

# Russian space official resigns after failed launch

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(AP) — The head of Russia's leading rocket manufacturer has stepped down after a failed launch, the nation's space chief said Thursday.

A Proton booster rocket failed to place two communications satellites into target orbits after its Aug. 6 launch, the latest in a long series of recent mishaps that has hurt the nation's pride in its space program.

Vladimir Popovkin, the director of national space agency Roskosmos, said that Vladimir Nesterov, the head of the state-controlled Khrunichev company that builds Proton rockets, submitted his resignation.

"We have no lifetime jobs here; we are going to reshuffle our personnel," Popovkin said.

Popovkin said that an official investigation into the failed launch has determined that it was caused by a faulty pipe in the rocket's Briz-M upper stage.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Tuesday that Russia had seven failed launches in the past 1 1/2 years, resulting in the loss of 10 satellites. He added the high rate of failure marked a "colossal difference with other leading space powers."

Russia's space officials have blamed the failures on manufacturing flaws and engineering mistakes. Observers say that the decline of a once-proud space program is rooted in a post-Soviet industrial meltdown that has

stymied its modernization. Despite a steady increase of funding in recent years thanks to oil revenues, Russia's space industries continue to rely on outdated equipment and an aging workforce, and quality standards have deteriorated.

Popovkin said his agency would continue its effort to improve production quality by placing its inspectors at rocket factories and subcontractors.

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