First Soyuz launch from Europe's space base for last quarter 2010

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A Russian Soyuz TMA-18 rocket is seen in preparation for launch at Kazakhstan's Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in April 2010. The first launch of Russia's Soyuz rocket from Europe's space base in French Guiana, initially scheduled for the end of 2009, will now take place "during the fourth quarter of 2010," satellite launch operators Arianespace announced on Tuesday.

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In a press release, Arianespace said it had met in Kourou with the Russian space agency Roskosmos, the European Space Agency (ESA) and the French space agency CNES, its partners in the joint venture.

Soyuz, a 43-year-old Soviet-era workhorse of space, will be launched from Kourou to provide a mid-range option for Arianespace, between its heavy vehicle, the Ariane 5, and a planned small rocket Vega, intended for small payloads.

The press release said the meeting was called "to take note of actual work progress" at the Soyuz launch pad and approve the test schedule leading up to the inaugural flight.

Arianespace did not give the reasons for the new timeframe for launch.

The first launch from Kourou had been expected for the end of 2009, but in August last year, Russia announced a postponement until April 2010 due to a delay "linked to a mobile launch pad."

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