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WORLD

# Biden Pushes Back on Ukraine's Claim Russia Shot Missile That Struck Poland

'That's not the evidence,' U.S. president says; Zelensky says his military told him missile was fired by Russia

*By Vivian Salama in Washington and James Marson in Brussels*

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President Biden pushed back on claims by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that a missile that killed two people in Poland this week wasn't fired from Ukraine.

Just after midnight Wednesday, after stepping off Marine One at the White House, Mr. Biden was asked about Mr. Zelensky's claims that the missile wasn't Ukrainian. Soon after the missile landed Tuesday, Mr. Zelensky said, "Russian missiles hit Poland."

"That's not the evidence," said Mr. Biden, who was returning from the Group of 20 summit in Bali, Indonesia.



President Biden spoke on the White House's South Lawn upon returning from the G-20 summit in Indonesia.

PHOTO: SUSAN WALSH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Following the Tuesday strike that hit Poland—a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—senior NATO officials said the missile was likely a Soviet-

made weapon fired by a Ukrainian air-defense system, and said no evidence indicated it was aimed at Poland.

Russia denied that it was responsible for the incident.

Russia has long claimed that NATO posed a threat to its security, including through its alliance with Ukraine. Moscow has tried to foment discord among the allies, which rushed to Ukraine's aid in the lead-up to the February invasion.

The disagreement over the missile's origin is the latest between NATO and Ukrainian officials this year on issues surrounding the war.

Before the invasion, the U.S. declassified intelligence to call out Russia over its plans to invade Ukraine in the hopes of pre-empting an attack. It worked to rally the support of NATO allies by sending additional weapons to Ukraine and preparing sanctions against Russia in the event of an attack.

Ukrainian officials publicly dismissed the warnings, aiming to forestall panic and a run on Ukrainian banks. In January, Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleskii Reznikov told The Wall Street Journal, "When our partners try to raise panic or hysteria, it will not help us, it can ruin us."

While investigations into the missile strike are continuing, the initial finding that the missile hadn't been fired by Russia quickly eased concerns that the incident could trigger NATO's Article V, a collective defense pact by its members.

Mr. Zelensky has demanded that Ukrainian experts be included in any team investigating the strike.

"I don't know what happened. We don't know for sure. The world does not know. But I am sure that it was a Russian missile," he said during a video appearance at the Bloomberg New Economy Forum. "I am sure that we fired from air defense systems. But it is impossible to talk about something specific today—that it was the air defense of Ukraine. Although we are grateful that no one accuses us, because we are fighting against Russian missiles on our territory."

Mr. Zelensky told Ukrainian reporters Wednesday that he is relying on information from his military when he says he thinks the missile was Russian.

He said Ukraine had registered a collision aloft over Ukrainian territory around the same time, and that could have caused debris to fall in Poland.

He said, however, that he thought falling debris couldn't have caused what he said was a crater 20 meters in diameter and five meters in depth (about 60 feet wide and 15 feet deep). "I believe that this is a Russian missile, trusting the report of the military," he said.

At the same time, he said that Ukraine would apologize if an investigation showed that the people in Poland had been killed by parts of a Ukrainian missile. "We are honest people," he said Wednesday.

Mr. Zelensky's comments highlight tension that sometimes becomes public between Ukraine and its Western backers. He complained the world was focusing on one strike in Poland, while Ukraine had been facing Russian assaults for years and was acting as a "human shield" for Europe.

"We've lost thousands of people," he said.

He has complained that Ukraine isn't always treated fairly, including in not being offered a clear path to NATO membership.

In June, Mr. Biden also lost his temper in a call with Mr. Zelensky, after the Ukrainian leader pushed him to send additional aid, according to U.S. officials. The officials said the two men patched things up and said that Mr. Biden's frustration underscored the pressure on Washington and its NATO allies as they send billions in aid to Ukraine even amid economic troubles at home.

This week, Mr. Biden spoke with Polish President Andrzej Duda from Bali and committed to assisting Poland in its investigation. The White House released a statement Wednesday saying no evidence had emerged to contradict Polish officials' initial finding that the missile had been fired by Ukraine, but noting "the party ultimately responsible for this tragic incident is Russia, which launched a barrage of missiles on Ukraine specifically intended to target civilian infrastructure."

"Ukraine had—and has—every right to defend itself," the statement read.

On Thursday, Pawel Soloch, secretary of state in the Polish president's office,

said it would be better for Poland and Europe if the missile hadn't come from Russia, because that would have forced a response. He said Ukraine wouldn't be a "co-host" of the Polish inquiry but would contribute.

"At this stage, we are gathering information from our allies," he said on Polish radio.

While U.S. officials have described the incident as an unfortunate accident, the episode does raise concerns about security along Europe's eastern flank as the war in Ukraine goes on.

—*Karolina Jeznach contributed to this article.*

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