

On the day of a key test, Russia trolls Boeing's Starliner mission

Enlarge / Starliner is tested on top of an Atlas V rocket on Friday.

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On Friday, Boeing and United Launch Alliance conducted a number of key tests in preparation for the launch of the Starliner spacecraft later this month.

During this "Integrated Day of Launch," flight controllers in Houston and Florida monitored data as the spacecraft and its United Launch Alliance rocket practiced fueling as if the booster were about to launch. During this test, the Atlas V rocket was loaded with propellants, and the countdown was taken to the final second at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station.

Boeing and United Launch Alliance said this wet dress rehearsal was successful and that they remain on track for a December 20 launch. This Starliner uncrewed mission is a precursor to a flight with astronauts that will follow several months later.

NASA's partners on the International Space Station, the Russian space corporation, were apparently watching the proceedings. The Roscosmos-linked Twitter account of a robot sent to the space station earlier this year, Fedor, shared an

image of the Atlas V rocket and noted the vehicle is powered by an RD-180 engine, manufactured in Russia. “And here is the hand of Moscow,” the Fedor account tweeted.

Then the Roscosmos-owned Glavkosmos, which promotes the sale of Russian launches and space hardware around the world, shared the tweet and added its own comment:

*: -) #Starliner @BoeingSpace @ulalaunch @NASA @roscosmos
#Energomash <https://t.co/ZGqNx0wAJ1>
pic.twitter.com/7JbUEXQ8Y2*

– GLAVKOSMOS (@glavkosmosJSC) December 6, 2019

This colorful bit of trolling shows a Russian bear peeking out from behind the bushes to remind Americans that the Starliner spacecraft will reach orbit under the power of a Russian rocket engine.

It’s an interesting gambit by the Russians, who stand to lose several hundred million dollars a year—a significant amount of money for the country’s space program—when Starliner and SpaceX’s Dragon spacecraft finally begin ferrying passengers to the International Space Station. This should happen some time in 2020 and will end NASA’s reliance on purchasing Soyuz seats to get its astronauts into orbit.

Russia could not adopt the same trolling tactic when SpaceX launched its uncrewed test flight of the Dragon spacecraft earlier this year. That vehicle and its Falcon 9 launcher are designed and manufactured almost entirely in the United States.

Instead, the Russian space agency sniped about Dragon’s potential threat to the station and complained about an unusual smell on the station after “a high concentration” of isopropyl alcohol was found to be circulating in the air on board the International Space Station following Dragon’s

arrival. This was mostly nonsense, US officials said.

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