

Space Agency Chief Replaced

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Popovkin

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has named a new chief to the Federal Space Agency following a string of embarrassing setbacks and failed satellite launches.

Anatoly Perminov, 65, head of the Federal Space Agency since March 2004, was ordered to retire on Friday, a government spokesman said, and Putin named First Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin as his successor.

Popovkin worked a stint at the Baikonur Cosmodrome and headed the missile and space defense force from 2004 to 2008.

Speculation about Perminov's dismissal has swirled since December, when the space program lost three Glonass navigation satellites in a failed launch that hampered the Kremlin's much-touted plans to rival the U.S. GPS system.

Two high-ranking space officials were fired over the botched launch.

Russian law sets an age limit of 60 for officials, which the president and prime minister have

the right to waive. Perminov had no plans to retire or resign early, Alexander Vorobyov, his spokesman, said in early April.

Perminov will step down just weeks after he presided over high-profile 50th anniversary celebrations of Russia's space race victory in launching the first human into orbit, with Soviet cosmonaut Yury Gagarin's maiden April 1961 voyage.

(Reuters, Bloomberg, MT)

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