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Russia Approves 4-Year Extension of International Space Station Program

By The Moscow Times

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The International Space Station

The Russian government has accepted a NASA-led proposal to extend the life of the International Space Station (ISS) to 2024, the head of the Federal Space Agency said at the Baikonur Cosmodrome on Thursday, ending fears that Moscow would torpedo U.S.-Russian space cooperation as a result of the Ukraine crisis.

Speaking after Wednesday's launch of a new three-man international crew to the station from Baikonur, Roscosmos chief Igor Komarov told reporters, "I've informed our colleagues that the Russian government has approved the operation of ISS until 2024," according to news agency TASS.

NASA announced in January last year its intention to extend the $150 billion ISS program beyond its original 2020 end date, but was waiting for partner agencies in Russia, Europe and Japan to receive permission from their governments. The station costs several billion dollars

to operate annually.

The project became highly politicized in Russia following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis last year and the imposition of Western sanctions against Moscow. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said in May last year that Russia would pull out of the program in 2020, rebuffing NASA.

Roscosmos fought for the extension of ISS, but one official at the agency told SpaceNews last summer that tensions with the U.S. were slowing the Russian government's approval of the plan.

In response to Komarov's announcement, NASA Deputy head Bill Gerstenmaier said, "The approval of extended operation of ISS by the Russian and Canadian governments suggest that we will continue to move forward together [in space]," TASS reported.

Roscosmos is the first agency to sign up to the 2024 end date. The European Space Agency and Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency are working with their governments to secure funding and are expected to agree to NASA's plans.

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