

Russia Doesn't Belong in the United Nations

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If a criminal is at the helm of the United Nations, how can we expect justice?

A year ago, our delegation of Ukrainian parliamentarians sat at the U.N. headquarters in New York as a seemingly surreal but all too familiar situation unfolded: the Security Council was listening for hours to Russia propagandize about “8 years of genocide in Donbas committed by Ukraine,” while all the couloir talk was about the imminent invasion Moscow was about to launch.

In the face of the war that followed, the U.N. has been helpless to assist. The Security Council could not take any decisive action because Russia was able to block everything.

The war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine has exposed an overdue need for a radical reassessment of the U.N. and its Security Council, organizations that have proven unable to fulfill their promise to ensure global peace.

Since 1991, Russia has had a seat at the U.N. absolutely illegally, being the only participating country that has neither signed the organization’s 1945 founding Charter nor ever been voted a member by the General Assembly. Instead, its place in the U.N. is the result of a tacit consent that has lasted more than three decades.

That tacit consent has allowed the Kremlin, among other things, to block any efforts in the Security Council to help Ukraine amid increasing Russian aggression since 2014. In fact, over the years, Russia (including its predecessor the USSR) has used its veto 143 times: more than all other permanent members in the Council, including China, combined. This has reduced the main peacekeeping world organization to a mere powerless observer.

It took a full-scale invasion for the world to begin talking about this biggest swindle in the history of international politics, but a year later, the problem still hasn't been addressed.

While Russia has invaded the sovereign territory of Ukraine and committed mass acts of killing and torture of civilians, the U.N. has failed—and without change, will continue to fail—to provide any meaningful response.

Russia's undeserved seat in the U.N.

According to Article 4 of the U.N. Charter, new member states must be admitted by a vote of the General Assembly. But Russia avoided this by claiming to continue the membership formerly held by the USSR.

That's despite the Supreme Soviet of the USSR proclaiming on Dec. 26, 1991, that “the USSR as a state and as a subject of international law ceases to exist.” More than a dozen new independent states emerged after the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russia being just one of them. Others like Georgia and Belarus, for example, had to be approved by the General Assembly to join the U.N., but Moscow simply changed the nameplates from “USSR” to “Russia Federation” and hoped the world would look past it.

While the concept of successor states has a long history, when it comes to U.N. membership, only Russia has gotten away with tacit rather than formal consent to take the place of its predecessor. When [Czechoslovakia](#) and [Yugoslavia](#) each dissolved, every one of the countries that emerged from those former blocs had to be admitted to the U.N. by resolution before the General Assembly.

Russia's illegitimate presence in the U.N.—and even worse, as a permanent member of the Security Council—has had disastrous consequences. It exploits the U.N. both as a platform for its propaganda and to block via veto power any attempts by the international community to counter its predatory behavior.

Without restoring the rule of law within its own organization, the U.N. will become more and more irrelevant, just as the League of Nations did when it failed to react to the Third Reich's invasion of Poland in 1939. An impotent U.N., unable to prevent wars and fulfill its peacekeeping obligations may too eventually vanish, leaving a void in the architecture of global security.

This is the time to change direction. If not, authoritarian regimes around the world won't miss this moment of utter weakness by the world's institutions to fight back.

Expelling Russia from the Security Council

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we and a group of other diplomats, lawyers, journalists, and academics from around the world launched a petition to expel Russia from the U.N.: [#unrussiaUN](#).

It calls on U.N. leadership to either provide documentary evidence of Russia's legitimate membership or to recognize its U.N. membership as fictitious.

The petition has collected nearly 300,000 signatures, as of this writing. It's also not a pipe dream. Thomas Grant, an international law professor at Cambridge and former U.S. State Department adviser who also backs the petition, [has said there's a legal mechanism](#) by which Russia can be forced out of the Security Council. He points out that the U.N. already went further when it kicked out Taiwan completely in 1971.

At the beginning of the war, many politicians didn't take this push seriously, but it's starting to gain momentum.

Last September, world leaders openly called for reform of the Security Council at the 77th session of the U.N. General Assembly. Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, called for Russia to be expelled from the Security Council for attacking Ukraine, while U.S. President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, then-Prime Minister of Ireland Micheál Martin, and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu all called for limiting Russia's veto right.

Russia must be brought to justice. U.N. membership was meant to be restricted to "peace-loving states." If the country's regime changes, of course it should be possible for its membership to be restored by a vote of the General Assembly. But until then, the very viability of the U.N. as a peacekeeping organization suffers as long as its members are forced to negotiate with a political regime that has been deemed, [by the European Parliament](#) and [others](#), as a "state sponsor of terrorism."

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