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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Loses Bid to Regain Seat on UN Rights Body

By AFP

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Jean Marc Ferré / UN Photo

The UN General Assembly on Tuesday rejected a bid by Russia to regain a seat on the Human Rights Council, from which it was ousted after invading Ukraine.

Russia, which was competing with Bulgaria and Albania for two open spots allocated to the Eastern Europe regional group, nonetheless received 83 votes in its favor from the UN General Assembly's 193 members.

The election for the body's 2024-2026 term had been viewed as a test of what Moscow contended was quiet support despite fierce Western-led criticism over its brutal assault on its neighbor.

The vote comes just days after a Russian missile attack on the Ukrainian village of Groza killed more than 50 people, although global attention has since turned to war between Israel and

Palestinian militants Hamas.

"UN member states sent a strong signal to Russia's leadership that a government responsible for countless war crimes and crimes against humanity doesn't belong on the Human Rights Council," said Louis Charbonneau of international NGO Human Rights Watch.

Albanian ambassador Ferit Hoxha, whose country received 123 votes while Bulgaria received 160, had said earlier that the UN General Assembly "has an important choice" to "demonstrate that it is not ready to take an arsonist for a firefighter."

The Human Rights Council's 47 members are allocated by region, and each large regional group usually pre-selects its own candidates, which the General Assembly then typically approves.

But this year, two groups had more candidates than available seats.

In Latin America, Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Peru were vying for three seats, and in Eastern Europe, Albania, Bulgaria and Russia sought two seats.

The vote takes place by secret ballot, testing Russia's contention that it has private support in developing countries weary of the West's billions of dollars in support to Ukraine.

In April 2022, 93 countries voted to suspend Russia from the council, while 24 opposed that punishment.

That vote against Russia was less lopsided than other resolutions defending the territorial integrity of Ukraine, which drew approval from around 140 countries.

Votes for the Human Rights Council are more complicated as some countries whose own records face scrutiny are uneasy about authorizing repercussions.

'Undermine credibility'

The United States has often criticized the Human Rights Council over its membership and alleged slant against Israel, although President Joe Biden rejoined the group after a pullout by his predecessor Donald Trump.

"Russia's reelection to that body, while it openly continues to commit war crimes and other atrocities, would be an ugly stain that would undermine the credibility of the institution and the United Nations," senior US diplomat Robert Wood said.

But Vassily Nebenzia, the Russian ambassador to the United Nations, insisted that there "are no beacons of democracy or rogue states, as is sometimes being portrayed."

"No member-state can claim to be immune from human rights violations. But the solution is to strengthen international regulation," he said.

Richard Gowan, who follows the United Nations for the International Crisis Group, said that Western diplomats were worried that Russia could return.

"Russia has always argued that many UN members sympathize with it in private but won't support it in public for fear of antagonizing Western powers," he added. "Moscow will hope that this supposed silent majority supports it in this secret vote."

Advocacy group Human Rights Watch had called on countries to oppose the candidacies of Russia, China and Cuba.

China, at least, faced little risk as it was one of the four countries in the Asian group vying for four open seats, alongside Japan, Indonesia and Kuwait.

The United States and several other Western governments say China is committing genocide against its mostly Muslim Uyghur minority through massive camps, a charge denied by Beijing.

China was ultimately reelected with 154 votes while Cuba also retained its seat with 146 votes.

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