The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Delays First Launch From Russia's Troubled Vostochny Cosmodrome

By Matthew Bodner

October 14, 2015



President Vladimir Putin during his visit to the Vostochny Cosmodrome, which is under construction, in Amur region, Russia, Oct. 14, 2015.

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday officially postponed the date of Russia's first space launch from the Vostochny Cosmodrome, a $3 billion construction project in the country's Far East, by four months — pushing the launch into early 2016.

The spaceport, one of Russia's most high-profile mega-projects, has been delayed by faulty construction, repeated corruption scandals and worker strikes. Putin last year demanded the facility be ready for the first launch of a Soyuz-2 rocket by December 2015 — a target that has proven impossible to hit.

After scolding officials for letting construction slip so far behind schedule, Putin conceded that the timeline of completion was less important than the quality of the facilities. Earlier this month it was reported that a rocket assembly building was built to the incorrect

dimensions and was too small to house Soyuz-2 rockets.

“Therefore, let's agree on this: you complete work on the water supply, electricity and sewage ... and get ready for a first launch in 2016, sometime in the spring,” Putin said, according to a transcript of a meeting held at Vostochny published on the Kremlin website Wednesday.

“If you do this by Cosmonauts Day, that will be fine,” he said, referring to Russia's annual celebration on April 12 of Yury Gagarin's first flight into outer space.

Putin's remarks came during a meeting at the cosmodrome with officials from the Roscosmos space agency and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, the government's space industry czar.

Vostochny is intended to eventually become Russia's primary space launch facility, replacing the Soviet-built Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, which Russia leases for a reported $115 million per year.

Located close to the Chinese boarder in Russia's Far East, about 5,500 kilometers east of Moscow, the project has seen several construction bosses arrested for pilfering state funds of up to $1 million.

Meanwhile, workers have at times gone unpaid despite Putin's insistence money was allocated from the federal budget to pay them. Putin on Wednesday also criticized Roscosmos and a federal construction contractor for lack of oversight of their subcontractors, resulting in construction defects.

Roscosmos and Spetsstroy, the contractor, have employed up to 130 subcontractors to carry out work at the cosmodrome, and according to Putin, “close supervision of these organizations has not been organized.”

“The qualifications of specialists working in this area required particularly close attention, because we have seen a sizable number of construction flaws,” Putin said, before scolding Spetsstroy for falling behind schedule by eight months at one point.

“I realize that we are building a unique facility here ... but at the same time, we do need to keep the deadlines in mind and not let construction delays build up,” Putin said.

“I know that at other facilities, including sites abroad, there were similar, if not even longer delays, including at the [European Space Agency spaceport] in French Guiana ... but we need to try to keep to our own deadlines,” he added.

Rogozin, who was appointed overseer of the cosmodrome last year, told Putin that the site could be ready for the previously promised December launch if necessary, but with construction efforts four months behind schedule, he warned it would be a tall order.

Putin urged calm, however, and said that even the April date was “not necessary,” according to the meeting minutes.

“I repeat, [April] is not necessary. Simply work it out and tell me when this will be done optimally,” Putin said, before repeating, “Optimally.”

Contact the author at m.bodner@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/10/14/putin-delays-first-launch-from-russias-troubled-vostochny-cosmodrome-a50248