'Formidable' Opposition

Bogdan-Martin Likely Faces Tough Election at ITU

American Doreen Bogdan-Martin likely faces a tough election to become ITU secretary-general, facing a formidable challenger in Russian nominee Rashid Ismailov, a former Russian deputy telecommunications minister and former Huawei executive. ITU watchers told us Bogdan-Martin is in a strong position and has been consolidating support from around the world, but Ismailov is also mounting a robust campaign. Gerald Gross was the last American to hold that job, from 1960 to 1965. Bogdan-Martin would be first woman to be elected to the top spot at the ITU.

Bogdan-Martin, a former NTIA official, is unique among Americans, with three decades spent in Europe. In 2018, she was elected director of the ITU Telecom Development Bureau, after a campaign led by Trump administration officials including then-FCC Chairman Ajit Pai and then-NTIA Administrator David Redl. She won the position, which usually goes to someone from the developing world, on the first ballot, with support from the Americas and parts of Europe and Africa (see 1811010052).

ATIS backed Bogdan-Martin’s election last week. “Her record of accomplishments as Director of the ITU’s Bureau of Telecommunications Development and her nearly three decades of commitment to supporting communications connectivity make her preeminently qualified to lead the ITU in its role supporting efforts to deploy advanced communications technologies around the world,” said ATIS President Susan Miller. Other groups are likely to offer similar support but have to act with care and not make her seem like the candidate of the U.S., but rather someone with global support, officials said.

The election is likely too close to call, with a huge amount of work required, as U.S. ambassadors talk to their counterparts globally and while NTIA and the FCC also lobby, said former U.S. officials. The U.S. has a tool available it didn’t have during Bogdan-Martin’s last election. Last year, the State Department created an election office under the Bureau of International Organization Affairs, and right now the ITU election is its sole focus.
Former officials told us it’s helpful to have political leadership at both NTIA, with the confirmation of Alan Davidson as administrator, and at the FCC, with Jessica Rosenworcel as permanent chairwoman. The election will be decided at the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference, starting Sept. 26, in Bucharest, Romania, where the head of each delegation will cast a secret, paper ballot in a closed-door meeting.

“ITU is an institution that’s important to both U.S. economic and international security,” said Fiona Alexander, former NTIA associate administrator for international issues who helped lead Bogdan-Martin’s last campaign at the ITU. “Having someone so qualified and so committed to connectivity and diversity and inclusion running [ITU] and having the first woman run it would be a great forward-looking construct for how we look at communications policy.”

Bogdan-Martin “seems immensely qualified,” said former FCC Commissioner Mike O’Rielly. “ITU is in a precarious situation,” he told us: “Global spectrum policy, which should be based on engineering and science and recognition of unprecedented demand, is shamefully being influenced by bigger geopolitics goals and members’ other agendas at the expense of wireless progress.”

“I’m very hopeful that the race for ITU secretary-general will be determined on the merits,” said Wiley’s David Gross. Bogdan-Martin’s “experience, her expertise, her dynamism and the fact that she’s been the first woman elected to the ITU [leadership], speaks volumes about why she would be a great secretary-general,” he said.

Russian Rivalry

Russian rivalry with the U.S. also may be in play.

ITU decisions “have considerable effect on private sector regulations and help to shape everything from the positioning of weather satellites to how the internet is structured,” emailed Elizabeth Hoffman, Center for Strategic and International Studies director-congressional and government affairs. Ismailov “not only has links to the Russian Federation but to Huawei, a Chinese telecommunications company that was sanctioned by the United States in 2019,” she said: Neither Russia nor Huawei “are champions of free and open communications. His candidacy should deeply concern the U.S. and like-minded countries that hope to preserve a digital sphere that respects democratic norms and values.”

“The Russian candidate is not nearly as qualified,” agreed Gross. Bogdan-Martin “presents a compelling candidacy,” in part because of already holding an ITU elected position, said Rob Frieden, Penn State telecommunications and law emeritus professor. He said the U.S. could make a forceful argument that it’s “sorely underrepresented” at ITU in terms of employees and elected officials.

Geopolitical tensions with Russia could work against her, Frieden said. Tensions between the two countries are “sometimes ignored in the spirit of optimizing technology … but sometimes not,” he said. The emergence of a compromise candidate from another nation, such as Japan, could be “the path of least resistance” for delegates, Frieden said. He noted that China, smarting from U.S. national security moves against Huawei and other Chinese telecom companies, might campaign against Bogdan-Martin’s candidacy.

Netmagic Associates’ Tony Rutkowski, who previously worked in the ITU secretariat, called a Bogdan-Martin secretary-generalship “possible.” The U.S. has held the position in the past, with Gerry Gross as acting secretary-general and secretary-general 1958 to 1965. Rutkowski emailed that in a U.S.-Russia contest for heading the ITU, “the U.S. will probably prevail.” But the outcome of the election “will likely turn on whether an additional strong third candidate emerges [so] it is wait and see,” he said.
Bogdan-Martín isn’t a sure-fire bet to head ITU.

The U.K.’s Malcolm Johnson, who started a second four-year term in 2019 as deputy secretary-general, had been expected to be the next secretary-general, given his career path and qualifications, Rutkowski said. Penn State’s Frieden said it’s becoming less likely over time that a “perfectly capable” candidate like Johnson would naturally ascend to the secretary-general position due to growing politicization of the organization.

A U.S. ITU Association member told us any candidate for secretary-general faces difficulty because the COVID-19 pandemic has made the retail politics of campaigning difficult. He said one major ITU event last year ended up being held virtually, and it’s unclear if two significant ones scheduled for this year will be virtual or in-person.

Bogdan-Martín and Ismailov offer different visions for the job.

Bogdan-Martín said on a website put out by the State Department that the pandemic changed the equation on how important connectivity is and emphasized the importance of getting the world online. “I envision an organization at the forefront of global efforts to meet connectivity needs and expand digital opportunities for all people,” she said: “I will work tirelessly to strengthen ITU as an increasingly forward-looking, fact-based, impact-driven, results-focused, transparent, and responsive organization.”

Ismailov similarly calls for universal access but also emphasizes the importance of rules for the internet. His platform calls for “establishing unified international rules regulating the use of drones, autonomous physical and virtual systems with the elements of Artificial Intelligence both on the level of technical regulations and ethical codes” and “developing recommendations to update national legislations and elaboration of international codes.” — **Howard Buskirk and Matt Daneman**