

THE RISING IMPORTANCE OF EASTERN EUROPE WITHIN NATO

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The next leg of the NATO Summits, where Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) meet regularly to evaluate the Alliance's activities and give them strategic direction, will be held in Washington DC, the capital of the United States. The Summit, which will take place on July 9-11, 2024, will be the scene of the 75th anniversary celebration of NATO, which was established with its signature in Washington DC on April 4, 1949, in the city where its foundations were laid. In addition, the Summit will focus on the Alliance's response to increasing global threats to peace and democracies. Major issues that occupy the international community, such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Palestine war, which is increasingly threatening to spread to the Middle East geography, and Iran's active involvement in the conflicts, will be on the agenda of the Summit.

However, apart from all these important topics, the topic that makes the Summit perhaps the most important NATO Summit of recent years is the issue of finding a successor for former Norwegian Prime Minister Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who has been in this position for ten years. For now, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, supported by NATO heavyweights such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany, appear as the two candidates who have officially applied for the vacant post of general secretary. Mark Rutte, the longest-serving Prime Minister of his country, the Netherlands, and known as “Teflon Mark” for his ability to emerge from political scandals with his reputation intact, is currently seen as the favorite in the race. However, when we remember what Sweden experienced on its way to Brussels because of the attitude of Turkey and Hungary, the outcome of the race remains uncertain within the framework of the general secretary's need for the unanimity of the member states. As a matter of fact, as expected, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, referring to Mark Rutte, said, “We absolutely cannot support the election of a person who previously wanted to bring Hungary to its knees as NATO secretary general.” His statement was a declaration of the obvious.

Based on this, it is now time to ask a question that has been overlooked or deliberately ignored: “Isn't it time for an Eastern European name to become the Secretary General of NATO?” The Russia-Ukraine war, which has been going on since 2022, has already made the Eastern wing of NATO, whose importance has increased because of rising defense expenditures and various discourses over the years, one of the dominant regions in European politics. As a natural consequence of this situation, the emergence of the next secretary general from this region will have many

benefits for NATO. That's why looking at these returns has been the main subject of this study. The study will discuss that Eastern Europe now constitutes the new center of gravity of NATO, through Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, which are considered as the Eastern wing of NATO. While doing this, the developing importance of the NATO Secretary General's seat and why it is important for the new secretary general to come from these countries will be touched upon.

Development of NATO Secretariat General

NATO Secretary General, first, he is an international diplomat who chairs many important committees of the Alliance, especially the meetings of the North Atlantic Council, which is the main political decision-making body of the Alliance, is responsible for ensuring the order of the work of the Alliance and leads the international staff of the Alliance. In addition to all these, the secretary general, apart from his presidential duties, has the authority to propose the issues to be discussed and to use his good will in case of any disagreement between member states. Leading the consensus-building and decision-making process across the alliance, the Secretary General acts as a decision facilitator by acting as a guide. The Secretary General continues to be in direct contact with the Heads of State and Government, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense of the member countries and carries out various visits and bilateral contacts. However, the Secretary General does not have any military command duties. Political, military, and strategic decisions ultimately rest with member states. The Secretary General is one of NATO's most prominent officials, along with the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee and the allied supreme commander. It gained this importance especially in the post-Cold War period. To look at this change, it will be useful to take a brief look at the historical development of the general secretary position (NATO General Secretariat, 2023).

In May 1950, the desire for order in daily affairs led to the emergence of Council deputies. Council deputies met for the first time on July 25, 1950, and elected United States Representative Charles Spofford as

President. Following the establishment of the Council mandate, many important structural changes have occurred, and the increasing challenges facing NATO have led to the rapid growth of the organization's institutions. In 1951, NATO introduced reorganizations to streamline and centralize its bureaucracy. Like this Their power and importance were greatly increased by delegating to the Council deputies the authority to represent their governments on all matters, including not only foreign relations but also those related to defense and finance. As the powers of the proxies increased and the size of the organization grew, NATO established the Interim Council Committee, chaired by William Averell Harriman. The committee recommended that "NATO organizations should be strengthened and coordinated" and emphasized that the senior leader of the alliance should be someone other than the President of the North Atlantic Council. Ultimately, at the Lisbon Summit of the North Atlantic Council in February 1952, he established the position of secretary general to manage all civilian institutions of the organization, control its civilian personnel, and serve the North Atlantic Council (Ismay, 1954:28-48).

Initially, the Secretary-General was tasked with assisting in the establishment of an international secretariat composed of appropriate bureaucratic bodies, with the primary task of assisting in the promotion of cooperation and consensus among allied states. During the Cold War, the duty of the Secretary General was basically limited to promoting consensus among allied states and using diplomatic persuasion power in this context. Although the influence of the Secretary General developed and expanded over time, the Secretary General faced significant political restrictions in the

light of the conditions brought by the period during the Cold War. This situation began to change with the disintegration of the Cold War order. As NATO's organizational perspective expanded after the Cold War and new functions, mechanisms and threats emerged, the Secretary General's role in guiding Alliance decisions has similarly increased. Ultimately, all these developments have made the Secretary General a representative whose opinion and contribution are sought more frequently. After the Cold War, the office of Secretary General played a particularly important role in the development of NATO and in shaping the political relations between allied states (Hendrickson, 2014:126-128).

NATO's Eastern Wing and Its Rising Importance

Today's European politics can basically be defined by four sub-regions. These regions roughly classify the political society of the continent as western, eastern, northern (Scandinavian Europe) and southern (Mediterranean Europe). However, drawing the borders of these four regions is less challenging than drawing the borders of the east when it comes to the west, north and south. The existence of concrete geographical factors such as the Mediterranean, Atlantic and North Sea provides a facilitating feature in determining where the western, northern, and southern borders begin and end. However, the question of where the east of Europe begins, and ends has a background as old as the history of Europe. Due to the relatively flat topography of the Eastern European geography, the term has a wide range of geopolitical, geographical, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic connotations. Many examples such as the east of the Roman Empire, the geography where

Pagan communities lived, the kingdoms of Orthodox Christian faith, the Ottoman Empire and the Iron Curtain countries have contributed to various historical periods in determining the borders of Eastern European lands, which are the "other" of Europe. So much so that the cities of the German Democratic Republic are considered Eastern European because of the international political order they are in. Considering that important capitals such as Prague, Budapest and Bratislava are at least as close to the West as Vienna, it is obvious how interesting the situation can become. The fact that these cities, which were considered eastern until the last part of the 20th century, today constitute the center of Europe, summarizes the variability of this situation. The impact of the order created by the Cold War has been the most influential situation that determines Eastern Europe in our minds today. As a result, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Eastern European countries prepared themselves for the process of integration with organizations based in Western Europe such as the European Union and NATO. Ultimately, the Eastern wing of the Alliance, while during the Cold War it consisted of states such as Turkey, Italy, West Germany, and Denmark, now consists of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania.

NATO's Eastern wing, which was exposed to the Soviet threat during the Cold War, is today exposed to the same threat through Ukraine, even though it consists of different countries. The re-emergence of Russian military power, the warm specter of the Cold War, as a threat has made Eastern Europe, in the short period from 2014 to the present, NATO's first deterrent line of defense and effectively the epicenter of the war. The NATO Summit in

Wales, the first summit held after Russia's annexation of Crimea, was where the turning point began. Likewise, the 2014 Summit was described by United States Navy Admiral James G. Stavridis as “the most important Summit since the fall of the Berlin Wall” (USA TODAY, 2014). However, opinions that Russia was not a threat were also expressed that day. Retired German politician Walther Stütze said that Russia was not a military threat to NATO and stated that the goal of new NATO members was not to detente and negotiate with Russia (Deutschlandfunk, 2014). Of course, we should not fall into anachronism, but when we look back from today's political environment, it is obvious how naive these and similar discourses remain. As a matter of fact, those who predicted that these days would come were the Eastern wing countries that were aware of what Russia could do.

The members of the Eastern wing of the Alliance feel threatened by Russia's annexation action against Ukraine's sovereignty in 2014. The fact that Russia created a legitimate basis for annexation by stating that it had the right to protect the ethnic Russian people in Ukraine caused these countries, which still have “Soviet trauma” in their minds, to be worried about their future. In this regard, it should not be forgotten that the Soviet interventions in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw are still fresh in the memories of these people. As a result, NATO took two decisions that acknowledged and reassured its members' concerns and kept the political and military importance of Eastern Europe on the agenda even today. First, the “Preparatory Action Plan” was adopted, covering a series of military steps designed to increase the deterrent value of NATO's military posture on the Eastern border. Secondly, NATO member states

have committed to spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense within ten years (Techau, 2015). Today, many of the countries that strictly adhere to this commitment are Eastern European countries, and it is this historical background that is considered together with today's threats.

Thanks to the eastern flank countries, NATO took the first steps in transitioning to a deterrence policy towards Russia with the Wales Summit in 2014. Despite all this transformation, the deterrence of the Eastern flank remained in rhetoric rather than action, as there was no consensus within NATO on increasing the military presence on the Eastern flank. The reason for this is that the Russian threat remained in the background because of the mass and irregular human movements brought about by the Arab Spring and the threat posed by ISIS. NATO's transformation of the deterrence of its Eastern wing from rhetoric into action started with the Warsaw Summit in 2016. The decisions taken at the summit changed the nature of the Eastern wing of the alliance. Ultimately, the wishes of the members of the Eastern wing, who frequently stated that it was necessary to ensure the presence of NATO forces suitable for war, not for exercises, were met in NATO. The importance of these forces, known as NATO's “Advanced Forward Asset”, was better understood with the Russia-Ukraine war that started in 2022.

Thus, the transformation of the Eastern wing, which started after the annexation in 2014, was completed with the full-fledged war in 2022. Eastern European countries, which had been stuck between two fronts for many years, were now trying to have their own discourse and action power and move up in the international political

hierarchy, which was effective in achieving this transformation. Aware of the threat that may come from the east, these countries have emphasized the importance of deterrent actions by forcing their allies to go beyond rhetoric. In addition, we should not make the mistake of seeing the mentioned Eastern European countries as a homogeneous structure from a trans-Atlantic perspective. Although they have different political cultures and agendas, these countries acted in the light of their common historical consciousness. Thus, these countries, which were once under the umbrella of the Warsaw Pact, have formed the new center of gravity of NATO because of today's threats.

An Eastern European Secretary General

During his term of office, which began with the annexation of Crimea, Jens Stoltenberg witnessed the Russia-Ukraine War, supported the expansion of NATO, and led the Alliance against many regional military threats. Except for the 1990s, it is very difficult to find a Secretary General who was so involved in the conflict. Therefore, it would not be wrong to show him among the Secretaries General who carry out their duties best. However, another difficulty is who will be his successor. At this point, it would be appropriate to explain a few reasons why the new NATO Secretary General, who will be announced soon, should come from Eastern European countries.

Firstly, with the addition of Finland and Sweden to its ranks, NATO has shown that it is a living and vibrant structure, disproving the once thought that it was brain dead, apart from all the quantitative benefits. It is very possible to build a new victory on this symbolically important "fresh blood" victory, thanks to the

election of the Secretary General. Today, it is time for a name coming from Eastern European countries, at least 20 years after they joined NATO, to become the new Secretary General. In 1982, after completing its democratic transition, Spain joined NATO, and just 13 years later, its country's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javier Solana, became the new Secretary General of NATO. After all, if organizational experience is to be taken as a criterion for the selection of the General Secretariat, the members of the Eastern wing have proven this quite adequately.

Secondly, the contribution to defense expenditures is an important indicator for Eastern Europe to become the center of deterrence within NATO. As a result of the perceived threat posed by Russia to the security of the Alliance and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region, NATO's Eastern wing countries began to achieve the 2% GDP target. Today, except Bulgaria, all other Eastern wing countries have achieved this goal. When we look at the changes in the GDP rate from 2014 to 2023; Poland from 1.88 to 3.90, Estonia from 1.93 to 2.73, Lithuania from 0.88 to 2.54, Romania from 1.35 to 2.44, Hungary from 0.86 to 2.43, Latvia from 0.94 to 2.27, Slovakia from 0.98 to 2.03, Bulgaria from 1.31 It increased from 1.84 to 1.84 (NATO Press Release, 2023:8). It is not a coincidence that 7 of the 11 NATO members who have achieved the 2% target today are from NATO's Eastern wing. In particular, the fact that these countries are close to war and know well the threat posed by Russia in the historical context explains why they look at the events that have happened since 2014 with a different perspective. Moreover, it should not go unnoticed that among these countries - such as Hungary and Slovakia- there are governments accused of being pro-

Russian. Ultimately, it would be better for someone who comes from a country that has managed to achieve this commitment to be the new Secretary General, rather than Rutte coming from a country like the Netherlands that has not achieved this commitment.

Thirdly, to prevent the possible deepening of the west-east and old-new divide within NATO, it is extremely important for an Eastern European name to be appointed as the Secretary General. There is a danger that the election of a Dutch candidate for the fourth time in history will create the perception of a “second level” ally for the countries that have contributed to the organizational structure for a quarter of a century. It needs to be shown that Eastern European countries, which are seen as the other of Europe, are now among equals. Ultimately, this situation must go beyond rhetoric and be demonstrated in action.

Fourth, as this study shows, NATO's new headquarters is moving eastward. It is important that a Secretary General who understands today's threats comes from that geography. The Eastern European states, which forced their allies to take a position on the approaching Russian threat in the post-2014 period and increased their influence in determining NATO's rhetorical power, deserved the reward for this.

Fifth, having someone from Eastern Europe as the new Secretary General would mean a strong message to Russia. Of course, there will be those who think that perhaps this is too strong a message and could have the opposite effect. However, there is no obstacle to being elected Secretary General if the candidate is from a NATO member country. In addition, it should not go unnoticed that this message will be a strong warning to those who see Eastern

Europe as the backyard of the Soviet Empire.

Today, there is no Eastern European candidate for the General Secretary race, other than Romanian President Klaus Iohannis. Although the name of Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas has been mentioned many times as a candidate for Secretary General, no official statement has been made. Considering that there is only a short time left for the NATO summit to be held in Washington DC in July, it seems quite difficult for a second candidate to emerge from the region. Therefore, having Klaus Iohannis as the new Secretary General would be the right choice, based on what the study reveals. However, Mark Rutte has the possibility of starting his duty as the new Secretary General at the end of this process. As a matter of fact, the study does not explain why it would be wrong for Mark Rutte to become Secretary General, but why it would be more correct to elect an Eastern European candidate. It should be noted that the election of Mark Rutte means that we will lose four more years waiting for someone from Eastern Europe, and that the fractures this will create may be irreversible within the organization. Meanwhile, while the study defended the appointment of an Eastern European person as the general secretary, it avoided evaluating this in the context of “positive discrimination”. Their increasing importance within NATO is supported by concrete indicators, and it has been stated that it is time for these countries, which were once seen as “beyond the wall”, to become “first among equals”.

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