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Russian Government Tightens Control of Troubled Vostochny Cosmodrome Project

By The Moscow Times

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Construction of Russia's Vostochny Cosmodrome

Construction of Russia's Vostochny Cosmodrome will come under direct state control following an order signed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev that gives the government authority to appoint and fire the project's top managers.

"This decision will enable us to improve the efficiency of the directorate's management and address the main problems in the creation of the Vostochny Cosmodrome," the government said in a statement Thursday.

Russia currently launches most of its space missions from the Soviet-era Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, from which it rents the facility for $115 million annually. There have been periodic spats between Moscow and Astana over Russia's use of the facility,

prompting Russia to build a new spaceport to ensure its unfettered access to space.

This consideration led President Vladimir Putin to declare the new spaceport, located in the Amur region of Russia's Far East, to be a project of national importance in 2012. Since then, construction has fallen behind by about two months, jeopardizing the promised first launch from the cosmodrome at the end of next year.

In September, Putin visited Vostochny and stripped the Federal Space Agency of direct oversight over the construction effort. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin — who oversees the space industry — was put in charge of the project.

Putin also pledged an additional 50 billion rubles ($1 billion) to Vostochny. Construction has already cost about 100 billion rubles ($2 billion), and Putin warned that the government was keeping a close eye on the project's spending.

In late October, the Investigative Committee arrested Yury Khrizman, the former head of one of the cosmodrome's main contractors, for embezzling 1.8 billion rubles ($39 million).

Rogozin has gradually taken a more hands-on approach to dealing with Vostochny's problems. Earlier this year he installed cameras throughout the vast construction site to spy on "slackers" impeding the construction efforts.

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