a liquid-oxygen and bio-methane engine developed by ArianeGroup. The engine is designed to support reuse, while its technology represents a shift away from older, more costly launcher development models. The Maia architecture also includes the option of Colibri, a kick stage intended to deliver satellites more accurately into their required orbits.

One of the most striking objects visible in the hangar was a test article nicknamed Quasimodo. Its name does not come from Greek mythology, unlike Maia associated with the Pleiades and Prometheus, the Titan who brought fire to humankind. Quasimodo recalls Victor Hugo's character from The Hunchback of Notre-Dame.

The name was given to a structural test model whose shape became distorted under pressure. Rather than concealing that visual imperfection, the engineers turned it into a sign of their method: test, learn, adjust and improve. The object is a reminder that excellence is not created by pretending that no weaknesses exist. It is created by identifying them, working with them and designing better solutions.

For HandyJournalists, the image also carries a wider meaning. Disability and difference must never be reduced to imperfection. Like Quasimodo, a person who does not fit a standardised model may expose the limits of the system around them — and invite society to adapt. Inclusion does not lower the standard of excellence; it makes excellence more complete, human and durable.

A TERRITORY & A STRATEGIC BET

Christophe Bruneau, Chief Executive of ArianeGroup, described MaiaSpace as “the meeting of a project and a territory.” He said the company's mission was to bring together the “best of both worlds”: the speed of a start-up and the experience of a long-established industrial ecosystem. “There is no innovation without solid foundations,” he said.

Hervé Morin, president of the Normandy region, connected MaiaSpace to Normandy's wider industrial landscape, including nuclear energy, food processing, aeronautics, space and the workforce training required by these sectors. He pointed to the need for welders, boilermakers, engineers and technicians, arguing that industrial renewal depends as much on people and skills as on buildings and technology.

HERVE MORIN CHALLENGES ELON MUSK OF THE FRENCH ROCKETS MAE IN NORMANDY

In a lighter moment, Morin directly addressed the competitive challenge posed by SpaceX: “Elon Musk, watch out: MaiaSpace is here. We are here.” The remark drew laughter, but its message was serious. Europe is trying to close a gap in reusable launch systems while building a more independent capacity to reach orbit.

Prime Minister Lecornu was equally direct about the uncertainty. “We are taking a big risk,” he said. “The most important thing is to start and to start quickly.” He added: “We must not tell ourselves stories.”

The French Prime Minister linked the programme to France's longer history of technological and strategic choices. He argued that, as Minister for the Armed Forces, the most meaningful risk was to make the State a customer: “The finest risk was to become a customer.” The remark suggests that public procurement including for security and defence-related space missions could be as important as public subsidies in helping MaiaSpace reach operational maturity.

WHO MAY GOVERN THE SPACE ABOVE US?

The first stone laid in Vernon represents more than a factory. It marks a bet that France and Europe can design, build, launch and eventually recover strategic space systems on their own terms.

MaiaSpace still faces the decisive tests ahead: industrial ramp-up, the first flight, operational reliability, recovery at sea and the pressure of competing with far larger and more established players. But the Vernon project also shows that sovereignty is built in specific places through training, engineering, public investment, local supply chains and the willingness to take calculated risks.

As France and Europe seek greater autonomy in orbit, the question is no longer only who can build and launch rockets. As states and private companies expand their presence beyond Earth, who governs space, who writes its rules, and is it time to create a global authority for the shared, responsible use of outer space, as the international community has tried to do for the seas?

By Rahma Rachdi, reporting from Vernon, Normandy, with HandyJournalists

Disclaimer

This independent on-the-ground report was produced with the support of HandyJournalists, an agency committed to disability inclusion, accessibility and equal working conditions for journalists with disabilities. While the Prime Minister's Office and MaiaSpace teams provided a welcoming, attentive and professional reception on site, no ramp-equipped shuttle was available for the wheelchair-using journalist covering both Vernon and Giverny. The reporter therefore travelled independently with her assistant and personally incurred transport costs, while collective transport was provided for other accredited journalists. Accessibility must extend to the entire reporting journey, not only to access inside a venue.

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