



Bologna 6/9/2005

To: G. Reibaldi
Head of microgravity facilities
for Columbus and External Payloads

European Space Research & Technology Centre
Keplerlaan 1
Postbus 299
2200 AG Noordwijk (The Netherlands)

Subject: SPOrt Programme

Dear Mr Reibaldi,

It is with great displeasure that I am informing you about the end of my commitment as Principal Investigator for the SPOrt experiment.

This task began in 1997, when the experiment was proposed in reply to the ESA Call Ideas for experiments to be flown on board the ISS during the Early Phase Opportunities (2001-2003). SPOrt was then selected by ESA and approved by ASI that started the funding of the programme in 1998. From that time my commitment, and that of the Scientific and Technological teams that took part in the project, was continuously aimed at making the experiment as good and successful as possible. The activity continued through expected (and unexpected) difficulties till the end of the industrial phase B (2003) and provided results of great interest, both on the scientific and technological field. The Italian industry gave an important support all over the years, during phase A and B, up to the finalisation of the phase C/D offer to ASI (early 2004), making significant investments.

Today, due to the well-known problems of the Space Shuttle, it is unrealistic – in my opinion and I think you will agree - to plan a flight for SPOrt before 2010-2011. For that time I'd suppose that a new generation mission studying the polarization of the Cosmic Microwave Background will be either observing or at least on the point of being completed. The Polarization of the CMB, in fact, is one of the most intriguing field of investigation of the Universe and the efforts in that direction are growing both in Europe and in USA. The techniques developed by the SPOrt Team were and are still at the forefront and can be kept as reference for forthcoming instruments using also new technologies for the detection of astrophysical signals.

The SPOrt project has not received funds either by ASI or by other Italian Institutions since 2001.

Even though reduced, the scientific activity continued after several re-planning in order to keep the programme competitive with respect to the scientific scenario. Part of the technological development was also carried on to ensure a quick re-starting of the programme in case of need. During this period the scientific production was still at a high level, as demonstrated by several published articles (see the web page of SPOrt at <http://spOrt.bo.iasf.cnr.it:8080/> for details).

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At the beginning of this year it was clear to me that there were not resources available (by ASI or INAF) to maintain not even a minimum of activities.

After the rescheduling imposed by the problems affecting the NASA Space Shuttle no alternatives were investigated between ESA and ASI to provide a real backup solution for SPORt. Off course I recognize that to continue it would require more and more resources, and today the general situation does not appear suitable for further investments in this experiment. Unfortunately the result will be the loss of the know-how acquired by the SPORt Italian Science Team and people under contract (PhD, researchers) have already left.

Nobody in Italy seems to care much about it but, in my opinion, an important opportunity to contribute to the development of European competitiveness both in science and technology will be lost.

Early this year I decided to give up my role as Responsible of the Scientific Team by informing the Presidents of both ASI and INAF: no actions at all. Later on, last May, I solicited both ASI and INAF to take care of the SPORt Italian science to avoid the complete "evaporation" of the know-how. I'm still waiting for a reply

In this situation I cannot maintain any responsibility with respect to anyone.

Finally, let me thank all the ESA people who supported SPORt through its hard way to be stopped.

Thanks for your collaboration. Best regards,

Dr. Stefano Cortiglioni