

## Was Putin Targeted for Mid-Air Assassination?

By [Robert Parry](#)

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*Official Washington's conventional wisdom on the Malaysia Airlines shoot-down blames Russian President Putin, but some U.S. intelligence analysts think Putin, whose plane was flying nearby, may have been the target of Ukrainian hardliners who hit the wrong plane, writes Robert Parry.*

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U.S. intelligence analysts are weighing the possibility that the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was a botched attempt by extremists in the Ukrainian government to assassinate Russian President Vladimir Putin whose aircraft was returning from South America the same day, according to a source briefed on the U.S. investigation.

If true, the direction of the investigation into the July 17 crash has veered dramatically from initial U.S. government allegations that eastern Ukrainian rebels, using a Russian-supplied anti-aircraft battery, were responsible for bringing down the plane killing 298 people onboard.



A side-by-side comparison of the Russian presidential jetliner and the Malaysia Airlines plane (right)

The Obama administration used those claims to whip up an anti-Russian hysteria that prompted European countries to ratchet up economic sanctions against Moscow, starting what now looks like an incipient trade war.

But the U.S. analysts [dismissed](#) those original suspicions because they could find no evidence that such a missile battery had been supplied by the Russians or was in the possession of the rebels, prompting a shift in thinking toward a scenario in which Ukrainian hardliners working with elements of the air force may have tried to ambush Putin's plane but instead hit the Malaysian airliner, said the source speaking on condition of anonymity.

Putin flies in a plane with similar red, white and blue markings as the Malaysian airliner and was known to be on his way home after a six-day visit to South America. But his plane took a different route and landed safely in Moscow.

After the crash, as U.S. intelligence analysts pored over phone intercepts and other intelligence data, they began to suspect that the motive for the shoot-down was the desire among some Ukrainian extremists to eliminate Putin whom they had been privately vowing to kill - words initially viewed as empty bluster but which were looked at differently in hindsight - the source said.

If some Ukrainian authorities were hoping to ambush Putin's plane, they also would have had only a matter of minutes to detect the aircraft's presence and make a decision to fire, so it could be plausible that the attackers made a hasty decision to hit Putin's plane before they realized that they had made a tragic mistake.

## **Blaming Russia**

After the crash, the Ukrainian government quickly assembled some pieces of information from "social media" to pin the blame on the eastern Ukrainian rebels and the Russian government for what would have been a reckless decision to supply such powerful weapons to a poorly trained force.

The rebels denied having a Buk anti-aircraft battery capable of reaching an aircraft flying at 33,000 feet and the Russians denied having supplied one, but those denials were brushed aside by [the mainstream U.S. news media](#) and were rejected as well by senior U.S. officials. Only three days after the crash, [Secretary of State John Kerry made the rounds](#) of five Sunday talk shows to embrace the Ukrainian government's assertions although the official investigation into the crash had just begun.

The following Tuesday senior U.S. intelligence officials [briefed](#) mainstream reporters from several news outlets offering qualified support to the claims by Kiev and Kerry, but some journalists noted the lack of any real evidence and the briefing's curious reliance on "social media" rather than aerial reconnaissance, phone intercepts or other official sources. The absence of this corroborating evidence suggested that the case against the rebels and Russia was weaker than the Obama administration was letting on.

Yet, because of the high-level endorsements of Russia's presumed guilt, the U.S. intelligence analysts are moving cautiously in developing their alternative scenario, said the source, who added that another line of inquiry still being pursued is that the Ukrainian military brought down the passenger plane simply to create a provocation that could be turned against the rebels and Russia.

But the assassination motive would seem to make more sense given the intense hatred expressed by Ukrainian leaders toward Putin and how Ukrainian extremists would view the murder of Putin as a giant feather in their cap.

Still, the idea of assassinating the Russian president by shooting down his plane - even if the attack were carried out by hardliners without the approval of top officials - could have provoked a major international crisis. Nuclear-armed Russia would have almost surely retaliated against Ukraine, possibly with a full-scale invasion which could have escalated into a dangerous military confrontation with the United States.

This possibility of a cascading crisis beyond the control of rational policymakers has always been a risk since the U.S.-backed overthrow of elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, a putsch spearheaded by neo-Nazi militias though also supported by more moderate political figures. The U.S. State Department quickly embraced the coup regime as "legitimate," but ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, which had been Yanukovich's political base, resisted the new order.

Crimea, another stronghold of ethnic Russians, [voted overwhelmingly to secede](#) from Ukraine and rejoin Russia, a move endorsed by Putin and backed by Russian troops who

were stationed in Crimea, the site of the Russian naval base at Sebastopol. The annexation of Crimea was heartily denounced by President Barack Obama and U.S. allies in Europe, who began applying sanctions on Russia.

Meanwhile, the new Ukrainian government, which gave the neo-Nazis several ministries in appreciation for their key role in the coup, [began calling the ethnic Russian resistance "terrorists."](#) New National Guard units, formed from neo-Nazi militias, were dispatched to intimidate ethnic Russians in the southern city of Odessa, where scores were killed when a pro-Kiev mob set a trade union building ablaze.

## **A Worsening Crisis**

As the crisis worsened, several eastern cities in the Donbass region also voted to secede and an armed resistance emerged against the Kiev regime, which responded by vowing to crush the rebellion with an "anti-terrorist operation" that has included artillery and aerial bombardments against towns and cities held by the rebels.

On Friday, a Ukrainian parliamentary group [reported](#) that more than 10,000 people have been killed in Kiev's offensive since April, a number far higher than earlier estimates.

Angered by the mounting violence, the Russians lodged [murder accusations](#) against two Ukrainian officials, Interior Minister Arsen Avakov and Ihor Kolomoisky, a billionaire oligarch who was appointed by the coup regime to be governor of the southeastern Dnipropetrovsk Region.

Kolomoisky, known for his strong-arm business tactics including deploying paid thugs to intimidate rivals, is now using his fortune to finance paramilitary units, such as the Dnipro Battalion which is considered one of the most aggressive and brutal units in the "anti-terrorist operation" in eastern Ukraine.

Since the February coup, Kolomoisky also has engaged in a bitter war of words with Putin whom he publicly mocked as a "schizophrenic shorty." But Kolomoisky's fury toward Putin has intensified in the face of the Russian murder charge and other threats to the billionaire's PrivatBank holdings. In private conversations, Kolomoisky has made angry threats against Putin, the source said.

Other Ukrainian officials have vowed to kill Putin. Ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a onetime Kolomoisky ally, [said in an intercepted phone](#): "It's about time we grab our guns and kill, go kill those damn Russians together with their leader."

Though U.S. intelligence was aware of such threatening anti-Putin rhetoric via American intercepts, the rants were not taken seriously, at least not until after the shoot-down of the Malaysian airliner, the source said. Now, they are reportedly being studied as a possible motive for the July 17 attack.

Another curious development was the sudden resignation on Thursday of Andriy Parubiy as chief of Ukraine's national security. A longtime neo-Nazi leader, Parubiy had organized and directed the paramilitary forces that spearheaded the putsch on Feb. 22 forcing Yanukovych and his government officials to flee for their lives.

Parubiy refused to explain his reason for quitting but some analysts believe it may have a connection to the Malaysia Airlines shoot-down, the source said. The U.S. intelligence

analysts specifically said their evidence does not implicate Ukraine's current President Petro Poroshenko or Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, but they did not extend that clearance to the more extreme elements of the government, the source said.

## **Russian Evidence**

Based on technical evidence that Moscow has supplied to U.S. and other investigators, it appears that the Ukrainian military had several Russian-made Buk anti-aircraft missiles along the path of the Malaysia Airlines flight as well as two jetfighters in the air in the vicinity of the doomed plane.

Eyewitnesses also [reported](#) seeing one or two Ukrainian jetfighters near the airliner right before it was blown out of the sky. Two theories are that the jetfighters were trying to identify the plane or were responsible for finishing it off if the missile failed to do the job.

An independent analysis by an expert on the Buk systems, who has reviewed the Russian evidence, [says it shows](#) that one of the Ukrainian anti-aircraft batteries was in position to take down the Malaysian airliner by inflicting damage consistent with the wreckage that has so far been recovered from the plane.

As the pieces of this puzzle fill in, the image that emerges is of a possible Ukrainian ambush of a jetliner heading into Russian airspace that had markings very similar to President Putin's official plane. As shocking as that picture may be, there is a grim logic to it, given the demonization of Putin who has been likened to Hitler and Stalin by pundits and politicians from Ukraine to the United States.

However, even if the U.S. intelligence analysts do assemble a strong case implicating an extremist faction within the Ukrainian government, there is still the political problem for the Obama administration of dealing with a conclusion so dramatically at odds with the original accusations aimed at the rebels and Russia.

Powerful people are notoriously unwilling to admit mistakes, especially when it could open them to charges that they rushed to judgment and behaved recklessly. There are similarities with the hasty U.S. conclusions a year ago when sarin gas killed hundreds outside Damascus on Aug. 21 - and the finger of blame was pointed immediately at the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

On Aug. 30, Secretary Kerry declared repeatedly that "we know" that the Assad regime was guilty, but some U.S. intelligence analysts were privately expressing their doubts and refused to endorse a "Government Assessment" which presented no verifiable evidence to support the accusations. The four-page white paper also suppressed the dissents of the analysts.

Over the ensuing months as much of Kerry's case fell apart, some of these analysts came to believe that rebel extremists were likely responsible for the attack as a provocation to draw in the U.S. military into the civil war on their side. But the U.S. government has never retracted its allegations against the Syrian government. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case](#)."] ]

Given how far senior U.S. officials have gone in heaping blame for the Malaysia Airlines shoot-down on the rebels and the Russians, it is hard to envision a walk-back of those accusations regardless of the actual evidence. To compel that would require true courage

from U.S. analysts or from international investigators looking into the crash.

It is never easy to contradict important people, especially when they have leveled such serious accusations so confidently. That is one reason why Kerry and the mainstream U.S. news media should have held back on their conclusions until a thorough investigation had been done.

*Investigative reporter **Robert Parry** broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).*

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