
UN SECRETARY GENERAL RACE: AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF EASTERN EUROPE'S CHANCES

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The UN Security Council held its second straw poll to determine who will replace Ban Ki-moon as the next Secretary General at the end of this year. The results show the complex relations between Security Council members at a time of tense US – Russia relations. Eastern Europe, the only UN region never to have held the position is caught in the middle and picking the next Secretary General will not be easy.

The early winner from the second poll is former Portuguese Prime Minister and UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, who gained supportive votes from 11 of the 15 Security Council members. Compared to the first vote, he received two discourages and it is worth remembering that Russia and China want a lengthier discussion process. Those discourages guarantee at least another month of debate. Serbias Vuk Jeremić surprised many by finishing a strong second with eight encourages and four discourages.

At the other end, early favorite Helen Clark, will be seriously considering her options after finishing a disappointing seventh. Likewise Moldovas Natalia Gherman will find it impossible to continue after receiving ten discourages, more than any other candidate.

Croatias Vesna Pusić already withdrew from the race the day before the second vote and one could expect the field of candidates to thin considerably now. A path for Miroslav Lajčák, Slovakia's Foreign Minister, who received nine discourages is very difficult. His compatriot and former Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan has already blamed his governments anti-refugee sentiment for Lajčák's poor result and he will likely withdraw to focus on more pressing matters in the European Union, since Slovakia holds EU presidency in the most challenging times.

As a Montenegrin, I was proud to see Igor Lukšić representing our country. The fact that Montenegro had a serious contender is very important for a country which became a UN member only in 2006. However, with only two Security Council members supporting him, it is less likely Igor will progress further. The UN unwritten principle of regional rotation means the next Secretary General should be Eastern European. So, it is a good sign that three of the top five positions are occupied by Vuk Jeremić, Danilo Türk, and Irina Bokova.

Vuk Jeremić was a controversial Foreign Minister and his second place is most probably due to

Russian support. Jeremić still rejects Kosovos independence. He reflects Serbias strong anti-NATO sentiment and it was through Russian support and aggressive lobbying that he secured the Presidency of the General Assembly in 2012. His leadership was not well received by many in Eastern Europe. He would be a perfect fit for Vladimir Putin but it would be extremely surprising if Jeremić was acceptable to the United States and to most of European countries.

Jeremić might have Putins backing but Danilo Türk, Slovenias ex- President, is publically looking for his support. Putin visited Slovenia at the end of July where he met with Türk while attending a commemoration for a Russian chapel. Türk may have a low profile but after a lengthy and successful career as an Ambassador and UN Assistant Secretary-General he has developed a solid reputation as a UN insider. His UN connections and knowledge have helped his campaign but he slipped to fourth in the second vote. Türk was a competent official in his time and as a professor is very knowledgeable on international law, but many in the UN remember his leadership as cautious and reluctant to take a strong position. Perhaps Türk is too much of a reminder of Ban Ki-moon.

After 70 years and eight male Secretaries-General, the United Nations has yet to be led by a woman. It is time for this to change.

The criteria of geography and gender may give another top candidate an edge. UNESCOs Director General Irina Bokova was the only woman to finish in the top five after both votes and many observers find her to be the strongest Eastern European candidate remaining. Bokova is often mentioned as Russias choice, and while they probably will not veto her, the last vote probably revealed their actual favorite - Jeremić. She has more than solid UN and diplomatic credentials and an impressive track record of reform in the face of budget constraints. She was twice elected as Director-General of UNESCO - so is trusted by the Member States, including the United States as a bridge builder and leader. Some commentators blame Bokova personally for Palestines accession to UNESCO. They should not forget that it was a decision taken by the Member States, not the Director General. Her work on fighting anti-Semitism has earned her praise from American Jewish leaders and the Speaker of the Israeli Knesset - a rarity for a UN official. She, and Igor Lukšić, were also recognised by Amnesty International in the Netherlands as the most credible UNSG candidates who are human rights defenders. That should not be overlooked.

There are more votes ("straw polls") to come and backroom politics mean anything can happen.

The election of an Eastern European UN Secretary General would be a significant sign of faith in our regions progress since the end of the Cold War. There is a real danger that without a coordinated and unified approach our region will be overlooked again.

We could not fault António Guterres for winning but only our own lack of progress and inability to see beyond old differences and grievances. Now is the time to regroup as a region, and identify our common strategy for the future. Eastern European candidates who have withdrawn from the race, or are considering it, should put the good of the region above individual preferences and consider supporting the most suitable remaining candidate.

This opportunity is too rare and important to let slip away and we would only have ourselves to blame.

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