

# Russian Missiles Exploded Near Azerbaijani Plane That Crashed Last Year, Putin Admits

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The site of the Azerbaijan Airlines plane crash in December 2024. **Azamat Sarsenbayev/AP/TASS**

President Vladimir Putin [told](#) Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev on Thursday that two Russian anti-aircraft missiles had exploded several meters away from an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet that crashed last year, killing 38 people on board.

The Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 jet was flying from Baku to Grozny in the republic of Chechnya on Dec. 25 when it disappeared from radar near Russia's Caspian Sea coast before crashing later near the Kazakh city of Aktau.

Russian officials had offered conflicting explanations for the disaster, initially suggesting that poor visibility or a possible bird strike was to blame, and later saying air defense systems were targeting Ukrainian drones in the area.

In February, Kazakhstan's Transportation Ministry published a 53-page report that referred

to “external objects” striking the aircraft and included photographs showing the fuselage riddled with holes. The report said the damage caused a loss of hydraulic fluid and pressure, leading to stabilizer failure.

Russian civil aviation authorities [said](#) they were not granted full access to the wreckage. An Azerbaijani government source [told](#) Reuters at the time that international experts had identified a fragment of a Russian Pantsir-S anti-air rocket among the recovered debris.

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Now, with the investigation into the crash nearing completion, Putin [informed](#) Aliyev that the accident was caused by a combination of Ukrainian drones entering Russian airspace and a malfunction in air defense systems, which triggered two missiles to detonate close to the plane.

“They exploded, perhaps via self-destruct, roughly at a distance of 10 meters [33 feet]. Thus, the aircraft was damaged not predominantly by direct warhead impact but rather by missile fragments,” Putin said during a meeting with the Azerbaijani president in Tajikistan, marking the first time he publicly admitted that Russia was partly to blame.

He added that if the aircraft had been hit directly, it would have “fallen immediately.” Citing cockpit recordings, Putin said the pilot had mistaken the explosion for a bird strike and declined to divert the flight to the nearby city of Makhachkala.

Putin promised compensation for the victims’ families and a “legal assessment” of actions that Russian officials took during the incident.

Aliyev, who had previously blamed Russia and demanded accountability, [thanked](#) Putin for personally overseeing the investigation.

“We had no doubt that it would thoroughly and objectively determine all the circumstances,” the Azerbaijani president said.

Relations between Russia and Azerbaijan have soured since the December plane crash.

Baku took a series of steps seen as retaliation for the incident, including [closing](#) a Moscow-funded cultural center, [barring](#) Russian officials from entering the country over “offensive” remarks and [forcing](#) Kremlin-funded media based in Azerbaijan to shut down.

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