

Russia and Europe to Sign Off on Mars Missions

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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An unmanned spacecraft will be sent to Mars in 2016 to start a search for life under a joint program that Russia will sign this week with the European Space Agency, Russia's top space official said Tuesday.

Vladimir Popovkin, head of the Federal Space Agency, told reporters in Moscow that a final agreement on the unmanned ExoMars missions would be signed on Thursday, Interfax reported.

ExoMars, which means Exobiology on Mars, is a program that envisages several Mars launches, including an orbiter, a stationary lander and a rover, in 2016 and 2018.

The launches will be made on Russian-built Proton-M rockets, which Russian officials have insisted should be sufficient payment for its inclusion in the partnership with the European Space Agency.

Russia also has pushed for the orbiter to carry Russian instruments, including some originally developed for Fobos-Grunt, a failed spacecraft that was supposed to collect soil samples from Phobos, one of Mars' moons, but fell into the Pacific Ocean in January 2012 after getting struck in Earth's orbit for three months.

A third sticking point in partnership talks has been a Russian demand that all scientific results become the intellectual property of the European Space Agency and the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Popovkin did not say how those issues had been resolved.

The European Space Agency, which has invested more than 400 million euros (\$520 million) into the program, initially had agreed to work with U.S. space agency NASA, but Russia wound up the sole partner after NASA pulled out because of budget constraints.

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