

Russian and American astronauts return to Earth

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Russian doctors help US NASA astronaut Steven Swanson (C) after he returned with two Russian cosmonauts from the International Space Station, near the Kazakhstan city of Zhezkazgan on September 11, 2014

Two Russian cosmonauts and an American astronaut returned to Earth on Thursday after spending more than six months working together aboard the International Space Station, as tensions between their countries soared over the Ukraine crisis.

American Steven Swanson and Russians Alexander Skvortsov and Oleg Artemyev, who left on March 26, landed in the Kazakh steppe at 0223 GMT aboard a Soyuz capsule, the Russian space agency Roscosmos and its US equivalent NASA said in statements.

The trio, who worked together in cramped quarters aboard the ISS as relations between their countries plummeted to levels unseen since the end of the Cold War over Ukraine, smiled broadly, gave thumbs up signs and waved in the sunshine as they spent their first minutes back on the planet.

The three spent a total of "169 days of science and technology research in space, including a record 82 hours of research in a single week" in July, NASA said in a statement.

The crew orbited the Earth more than 2,700 times and travelled more than 71.7 million miles, NASA said.

"One of several key research focus areas during Expedition 40 was human health management for long duration space travel as NASA and Roscosmos prepare for two crew members to spend one year aboard the orbiting laboratory in 2015," it said.

The ISS is now being commanded by Max Suraev of Russia, with crewmates Reid Wiseman of NASA and Alexander Gerst of the European Space Agency, with three new crew members—Barry Wilmore of NASA and Alexander Samokutyaev and Elena Serova of Roscosmos—due to arrive in two weeks, blasting off from Kazakhstan on September 25.

The Ukraine crisis has sent East-West tensions soaring, with the US, the EU and Kiev accusing Moscow of fomenting, supporting and participating in separatist unrest in the ex-Soviet state's east—charges that Russia has denied.

Amid the tensions, NASA in April announced that it was cutting space cooperation with Russia over Moscow's Ukraine policies, but that work at the [space station](#) would not be affected.

Use of the space station depends on Russia, which is the only country in charge of transporting astronauts and cosmonauts to and from the facility.

The ISS was launched in 1998 as an international effort and has been a symbol of cooperation, particularly between the US and Russia. When the time comes to retire it, the station will be taken out

of orbit and sunk in the ocean.

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