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INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW PARISH
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Matthew Parish was the Chief Political Advisor to Vuk Jeremić, the candidate to be UN Secretary General who came second in the recent competition. He lives in Geneva, worked as a UN peace keeper in the Balkans, and is a well known Swiss lawyer specialising in international law and international dispute resolution. In this interview he expresses his views on the future of the United Nations and its role in the City of Geneva.

NOW WE ALL KNOW WHO THE NEXT UN SECRETARY GENERAL WILL BE. HOW DO YOU THINK THE FINAL DECISION WAS MADE?

I was not present in the UN Security Council for the final deliberations! But this is what I do know. Firstly, we had six rounds of anonymous voting in the Security Council. The purpose of that was to clean out unrealistic candidates, and to draw up a top two or top three. Then Russia and the United States both pushed the idea of “coloured” ballot papers in a voting round on 5 October 2016. The Permanent Members of the Security Council, who each wield veto votes, would have red ballot papers. So if a candidate received any negative vote on a red ballot paper, their candidacy would be effectively be finished.

The problem was that if this procedure was followed, then every single candidate would receive a negative vote on a red ballot paper, including the last-minute second Bulgarian candidate, Kristalina Georgieva. Hence there would be no candidates left, and the entire straw poll process would have revealed itself as achieving nothing.

Therefore the Permanent Five Member States engaged in a last-minute negotiation, overnight on 4/5 October, to try to agree the identity of a candidate before any voting was necessary. In effect, the introduction of red ballot papers forced them into a high-pressure bargain.

I don't know, but if I were had to guess then I don't believe there was actually any vote in the Security Council using coloured ballot papers. The reason I think this is because different newspapers report different alleged results of that vote, whereas for each of the prior five rounds of voting the results were made public, without contest, virtually immediately. This speaks for itself.

WHAT WERE THE TERMS OF THE BARGAIN THE PERMANENT FIVE SECURITY COUNCIL MEMBERS MADE?

Again, I wasn't there. But I can speculate. The Russians gave way on Antonio Guterres. He is not from Eastern Europe. But I think the Russians understood that the current US administration was going to veto any Eastern European candidate. Moreover Mr Guterres is an exceptional diplomat and an impressive statesman. He covers many bases. He is was the leader of a left-leaning Portuguese government, but also an Atlanticist and a European. His relations with Moscow are warm, just as they are with Washington. And he is respected as a dignified public servant of universally admired integrity. So everyone was content with him, particularly based upon his prior highly-regarded UN management performance. And that is the principal qualification to be elected UN Secretary General.

In exchange, I believe the Russians have been accorded the right to appoint a Deputy Secretary-General of their choice. It remains to be seen who that is going to be. I am not sure the Russians themselves yet know. But one thing I am sure of is that the new Deputy Secretary General, whoever it will be, will have a more substantial role than may have occurred in the past. And they may be focused, in particular, upon Geneva.

We're entering a new era of geopolitics, which is more multipolar. That will be reflected in the new composition of senior management positions in the United Nations. I think the Russians and the Chinese are going to become more involved in the United Nations than hitherto they may have cared to be. That is another part of the bargain, at least in my opinion.

I also see a change in the traditional nationality-based occupancies of some of the most senior roles. There have been conventions that some jobs are held by certain nations. I think those conventions are going to break down, at least to a degree. It remains to be seen just to what degree.

I also think it is an implicit term of the bargain that substantially more influence is going to move to Geneva. The United Nations might be thought to have neglected Geneva over the last ten years. The reasons for that are complex, but the fact is hard to deny. I think we may soon see a change in the other direction. Geneva will grow. It will become more important. Mr Guterres is well-known to admire Geneva as a diplomatic centre and to consider the UN's role in the city of fundamental importance. He served as High Commissioner for Refugees from 2005 to 2015. He has an affection for the city. Geneva is increasingly seen amongst the Great Powers as a neutral territory that may serve as a centre for negotiation and resolution of some of the world's most intractable conflicts. New York cannot always comfortably occupy that role.

WHAT WILL THIS MEAN FOR THE STAFF OF THE UN IN GENEVA?

I think many things will change. Firstly, UN staff working in Geneva will cease to feel neglected. Their work will become more central to the mandate of the United Nations. But with those advancements, a new sense of responsibility will be inculcated. UNOG staff are going to have much clearer mandates. They will surely have a much stronger sense of job satisfaction. Accordingly, they will be held to the central tenets of the Treaty of San Francisco far more than they might have felt that they were in the past.

I think the effects are going to be very positive. UNOG staff are going to feel a lot more central to their roles. They will be more motivated. They will feel that the system treats them more fairly in the past, although it will demand more of them. They will find their job descriptions better defined, and they will be held to those standards. They will not find themselves fighting with other departments and officials. They will be encouraged to cooperate, not to compete. New systems of performance appraisal will be hugely fairer. Principles of geographical distribution of jobs will be both transparent and reasonable.

In short, I imagine that UNOG is going to become an ever more efficient secretariat. It already has a number of brilliant people. The work they do individually is often excellent. They need the incentives, and a liberal sense of management, to do their jobs effectively. I have met many UNOG officials who are some of the most excellent civil servants in the world. Those who perform effectively should be given the due discretion to do their jobs properly without bureaucratic hindrance. I think that is where UNOG management is going to go.

WILL THERE BE A BIGGER BUDGET FOR UNOG AND THE UN SPECIALIST AGENCIES IN GENEVA?

That's a matter for the Member States. I can only give my opinion. And my opinion is "yes". I think there will be a redistribution of resources that favours Geneva. I believe this because there is so much that the European centre of the United Nations should be doing, and is not doing, and I believe that the new Secretary General is going to want this to change.

We should not consider this a gift. With greater resources and focus, comes greater responsibility. Greater things will be needed of us. We will have to work harder, but our sense of professional satisfaction will be greater. We will be appreciated more. Geneva will become a pivotal centre for international diplomacy as it used to be and as it will be again. But that's asking a lot of all of us. We will all need to work together to achieve these goals. The talent is surely there. We will just need to guide it.

We will also need to be realistic. There are some areas in which the UN in Geneva has arguably outlived its usefulness, and where the organisation is not working as effectively as it should. The staff employed in a small number of areas will need to be redeployed, and their skills applied in other fields. There will be some tough choices to be made. But I think this can be done without undue hardship. Everyone will understand what is necessary, and why. And I believe UN staff will find themselves up to the task of the requisite flexibility.

WHAT ABOUT THE ROLE OF GENEVA IN ISSUES OF HUMAN RIGHTS?

Geneva remains the pre-eminent centre for international human rights. The Human Rights Council is here. The High Commissioner for Human Rights is based in Geneva. There is no city in the world more associated with the promotion of international human rights.

This is going to stay the same, as it should do. I know that every P5 Member State, and every member of the Security Council, is totally committed to this vision. And I know that the new Secretary General is committed to exactly the same thing. I believe that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in particular deserves a substantially bigger budget, if it is to meet the expectations the international community has for its due and proper objectives.

In the new multipolar world that the Secretary General-elect is facing, propagation of international norms of human rights on a strictly impartial and independent basis is one of the most important mandates of the United Nations in acting as a fair arbiter in achieving its principal mandate as the mediator of contemporary international security policy crises. Human rights will stay high on the agenda. The work of the UN staff who focus upon human rights, and everything associated with them, will remain intensely important.

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY ISSUES IN GENEVA ABOUT UN STAFF RIGHTS. WHAT'S YOUR POSITION ON THIS?

UN staff make a lifelong commitment. They commit to leaving their countries of origin, working in the international civil service, and devoting themselves to international public office. This is a serious commitment. In many cases they are also some of the most intelligent, well-educated and professionally devoted staff in any inter-governmental system. They deserve to be treated with respect.

Whenever I have found that staff are not treated with what I think is the proper level of respect, impartiality and decency, I have taken a stand. I think that's the right attitude towards people who have made such profound commitments to public service. The organisation for which they work should make equivalent profound commitments towards them. At the same time, any staff member associated with corruption or impropriety must be held to account. And institutional mechanisms to encourage other staff members to come forward in reporting concerns must be strengthened.

There are a number of themes of particular importance to me. These include the rights and positions of minorities; equitable distribution of posts while maintaining regard for the overriding principle of merit; the necessity for gender balance; the protection of whistleblowers and those seeking to expose wrongdoing, and the importance of accountability in a fair, neutral and impartial set of institutional procedures, particularly in hiring and promotion.

That is my vision of the United Nations administration. I very much believe that this is the direction the organisation will pursue within the mandate of the next Secretary General.