



Swiss kids suit up for 'Mission to Mars'

A pupil of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing a spacesuit costume, runs holding a self-made paper rocket during their project "Mission to Mars".

Leo pulls on a shiny, silver suit and places the helmet gingerly over his head before marching with the other budding astronauts towards their spaceship. "Going to Mars is really my dream," the eight-year-old said, jumping excitedly from foot to foot. While the world has been riveted by the escapades of NASA's Perseverance Mars rover, a group of Swiss primary school children has been eagerly preparing their own mission to the red planet.

Some of Switzerland's top space experts, including the country's only astronaut, Claude Nicollier, evaluated the detailed mission plan the children had developed over nine months. And on March 8, they gave it the all-clear for lift-off. The children "exploded with joy" when they heard, their teacher at the Vivalys private school near Lausanne, Sebastien Roussel, told AFP. "It was like watching the NASA engineers' ecstatic reaction when Perseverance touched down." This week, they finally blasted off. Their rocket is actually a bus, with images of astronauts astride a spaceship heading towards a bright red sphere covering the windows, flanked by the message: "Mission Vivalys. Direction Mars".

Space station

Their destination? A Mars space station conveniently situated a bus-ride away in a secluded wooded area on the outskirts of Lausanne in western Switzerland. Here, the 16 eight- and nine-year-olds will spend three days carrying out experiments similar to some conducted by actual astronauts, including attempting to grow plants to sustain them on the long journey.



A pupil of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing a spacesuit costume, shows a self-made paper rocket during their project "Mission to Mars".

And while the idyllic, snow-sprinkled surroundings are far less hostile than the windswept, dusty surface of Mars, the children wear suits and helmets whenever

they step outside. Inside the base, with his helmet-actually a face-covering scuba-diving mask-under his arm, Leo says this "analogue mission to Mars" made him all the more eager to see the real thing. "But I don't want to land where Perseverance landed. It's radioactive

Ewan, the project's appointed leader, recommends using a lot of tape. "We are going to pump air into them, so it is important to close them tightly," the youngster explains. He pulls on his mask and heads out to help secure the launch site with safety cones and tape. When the



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, pose for a group picture during their project "Mission to Mars" in Lausanne. — AFP photos

there and very cold," he said. In a bid to simulate a true space mission, all the children's meals consist of freeze-dried space food.

Initial plans for them to sleep on site were meanwhile scrapped due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Our biggest concern is not bringing the virus to Mars," Olivier Delamadeleine, head of the Educalis group that runs the school, told AFP. The mission fits with the school's general approach aimed at deepening the students' learning through "real life" experiences, he said. During the months of preparation, the children participated in workshops on astronomy and rocket engineering hosted by students at the neighboring EPFL-among the most prestigious technical universities in Europe.

A motivation 'win'

The mission required them to use mathematics to calculate the distance to Mars, and they have also sharpened their language skills, learning how to spell the names of the planets. Roussel said the mission was "a win" for a teacher seeking to motivate his students. The first experiment the team embarks upon after arriving at the space station is launching home-made paper rockets into space. The children get to work rolling sheets of paper into tubes, before adding pointed paper tips and fins.

other children arrive, he helps Roussel place one rocket on a large metal contraption attached to a pump. When they flip a red lever on the valve, the paper rocket flies as high as the treetops amid wild applause.

Exploding rockets

After all the rockets have been launched, the children have a debrief Zoom session with Jonas Morfin, known as "Jupiter Jonas", at EPFL's Space Innovation unit. Lined up in front of the camera, they detail the problems some rockets ran into, and he provides pointers on how to improve the structures for the next launch. "Maybe reinforce the next one with more tape?" Morfin tells a girl whose rocket exploded in mid-air.

The preparation for the mission, and especially the Zoom conversation earlier this month with Nicollier, has left some children dreaming about becoming astronauts themselves. "That's what I have in mind," Leo said. "Now I want to be a scientist or an astronaut." Perseverance's images from Mars have also left some children eager to see humans walk on the red planet. "It's possible for robots," said Nina, one of two children named mission leaders. "I think it will be possible for us too, soon." — AFP



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, build paper rockets during their project "Mission to Mars".



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, take part in their project "Mission to Mars".



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, take part in their project "Mission to Mars".



Pupils of the Ecole Vivalys elementary school, wearing spacesuits costumes, plant a Swiss national flag in the ground during their project "Mission to Mars".

HUNGARY POP MUSIC REFORM OPENS NEW FRONT IN CULTURE WAR

A Hungarian government plan to reinvigorize the local pop music scene and promote Hungarian culture at the same time has sparked concerns about political influence and censorship. Details of the 62-million-euro plan revealed Tuesday include funding for training and talent spotting, grants for content creation and marketing, and infrastructure like studios and performance venues. "It's about producing quality Hungarian pop and rock, and identity-building," said the project's frontman Szilard Demeter, 44, appointed by Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government as a cultural commissioner in 2019.

"Music can express what is different in Hungarians' character, vision, and historical experience," Demeter told AFP after a draft of the plan was published last year. "Perhaps that's not always understandable when looked at by western Europeans, but that's why it can be exciting and exotic," he said.

'110 percent Orbanista'

Government critics however fret that the music plan opens a new front in an escalating culture war. The self-styled "illiberal" nationalist premier Orban, 57, in power since 2010, declared in 2018 that "big changes" were coming for Hungary's cultural and academic scenes, seen in pro-government circles as hotbeds of liberalism. Since then, the government has tightened control over theatres and universities while an anti-LGBT campaign has been launched. A university founded by the liberal US billionaire George Soros, a bete noire of Orban, said it was forced from Budapest into exile in Vienna.

Demeter, a writer and amateur bass guitarist who hails from the Hungarian minority in Romania, has also sparked controversy by comparing Soros to Adolf Hitler. "I totally support the Prime Minister's policies. I am 110 percent an Orbanista," Demeter, who also heads a prestigious literary museum in Budapest, told AFP. "Yes there is a fierce culture war going on, the big question is whether Hungarian culture will exist at all in 100 years," he said. "The guarantee of survival is that we live in our own national culture, national identity has got weaker, and should be restored," he said.

Although in another interview Demeter said that he does not like pop singers "spluttering" about politics as "that divides the audience" he told AFP that political affiliation will be no bar to funding under the new scheme. "Everyone should be involved, from left to liberal to right, far-right to Marxist, diversity is the source of Hungarian culture's strength, just as diversity of national cultures is Europe's strength," he said. "So if a band is good quality, why shouldn't it be supported?" he added.

Censorship

But according to Ferenc Megyeri, 55, lead singer of punk group "Usual Disappointments", the state is already censoring musicians. Megyeri's band, founded in 1990, has penned songs like "Viktor", "Absurdistan", and "Soros" that criticize or parody Orban's policies. The songs were cut from the broadcast version of its concert last October during a series of state-sponsored online gigs.

Organizers also asked Megyeri to remove a T-shirt he wore with "Soros" written on it. "I refused, so the broadcast focused on close-ups of my face," he told AFP in his hometown of Pecs, south of Budapest. "It is a good idea to help musicians, after all it's our money, taxpayer money, but not by censorship," he said. "Most bands will take government funding and stay silent. But we are not that type," he added.



Director of Petofi Literary Museum Szilard Demeter gives an interview in his office of Budapest, Hungary. — AFP photos



An award-winning songwriter and musician Zoltan Czutor gives an interview in Budapest, Hungary.

Indoctrination

Zoltan Czutor, an award-winning songwriter, says "wonderful things can be done" with the funding like teaching schoolkids how to play an instrument, but he worries about the risk of "indoctrination". "I hope there won't be mandatory visits to nationalist rock operas for kids," he told AFP in a Budapest studio.

According to Czutor, 51, who teaches music as well as leading four projects—an acoustic guitar band, his own solo act, a pop-rock group, and a kids' music band—only a handful of stars can make a living from pop music. "Most income comes from big state or municipality-sponsored festivals, and organizers don't want trouble. Bands avoid politics for fear of being blacklisted from gigs or radio airplay," he said. Exclusion from the airwaves is a familiar feeling for Zsuzsa Koncz, 75, an iconic pop singer whose career began in the 1960s.

"I haven't been invited to perform on state media in the last decade," Koncz, who has supported liberal causes in the past, told AFP. For her, the new plan revives uncomfortable memories of a communist-era cultural policy - "Tolerated, Forbidden, Supported" - where any artwork that questioned the system was banned. "The last 10 years have shown that the closer you are to the regime's honey pot the easier it is to eat from it," she said. — AFP

Rare Bernini drawing fetches record price at French auction

A rare drawing by the Italian 17th century sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini sold for 1.9 million euros (\$2.3 million) in France on Saturday, the highest price ever paid for a drawing by the artist, the auction house said. The original estimate price for the sanguine, or red chalk drawing of a male nude dating from somewhere between 1630 and 1640, had been set at 30,000-50,000 euros by the Acteon auction house in Compiègne, northern France.

But an anonymous, "probably Anglo-Saxon", buyer secured it for 1.3 million euros, which including fees and commission represented a final purchase price of 1.9 million euros, auctioneer Dominique Le Coent told AFP. The previous world record price paid for a Bernini drawing was 139,000 euros in 2014. Bernini (1598-1680) designed statues for many of Rome's landmarks such as the Four Rivers Fountain in Piazza Navona. The "Academie d'Homme" drawing, which belongs to an "extremely small body of academic drawings known to be by Bernini", Le Coent said. Art historians know of only seven others, "all preserved



A handout photo made available by the Acteon auction house shows a drawing entitled "Academie d'homme" by Italian artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini aka Le Bernin. — AFP

in museums and institutions, including one at the Uffizi Museum in Florence". The auction, broadcast live on the internet, attracted the interest of many collectors, mostly international, and there were nine telephone bidders. Discovered in Compiègne, the drawing was first mistakenly attributed to the French Baroque sculptor Pierre Puget (1620-1694) before being authenticated as a work by Bernini. — AFP