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Moscow Suspends Russian-Ukrainian Nuclear Missile Conversion Program

By The Moscow Times

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Russia's federal Space Agency has suspended a Russian-Ukrainian joint venture tasked with converting Soviet-era nuclear missiles into peaceful rockets for commercial satellite launches, the TASS news agency reported on Monday.

The agency's press service was quoted as saying only: "The project for launching the Dnepr rockets has been suspended. Perspectives for the future of the program will be decided later."

Dnepr rockets are actually surplus SS-18 Satan missiles — capable of showering Russia's enemies with 10 independently targeting nuclear warheads per missile. Under a 1997 Russian-Ukrainian agreement, they are converted into space launch vehicles by Ukraine's Yuzhmash factory.

The rehabilitated rockets are sold on the global commercial launch market by the Moscow-based Kosmotras International Space Company for commercial and scientific use.

Last summer, Russian media reports suggested that the conversion program was in jeopardy following Moscow's seizure of Crimea in March and subsequent support of pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine — though Moscow denies such involvement.

Although it is not yet clear what the program's suspension means for the future of the Dnepr rockets, Russian officials have previously stated that the SS-18 missiles could be converted without Yuzhmash's help.

In May, Roscosmos deputy head Sergei Ponomaryov told TASS that the conversion could be handled by Russia's Makeyev Rocket Design Bureau, a state-run enterprise that builds Russia's submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

Earlier on Monday, the Izvestia daily reported that Roscosmos would no longer order Ukrainian-made Zenit rockets, also produced by Yuzhmash. The rockets are predominantly used in a U.S.-Russia joint venture known as Sea Launch, and will be replaced by Russia's new Angara rockets.

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