

Glitch delays first rocket launch from Russia's new cosmodrome (Update)

April 27 2016



A Russian Soyuz 2.1a rocket carrying satellites stands on the launch pad at the new Vostochny cosmodrome outside the city of Ulgorsk on April 27, 2016

The first rocket launch from Russia's new Vostochny cosmodrome was put on hold at the last moment on Wednesday in the latest embarrassing glitch for the country's beleaguered space industry.

The launch of a Soyuz rocket bedecked with the Russian flag and

watched by President Vladimir Putin was halted just two and a half minutes before takeoff and space chiefs said it would be postponed by at least 24 hours.

"The automated control system initiated an automatic halt," Russia's Roscosmos space agency said in a brief statement.

Roscosmos spokesman Igor Burenkov told Kommersant FM radio the launch was aborted because data from the rocket showed a problem but suggested it was simply a "technical malfunction" and that the spacecraft was fine.

The Soyuz 2.1a carrying three satellites was due to blast off from the new cosmodrome in Russia's far eastern Amur region at 11:01 am (0201 GMT).

Russia ultimately hopes to use Vostochny for manned launches, which now 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, saying they were working on identifying the cause of the glitch and expressing confidence that the launch would go ahead on Thursday.

"We have managed to locate the problem spot fairly precisely," Roscosmos general director Igor Komarov said in televised comments.

"I think there is every reason to consider that this can be cleared up within 24 hours."

However a space industry source told Interfax news agency that space chiefs could opt to postpone the launch further.

Independent expert Vadim Lukashevich said the delay was not out of the ordinary, but that the presence of Putin could have made the organisers nervous.

"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 is 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."

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

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

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in televised comments that the president would stay at the cosmodrome until it was clear whether the launch would go ahead on Thursday.

He said Putin would spend the time discussing the development of the cosmodrome and the construction of a new town nearby.

Corruption scandals

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

Some 10,000 workers have since 2012 been building 115 kilometres (70 miles) of roads in the immense and sparsely populated region, as well as 125 kilometres of railways and a new town for 25,000 people, named after space pioneer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky.

The project has been delayed, with the launch originally planned 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 the Soyuz 2.1a will be the only rocket launched from Vostochny in 2016.

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.

Russia's space industry has suffered a series of setbacks, including the failure last year of an unmanned Progress freighter carrying supplies for the International Space Station, which lost contact with Earth and burned up in the atmosphere.

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Citation: Glitch delays first rocket launch from Russia's new cosmodrome (Update) (2016, April 27) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-04-rocket-russia-vostochny.html>

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