Covid-19 restrictions disrupt astronauts' preparations for ISS

**Decades of traditions halted as concerns also grow for other space programmes**

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 Nasa astronaut Chris Cassidy (left), and Russian cosmonauts Anatoli Ivanishin and Ivan Vagner (centre and right) are scheduled to launch on 9 April Photograph: Yuri Kochetkov/EPA

Traditions that spacefarers have observed for decades have fallen foul of efforts to rein in the coronavirus pandemic as astronauts and cosmonauts face more stringent quarantine measures before they blast into orbit.

The next crew bound for the [International Space Station](https://www.theguardian.com/science/international-space-station), the ultimate destination for self-isolation, will break with ceremony next month and not lay a red carnation at the Kremlin wall where Yuri Gagarin’s ashes are interred. Nor will they visit his office at Star City, which preserves everything as it was on the day the first man in space died in a 1968 training flight crash.

The customary visits were never crowded events, but in keeping with the lockdowns and social distancing measures brought in around the world, space agencies and their staff are not taking any chances.

“All the traditions are scrapped,” said Frank De Winne, the head of the European Space Agency’s astronaut corps, who received his test pilot degree from the Empire Test Pilots’ school in Boscombe Down, Wiltshire. “The crew is locked up and cannot see anybody except those who are screened.”

Before the virus arrived, space station crews spent two weeks in full quarantine at the Baikonur launch site in southern Kazakhstan, but were free to attend ceremonies and farewell meals in Moscow before flying out to the cosmodrome. The tougher measures mean crews, including the [Nasa](https://www.theguardian.com/science/nasa) astronaut Chris Cassidy and Russian cosmonauts Anatoli Ivanishin and Ivan Vagner, who are due to launch on 9 April, must now be quarantined for two weeks before they even reach Baikonur.

“The quarantine is much more strict now. As few people as possible will have access to the crew, which means that scientists who need to get baseline data from them have to go into quarantine as well before they can access the crew and do their final checks. It has a big impact on the operations,” said De Winne.

The ESA has sent staff home from its sites across the continent and all training has been put on hold at its European Astronaut Centre in Cologne, Germany. Astronauts who were already at Nasa’s Johnson Space Center in Houston will stay on for more training and fly back to Cologne when it is considered safe to do so. “We are basically reshuffling the entire training plan of the astronauts,” De Winne said.

Nasa faces its own problems with the spread of the virus. The US space agency’s chief administrator, Jim Bridenstine, told staff on Thursday that work was being paused on Orion, a new rocket and crew capsule that it was hoped would return astronauts to the moon in 2024.

It is not just crewed missions that have been disrupted. Scientific missions scattered across the solar system and scheduled for launch this year are also a concern. The ESA’s director general, Jan Wörner, said that if the situation continues for months, delays are to be expected. “It’s not only the launches. Scientific missions take years of preparation and if you interrupt the preparations sometimes it’s not possible to get it back on track. That for sure is an impact,” he said.

For now, ESA teams can still take data from their spacecraft, but that is not guaranteed if the crisis worsens. Staff are monitoring for collisions from home – on average, each spacecraft has to dodge a satellite or a chunk of space debris twice a year – and are on standby to come in if needed. But Wörner says he cannot pare the workforce down further. “We cannot close more than we have. We are at level zero,” he said. “I’m really nervous. The problem is you don’t know how to handle it. I have a crisis meeting over Skype every day.”

De Winne said that despite the disruption,the ESA was in an extremely privileged position, unlike many businesses that faced real hardship in the months ahead. He urged people to wash their hands and stay at home to help slow the spread of the virus. “All our astronauts are staying home. On the [International Space Station](https://www.theguardian.com/science/international-space-station) we have no place to go for six months, so I think everybody can stay home for a couple of months,” he said. “It’s not too bad.”