Commentary | Published 31 March 2022

By International Crisis Group

Maintaining a Coalition in Support of Ukraine at the UN

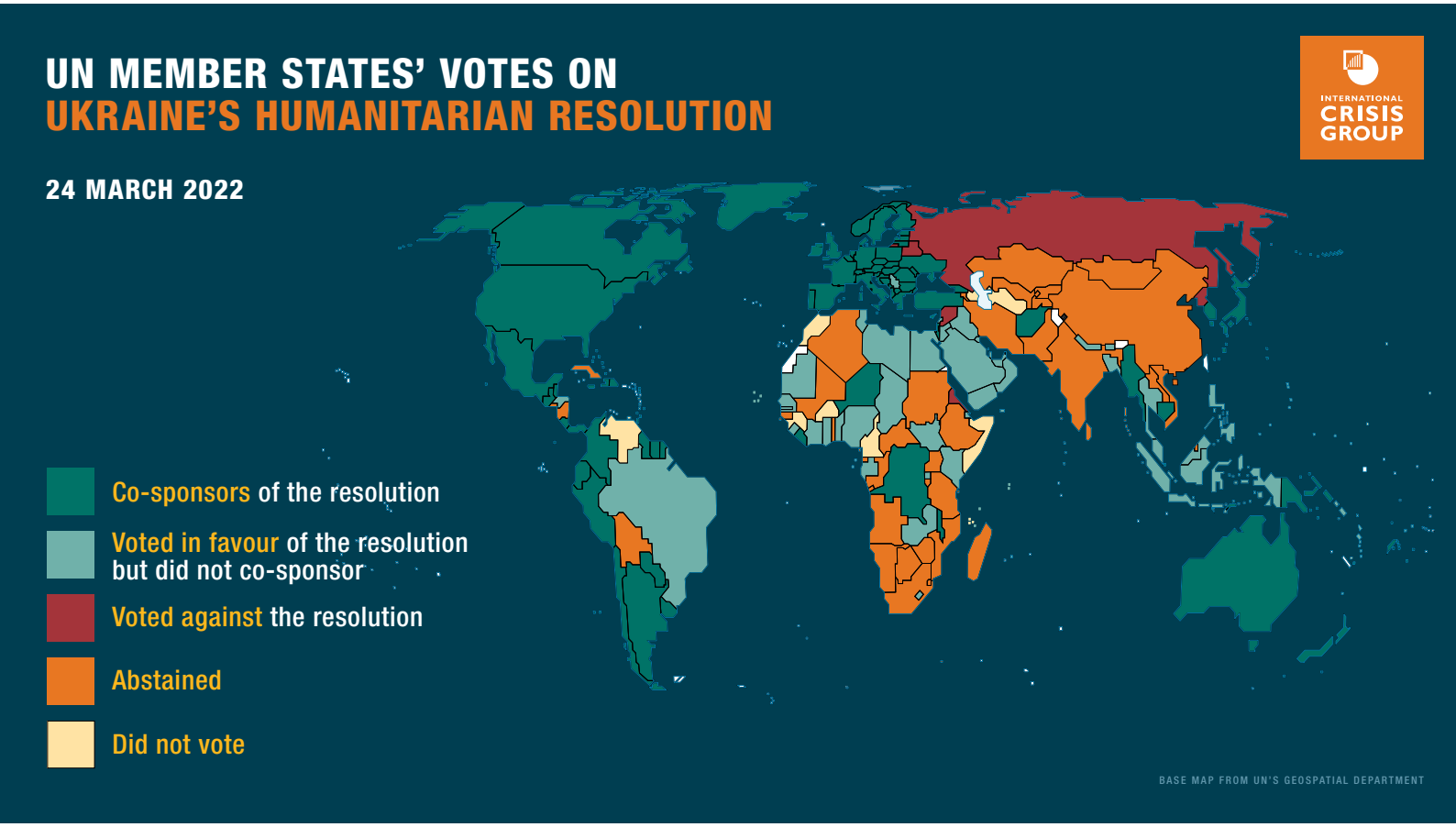
The UN General Assembly has now passed two resolutions condemning Russia's assault on Ukraine. But the majority is not as solid as it seems. Allies of Kyiv should pay more attention to the concerns of countries from the Global South.

On 24 March, the UN General Assembly passed its second resolution on Russia's war with Ukraine. Its first resolution, condemning Moscow's aggression, passed with the support of 141 member states on 2 March. The second text, which again condemned Russia and focused on the humanitarian situation, was tabled by Ukraine and 89 co-sponsors and received a total of 140 positive votes. In both cases, only four countries joined with Moscow to vote no: Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria. A handful of states shifted from abstaining on the first resolution (or not voting at all) to backing the second, and vice versa, but at first glance the majority in support of Ukraine in the General Assembly looks consistent.

Diplomats at the UN, however, say the task of securing such support for the more recent resolution was difficult. Since the General Assembly first voted on the situation in Ukraine, many members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) at the UN (which accounts for some 120 of the body's 193 members) have started to worry about the global effects of the crisis. These include the threat of food price shocks – which are likely to hit Africa and the Middle East particularly hard, as both are major importers of grain from Russia and Ukraine – and the likelihood that the U.S. and European donors will need to divert development and humanitarian aid to help Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, creating funding shortfalls elsewhere. Western diplomats insist that they will try to avoid this outcome – and the European Union (EU) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development say much the same– but in private they admit that it is almost inevitable. Some European representatives at the UN have annoyed their NAM counterparts by raising Ukraine in talks on other troubled areas, such as the Horn of Africa.

The 24 March General Assembly resolution on the humanitarian situation threatened to become a lightning rod for this discontent. It began life in the Security Council, where France and Mexico tabled a text on the war's humanitarian aspects at the end of February. This draft was designed to create common ground with Russia after Moscow predictably vetoed an earlier Council resolution casting it as the aggressor. The French-Mexican text deliberately omitted any reference to Russia by name, but the United Kingdom and United States, which refuse to back a resolution that does not blame Russia, blocked it.

After a series of fruitless discussions in the Council, France and Mexico decided to turn to the General Assembly instead in mid-March. Diplomats from other countries supporting Ukraine were worried by this move: they



predicted that NAM members would think twice about backing a text, given misgivings about the West's alleged failure to address the war's global consequences. A week before the vote, European diplomats speculated that the French-Mexican initiative might pick up as few as 100 votes and no more than 120. Ukraine itself took a hawkish approach to the text, insisting that it include condemnation of Russia, on top of less controversial items such as clauses providing for protection of civilians, aid workers and refugees.

The diplomatic situation grew more complicated still in the week of 21 March. Russia announced that it would demand a vote on a Security Council resolution of its own on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine – including language in effect condemning the Ukrainians for putting civilians in besieged cities at risk – that it had previously floated but then shelved for lack of support. Russia's decision to reintroduce this text was presumably designed to create confusion about the value of the General Assembly process, or to make the Western powers cast their veto to block an ostensibly humanitarian initiative. Either way, it flopped. China and Russia backed the text in a vote on 23 March, but all other Security Council members abstained, killing the text (Council resolutions need nine votes to pass).

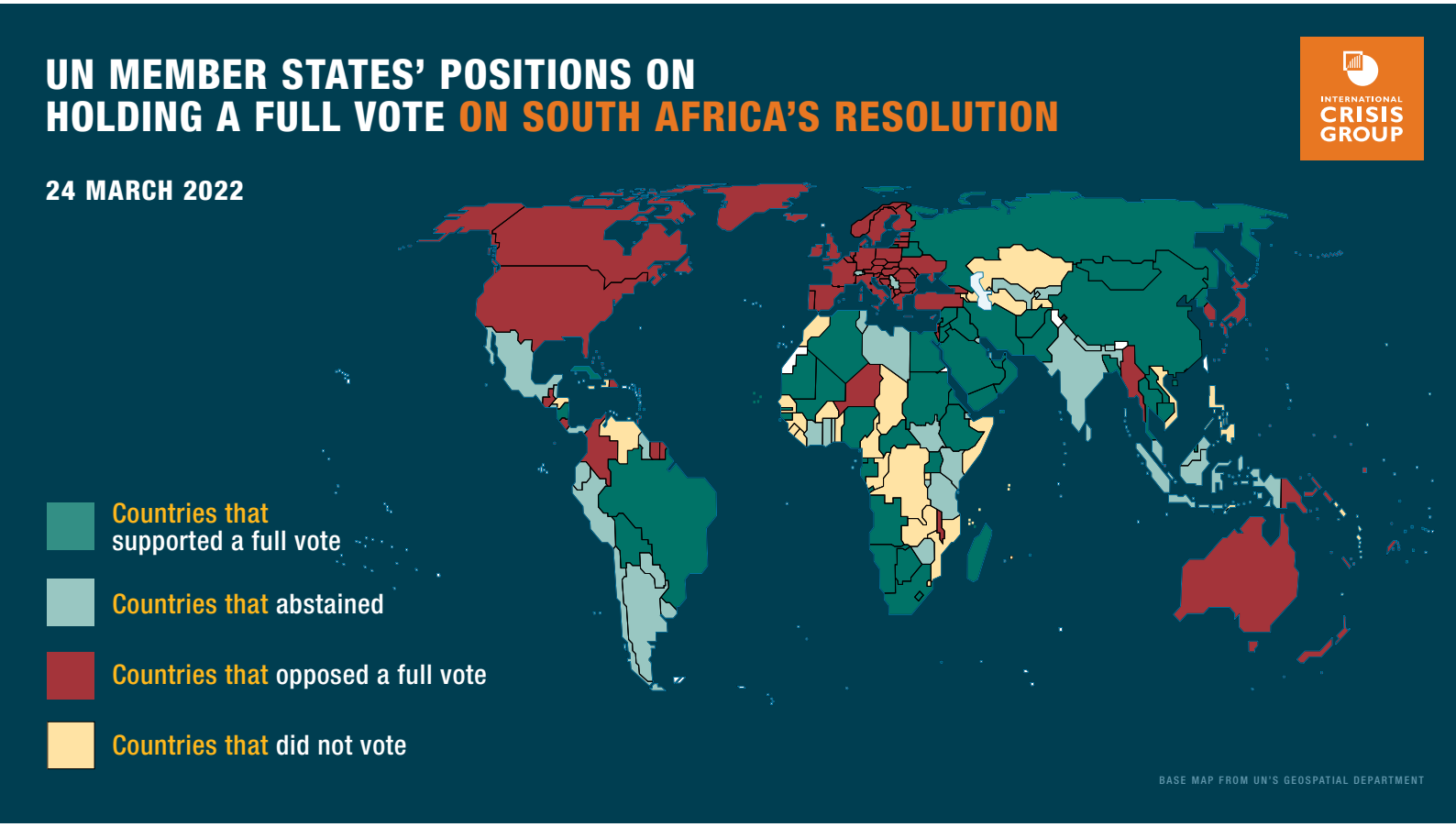
Ukraine and its allies faced a more serious dilemma back in the General Assembly, where South Africa introduced a humanitarian resolution of its own on 21 March. Pretoria's draft looked like an effort to split the difference between the other texts on offer, as it made no mention of Russia's invasion but also included language reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, implicitly including Russian-controlled Crimea. It was additionally free of phrasing that could be read as blaming Ukraine for civilian casualties (humanitarian experts, however, worried that it contained a paragraph on "UN

coordination" of humanitarian efforts that could open the way for Russia to interfere in UN aid operations).

South Africa's initiative took Western diplomats by surprise, and its motivation remains a matter of debate in New York. South African officials insist that their intentions were solely humanitarian, noting that President Cyril Ramaphosa had called for a UN role in ending the war as early as February. They also say they informed Ukraine of their proposals before introducing them at the UN.

Ukrainian diplomats, by contrast, claim that South Africa gave them no advance warning of the text. Western officials suspect that the text was a conscious effort to help Russia by complicating General Assembly discussions of humanitarian issues. South African officials strongly dispute this notion, saying they felt that Western diplomats took a high-handed approach to the process, refusing to engage in real negotiations. It is hard to get to the bottom of these claims and counter-claims. All involved admit that the General Assembly discussions were confused, with diplomats in New York and their superiors in capitals often struggling to keep up with each other as the debate evolved. The Russian ambassador to the UN did not help Pretoria much by telling a NAM gathering that Moscow approved of 97 per cent of the South African text, convincing some diplomats that it was indeed some sort of pro-Russian gambit.

By the end of the week, the EU had led a concerted lobbying campaign on behalf of the Ukrainian text that ensured it had a total of 90 co-sponsors, including Ukraine itself. The EU delegation in New York played a significant part in both keeping the Union's members – who had differing views on how hard to push back against South Africa – together, while also coordinating lobbying around the UN and in capitals to get the most votes possible. By contrast, South Africa could muster fewer than ten co-sponsors for its draft. The latter group did include China, but there is no evidence that Beijing worked especially hard to build a coalition



behind the text. On 25 March, the Ukrainian resolution sailed through the General Assembly (China abstained). Immediately thereafter, Ukraine called a procedural vote on whether to hold a full vote on South Africa's draft at all.

Only 50 countries (including China and Russia) backed voting on the South African text, while 67 (including all EU members and the U.S.) opposed it (see map below). The initiative died. But it was a close-run thing. A significant number of EU members had wanted to abstain on the South African proposal, and had this bloc done so, the South African draft would have at least gone to a full vote – and most probably passed, although not by a great margin. UN officials would have been left trying to interpret two competing resolutions on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, leaving the General Assembly looking seriously divided.

As the General Assembly in fact emerged from this messy process looking surprisingly firm in support of Ukraine, Western diplomats are now wondering what more they can do in the forum to penalise Russia. One option is to try suspending Moscow from its seat on the Human Rights Council in Geneva, which requires a two-thirds majority in support in the General Assembly. On paper this option looks feasible given the numbers in the late March voting, especially as abstentions and no-shows at the Assembly would not count toward the result. But the numbers may be misleading. Many NAM members dislike on principle the idea that the General Assembly would pass resolutions on an individual country's human rights performance. Those that have been willing to vote against Russia on largely symbolic resolutions to date might baulk at supporting more concrete penalties, like Human Rights Council suspension, for Moscow.

Ukraine and its supporters should now tread carefully at the UN. They have secured two impressive majorities against Russia in the General Assembly, both meaningful for signalling the world's support for Ukraine, even if not for concrete policy measures. But had they made just one or two diplomatic missteps, the second push could have ended badly. At the very least, Ukraine, European states and the U.S. should pause to listen to their African, Asian and Latin American counterparts' concerns about the future of food prices and development aid. There are positive signs in this direction. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has already put together a team of UN senior officials to address these issues, and the UN Secretariat has done studies of the consequences of the Ukrainian war for some 100 countries. On 28 March, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke at the Security Council on the humanitarian situation Ukraine and – along with other friends of Kyiv in the Council – referred to the global food security situation, blaming supply shortages on Moscow.

Lebanon, which imports 80 per cent of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia, has now also floated the idea of a General Assembly debate devoted to global food security, calling for "a resolution drawing attention for the need for coordinated, cohesive global action to deal with this challenge of our times". Some European diplomats see this opening as promising, but others worry about losing focus on the crisis in Ukraine itself. Ukraine's supporters, and the government in Kyiv, should engage seriously with the Lebanese proposal. If they want to maintain a high level of support among non-Western countries for future votes concerning Ukraine and Russia in UN forums, they should look closely at how to mitigate the effects of the war on countries outside Europe as well.