

Putin slams Russian space failures after delayed launch

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President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday criticised Russia's large number of space failures after the first rocket launch from the country's new Vostochny cosmodrome was delayed minutes before blast-off.

Putin scolded space chiefs after the unmanned launch from the far eastern cosmodrome was halted a minute and a half before lift-off and postponed at least 24 hours—the latest embarrassing glitch for Russia's beleaguered space industry.

"Despite all its failings, Russia remains the world leader in the number of space launches," Putin told a televised meeting of space officials.

"But the fact that we're encountering a large number of failures is bad. There must be a timely and professional reaction."

He said space officials had told him the latest glitch was due to the "rocket system," not the new cosmodrome.

The Soyuz 2.1a rocket decked with a Russian flag and carrying three satellites failed to lift off at 02:01 GMT from the launchpad, around 5,600 kilometres (3,500 miles) east of Moscow.

Russia's Roscosmos space agency said in a brief statement that an automated control system had halted the rocket.

Roscosmos spokesman Igor Burenkov told Kommersant FM radio that

data from the rocket showed a problem but suggested this was simply a "technical malfunction" and that the spacecraft was fine.

Russia ultimately hopes to use Vostochny for manned launches, which currently blast off from its rented Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, but the construction project has been plagued for years by scandals and setbacks.

'Nothing abnormal'

Space agency chiefs put a brave face on Wednesday's failure, expressing confidence that the launch would go ahead at the same time on Thursday.

Independent expert Vadim Lukashevich said the delay was not out of the ordinary and even suggested that the presence of Putin could have rattled the organisers.

"Nothing abnormal has happened," Lukashevich told AFP, saying the cut-off was triggered by safety systems.

"This is the first launch from a new cosmodrome and naturally there's a lot of attention devoted to safety. It's much better if there is any hint of an unfavourable outcome to stop and work out what's going on."

But he added Putin's presence could have had an effect.

"The military and everyone who launches rockets have a concept of 'visit effect'. When top authorities come, there is nervousness and greater possibility of error," he said.

Journalists at the launch were even requested by Roscosmos to observe an embargo of 10 minutes after the blastoff, an AFP correspondent said.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the president would stay for the launch if it went ahead Thursday, quoted by Interfax news agency.

Corruption scandals

The new spaceport has been hailed by Putin as the country's biggest current building project, with a budget estimated at between 300 and 400 billion rubles (\$4.5 billion to \$6 billion).

It is designed to end Russia's dependence on the Baikonur cosmodrome, which Moscow has rented out for \$115 million a year since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since 2012, some 10,000 workers have been building 115 kilometres (70 miles) of roads in the immense and sparsely populated Amur region, as well as 125 kilometres of railways and a new town for 25,000 people.

The project has been delayed, with the launch originally set for December 2015.

Deputy premier Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the space programme, has said Russia will continue to use Baikonur for manned missions until 2023, and this year the Soyuz 2.1a will be the only rocket launched from Vostochny.

The construction project has been mired in corruption scandals, with contractors indicted for failing to pay workers and the former head of the lead construction company accused of embezzling millions of rubles from state contracts.

Putin on Wednesday promised that if convicted, the four suspects "will swap warm beds at home for cold prison bunks."

Russia's [space](#) industry has suffered a series of setbacks, including the failure last year of an unmanned Progress freighter heading to the International Space Station, which lost contact with Earth and burned up in the atmosphere.

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