



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# An Eastern European as the head of NATO - a long-deserved honour that will wait another 4 years



Romanian President Klaus Iohannis will probably not become the Secretary General of NATO. However, the mere hint of his candidacy has already paved the way for one of the Eastern Europeans to lead the Alliance in 4 years.

Mr Iohannis's second and final presidential term will end soon, and his successor will be elected next November. The announcement of his candidacy for the leading position in NATO, from that point of view, was not late.

However, it came too late because the (potential) opponent, former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, has already **received the support** of the most influential NATO members - the US, the UK, Germany and France.

Despite this, a race for head man of NATO between Rutte and Iohannis is not impossible. It would be a competition between 2 strategic concepts of NATO for the next 4 years more than a competition between 2 experienced political leaders.

With his candidacy, Klaus Iohannis stands out as a symbolic voice of Eastern Europe, stating that it is mature enough and capable of leading the Alliance. That is a pretty compelling claim.

## The time has come

It easily refutes the claims of sceptics that the Eastern European countries are still "new" to NATO and that the leading position should be performed by representatives of older members, primarily those who founded the Alliance in 1949.

Romania will celebrate 20 years of NATO membership this year, just like Bulgaria, the 3 Baltic states, Slovenia and Slovakia. Three Eastern European countries - Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic - have a longer tenure. They were admitted to NATO 25 years ago.

By this standard, NATO has already set a precedent once, when it chose the Spaniard **Javier Solana** as Secretary General in 1995, "only" 13 years after his country was admitted

into the Alliance.

**Having a civilian head of the Alliance from a region whose security is the number one concern of the entire Alliance is a logical and pragmatic choice**

An even stronger argument for Mr Iohannis, or any other Eastern European, to lead NATO is the loyalty of this bloc to the Alliance. This loyalty manifests in the unquestionable support of its citizens and political elites for NATO membership and its participation in shared policies and operations.

An even greater quality of the Romanian head of state's candidacy is that NATO's eastern flank and the Black Sea region are NATO's top priority, clearly marked in its strategic documents.

Having a civilian head of the Alliance from a region whose security is the number one concern of the entire Alliance is a logical and pragmatic choice.

## The advantages are also the biggest disadvantages

The Alliance would demonstrate how much it values the more aggressive stance of its eastern members towards Russia than the governments in the rest of the Alliance if the President of Romania were elected NATO Secretary General. This would be the greatest advantage—as well as the greatest justice—of the potential election.

Therefore, Iohannis's possible candidacy comes as a test for NATO of whether it is ready to confirm its belief that Russia poses the biggest threat to the bloc and its members, given the most significant personnel change.

However, many of the indisputable strengths of Klaus Iohannis' candidacy are also its biggest weaknesses. The last one, for example.

## Neither Mr Iohannis nor any other leader from Eastern Europe could automatically count on the support of the entire region

Electing an Eastern European as NATO Secretary General would be a clear message that the entire Alliance would join the position of its Eastern members, regarded by a large part of the old members as "too hawkish" when it comes to Russia.

An Eastern European as the head of NATO would mean that the Alliance has focused on the issue of Russia and that it might have put aside other significant aspects - counter terrorism or cyber-attacks, for example.

Perhaps the handicap of Mr Iohannis' candidacy is that, for example, he is not Polish. If he were Polish, it would be much more difficult to dispute his influence and the influence of the country he comes from, considering that Poland is among the leaders in supporting Ukrainian defence against Russian aggression and one of the largest and definitely the fastest growing security forces in Europe.

Also, neither Mr Iohannis nor any other leader from Eastern Europe could automatically count on the support of the entire region. For many of them, the voice of the most influential members of the Alliance is much more significant than neighbourly ties with friends with whom they were once part of the Warsaw Pact.

## The risk of divisions

The fact that his candidacy causes fears of internal debates, perhaps even political conflicts, does not suit the Romanian president at all in a year in which NATO wants to demonstrate its unity against the emphasised threat of Russia.

The **extension of the mandate** of the current Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, due to the

Russian aggression against Ukraine, was a sufficient manifestation that the Alliance has been under pressure, so a mini-campaign in the middle of the biggest security crisis since the Cold War would be too much for its internal stability.

If Mark Rutte is elected, this will be the fourth time a Dutchman is the head of NATO, in which this country will surpass Britain, which has had 3 secretaries general so far.



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Apart from the fact that he already has the support of the bloc of the most influential members and that unofficially, already two-thirds of the members agree with this choice, Mark Rutte symbolises a good compromise, which NATO often resorted to when choosing its head.

Dutch leaders were always a good and desirable choice when there were frictions between, for example, Britain and France over the election of the secretary general. This time, this would be a good compromise between East and West and "new" and "old" NATO.

Electing Mark Rutte, as a great supporter of the unity of the EU and NATO and their strong ties with the US, would be an excellent response to the danger to the Alliance that could arise from the second presidential term of Donald Trump.

Therefore, the Eastern Europeans will still have to wait for the next chance to finally get the position of the primary boss after a series

of "consolation prizes" in the form of high positions in the Alliance.

The potential candidacy of Klaus Iohannis has already done enough in this respect. The silent resentment of underrepresentation existing in the eastern NATO members could only be annulled by the election of their man to the leading position.

The Alliance's obligation to show its eastern members the respect they deserve will be even greater after this year's secretary general election, and it will be difficult not to fulfil it in the next election round.