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PLANETARY PROTECTION CHALLENGES IN SPACE EXPLORATION MISSIONS AND WAYS OF THEIR RESOLUTION WITH ACCOUNT OF RUSSIAN EXOBIOLOGY EXPERIMENTS

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1. Introduction

In view of recent flights of space probes to other planets of the solar system, many space agencies have incorporated search for extraterrestrial life or its predecessors into their research programs. However, deep space missions are fraught with high risks of disseminating terrestrial life forms, which may have unexpected consequences. Propagation of and contamination by Earth's life forms, mainly microorganisms with their unprecedented resistance to extreme environments, may exclude the possibility of exploring planets in their pristine conditions. Of greater concern is potential Earth's contamination by extraterrestrial organisms or by terrestrial pathogenic microorganisms that were transformed during their exposure to the space environment and brought back to Earth.

Understanding the necessity of investigating planets in their unaltered state led to the concept of planetary protection or planetary quarantine, which was put forth by an international nongovernmental organization, viz., the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR) established in 1958. The concept was first formulated at the COSPAR Assembly in 1964 [1], and the final version was adopted by the COSPAR Resolution of 2002 [2].

This document forms the basis of procedures aimed at protecting planets from contamination by terrestrial microorganisms as well as at protecting Earth from back contamination by returning vehicles. However, planetary protection cannot be achieved without a comprehensive study of microbial survival in open space. Relevant studies are important not only for natural sciences theories but also for the practical implementation of efficient planetary protection measures.

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