

Contact Restored After Satellite Went Off Orbit

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The Space Forces restored contact Wednesday with a military satellite that went missing the day before after entering into the wrong orbit, in the latest setback to the Kremlin's ambitious space program.

The GEO-IK-2 satellite, designed to measure the shape of the Earth, blasted off from the Plesetsk launchpad in northern Russia on Tuesday, but mission control soon lost contact with it.

The mishap follows a failed launch two months ago of three satellites at the center of Glonass, a Russian global satellite navigation network designed to rival the U.S.-made GPS system.

"The parameters of the satellite's orbit have been established. Currently, there is stable contact with it," Space Forces commander Oleg Ostapenko said in a Defense Ministry statement.

A commission of experts is studying whether the off-kilter satellite has been stranded in a

useless orbit, forsaking its intended mission, the ministry said.

The low-orbit Geo-IK-2 was designed to probe the Earth's gravitational field for potential military use in guiding ballistic missiles. Its civilian use included monitoring tectonic plate movement, ice conditions and ocean tides.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has put strong emphasis on Russia's "satellite navigation sovereignty." But the botched December launch cost the government more than \$168 million and delayed by six months plans to complete its Glonass system.

Federal Space Agency chief Anatoly Perminov said last week that three new Glonass satellites worth 2.5 billion rubles (\$83 million) would be launched in May and June to replace those that fell into the Pacific Ocean in December.

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