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Baikonur Deal Foresees at Least 14 Commercial Launches

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Kazakhstan relented and allowed Russia to make at least 14 commercial launches from the Baikonur Cosmodrome this year in a compromise that followed months of talks, Russian and Kazakh officials said.

Russia will use the launch pad it rents from its Central Asian neighbor to send 15 rockets into outer space, said Kalamkas Temirova, a Kazakh Space Agency spokeswoman said late Monday. A Russian government source said the number was 14.

Russia initially received permission to launch 12 Proton rockets, although it requested 17, a development that triggered Moscow's diplomatic offensive.

The final number is not lower than last year's 14 blastoffs. Proton rockets are the Russian workhorse of choice for delivering satellites into orbit. The agreed quota is in addition to launches related to the International Space Station.

The Monday announcements followed the latest round of talks on March 27. The meeting took place at Baikonur when a Proton took off from the cosmodrome for the first time this year, carrying a Satmex 8 telecommunications satellite.

Russia's first deputy prime minister, Igor Shuvalov, who led the country's delegation for the negotiations, said afterward that disagreements over the number of launches for this year were settled, according to a statement on the Cabinet's website. He did not name the number.

Federal Space Agency spokesman Alexei Kuznetsov said Monday that he was unaware how many commercial launches the countries agreed on.

The news of a standoff between Russia and Kazakhstan over the frequency of launches first broke in January. A raft of high-level bilateral meetings, including between President Vladimir Putin and his Kazakh counterpart, Nursultan Nazarbayev, ensued as the countries sought to iron out the wrinkle.

Russia pays $115 million a year to rent the Baikonur Cosmodrome for military and commercial satellite launches, in addition to carrying astronauts and freight to and the International Space Station. Russia is building its own launch pad, Vostochny, in the far eastern Amur region that in the future could take away some business from Baikonur.

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