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Portugal and the United Nations: Will António Guterres be the Next UN Secretary-General?

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On September 4, António Guterres announced he will leave his post as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) by the end of this year.¹ The former Portuguese prime-minister was elected by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in June 2005 and re-elected in 2010 for a second-term, which should have expired last June. However, with the deepening of the refugee crisis, in February 2015, upon recommendation of the UN Secretary-General, the UNGA decided to extend his mandate until the end of the year.²

So far, Guterres has not confirmed whether he will run for the role of UN Secretary-General. Nonetheless, his interest in the position is an open secret. It should be noted that the selection process is only now taking its

first steps. On September 11, for instance, a resolution granting Member States the right to receive candidates' résumés and hear their views is expected to be submitted to the UNGA, where it is due to be put to a vote. The resolution also calls on the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the UNGA to begin with the candidate selection process — which is to be done through a letter inviting Member States to submit applications, if they wish to do so, and explaining the mechanisms for the selection process.³ In any event, such as in past, the selection process threatens to characterize itself by opaqueness, under a formula that continues to grant permanent members of the UNSC discretionary power in the backstage.

The UN Charter is very clear on this issue. Article 97 limits itself to stating that the Secretary-General shall be appointed by the UNGA upon recommendation by the UNSC. In practice, according to a resolution approved by the UNGA in 1946, the UNSC shall recommend only one name, under a process in which the five permanent members of the UNSC — China, France, Great Britain,

1 "Head of U.N. refugee agency to step down this year" (*Reuters*, 4 September 2015).

2 "General Assembly Extends Term of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Appoints France to Committee on Conferences" (*United Nations*, 2 February 2015).

* Revised and enlarged version: "António Guterres: futuro secretário-geral da ONU?" (*i*, 8 September 2015), p. 31.

3 Carole Landry, "UN states want voice in choosing secretary general" (*Agence France-Presse*, 4 September 2015).



Russia and US — have veto power. The unwritten rule also establishes that the UNSG shall not originate from one of the five permanent members and respect the principal of geographic rotation.

Ban Ki-moon's mandate expires at the end of 2016 and, in theory, the next UNSG should originate from the Western European and Others Group. However, the Eastern European Group is claiming that right, since, due to the Cold War context, there has never been a UNSG from that region.

In the event Guterres decides to enter the race, he will have to face capable rivals from the Eastern European countries. Some have already officially assumed their bids and enjoy overt support from the governments of their own countries. Such is the case of Danilo Türk, former President of Slovenia,⁴ Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria,⁵ or Vesna Pusić, current Minister of Foreign Affairs of Croatia.⁶ The list of possible candidates is, nonetheless, much broader — I refrain from enumerating the other two or three dozen names already mentioned in the international media — and, of course, is not limited to the Eastern European Group. In effect, at this point

there are potential candidates for everyone's liking. In the midst of this abundance, would an eventual bid by Guterres be successful?

Would an eventual bid by António Guterres be successful? The answer is far from being clear. Guterres is confronted with strong political and diplomatic pressure coming from the highest level of the UN to choose a candidate from the Eastern European Group. He also faces a considerably powerful lobby focused on choosing a woman for the post, since this has never happened. Thus, the wind doesn't seem to blow favorably for Guterres. That being said, nothing is yet lost.

The answer is far from being clear. Currently, Guterres is confronted with strong political and diplomatic pressure coming from the highest level of the UN to choose a candidate from the Eastern European Group. That is exemplified by the fact that Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, has on several occasions claimed the primacy of that requisite.⁷ Naturally, regional countries appear to be aligning with Russia with regard to such a demand, despite it not having been yet decided who that candidate will be.

The former Portuguese prime-minister also faces a considerably powerful lobby focused on choosing a woman for the post, since this has never happened. The resolution to be voted on September 11 in the UNGA explicitly invites Member States to submit female candidates and not male ones. Having said this, the office doesn't lack female candidates with strong backgrounds and *résumés*, as noted above, in a list that is highly likely to be still open.

Additionally, Guterres may have to face an unfavorable

calendar. In case the UN's dominant orientation prevails, according to which the list of candidates must be finalized by November and the short-list closed in December, the former Portuguese prime-minister's bid becomes practically unfeasible, even if the final decision is taken sometime during the second semester of 2016.

Clearly the wind doesn't blow favorably for Guterres. That being said, nothing is yet lost. It is not granted that the Eastern European Group will be able to name the next UNSG. In fact, Churkin's activism may well work in the opposite direction, in part because not every candi-

4 Türk's bid received support from former Slovenian prime-minister, Alenka Bratušek. Unsurprisingly, the new prime-minister, Miro Cerar, who took office in September 2014, maintained his support for the candidature. See "Govt Endorses Former President's Candidacy for UN Sec-Gen" (*The Slovenia Times*, 2 January 2014); and, "Türk's UN Sec-Gen Candidacy Endorsed by PM, President" (*The Slovenia Times*, 7 January 2015).

5 Bokova's bid received support from former Bulgarian prime-minister, Plamen Oresharski. The current prime-minister, Boyko Borisov, who took office in November 2014, maintained diplomatic support for the candidature. See "Bulgaria nominates Irina Bokova for UN Secretary General" (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs* [Bulgaria], 18 June 2014); and, "Bulgaria to Support Irina Bokova's Nomination for UN Secretary-General" (*Sofia News Agency*, 9 January 2015).

6 Vedran Pavlic, "Foreign Minister Pusić to Be the Croatian Candidate for the UN Secretary General" (*Total Croatia News*, 3 September 2015).

7 Dulcie Leimbach, "Has Russia Dashed All Hopes for a Female Secretary-General?" (*PassBlue*, 30 April 2015).



date from the region will pass the Russian screening, especially at a time when the Ukrainian crisis is far from being solved and considering that a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe were — and some still are — particularly tough with Russia.

The gender factor may also not prevail, especially when there are — or on the verge of being — several women in top positions in various UN agencies. Former prime-minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark, heads the United National Development Programme (UNDP). As mentioned above, Irina Bokova is director-general of UNESCO. Moreover, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, former prime-minister of Denmark, has recently announced her bid for the position of high commissioner of the UNHCR.

On the other hand, however, the extensive network of contacts which Guterres acquired over his ten years as high commissioner of the UNHCR, as well as his deep knowledge of the UN inner workings, are relevant political trump cards favoring the former Portuguese prime-minister. Finally, as far as anyone knows, Guterres may

benefit from the fact that he has not generated antibodies among the permanent members of the UNSC.

In a nutshell, Guterres doesn't currently seem to be among the favorites. Despite this, although not being a favorite, he may still be close enough to be allowed to battle for victory in case the wind blows in his direction. Let us not forget that, in past occasions, the favorites didn't always end up being the final choice.

In any event, the moment for making big decisions draws near. Guterres has not officially communicated to the Portuguese government his intention to enter the race and, as such, the minister of Foreign Affairs, Rui Machete, has not yet initiated diplomatic *démarches* to garner votes. That said, it is unlikely that the Portuguese government has not informally carried out some preparatory work. After all, if and when the former Portuguese prime-minister's bid goes forward, that will ultimately be a national cause, regardless of the next government's party composition.

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