‘Absurdity to a new level’ as Russia takes charge of UN security council

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By [Julian Borger](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/julianborger)

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**I**n [Ukraine](https://www.theguardian.com/world/ukraine), Moscow is pursuing an unprovoked war of aggression. In The Hague, Vladimir Putin is facing an arrest warrant for war crimes. But at the UN, Russia is about to take charge of a powerful international body, the security council.

From Saturday, it will be Russia’s turn to take up the monthly presidency of the 15-member council, in line with a rotation that has been unaffected by the Ukraine war.

The last time Russia held the gavel was in February last year, when Putin [declared his ‘special military operation’](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/24/moment-that-putin-thundered-to-war-drowning-out-last-entreaties-for-peace) in the middle of a council session on Ukraine. Fourteen months on, tens of thousands of people have been killed, many of them civilians, cities have been ruined and [Putin has been indicted](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/17/vladimir-putin-arrest-warrant-ukraine-war-crimes) by the international criminal court for the mass abduction of Ukrainian children.

In such circumstances, putting Russia in the driving seat of a world body tasked with ‘maintaining international peace and security’ seems like a cruel April fools joke to many, not least the Ukrainian mission to the UN.

‘As of 1 April, they’re taking the level of absurdity to a new level,’ said Sergiy Kyslytsya, the Ukrainian permanent representative. ‘The security council as it is designed is immobilised and incapable to address the issues of their primary responsibility, that is prevention of conflicts and then dealing with conflicts.’

The ambassador said Ukraine would stay away from the security council in April except in the case of an ‘issue of critical national security interest’. Ukraine is not a current council member, though it is often called to speak on issues related to the war.

The US, Britain, France and their supporters on the council are likely to show their disapproval by downgrading the level of their representation at Russian-hosted events over the course of the month, but no member state is known to be planning any form of boycott or other protest.

Diplomats at the UN headquarters in New York point out that most of the council’s business in April, like any month, is taken up by routine briefings and reports on UN peacekeeping missions around the world.

‘It’s important to protect the rest of the council’s work on other files,’ one European diplomat said. ‘We don’t want to disrupt the work that the council is doing elsewhere, because that would allow Russia’s invasion to have an even wider impact on issues of peace and security around the world.’

The council presidency does give the monthly incumbent the power to organise its own sessions, and Russia is planning three. On 10 April it will hold a briefing on the ‘risks stemming from the violations of the agreements regulating the export of weapons and military equipment’, at which it is expected to single out the US for its arms supplies to Ukraine and to other allies over recent years.

Later in the month, it will chair two open debates on ‘effective multilateralism’ and on the situation in the Middle East, over which its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, is expected to preside.

The last occasion when a permanent member of the council carried out an unprovoked invasion was the US attack on Iraq. The US was not subjected to the humiliation of repeated overwhelming defeats in the UN general assembly of the kind that Russia has endured over the past year, with about 140 of the 193 member states voting against Moscow’s positions, leaving Belarus, Eritrea, Syria and North Korea as Russia’s only reliable friends.

Russia’s deputy permanent representative, Dmitry Polyanskiy, denied that his mission was becoming a pariah at the UN. ‘Absolutely not. We feel that the west is embattled in the UN right now because more countries understand our position,’ Polyanskiy said, claiming that the western allies had to water down resolutions and arm-twist to get 140 votes. ‘So I think that it’s rather the west is isolated, but not us in the general assembly.’

As for Putin’s ICC arrest warrant, Polyanskiy dismissed it as ‘totally irrelevant to any of our activities’. The last time the Russian leader travelled to the UN headquarters was in 2015.

In the security council, the balance of diplomatic forces is less clearcut than in the general assembly. The division of five permanent members: US, UK, France, Russia, China, has hardened considerably, with China regularly echoing Russian talking points in the council. The ten non-permanent members are elected for two year terms by the general assembly. Among the current batch, Mozambique, the United Arab Emirates and Gabon have generally stayed neutral over the Ukraine invasion.

Brazil is moving into the neutral column. Polyanskiy said the ‘Brics’ group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa was drawing closer together and claimed there were 20 other countries interested in affiliation.

Richard Gowan, the UN director at the International Crisis Group, said that under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil was ‘making an effort to engage with Russia and position itself as a potential peacemaker over Ukraine’.

‘I don’t think Russia has many close allies in the council, but a lot of council members really want to avoid getting caught up in big power games,’ Gowan said. ‘There is a definite sense that a lot of council members want to shift attention to crises other than Ukraine where the UN may be able to do marginally more good.’

There are no security council sessions on Ukraine planned for April, but nine members can vote to force it on to the agenda, or members can hold informal sessions on the subject.

The glaring council impasse and paralysis over Ukraine has served to elevate the importance of the general assembly, but few expect it to bring any long-awaited reform to the running of the council, established by the victors of the second world war.

More likely, Kyslytsya acknowledged, ‘everybody will get accustomed to this new level of global hypocrisy’.

‘That will be a disgrace,’ he added. ‘But I think there’s quite a chance that may happen.’