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Russian, U.S. ISS Record-Holders Return to Earth

By Christopher Rickleton for AFP

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Ground personnel work at the landing site of the Soyuz MS-19 space capsule carrying the International Space Station (ISS) crew of Russian cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov and Anton Shkaplerov and NASA astronaut Mark Vande Hei. **Bill INGALLS / NASA / AFP**

A record-breaking U.S. astronaut and two Russian cosmonauts returned to Earth from the International Space Station Wednesday, with tensions between Moscow and the West soaring over Ukraine.

"The crew of Roscosmos cosmonauts Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov, as well as NASA astronaut Mark Vande Hei, has returned to Earth," Russia's space agency Roscosmos said in a statement.

Footage broadcast from the landing site in Kazakhstan showed the Soyuz descent module touching down at the expected time of 11:28 GMT in bright conditions before the crew emerged from the vehicle that had blown onto its side.

"Tasty!" said Shkaplerov, the first man out of the descent module, as he sat sipping a tea provided by recovery staff.

NASA's Mark Vande Hei emerged from the vehicle last, after setting a new record for the single longest spaceflight by a NASA astronaut, clocking 355 days aboard the International Space Station.

Cosmonaut Dubrov, with whom he blasted off from Baikonur in April last year, now holds the record for the longest mission by a Russian at the ISS, although four cosmonauts clocked longer stints at the now-defunct Mir space station, which was the world's first continuously inhabited orbital lab.

Shkaplerov was rounding off a standard six-month mission.

Relations between Moscow and Washington have been in tatters since the Kremlin launched an invasion of Ukraine last month, killing thousands and forcing 4 million people to flee the country.

Space was one of the few areas of cooperation between Russia and the West untouched by the fallout of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, but here, too, tensions are growing.

The ISS, a collaboration between the U.S., Canada, Japan, the European Space Agency, and Russia, is expected to be wound up in the next decade.

Embed:

> Touchdown! At 7:28ET after 355 days in space for Mark Vande Hei of @NASA_Astronauts and Pyotr Dubrov of @Roscosmos and 176 days in space for Anton Shkaplerov of @Roscosmos, the crew has landed in their Soyuz MS-19 spacecraft in Kazakhstan! ?https://t.co/E4LYH026dx pic.twitter.com/ad9Hz4TPuS
>
> — NASA HQ PHOTO (@nasahqphoto) March 30, 2022

Last month, Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin, an avid supporter of what Moscow has called a "special military operation" in Ukraine, suggested that Western sanctions targeting Russia in response had put the orbital lab in jeopardy.

"If you block cooperation with us, who will save the ISS from uncontrolled deorbiting and falling on the U.S. or European territory?" Rogozin wrote in a tweet last month – noting that the station does not fly over much of Russia.

At present, the ISS depends on a Russian propulsion system to maintain its orbit, some 400 kilometers above sea level, with the U.S. segment responsible for electricity and life support systems – interdependencies that were woven into the project from its inception in the 1990s.

ISS astronauts and cosmonauts traditionally steer clear of politics, stressing the need for

cooperation to further humanity's goals in space.

But at least two retired heavyweights of the space world, U.S. astronaut Scott Kelly and Russia's Gennady Padalka have responded to the invasion with criticism.

Kelly, who held the NASA spaceflight record before it was broken by Vande Hei earlier this month, said he had returned a medal awarded to him by the Russian government in 2011.

"Please, give (the medal) to Russian mothers whose sons have been killed in this unjust war," Kelly said in a tweet addressed to Russia's former president and current deputy security council chairman Dmitry Medvedev earlier this month.

Kelly's former ISS commander Gennady Padalka, also appeared to criticize the invasion in an interview with private Russian media this month.

"One thing is clear to me: authorities, regimes, ideologies come and go, but Russia and Ukraine will always be next to each other. We cannot be separated onto different planets," Padalka told liberal newspaper Novaya Gazeta.

He expressed concern that Russia's invasion meant that Ukrainians would view current and future Russian generations with "hatred."

Padalka, 63, holds the world record for cumulative days spent in space – 879 – and is a Hero of the Russian Federation.

NASA on Wednesday hailed its own record-breaker, Vande Hei, with the agency's administrator Bill Nelson noting in a statement that his mission was "paving the way for future human explorers on the Moon, Mars, and beyond."

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