

Russian deputy PM attacks space industry with reform bill

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A Russian-built Proton rocket blasts off from a launch pad in the Russian leased Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome on April 28, 2014

Russia's deputy prime minister on Tuesday lambasted the country's beleaguered space industry as inefficient and corrupt, as he presented proposed reform measures to parliament.

Speaking several days after the latest failures in the sector—including

the botched launch of a Proton rocket that led to the loss of a Mexican satellite—Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said the industry was plagued by "morally decayed" officials and underpaid personnel.

He reserved the most biting criticism for the Khrunichev space centre, which produces the Proton rockets.

After the latest failure, investigators launched probes targeting the lab's ex-employees for allegedly falsifying documents and causing a loss of nine billion rubles (\$180 million, 161 million euros), Rogozin said.

"With such high moral decay of its leadership, one should not be surprised at the product's poor quality," he said.

He said the latest accident with the Proton rocket is identical to two other accidents in 1988 and 2014, which shows that the high-profile probes into them "did not find the real reason" for the malfunction.

Khrunichev employs 13 times the people working at Orbital Sciences, a US firm which launches supply missions to the International Space Station, Rogozin said, while in general the US space industry is "nine times more efficient" than the Russian one.

The hawkish deputy prime minister, who is in charge of defence and space sectors in the government, warned that Russia was on its way towards losing its competitive edge in space, as he presented bills that the government believes will begin to fix the problems.

The Duma lower house swiftly passed the reform package in its initial reading, which would amend a total of 23 different laws. The bill would need to go through two more readings before it could be approved by the upper chamber and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

'Stuck' in 20th century

The proposed measures are aimed at streamlining the industry by reorganising the federal space agency Roscosmos into a "state corporation", and boosting salaries for staff.

The corporation—modelled after Rosatom, which oversees the country's nuclear industry—would be headed by Igor Komarov, who has served as the chief of Roscosmos since 2013 after a career in banking and a four-year stint as chief executive of Russian carmaker Avtovaz.

The production of rockets and spacecraft would become more computerised and automated, Rogozin said, hinting at future layoffs from the bloated workforce.

Many engineers working in the industry make only 30,000 rubles (\$600) per month and are able to make ends meet only by living in dormitories far from Moscow, he said.

"People must be paid an adequate salary," he said. "If we want to keep them in the country... to keep them in the industry, we must pay them adequately."

"We still don't know what digital design is in the industry," he added. "It's an embarrassment, we are still stuck at the turn of the century."

"We need a guaranteed and inexpensive access to space," he said, lowering the cost associated with space launches by several times.

"Only then we can keep our competitiveness," he said.

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