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Putin Apologizes Without Claiming Responsibility for Plane Crash

By AFP

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Emergency specialists work at the crash site of an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet near the western Kazakh city of Aktau. **HANDOUT Kazakhstan's emergency situations ministryAFP**

Vladimir Putin admitted Saturday that Russian air defence was working when an Azerbaijani Airlines plane tried to land in Grozny before crashing, breaking the Kremlin's silence as speculation mounted Russia may have accidentally shot down the plane.

The Russian leader called his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev, apologizing for the incident that took place in Russian airspace, while stopping short of saying Russian air defense shot the plane.

Baku, meanwhile, said Aliyev had "emphasised" to Putin that the plane was hit by external interference over Russia, saying it wanted those responsible "held accountable."

The phone call between the allies came three days after the Embraer 190 plane flying from

Baku to Grozny crashed in Kazakhstan, killing 38 people out of the 67 onboard.

Western experts have pointed the finger at Russia, while the U.S. said it had "early indications" the plane was shot.

Putin told Aliyev the plane had tried to land in Grozny "several times."

"During this time, Grozny, Mozdok and Vladikavkaz were being attacked by Ukrainian combat drones and Russian air defence was repelling these attacks," Putin said, according to a Kremlin transcript.

It added that: "Vladimir Putin had presented his apologies that the tragic incident happened in Russia's air space and again expressed his deep and genuine condolences to the families of the dead, wishing a quick recovery to those affected."

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But Aliyev appeared in no doubt that the plane was shot at over Russia.

"President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that the Azerbaijan Airlines passenger plane encountered external physical and technical interference while in Russian airspace, resulting in a complete loss of control," Baku's presidency said in a statement.

It added Aliyev "highlighted that the multiple holes in the aircraft's fuselage, injuries sustained by passengers and crew due to foreign particles penetrating the cabin mid-flight, and testimonies from surviving flight attendants and passengers confirm evidence of external physical and technical interference."

Survivors have told the media about hearing an "explosion" as the plane attempted to land.

Aliyev's office said Baku wanted an investigation "ensuring those responsible are held accountable."

'Stark reminder' of MH17

Speculation has swirled for days, with the U.S. weighing in Friday.

Its White House spokesman John Kirby said Washington had "early indications that would certainly point to the possibility that this jet was brought down by Russian air defense systems."

Putin's phone call came after the Kremlin had earlier said it would be "inappropriate" to comment on the speculations.

Moscow also said it will work with an investigation by Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

While some in Azerbaijan – a Russian ally – have called for an apology from Moscow,

Kazakhstan, one of Moscow's main allies, has not pointed the finger at Russia.

Russian officials had earlier said that Ukrainian drones were attacking Grozny that day.

Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky said he also spoke to Aliyev on Saturday, saying the footage of the plane make it looks "very much like an air defence missile strike."

"The key priority now is a thorough investigation that will answer all questions about what really happened. Russia must provide clear explanations and stop spreading disinformation," Zelensky said on social media.

The EU, meanwhile, urged a "swift, independent international investigation."

Its top diplomat Kaja Kallas said the crash was a "stark reminder" of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, which international investigations said was downed by a surface-to-air missile by Russian-backed rebels over eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Airlines cancel flights

A series of airlines have this week began cancelling flights to Russia after the incident, including national carriers of Moscow's allies.

The vast majority of Western airlines have stopped flights to Russia since Moscow launched its Ukraine offensive.

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Turkmenistan Airlines – the national carrier of the reclusive Central Asian state – was the latest airline to announce cancellations Saturday.

It said that "regular flights between Ashgabat-Moscow-Ashgabat were cancelled from 30/12/2024 to 31/01/2025," without giving an explanation.

The decision came after UAE airline flydubai suspended flights between Dubai and the southern Russian cities of Mineralnye Vody and Sochi that were scheduled between Dec. 27 and Jan. 3.

Kazakhstan's Qazaq Air has suspended its flights to Russia's Urals city of Yekaterinburg until the end of January.

Earlier this week, Israeli airline El Al said it was suspending its flights to Moscow for a week.

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