

# Russia hints at foul play in its space failures

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File illustration photo shows the Soyuz rocket blasting off from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in December 2011. The head of Russia's beleaguered space programme hinted on Tuesday that foreign powers may be behind the string of failures that struck his agency in the past year.

The head of Russia's beleaguered space programme hinted on Tuesday that foreign powers may be behind the string of failures that struck his agency in the past year.

Roskosmos chief Vladimir Popovkin told the Izvestia daily he could not understand why several launches went awry at precisely the moment the spacecraft were travelling through areas invisible to Russian radar.

"It is unclear why our setbacks often occur when the vessels are travelling through what for Russia is the 'dark' side of the Earth -- in areas where we do not see the craft and do not receive its telemetry readings," he said.

"I do not want to blame anyone, but today there are some very powerful countermeasures that can be used against spacecraft whose use we cannot exclude," Popovkin told the daily.

One of Russia's most high-profile recent failures involved the November launch of a [Mars probe](#) called Phobos-Grunt that got stuck in a [low Earth orbit](#) and whose fragments are now expected to crash back down on Sunday.

Popovkin said there was "no clarity" as to why the 13.5-tonne probe's [booster rocket](#) failed to fire on schedule.

But he admitted the mission was risky to begin with because it involved an underfunded project whose original designs went back to Soviet times.

"If we did not manage to launch it in the window open in 2011 for a [Mars mission](#), we would have had to simply throw it away, writing off a loss of five billion rubles (\$160 million)," he said.

Popovkin was named the head of Russia's space agency in April after its previous chief was sacked in the wake of an embarrassing loss of three [navigation satellites](#) during launch.

Yet the problems only multiplied under his watch as Russia lost several more satellites and also saw its Progress cargo ship experience its first-ever failure on a mission to the [International Space Station](#).

The Mars mission setback was followed last month by the loss of the Meridian communications satellite. Its fragments crashed into the Novosibirsk region of central Siberia and hit a house ironically located on Cosmonaut Street.

No injuries were reported but the 50-centimetre (20-inch) fragment blew a hole in the home's roof.

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