Russia grounds rockets after launch failure

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A Proton-M rocket is transported to the launch pad in the Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome, 2010. Russia temporarily grounded its workhorse Proton-M carrier rockets after the latest in a string of launch mishaps put a prized telecommunications satellite into the wrong orbit.

Russia on Tuesday grounded its workhorse Proton-M rockets after the latest in a string of launch mishaps put a prized telecommunications satellite into the wrong orbit.

Thursday's accident has already reportedly prompted an angry Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to cancel a government meeting on space issues and marks another blow to an industry reeling from five failed missions in nine months.

The scale of Russia's current space problems was underscored when the first discovery of the missing craft was reported by observers at NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command), the bi-

national US and Canadian command that was the Soviets' main rival during the Cold War.

The Federal Space Agency (Roskosmos) said the "temporary" grounding was caused by the malfunction during Thursday's launch of an upper booster that Russia also uses in military satellite missions.

"The preparation of Proton-M carrier and Briz-M upper stage rocket launches is temporarily suspended until the reasons for the Express-AM4 satellite's aborted ascent are learned," Roskosmos said in a statement.

An industry analyst said the delay will probably cover six starts through the end of November and may require the Proton-M developer to pay damages to private clients.

"This is an especially big problem for our commercial launches," said Moscow's Space News magazine editor Igor Marinin.

"It is serious because no one knows how long this will last or how much money it will cost to solve," Marinin added.

The satellite lost by Roskosmos was billed by state media as one of Europe's largest and promised to provide digital television along with secure government communications for Siberia and Russia's Far East.

Those programmes now face multiple-year delays and the Izvestia daily said Putin -- whose can-do image may spell his return to the presidency next year -- expressed his frustration by canceling a Monday meeting devoted to satellites.

Roskosmos said Tuesday that it had not given up on the craft entirely and was still trying to establish if it could be manoeuvred into the right orbit and its mission be saved.

Space insiders said this was highly unlikely.

"If this type of satellite does not come to life (in the first 24-hours) and deploy its solar batteries, then it turns into a lump of frozen metal," an unnamed space agency official told Izvestia.

Russia has been using Proton carriers since the Soviet era and has since been working on various upgrades that can expand and extend its use.

One of those modifications include a Briz-M upper stage that propels payloads into the more distant orbits used by some satellites.

The upper stage most recently failed during a February launch that also put a military satellite into the wrong orbit -- an accident that one Russian space official initially blamed on electromagnetic interference by a foreign state.

Russia has now cancelled a military satellite launch scheduled for August 31.

But officials stressed that the grounding will not affect Friday's planned launch of a Glonass communications satellite from Russia's northern Plesetsk space centre on Soyuz rocket.

A Proton-M failure prompted Russia to lose three of the advanced Glonass satellites last year in a launch conducted from the Baikonur launch pad in Kazakhstan.