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## RUSSIA LAUNCHES THE FIRST ROCKET FROM ITS BRAND-NEW SPACEPORT

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Russian space agency Roscosmos has launched the first rocket from Vostochny Cosmodrome, the country's newest spaceport. Last night at 10:01PM ET, a Soyuz-2.1a rocket blasted off, taking with it three satellites that will monitor the Earth and measure cosmic rays. And almost no one saw it happen live.

Anatoly Zak, who has written about Russia's space program for years, reports for Popular Mechanics that Roscosmos (which is a corporation run by the Russian government) didn't allow any foreign press to view the launch from Vostochny. And since it's a new spaceport, neither NASA nor the European Space Agency have any of the infrastructure in place that typically facilitates the live streams we've become so accustomed to.

In fact, just one local TV channel was allowed to broadcast, but they were forced to set up miles away from the launch site. While they were able to live stream footage of the rocket once it was in the air, they weren't able to see it take off. In the end, the station captured little more than a blur in the sky, and the only other option to watch live online was a Periscope stream. It wasn't until the rocket was well on its way to orbit before the space agency published any footage.

The massive new spaceport required thousands of workers and billions of dollars to build. It has multiple launchpads, a train station, a mission control center, and an assembly and processing complex (where the Soyuz-2.1a rocket was built). But Roscosmos' trepidation over showing the launch was likely rooted in the new spaceport's checkered past.

Until recently, Russia launched the bulk of its rockets from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, which is located in what used to be the southwestern reaches of the Soviet Union. It was the first spaceport ever built, and was the origin point of some of the most famous space missions in history; both Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin blasted off from Baikonur.

## VOSTOCHNY IS SUPPOSED TO HELP RUSSIA BECOME LESS DEPENDENT ON THE SPACEPORT IN KAZAKHSTAN

But when the Soviet Union collapsed, the million square miles around Baikonur became the independent Republic of Kazakhstan. In order to keep its space program alive, Russia agreed to lease the Baikonur Cosmodrome from Kazakhstan for \$115 million per year.

As Vladimir Putin rose to power, though, he stressed the importance of an independent space effort. Russia isn't limited to Baikonur — it built the Plesetsk spaceport in the 1950s, which is in the northwestern region of the country, and it has launch access at the Guiana Space Centre in French Guiana — but a new spaceport would "guarantee Russia full independence of space activities," Putin said in 2010. "It is important that the cosmodrome effectively ensures the operation of all future space projects."

Construction began in 2011, but the project hit a number of outrageous snags along the way. Again from Zak at Popular Mechanics:

Putin declared Vostochny his pet project, much as he did for the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014. No expense would be spared. The Kremlin demanded to fire the first rocket from the site in 2015 no matter what. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who took over the supervision of the beleaguered project in 2012, even promised to sacrifice a tooth if the launch pad would not be ready in time.

It wasn't. Despite all the declarations, and Rogozin's countless trips across six time zones to visit the remote site and try to accelerate construction, Vostochny was marred by corruption, mismanagement, and delays. One construction manager was caught driving a diamond-encrusted Mercedes, while many other top officials were accused of stealing federal funds to buy houses, yachts, and other luxury goods. In the meantime, up to 5,900 employees — majority of the center's workforce—went for months without pay.

Despite the mess, Russia was finally ready to get a rocket to launch off the pad this week, though not without more troubles. A glitch was found in the rocket moments before the first attempt to launch it on Tuesday night, so Roscosmos decided to delay the launch for 24 hours. Putin himself had flown to Vostochny to oversee the launch and was reportedly very unhappy with the delay, issuing a vague warning on state television. "The fact is there is a large number of hitches," he said. "That is bad. There should be an appropriate reaction."

It's not likely that Vostochny will change much in the short term. Even though the new spaceport has now been christened with a launch, Roscosmos only plans to launch about one rocket per year from there for the foreseeable future, and the agency's lease on the Baikonur Cosmodrome lasts

until 2050.

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Kaynak/Source: