

Putin Instructs Roscosmos To Defend Russia's Position in Space Market

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President Vladimir Putin has instructed space industry officials to take measures to ensure Russia remains a major player in the commercial space launch market and in the field of manned spaceflight, the TASS news agency reported Thursday evening.

“Special attention needs to be directed in the course of [new space] programs at strengthening our positions in the spheres of manned spaceflight and in orbiting cargo, primarily in commercial launches,” Putin said at a meeting of space industry officials in Sochi on Thursday.

Russia — historically a leader in the field of spaceflight — has fallen on hard times since the fall of the Soviet Union. Though Russia has managed to stay afloat by selling rides aboard its

hardy Soviet-designed rockets, its market share is threatened by the rise of U.S. commercial space companies.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, the Russian government's space czar, raised the alarm on Russia losing its 40 percent market share for commercial launches to American companies like Elon Musk's SpaceX in May, warning drastic reform was needed to stay competitive.

Rising competition isn't the only thing threatening Russia's market share. Previously reliable rockets, like the Proton-M, in the last five years have been crashing at an astonishing rate, scaring away potential customers as Russian officials such as Rogozin increasingly describe the state of the space industry as a systemic crisis.

Putin doubled down on Rogozin's warning Wednesday, telling space officials that "Russian rockets must be reliable and competitive to meet all requirements [set] by leading customers both inside the country and abroad," Putin said.

The meeting focused on hashing out details in a draft of Russia's upcoming Federal Space Program 2016-2025, a government outline of all Russian space activity and funding levels over the next decade. The program is a year late, and has been rewritten several times as Russia's economic crisis has forced space officials to re-evaluate what they can afford to do.

Putin said that beyond ensuring Russia's position in the space launch market is secure through 2025, the program should focus on restoring Russia's fleet of communications satellites, and to focus more on scientific research — an aspect of the space program that suffered most after the Soviet collapse.

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