

Proton Rocket Crash Spurs Space Industry Consolidation

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Proton rocket boosters laid out on the floor of the Khrunichev State Research and Production Space Center.

Special report for MT

Last week's Proton-M rocket failure will accelerate the formation of Russia's United Rocket and Space Corporation, a massive space industry consolidation project intended to rescue the country's troubled space industry, the company's CEO said Tuesday.

Igor Komarov, the corporation's chief, speaking before an audience at the Berlin Air Show said Friday's failure of the Proton-M rocket — the fifth crash since 2010 of a tried-and-true Soviet design that first launched in 1965 — reflected "a serious systemic crisis" at the Khrunichev Space Center, where the rocket is manufactured, Interfax reported Tuesday.

Komarov pledged that measures to address the problems at the Khrunichev center would be

addressed following the release of an investigation report commissioned by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin on Friday, in the wake of the high-profile launch failure — which saw the loss of an advanced Russian-built communication satellite when the third stage of the rocket failed to complete its burn and fell back to earth.

The investigation board is expected to release its findings May 22.

The United Rocket and Space Corporation was created in March, in a direct response to the last Proton accident in June 2013. The corporation is meant to serve as the center of a massive industry consolidation and modernization effort by taking control of the state's shares of the Russian space industry's largest contractors — such as Khrunichev and Energia, which builds Russia's manned spacecraft.

It is not clear by how much the accident will accelerate plans to consolidate the industry under the new corporation, but Komarov at the Russian Embassy in Berlin said on Monday that the process would take 5 to 7 years, adding that "our task is to create a strong Russian space industry," Interfax reported.

"Today, we are at a critical juncture," Komarov said. "Russia launched the first satellite and Yury Gagarin. The whole world knows this. Russia has a huge base of technical and human capacity to produce and launch rockets and satellites, space stations ... and, of course, manned spaceflight. But the time is ripe for serious changes to restore its leading position in the Russian space industry."

The establishment of the United Rocket and Space Corporation is one of the priority items of the new Federal Space Agency budget through 2020, which will pump \$52 billion into modernization and infrastructure development across the entire industry.

The failure of the Proton-M rocket comes at a time when space industry officials have been asserting the independence of the Russian space industry in the face of Western sanctions and export license restrictions.

Hours after the Proton disaster on Friday, the U.S. successfully launched a GPS satellite aboard a Delta IV rocket — which uses entirely domestic components and does not rely on a Russian engine.

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