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Satellite Failure Disrupts TV Service for Russian Providers

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Yevgeny Leonov / TASS

An unexpected failure of a Russian telecoms satellite last week has left millions of households without television service and forced major providers to seek emergency help from foreign operators.

The state-owned Russian Satellite Communications Company (RSCC) said its Express-AT1 satellite abruptly stopped functioning on March 4 for unknown reasons.

Industry analysts estimate the outage may have affected around 5 million people and exposed RSCC's lack of a backup satellite for the service, the RBC news outlet reported. The company operates 12 satellites that transmit more than 1,100 television channels.

Launched in 2014 and designed to operate until around 2030, Express-AT1 carried signals for at least three major satellite television providers — NTV Plus, Trikolor and Russkiy Mir ("Russian World"), all of which serve viewers across Russia's 11 time zones.

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Trikolor said it had begun negotiations with the Moscow-based international space communications organization Intersputnik to lease capacity on another satellite. NTV Plus said it had temporarily granted affected customers free access to digital channels, while Russkiy Mir lost access to its only satellite.

RSCC has opened bidding to build a replacement satellite, Express-AT3, which it expects to launch into service in late 2030.

The company said some customers will regain service after equipment is reconfigured to operate at a different orbital position, while others may face outages lasting up to a month.

A telecoms industry source told the business newspaper Kommersant that the sudden failure of Express-AT1 could have been caused by anything from an external impact to a cyberattack.

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