

Putin oversees successful rocket launch (Update)

December 23 2014, by Anna Smolchenko



Russian President Vladimir Putin gives a thumbs up after watching a live broadcast of the launch of the Angara rocket from the Plesetsk cosmodrome in Moscow on December 23, 2014

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday oversaw the successful test-launch of Russia's newest heavy-class Angara rocket, a rare piece of good news in a week dominated by the economic crisis.

The president oversaw by video link the launch of the Angara-A5 from Plesetsk in northern Russia at 0557 GMT, saying the new rocket would allow the country better protection.

"Indeed, for our space industry and I suppose for the whole of Russia this is a major, very important event," Putin said from the Kremlin.

"Russia remains one of the internationally recognized leaders in space exploration."

Putin said that Russia will over the next five years conduct a series of test-launches for the Angara—which is designed for civilian and military use, including the launch of manned spacecraft.

The Kremlin said the Angara—named after a Siberian river flowing out of Lake Baikal—was expected to launch a payload of two tonnes into space.

A locomotive pulled the huge white rocket out of a hangar in footage released by the defence ministry, with personnel bundled up against the cold.

'Slowdown expected'

Designed to succeed Proton and other Soviet-era launchers, the Angara is billed as the first rocket to have been completely built after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Putin said that the next-generation spacecraft was more environmentally friendly than its predecessors because it is fuelled by oxygen and kerosene rather than hugely toxic heptyl.

The Khrunichev Center, the state-run spacecraft maker which developed

the rocket, said the launch was performed by the aerospace defence forces.

The test launch of a light version of the Angara rocket ended in embarrassment in June due to a sudden automatic launch abort.

Following the mishap, the launch of that version was postponed until July.

Angara's development was ordered by former president Boris Yeltsin in the early 1990s and cost "tens of billions of dollars", according to the Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade.

It is crucial as part of the government's drive to reduce its dependence on the Baikonur launch pad which Moscow leases from ex-Soviet neighbour Kazakhstan.

The Russian space programme is renowned for having sent the first man into space in 1961 and launching the first sputnik satellite four years earlier, and remains a major source of national pride.

But more recently it has endured a series of setbacks, notably losing expensive satellites and an unmanned supply ship for the International Space Station.

A Proton launcher carrying an advanced communications satellite fell back to Earth minutes after lift-off in May.

The latest launch came after a week of drama that saw Russia's national currency, the ruble, collapse and ordinary Russians rush on stores ahead of expected price hikes.

Economic troubles were also expected to deliver a heavy blow to

Russia's space industry.

"Of course, there will be a slowdown," Igor Marinin, editor of Russian magazine Space News, told AFP.

He insisted, however, that the expected financial difficulties would not affect further development of the new rocket.

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