

Russia Resigned to Losing Space Probe

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Federal Space Agency officials on Tuesday acknowledged that the chances of fixing Fobos-Grunt — a space probe that got stuck in Earth's orbit — are close to zero.

The unmanned \$170 million probe bound for the Martian moon Phobos was launched two weeks ago and reached preliminary Earth orbit, but its engines never fired to send it off to the Red Planet. Engineers have been trying to retrieve data from the probe as it passes over Russia but haven't been able to establish contact.

"We have to be realistic. Since we haven't been able to get in touch with it for such a long time, chances to accomplish the mission are very slim," Federal Space Agency deputy chief Vitaly Davydov said in remarks carried by Interfax.

Davydov said engineers can keep trying until the month's end to fix the probe's engines to steer it onto its intended path.

Russian scientists could fix the problem if the probe failed because of a software flaw, but some experts think that the failure was rooted in hardware that's difficult to fix.

The failure of the probe could see Russia change its priorities in space research. The space agency will more likely focus on research of Earth's moon instead of studying Mars, Davydov said.

The failed spacecraft is 13.2 tons, and most of that weight, about 11 tons, is highly toxic fuel.

Davydov said Tuesday that Fobos-Grunt could crash to Earth some time between late December and late February. The site of the crash cannot be established more than a day in advance, he said.

Davydov insisted that "if you calculate the probability of it hitting somebody on the head, it is close to zero."

A satellite tracking web site showed the Mars probe passing over North America on Tuesday morning Moscow time.

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