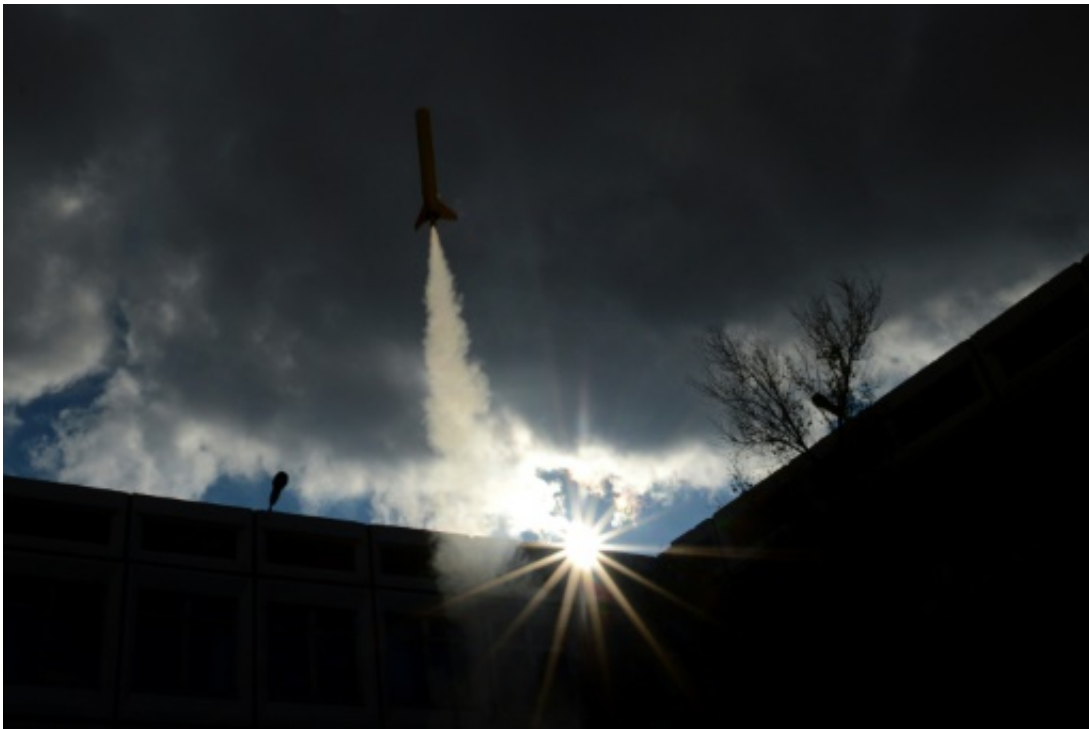


Russia plans return to Mars, Moon despite money woes

February 19 2016, by Maria Antonova



A model of a rocket blasts off from a courtyard of the International Space School in Baikonur, near the Russian-leased cosmodrome, on November 2, 2013

Visitors are rare these days to the museum of Russia's Space Research Institute in Moscow even though it holds gems like the model of the Soviet Lunokhod, the first ever space rover to land on the Moon, in 1970.

While the Cold War [space race](#) fired such cutting-edge projects, Russia's planetary exploration has stalled for the past three decades—until now.

Under an ambitious plan with the European Space Agency (ESA), scientists have new hope of again sending missions to the Moon and to Mars.

"The last decade was truly difficult for us," the institute's director Lev Zeleny told AFP.

Among the biggest blunders was the tragic Phobos-Grunt probe, which in 2011 failed to reach its planned course to one of the moons of Mars and crashed back to Earth over the Pacific Ocean.

"But now the programme is entering a new stage for this decade."

Next month, a Russian Proton rocket is scheduled to launch the first of two missions under ExoMars, a joint venture with the ESA, to snoop out possible life, past or present, to the red planet.

Zeleny's hopes are high that this will return Moscow to its glory days of space exploration—if the project actually gets off the ground.

In the first mission, an orbital spacecraft will search for traces of methane in the atmosphere of Mars—possible evidence of biological activity.



A Zenit-2SB rocket, carrying the Phobos-Grunt spacecraft , stands at a launch pad of the Russian-leased Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome on November 9, 2011, just before its blast-off toward Mars

For the second part in 2018, Russian engineers are to build a complex landing system to drop an ESA-built Martian rover to the planet's surface, a platform not only to ensure a soft landing but also to serve as "a science lab in itself" for inspecting the landing site, said Zeleny.

"If we manage this, it will be a major breakthrough," he said.

Financial limbo

The ambitious plan, however, has caused jitters among some observers and is dismissed as a pipe dream by others.

In January, the ESA already warned that the 2018 mission could be delayed due to cash flow problems.

With the economic crisis, the Russian government is likewise pressed to make budget cuts and space exploration is far from one of its priorities.

The Russian Federal Space Agency, Roscosmos, is itself in financial limbo but went ahead and announced its programme for the next decade in January, though the plan has yet to be confirmed, said Igor Marinin, editor of Space News magazine.

"Now there is no plan, so there is no financing and Roscosmos is taking out loans just to pay salaries," he told AFP. "For this reason, I'm sceptical, and I don't think we will make a good landing platform in the time that's left."

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