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Russia Launches Modernized Soyuz Rocket to Space Station

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A Russian rocket carrying three astronauts to the International Space Station successfully took off from the Baikonur Cosmodrome on Thursday, the state-run TASS news agency reported.

The launch marked the first flight of a modernized version of the venerable Soyuz spacecraft that Russia has flown since the late 1960s.

Known as the Soyuz-MS, the new vessel features an all-digital control system, streamlined internal hardware, and more efficient solar panels. It is intended to be the final modification of the Soyuz spacecraft, and will be used until Russia fields its still-in-development Federation spacecraft in the 2020s.

The crew will take the scenic route to the International Space Station. While Soyuz missions in recent years have often taken a quick, six-hour route to the orbiting outpost, the new modification will take a more traditional two-day route.

The vessel is commanded by Russian cosmonaut Anatoly Ivanishin, Japanese astronaut Takuya Onishi, and NASA's Kate Rubins. Their Soyuz-MS spacecraft is expected to arrive at the station on Saturday.

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