

The Pioneers: Cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev

“Once Lost in Space – Now Prominent in crewed Spaceflight”

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Sergei Krikalev appointed Special Presidential Representative for International Cooperation in Space Vladimir Putin signed Executive Order On Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for International Cooperation in Space Exploration on May 22, 2025. [1] He previously held the position of Executive Director for Human Space Flights of the Roscosmos State Space Corporation. [2]

In accordance with this Executive Order, Hero of the Russian Federation Sergei Krikalev has been appointed *Special Presidential Representative for International Cooperation in Space*.

When cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev launched into space aboard *Soyuz TM-12* in May 1991, he left behind a nation that no longer existed by the time he returned. His mission to the Mir space station was scheduled to last about five months. Instead, Krikalev remained in orbit for 311 days—nearly twice as long as planned—while the country that sent him into space, the Soviet Union, disintegrated beneath him.

This is the extraordinary story of a man caught between Earth and history, orbiting a collapsing empire.

A Routine Launch, an Extraordinary Return

Sergei Krikalev was already a veteran cosmonaut when he embarked on this mission. He had previously flown aboard Mir in 1988. This second mission was supposed to be relatively straightforward. He would spend a few months on Mir conducting experiments and maintenance before returning to Earth. At the time, few could have predicted that the Soviet Union, a global superpower with an extensive space program, would cease to exist before Krikalev's mission ended. From orbit, Krikalev had limited contact with developments back on Earth. News reached him slowly and sporadically. He was aware of rising political tensions and of Mikhail Gorbachev's reform struggles. But nothing could have prepared him for the chaos that would unfold during his time in space.

A Country Collapses

In August 1991, a failed coup by hardline Communists accelerated the unraveling of the Soviet Union. Over the next several months, the USSR's constituent republics declared independence one by one. By December, the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist.

Back on Earth, Krikalev's home city of Leningrad was renamed St. Petersburg. His Soviet passport was obsolete. The organization that had put him in space, the Soviet space agency, was now being absorbed into a new Russian agency amid funding crises and political upheaval.

Meanwhile, stranded aboard Mir, Krikalev became the symbol of a nation that no longer was.

Stranded by Necessity

One of the reasons for Krikalev's extended stay was financial. The Soviet space program had started selling seats on Mir missions to international partners. In July 1991, Krikalev agreed to stay on Mir as flight engineer for the next crew, scheduled to arrive in October because the next two planned flights had been reduced to one. The engineer slot on the *Soyuz TM-13* flight on 2 October 1991, was filled by Toktar Aubakirov, an astronaut from the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, who had not been trained for a long-duration mission and Franz Viehböck, the first Austrian astronaut,

Kikalev became known among ground control as the “last citizen of the USSR,” a lone Soviet drifting above a world in turmoil. There were genuine concerns about whether he would ever be brought home. Russian mission control scrambled to find the funds, hardware, and political will to ensure his return.

Return to a New World

On March 25, 1992, Krikalev finally landed back on Earth. From May 1991 to March 1992 he had spent 10 months in space, during which he orbited the planet over 5,000 times. He returned to a different nation—no longer a citizen of the Soviet Union, but of the Russian Federation.

Krikalev was pale and weak from the extended weightlessness, but he had endured mentally and physically. His endurance was celebrated not just for the mission's technical success, but as a symbol of resilience amid epochal change.



Legacy of a Cosmic Witness

Today, Sergei Krikalev is recognized as one of the most experienced space travelers in history. He went on to fly missions aboard the Space Shuttle and the International Space Station, eventually becoming a high-ranking official in the Russian space agency.

Yet his 1991-1992 Mir mission remains one of the most remarkable human experiences in the space age—a man caught in political limbo, orbiting Earth while watching history unfold from 400 kilometers above.

Krikalev did not choose to be a historical footnote in the fall of the Soviet Union. But by doing his duty in extraordinary circumstances, he became something more: a quiet hero of perseverance, marooned in space while the world below fell apart.

Sergei Krikalev, Lost in space, indeed—but never forgotten.

Reference:

[1] <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/123/events/copy/76977>

[2] iafastro.org

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