

Putin unveils \$50 bn drive for Russian space supremacy (Update)

April 12 2013, by Stuart Williams



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a live link-up with the multinational crew of the International Space Station (ISS) from the new Vostochny (Eastern) cosmodrome Russia is building in the Amur region of the Far East, on April 12, 2013. Putin unveiled a new \$50bn drive for Russia to preserve its status as a top space power, including a new cosmodrome from where humans will fly to space

President Vladimir Putin on Friday unveiled a new \$50 billion drive for Russia to preserve its status as a top space power, including the construction of a brand new cosmodrome from where humans will fly to space by the end of the decade.

Fifty-two years to the day since Yuri Gagarin became the Soviet Union's greatest hero by making the first human flight into space, Putin inspected the new Vostochny (Eastern) cosmodrome Russia is building in the Amur region of its Far East district.

Putin said in a live link-up with the multinational crew of the International Space Station (ISS) that Russia hoped to have the first launches from Vostochny in 2015 and the first manned launches in 2018.

"It's going to be a great launch pad. It took a long time to choose but now work is fully underway," said Putin in comments broadcast on state television, adding that Vostochny would be fully operational by 2020.

Russia still carries out all manned launches from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan—the same place where Gagarin made his historic flight. But this has been clouded in recent years by disputes with the Kazakh authorities over lease terms.

Putin announced that the town being built around the new cosmodrome to house its engineers and families would be called Tsiolkovsky, in honour of the Russian scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky who pioneered rocket design in the early Soviet era.

The Russian space programme has been hurt in recent years by a string of launch failures of unmanned probes and satellites, but Putin vowed Moscow would ramp up spending.

He said that from 2013-2020, Russia would be spending 1.6 trillion rubles (\$51.8 billion, 38 million euros) on its space sector, a growth far greater than any other space power.

Putin complained that Russia was behind other states in space activities other than manned flights, which he said had long been the "priority" of the Russian space programme "to the detriment" of other projects.

With up to 58 percent of the Russian space budget going on manned space flight, Russia had lost ground to other powers, in particular in unmanned deep-space exploration, said Putin.

"We need to preserve what we have achieved in manned space flight but also to catch up in these other areas," said Putin, who said he also did not rule out the creation of a ministry of space.

One of Russia's most embarrassing failures was the loss of its Phobos-Grunt probe to Mars in 2012 which ended up crashing back into Earth rather than even coming close to completing its mission of visiting a Martian moon.

The disaster underlined Russia's weaknesses compared with US space agency NASA, which has basked in the huge public successes of its unmanned Mars missions in recent years.

But speaking to Canadian spaceman Chris Hadfield, currently commander of the ISS, Putin hailed cooperation in space which meant world powers could forget about the problems of international relations and think "about the future of mankind."

Russia's veteran Soyuz rocket and capsule system, based on the same principles as the system that launched Gagarin, is currently the sole means of transporting humans to the ISS since the retirement of the US shuttle.

Putin said that cosmonauts returning to Earth after lifting off from Vostochny would most likely splash down in the Pacific Ocean rather than land as they currently do in Kazakhstan.

"Most probably, according to specialists, they will come down on the ocean. So our cosmonauts will splash down rather than touch down," Putin said.

The head of Russia's space agency Roscosmos, Vladimir Popovkin, meanwhile said Moscow was targeting 2030 as the year in which it could begin creating a base on the moon for flights to Mars.

"The moon is a great launch pad, it's basically a big space object on which a whole load of things could be accommodated. Not using it would be sinful," he told state television.

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APA citation: Putin unveils \$50 bn drive for Russian space supremacy (Update) (2013, April 12) retrieved 9 December 2022 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-putin-unveils-bn-russian-space.html>

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