

The Azerbaijani aircraft crash: Moscow comes under pressure from Baku

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On 25 December, an Embraer E190 aircraft operated by Azerbaijan Airlines (AZAL) flying from Baku, Azerbaijan to Grozny crashed near Aktau, Kazakhstan, where it had been redirected by Russian airspace. The accident claimed the lives of 38 of the 67 people on board, who included citizens of Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Initial reports suggested that a bird strike could have caused the crash. However, subsequent updates indicate that Russian air defence forces likely damaged the aircraft by accident. Following the crash, major airlines from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Israel partially or completely suspended flights to Russia.

In official statements, all parties involved (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia) have exercised restraint in addressing the matter. However, Azerbaijan has exerted pressure on Moscow through the media, effectively demanding that it admits responsibility for downing the aircraft. The political costs of the incident for the Kremlin will largely depend on the degree of Azerbaijan's assertiveness. The government in Baku may seek to leverage its pressure on Russia to extract specific concessions.

Commentary

- **Extensive evidence suggests that Russian air defence forces were responsible for damaging the AZAL aircraft.** The incident coincided with Ukrainian air strikes on Chechnya, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia. Reports indicate that the plane's GPS signal was jammed, and it purportedly made three attempts to land in Grozny. In addition to the failure of the control system, the fuselage and the rear section of the engine nacelle were damaged, indicating that Russian air defence systems may have actively engaged the aircraft. This contradicts claims of a bird strike, as some media reports suggest the pilots communicated this via radio. Survivors of the crash described hearing a loud explosion during one of the landing attempts in Grozny. Earlier, Kazakhstan's Minister of Transport, Marat Karabayev, citing reports from a Russian air traffic controller in Rostov-on-Don, suggested that an oxygen cylinder could have ruptured. The plane was initially diverted to an alternative airport in Makhachkala, Dagestan due to poor weather conditions (fog) in Grozny and the presence of Ukrainian drones. According to the head of Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency, the airspace over Grozny was closed at the time. However, due to weather issues, the aircraft was ultimately redirected to Aktau.

- **Russia has avoided taking a clear position, which suggests that it is playing a political waiting game.** The Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, declined to comment pending the completion of the investigation, with reports indicating Russian officials are part of the commission. Russian pro-government media have provided only brief reports on the crash, omitting any details that could implicate Moscow, while pro-Kremlin bloggers have been circulating various claims, including some blaming Ukraine. Russia is likely to intensify its disinformation and propaganda efforts to discredit the theory that the plane was damaged by its air defence forces.
- **Just hours after the crash, the Azerbaijani government suggested that Russia was responsible,** bolstering claims that the aircraft was shot down by Russian air defence forces. This approach also reflects Azerbaijan's growing assertiveness; however, Baku has not suggested that the downing was deliberate. According to AZAL's preliminary findings, the crash resulted from "external physical and technical interference." Upon learning of the incident, President Ilham Aliyev, who was en route to the CIS summit in St. Petersburg, returned to Azerbaijan. Baku has demanded that Russia acknowledge its responsibility, issue an apology, and provide compensation. Moreover, it has refused to conceal its investigation into the crash, reportedly against the wishes of Russia and Chechnya. The firm tone of Azerbaijan's statements and its pressure on Moscow, including hints of potential legal action, may be a calculated negotiating tactic aimed at extracting concessions from Russia, for instance, on the issue of regional transport routes. In particular, Azerbaijan wants Russia to pressure Armenia into agreeing to an extraterritorial corridor to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan.
- **Kazakhstan has responded to the crash in a measured and restrained manner.** Government officials have avoided commenting on potential causes, instead highlighting the skill and dedication of the crew, who managed to minimise casualties by steering the aircraft over uninhabited areas. Kazakhstan has established a government commission, chaired by the country's deputy prime minister, to investigate the circumstances of the crash. Astana has also invited representatives of Embraer to visit the country. Furthermore, an operational headquarters has been established at the crash site to coordinate the response to the incident. Notably, the government has not imposed a full information embargo – journalists have been granted access to survivors of the crash. However, a blogger who was the first to publish photos of the wreckage showing signs of damage was detained and sentenced to 10 days in prison.
- **The crash presents a significant reputational challenge for the Kremlin and risks straining its relations with Azerbaijan.** The resolution of the incident will largely hinge on the extent of Azerbaijan's assertiveness and Russia's reaction. Practical repercussions for Russia include at least temporary disruptions to international air travel. In addition to AZAL, Israeli airline El Al and Kazakhstan's Qazaq Air have partially suspended flights to Russia, while Air Astana has ceased operations entirely.