

Russia looks to space future after bruising failures

May 18 2015

Russia's recent string of space failures—including the embarrassing loss of a satellite after the rocket carrying it fell to Earth—come as the country tries to restructure its ageing programme.

Once the pride of the Soviet Union, the space sector was hit hard by the collapse of Communism.

Spending has risen in the past decade with Russia seeking to move away from manned spaceflight to more commercially attractive ventures.

But the industry must overcome corruption, inertia and a shortage of trained staff to take it forward, analysts say.

"There is a deficit of qualified employees, both engineers and workers. This has to do with the 1990s, when all qualified people left the industry," said editor of Space News magazine Igor Afanasyev.

Officials hope an overhaul of the Roscosmos space agency, switching to a new Angara rocket, and the opening of a mammoth cosmodrome in the Russian Far East can reinvigorate the programme.

Space corporation

A bill set to be presented in parliament Tuesday aims at turning the federal space agency into a state corporation, similar to other enterprises

like Rosatom, which oversees Russia's nuclear sphere.

In weekend remarks following the Proton-M crash and the loss of a Mexican satellite, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said the reforms would establish "clear lines of responsibility" for future failures.

"Accidents are the effect of a systemic crisis in the industry," said Rogozin.

The shake-up is designed to streamline decision-making, including on painful issues like laying off employees.

Former Roscosmos chief Vladimir Popovkin has estimated the sector needs to shed at least 70,000 people.

Angara rocket

Rogozin on Monday said Russia needs to speed up the retirement of its workhorse Proton rocket and switch to the next generation Angara model, which was sent on a successful test launch last year.

The Angara family of vehicles makes it possible to haul loads of up to 24.5 tonnes by using several rockets at once to bolster the launch power.

Developing the Angara has cost Russia at least \$2 billion (1.7 billion euros) since the early 1990s, sparking criticism over the high cost.

The current authorities have embraced the new rocket, particularly after recent Proton failures.

Angara is a "unique module rocket, nobody else has anything like this", Sergei Gorbunov, who worked at the [space agency](#) in the 1990s and early 2000s, told AFP.

Eastern launchpad

Designed to eventually replace the Baikonur launch site in Kazakhstan, the Vostochny cosmodrome is still under construction in Russia's Far Eastern Amur region, but aims to launch its first rocket by the end of this year.

The new facility is meant to move strategic launches onto Russian territory and cut Moscow's dependence on the neighbouring Central Asian nation.

Vostochny—about 100 kilometres (62 miles) from the border with China—is closer to the equator than Russia's only functioning Plesetsk cosmodrome, and will therefore help save money by bringing satellites to orbit faster.

But construction has been plagued with delays and corruption.

Some workers held a hunger strike over three-month wage arrears in April, and at least two ongoing probes are targeting misspending by the construction contractor, which allegedly spent money on yachts and villas.

Head of the contractor TMK, Viktor Grebnev, was put under house arrest Monday over the suspected theft of over \$8 million (seven million euros) allocated for the cosmodrome.

"Even constant reprimands by the Kremlin and threats of criminal prosecution do not rescue the expensive project from massive corruption," said a Monday editorial in Vedomosti daily.

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Citation: Russia looks to space future after bruising failures (2015, May 18) retrieved 15 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-05-russia-space-future-failures.html>

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