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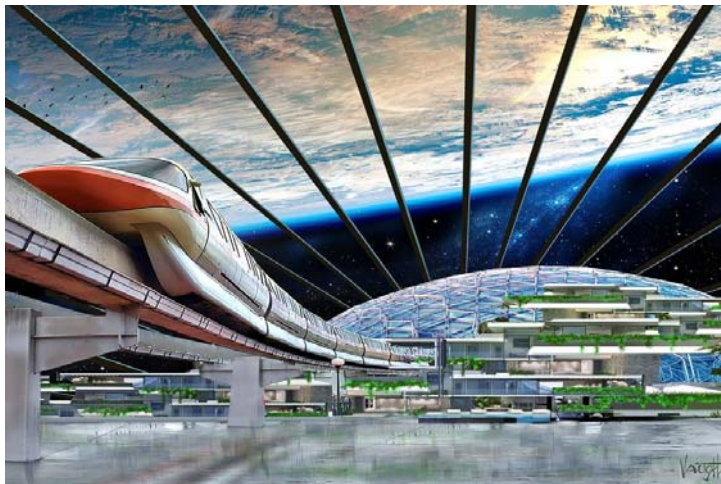
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A-HED

# What Tops the Agenda for a New Space Colony? A Debate Over Taxes

A Russian businessman plans to put in orbit a utopia called Asgardia. If only he could get his citizens to agree on how to run it



An artist's concept of Asgardia. PHOTO: JAMES VAUGHAN

*By Charles Rollet*

Aug. 29, 2017 1:15 p.m. ET

It's tough enough to create a nation in space. There's the Earth-orbiting colony to plan, the provisioning to figure out and the technical challenge of launching thousands of people.

On top of that, you have to make folks get along before they even rocket up there.

The scale of the human task is dawning on Russian businessman and scientist Igor Ashurbeyli, who last year drew headlines with his plan for a peaceful democratic utopia dubbed Asgardia above the stratosphere.

More than 300,000 people from 217 countries and territories signed up online to be Asgardians—among them starry-eyed dreamers, sci-fi fans and political idealists—and 110,000 of them are now officially citizens.

While Dr. Ashurbeyli's lofty plan involves launching "Space Arks" into lower



Igor Ashurbeyli

Earth orbit by 2025, he has found himself caught up in earthly debates among his people about pesky details such as the space nation's constitution and potential taxes.

Not to mention its prospective shortage of women.

Among problems facing Asgardia, "the biggest is self-organization," said Dr. Ashurbeyli, 53, "because no one has ever tried organizing...what is today 100,000 citizens from 200 countries who don't know each other and live in different places on Earth."

Dr. Ashurbeyli, based in Moscow, has few details about how Asgardia, named after Asgard, the godly realm of Norse mythology, would be built, launched and run. Specifics are to be

decided by the nation's parliament.

One mission: Guard against space threats like asteroids. "My task is to defend planet Earth and defend humanity," Dr. Ashurbeyli said in a phone interview, "nothing more."

Before liftoff, the Soviet-trained engineer wants the United Nations to recognize Asgardia as a country. He plans to establish a government online and devise a flag, anthem and currency. Initially, citizens will get to send data into space on a satellite he plans to launch from the U.S. this fall.

Dr. Ashurbeyli, who owns an industrial company he values at \$200 million,



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insists he is deadly serious. He is the sole funder and pays about 50 people to manage Asgardia's affairs. His plan is to pay for launches through crowdfunding.

Others are skeptical of the project's success. "I think the initiators don't have any idea what they are doing, legally speaking," said space-law professor Frans von der Dunk of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

And earthbound Asgardians, it turns out, are a fractious lot. Hailing from Tulsa to Turkey to East Timor, they speak different languages and can't agree on basic policies. Hotly debated issues include the merits of establishing diplomatic relations with extraterrestrials, whether refugees should be welcomed and what role

cryptocurrencies should play.

The biggest fault line is Asgardia's constitution, which Dr. Ashurbeyli and his advisers wrote. Unveiled in June, it met opprobrium from rebellious corners of the would-be nation.

"I'd say the community is very divided," said Chris Hawkes, 58, a teacher from Preston, England, who joined because he liked the idea of a "societal restart."


Mr. Hawkes said the constitution accords too much power to Dr. Ashurbeyli by declaring Asgardia a "Space Kingdom"—giving him extensive rights to determine the composition of the powerful Supreme Space Council. "There's so much mishmash in the constitution," he said.

Debate raged on other aspects of the constitution, from its minimum age of 40 for parliamentarians to worries that Asgardia would impose taxes before launch.

Such a levy, fretted one Asgardian online, would mean citizens supporting a nation "that has few assets, no territory, no institutions and no international recognition." The constitution states that paying taxes is voluntary.

Critics' online clashes with those loyal to the founder got heated. The disputes delayed ratification of the constitution, which was scheduled for June 18, for almost six weeks.



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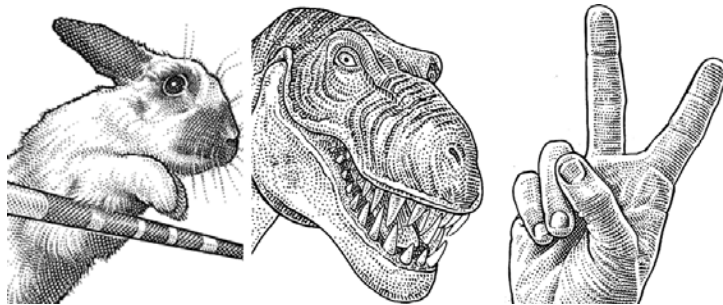
Of the over 300,000 who became Asgardians by signing up online, only the 110,000 who finally voted to approve the constitution were granted official citizenship.

Jenn Roznicki, 40, a child-care provider in Calgary, Canada, quit Asgardia when it was revealed that those who didn't approve the constitution would be considered tourists, not citizens.

"I was sad that it happened because I had so much hope for Asgardia," she said. "When I joined a year ago, my husband said, 'You know it's going to descend into madness,' and I said, 'No, I have faith!'"

Dr. Ashurbeyli said he simply wants to establish a more structured society and would serve only one five-year term. As for anointing himself king, he said Asgardia would be a constitutional monarchy similar to those in Europe.

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He has created a Vienna-based group—named NGO Asgardia—to manage the nation. It is now holding parliamentary elections, with almost 4,000 running for seats, with candidates including an Indian computer scientist, an American

high-school teacher and a British hypnotherapist.

While some have fleshed-out platforms advocating policies from universal basic

income to building a virtual-reality-based society, many haven't bothered.

Lena De Winne, director of the NGO, recently stressed on Facebook that candidates needed platforms. She fielded questions from Asgardians about technicalities such as potential problems for those who live in countries that ban dual citizenship. "It's not like you're a citizen of America and Canada at the same time," she responded. "These are just earthly countries."

Asgardia will seek recognition from individual countries before venturing into space, she said, a process that has begun by sending messages of congratulations to newly elected leaders such as France's Emmanuel Macron.

To join the U.N., Asgardia needs Security Council blessing and must persuade two-thirds of member states "that it is a peace-loving state and is able and willing to carry out the obligations" of the U.N. charter, said Dan Thomas, a U.N. spokesman.

Asgardia's constitution is available in 12 languages and states it will "strive towards a single Asgardian language"—a subject of intense discussion among Asgardians, with suggestions ranging from Esperanto to a hybrid of Chinese and English.

Then there's a vexing demographic problem. As of March, 16% of Asgardians were women, prompting the organization to call for members to find ways to get more to join.

"We definitely need more women," said Samuel Fisher, 25, a Colorado-based Asgardian and book author, "but we're not in space right now."

*Appeared in the August 30, 2017, print edition.*

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