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Russia Delays First Manned Launch From New Spaceport to 2023

By The Moscow Times

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The first launch of a manned spacecraft from Russia's troubled new Vostochny Cosmodrome is slated for 2023, at least three years later than originally planned, the head of the Roscosmos federal space agency, Igor Komarov, said Friday, news agency RIA Novosti reported.

Vostochny is a $3 billion spaceport under construction in the Amur region of Russia's Far East. The project is intended to ensure Russia's independent access to space by easing reliance on the Soviet-built Baikonur complex in Kazakhstan, but has been plagued by corruption allegations as construction deadlines have slipped.

"The first launch under the manned [spaceflight] program from Vostochny will take place in 2023," Komarov was quoted by RIA as saying during a visit to the construction site.

He said the launch would use a rocket known as the Angara-5V, a version of Russia's new Angara heavy rocket, which first test-launched in July last year, that is adapted to the safety standards required to launch cosmonauts.

Space officials originally planned to begin manned launches from Vostochny aboard Soyuz rockets before 2020, but last month newspaper Kommersant reported that Angara would be modified for the task instead. The modifications will take several years to complete, pushing the first manned launch to beyond 2020.

Russia is struggling to fund its ambitious space program amid an economic contraction that began this year.

Komarov said, “work on the Angara heavy rocket class is proceeding in two stages. First, we are preparing the launch complex for a launch of Angara in 2021 with an unmanned spacecraft.”

“The next step will be the creation of a second launch pad for the [heavy] Angara-A5, and ... the Angara-5V, [which] will carry a next-generation manned spacecraft,” he said.

Komarov did not specify which new manned spaceship would be launched by the Angara-5V, but it is possible that it could be the long-awaited PTK NP (New Generation Piloted Transport Ship) designed by Russia's largest spaceship builder, RSC Energia.

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