

# Women In International Security



## **MH17: Who is the Most Likely Culprit?**

The crash of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 (hereafter, MH17) on July 17, 2014 was pivotal to the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The Boeing 777 aircraft, en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was shot down over Snizhne, Ukraine killing all on board. Investigation into the disaster is ongoing, but allegedly has been hampered by various [actors](#). These include, but are not limited to; the pro-Russian separatists active in the area, the Ukrainian military, and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The pro-Russian separatists are suspected firstly of utilizing a Moscow-supplied, Soviet-era surface to air missile (SAM) system, known as the Buk SAM system, to shoot down the airliner. Subsequently, they are accused of restricting investigators', journalists', and international observers' access to the crash site, as well as failing to preserve the chain of evidence, desecrating the victims, and looting their possessions. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been charged variously with supplying the separatists with heavy weaponry, including the above-mentioned Buk SAM system allegedly used to shoot down MH17 and for failing to withdraw support. Critics claim that Putin could, instead, choose to broker an effective and lasting cease-fire between the separatists and the Ukrainian government in Kiev. In fact, such an accord has been concluded several times - [most recently in September 2014](#) - but fighting nevertheless persists in the region. The situation poses a myriad of unresolved questions. Perhaps one of the most enigmatic is who in fact shot down the airliner - members of the Ukrainian military, Russian-backed separatists, or Russian military personnel?

One explanation of the disaster advanced by the Kremlin is that the Boeing was shot down by an air-to-air missile fired from a [Ukrainian fighter jet](#). There are several problems with this theory. The first is that it contradicts the physical evidence from the crash site. Namely, fighter pilots are trained to attack a plane from the rear, its blind spot. By contrast, MH17 was hit by “[objects with high energy](#)’ from above and the front at a high speed and with such force that

the rump broke apart in the [air](#).” The damage sustained by the airplane is consistent with that inflicted by a surface to air missile which “was fired from the ground and not from a fighter [jet](#).”

Although a Ukrainian fighter jet - a SU-25 - was reportedly sighted in the vicinity of MH17 immediately prior to its demise and therefore has been held responsible for the same, those claims are likely false. A SU-25 is an improbable culprit for several reasons. Not only are its speed and flight ceiling lower than that of the Boeing 777, but the ordinance it was allegedly carrying - R-60 air-to-air missiles - is inconsistent with the damage sustained by the [airplane](#). Downing by Russian-backed separatists also is a dubious, if attractive, scenario.

American diplomats have accused Russian-supported separatists in Eastern Ukraine of shooting down MH17 using a Buk SAM, a charge which the fighters have [denied](#). Despite allegations, there is [a lack of consensus](#) among U.S. intelligence officials as to the guilty parties, as well as the hardware used to down the airliner. Nevertheless, Washington might have hoped that such a move would force President Putin to admit to the presence of Russian troops, or at least military advisors, funding, and materiel in the region, without accusing Moscow of direct involvement in the disaster. Putin has steadfastly refused to adopt such a position. However, there are reasons to believe the separatists’ denials of connection to the tragedy. First, the rebels [did not possess](#) a Buk SAM system at the time of the downing of MH17. Second, and more importantly, to fire a missile from a Buk launcher “requires a specialized team operating in coordinated fashion from three locations. The crew requires at least six months of special training, which rules out a missile launch by irregular separatist [forces](#).” The separatists themselves have conceded that “we don’t have and didn’t have specialists who can operate such high precision weapons [systems](#).” If not the Ukrainian military, or the Russian-backed separatists, who is the most likely culprit in the MH17 catastrophe?

A recent independent investigation into the crash concluded that MH17 “was shot down by a [trained Russian crew](#),” most likely from the 53rd Russian Air Defense Brigade, based in Kursk, Russia. Broadly, several factors underpin this conclusion. The Buk SAM system and its Russian crew were seen traveling between Kursk, Russia and Snizhne, Ukraine, the site of the disaster. The Buk SAM system has been traced to the aforementioned brigade utilizing its [identification number](#). In Snizhne, a witness described seeing a missile shoot down a passenger [plane](#). Later that day, the same missile system is photographed returning to Kursk via the single road connecting the two cities with one of its missiles [missing](#). Having established that the

system utilized to down MH17 was of Russian origin, identifying its operator becomes easier. Russian military doctrine severely restricts the type of person who could have affected such an event. Specifically, only a specially trained Russian officer - not a conscript - can authorize a Buk [missile launch](#). Having identified both the hardware used in the MH17 shoot down and the most likely system operator as Russian, it is useful to outline the implications of this finding for the ongoing conflict in the region, and for U.S.-Russian relations.

The evident presence of uniformed Russian troops, in addition to the Moscow-backed separatists, in Eastern Ukraine suggests that the Kremlin views ensuring victory in the conflict as being of paramount importance. Their presence compromises the Kremlin's ability to deny direct involvement in the crisis, although that does not stop Moscow from continuing to attempt to invoke [plausible deniability](#). The shoot down also demonstrates the dangerous lengths to which Moscow is willing to go when its perceived core interests are at stake. U.S.-Russian relations suffer a serious setback when such a catastrophe cannot be thoroughly investigated by an international panel of experts, despite knowing "who and where the suspects are who may have killed 298 innocent civilians aboard the [Boeing 777](#)." By admitting its role in the shoot down, even if only via back channels, Moscow could mitigate the downturn in U.S.-Russian relations. However, such a development is highly unlikely.

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