

Satellite Launch Flop Will Freeze Program

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The Federal Space Agency might fail to complete its launch plan this year after the loss of the country's most powerful telecommunications satellite, a space industry source said Friday.

"The Federal Space Agency must launch seven Proton-M rockets with Briz-M upper stages by the end of the year, but this schedule is likely to be reconsidered because of the latest faulty launch," Interfax reported, citing a source at the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

A commission has been established to investigate the reasons for the loss of the Express-AM 4 satellite, which went missing from radar after being launched from Baikonur late last week. Until the results of the check are available, launches of Proton-M rockets must be suspended, the source said, adding that an official decision will be made in a couple of days.

The launch of a Defense Ministry satellite scheduled for late August has been delayed indefinitely until the reasons for the faulty launch become clear, another source told Interfax

on Sunday.

The Express-AM 4 satellite was insured for more than 7 billion rubles (\$240 million) by Ingosstrakh. It was designed to provide digital television and telecommunications services across Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The satellite was built by a unit of the European Aeronautic, Defense and Space Company, or EADS, in collaboration with state-owned Khrunichev State Research and Production Space Center.

The satellite and the Briz-M upper stage were apparently located by the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, at different orbits, RIA-Novosti reported late Friday, citing a source in the aerospace industry.

But the satellite's current location does not allow it to be used for the intended purpose, the source said.

Spokespeople for the Federal Space Agency and Khrunichev were unavailable for comment Sunday.

Losing the satellite could have a negative effect on the domestic telecommunications industry because the Express-AM 4 was designed to bring to life ambitious programs like spreading digital television and broadband Internet across Russia, said defense analyst Alexander Golts.

Communications and Press Ministry spokeswoman Yelena Lashkina said losing the satellite would not affect the deadline of switching to digital television, which is slated for 2015, said a spokeswoman for the Yelena Lashkina.

But both the government and the Kremlin are unlikely to take this failure "as a tragedy" because the two major analog channels — state-owned Channel One and Rossia — are the main priority for them, Golts said by telephone.

Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, said Friday that "one shouldn't dramatize the situation very much," adding that it is necessary to identify the satellite's location first.

Another recent setback for the aerospace industry, when three Glonass navigation satellites were lost in December, resulted in the dismissal of the Federal Space Agency chief Anatoly Perminov, who was replaced by former Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin.

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