

Russia launches fresh crew to ISS on fast-track journey

October 14 2020, by Christopher Rickleton



The three-member crew launched from the Russian-operated Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan

Two cosmonauts and a NASA astronaut blasted off on a fast-track journey to the International Space Station Wednesday, in the first such

launch aboard a Russian capsule since SpaceX's game-changing debut manned flight from US soil.

Sergey Ryzhikov and Sergey Kud-Sverchkov of Roscosmos and NASA's Kathleen Rubins launched from the Russian-operated Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan at 0545 GMT on Wednesday.

A NASA TV commentator said everything was normal, citing communications between Russian mission control and the crew, while Roscosmos said the capsule had successfully gone into orbit.

Their journey will be the first [manned flight](#) to the ISS to last just over three hours before docking—a new fast-track profile that takes half the time of standard trips to the orbital lab.

Only an unmanned Progress cargo space ship has previously used this profile, which requires just two orbits before docking.

Stringent precautions, including tighter quarantine and mask-wearing before launch, have been taken due to the coronavirus pandemic but the astronauts and space officials have rejected any concerns about a risk of infection on the station.

'Incredibly lucky'

The launch is sandwiched between two SpaceX launches—the first manned spaceflights to the ISS under NASA's aegis since 2011.



The International Space Station crew of NASA astronaut Kate Rubins and Russian cosmonauts Sergey Ryzhikov and Sergey Kud-Sverchkov

Before May 30, when US astronauts Robert Behnken and Doug Hurley arrived at the ISS, Russia and Baikonur had enjoyed a lucrative monopoly on manned missions to the ISS.

The NASA duo returned safely on August 2 and a fresh SpaceX launch, this time anticipating a full-length half-year mission at the [space station](#), is expected next month.

The emergence of private players SpaceX and Boeing—part of NASA's Commercial Crew Program—has fuelled talk of a new "space race" between a number of countries.

But the men and women that fly to the space station have played down talk of competition and focused instead on [space travel](#)'s ability to bring rival nations together for a common cause.

Speaking at a pre-launch press conference on Tuesday, Rubins did not directly reference the SpaceX flight when asked how she felt to be on board during a new era in spaceflight.

"We don't get to choose our launch date or what occurs on station but certainly I feel incredibly lucky to be on station when... these events are happening," said the American astronaut, who was celebrating her 42nd birthday on Wednesday.

Rubins was a microbiologist who researched the Ebola virus among other viruses before she began training as an astronaut, launching to the ISS for the first time in 2016.

She said she will work on experiments including "bio printing tissues and growing cells in space and of course continuing our work on DNA sequencing".



Roscosmos said the capsule had successfully gone into orbit

The astronaut added she found it very unlikely that the coronavirus—which has seen pre-flight protocols overhauled at Baikonur—could find its way onto the ISS.

"We have a very strict quarantine, almost from March by my perception," she said, noting that the crew had been regularly tested for the virus.

'Too US-centric'

Ryzhikov, 46-year-old former military pilot, has spent 173 days in space

compared to Rubins' 115 while Kud-Sverchkov, 37, is flying for the first time.

On the eve of the launch, Ryzhikov expressed sadness over ongoing fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh and said he hoped the example of the ISS could help "spread love, friendship and comradeship".

The ISS, which has been permanently occupied since 2000, has been a rare example of cooperation between Moscow and Washington, but the project may be entering its final decade.

Dmitry Rogozin, the head of the Russian [space](#) agency Roscosmos on Monday also said he did not envisage Moscow participating "on a large scale" in a NASA-led Moon-orbiting station known as The Gateway.

The proposed new station "is too US-centric" Rogozin said.

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