

## Crew including first woman cosmonaut in 17 years blasts off for ISS (Update)

September 25 2014, by Anna Malpas

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Member of expedition to the International Space Station Russian cosmonaut Elena Serova waves during farewell ceremony as they get up into the spacecraft Soyuz TMA-14M before the launch at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Thursday, Sept. 25, 2014. (AP Photo/Yuri Kochetkov, Pool)

A Russian Soyuz spacecraft carrying an American astronaut and two Russian cosmonauts, including the first woman cosmonaut in 17 years, blasted off on schedule Friday, Russian mission control said.

The Soyuz-TMA14M spacecraft took off at 12:25 am Moscow time (2025 GMT Thursday) from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan to start the journey to the International Space Station (ISS).

"The Soyuz-FG space rocket successfully launched to put the Soyuz TMA-14M spacecraft into orbit," the Russian space agency Roscosmos said in a statement.

The crew members were doing well, it added.

Yelena Serova is the first Russian woman to fly to the ISS. She is accompanied by fellow cosmonaut Alexander Samokutyaev and NASA astronaut Barry Wilmore.

Their spacecraft is set to dock with the ISS at 0215 GMT on Friday after taking a six-hour fast-track route.

They are due to join the ISS commander, Russia's Maxim Surayev, his American colleague Reid Wiseman and German Alexander Gerst from the European Space Agency onboard the space laboratory.

The new ISS crew members are scheduled to spend a total of 169 days in space.

Earlier Thursday, the trio took part in pre-flight rituals such as signing the door of their Baikonur hotel and receiving a blessing from a Russian Orthodox priest, before boarding a bus to the launchpad to cheers from relatives.

They then entered their Soyuz-TMA14M capsule around one-and-a-half hours before lift-off on a dark, cloudy night.



Members of expedition to the International Space Station Russian cosmonaut Alexander Samokutyaev, bottom, Russian cosmonaut Elena Serova, top, and NASA astronaut Barry Wilmore, center, wave during a farewell ceremony as they enter the spacecraft Soyuz TMA-14M before the launch at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Thursday, Sept. 25, 2014. (AP Photo/Yuri Kochetkov, Pool)

Serova is just the fourth Soviet or Russian woman cosmonaut.

The first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, made her only space flight in 1963.

The following two women made two space flights each: Svetlana Savitskaya in 1982 and 1984 and Yelena Kondakova in 1994 and 1997,

before a 17-year-long hiatus.

"My flight is my job," 38-year-old space engineer Serova said at a press conference this week, where she had to fend off questions about her hair style and how her daughter would cope in her absence.

"I'll be the first Russian woman who will fly to the ISS," she said. "I feel a huge responsibility towards the people who taught and trained us and I want to tell them: We won't let you down!"

Both Serova's colleagues in the cramped Soyuz capsule have space mission experience.

Wilmore, 51, known as Butch, made his first space flight as the pilot of the US shuttle in 2009, while Samokutyaev, 44, who is commander of the Soyuz spacecraft, spent 164 days on the ISS in 2011.

Russia is currently the only country that can send astronauts to the ISS after the United States stopped its shuttle programme.

NASA has vowed to continue cooperation aboard the ISS despite a major chill in relations over Moscow's role in the Ukraine crisis.

But Russia has hinted that it may turn down Washington's request to extend the lifespan of the ISS by four years through 2024, saying it is only needed until 2020.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the space sector, jokingly suggested in April that the United States would have to use a "trampoline" to get to the ISS after it imposed sanctions over Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Citation: Crew including first woman cosmonaut in 17 years blasts off for ISS (Update) (2014, September 25) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-us-russian-space-crew-station.html>

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