

The Downing of the Azeri Plane—A Lesson for Relations in the Post-Soviet Space

Yaron Gamburg and Arkady Mil-Man | No. 1932 | January 14, 2025

The circumstances of the downing of a plane belonging to Azerbaijan Airlines and the official responses by Azerbaijan, Russia, and Kazakhstan highlight the complex and dynamic nature of Russia's relations with its neighboring countries in the post-Soviet era. While Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other countries in Central Asia would like to reduce their dependence on Russia, Moscow's current economic weakness—a result of the international sanctions imposed on it—has made it increasingly reliant on these countries. This dynamic has allowed them to demand that Russia treat them with more respect while they also benefit from Russia's economic dependence on them. The Azeri plane incident also underscores the gradual decline of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, as other players take its place.

A passenger jet of Azerbaijan's national airline en route from Baku in Azerbaijan to Grozny, the capital city of Chechnya, crashed near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan on December 25, 2024, after being hit by a missile from the Russian Pantsir-S1 air defense system. According to Russia's assertions (of dubious credibility), the Russian air defense systems were being used against Ukrainian drones at the time that the Azeri plane was attempting to land in Grozny. The Russian aviation authorities, however, failed to warn the Azeri plane's crew to avoid the area, causing the plane to be hit. In addition, Russian aviation authorities rejected requests by the plane's crew to land at nearby airports and instead referred the plane to Aktau, on the other side of the Caspian Sea, where the plane crash-landed. The circumstances of the downing of the plane and the series of official responses to the incident, especially by Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, have brought to light the complex and dynamic nature of the relations between Russia and its neighboring countries in the post-Soviet space.

As expected, the Russian authorities' initial response was total silence. In contrast, Russia's official media began spreading false reports that the plane had collided with birds, leading to the crash. This pattern of immediate denial and spreading false reports is typical of Russian policy in situations of this type, [as happened following the downing of the Malaysian plane in 2014](#) by Russian forces in the airspace over Donbas. This time, however, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev made three public demands of Russia: apologizing for the incident, taking responsibility for it and bringing those guilty to trial, as well as compensating the Azeri airline and its passengers. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who usually demonstrates arrogance and contempt in such situations, apologized for "the tragic incident that occurred in Russian airspace during attacks by Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicles." Furthermore, after

Aliyev made it clear that this apology was inadequate, Putin initiated a second conversation with the Azeri president in an effort to ease the tension between the two countries.

Behind the Azeri president's boldness are weighty factors and circumstances involving the balance of the relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. Bilateral relations between the two countries have reached a new level of closeness in recent years, prompted by Russia's international isolation and dire economic straits. At the same time, the Kremlin has become increasingly uneasy with the dysfunctional Armenian government headed by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. In effect, Russia has abandoned Armenia, having recalculated the benefits gained from relations with Azerbaijan—[something that Armenia regards as tantamount to treason](#)—thus allowing Azerbaijan to achieve victory in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Azerbaijan's triumph has created a new situation in the Caucasus, in which Russia recognizes Baku's more independent stance, while Turkey is increasing its influence in the region alongside Russia. In 2024, the presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan met frequently to discuss economic cooperation, particularly in the field of energy. It seems that in Azerbaijan, there is a sense that Russia's reliance on their economic cooperation has increased, effectively bolstering President Aliyev's confidence.

In addition to its growing military and political power, Azerbaijan is taking advantage of its oil and natural gas resources to develop substantial cooperation in the energy sector with the European Union, despite the political tensions with France. The war between Russia and Ukraine has reduced the supply of Russian gas to Europe and enhanced the importance of the Azeri gas pipeline—the Southern Gas Corridor—which passes through Turkey to Europe. Given the failure to renew the agreement for the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine (the agreement expired on December 31, 2024), the European Union has been considering a number of alternatives to increase Azeri gas exports to Europe. Among the options considered is [the possible indirect inclusion of Russia in the new export format](#), which would enable Russia to expand its gas exports to Turkey instead of Europe. Azerbaijan would play a key role in realizing this option. The plan includes classifying the Russian gas that reaches Europe as Azeri gas and designating Azeri gas that reaches Turkey as Russian gas. It should be noted that in 2023, Russian gas corporation Gazprom posted its first loss since 1999. This dealt a harsh blow to the Russian state budget and bolstered Putin's motivation to appease Aliyev in order to obtain his consent to include Russia in the emerging export plan.

As a result of the crash-landing of the Azeri plane in the city of Aktau, another country in the post-Soviet space—Kazakhstan—has been forced to deal with the sensitive incident involving its two important neighbors. The Kazakh aviation authorities have been reluctant to ascertain the circumstances surrounding the plane crash, opting to leave the decision to the Brazilian aerospace manufacturer to avoid a potential dispute with Russia and Azerbaijan. Kazakhstan's caution in this matter can be attributed to its dependence on both countries. [Russia is one of Kazakhstan's most important trading partners, with about 80% of Kazakh oil exports passing through Russia](#). This economic dependence is compounded by fear of Russia's military power—despite having been somewhat weakened by its military failures in Ukraine—which remains a salient concern, especially given the repeated statements by Russian nationalists threatening to occupy the northern part of Kazakhstan.

Concurrently, the Kazakh authorities are undertaking measures to diversify their trading partners and explore alternative oil export routes, with the Azeri Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline playing a critical role in these efforts. In contrast to Azerbaijan, which has formed a strategic alliance with Turkey and has sought to distance itself from Russia, Kazakhstan’s substantial dependence on Russia necessitates a more circumspect policy. Nevertheless, even cautious Kazakhstan joined Azerbaijan and other countries, including Israel and the United Arab Emirates, in suspending flights to Russia by their national airlines following the crash of the Azeri plane. Furthermore, the presidents of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, two countries that also have complex relations with Russia, personally extended their condolences to the president of Azerbaijan. In this context, it should be noted that beyond their shared challenges concerning Russia, there are signs of increasing solidarity among the Turkish peoples in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, with Turkey positioned as one of the primary beneficiaries of these processes.

The plane incident highlights the dynamic relations between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, the latter being seen as a defeat for Russia and a victory for Turkey. Russia’s diminished influence has emboldened Azerbaijan, enabling it to display considerable self-confidence and engage in dialogue with Russia on more equal terms. Taking a more cautious stance, Kazakhstan has refrained from automatically aligning with Russia and has not given Russia preference over Azerbaijan. These developments are further eroding Russia’s role as the dominant power in the region.

At the same time, while Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian countries are working to reduce their reliance on Russia, they are not seeking to completely disengage from it. Rather, they are demanding, as Tajikistan’s President Rahmon stated in 2022, that Russia treat them “with respect.” Russia’s current weakness, exacerbated by international sanctions, has given these countries leverage to assert their demands while concurrently capitalizing on Russia’s growing economic dependence on them. Azerbaijan has gone further by positioning itself as a potential partner in Syria’s reconstruction. Under Turkish sponsorship, it is upgrading its relations with the new regime in Syria, taking advantage of Russia’s loss of influence in the region and is reopening its embassy in Damascus after 12 years.

The downing of the Azeri plane also provides a unique glimpse into the complex relationship between Russia’s President Putin and the Chechen Republic, led by Ramzan Kadyrov. The Azeri airliner was struck by fire from the Pantsir-S1 air defense system, which was stationed in Chechnya following a series of Ukrainian drone attacks on military facilities there. The Pantsir-S1, an advanced short-range air defense system, has also been stationed in Moscow, in Valdai and Sochi to protect Putin’s palaces, as well as in eastern Ukraine. Its deployment now in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, highlights the priority that Putin is giving to his relations with Chechnya’s leader, Kadyrov.

Despite the involvement of Chechen aviation authorities—under Kadyrov’s control—in shooting down the Azeri airliner, Putin has refrained from holding Kadyrov or his allies accountable. This attitude reflects the close relationship between Putin and Kadyrov over the

past two decades, during which the Russian federal government has given Kadyrov enormous budgets and has allowed him to establish Chechen military units under his exclusive authority. Kadyrov's mercenaries have clashed with Russian federal law enforcement multiple times, [and Kadyrov himself has publicly excoriated their leaders](#), without repercussions, thanks to the Kremlin's support. Furthermore, Putin has continued to give special attention to Chechnya and has supported Kadyrov's policies, including the Islamization of the republic; during a recent visit to Grozny, Putin publicly kissed the Qur'an. Putin appears to value Kadyrov's blind personal loyalty to him as invaluable, making it unlikely that he would risk alienating Kadyrov by holding him or his men accountable, even to placate Azerbaijan's president.

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has further exposed the incompetence of the Russian army, which remains unable to defeat Ukraine after three years of conflict. Concentrating all of Russia's forces on the Ukrainian front has now enabled slow progress, but it has also undermined its military presence in Syria, a factor that contributed to the overthrow of the Assad regime. The Azeri airliner incident also underscores Russia's waning influence in the post-Soviet space, with other powers, notably Turkey, taking its place. Domestically, the special status of Kadyrov in Chechnya and his private army are both indicative of Putin's inclination to strengthen his own "Praetorian Guard," amid his government's failures.

In January 2024, as Donald Trump prepares to return to the White House, he is likely to encounter a different Putin from the one he knew during his first term in office: a president who is not a winner, but rather marked by successive defeats, who has been backed into a corner and threatens to adopt desperate measures. Israel should also consider these developments as it revises its policy toward Russia.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg