

Interview with Irina Bokova, Candidate for UN Secretary General: “My biggest priority is to keep the United Nations relevant”

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The United Nations will select a new Secretary General this year to take over from Ban Ki-moon, whose term ends on 31 December. In the leadup to the appointment, we are featuring interviews with some of the candidates for the role. In the fourth of these discussions, EUROPP editor Tena Prelec speaks to [Irina Bokova](#), the candidate from Bulgaria, on her plans for the UN and what her experience at the head of UNESCO and in domestic politics would allow her to bring to the position. Bokova counters claims she may be viewed as a Russia-friendly candidate and responds to insinuations which would see another candidate from Bulgaria re-entering the race.



If you were successful in your bid to become UN Secretary General, what would be your number one priority in office?

I think in general terms you could say my biggest priority is to keep the United Nations relevant. We know the United Nations was created 70 years ago to build peace and promote human rights, but at the same time the threats we now face are very different from what they once were. Of course I am speaking about challenges such as interethnic conflict, civil wars, extremism, terrorism and other problems which do not derive first and foremost from state actors.

The UN also has to deal with huge humanitarian crises, the implementation of the 2030 agenda, and the Paris climate change agreement. All of these issues make it a necessity that we continue to keep the United Nations relevant and that would be my priority as Secretary General.

If there were one specific criticism of the way the UN currently functions, or one specific area where you think the UN could improve, what would this be?

I don't think it would be right to pass judgement here, I think the issue is more that the world is changing and the United Nations will also change to adapt to the new challenges we face. We can't compare directly what happened 10 or 50 years ago with what is happening now. And I think if an organisation cannot adapt or change with the times then it will become irrelevant. That is the issue that we're currently facing.

To give an example, the problems of sexual violence and rape by peacekeepers in the Central African Republic has tarnished the image of the United Nations and this is something that demands an immediate response if we want to show that the great work done by peacekeepers across the world makes a real difference.

You are currently the Director-General of UNESCO and you have had to deal with some of the problems created by so called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. What lessons do you think you could draw from this experience if you were to become Secretary General?

My work with UNESCO has strengthened my conviction that one of the biggest threats we face to peace, human rights, development and the United Nations' common agenda is violent extremism and terrorism. Islamic State do not just violate human rights, they also destroy cultural heritage and are engaged in a process of what could be termed 'cultural cleansing'. This is a new threat that has to be countered by the United Nations.



At UNESCO I have attempted to do this through our mandate for protecting heritage. And I do believe that this should be part of the agenda of the United Nations. We need to refocus our activities: I have tried to join the dots between the security concerns, the humanitarian concerns and also the cultural concerns of protecting people's heritage and identities while establishing intercultural dialogue and tolerance. I think we have succeeded in joining these dots, but now is the time to take strong decisions and measures to unify the international community around these objectives. This is not always well understood and we need to work toward developing a common understanding of these threats.

You are perceived to be a Russia-friendly candidate. Are you happy to be viewed in this way?

Let me be clear that first and foremost I am a Bulgarian candidate. I am very happy that the government and the country's institutions are supporting me. Second, I think that the role of the Secretary General is to be an honest broker. The Secretary General clearly has to enjoy the support of not just Russia, but also the Americans, the French, the Chinese, and the British, among others. Without this support the Secretary General cannot succeed in being this honest broker.

What I would say is that on several occasions I have reached out to Russia and I have received Russia's support on important issues. For instance, there is the issue of the illicit trafficking of antiquities – so called 'blood antiquities' – where we worked with the Americans and others, but where I was asked to help secure Russia's support for our efforts and I succeeded. This was my role and this should also be the role of the future Secretary General: to broker important decisions working with all of the Security Council, particularly the permanent members.

I think I have proven that I am a deep believer in human rights and I have developed a very strong position at UNESCO on freedom of speech and the safety of journalists, which is perhaps not always an issue that has full consensus across the world, but I think it is important for good governance and development. So I think that I have the right approach based on the Charter of the United Nations and at the same time I believe I can talk for everybody and be this honest broker.

Bulgaria stands out as a country which had two much talked about high-profile candidates before the official candidatures were announced, yourself and Kristalina Georgieva. Do you exclude the possibility that Georgieva might re-enter the race?

Well I have been the official candidate of Bulgaria since 9 February and there has not been a single decision from the government that would place this in doubt. There may have been some talk elsewhere in journalistic articles, but this is all I can say. I have respect for Kristalina, she has been a very efficient Commissioner in the European Commission, but this has been the policy of the government since the very beginning.

Can you comment on the way you are viewed in Bulgaria? There has been some criticism which has made

headlines recently, for instance in the letter written by the Bulgarian film-maker Evgeni Mihailov.

What I would say is that Bulgaria is a democracy. People have different opinions, but I think I have very strong and wide-ranging support. You have mentioned just one case, but there is so much other support that I am getting from civil society, intellectuals, youth groups and students. I have a lot of confidence that Bulgarian society is fully supportive of my candidacy and that they are following closely the developments in the race.

Of course this is also something that is important for the country as a whole. When I was elected as Director-General of UNESCO in 2009 as the first woman and first eastern European to hold the role I received a lot of support not just from Bulgaria, but from all of south-eastern Europe. And I have received a lot of feedback from other countries who have told me how good they think it will be for the region if I am successful in my candidacy.

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Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. The interview was conducted on 7 September 2016. Featured image: Irina Bokova; credits: UNESCO (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

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About the interviewee

Irina Bokova

Irina Bokova is the Director-General of UNESCO and a candidate for the position of UN Secretary General.

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