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Putin Bears Responsibility for MH17 Tragedy

July 17, 2025

– Categories: Human Rights



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On the eleventh anniversary of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 disaster, investigative journalist Eliot Higgins has reiterated that Vladimir Putin bears ultimate responsibility for the downing of the passenger jet over eastern Ukraine. The tragedy, which claimed the lives of all 298 people on board, including 10 British citizens, stands as a stark reminder of Russia's destabilising actions in the region.

Higgins, founder of Bellingcat, spoke on 17 July 2025, reflecting on the 2014 atrocity. In an interview, he stated, "Putin allowed the transfer of heavy weapon systems from Russia into

Ukraine, so while there's nothing to indicate he ordered MH17 to be shot down, he does bear responsibility for allowing those weapons to be sent to Eastern Ukraine along with Russian soldiers." This act of aggression, Higgins argues, contributed not only to the MH17 catastrophe but to the broader loss of life in the conflict.

The flight, a Boeing 777 en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was struck by a Buk missile launcher operated by Russian-backed separatists in the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Among the victims were Richard Mayne, a 20-year-old University of Leeds student heading to Australia for a study year, and Ben Pocock, a 20-year-old Loughborough University student from Bristol. The passenger list included 196 Dutch, 43 Malaysians, 38 Australians, and 80 children, with wreckage and bodies scattered across sunflower fields near Hrabove—a haunting image that has since become a symbol of the tragedy.

Bellingcat's meticulous open-source investigation, led by Higgins, uncovered critical evidence, including time-stamped photographs and videos, showing the Buk missile launcher's movement through separatist territory the day before the attack. The launcher, operated by Russia's 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade, was pinpointed as the weapon used. Dutch prosecutors revealed that separatists, believing they had targeted an enemy aircraft, celebrated after firing the missile near Snizhe in Donetsk.

In November 2022, the District Court of The Hague sentenced Russian nationals Igor Girkin, Sergei Dubinsky, and Ukrainian separatist Leonid Kharchenko to life imprisonment for murder in absentia. The court described their actions as causing "devastating destruction" with profound consequences for victims' families. However, Russia's refusal to extradite the trio means they remain at large. Girkin, notably, was imprisoned by Russia in 2024 for four years on extremism charges after criticising Moscow's military failures in Ukraine.

The verdicts, coupled with a July 2025 European Court of Human Rights ruling holding Russia accountable, have helped counter Kremlin disinformation. Early Russian media falsely claimed a Ukrainian military aircraft was downed, while later narratives pinned blame on Kyiv, citing alleged Ukrainian fighter jets. Higgins noted, "With the amount of disinformation pumped out about MH17, having those official investigations helps draw a line under events, rather than it feeling like an open question that propagandists are happy to answer with their theories."

The Kremlin, through spokesman Dmitry Peskov, dismissed the Strasbourg ruling as "null and void," according to Kommersant. This defiance underscores Russia's broader rejection

of international accountability, a pattern evident in its ongoing war in Ukraine and “grey zone” tactics across Europe. The Labour government’s response to such aggression has been notably restrained, raising concerns about Britain’s resolve in confronting Putin’s provocations.

The MH17 case continues to evolve. In the Netherlands, families advocate for a museum to preserve the wreckage and educate future generations. A separate US lawsuit, recently greenlit, allows a victim’s family to sue a Russian bank for enabling separatist warfare. Meanwhile, parallels have been drawn with the Christmas Day 2024 Azerbaijan Airlines crash, where a Russian missile is suspected of killing 38 people. Higgins cautions against direct comparisons but sees MH17 as a warning: “The failure to respond firmly to Russia’s secret invasion of Ukraine set up the circumstances for the shooting down of MH17, and eventually the official invasion of Ukraine in 2022.”

As the search for justice persists, MH17 remains a sobering lesson in the cost of appeasing authoritarian regimes. The West’s hesitation, Higgins argues, emboldened Russia’s aggression, with consequences that continue to reverberate.