

# Russia replaces space agency chief in reform bid (Update)

October 10 2013, by Anna Smolchenko

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Newly appointed space agency chief Oleg Ostapenko attends a meeting with Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in the government headquarters in Moscow, on October 10, 2013

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Thursday replaced the head of the state space agency as Russia scrambles to turn around the

once-pioneering industry after a series of high-profile setbacks.

Oleg Ostapenko, previously deputy defence minister, was appointed the new Roscosmos chief, replacing Vladimir Popovkin who lasted only 2.5 years at the post.

The replacement comes as Russia struggles to overhaul its space industry, and President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday approved the creation of a new state champion that will group together the country's aerospace makers.

"I am hoping that a whole number of problems, which unfortunately have been recently seen in Roscosmos' work, can be overcome with your arrival," Medvedev told Ostapenko, noting that his agency will remain in charge of the "ideology of space development".

"I am hoping that everything, including future launches, will be implemented in accordance with the existing plans," Medvedev said. "Everything that Roscosmos does should be in agreement with state development plans."

Before his appointment to the post of deputy defence minister last year, Ostapenko served as commander of space forces and before that as chief of Plesetsk Cosmodrome.

The previous Roscosmos chief Popovkin was appointed to the job in April 2011 amid frustration in the government with the country's space programme including a series of satellite crashes and other setbacks.

However Popovkin's own stint was marked by continuing embarrassments including a spectacular explosion of an unmanned carrier rocket upon takeoff that was caught on live television in July.

The Proton-M rocket carried several hundred tonnes of kerosene, heptyl and amyl which are highly poisonous components of rocket fuel.

In an effort to put an end to several years of setbacks, Putin on Wednesday approved the creation of a new state corporation called the United Rocket and Space Corporation.

Space analysts said it remained to be seen how the state space agency and the newly-created corporation will share responsibility.

Independent space expert Vadim Lukashevich said Ostapenko would likely face a hard time in his new job as he may lose control of the space industry.



A Russian Soyuz-FG rocket blasts off from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan early on September 26, 2013

"The industry will stop being answerable to him. It might become worse," he told AFP.

He called the current reform drive a "very painful process", noting that the opaque structure of the new state champion is likely to provide a fertile breeding ground for corruption.

Some observers have said Popovkin was shown the door because he did not approve of the creation of the space corporation.

Many economists have repeatedly criticised Putin's government for creating a series of state giants in automotive, aviation and other industries, saying they are unable to compete with private businesses.

Space expert Konstantin Kreidenko said Popovkin simply did not have the time to prove he was able to make a difference.

"The accidents that happened during his tenure were really the accidents of his predecessors," he told AFP. "It's premature to say that the new management will be more successful."

Accomplishments like sending the first man into space in 1961 have brought Russia's space programme acclaim but it suffered from a sharp drop in funding after the fall of the Soviet Union 30 years later.

Roscosmos has in past years sent several paying space tourists to the International Space Station (ISS) to help make ends meet although this programme is currently frozen.

After the retirement of the US shuttle, Russia is currently the only nation capable of transporting humans to the ISS and currently sends American and other international astronauts into space as well as its own Russian cosmonauts.

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