**Minister must put South Africans first and principle above loyalty**

This did not start last month. For a long time, I have been pushing DIRCO and previous ministers to use their proximity to President Putin to try and persuade him first from occupying the Crimean Peninsula, then from building up military on the borders of Ukraine and from handing out passports to create instability and friction as per the Georgian script a decade ago.

I was not asking South Africa to take sides; I was rather tending them to clean their tarnished and embarrassing world image that has not shone since the Madiba magic days.

Scoring an own goal at the UN general assembly, took away our last ounce of credibility as defenders of any form of human rights with our hypocritical but damagingly loyal excuse for a policy.

A week before the Russian invasion, whilst no one believed Russia would necessarily invade Ukraine, embassies proactively made evacuation plans for their citizens. Some of these included pre-evacuation, emergency travel documents and emergency contacts. Contrast this to our embassy that abandoned passports and visa applications when taking themselves to safety.

A group of us who had worked together under different DIRCO leadership in

repatriating South Africans back during Covid-19 got together to immediately assist in the evacuation of around 200 South Africans - mainly students - stranded in the war-torn areas of Ukraine.

As the names were being put on the group, the Ambassador put politics ahead of South Africans. Threatening the group that if my name was not removed, he would remove himself.

He then went on to treat the group of admin volunteers like his secretaries and only took info but withheld crucial info that could assist. Furthermore, DIRCO WhatsApps would tell people to stay put, that there is no war; that it is a military operation and that they cannot get emergency travel documents because these are only issued in exceptional circumstances.

Thankfully the volunteers headed by Lorraine Blauw and Kim Kur continued to pull people over the border thanks to other embassies, foreign embassies and committed DIRCO heroes and South Africans being South African.

DIRCO boasts about their flights but somehow did not know that people could fly testing positive once recovered from Covid-19. So, they still ended up having to assist there too and with the ones that DIRCO still refer to them.

The situation could be helped immediately if stranded Ukrainians with families in South Africa had a visa-free rite of passage for at least 6 months, reviewed annually and if we instructed our embassies in surrounding countries to assist our citizens with emergency travel documents to travel home.

Come on Minister, save face. Put your people first and put principle above loyalty.

This is war. It does affect South Africa and your voice must protect our pockets.