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Putin Pledges $1 Billion for Completion of New Cosmodrome

By Matthew Bodner

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President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin listen to Oleg Ostapenko (L), head of the Russian Federal Space Agency, or Roscosmos, as they visit the construction site at Vostochny Cosmodrome in the Amursk Region, September 2.

President Vladimir Putin called for the pace of construction at the far-eastern Vostochny Cosmodrome to be picked up during a visit to the site on Tuesday, and pledged an extra 50 billion rubles ($1.3 billion) to help see the job through.

Putin has made cosmodrome in the Amur region the centerpiece of Russia's efforts to develop the Far East, and on Tuesday said it will be the launch site Russian cosmonauts venturing out to the moon and Mars beyond 2020.

But the site is also important from a national security standpoint, as it would give Russia its own base from which to launch heavier rockets that can be used to send military satellites into orbit. Russia currently leases the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan for $115 million

a year for such launches, and achieving independence in this sphere appears to justify putting more strain on an economy hit hard by sanctions over the Ukraine crisis.

"We are putting serious money into the construction [of the Vostochny Cosmodrome]," Putin said, according to a statement on the Kremlin's website. "Since 2011, we have spent more than 100 billion rubles. Another 50 billion will be allocated in 2015."

Rogozin Takes Command

The construction of Vostochny is taking place in stages. The first stage — land surveying — was completed in 2010, while phase two — the construction of launch pads for the Soyuz-2 and Angara rockets — is nearing completion. The final construction stage, which focuses on launch facilities for a super-heavy booster rocket, is to take place between 2016 and 2018.

But Putin said the project is 30 to 55 days behind schedule, and warned that the cosmodrome must be ready to facilitate its first launches next year. Moreover, the 6,000-strong workforce needs to be doubled, he said.

To ensure that there are no additional delays, Putin on Tuesday gave Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin direct control over the construction project, taking over from Oleg Ostapenko, head of the Russia's space agency Roscosmos.

Ostapenko replaced Vladimir Popovkin as Roscosmos' chief last year, partly due to delays at the launch center.

The new appointment is likely to keep the builders on their toes. While visiting the cosmodrome in February, Rogozin, who is the government's point man for the space industry, announced that cameras had been installed throughout the complex so that he could root out slackers.

"Slackers who are not doing anything at work should know that I am watching them," he said.

Rogozin said later Tuesday that Putin had approved the development of a super-heavy booster — Roscosmos had requested 200 billion rubles for its development as part of its budget proposals for 2016-2025 that are currently being reviewed by the government.

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