

Space Audit Finds Major Violations

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The string of failed spacecraft launches in recent months may be due to misuse of funds at the Federal Space Agency, a check by the Audit Chamber showed.

The inquiry exposed "serious financial violations," the chamber's head, Sergei Stepashin, said Wednesday, Interfax reported.

"Unfortunately, those violations could have contributed to the recent failed launches," he said.

He did not elaborate on how money was misused or the amount, but said the check's results were forwarded to law enforcement agencies looking into the case.

The check was conducted in the spring, but was not reported until now. Stepashin said the findings might have contributed to the sacking of Federal Space Agency chief Anatoly Perminov, replaced by Vladimir Popovkin in April after seven years on the job.

The Federal Space Agency, which this year has a budget of 120 billion rubles (\$4 billion), did not comment on Stepashin's statements Wednesday.

The spate of failures began in December, when a Proton rocket carrying three satellites meant to complete the Glonass navigational system crashed in the Pacific Ocean. A check into the incident is ongoing, but investigators believe that either an engine pipe made of subpar materials or a poorly welded junction is to blame, an unidentified investigator told Interfax on Wednesday.

In February, a rocket malfunction sent a military satellite into the wrong orbit. Last month, a communications satellite was lost for the same reasons, and a week later, a cargo-laden rocket bound for the International Space Station crashed shortly after launch.

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