

# Russia launches Sochi Olympic torch into space

November 7 2013

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People take photographs as a Soyuz spacecraft carrying Japanese astronaut Koichi Wakata, Russian cosmonaut Mikhail Tyurin, US astronaut Rick Mastracchio and an Olympic torch for the Winter Games in Sochi blasts off from Baikonur, November 7, 2013

Russia on Thursday launched into space a trio of Russian, Japanese and US astronauts carrying an unlit Olympic torch that will for the first time be taken on a spacewalk to mark the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi.

The Soyuz-FG rocket and Soyuz-TMA capsule, emblazoned with the symbols of the Sochi Games and the Olympic rings, blasted off for the International Space Station (ISS) from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

"The Soyuz FG rocket and the Soyuz-TMA capsule launched successfully from Baikonur cosmodrome at 8:14 am Moscow time (0414 GMT)," Russian space agency Roscosmos said in a statement.

NASA astronaut Rick Mastracchio earlier climbed the steps into the capsule carrying the Olympic torch, along with his fellow spacemen, Russia's Mikhail Tyurin and Japan's Koichi Wakata.

In an unprecedented move, two of the Russian cosmonauts who are already on board the ISS are set to take the torch on a space walk from 1430 GMT on Saturday aimed at promoting the Sochi Games.

Russian officials have made it clear that the torch will remain unlit at all times for safety reasons.

"Taking the Olympic torch to space—only we are capable of that," boasted a presenter on state-owned Rossiya-2 television.

In fact the Olympic torch was carried into space ahead of the 1996 and 2000 Olympics in Atlanta and Sydney but has never before been taken on a spacewalk.

However, Russia's efforts to promote the Sochi Games as a symbol of its post-Soviet transformation have been tarnished by rows over a law seen as anti-gay as well as allegations of corruption in the vast construction needed for the event.



A Russian Soyuz spacecraft carrying Japanese astronaut Koichi Wakata, Russian cosmonaut Mikhail Tyurin and US astronaut Rick Mastracchio and an unlit Olympic torch for the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi lifts off from Baikonur, November 7, 2013

### Polar bear Sochi talisman

The rocket decorated with the mainly blue Olympic logo and the words Sochi 2014 blasted off into clear skies from the Kazakh steppe on a sunny Autumn morning.

Minutes later, the initial booster rocket delivered the astronauts into orbit. The capsule carrying the astronauts is due to dock with the ISS at 1431 Moscow time (1031 GMT).

On the ISS, they will join six incumbent crew, station commander Fyodor Yurchikhin of Russia and flight engineers Karen Nyberg of

NASA, Italy's Luca Parmitano, Russian Oleg Kotov, NASA's Mike Hopkins and Russian Sergei Ryazansky.

Their talisman hanging inside the capsule was a toy polar bear, one of the symbols of the Sochi games, Russian television showed. The toy will be used as an indicator of weightlessness.

The launch was also broadcast live on a big screen to thousands of people watching in New York's Times Square, according to NASA.

After a brief stay on the ISS, the torch will then be taken back to Earth by the three astronauts now finishing their five-and-a-half-month mission on the ISS. They are due to touch down in Kazakhstan on Monday at 0250 GMT.

The same torch will later be used to light the Olympic flame at the Fisht stadium in Sochi for the opening ceremony of the Games on February 7.



Japanese astronaut Koichi Wakata (C), Russian cosmonaut Mikhail Tyurin (front) and US astronaut Rick Mastracchio pose with the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic torch (front L) prior to liftoff from Baikonur cosmodrome on November 7, 2013

In a spectacular torch relay, Russia last month took a lit Olympic torch to the North Pole on a nuclear-powered icebreaker.

The high-profile Olympics mission comes as Russia seeks to prove that its mostly Soviet-designed systems are reliable enough to continue humans' conquest of space.

The 2011 retirement of the US Space Shuttle programme made the Soyuz—whose basic principles are little changed since the first manned spaceflight by Yuri Gagarin in 1961—the world's last remaining manned

link with the ISS.

But Russia has been recently blighted by a string of space failures that include the July 2 explosion shortly after take-off from Baikonur of an unmanned Proton-M rocket.

In an apparent response to the problems, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on October 10 fired the head of the state [space](#) agency Roscomos, Vladimir Popovkin, after just two-and-a-half years in the job.

Oleg Ostapenko, previously deputy defence minister, was appointed the new Roscosmos chief.

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