Russia sets its sights on the moon for 2020

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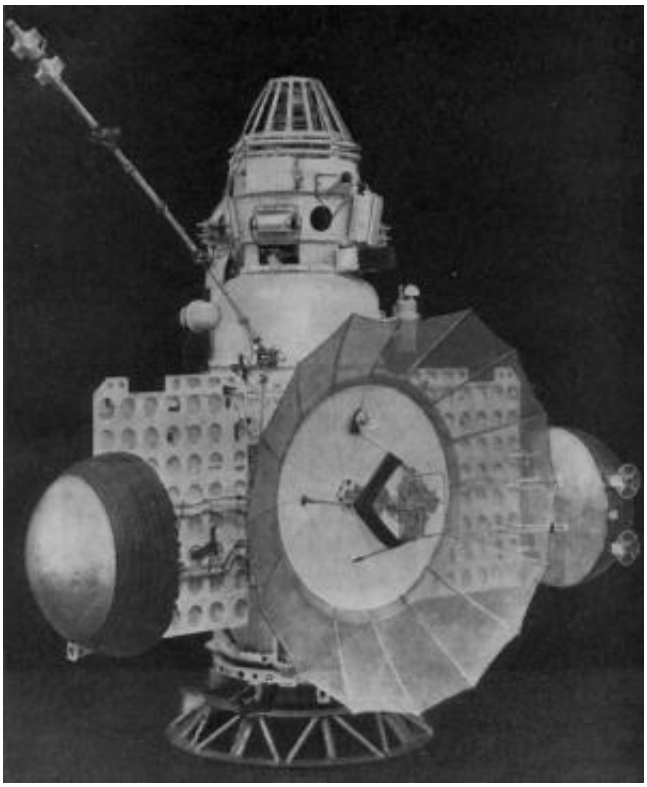
The Moon. Credit: NASA.

Looks like Republican Presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich might have some competition if he wants to be the first to build a base on the Moon. Last week, the Russian Space Agency Roscosmos announced plans to put a man on the Moon by the end of the decade with a lunar base as its next step.

After canceling its lunar Zond program in early 1970s, the former Soviet Union took aim elsewhere in space. In 1998, Russia jumped back in the Moon game with Luna Glob, a series of robotic missions to the Moon that could come together to make a lunar orbiting space station or a base on the surface.

Now, Russia's sights are set on a manned mission. "Man should return to the Moon," head of Roscosmos Vladimir Popovkin told the Ekho Moskvy radio station. "And not just like in 1969, to leave a mark. We can do important work there." He lists solar observation among the science goals.

More recently, another opportunity has arisen for Russia to pursue a lunar program. In 2008, NASA proposed the creation of an International Lunar Network, a set of interconnected manned bases scattered over the surface of the Moon. Popovkin said recently that Russia may coordinate with the European Space Agency and join the ILN.



USSR's Zond 3 spacecraft. Credit: NASA.

Russia's lunar announcement comes on the heels of a bad year for Roscosmos. The agency lost five missions in 2011, including the Phobos-Grunt mission that never reached its target Martian Moon. After months in Earth orbit it fell through the atmosphere earlier this year. This most recent loss might be the spark behind the new push for exploration. "Perhaps, we need a more specific, realistic Moon program, and do any Mars research as a part of a bigger international program," Anatoliy Davydov, the deputy head of Roscosmos, said in the aftermath of the Phobos-Grunt failure.

But the loss of Phobos-Grunt could anticipate trouble on the Luna Glob missions and any later attempts to reach the Moon. Luna Glob is technologically similar to the failed Mars mission, which means it shares

the same vulnerabilities. There will have to be some major changes before Russia can move forward towards the Moon. “The design decisions used on Phobos-Grunt need to be reconsidered and significantly adjusted. Unfortunately, the same ones are used on the lunar missions. This is likely to push back the dates of any future launches, particularly of the Luna Glob modules” said Lev Zelenkin, who is closely involved with both projects.

Another variable in a Russian lunar program is NASA’s possible withdrawal from the ESA-based ExoMars mission. If NASA does pull out, the ESA hopes Roscosmos will step in. Not having NASA’s power and experience on Mars will certainly change the mission, as well Russia’s involvement. The country’s track record on Mars isn’t stellar, and a decision to tempt that galactic ghoul again with another mission to the red planet would likely supercede any Russian missions to the Moon.

If Russia does turn its attention to manned lunar missions and eventually a lunar base, anyone will be eligible to go. Roscosmos is looking for volunteer cosmonauts through an X-Factor style search it hopes will rekindle public interest in Russian spaceflight. If you have a scientific or medical degree, are fluent in English, and wear shoes no bigger than a UK size 11, you could be the first cosmonaut to leave a boot print on the lunar surface.

Source: Universe Today