



Leadership in a Fractured Order

Choosing the Next UN Secretary-General: Legitimacy, Gender and Regional Balance



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Foreword

The New UN Secretary General: Can She Succeed?

By Vesna Pusić

**Former Croatian First Deputy Prime Minister and
Minister of Foreign and European Affairs**

We live in a time of anti-multilateralism. It is still perplexing how it happened so fast, it seems almost sudden. But like all major global change it had probably been happening slowly for a long time, and then all at once. And yet, in this time of major transition, when everything is in a flux, the world needs multilateral organisations and some universally applicable rules more than ever. Regardless of different ideologies addressing globalisation, the world is interconnected. Wars, climate change, recessions, pandemics, affect everybody, regardless of where they start. The rules-based order and the international law as its implementation tool, had the United Nations as the crown jewel of global consensus. But this biggest and most important multilateral organisation has been eroded over time by wars, double standards, hypocrisy, resentment; followed by defunding and finally marginalization. The concept of "great powers" ruling the world and dividing it into their spheres of influence has returned with a vengeance.

In this atmosphere the United Nations are electing its new Secretary General. It will be the Chief Operating Officer that will have to navigate the most important multilateral organisation through this dramatic change of attitude, funding, global consensus and authority. There is no doubt in my mind that at the other end of this transition, the Sustainable Development Goals will still be of crucial importance, rule of law will still matter, peace will still matter, human rights equal for all will still be important for all of humanity. The question is can the UN survive until that time and where should we look for a Secretary-General that can successfully steer it in that direction, rather than preside over its demise.

In times of crisis many nations have tried and some have even succeeded, to elect a woman to the top leadership position. This is not because there is a bigger pool of talent in the female part of society, but because this has been the pool far less explored and used when looking for leadership. It could be argued that in today's world the experience of female human existence is still closer to

politics of everyday life, the need to economise with budgets, objectives and ambitions. If the UN is to regain its authority and influence, it would have to restart with some of its original tasks and purpose. And that is to prevent and stop wars. That would primarily require first class diplomacy, negotiations and consensus building skills. If it can reaffirm its authority in this field, when the time comes it can again become the most important guardian of human rights and a rules-based international order.

For a number of formal reasons, such as that there has never been a Secretary-General from Southeast Europe, or that already ten years ago the idea was to elect a woman from SEE that somehow got lost along the way, it would be good to elect a woman from SEE. But there is another, more substantial reason. Women from SEE have in their lifetime been either through war, or major social strife, the collapse of an old order and the birth pangs of a new one. They have a first-hand experience that countries and governments can win or lose wars, but no society has ever won one; it is always the loser.

So, while for all those reasons, the time has come to elect a woman as Secretary-General, and a woman from SEE at that, being a woman should not, would not and is not enough! It has to be a woman who values and has a track record in fighting for democracy, human rights, social equality, sustainable development, conflict resolution, peace; a woman who has the knowledge, intelligence and courage to persevere through difficult times.

And there are quite a few of those in Southeast Europe.



Context

The Secretary-General for the Next Era: Restoring Legitimacy and Shaping the Post-2030 Agenda

Appointing the New UN Secretary-General in the Middle of a 'Lost Decade'

The 2026 appointment of the United Nations Secretary-General comes with higher stakes than any previous contest.

In a context of a global realignment¹ and a fractured international order,² the United Nations itself comes under attack. As it celebrates its eightieth anniversary, the Organisation faces in the eyes of most observers the severest crisis since its founding:³ wars in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan rage on, whilst the Security Council is paralysed, and great powers openly defy the Charter. States withdraw from multilateral instruments and institutions questioning their very usefulness and defy their authority, notably criticism raised by the current presidential administration of the United States, the withdrawal from the Rome Statute from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Budget cuts force agencies to scale back life-saving operations, from halving food aid to Rohingya refugees to shutting health programmes in Lebanon. Under political and financial pressure, the UN leadership is pressing through a reform plan questioned by staff and civil society. Meanwhile, rising blocs such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation parade themselves as alternatives to a "Western-led" multilateralism with military might.

To sum up the general impression: the UN is in "free fall", short of resources, relevance and unity.⁴ All these factors converge in a profound crisis of legitimacy.

Are we in a sort of "League of Nations Redux" moment?⁵

The legitimacy is indeed on the line: against the rise of illiberalism, populism and authoritarianism affecting all UN regional groups and altering its ability to respond to the crisis the globe faces, the UN is seen as being affected by a "culture of caution"⁶ rendering it unable to use the power and legitimacy it has to save lives and stand up for rights.

A "culture of caution," which is leading the UN to fail to achieve its own 2030 Agenda: the 2025 Sustainable Development Goals Report

indicate that of 137 measurable targets, only 20% are on track. Nearly two thirds of SDG targets are unlikely to be met by 2030. Progress on SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) is among the weakest: "none of the 23 targets under Sustainable Development Goal 16 are on track [and] 15 per cent of the Goal's targets are regressing." We are in the midst of what might well be a "lost decade for humanity."⁷

In the middle of this lost decade for humanity, the UN will need to choose a leader able to address the democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space, widening inequalities and "gender backlash,"⁸ multiplying violent conflicts, accelerating climate change, and defending peace, human rights, gender equality, and sustainable development.

They could be put even more at risk by the wrong selection of the next United Nations Secretary-General in 2026.

Notes from the Faultline: Dispatch #1 argues that the 2026 appointment of the United Nations Secretary-General will be a defining test to the UN's legitimacy in the middle of a "lost decade for humanity." It calls for leadership able to restore credibility to an organisation in crisis: leadership that embodies independence, integrity, and courage to defend the UN Charter against erosion by power politics. Notes from the Faultline: Dispatch #1 contends that legitimacy now also depends on who is chosen, not merely the quality of the selection process ([Benchmark 4](#)): a woman ([Benchmark 2](#)) from the Eastern European Group ([Benchmark 3](#)) whose experience of transition, resilience, and rebuilding can help the United Nations confront the crises of democracy, climate, and human rights that will shape the post-2030 world ([Benchmark 1](#)).

From Opaque Bargaining to a Rules-Based Contest

These circumstances could lead the UN's member states to "choose [its next leader] in a back room",⁹ as was feared by Liechtenstein's representative to the United Nations in 2015.

The fear was not unjustified. For decades, the choice of Secretary-General was the preserve of the permanent five members of the Security Council. Article 97 of the Charter gives the General Assembly the formal power of appointment, but only upon the recommendation of the Security Council. In practice, this translated into secretive bargaining dominated by the five permanent members of the Security Council, conducted through straw polls and informal consultations. There was no public record of who was being considered for the position, no written information, and names were simply suggested, almost always by permanent members.

In circumstances like today's, the permanent members might indeed again prefer "opaque bargaining" as in the past, a process "geared to appoint the candidate representing the lowest common denominator," as Yvonne Terlingen observed in 2016.¹⁰

In this context, it is highly valuable that the UN General Assembly clearly reaffirmed that it — for the second time in the Organisation's history — wishes for a transparent process, the only way to designate a leader able to confront today's crises.

Its 2025 resolution reaffirms the standards first articulated in 2015-2016:¹¹ candidates must meet "the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity", and demonstrate "a firm commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter." Given the challenges faced around the globe, these should be read as tests to leadership character.

For the first time, the General Assembly established a clear timetable and minimum transparency standards for the selection process. It is to be formally initiated in the last quarter of 2025 by a joint letter from the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Security Council. This letter should set out notional milestones including a deadline for nominations, a period for public hearings and dialogues, and a timeline for Security Council deliberations. The process should end with the swearing-in of the Secretary-General-designate in the last quarter of 2026, allowing time to prepare the person to take office on 1 January 2027.

The new resolution adopted reflects this awareness: process reform is not technical, but existential.

The 2015-2016 reforms, driven by the ACT group, 1 for 7 Billion, and the General Assembly's own Ad Hoc Working Group on Revitalization, changed expectations. For the first time, candidates had to submit vision statements, take part in public hearings, and were named publicly. Media scrutiny and civil society engagement made it politically untenable to advance weak or unqualified candidates.

The 2025-2026 process now needs to allow the United Nations to select a person qualified to address today's challenges and have the legitimacy of being chosen through a transparent process.

Only through such a transparent process can the UN secure a leader equipped to meet the current decade's challenges and lead the post-2030 Agenda.

Benchmark 1

Prioritise Human Rights, Climate Change and Post-2030 Credibility

Argument: The next United Nations Secretary-General must be able to lead on three defining challenges of our time climate change, human rights, and the credibility of the post-2030 agenda. Without bold leadership on these fronts, the UN risks consigning humanity to another lost decade.

The new General Assembly resolution reaffirms that the office of the Secretary-General demands “the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity, and a firm commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter.” These requirements must translate into the ability to defend human rights in the face of democratic backsliding, to confront the global gender backlash, and to hold states accountable for commitments too often ignored. Calls made in 2016 for a Secretary-General who would be a human rights champion remain urgent.

The **climate emergency** adds urgency. The Paris Agreement created the framework for action, but the coming decade will decide whether the 1.5°C threshold is overshoot. Ambitious targets to 2030 are central, even if we now know they will not be met, because they lay the foundation for 2050 neutrality, to which the next Secretary-General will need to lead humanity. The UN needs a Secretary-General who has the authority and resolve to mobilise governments and societies for climate action, integrating it across the UN’s work.

The credibility of the **post-2030 agenda** hangs in the balance. As Mary Dejevsky warned in 2016, the UN risks becoming “toothless” unless its leadership can show the Organisation has a mission that works. The next Secretary-General must rebuild belief that multilateralism can deliver on human rights, sustainability, and peace, not just rhetoric.

If faithfully applied, the selection process outlined by UNGA favours scrutiny over horse-trading and maximises the chance of securing **a leader who can meet these three tests.**

Benchmark 2

Appoint a Woman to Lead a Global Gender Renewal

Argument: After eighty years of male leadership, failing once again to appoint a woman would irreparably damage the UN's legitimacy, contradict its own resolutions, and send the wrong signal at a moment of global gender backlash.

In a world in which illiberalism, populism and authoritarianism is advancing, women's rights and gender rights are under attack, there is more than symbolism in appointing the United Nations first woman as leader, and a woman ready to lead a global gender renewal.

The General Assembly itself has now "noted with regret" that no woman has ever held the post and explicitly "encourages Member States to strongly consider nominating women."¹² This language goes further than the Pact for the Future and builds on decades of commitments to parity. It also reflects growing impatience: women advocates have long warned that unless structural measures are taken, the UN will continue to reproduce discrimination "for the next 112 years."¹³

The legitimacy question is stark: As Anne-Marie Goetz observed during the 2016 race, double standards meant that "statements judged as visionary in male candidates were dismissed as adversarial when voiced by women."¹⁴ The contemplation of a man being appointed in 2016 — notwithstanding his qualities — despite a number of highly qualified women running for the office, left many to conclude that the UN could become "anachronistic, irrelevant and unfit to handle the most pressing crises."¹⁵

If the UN fails again in 2026, this will further reinforce the perception that its inability to practise what it preaches is due to the absence of female leadership.

This is beyond symbolism: This failure would come at the very moment when women's rights are under unprecedented attack. The UN's Working Group on Discrimination against Women has warned of a "significant backlash" against gender equality, fuelled by transnational movements opposing so-called "gender ideology."¹⁶ Gains once considered irreversible, including reproductive rights,

gender-based violence protections, and equality in education are now openly contested. Paola Salwan Daher notes that in this context, feminist commitments are not "add-ons" but existential: "They determine whether power structures change or entrench themselves."¹⁷

Appointing a qualified woman Secretary-General, ready to lead a global gender renewal in the context of the post-2030 Agenda, is not symbolic. It is indeed structural: it signals a break with the UN's own patriarchal traditions and aligns its leadership with its normative commitments, from CEDAW to the Beijing to Sustainable Development Goal 5.

The consequences of failure are clear: In a fractured global order, a UN led yet again by a man will lack the moral authority to press governments on women's rights, to confront anti-gender movements, or to credibly advance feminist approaches to peace and security, all to the core of the very challenges the Secretary-General will need to address.¹⁸

A woman Secretary-General is not a "nice to have," it is a test of whether the UN can survive as a legitimate multilateral body in the twenty-first century.

Benchmark 3

Appoint a Woman from Eastern Europe

Argument: Amongst all United Nations regional groups, only the Eastern European Group has never had one of its citizens as Secretary-General. An Eastern European woman could simultaneously close two legitimacy gaps — regional and gender — while bringing firsthand experience directly relevant to today's UN agenda.

Every regional group except the Eastern European Group has held the office of Secretary-General. As Luke Coffey noted in 2016, “of the eight [now nine] people who have held the position [...] all have been men and none have been from Eastern Europe.”¹⁹ This imbalance is a direct challenge to the UN's legitimacy, which depends on perceptions of fairness and equal participation.

A woman from a country belonging to the Eastern European Group at the United Nations could close two legitimacy gaps at once, gender and region, while bringing lived experience that is directly relevant to today's UN agenda.

History strengthens the case: The region has endured the Cold War and then lived through the difficult transitions that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. The wars in the Balkans marked the end of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first centuries. Most countries in the region rebuilt strong democratic institutions, managed successful economic transformation, and confronted authoritarian pressure. Where too many too often dismiss Eastern Europeans as traumatised by their historical experience and prone to scaremongering,²⁰ the experience and perceptions brought by today's Eastern European democratic leaders are precisely the insights and instincts that the UN needs in its leadership today. Even more so for leaders from Central and Southeastern Europe.

At a moment of global democratic backsliding, this lived experience has direct value. As violent conflicts and wars surge, the experience of peacebuilding and reconciliation brought by democratic Eastern European, and especially Central and Southeastern European, leaders is exactly what is needed today. Research shows that states emerging from communism have drawn on their own transition paths

to support democratic breakthroughs abroad, emphasising civil society participation and institutional reform. A Secretary-General shaped by this trajectory would bring credibility to the UN's efforts to promote peace, defend democracy and stand up for human rights in an increasingly hostile environment.

Most EEG member states should support a woman candidate:

Whilst the Eastern European Group is a heritage of the Soviet Union and is well known for its very limited collaboration. In 2016, the Group undermined its own chances by fielding multiple competing candidates, amongst whom uniquely qualified women. At the time, commentators already warned at the time that the region "should not miss the historic opportunity [...] preferably a woman."²¹

A united push by most states belonging to the Eastern European Group behind a woman candidate from the region in 2026 would be both historically just and strategically wise, correcting decades of exclusion and equipping the UN with leadership forged in the struggle for democracy.

Appointing such a candidate would be the rectification of a historical omission and would equip the UN with leadership rooted in transition, resilience, and an instinct for defending democracy in an era of authoritarian pushback.

Furthermore, appointing a woman from a geographic region impacted by the war of aggression led by the Russian Federation against Ukraine would certainly be a benefit to the Organisation's ability to handle the regional and global consequences of the conflict and build bridges for a rules-based peace with accountability.

At stake is not just fairness to a region, but the UN's ability to respond credibly to one of the defining challenges of our time: the surge of violence and the global erosion of democratic norms.

Benchmark 4

The General Assembly Should Play Its Full Role

Argument: The United Nations General Assembly's stronger hand — clarified again in the revitalisation track — should translate into assertive stewardship of hearings, timelines and follow-up; its Charter-based authority complements the Security Council's recommendation power.

The General Assembly's role in the process has been further strengthened in several ways in its 2025 resolution: the resolution recalls the Assembly's powers under Articles 10, 11, 12 and 35 of the UN Charter, which allow it to discuss and make recommendations on issues of peace and security, even when the Security Council is dealing with them. It also calls for closer coordination between the Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council.

The resolution reaffirms the Assembly's commitment to the 1950 "Uniting for Peace" resolution, which enables the UNGA to act when the Security Council is paralysed by vetoes or deadlock. It also links this to the 2022 veto initiative, under which the UNGA must meet automatically within ten days whenever a veto is cast in the Security Council, provided that the Assembly does not meet in an emergency special session on the same situation. Together, these measures strengthen the UNGA's authority and increase transparency in situations where the Security Council is divided.

These provisions matter: they embed the General Assembly's role in safeguarding legitimacy, including when the Council is divided.¹²

For the selection of the new Secretary-General, the practical implication is clear: the President of the General Assembly should run interactive, substantive dialogues; seek broad Member State input; and publish detailed summaries and recommendations. In turn, the Security Council should improve transparency around its procedures, short of compromising diplomacy, including timely updates and, where feasible, official communication of indicative polling outcomes.

As H.E. Annalena Baerbock, President of the eightieth General Assembly, reminded Member States, the UN cannot allow cynics to weaponize its failures. "It is not the Charter which fails. It's not the UN as an institution which fails. The Charter, our Charter, is only as strong as Member States' willingness to uphold it. And their willingness to hold to account those who violate it."²²

This reminder places a high responsibility on the General Assembly as a whole, and on President Baerbock, to prove its relevance in the choice of the next Secretary-General, to showcase its ability to limit the P5's negotiations behind closed-door, and to ensure that process and outcome together restore legitimacy.

Conclusion

A rules-based, time-bound, and transparent process is now agreed. Applied with rigour, it offers the chance to deliver the kind of Secretary-General the times demand: independent, values-anchored, and capable of rebuilding trust in multilateralism at a moment when it is challenged.

The legitimacy of the United Nations is at stake. After eighty years, another male appointment would confirm the worst suspicions that the UN demands of its members what it cannot practise itself. And leaving the Eastern European Group once again without representation — at a moment when the region may need leadership the most to once again confront its devils — would hollow out the principle of equal participation that is supposed to bind the membership together.

The challenges ahead make the stakes higher still. The climate crisis is accelerating, human rights are under systematic attack, and the credibility of the post-2030 agenda hangs by a thread after a lost decade for humanity. Without leadership prepared to confront these realities head-on, the UN risks drifting into irrelevance.

In 2026, legitimacy and leadership converge in a single proposition: Member States must unite to appoint a woman from the Eastern European Group with the courage, experience, and credibility to lead the United Nations through the next decade. Anything less would be a historic failure — both for the UN and for the people it was created to serve.

Once again, the United Nations must stand as a beacon of cooperation and contribution and now it is time for a woman to lead its path.

As President Baerbock reminded UN member states: “Clearly, we have to do better.”²³

Notes

¹ See *inter alia*, Human Rights Compass, "Global Realignment. Recommendations on how to avoid an adverse impact on human rights," April 2025.

² See *inter alia*, Human Rights Compass, "Fractured Order. Recommendations to Advance Human Rights Multilateralism," June 2025.

³ See, The Economist, "The UN's grim future," 18 September 2025.

⁴ Farnaz Fasssihi, "U.N. Gathers Amid Its 80th Anniversary and a 'Free Fall'," The New York Times, 21 September 2025.

⁵ See, Stewart Patrick, "League of Nations Redux? Multilateralism in the Post-American World," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 September 2025.

⁶ Martin Griffiths, "I've seen the UN at its best. As it turns 80, with a world in crisis, it must recover its courage," The Guardian, 26 August 2025.

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, "A Decade Lost: No Peace, Justice or Inclusion Target on Track as 2030 Deadline Looms," 23 September 2025.

⁸ United Nations Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, "Gender equality and gender backlash – Guidance document," 31 October 2024 (UN Doc.: A/HRC/WG.11/41/2).

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¹⁰ Yvone Terlingen, "Choosing a new UN Secretary-General who will champion human rights," Open Democracy, 4 April 2016.

¹¹ United Nations General Assembly resolution, "Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly," 5 September 2025 (UN Doc.: A/RES/79/327).

¹² *Ibidem*, para. 42 (c).

¹³ Ourania S. Yancopoulos, "An Evaluation of Gender Balance in the Leadership of the UN Secretariat," Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 1 June 2016.

¹⁴ Anne-Marie Goetz, "Still no country for women? Double standards in choosing the next UN Secretary-General," Open Democracy, 28 July 2016.

¹⁵ Somini Sengupta, "After 70 Years of Men, Some Say It Is 'High Time' a Woman Led the U.N.," The New York Times, 22 August 2015.

¹⁶ UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Paola Salwan Daher, "Wie feministisch ist feministische Außen- und Entwicklungspolitik?," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 27 September 2022.

¹⁸ See *inter alia*, Saskia Brechenmacher, "The New Global Struggle Over Gender, Rights, and Family Values," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2025.

¹⁹ Luke Coffey, "Time for Eastern Europe to shine at the United Nations," Al Jazeera, 1 July 2016.

²⁰ See *inter alia*, Edward Lucas, "Why, Oh Why, Didn't We Listen to the Eastern Europeans?," Politico, 26 May 2014.

²¹ Miodrag Vlahovic, "Eastern Europe Must Grasp Its UN Moment," Balkan Insight, 6 July 2016.

²² Remarks by the President of the General Assembly, H.E. Annalena Baerbock, "Opening of the 80th General Debate," 23 September 2025.

²³ *Ibidem*.



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