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Irina Bokova's office is at the extremity of one of the arms of the star shaped Head Quarters of Unesco. The plush corridors leading to her office are lined with an impressive selection of modern art. For an organisation defined as the 'conscience of the world', this is hardly surprising.

Ushered in just minutes after a meeting with the Minister of Culture of Lebanon, one cannot help but notice the vast expanse of the Paris skyline through the blinds behind her desk. Given the stresses of her new job, she must rarely the time to gaze at the dazzling cityscape of cluttered rooftops below.

French Ministers are often known for the complete redecoration of their offices upon arrival in a new ministry, a way of blowing out the cobwebs and making their mark from day one. It seems that the faded United Nations pale blue chairs haven't changed since her predecessor's time. Looking around one wonders for a moment if Ms Bokova has perhaps inherited more than simply the furniture in this institution renowned for its inertia. There is, however, nothing inert about her. Chic and glamorous, even if she almost seems small in this large office perched on the sixth floor. Her ambassadorial charm is intact and she has that sparkle of intelligence and tenacity of those women who have succeeded in life.

An atypical diplomat from the 'New' Europe

Chatting easily in French and English, one senses a certain lassitude when asked about her youth and her family background. Her origins in the communist elite in Bulgaria are a subject you can tell she has had to explain many times before. "Sometimes it is said that I was a communist supporter, that is not the case. I was a diplomat." She reminds us that "everyone was a member of the communist party in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe in that period. There was no choice. My family was in the communist party, but my father was also a member of the resistance during the war. He was man of strong convictions".

She readily evokes her communist roots. Her father, chief editor of the Communist Party newspaper, became a dissident in 1960s after a disagreement with the dictator in power at the time. Forced into retirement at the age of 50, he was pushed out of the party for his opinions. She speaks passionately of her respect for her father. "He instilled in me the importance of having convictions and of reflecting and not taking the official discourse at face value. He taught me my first lesson of how to have open approach to the world and to politics."

In the 1970s, Irina Bokova took the privileged route to study at the elite Russian Institute for Foreign Relations in Moscow. These were the first years of openness in the USSR. She remembers vividly the first visit of an American President, in the person of Richard Nixon, to Russia in 1973. It was the period

when the first free exhibitions of writers and artists were taking place in the city, "life in Russia was more open than in Bulgaria at the time" she recalls.

As a young student she mingled with the intellectuals and artists of this new Russia before returning to Sofia to join the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry. "This was the most liberal of all the government departments as, by its very nature, it was open to the world." The word openness crops up frequently in her description of this period as an antidote to the tight grip of the communist authorities.

While in the foreign ministry, she worked on human rights, the rights of women and social questions, topics which would remain central to her career. Then, during the crucial years of 1986 to 1990, she was a member of the cabinet of the Minister for Foreign affairs, who was to become one of the leading instigators of change in Bulgaria.

"It was evident from the point when perestroika took hold that the system was no longer viable. The economic difficulties were also a sign of the fragility of the regime". However, she pinpoints the crumbling of the regime to certain events in 1985/86. "The persecution of the Turkish minority changed things. All of a sudden there was this campaign of persecution. It gave rise to the resistance of intellectuals and the wider society. This action precipitated the fall of the regime in Bulgaria" she explains.

As a member of Petar Mladenov's cabinet, Bokova was in the inner circle and witnessed the transformation of Bulgarian society firsthand. "We exchanged ideas with him. I know all of what happened. It was natural then that I was part of the changes of this period." Moreover, she was well placed to play a key role in the new society after the fall of communism.

She would go on to become a member of the national assembly and President of the parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe. A valued member of the Socialist Party she rose to the position of Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs. "I worked hard to have Bulgaria admitted to the Council of Europe, and organised the first parliamentary seminar on the European declaration of human rights" she says earnestly. Listening to her you get a sense of how important these issues are for her. What may seem like inevitable steps today were huge institutional and intellectual shifts for Bulgarian society, in the throes of de-sovietisation at the time. One of the first advocates of the abolition of the death penalty, she is proud of the role she played in the rebirth of the Bulgarian nation and in its reintegration into the European mainstream.

A controversial campaign for a consensus candidate

The strengths that made Ms Bokova a successful diplomat - rising through the ranks to become Ambassador to France - were to help her during the global marathon that is the Unesco election. She took to the campaign trail, visiting 45 countries to garner support for her candidacy. Despite her European contacts gained while deputy Minister, she was still considered a long shot for the post of Director General.

And yet, the novelty factors of being a woman and from Eastern Europe were to be to her advantage in a race that would quickly turn sour. The favourite, Egyptian Minister of Culture, Mr Farouk Hosni was accused of belonging to a regime that cautioned censorship and was criticised for his strident anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic positions. His past declarations before the Egyptian parliament, notably that he would burn books written in Hebrew if he found them in Egyptian libraries, came back to haunt him. Intellectuals such as Bernard Henri Levy, Elie Wesel and Claude Lanzmann lobbied against the Egyptian candidate.

The behind the scenes horse-trading was intense even if Bokova would prefer us to believe that her programme and experience were the deciding factors. "Many countries said they would vote for me after having read my programme and after listening to my audition in front of the executive council. Until then they hadn't decided" she insists.

Indeed, each candidate presented a 2,000 word manifesto outlining their vision for the post in an effort to combat the criticisms that the process was an old-fashioned diplomatic routine of promises and trade-offs with little regard for the substance of the issue at stake. "There was a sentiment that the campaign wasn't important, that geopolitical reasons would predominate. For me each activity in the campaign was important. I wrote my own vision myself, each word," she says, underlining the fact that this probably wasn't the case for her opponents.

After a tight competition of five rounds worthy of the Vatican, Mme Bokova was to emerge as a compromise candidate.

Asked about this difficult period, Bokova is confidently defiant. "It's over. It is behind us a long time ago. Egypt has been very generous. There is no sign of frustration or reluctance to cooperate with Unesco" she says.

Despite the bitter circumstances of her election, she claims to have the full support of the Arab world, listing off the invitations for official visits of numerous Arab nations to prove her point. "We work together. I have had an interesting discussion on dialogue among cultures with the Secretary general of the organisation for culture and education in Islamic countries. Education for girls will be one of our joint priorities."

As the first woman to become Director General of Unesco, the pressures are huge. "The challenges are the same but the expectations much higher" she admits. A firm believer in gender equality, Irina Bokova just wants to be treated equally. Since she started her new job the expectations kept spiralling out of control. Such was the pressure, she says jokingly, "I just wanted people to treat me like a man!"

Women's education, the touchstone of her mandate

Undoubtedly the task facing her is huge. For its relatively limited budget, Unesco has a vast remit; critics would say too vast. Covering science, education and culture, it deals with topics ranging from oceanography to women's education. Originally conceived as the brain of the United Nations, this is

a role that Mme Bokova wants to preserve without neglecting the practical aspects of her mandate. "We have to preserve this moral authority but we can't confine ourselves to this intellectual role... We have to be present on the ground to advance our ideas".

Mme Bokova intends to place an interdisciplinary approach at the heart of her project for Unesco. She believes that the breath of Unesco's mandate is its strength in an ever more complex world and that it is in tune with the challenges of globalisation. Unesco is unique in its ability to combine different disciplines, linking domains as seemingly disparate as cultural diversity and climate change.

Hers is an ambitious programme to shape a 'new humanism for the 21st century'. But, she is realistic regarding her role. She wants to be an advocate for reform. Coming from an Eastern European country she is no stranger to implementing profound reforms. She intends to influence the orientations and choices of the organisation to focus on the millennium goals and on spearheading a campaign of education for all, especially girls.

'Gender equality is one of the most humanist agendas. Since the Beijing Conference in 2000, it has been in retreat. With the economic crisis and globalisation, the challenges for the education of women are fierce: 2/3 of the illiterate people in the world are women and girls. Education of women has huge knock on effects in terms of the health and well-being of societies."

Bokova will also bring a certain freshness to this dusty institution. Her experience of living in a communist society means freedom of expression and iconoclastic views are important to her; under her watch no discussion will be taboo within the walls of Unesco. Vowing to put Voltaire before political correctness, religious leaders, intellectuals, academics will all be welcome to express their views.

She is also a steadfast opponent of the clash of civilisations thesis. "I have never believed in it, perhaps for personal reasons. I come from a very diverse country". Her family was originally from a small town in rural Bulgaria where up to 80% of the population were Muslim. When visiting her grandmother she was steeped in an atmosphere where neighbours celebrated the different religious feasts together – sharing gifts at Easter or for other traditional feasts. In her opinion, globalisation has given rise to greater misunderstandings and, paradoxically, has been a source of more conflicts and alienation in the world.

Putting a European stamp on Unesco

Despite her global responsibilities, Bokova intends bring her European convictions to bear on her new post. 'We don't work enough with the EU. The potential is enormous.' She has already met with several members of the new Commission who are working on areas linked to Unesco's mandate: culture, education, innovation and humanitarian aid. For instance, Unesco is cooperating closely with the EU on humanitarian programmes in Haiti.

She will take things on step further by opening an office in Brussels to reinforce the links with the European Union and will to put in place a strategic action plan for greater co-operation between the two

organisations. One of the key areas of cooperation is between the Unesco's global digital library, which will bring together the resources of 33 international libraries, and a similar European project, Europeana.

Her biggest challenge though will be informing ordinary people about her work. Who knows what Unesco does and why? Bokova readily admits that the institution has an image problem, which in turn undermines its credibility. "Many of the wonderful things Unesco does are unknown, therefore when it comes to deciding on resources countries are unwilling to allocate the funds," she explains. "Who knows, for example, that research on oceanography carried out by Unesco has led to the creation of a Tsumani alert system which has already saved lives in the Soloman islands?" she wonders.

She has made reaching out to the media a priority of her mandate. A sign of the progress that remains is that her regular press conferences are a mini-revolution for this organisation. Slowly, but surely, she is changing the communications agenda, revamping the website and creating a special unit for speech writing.

Just as she is getting into the swing of the better communications pitch, her press advisor interrupts to call time on the interview. Time for journalists to leave and time for the next meeting on the list. From even a short period in her company, one comes away with the feeling of having met someone who has lived through a great deal and who has a great deal yet to give to her mandate at the head of Unesco, and who knows, maybe to European Union in the future...

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