

Putin hails first rocket launch from new cosmodrome after delay (Update)

April 28 2016



A Russian Soyuz 2.1a rocket carrying Lomonosov, Aist-2D and SamSat-218 satellites lifts off from the new Vostochny cosmodrome outside the city of Ulegorsk, in Russia's far eastern Amur region, on April 28, 2016

Russia launched the first rocket from its new Vostochny cosmodrome on Thursday, with President Vladimir Putin hailing the event after dressing down officials over a delay caused by a technical glitch.

The launch is a major milestone for Russia's beleaguered space sector, with the new spaceport in the country's far east touted to mark a rebirth of an industry plagued by a string of embarrassments in recent years.

Carrying three satellites, the Soyuz 2.1a rocket took off at 11:01 am (0201 GMT), the Roscosmos national space agency said in a statement, after the countdown was automatically halted for technical reasons 24 hours previously.

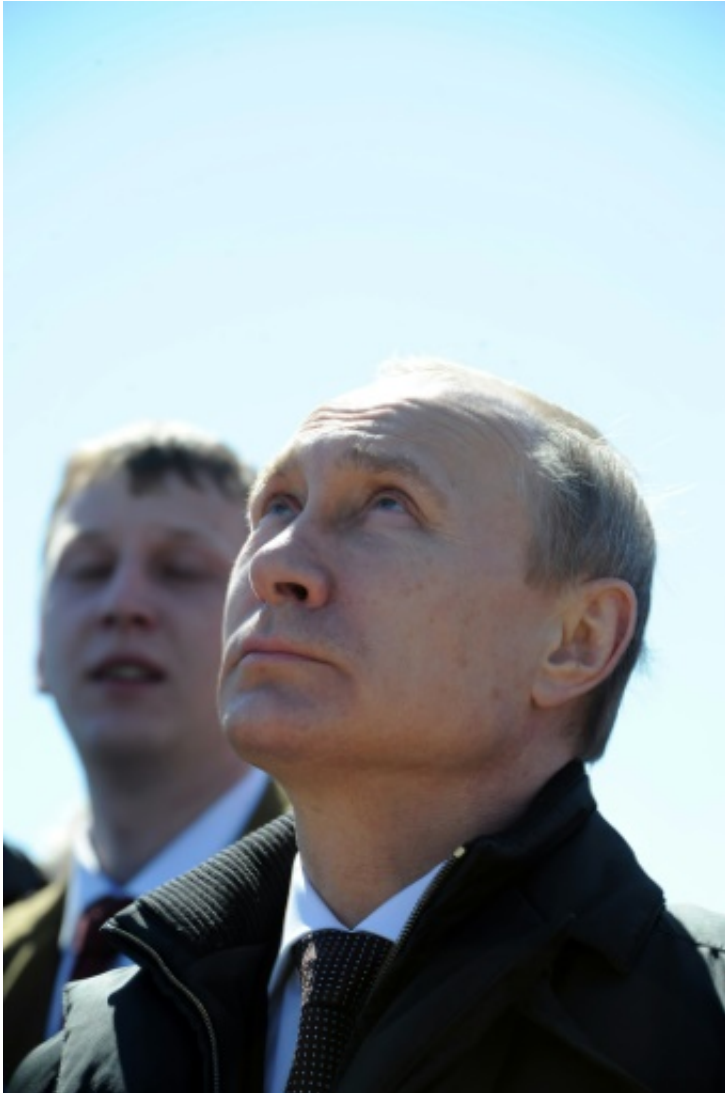
National television showed the rocket taking off into a blue sky in light winds, although foreign media organisations including AFP were not allowed to enter the new space centre.

Putin was present for the take-off.

"You know they say that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. You have to make the first launch to confirm the cosmodrome is ready for work. And you did it!" Putin told industry officials.

"I want to congratulate you. We can be proud. It's a serious and important contribution to the development of the Russian space industry," he added.

"Yesterday the technical side was put to the test and the launch had to be stopped, but it happens. It's a normal thing."



Russian President Vladimir Putin watches the launch of a Soyuz 2.1a rocket, carrying Lomonosov, Aist-2D and SamSat-218 satellites, at the new Vostochny cosmodrome outside the city of Udegorsk, in the far eastern Amur region, on April 28, 2016

The postponement of Vostochny's inaugural launch had seen the Russian strongman scold space chiefs—despite delays worldwide being relatively frequent.

A European launch from French Guiana had to be put off three times

last week before finally taking place on Monday.

The Russian delay was due to a malfunction of a cable, a space agency spokesman Mikhail Fadeyev, told AFP.

Putin officially reprimanded Dmitry Rogozin, the deputy prime minister in charge of the space and defence industries, and Roscosmos head Igor Komarov over the delay, his spokesman told reporters.

'World leader'

Construction on the new spaceport began in 2012 but has been marred by labour disputes, corruption scandals and delays.

The first satellite launch had been scheduled for late 2015, but setbacks forced authorities to review the timetable.

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



A Russian Soyuz 2.1a rocket, carrying Lomonosov, Aist-2D and SamSat-218 satellites, lifts off from the launch pad of the new Vostochny cosmodrome outside the city of Udegorsk, in Russia's far eastern Amur region, on April 28, 2016

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

The new spaceport in the far eastern Amur region has been hailed by Putin as Russia's biggest current building project with a budget estimated at 300-400 billion rubles (\$4.5-6 billion, 4-5.3 billion euros).

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

The Kremlin's goal is to ease Russia's dependence on Baikonur in Kazakhstan, a launchpad Moscow has been forced to rent at a cost of \$115 million a year since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

But Deputy Prime Minister Rogozin said Russia would continue to use Baikonur to launch manned missions until 2023, and the Soyuz 2.1a would be the only launch from Vostochny in 2016.

Roscosmos plans to hold two launches from Vostochny next year and six to eight launches in 2018, said Fadeyev.

'Playing catch-up'

Political analyst Alexei Makarkin said Thursday's launch was a clear success and all the more important against a backdrop of an economic crisis brought on by low oil prices and Western sanctions over Moscow's role in Ukraine.

"Space right now is an attribute of greatness," he told AFP.

"Russia now is trying to catch up in the space industry. Outside the commodities sector we don't have a lot of competitive industries. What else can we offer the world?"

Russia is also home to the Plesetsk cosmodrome in the north, which is used for satellite launches and missile testing.

Vostochny, like Baikonur, is closer to the equator, making launches cheaper and more energy-efficient.

The new cosmodrome currently has one launchpad for the Soyuz, the only rocket currently being used for manned space flights.

A second construction phase will begin next year to build a reinforced launchpad for the new Angara rocket, which is being tested to replace the ageing Proton workhorse rockets.

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