At least 38 dead as Azeri jetliner bound for Russia crashes in Kazakhstan

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27 December 2024

At least 38 people were killed on Christmas Day, when Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243, scheduled to fly from the Azeri capital of Baku to Grozny in Russia, crashed at Aktau in Kazakhstan. Rescue workers pulled 29 survivors from the wreck of the jetliner, though at least one of the survivors is still in critical condition, fighting for life. There were 37 Azeri, 16 Russian, six Kazakh and three Kyrgyz citizens aboard.

The front of the airplane burst into flames on impact, as it crashed 3km short of Aktau airport, but passengers in the back of the plane survived, though many with terrible injuries.

The cause of the tragedy remains unclear, and officials in Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are calling for caution in drawing conclusions. Initially Russian officials claimed the plane crashed after colliding with a flock of birds. Yesterday, however, Azerbaijan Airlines issued a statement declaring that "preliminary results of the investigation of the crash" indicate "an external, physical and technical interference."

Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister Kanat Bozumbayev said "even the preliminary cause cannot be determined yet, as specialists are needed for that. They will conduct the work, and then it will be clear." Bozumbayev said it would take approximately two weeks to fully read the black box flight recorders from the plane, an Embraer 190, which have been recovered. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev called his Azeri counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, to promise that "the causes of the accident will be examined in detail."

Initial accounts make clear however that whatever the direct cause of the crash, the conditions in which it occurred were created by the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. Ukraine is now waging drone warfare across much of Russia, while Russian electronic warfare and air defense systems are on high alert. There are growing accusations by Ukrainian and NATO officials that a Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense system fired on and crippled the jetliner near Grozny.

Aviation experts who reviewed pictures of the jetliner said holes in its fuselage are consistent with shrapnel damage from a nearby missile explosion, although it is impossible for now to say precisely which or whose missile hit the aircraft.

The head of Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency, Dmitry Yadrov, told Interfax that the jetliner crashed after Russian authorities closed Grozny air space due to Ukrainian drone attacks. This forced the pilot to abort the landing in Grozny and trying landing elsewhere, ultimately crossing the Caspian Sea to try to land in Kazakhstan.

Ydrov said, "The situation on that day and at that time in the area of ??the Grozny airport was very difficult. At that time, Ukrainian combat drones were carrying out terrorist attacks on civilian infrastructure in the cities of Grozny and Vladikavkaz. In connection with this, the 'Carpet' regime was introduced in the area of the Grozny airport, which provided for the immediate departure of all aircraft from the specified area."

As a result, the plane flew blind throughout much of its flight path. The "Carpet" regime includes powerful electronic jamming to disorient Ukrainian drones flying into Russian airspace. According to several reports, the Fight 8243 was subject to electronic jamming and had no GPS signal throughout much of the flight. Moreover, on that day, Yadrov said, "there was dense fog, and there was no visibility at an altitude of 500 meters."

As a result, Yadrov said, "The commander [of Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243] made two attempts to

land the plane in Grozny, which were unsuccessful. The commander was offered other airports, but he decided to go to Aktau airport."

The BBC quoted a passenger on the flight who largely corroborated Yadrov's account, saying the pilot tried to land in Grozny twice in dense fog, but the "third time, something exploded … some of the aircraft skin had blown out." It added that in recent weeks, there have been multiple Ukrainian drone strikes across the region, in the Russian republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia. One woman was killed when a drone crashed into a shopping center in nearby North Ossetia.

Justin Crump, an intelligence and security analyst, told the BBC that the jetliner being fired at by Russia is "the best theory that fits all the available facts that we know of." He said Russian air defenses were active in Grozny when the plane was damaged. "I don't think this is deliberate at all," he continued, adding that Russia is "very worried" about Ukrainian drones that are "very often not getting shot down."

On December 26, Reuters cited anonymous Azeri officials involved in the investigation as saying that they believed Russian air defenses had damaged the jetliner. One said, "No one claims that it was done on purpose. However, taking into account the established facts, Baku expects the Russian side to confess to the shooting down of the Azeri aircraft."

Azeri lawmaker Rasim Musabayov has given multiple interviews to US and European press outlets, blaming the tragedy on Russia and threatening serious damage to Russian-Azeri relations. "If someone thinks that we are allies with Russia and therefore we would close our eyes on everything, then they are mistaken," Musabayov said. "There aren't that many countries that are on good terms with Russia now … If Moscow doesn't make the right steps in this situation the list might get shorter."

If a Russian air defense system did indeed mistake the jetliner for a Ukrainian drone and damage it with a missile, the question would remain what caused the plane to crash in Kazakhstan. Indeed, the plane flew some distance, across part of Russia and the entire Caspian Sea, before crashing near Aktau.

The *New York Times* reviewed data from live flight tracker FlightRadar24 and said it oscillated vertically more than 100 times in the last 74 minutes of the flight. "You see an airplane flying wild, wild maneuvers with

strong fluctuations in the course and in the flight altitude," Heinrich Grossbongardt, a Hamburg aviation industry expert, told the *Times*, which concluded: "the plane probably was rendered uncontrollable because its electrical and hydraulic systems had been severely damaged."

Ukrainian officials and major press outlets in the NATO countries have now launched a political campaign, demanding that full blame for the crash be pinned on Russia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky tweeted: "Every human life is valuable, and every loss of life deserves a thorough investigation to establish the truth. We can see how the clear visual evidence at the crash site points to Russia's responsibility for the tragedy."

Ukrainian presidential chief of staff Andriy Yermak said that Russia must be "held responsible for shooting down the Azerbaijan Airlines plane," while Ukrainian National Security Council official Andriy Kovalenko tweeted: "Russia should have closed the airspace over Grozny but failed to do so."

In reality, not only Russian but also Ukrainian and NATO officials bear direct responsibility for the continuing war in Ukraine and the escalation of drone warfare across the region that created the disastrous conditions in which Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243 crashed.