

Gagarin's widow fetes space flight with US astronauts

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Legendary astronauts, including a veteran of the US Apollo programme and the first man to walk in space Tuesday joined the widow of Yuri Gagarin in the Kremlin to remember his space flight 50 years ago.

President Dmitry Medvedev hosted the reception and pinned medals on cosmonauts and astronauts from Europe, Japan and the United States, almost all of whom gave their brief speeches in fluent Russian.

In cheerful mood, he confessed that he had wanted to be a cosmonaut himself, but that it "did not work out."

Watching in the first row was Gagarin's widow, Valentina Gagarina, who rarely appears in public. A slight dark haired woman in glasses, she did not speak at the ceremony.

Sitting behind were her two daughters, Galina and Yelena. Gagarin died in an air crash that has never been properly explained in 1968.

Russian cosmonauts present included Alexei Leonov, 76, the first man to make a [space walk](#), and Valentina Tereshkova, 74, the first woman in space, dressed elegantly in a purple suit.

Speaking Russian, Thomas Stafford, who commanded the Apollo 10 lunar reconnaissance mission in 1969, paid tribute to Gagarin and said that without his pioneering flight, his own achievements would not have been possible.

"This is a good day because today [Yuri Gagarin](#) opened the way to space. Mr President, I am sure that I would not have flown to the moon without Yuri Alexeyevich's flight," said Stafford, 80.

"Yury Alexeyevich was a hero of the Soviet Union and of the whole world."

In an emotional speech, Leonov, who made the first space walk in 1965, praised the Soyuz-Apollo programme for promoting cooperation between former Cold War enemies.

"In 50 years we have gone from such a confrontation to such flights. Humanity has got more intelligent, it has to be said," he said.

He pointed out that Gagarin was a "boy" at 27, compared to the astronauts who fly to space today, many of whom are now in their 40s and 50s.

US astronaut Scott Kelly, 47, who returned to Earth last month after commanding an expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), also spoke at the ceremony and thanked Medvedev on behalf of NASA and his US colleagues.

Kelly's twin brother Mark is due to fly out to the ISS on the last voyage of the US shuttle on April 26. His wife, Democratic representative Gabrielle Giffords, is recovering from head injuries after she was shot in January.

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