[So, You Want to Be U.N. Secretary-General?](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/20/so-you-want-to-be-u-n-secretary-general/)

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Let the culling begin.

In the first effort to narrow the field of candidates for secretary-general, the United Nations Security Council is scheduled to conduct a straw poll Thursday to determine which of the 12 candidates have enough support to continue their bids for the world’s top diplomatic job.

The field is nearly as sprawling and unwieldy as the Republican presidential slate had been before Donald Trump routed his opponents and emerged as the GOP nominee. The 12 candidates include eight women and range from well-known figures like former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark to lesser-known diplomats like Natalia Gherman, a former Moldovan foreign minister. Other contenders, including former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, are expected to enter the fray. So far, there are no sure bets to win the brass ring.

“None of us can predict,” the winner at this stage, said one European diplomat who has been closely tracking the contest. The race is “still pretty open.”

Thursday’s vote is designed to measure the level of support for each candidate, with each of the council’s 15 members casting a vote indicating whether they encourage, discourage, or have no opinion on a candidate. The results, which will not be made public, will then be shared with governments sponsoring the candidates. The point is to urge candidates incapable of securing sufficient support to drop out of the race.

The initial debates have played to the strengths of U.N. insiders like including Clark, António Guterres, who served as the U.N. high commissioner for refugees for ten years, and Argentine Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra, a former top U.N. official who oversaw logistics for the organization’s peacekeeping operations; these three have displayed a far deeper grasp of the issues before the U.N. than some of their challengers. But the process has also exposed anxieties among U.N. staffers and diplomats about the willingness of key powers to agree a high-caliber candidate that can stand up for the values enshrined in the U.N. charter. “We all know this could end with the lowest common denominator candidate winning,” said one Security Council diplomat.

That fear has prompted U.N. staffers to pen a [letter](https://foreignpolicymag.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/4de42-unstaffopenletterontheselectionofthenextsecretary-generalv14.pdf) urging member states to select an independent-minded secretary-general who “can stand for principle when states are not themselves united.” They fear the council’s big powers will settle for a candidate who will toe the line rather than pursue initiatives that serve the interests of the wider public.

“Global leadership needs a shot in the arm,” Karin Landgren, a former senior U.N. official who headed U.N. missions in Burundi, Liberia, and Nepal, [wrote](https://medium.com/unsg-2016/global-leadership-needs-a-shot-in-the-arm-starting-with-the-next-sg-cf0271217bf9#.xkoxxe74a) recently. “Expectations of the new SG are high, and the Security Council would do a disservice to the world if it gravitated to the candidate perceived as ruffling the fewest feathers or offering the best backroom deals.”

Despite a push by the U.N. membership to instill greater openness in the selection process, Thursday’s straw poll will be largely carried out in secret, and even the candidates will never know whether a vote discouraging their candidacy has been cast by a veto-wielding member or a non-permanent member. It also remains unclear how long the U.N. election process will play out, with some suggestions that the race could drag off well into the fall.

The U.N. Security Council — particularly its five permanent members, Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States — will ultimately cast the deciding votes. But the outcome of the race hinges in part on whether Russia, as the key Eastern European power, will insist that the next U.N. leader comes from the region.

The world body has traditionally elected secretaries-general on the basis of regional rotation, and Eastern Europe is the only regional bloc that has not produced a U.N. chief. The prospect of the major powers reaching agreement on an Eastern European candidate is hardly a sure bet. The U.S. and Russia remain deeply divided over Moscow’s role in Eastern Europe, particularly its annexation of Crimea in eastern Ukraine, which triggered the imposition of U.S. and European sanctions against Russia. The political climate is so polarized that any candidate in the region that is perceived as too close to Moscow or Washington may be doomed.

For now, Russian officials have been sending mixed signal to the candidates and delegates about their willingness to consider candidates from outside Eastern Europe. “They are trying to keep their options open,” said the council diplomat.

Russia’s U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, told reporters last week that Moscow has a “preference” for an Eastern European candidate. Asked if Russia would block any candidate from outside Eastern Europe from ascending to the top U.N. job, he joked: “I love to veto, I love to veto.” But the Russian government has not actually told its council counterparts it would block a candidate from outside the region. And the Russian mission to the United Nations removed Churkin’s veto comment from the official transcript of his remarks.

Churkin also said Moscow has an open mind about the prospect of electing a woman as secretary-general. “We believe that there is a strong interest among member states and there are some interesting women in the group and I do think they have a good chance,” Churkin said.

Still, a deadlock with the United States would strengthen the case for several candidates outside the region. So far, Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister, has emerged a kind of in-house favorite among U.N. staffers. But he is viewed as a long shot with two potentially fatal marks against him: He is a Western European at a time when many feel it’s time for Eastern European to have the job for the first time in the U.N.’s history; he is also a man, a liability in a year when more than 50 countries have banded together to promote the idea of electing the first female secretary-general in the U.N.’s 72-year-long history.

Clark and Malcorra have emerged as early front-runners, but neither has a smooth path to the top U.N. job. Clark has the support of Britain, but lacks enthusiastic backing from the U.N. rank-and-file as well as France and the Obama administration. As Ban Ki-moon’s former chief of staff, Malcorra has worked closely with the U.N.’s five big powers who will ultimately decide who leads the United Nations. But she has been unable to muster broad support within her own region, opening the door to a challenge from Christiana Figueres, a Costa Rican diplomat who headed the U.N. negotiations on climate change.

The race for secretary-general has already emerged as a watershed event, forcing candidates out in the open and subjecting them to questioning by the U.N. General Assembly and the press. In stark contrast to political elections in most countries, the candidates virtually never launch a direct attack on their competitors — but they have indirectly questioned their opponents’ judgment.

In a debate organized earlier this month by Al Jazeera, one of the aspiring secretaries-general, former Slovenian President Danilo Turk, said he would welcome U.N. whistleblowers like Anders Kompass back into the fold. The remark put Turk at odds with Malcorra, who was sharply criticized for her role in pursuing charges of misconduct against Kompass for his role in divulging information about sexual exploitation by French and African peacekeeping troops in the Central African Republic to French authorities. He was recently cleared of wrongdoing by an independent panel, but resigned from his job. “I know him, I worked with him, and I have a very high opinion of him,” Turk said. “I hope we can still bring him back to the United Nations.”

Figueres took issue with the U.N.’s response to the cholera epidemic in Haiti. The U.N., she said, should have apologized to thousands of Haitians stricken by cholera, which is widely believed to have been introduced to the country by peacekeepers from Nepal. But when pressed to say whether the victims and their families should receive compensation for their losses, she said no.