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Communications Satellite Lost

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A Proton-M rocket carrying the satellite being lifted for launch Monday.

Russia said Thursday that it had lost track of a newly launched major telecommunications satellite, the latest in a series of setbacks that have dogged its space industry.

The Express AM-4 satellite, described by its makers as the most powerful satellite ever built in Europe, was launched late Wednesday aboard a Proton-M rocket from the Russia-leased launch pad in Kazakhstan.

The Russian space agency said the first stages of the launch went smoothly but communication with the satellite was lost due to a failure of the Briz-M upper stage.

The agency said experts were working to re-establish contact with the craft, built by Astrium, a unit of European aerospace group EADS, to provide digital television, Internet and telecom services for Russia.

Russian news wires quoted industry sources as saying the craft had never reached its planned orbit.

A malfunction of the Briz-M engine led to the loss of a key military Earth-mapping satellite earlier this year.

That mishap also followed the costly loss in December of three Glonass navigation satellites in a major setback to Kremlin plans to create a global positioning system that would rival the U.S.-made GPS.

The glitches cost Russia's veteran space agency chief Anatoly Perminov his job this spring. Former deputy defense minister and space forces commander Vladimir Popovkin replaced him.

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