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Soyuz Rocket Deploys 2 Galileo Satellites

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A Russian-made Soyuz rocket blasted off from French Guiana and placed two satellites in orbit for Europe's Galileo global positioning system, space officials said.

It was the third time that Soyuz, which first flew in 1966 and traces its roots back to the earliest Cold War intercontinental ballistic missiles, had been launched from outside its former Soviet bases.

The rocket lifted off at 3:15 p.m. Friday from a launch pad at Europe's space base near Kourou, French Guiana, on the northeast coast of South America.

After a nearly four-hour flight, the satellites separated from the rocket, bringing to four the number of Galileo satellites now in orbit. Two other satellites for the project were launched from French Guiana last year, also aboard a Soyuz rocket.

Once Galileo is fully operational later this decade, it aims to give Europeans autonomy from the U.S.-government-controlled GPS and other systems created by Russia and China.

Positioning satellites provide accurate navigation to ships, aircraft, trucks and private vehicles. They are also used extensively by the military, notably to target guided missiles.

Latest estimates put the price tag for Galileo at over 20 billion euros. It is planned to be a 30-satellite constellation and be fully operational by 2020.

With many European countries facing economic difficulties, questions have grown over the necessity of a system whose services are already assured by the GPS constellation.

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