Group Project

Satellite Ground Station

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Technologie Kosmiczne i Satelitarne

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## Project participants

* **Tomasz Mrugalski** (TM) – project lead, orbital mechanics specialist, logistics, reliability engineer
* **Sławomir Figiel** (SF) – geospatial data engineer, programmer, Raspberry Pi, OS specialist
* **Ewelina Omernik** (EO) – low-level software developer, integrated circuits specialist

## Project Schedule

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Task** | **Deadline** | **Coordinator** |
| 1 | **Feasibility study** Research of available satellites, capabilities of existing SDR hardware, necessary SDR, antenna and LNA capabilities. | 2019-10-17 | SF |
| 2 | **Hardware acquisition** Selection of specific hardware type, vendor selection, purchasing process, shipment, hardware delivery. | 2019-11-07 | TM |
| 3 | **System integration** Hardware (computing unit, SDR, antenna, wiring), assembly, base software installation (OS, SDR drivers, SDR software) | 2019-11-14 | EO |
| 4 | **Software automation design**  Design of the automated data acquisition, processing pipeline, data deployment | 2019-11-21 | SF |
| 5 | **Software implementation**  Implementation of the design specified in task #4, developed software deployment | 2019-12-05 | TM |
| 6 | **Test campaign**  Test specification, experimental assessment of the system performance, test report, improvement suggestions, conclusions | 2019-12-19 | EO |

## 

# Progress report

## Task 1: Feasibility study.

The first task conducted was a determination whether the data reception from satellites is feasible by a group of students with modest budget. The key concern was whether the hardware required to reliably and repeatedly receive transmissions would be within our budget. Several existing projects were identified with reported repeated successes [1], [2], [3]. The typical radio hardware used was an inexpensive SDR (software defined radio) running on a PC, connected to VHF antenna. In some projects additional components, such as LNA (low noise amplifier) or more advanced directional antenna with tracking mechanism, were used.

Our team looked at various embedded computing platforms. The leading solution available on market is a Raspberry Pi. Its popularity comes from several factors – affordability (cost around 50-70 EUR), high performance (1.5GHz CPU, comparable to mid-level laptops), availability (sold by many vendors, hardware available in stored, including those in Poland), and extensibility (4 USB sockets for data, powered over USB, Ethernet, some models have PoE, some models have WiFi integrated, GPIO, HDMI output). Our earliest experiments used Raspberry Pie 1B+ model, which is 5 years old. While it has proven the general approach, it was difficult to work with due to low performance. We decided to use the latest RPi 4B model. For more details, see Gitlab #4.

Another researched aspect was the radio bands. Two most popular bands are VHF and UHF. We decided to use VHF due to being used by several Polish sats, available antennas and other factors. For more details, see Gitlab #2.

The third researched problem was the choice of antenna. We had to balance several factors here. First concern was he antenna availability. Since the project has strict deadlines imposed, we wanted to get the antenna as soon as possible. Second, the antenna should be reasonably simple to construct. The final aspect was financial. There are many high performance antennas, but their price is often prohibitive. Two final candidates were Winkler turnstile antenna and WiMo TA-1. The latter was slightly more expensive (90EUR, compared to 40EUR), but offered much better delivery options (shipment within 4 days rather than 28 working days).

The deliverable for this task is an analysis with set of specific hardware selected for purchase.

## Task 2: Hardware acquisition.

The second task conducted that was following the feasibility study was to analyze the market from the perspective of available components. Our team looked at several vendors offering different Raspberry PI models via varied channels. Our process covered purchase of three elements: embedded computing platform, a Software Defined Radio component and an antenna.

***Embedded computing platform purchase***. As determined in task #1 (see the text above), our platform choice was Raspberry Pi 4. It’s a very recent model with many powerful features. Our research uncovered stories of users complaining about RPi 4 stability. It seems the problem was faulty design of the USB used to power the solution. This was promptly fixed in an updated 4B versions. The RPi 4B comes with 1, 2 and 4GB memory variants. Since the price difference between models is not that great, we chose the most powerful model with 4GB of memory. Our rationale for this decision is to be able to run GUI software, such as gprx, gnu radio or gpredict on this configured RPi 4B. We also chose a kit that provided several essential hardware. The kit included the board itself, a robust case, micro-HDMI to HDMI connector, a USB-C power fully that can meet the power requirements (constant 3A, even under heavy load), a new micro SD card,and a reader for SD cards. The kit has been purchased on Allego platform on Oct. 22nd and delivered on Oct. 28th.

**SDR platform**. As determined in task #1, we decided to purchase an SDR platform. By far, the most popular solution is based on two chipsets: RTL2832U + R820T2. Obviously, we needed to connect the SDR dongle to the computing platforms, so it must use USB connector. The model we chose also had a robust case, which protected the delicate hardware inside. The kit we chose came up with a telescope antenna, an SMA cable and a mini-tripod. The SDR kit was ordered on Oct. 12th and was delivered couple days later.

**Antenna purchase**. The last missing element of a robust program was an antenna. The initial antenna we considered was Winkler turnstile. We discovered that the vendor requires 28 working days to build the antenna and ship it. This was a major problem, given our projects schedule. Fortunately, we were able to find WiMo TA-1 antenna. While is it significantly more expensive (c.a. 100EUR) as compared to Winkler antenna, it has a great benefit of being readily available. The vendor claims the antenna will be shipped within 4 working days. The order has been placed on Oct. 22nd and we received tracking number for the shipment. As of Nov 6, the package has arrived to Wroclaw and is expected this week.

The deliverable of this task is to have all the hardware components received.

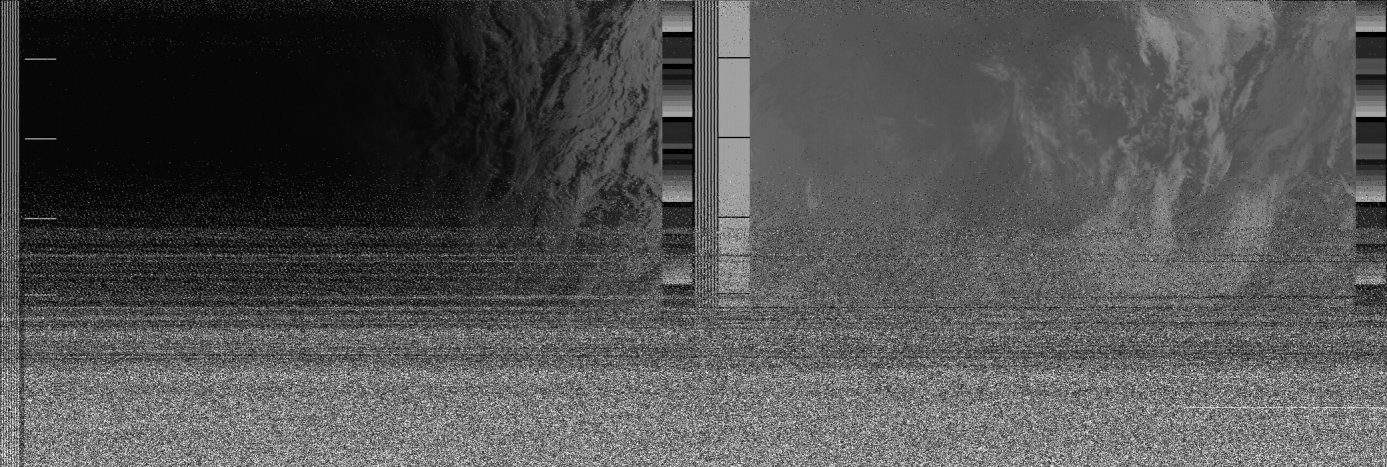
Status: expected completion date 2019-11-08.

## Task 3: System Integration

During the week of Oct. 21st our team did not do any individual tasks. Instead, we met together and spent half a day assembling the system. We migrated to the new Raspberry Pi 4B platform, replaced old power supply with a new one using USB-C, also put the motherboard into a case. The hardware setup was assembled at Tomek’s apartment. One major problem to solve was how to deploy the system in a way that has good sky visibility from the antenna point of view, has Internet connectivity, has a power supply and the electronics is protected from the weather. After several attempts, we came up with a plan to house the system in the apartment close to a window. The SMA coax cable will go outside through not completely shut down window. The antenna will be deployed on a photographical tripod, standing on a balcony near the window. We also adapted the basic telescope antenna to work a V dipole (53,4cm length, 120 degrees angle). This provisional set-up will be replaced with the ultimate one once the antenna ordered arrives.

We installed several software pieces: GNU Radio, GQRX (both used to control SDR hardware), gpredict (a software that tracks satellites and informs about upcoming fly-overs), NOAA-APT (an open source alternative to wxtoimg software).

We experimented with several fly-overs and finally were able to set up appropriate frequency for NOAA-18, record received transmission as audio and store it as WAV file. The file was then processed using NOAA-API software and generated the following image:



The lower part of the image is garbled, because we went into NLOS (non line-of-sight) mode (part of the sky was obscured by the roof). Nevertheless, we consider this experiment a full success.

Status: work in progress.

## Bilbiography

1. Satnogs project website, <https://satnogs.org>, retrieved on 2019-10-14
2. Perun Rockets website, <http://perunrockets.net/posluchajmy-satelitow.html>, retrieved on 2019-10-14
3. Pobieranie zdjęć ziemi z satelity za pomocą anteny DIY i… tunera TV, <https://majsterkowo.pl/pobieranie-zdjec-ziemi-z-satelity-za-pomoca-anteny-diy-i-tunera-tv/>, retrieved on 2019-10-30.