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Turkish president apologizes for downing of Russian jet

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Turkey's president has apologized for the downing of a Russian military jet at the Syrian border, the Kremlin said Monday, an unexpected move that could open the way for easing a bitter strain in Russia-Turkey ties.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin comes seven months after the incident, which has triggered a slew of Russian sanctions that have dealt a severe blow to the Turkish economy. The formal apology, which the Kremlin had requested, came hours after Turkey and Israel announced details of an agreement to repair their strained relations.

The Kremlin quoted the Turkish leader as offering his condolences to the killed pilot's family and saying: "I'm sorry."

"I share their pain with all my heart," Erdogan said in the letter, according to the Kremlin. "We are ready to take any incentive to help ease the pain and the burden of inflicted damage."

Erdogan's office was keen to describe the letter as an expression of regret, not an apology.

"In the letter, the president stated that he would like to inform the family of the deceased Russian pilot that I share their pain and to offer my condolences to them. May they excuse us," spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said.

Putin had denounced the downing of the Russian warplane at the Syrian border on Nov. 24 as a "treacherous stab in the back." Russia rejected the Turkish claim that the plane had violated its airspace, and responded by deploying long-range air defense missiles to its base in Syria, warning that they would destroy any target posing a threat to Russian aircraft.

The plane's downing came amid a rift between Moscow and Ankara over Syria, where they backed the opposing sides in the conflict.

Moscow moved swiftly to ban the sales of package tours to Turkey, which had depended heavily on the Russian tourist flow; banned most of Turkey's food exports; and introduced restrictions against Turkish construction companies, which had won a sizable niche of the Russian market.

Erdogan, who often has been compared to Putin because of both leaders' intolerance to dissent and biting criticism of the West, had apparently miscalculated the plane incident's fallout for the Turkish economy.

The letter comes at a moment when Ankara's relations with the EU and the U.S. have also been strained over the migrant crisis, human rights issues and other disputes.

Turkey's new prime minister, Binali Yildirim, said recently that Turkey wants to increase the number of its friends and decrease the number of its enemies, and the letter came on the same day that Turkey and Israel released details of a deal to reappoint ambassadors and end six years of acrimony over Israel's 2010 deadly raid on a Gaza-bound Turkish aid ship.

Lifting the Russian economic penalties was essential for Erdogan, who has found himself under pressure both at home and abroad. Since the incident, Erdogan and his ministers have continuously spoken in favor of normalizing ties with Moscow, but Putin made it clear that he expects a formal apology and compensation.

Erdogan has now offered both, according to his letter, excerpts of which were released by the Kremlin.

Erdogan's office also said that the Turkish leader called on Putin to restore traditional friendly relations between Turkey and Russia and work together to address regional crises and jointly combat terrorism.

The Kremlin said that the letter added that the Turkish authorities were conducting a probe against a Turkish ultranationalist militant, Alparslan Celik, who allegedly shot and killed the plane's pilot as he was descending by parachute. The plane's co-pilot survived and was rescued, but a Russian marine was killed by militants during the rescue mission near the border.

On Friday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu is set to visit a ministerial meeting of a grouping of the Black Sea nations hosted by Russia in Sochi, a trip that offers a chance to negotiate a rapprochement.

"We are pleased to announce that Turkey and Russia have agreed to take necessary steps without delay to improve bilateral relations," Erdogan spokesman Kalin said.