

OneWeb: UK satellite firm suspends use of Russian rockets

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OneWeb, the satellite company part-owned by the UK government, says it is suspending all launches from the Russian-operated Baikonur spaceport.

The firm had hoped to send up 36 spacecraft on a Soyuz rocket from the Kazakhstan cosmodrome, but the mission has become embroiled in the fall-out over the invasion of Ukraine.

Russia put down demands ahead of the flight that OneWeb could not meet.

These included a guarantee that armed forces wouldn't use the satellites.

Russia also wanted the UK government to divest itself of OneWeb shares, an ultimatum that was firmly rejected by Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng.

The board of OneWeb, which is headquartered in west London, voted on Thursday morning to suspend all future launches from Baikonur. It had been planning a series of flights from the cosmodrome this year to complete its broadband internet constellation in the sky.

When the vehicle, with 36 OneWeb satellites nestled under its nosecone, was rolled out by cosmodrome workers on Wednesday, it seemed that the flight was "go!".

But then the head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, started to make demands before he would give the flight approval. These demands, he said, were a response to western sanctions imposed on Russia because of the war in Ukraine.

First, he wanted assurances that OneWeb's system wouldn't be used for military purposes - an impossible ask given that UK and US forces are very keen to use the internet system. Then he wanted the "hostile" UK government to sell its shares in the company - instantly rebuffed by the business secretary.

Mr Rogozin ended by posting a video of pad workers covering up UK, US and Japanese flags on the rocket's nosecone.

Assuming Friday's planned launch is indeed cancelled, there arises the question of what happens to the 36 satellites.

These remain the property of OneWeb, but it's unclear how they could be returned. There are currently no OneWeb staff in Baikonur to organise a shipment, even if Russia agreed to release the spacecraft.

The company's manufacturing facility is in Florida where the production line can turn out two satellites a day, so they could quickly be replaced if alternative rockets are sourced.

Mr Rogozin has already stated that money received in exchange for Soyuz rockets will not be given back.

"Due to force majeure circumstances that have arisen as a result of the aggressive policy of the West and the sanctions that are applied against Russia, this money will remain in Russia," he said.

The firm will now be working with its French partner Arianespace, which organises Soyuz launches around the world, to find alternative rocket rides.

This will be difficult, however. There is a dearth of available vehicles in the class needed by OneWeb.

The company currently has 428 spacecraft in orbit. This is sufficient to provide space-borne internet connections above 50 degrees North (which includes the UK), but close to 650 satellites are required to run a truly global service.

After OneWeb's announcement, Mr Kwarteng, whose department has a seat on the board, followed up with his own comments, tweeting: "In light of Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, we are reviewing our participation in all further projects involving Russian collaboration."

This would appear to bring an end to the "will it, won't" confusion over whether the Soyuz rocket standing on the pad at Baikonur would actually launch on Friday.

DLR Statement

DLR beendet bilaterale Kooperationen mit Russland

3. März 2022

Das Deutsche Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt (DLR) als eine der größten Forschungsorganisationen in Europa ist der internationalen Zusammenarbeit für Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft verpflichtet. Im DLR sind Mitarbeitende aus 96 Ländern beschäftigt. Sie stehen für ein friedliches Miteinander aller Nationen und Menschen. Für uns gilt: Gewalt darf kein Mittel zur Durchsetzung von Zielen jedweder Art sein. Wir sehen deshalb mit großer Sorge die Entwicklungen in der Ukraine und verurteilen die kriegerischen Handlungen Russlands.

Das DLR und auch die Raumfahrtagentur im DLR kooperiert in einer Reihe von Forschungsprojekten mit russischen Einrichtungen, zum Teil unter Beteiligung weiterer deutscher Forschungsgruppen und Hochschulen sowie internationalen Partnern.

Vor dem Hintergrund des Angriffskriegs auf die Ukraine hat der Vorstand des DLR folgende Beschlüsse getroffen:

- Die Zusammenarbeit mit russischen Institutionen bei laufenden oder in Planung befindlichen Projekten wird gestoppt.
- Es wird keine neuen Projekte oder Initiativen mit Institutionen in Russland geben.

Wo erforderlich tritt das DLR dazu in die nötigen Abstimmungen mit weiteren nationalen und internationalen Partnern ein.

N° 6–2022: ESA statement regarding cooperation with Russia following a meeting with Member States on 28 February 2022

28 February 2022

We deplore the human casualties and tragic consequences of the war in Ukraine. We are giving absolute priority to taking proper decisions, not only for the sake of our workforce involved in the programmes, but in full respect of our European values, which have always fundamentally shaped our approach to international cooperation.

ESA is an intergovernmental organisation governed by its 22 Member States and we have built up a strong network of international cooperation over the past decades, which serves the European and global space community through its very successful programmes.

We are fully implementing sanctions imposed on Russia by our Member States. We are assessing the consequences on each of our ongoing programmes conducted in cooperation with the Russian state space agency Roscosmos and align our decisions to the decisions of our Member States in close coordination with industrial and international partners (in particular with NASA on the International Space Station).

Regarding the Soyuz launch campaign from Europe's Spaceport in Kourou, we take note of the Roscosmos decision to withdraw its workforce from Kourou. We will consequently assess for each European institutional payload under our responsibility the appropriate launch service based notably on launch systems currently in operation and the upcoming Vega-C and Ariane 6 launchers.

Regarding the ExoMars programme continuation, the sanctions and the wider context make a launch in 2022 very unlikely. ESA's Director General will analyse all the options and prepare a formal decision on the way forward by ESA Member States.

ESA continues to monitor the situation in close contact with its Members States.