

Satellite loss deals 'severe blow' to Russia: experts

August 19 2011, by Maria Antonova

The [loss of a communications satellite](#) touted as Europe's most powerful is a new blow to Russia's space programme and a major setback for its telecoms industry, officials and analysts said Friday.

The Express-AM4 satellite was launched at 1:25 am Thursday (2125 GMT Wednesday) from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan to provide [digital television](#), telephone and Internet services across Russia.

Shortly after the launch, connection was lost and Russia's space agency Roskosmos said Thursday that it was still trying to locate the orbiter.

Weighing 5,700 kilogrammes at launch, the Express-AM4 was the most powerful [telecommunications satellite](#) ever built in Europe, according to the Khrunichev Space Centre, which developed the satellite together with France's [Astrium](#).

Analysts said that besides being the latest embarrassment for Moscow's space programme it also jeopardized key development goals like switching to digital television.

"This is a big blow to Russia's domestic agenda and a disappointment for Roskosmos and the communications ministry," said military analyst Alexander Golts.

The communications ministry acknowledged in a terse statement that the

satellite's possible loss dealt a "severe blow to the [telecommunications industry](#)."

Express-AM4 was primarily supposed to provide digital broadcasting over the vast reaches of Russia and was a major part of a government plan to develop television services over the next six years.

"The programme of switching to digital television which our leaders are toying with would have to wait a long while," Golts added.

The satellite was "practically the first in Russia to be made entirely abroad," and was two to three times more powerful than other Russian telecoms satellites, said Sergei Pekhterev, head of satellite communications group Altegrosky.

The satellite's capacities were "sold out before it was launched, which is very rare," he told AFP. It was also supposed to bring Internet access to far-flung regions where on-ground network coverage is too expensive or impossible, he said.

It was designed to bring television coverage to 95 percent of Russians, many of whom have access to just one or two channels at the moment.

"This is not a tragedy -- we will still have communication -- but the industry will be set back by two or three years, that's how long it would take to build and launch a new satellite," said Pekhterev.

Roskosmos on Friday declined to confirm whether the satellite was permanently lost or if it failed to detach from the upper stage rocket, which was located Thursday evening. It should have separated as planned on Thursday morning.

Newly appointed Roskosmos chief Vladimir Popovkin recently

announced that Russia would like to reduce its focus on manned flights and engage in more commercially rewarding spheres such as telecoms and Internet [satellite](#) launches.

Losing the Express-AM4 would also be a let-down for the new management of [Roskosmos](#), which has struggled with a series of embarrassing failures in recent time.

Popovkin's predecessor Anatoly Perminov was sacked in April after three navigation satellites missed their orbit and crashed into the ocean.

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