

Russia's New Rocket Won't Fit in Its New Cosmodrome

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The Soyuz TMA-16M capsule with international space crew descends beneath a parachute just before landing near the town of Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan

Work at Russia's new \$3 billion spaceport in the Far East has ground to a halt after a critical piece of infrastructure was discovered to have been built to the wrong dimensions, and would not fit the latest version of the country's Soyuz rocket, a news report said.

The Vostochny Cosmodrome, under construction in the Amur region, north of China, is intended to become Russia's primary spaceport, replacing the Soviet-built Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

The cutting-edge facility was meant be ready for launches of Soyuz-2 rockets in December, but an unidentified space agency official told the TASS news agency late Thursday that the rocket would not fit inside the assembly building where its parts are stacked and tested before launch.

The building "has been designed for a different modification of the Soyuz rocket," the source said, according to news website Medusa, which picked up the story from TASS.

The quote could not be found on TASS, a state-owned news agency on Friday. TASS's report instead quoted a spokesperson for the Center for Ground-based Space Infrastructure (TsENKI) - a federal space agency organ tasked with managing the Vostochny cosmodrome.

"Work with the rocket at the integration and testing complex now can not be conducted because the facility is not ready," the spokesperson said in the report. "There are still imperfections in the construction."

The problems with the testing and assembly building are the latest incident in a saga of corruption scandals, embezzlement cases, high-profile arrests, worker strikes, and construction delays at the Vostochny cosmodrome.

The project has come under strict scrutiny from Russian officials such as President Vladimir Putin - who last year demanded the facility be ready for a first launch in December 2015 - and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who has threatened to rip the heads off any contractors that slow up construction efforts.

Putin's demand looks increasingly unlikely to be met. Month Last, Gazeta.ru news website reported that the first launch of a Soyuz-2 rocket from Vostochny would have to be postponed because of the complications at the construction site.

The Soyuz rocket design has been regularly upgraded and modified since its first use by the Soviet Union in the late 1960s. The original Soyuz was an advanced derivative of the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile, the R-7.

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