The 2016 election of a new UN Secretary-General

SUMMARY
On 13 October, the United Nations General Assembly appointed a European, António Guterres, to the post of UN Secretary-General, after a selection that was, in part, unprecedentedly transparent. For the first time in history, the nominated candidates had the opportunity to present their vision in public dialogues organised in the General Assembly with member states and civil society representatives.

Guterres emerged somewhat unexpectedly as the chosen candidate – without much diplomatic wrangling in the Security Council, and defying expectations that the next secretary-general would be a woman and/or an eastern European, according to the principle of diversity which holds sway in the UN. Given his strong political and diplomatic experience and his commitment to the refugees cause (he served as head of the UN Refugee Agency), his election has raised expectations that he will improve the UN's functioning and address current global challenges, especially the Syrian crisis and the refugee crisis.

In his vision statement, Guterres emphasised the importance of a 'diplomacy of peace' for his future mandate, focusing on the prevention of conflicts through political means. The commitment to human rights, sustainable development, women's empowerment and the value of diversity embodied in today's increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious societies defines his approach to rising global challenges. He intends to make the UN more efficient and more decentralised.

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The function of UN Secretary-General

The UN Secretary-General (SG) is the top official of the United Nations and the world's chief diplomat. The UN Charter however is not explicit on the SG's tasks. According to Article 97, the SG is the 'chief administrative officer of the Organisation' and acts in such capacity in all meetings of the main UN bodies (General Assembly – GA, the Security Council – SC, and the Economic and Social Council), and can perform any other functions entrusted to them by these bodies. A specific power in the charter is to bring to the attention of the SC any threat to international peace and security. According to the Charter, the SG cannot receive instructions from any government, but in practice has to take into account the concerns of member states, while upholding the values enshrined in the Charter. The SG often takes a mediation role ('good offices') to prevent international disputes. Each SG also defines their role, taking into account the global context during their term.

A GA Resolution of 1946 provided that the term of the first SG would be five years, renewable once, and that the SC and GA would be free to modify the term in light of experience. According to established custom, the term is of five years, but there have been some exceptions. To avoid any uncertainty, the SC includes the exact duration of the term in his recommendation on the appointment of a new SG. Of the eight SGs to date, all have served a second term, with the exception of Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Dag Hammarskjöld did not complete his second term, dying in a plane crash while in office.

The selection procedure

The procedure is set out, succinctly, in the UN Charter, Article 97: the SC issues a recommendation to the GA, which, on this basis, appoints the SG.

In the Security Council

In order to select one candidate, the SC meets in private and votes by secret ballot in accordance with its rules of procedure (rule 48). There are no formal rules on the selection procedure itself, but according to a practice that has developed over time, several rounds of 'straw polls' are held, in which each SC member can express approval/disapproval or no opinion with regard to each candidate. Permanent members can veto a candidate, and have done so in the past. The whole process is secretive, with no official information released about the outcome of SC voting rounds, although information often leaks.

In the General Assembly

Once it has selected a candidate, the SC makes a recommendation to the GA, with the name and duration of the term. The GA appoints the candidate through a resolution, adopted in a public session. Voting is usually unanimous, by acclamation.

The 2016 election

The principle of diversity

The UN rules do not provide for a geographical rotation of the post among the five UN regional groups, but in practice there has been a tacit understanding that such a rotation should apply, and a 1997 GA Resolution asked for due regard to continue to be given to regional rotation and also to gender equality. As Eastern Europe has never held the post, expectations were high that someone from this region would be elected this time, which explains why most of the candidates were from this region. Several of them were women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UN Secretaries-General</th>
<th>Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trygve Lie (Norway)</td>
<td>1946-1952</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dag Hammarskjöld (Sweden)</td>
<td>1953-1961</td>
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<td>U Thant (Myanmar)</td>
<td>1961-1971</td>
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<td>Kurt Waldheim (Austria)</td>
<td>1972-1981</td>
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<tr>
<td>Javier Perez de Cuellar (Peru)</td>
<td>1982-1991</td>
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<td>Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Egypt)</td>
<td>1992-1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kofi Annan (Ghana)</td>
<td>1997-2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ban Ki-moon</td>
<td>2007-2016</td>
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</tbody>
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Data Source: UN website
A more transparent election
Calls for increased transparency were made in GA resolutions in 1997, 2006 and 2010 and supported by GA President Mogens Lykketoft (2015-2016). In September 2015, the GA adopted a Resolution on the revitalisation of the work of the GA, which made proposals for improving the election of a new SG, who 'embodies the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity and demonstrates a firm commitment to the purposes and principles of the UN': the GA and SC will send a letter to member states inviting them to present candidates; the selection should take into account gender and geographical balance; the GA will conduct informal dialogues with the candidates.

Public campaigning by civil society organisations also played a part in ensuring that the 2016 election was unprecedentedly transparent, though, in civil society's view, more could still be done to improve the process: e.g. a clear timetable for the selection process should be established; and the SC should propose two candidates to the GA.

In accordance with the 2015 GA Resolution, a December 2015 letter signed jointly by the SC and GA presidents invited member states to publicly nominate candidates. Between April and June, the 12 nominated candidates (six men and six women) held public dialogues in the GA with member states and civil society representatives. Three later dropped out, while one candidate (European Commission Vice-President, Kristalina Georgieva, a Bulgarian) joined at the last moment, as there was no deadline for presenting candidates.

The election outcome
The SC considered 10 candidates in the end. Guterres' election was somewhat surprising, given that SGs originating in countries of the 'Western Europe and Others Group' have served 6 of the 15 SG terms. He emerged as the winner without facing any substantial opposition (or veto) from a SC member. It was initially expected that Russia would prefer a candidate from an eastern European country. Given tense diplomatic relations between the two major SC actors, the USA and Russia, more diplomatic wrangling over the choice had been predicted. Speculation that Guterres had promised important UN posts for Russia or China in return for his endorsement was dismissed. After six rounds of straw voting, in which he led from beginning to end, Guterres became the SC choice, with 13 votes in favour and 2 no-opinion votes in the final round. On 13 October 2016, Guterres was appointed by the GA, which endorsed the SC recommendation. The 193 GA members elected him by acclamation. His term runs from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2021.

António Guterres: the person and his vision
Guterres' election has raised significant expectations on institutional strengthening of the UN and of its capacity to address the current crises. The UN faces a difficult time after proving unable to put an end to the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Many voices consider that the UN has been hampered by weak leadership under the current SG, Ban Ki-moon. Guterres comes with extensive political and diplomatic experience. A socialist and polyglot (speaking English, French, and Spanish fluently, plus his mother tongue), he will be the first UN Secretary-General to have previously headed a government (Portugal's prime minister between 1995 and 2002). In this capacity, he chaired the European Council in early 2000. Between 2005 and 2015, Guterres was UN High Commissioner for Refugees and is credited with reforming this UN body: the share of headquarters expenditure and of staff expenditure in total costs was cut roughly in half, staff reduced by a fifth, and Geneva-based staff by 30 % through redeployment to crisis regions, while partnerships with NGOs and governments increased and programme implementation was very high. His experience in dealing with refugees most probably played a role in his selection.
His vision
Guterres presented his vision statement on 4 April 2016, emphasising that the UN is facing new challenges stemming from mega-trends in globalisation, including the new nature of conflicts. The UN should adopt a holistic approach based on three interdependent pillars: 1) development, peace and security, and human rights. Human rights should be mainstreamed across the whole UN system; 2) the UN should attach the highest priority to preventing conflicts. A diplomacy for peace based on the primacy of political solutions should be developed. For such an approach to succeed, several elements are essential: empowerment of women, capacity and institution-building of states, prevention of terrorism focusing on the battle for values, and fostering multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious societies; 3) the UN should be made more decentralised and efficient; it needs a culture of partnership with regional organisations, international financial institutions and civil society.

In his speech to the GA, on the occasion of his appointment, he highlighted the transparency and openness of the selection process and described his future role as one of 'convener, a mediator, a bridge-builder and an honest broker to help find solutions that benefit everyone involved'. He also talked about the need to fight with determination both terrorism and violent extremism, on one side, and populism and xenophobia, on the other. He declared empowerment and protection of women to be a priority and reaffirmed his faith in the UN values, and in the value of diversity displayed in 'more and more multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious societies'.

EU reaction to António Guterres' election
Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, sent a letter to Guterres, expressing his satisfaction that a European had been elected to the post, and his readiness to cooperate with him on issues such as migration, climate change, peace and security. Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, similarly expressed his satisfaction on the choice of a European candidate and his confidence that he will strengthen the UN role as a central actor of global governance. Guterres is known to the Parliament, which he visited in September 2015 on the occasion of a debate with MEPs on human rights of migrants.

Main references
Appointing the UN Secretary-General, Security Council Research Report, 16 October 2015.
Selecting a new UN Secretary General, House of Commons Library, October 2016.

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