

Kremlin Accountability for MH17 Is Essential for a Credible Peace

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Local people hold portraits of lost passengers during a mourning ceremony at the crash site of the MH17 plane. **Dave Mustaine / EPA / TASS**

The trust between a parent and child is unparalleled, built on natural affection and honesty. This relationship starts with parents teaching their children not to lie. If we do not accept lies from our children, why should we accept them from politicians shaping their future?

Exactly eleven years after Russia started its aggression against Ukraine, there is talk of peace. We should keep in mind that the first two attempts — the Minsk Protocols I and II — failed miserably. There were many reasons why. However, one overarching factor was the complete lack of trust shared between the signatories. Trust-building must precede peace-making.

It has been eleven years since my brother Klaas Willem boarded Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. He and his 297 fellow passengers became one of the first international victims of Russian weapons on Ukrainian soil. The same soil where our loved ones, some eighty of them

children, met their deaths. All equally defenseless and caught unaware of the impending danger, making this atrocity even more heinous.

The harrowing pictures from the crash area brought the war to millions of living rooms, leaving viewers in shock. How could this have happened? It must have been an accident, surely? we still thought, our civilized imagination failing us. With everything that followed in Bucha, Kramatorsk, Mariupol and so many other places, I am not so sure. I cannot be because the shootdown was followed by a crime that was nearly equally as cruel: Russia lied, hid suspects and witnesses, forged so-called evidence and obstructed justice in any way they could.

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Despite Moscow's efforts, we know for a fact the downing of Flight MH17 was an act of murder, a flagrant violation of human rights and a possible breach of the laws of war. After years of work by an international investigation team, a Dutch Court of Justice sentenced two Russians and a Ukrainian to life imprisonment for the murder of 298 passengers. The verdict said that "the Buk missile that shot down MH17 was supplied by the Russian Federation and that the actions of the convicted persons directly led to the death of 298 civilians," and that the missile was probably launched by members of the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade of the Russian military.

Immediately after the crime, the Kremlin went out of its way to shun responsibility, coming up with one fictitious scenario after another and spinning a web of lies. To this day, the Russian Federation denies responsibility, despite the compelling evidence and indisputable facts concerning their crime. This did not prevent us from eventually knowing what happened. But there are still families wondering why their loved ones came to die. Was it an accident or intentional? We know the names of three culprits, but they did not act alone. Who else is culpable? All answers still lie in the Kremlin's vaults.

This persistent denial not only undermines the bereaved families' pursuit of justice but has also prolonged and deepened their grief. Putin's refusal to acknowledge this crime has added to the already unbearable burden of our loss. The perpetrators' impunity is a permanent insult to human dignity.

Relatives have long called for Russia to acknowledge their role, apologize and launch a public investigation into all those involved and the reasons behind the downing of the aircraft. They have tried to reach Moscow multiple times, to be rebuffed. Since 2017, every year relatives have responded to Russian silence on MH17 by organizing an equally silent protest.

Each year, on the weekend of Russia Day in June, relatives set 298 empty chairs in front of the Russian embassy in The Hague in remembrance of the three hundred voices that were cruelly silenced. For now, it seems there will be empty chairs in The Hague for a long time to come. How can there be talk of peace while that is the case?

MH17 proved to be a turning point in the Donbas War. The intensifying violence was no longer a local conflict. Nations that had kept their distance could no longer look away as families demanded answers from their governments in The Hague, Canberra, Kuala Lumpur, Berlin

and London.

More notably, MH17 was a turning point in the Kremlin's foreign policy. At the time, the occupation of Crimea was still meticulously covered in a shroud of ambiguity. Russia denied that the "[little green men](#)" were their occupying forces and claimed their seizure of the peninsula was the outcome of a legitimate referendum. This is evidence that the Kremlin obviously still thought international law mattered.

Shortly after, they used the same playbook for the war in Donbas, with Russians staging a separatist uprising. They presented it as a civil war rather than admitting it was a Russian invasion, a blunt attempt at occupying a neighboring country's land. This charade fell apart in July 2014. The shoot-down of MH17 and especially the subsequent lies and ludicrous denials marked the Russian regime's definitive choice to no longer pretend to honor any international law and principle of justice or universal human rights.

Consequentially, MH17 families feel as much part of this war as everyone else personally affected by it. As our tragedy was part of this very war, MH17 relatives believe that our demands should be heard and be part of any potential peace settlement, too. If they are not, any chance of accountability will vanish and Russia's consistent trampling on human dignity will be rewarded. Lies will prevail. But lies cannot be part of lasting peace.

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To leave the lies behind, we families of MH17 victims firmly believe that any sincere peace settlement with Russia must include explicit recognition of their role in taking down MH17. But words will not suffice. They must be accompanied by concrete and tangible action that demonstrates accountability. This would encompass a formal apology, thorough and public investigations into why this crime happened, identification of all involved and appropriate reparations. The memory of our lost loved ones must be honored. Accountability is essential not only for our healing and the restoration of justice but also for the prevention of such tragedies in the future. Most of all, it is the foundation for building trust.

The MH17 disaster stands out, partly because in hindsight it marked the beginning of much worse to pass. However, we don't claim to be special. Sadly, indeed we are not. Our grief was followed with much more, heartbreakingly tragedies, outright massacres and war crimes, with unimaginable suffering that we only got a taste of.

As we are united in grief, all affected by this senseless war should unite in demanding the principle of accountability be a foundation for the pursuit of peace. What is true for MH17 is true for all atrocities committed since then. Our message to the men, the parents sitting at the negotiating table, the same ones who teach their children not to lie, is simple: accountability must be part of any peace agreement.

With lies enduring, there cannot be trust. And without trust, there can be no credible peace.

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