

Russia on the new findings concerning the downing of flight MH17

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On 28 September, the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), which includes representatives from Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Malaysia and Ukraine, under the leadership of the Dutch Public Prosecutor's Office, presented its interim findings from the investigation into the shooting down in July 2014 of a Malaysian Boeing passenger plane, flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. The investigators reported that the Buk missile launcher with which the plane was shot down had been brought into the part of the Donbas controlled by pro-Russian separatists from the Russian Federation (most likely together with the crew operating the launcher), and was taken back to Russia immediately after the shooting. According to the investigators, about a hundred people may have a connection with this incident, but at this stage no formal accusations have been levelled against any specific person. Regardless of the evidence assembled, the investigators have taken care to avoid any wording which might unambiguously suggest that Moscow bears the blame for the tragedy. Russian government representatives criticised the findings of the JIT, accusing the investigators of ill will and being politically prejudiced.

Commentary

- Moscow has so far failed to provide a single consistent version of the event, adjusting its narration to the state of knowledge at any given time, and to the investigators' findings as they are made available to the public. The aim of this tactic is to stall for time (interest in the tragedy will eventually wear off), and the desire to leave as much room for manoeuvre as possible, as most fully expressed by the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who said in an interview with the BBC that the team's latest report "may be the truth, and may not be". Two days prior to the JIT conference, representatives of the Russian Defence Ministry and the armaments sector announced that no single object (including missiles) was recorded as having been near the Boeing at the time of the crash. This announcement was a propaganda statement intended to neutralise the international investigators' findings, although it is at odds with the thesis Moscow originally set forth, according to which the plane was shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet.
- While commenting on the JIT's latest report, Moscow's representatives (Peskov and the head of diplomacy Sergey Lavrov) referred to it in two differing ways. On the one hand, they pointed out that the investigation is still in progress (it should end in 2018), and it is

difficult to prejudge what the final result will be. On the other hand, they tried to discredit the findings so far reported, accusing the investigators of basing their work on unreliable evidence (such as posts on social media and the testimony of anonymous witnesses) and ignoring the material provided by Russia (data from Russian radar, information from the manufacturer of the Buk system).

- Although at this stage the investigators have not conclusively placed the guilt on the Russian government, the findings presented thus far are a serious blow to the image of Russia – in the light of this information, Moscow bears at least the political responsibility for the tragedy. This is deepening the rift between Russia and the wider West, and may affect the further extension of the anti-Russian sanctions introduced after the annexation of Crimea, and expanded after the outbreak of war in the Donbas.