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Ukrainian error or a deadly russian trap? The Belgorod crash is yet another front in putin's war on truth

Українська помилка чи смертельна російська пастка? Катастрофа у Білгороді — ще один фронт путінської війни з правдою

Науковий співробітник програми «Росія та Євразія» у Chatham House Саманта де Бендерн зазначає, що обставини катастрофи російського стратегічного авіалайнера Іл-76 викликають безліч питань. росія стверджує, що на борту було 65 українських військовополонених. Ні Україна, ні якийсь національний чи міжнародний орган не змогли підтвердити чи спростувати це. Лише незалежне розслідування зможе встановити причину катастрофи. Шанси на те, що росія дозволить це зробити, невеликі. На думку автора, навіть якби українці збили літак і помилково вбили своїх полонених солдатів, росія була б винна у порушенні правил війни, доставивши військовополонених так близько до зони бойових дій на військовому літаку.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/04/ukrainian-error-deadly-russian-trap-belgorod-crash-putin-war>

Only an independent investigation can establish the cause of the crash. The chances of Russia allowing it are slim

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On 24 January, an IL-76 Russian strategic airlifter crashed 44 miles from the Russian city of Belgorod, close to the Ukrainian border. Many questions surround the circumstances of the crash, as well as the identities of those who perished. Russia claims that 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war (PoWs) were on board. Neither Ukraine nor any national or international body have been able to confirm or deny this.

Vladimir Putin has since claimed to have evidence that an American Patriot anti-aircraft missile downed the plane. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian SBU (security service) has opened an investigation into a “violation of the laws and customs of war”. While both sides are accusing each other of acting unlawfully, the mystery of who was on board and what actually happened is still unsolved a week after the crash.

The warring parties, as well as most journalists, ballistics and aviation experts and political analysts trying to make sense of what happened, agree on two issues: the plane was shot down by a missile, and a PoW exchange planned on the same day was cancelled.

The Ukrainian media outlet Ukrainska Pravda initially claimed that the Ukrainian military had shot down a Russian military plane carrying S-300 missiles, but the post was later withdrawn. Soon after, the Russians stated that the downed plane had been carrying Ukrainian PoWs. All on board the plane, including the crew, allegedly perished. Social media profiles of the Russian crew are now overflowing with condolences.

On the face of it, this appears to be a Ukrainian defence operation gone disastrously wrong. But the waters have since been muddied by confusing statements from each side.

Shortly after the crash, Margarita Simonyan, head of the Russia Today TV network, published a list of the alleged PoWs killed in the plane. Ukraine debunked this list, saying it contains the name of at least one prisoner who is already back in Ukraine and very much alive. However, on 27 January, the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War said on its Facebook page that the names on the list provided by Simonyan was correct.

At the time of writing, no independent analysts have been able to confirm the authenticity of the list, but it was notable that when 207 Ukrainian PoWs returned home on 31 January, according to the Ukrainians, none of them were among those who had been due to come home on 24 January.

Mistrust of the initial Russian list is understandable. In mid-January Russia published a list of alleged French “mercenaries” killed in a missile attack on the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. Xavier Tytelman, a French aeronautics consultant who has spent a lot of time fundraising for Ukraine since the war started, and knows most of the French volunteers there, reached out to each person on the list whose name he recognised, or to their comrades in arms. To date, all are alive and well (or never existed in the first place). French journalists working in Ukraine have also spoken to men on the list since their alleged deaths and French defence minister Sébastien Lecornu has since stated: “France is once again the target of a crude Russian disinformation campaign.”

In his 31 January address, Putin called for an international inquiry, but complained that no one had volunteered to investigate. He knows perfectly well that it is up to Russia or Ukraine to ask the UN for an inquiry, not for international bodies to volunteer.

If the Russians are certain that Ukrainian PoWs were on the plane and that it was downed by Ukrainians firing an American missile, they would have every reason to welcome an investigation. Unfortunately, the likelihood of any such inquiry taking place is slim. In a similar tragedy, approximately 50 Ukrainian PoWs died in a blast in the Russian prison camp of Olenivka in July 2022. Ukraine and Russia blamed each other for the explosion, but Russia was never able to provide convincing evidence that it had not been involved, and neither the UN nor the International Committee of the Red Cross were able to investigate the site.

Amid accusations and counter-accusations, as well as contradictory statements by both sides, the only certainty is that the PoWs’ fate remains unknown. At this point it seems unlikely they will turn up alive, and unless their bodies are found and subjected to autopsy by international independent pathologists, their fate will feed the myriad conspiracy theories embedding themselves in the narrative of this war.

Russia excels at disinformation. The opportunity to paint the Ukrainians in a terrible light in the wake of this tragedy is too good to miss. Even if the Ukrainians did down the plane and mistakenly killed their own captured soldiers, Russia would be guilty of violating the rules of war by flying PoWs so close to the war zone in a military aircraft and for not warning the Ukrainians which route the PoWs were taking.

A generous analysis would be that this was a terrible mess-up and bad communication. It is tempting, however, to see this as a deliberate trap in which Russia taunted Ukrainian air defences by flying a strategic aircraft full of PoWs close to the border so that they could blame the ensuing disaster on their enemies.

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