

Russian and U.S. Crew Reach Orbit

November 14, 2011



Russian cosmonaut Anatoly Ivanishin, right, joking around with his U.S. crewmate Dan Burbank on Monday. **Mikhail Metzel**

KOROLYOV, Moscow Region — Three astronauts blasted off on Monday to return a full crew to the International Space Station as Russia seeks to restore confidence in its space program following the recent crash of a cargo spaceship and several botched launches.

The launch was the first since NASA ended its 30-year shuttle program in July, heralding a gap of several years when the 16 nations behind the \$100 billion space station will rely on Russia to ferry crews.

“The spaceship has reached orbit,” flight engineer Anton Shkaplerov said in a radioed message to the cavernous Mission Control center in a northern Moscow suburb. Applause broke out as the crew flashed a thumbs-up signal.

The mission had been delayed since September over safety fears after an unmanned Russian Progress craft taking supplies to astronauts broke up in the atmosphere in August, one of the worst Russian space mishaps in decades.

Veteran NASA astronaut Daniel Burbank is making his first voyage on board a Soyuz spacecraft from Russia's Baikonur launchpad in Kazakhstan, while cosmonauts Shkaplerov and Anatoly Ivanishin are making their maiden space voyage.

The crew had shrugged off safety concerns before their craft lifted off from Baikonur, blazing an orange trail through the overcast sky above the Kazakh steppe.

"We don't have any black thoughts. We have faith in our equipment," Russian news agencies quoted Shkaplerov as saying before the launch.

Reporting back to Mission Control after takeoff, he said the crew was "feeling good." A small stuffed bird from the mobile app Angry Birds, a mascot given to Shkaplerov by his five-year-old daughter, hovered above the weightless crew.

"Except for the bad weather in Baikonur, everything went extremely well," Vladimir Solovyov, head of launches for the Russian segment of the space station, told reporters at Mission Control.

After a cramped two-day journey aboard the Soyuz TMA-22 capsule, the crew will dock with the space station on Wednesday, overlapping briefly with station commander Mike Fossum of NASA, Japan's Satoshi Furukawa and Russia's Sergei Volkov.

Any problem in reaching the space station could leave the space station empty for the first time in more than a decade when the current three-man crew returns to Earth later this month.

The Federal Space Agency chief has said the Aug. 24 failure of the Progress rocket launch was an "isolated" glitch caused by a fuel pipe blockage.

But it added to a string of failures that marred this year's celebration of the 50 years since Yuri Gagarin's pioneering orbit and pointed to deeper troubles with Russia's space industry.

Moscow hopes a smooth mission will begin restoring its reputation after a launch touted as post-Soviet Russia's interplanetary debut went awry.

Russia is likely to have lost the \$165 million Fobos-Grunt probe, which is stuck in orbit and may drop to Earth after it failed to set a course toward Mars' moon on Wednesday.

Botched launches have also lost Russia a high-tech military orbiter, a costly telecommunication satellite, and set back plans for a global navigation system to rival the U.S. GPS.

This year the United States turned over responsibilities to Russia, at a cost of about \$350 million a year, until commercial firms can offer space-taxi rides.

NASA is seeking \$850 million to help U.S.-based private companies develop human orbital transport capabilities with the goal of breaking Russia's monopoly on ferrying astronauts to the space station before the end of 2016.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/11/14/russian-and-us-crew-reach-orbit-a10766>