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U.S.-Russian Cosmic Cooperation Unhampered

By Matthew Bodner

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ILS is responsible for marketing and contracting for all commercial Proton rocket launch services worldwide.

Despite a looming collapse of U.S.-Russian bilateral relations, the standoff over Ukraine has not had any impact on commercial space ventures and intergovernmental space projects, such as the International Space Station, or ISS.

"We do not expect the current Russia-Ukraine situation to have any impact on our civil space cooperation with Russia, including our partnership on the International Space Station program," said Sean Fuller, NASA's director in Russia for human spaceflight.

NASA and the Russian Federal Space Agency, or Roscosmos, are no strangers to the political volatility between their countries. "A professional, beneficial, and collegial working relationship [has been maintained] through the various ups and downs of the broader U.S.-Russia relationship and we expect that to continue throughout the life of the ISS program

and beyond," Fuller said.

Dr. Scott Pace, Director of the Space Policy Institute at George Washington University's Elliot School of International Relations, said that although "a full range of options are being considered by the U.S. government" in response to the Russian incursion in Crimea, "I do not envision — at this stage — any impacts to the International Space Station or use of Soyuz vehicles for crew rotation."

"It seems that there are many other options for the U.S. and other countries to express opposition to Russian actions," he said, although "If pressed to speculate, I believe it would take a formal break in diplomatic relations to trigger a re-evaluation of ISS cooperation," Pace said.

It is business as usual, said Karen Monaghan, spokeswoman for International Launch Services, or ILS, which is a former joint venture between Lockheed Martin and the Khrunichev State Research and Space Production Center, but is now majority owned by Khrunichev, and based in Reston, Virginia.

ILS holds the exclusive rights to hawk the Proton-M launch vehicle on the global satellite market. Although Proton is a tried-and-true Russian design, ILS's parent company, Khrunichev has "a limited number of Proton [component] suppliers in Ukraine," said ILS spokeswoman Karen Monaghan.

"However, at this point we do not anticipate any impact on Proton launch vehicle production. Khrunichev has ample hardware to support our launches and Proton's steady launch tempo will continue as planned," she added.

Two of these launches are contracts to boost Gazprom Space Systems communications satellites in to orbit: the Yamal 401 and Yamal 601. Monaghan said that Gazprom Space Systems is one of their biggest partners and "a perfect match" for their services.

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