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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 before it crashed last year, marking the Kremlin leader's first public admission that Russia was to blame for the deadly accident.

The Azerbaijan Airlines jet, carrying 62 passengers and five crew members, 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, killing 38 people on board.

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 admitted to Aliyev that the accident was caused, in his words, 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.

He claimed 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 unspecified compensation for the families of the victims 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.

As Russia initially sought to avoid blame for the disaster, its relations with Azerbaijan soured.

Azerbaijan 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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