

Investigative Citizen Journalists Report That MH17 Downed by Rebels

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Relatives and friends of victims of the downing of Flight MH17 attending a memorial in Amsterdam on Monday.

As President Vladimir Putin accused Kiev of having hindered the official investigation into the downing of passenger plane MH17 in July, a group of investigative reporters have asserted that the plane was shot down by pro-Russian separatists using a missile system taken from Russia's military.

The investigation, titled “Origin of the Separatists' Buk: A Bellingcat Investigation” and conducted by a citizen journalism group, used various sources for its research, including social media, Google Earth satellite imagery, reports by journalists who were on the ground in Ukraine at the time of the plane's downing and interviews with residents near the crash site.

The group's founder, British journalist Eliot Higgins, is an expert in social media forensics and has previously conducted investigations using open source information, including

reports on the origin of weapons used in Syria's civil war.

The report on Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, published on Saturday, bases their argument that the rebels were responsible for the plane crash that claimed 298 lives on several key pieces of evidence, including sightings of the Buk missile system believed to have shot the plane down, the truck used to transport it, and the military convoy from Russia's 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade, from which they claim the missile system was taken.

Using messages posted on Twitter and photographs uploaded to various social media sites, the report tracks the Buk missile system on the day of the catastrophe and concludes that it was repeatedly spotted in rebel-controlled territory, not Ukrainian-controlled territory as Russia's Defense Ministry and the rebels have argued.

The low-loader truck believed to have been used to transport the Buk missile system responsible for the downing of the plane is also crucial to the report, which claims that the truck was photographed with separatists both before and after the downing of the plane.

In addition, journalists from Paris Match — a French magazine that contributed to the report — contacted the owner of the truck by phoning the telephone number listed on its side. The owner reportedly said his truck had been stolen by separatists, and that it was one of a kind in the region, according to the report.

The report also purports to debunk another one of the Defense Ministry's claims, that the Buk system was spotted in Ukrainian-controlled Krasnoarmeisk on the day of the plane crash.

The ministry had cited a photograph of the system parked next to a billboard with a Krasnoarmeisk address on it. Citing a resident of Luhansk, the Bellingcat report claims to the contrary that the same billboard fact located in that rebel-stronghold, not Krasnoarmeisk.

The report also argues that the BUK missile system used in the downing of the plane, called “Buk 3x2” for the one missing digit in its identifying number, came from a Russian military convoy used for a training exercise in Millerovo, near the border with Ukraine.

By analyzing 16 videos posted to social media accounts of members of the 53rd Brigade, the report concludes that “Buk 3x2” was present in the convoy of the brigade at the start of its training exercises, which began on June 22 and ran through July 25.

“Buk 3x2” appears in eight of the 16 videos taken between June 22 and June 25, the report said.

The next time “Buk 3x2” popped up was in Donetsk on July 17, the day of the plane's downing, according to the report, which cites various social media accounts as spotting the system in the town of Zuhres, then Shakhtarsk, and finally Snizhne, from where it is believed to have been used to shoot down the plane that day.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin on Monday accused Ukraine's government of interfering with the official MH17 investigation.

Putin made the comments in talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific conference in China. Najib called for greater access to the wreckage, but

Putin disputed the suggestion that pro-Russia separatists were hindering the investigation.

"The reference that the territory of the crash site is controlled by so called pro-Russian separatists is totally ungrounded," Putin said.

"It is not them but the opposite side [that is] constantly shelling the site and doesn't allow full work there," he said, adding that Russia supported a full and impartial investigation into the downing of the plane.

Material from Reuters is included in this report.

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