

Nebulous Future Weighs Down Space Program

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Sitting on a bench dressed in a blue bathrobe, veteran cosmonaut Alexander Laveikin is relaxing after an after-work tennis match with his friends, all of them former cosmonauts who took part in many Soviet space missions.

But while the faces of the men on the court are recognizable to many people born during the 1970s, the modern Russian space industry is struggling to recruit new blood to a once prestigious occupation.

"There was a time when we felt the country's attention drawn toward us," said the youthful-looking Laveikin, who flew to the space station Mir in 1987.

Now 60, Laveikin looks back nostalgically on the glory days. Originally an aerospace engineer, he joined the Soviet cosmonaut detachment, a dream job at that time.

"I wanted to become a pilot like my father, and I became both a pilot and a cosmonaut," he said.

His father was a military pilot during World War II. Laveikin took that legacy to even greater heights.

Until the end of the Soviet Union, cosmonauts enjoyed celebrity status, and their names were known by heart. Yuri Gagarin became a legend as a result of his cosmic exploits.

But the profession has lost a great deal of prestige since the Soviet Union breathed its last.

On the plus side, though, a recruitment drive by the Russian space agency has picked up steam in March.

At the end of February, only 53 people had applied for the cosmonaut-training program. The number had risen to 113 by mid-March, space officials said, bolstered by the media coverage of the competition.

The agency announced previously that only five or six people will be selected to join the Star City space detachment, which now consists of 39 cosmonauts.

Not all applicants seemed to be aware of how hard the job is, said center director Sergei Krikalyov, a veteran of six space flights, including one on a U.S. shuttle.

He said one person who called to sign up cited the center's proximity to his house as a reason.

"I don't think you have what it takes to become a cosmonaut if the only reason [for applying] is that work is close to home," Krikalyov said.

Agency requirements state that applicants must be generally healthy, have a university degree, not be older than 33, and weigh 50 to 90 kilograms. Candidates' height should be from 150 to 190 centimeters, and 90 centimeters when they are sitting.

They should also speak English, which is a requirement for international missions.

Few of the applicants in the current crop are women. But officials said the Russian space agency doesn't discourage women from applying.

The majority of American female astronauts are military pilots, said Alexander Krasnov, head of the space agency's department of manned space programs.

"There are no female military pilots in the Russian armed forces," Krasnov said at a recent news conference dedicated to the selection process. He was referring to the Russian armed forces, which consist mostly of male soldiers.

Applicants who are accepted into the program go through years of extensive training with no guarantee of going into space, experts said.

For example, Nadezhda Kuzhelnaya spent eight years training at the cosmonaut center without making a spaceflight. She left in 2003.

"Being a cosmonaut who never flew is psychologically hard," said Laveikin, who spent 10 years training for the mission before his spaceflight.

Uncertainty aside, the financial factor drives away many current applicants from an occupation that in the past has provided some lucrative privileges.

Krikalyov said cosmonauts' salaries have increased from 30,000 rubles (\$1,000) a month to 70,000 rubles (\$2,333) a month over three years.

"This salary is not a pie in the sky," he said. "If someone wants to make money by hard physical labor, it is better to become a loader. We need people who understand that it is not the easiest way to get financial benefits."

Soon after Laveikin flew to space, he moved out of his ordinary Soviet-era apartment block into a cosmonaut compound in the city's northwest featuring cozy two-story apartment buildings for nonmilitary cosmonauts.

The money paid by the government during that time was not a lot, Laveikin recalled, but he added that the money was a secondary factor.

"Everyone understood what it meant when a person has the title of Hero of the Soviet Union," he said, referring to the highest award cosmonauts were given.

Nevertheless, Laveikin said that nowadays financial considerations should play a bigger part.

"It is not good when a cosmonaut is paid like a cleaning lady at a good company," he said.

Laveikin now works as deputy director of the Moscow-based Memorial Space Museum, and he said the state should pay more attention to space, including promoting educational programs on space exploration on television.

"You should show more pilots and cosmonauts and not naked butts," he said.

Former cosmonauts have appealed to space agency chief Vladimir Popovkin to devote more attention to the needs of future cosmonauts. But nobody is heeding the warnings, Laveikin said.

The future of long manned flights is unclear. Popovkin told Izvestia in January that a "constant human presence in space is often not justified."

Popovkin, a former deputy defense minister who was appointed head of the agency in 2011, is believed to be a supporter of nonmanned space missions.

He said the agency considered replacing the regular manned missions with short-term ones that would require cosmonauts to return soon after they finish work on the required scientific experiments.

Deputy space agency head Vitaly Davydov told reporters recently that the number of manned space flights will decrease. But he said financing will remain the same "in absolute figures."

Only 113 people have applied for five to six openings for cosmonauts at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center, causing the agency to prolong recruitment until the end of April in hope of attracting more candidates to join the existing team of 39 candidates. In contrast, U.S. space agency NASA averages more than 4,000 applicants for about 20 openings every two years.

Here's what is required of space candidates:

Cosmonaut	U.S. astronaut
Health Physician's clearance required	
Education A university degree	Bachelor's degree plus 3 years of professional experience or at least 1,000 pilot-in-command time in jet aircraft
Age Not older than 33	No age restrictions, but candidates selected in the past have ranged between the ages of 26 and 46, with the average age being 34
Height 150-190 cm, and 90 cm while seated	148.5-193 cm
Starting monthly salary 70,000 rubles (\$2,370)	\$5,393

Sources: Federal Space Agency, Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center, NASA

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