

Russian Spacecraft Named 'Progress' Crashing Back to Earth

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Loss of this cargo spacecraft would be just the latest in a series of prominent glitches in recent years that have cast a shadow over Russia's ambitions in space.

Russia on Wednesday struggled to restore contact with a cargo spaceship named "Progress 59," which by early afternoon was reported to be crashing back to earth in what risks becoming the latest in the country's series of prominent launch failures.

An unidentified source told Agence France-Pressé on Wednesday that the ship had started descending because it had "nowhere else to go."

Progress 59 was launched from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on Tuesday morning at 10:09 a.m., carrying fuel, food, oxygen, equipment for scientific experiments and presents for the crew on board the International Space Station (ISS). According to plan, it was supposed to dock at the station six hours later.

But almost immediately, Progress 59 stopped sending data back home, the Interfax news agency cited an industry source as saying. An unidentified source in Russia's mission control center told the agency that there was a malfunction at the third stage of the launch that sent the rocket into a higher orbit than planned.

Two attempts on Tuesday to reestablish a reliable connection with the unmanned spacecraft failed, the news agency cited a source in the mission control center as saying.

On Wednesday morning, the center's spokesman Sergei Talasov said that it was “still too early to speak of losing the spacecraft for good,” Interfax reported.

Others in the space industry appeared less optimistic. State news agency RIA Novosti cited an unidentified source in the rocket industry as saying that it would most likely be impossible to reestablish a connection with the cargo ship, which would soon be declared “space trash.”

An unidentified space industry source told Interfax that the total financial hit from the failed launch could reach 5 billion rubles (\$96 million). This loss may only be partially covered: Sources in major insurance companies told the agency that the ship was insured to the tune of 2 billion rubles (\$38 million).

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Over the past four years, Russia's Proton rockets have crashed six times during launch.

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