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Russia Struggling to Finish Putin-Backed Spaceport On Time

By Matthew Bodner

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President Vladimir Putin visited last September and pledged 50 billion rubles ($801 million) to expedite construction and overcome a delay that he estimated to be around two to three months.

Russia's mega project of the moment, a new cosmodrome in the farthest reaches of the Far East, is at a crossroads, according to Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, with critical deadlines fast approaching and construction efforts still lagging.

Dmitry Rogozin: Cosmodrome Tsar

The Moscow Times

One of Russia's most colorful political figures, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin has long been in the spotlight.

He graduated with a degree in journalism from Moscow State University in 1986, took another degree in economics in 1988, and topped that off with a doctorate in philosophy in 1996.

Rogozin entered politics in 1993, when he joined the Congress of Russian Communities (CRC), a nationalist political party.

Russia was elected to the State Duma as a CRC deputy in 1997, but when the party's founder died in 2002 he joined with Sergei Glazyev — today a close adviser to President Vladimir Putin — to head up the nationalist Rodina party.

Rogozin ousted Glazyev in 2004 to become head of Rodina, but fell out with the party in 2006. He spent the next year bouncing around various nationalist parties and movements, before being appointed as Russia's ambassador to NATO in 2008.

In 2011, he was appointed deputy prime minister with responsibility for overseeing Russia's space and defense industries.

"We have now arrived at a critical moment in the construction [of the cosmodrome]," Rogozin was quoted by news agency RIA Novosti as saying on Monday.

The first launch of an unmanned Soyuz rocket is scheduled to take place by the end of this year, but ongoing delays and corruption scandals threaten to bump the facility's high-profile opening back till next year.

Alexander Mordovets, deputy director of Spetsstroi, the company contracted with building the cosmodrome, said on Sunday that Rogozin had approved an 85 percent increase, or 32 billion rubles ($512 million) in spending to speed up construction, RIA Novosti reported.

President Vladimir Putin, who in 2012 declared the new cosmodrome to be a project of national importance, visited last September and pledged 50 billion rubles ($801 million) to expedite construction and overcome a delay that he estimated to be around two to three months.

While it is not clear if the delay has grown or shrunk, soon after landing at the site on Sunday,

Rogozin dressed down the management of Spetsstroi, the state-owned firm contracted to build the new facility.

Spetsstroi managers will be held "personally and financially responsible" if they fail to finish by Nov. 30, Rogozin said, demanding that the firm call in all available personnel — accountants included — from across the nation to double-time construction.

Post-Soviet Mega Project

Moscow has wanted a cosmodrome on Russian soil since the fall of the Soviet Union, when a newly sovereign Kazakhstan inherited the U.S.S.R's Baikonur Cosmodrome.

Russia was left with one cosmodrome, the Plesetsk launch facility near Arkhangelsk in northern Russia. But Plesetsk is a specialized military cosmodrome, with little launch infrastructure.

Russia's space agency currently leases Baikonur for a reported $115 million annually — a modest sum considering the billions of dollars needed to build a new cosmodrome, but a potential political risk.

In 2010 President Vladimir Putin endorsed the creation of a new launch site and its hefty 150 billion ruble (today $2.4 billion) price tag, which would ensure Moscow's independent access to space in the future.

Known as the Vostochny (far eastern) Cosmodrome, near the town of Uglegorsk in the Amur region, the new site is in an ideal location to replace Baikonur — only five degrees latitude higher than Baikonur's 46 degrees north, allowing for similar types of space launches.

But the construction of a cosmodrome is no small task.

Launch facilities are complex installations to build, requiring assembly buildings, fuel depots, control centers, railroads and airports.

The launch pads themselves are particularly specialized pieces of infrastructure. Pads must be constructed specifically for certain rocket types — in the case of Vostochny, one for Soyuz rockets and another for the new Angara family of rockets.

The cosmodrome's remote location also poses a challenge.

"It's far away from industrial assets [such as the rocket factories in Moscow and Samara], and connected to them only through the Trans-Siberian Railroad," said Russian space industry analyst Pavel Luzin.

But as Luzin points out, corruption is also playing a part in delaying the cosmodrome's construction.

Spetsstroi, the state-owned firm responsible for the Vostochny project, was spun off from the military's construction corps, and according to Luzin inherited a strong tradition of cost overruns.

Cosmodrome Tsar

The difficulties of managing a construction project over 7,000 kilometers and seven time zones away from Moscow has seen Rogozin's star rise, as he has taken almost complete control of the project over the last year.

The Russian government in 2013 began to intervene in the project, hoping to send the message that embezzlement and inefficiency would not be tolerated, first by firing former Roscosmos chief Vladimir Popovkin.

Then, early last year, they sent Rogozin — whose responsibilities include oversight of the space industry — to sort out the Vostochny construction workers.

His first act of oversight was to order the installation of cameras throughout the facility, which he announced by sharing images of empty construction sites on his Twitter account, warning slackers that he was now watching.

Though slackers may have gotten the message, corruption and mismanagement have reportedly remained a problem.

Last year, Russia's Investigative Committee teamed up with the Federal Security Service to catch the head of Spetsstroi's local subsidiary, Dalspetsstroi, in a 1.8 billion ruble ($28.8 million) embezzlement probe in October.

Less than a month later, a Dalspetsstroi accountant was implicated in the case, along with a chief engineer from another construction firm working on the project.

Rogozin in September was awarded with total oversight of the project, stealing the honor from Roscosmos then-chief Oleg Ostapenko. Though not directly tied to problems at Vostochny, Ostapenko was unseated earlier this year as part of an industry-wide restructuring.

Rogozin, as the new tsar of Vostochny, now wields total control over the project's management and finances, declaring last week that he "will not allow sabotage" and will "rip the head off" of anyone caught stealing federal funding or otherwise impeding construction efforts.

After demanding on Monday that Spetsstroi call in every available employee from across Russia to help build Vostochny, Rogozin warned, "I am not going to accept any alternatives," and that he will return to inspect their progress in April.

Spetsstroi said in a press release Sunday that it already has around 10,000 people working at the facility, and 7,000 of them are assigned to the 12 pieces of critical launch infrastructure needed to field a Soyuz rocket in December.

Spetsstroi's Mordovets was quoted by RIA Novosti as saying on Sunday that the company is set to begin handing some of the infrastructure over to Roscosmos by the end of June, but did not specify a date for final completion of the Soyuz launch complex.

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