

Putin Visits Site of New Launch Pad

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Russia will launch its manned space missions from a new center in the Far East region of Amur in 2018, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said, as the country seeks greater independence for its space program.

Putin made the comments Saturday as he inaugurated the start of construction for the new cosmodrome at the former missile defense base of Vostochny, outside the town of Uglegorsk and a few hundred kilometers away from China.

Russia currently uses the Soviet-built Baikonur launch facility in Kazakhstan for all of its manned space missions and other commercial launches as well as a smaller center in northern Russia for military satellite launches.

Russia has a lease on Baikonur until 2050 and has paid about \$115 million to Kazakhstan in rent since the agreement in 2004.

Putin stressed the "strategic" need for Moscow to have "independent access to the space." Although Baikonur is located in a "friendly state," it is still owned by another country, he said on state-run Russia television.

Putin said Vostochny would host all launches of Russian-manned spacecraft beginning in 2018. Launches of the first unmanned spacecraft from the new center are expected in 2015.

Putin described the construction as "one of the biggest and ambitious projects of modern Russia" that "gives opportunity to thousands of young professionals to use their talent."

Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said the first stage of the construction would cost more than 24 billion rubles (\$779 million).

Like Baikonur in Kazakhstan, the Amur region is sparsely populated. New technologies will allow the new launch pad to be 10 times smaller compared with what Baikonur occupies in the Kazakh steppe, said Federal Space Agency chief Anatoly Perminov.

Windfall from oil revenues over the past years have allowed the Kremlin to spend more on Russia's space program, which had suffered in the post-Soviet economic meltdown.

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