

Russian rocket to launch from French Guiana in 2010

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A Russian rocket will next year for the first time blast off from a European launch pad in South America, officials said Saturday, as the first rockets headed for the site on board a ship.

Two Russian Soyuz rockets, the mainstay of its space programme, were later Saturday to depart the northern city of Saint Petersburg by ship bound for the French overseas department of French Guiana.

Packed in containers, they will arrive 15 days later ahead of the first planned launches next year of Soyuz rockets from France's Kourou launch site in French Guiana.

"We are in line for the first launch in the second quarter of next year," the chief executive of French aerospace firm Arianespace Jean-Yves Le Gall told AFP.

Finally confirming the project is ready after a string of delays, he said that the first [satellite](#) to be launched by a Soyuz from French Guiana will be the Hylas [telecommunications satellite](#) of British firm Avanti Communications.

The satellite will deliver broadband and corporate data network services across Europe, according to the company.

Two other such launches are planned in 2010 -- the Pleiades Observation Satellite and a launch of two satellites in Europe's Galileo programme.

The first Soyuz launch had been envisaged in 2009 but was delayed due to hold-ups in the delivery of the infrastructure that the [rocket](#) needs in order to function.

The move to French Guiana is a major step for Russia, which has mostly relied on the Baikonur launch pad in Kazakhstan from where the first man-made object and the first astronaut were launched into space.

Launching Russian rockets so close to the United States is likely to send a strong message about Russia's continued role in space.

It brings several other advantages for Moscow, including reducing dependence on Baikonur, which has been the subject of periodic disputes with Kazakh authorities.

French Guiana's closeness to the [equator](#) also enables heavier payloads -- three tonnes compared with 1.7 tonnes from Baikonur -- as launches can gain extra momentum from the Earth's own spinning motion.

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