

Fearing Another Rocket Disaster, Roscosmos Postpones Next Proton Launch

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The upcoming launch of a Russian Proton-M rocket with a European telecommunications satellite on Friday has been postponed after technicians at the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan discovered a fault in the vehicle's control system on Wednesday, Russia's Federal Space Agency said.

One of the most frequently used rocket designs in history, the Proton rocket was set to conduct its 400th flight on Friday. But with the vehicle's reputation still recovering from a series of embarrassing launch failures in recent years, officials are taking no chances.

The agency, Roscosmos, said in a statement that a fault was discovered in the control unit of the Briz-M upper-stage booster — the part of the rocket that maneuvers its satellite payload

into the proper orbit after reaching space.

The Proton rocket has been taken off its launch pad and returned to the assembly building, where engineers will replace the faulty command system and any other faults that may arise, the statement said.

A new launch date for the rocket will be announced after the new components are installed, Roscosmos said without specifying a timeframe.

Launch schedules at Baikonur, the world's busiest spaceport, are typically congested so the delay may be lengthy.

A different Proton rocket carrying a Yamal-401 communications satellite for Gazprom Space Systems, an arm of Russia's giant state gas company, will lift off from Kazakhstan in mid-December, according to the TASS news agency.

Proton rocket launches accounted for almost 30 percent of the commercial satellite launch market over the past decade, but the design's future is in jeopardy.

The Khrunichev Space Center, which has been plagued by quality control issues and financial troubles, is the Proton rocket's main producer. But it is also the prime contractor on another important rocket project — Angara.

The first rocket of post-Soviet design, Angara conducted its first successful test launch in July. A test of a larger version of Angara, the so-called "heavy" configuration, is set to blast off from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome on or around Christmas Day.

Angara has been tentatively tapped as a commercial replacement for Proton, as Khrunichev does not have the production capacity for both types of rockets, and commercial launches remain an important source of financing for Russia's space industry.

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