

Russian-US crew blast off for ISS from Kazakhstan (Update)

March 25 2014, by Vasily Maximov



The crew members of a mission to the International Space Station (ISS), US astronaut Steven Swanson (L), Russian cosmonauts Alexander Skvortsov (C) and Oleg Artemyev (R), in Kazakhstan on March 26, 2014

A crew of two Russian cosmonauts and an American astronaut blasted off Tuesday from Kazakhstan on a Russian Soyuz rocket for the International Space Station, with US-Russia space cooperation pressing

on despite the diplomatic standoff over Ukraine.

Russians Alexander Skvortsov and Oleg Artemyev along with Steve Swanson of NASA took off in a spectacular night-time launch at the start of a fast-track six-hour journey to the orbiting laboratory, where they will spend half a year.

All the stages of the launch went without a hitch and the Soyuz capsule successfully went into the right orbit. Docking with the ISS was expected at 0304 GMT Wednesday.

After the retirement of the US shuttle, NASA is for now wholly reliant on Russia for delivering astronauts to the space station on its tried-and-trusted Soyuz launch and capsule system.

Space officials have made clear that space cooperation—one of the few areas of genuine mutual work between Russia and the United States—will continue unaffected by the mounting diplomatic strains that have seen the US impose sanctions on Russian officials over Moscow's seizure of Crimea.

A yellow toy duck nicknamed "quack" given to Swanson by his daughter hung in the cockpit and started floating a few minutes into launch as the crew started to experience weightlessness.

'We'll live together peacefully'

At the pre-flight news conference at Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, senior astronauts Skvortsov and Swanson were all smiles behind the glass that protects them from infections from the media and other bystanders.

Skvortsov said that they had decided to have dinners together on board

the ISS "as an opportunity to come together as friends in the kitchen and look each other in the eye".

Swanson said that the crew would also been looking forward to watching the football World Cup in Brazil, which will take place during their mission.

Skvortsov, whose name originates from the word "starling" in Russian, said he would be able to live in harmony with the "swan" Swanson.

"In nature these birds exist together very peacefully. I do not think we will have any problems. I think we will all be able to live peacefully together," he said.

Swanson also paid homage to Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut who became the first man in space in 1961 with his flight from Baikonur.

"Yuri is a symbol for the whole world. I am proud to be part of history here," he said.

Skvortsov is making his second space flight and Swanson, a veteran of two past shuttle missions, his third.

Artemyev meanwhile is making his first voyage to space but took part in a 2009 experiment where volunteers were shut up in a capsule at a Moscow laboratory for 105 days to simulate the effects of a possible voyage to Mars.

"I hope that my small contribution will help those going to Mars and who make the first step on Mars and maybe even see extra-terrestrial life!" he said ahead of the launch.

"There are lots of good jobs on Earth but that would be the ultimate."

After docking, the trio will bring the ISS crew up to six by joining on board incumbent crew Koichi Wakata of Japan, American Rick Mastracchio and Russian Mikhail Tyurin.

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