

Russian satellite crashes into Siberia after launch

December 23 2011



Map of Russia showing the location of the western Siberian town of Tobolsk over which a Russian satellite fell back to Earth over after its launch on Friday, in the latest setback for Russia's space programme following a string of failures in the last year.

A Russian satellite on Friday crashed into Siberia minutes after its launch due to rocket failure, the defence ministry said, in the latest humiliating setback for Russia's embattled space programme.

The failure of the Soyuz-2.1B rocket -- a member of the same family that Russia uses to send humans to space -- comes after a supply ship bound for the International Space Station (ISS) carried by a Soyuz crashed into Siberia in August.

"The satellite failed to go into its orbit. A state commission will investigate the causes of the accident," the spokesman of Russia's space forces Alexei Zolotukhin told the Interfax news agency.

He said the problem occurred around seven minutes after the launch of the Meridian communications satellite on the Soyuz rocket from the Plesetsk cosmodrome in northern Russia due to a third stage rocket failure.

"What happened today confirms that the (space) sector is in crisis," the head of the Russian space agency Roskosmos, Vladimir Popofkin, told the ITAR-TASS news agency.

Popofkin's predecessor Anatoly Perminov was sacked in April after a series of setbacks, notably a highly embarrassing failure in December 2010 when three navigation satellites for the new Russian Glonass system crashed into the ocean off Hawaii instead of reaching orbit.

The recent problems are particularly painful for Russia as it marks half a century since Yuri Gagarin made man's first voyage into space.

Russian news agencies, quoting defence sources, said that the satellite

had crashed into the central Siberian region of Novosibirsk and its remains had already been found on the ground.

Workers from the Russian emergencies ministry as well as the police were on their way to the scene which had been cordoned off, Interfax said, but there were no reports of casualties or damage to property.

It was the fifth launch of a satellite from the Meridian series which have dual civilian and military use and are aimed at providing communications for ships in the Arctic as well as Russia's remote Siberia and Far East regions.

The Soyuz-2.1B rocket is part of the family of Soyuz rockets that has been the backbone of Moscow's space programme for decades and are used to launch humans for the International Space Station.

The satellite was supposed to have separated from the rocket about nine minutes after its launch, ITAR-TASS reported earlier.

But the carrier rocket experienced undisclosed problems even before the separation attempt, meaning that it never reached the low Earth orbit, an unnamed source told the news agency.

The loss of the Meridian satellite caps a disastrous 12 months for Russia that has already seen it lose three navigation satellites, an advanced military satellite, a telecommunications satellite, a probe for Mars as well as the Progress.

The unmanned Progress supply ship that crashed into Siberia in August was launched by a Soyuz and that failure forced the temporary grounding of the rockets and well as a wholesale re-jig of the station's staffing of the ISS.

Following the retirement of the US shuttle in July, Russia is currently the only nation capable of transporting humans to the space station.

Russia has also acknowledged the almost certain loss of its Phobos-Grunt probe for Mars's largest moon, which was launched on November 9 but has failed to head out of Earth's orbit on its course to the Red Planet.

Interfax said that the financial losses from the loss of the Meridian satellite could amount to two billion rubles (65 million dollars) and it was possible that it had not been insured.

Also Friday, a Russian Soyuz space capsule carrying a multinational crew of three successfully docked with the ISS two days after its launch from the Kazakh steppe, mission control said.

The addition of Russia's Oleg Kononenko, NASA astronaut Don Pettit and Dutch spaceman Andre Kuipers brings the ISS crew back up to its full complement of six after the loss of the Progress caused a series of flight delays.

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Citation: Russian satellite crashes into Siberia after launch (2011, December 23) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-russian-satellite-falls-earth.html>

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