

The New European Commission: security and defence in the hands of a Baltic duo

Łukasz Maślanka

On 17 September, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented the proposed composition of the new College of Commissioners. As previously announced, a new position of Commissioner for Defence and Space has been created and assigned to former Lithuanian Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius (EPP). He will be responsible for the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), established in 2021, which until now was part of the portfolio of the Commissioner for the Internal Market. Kubilius will report to the Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security, and Democracy, Henna Virkkunen (EPP, Finland), and not, as earlier speculated, to the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, a position that will be filled by former Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (Renew Europe).

The European Commission President has instructed Kubilius and Kallas to cooperate on building a "European Defence Union," including joint projects such as the European air defence shield proposed by Poland and Greece. They are also tasked with preparing a White Paper on the Future of European defence within the first 100 days of their term, as well as working towards closer cooperation between the EU and NATO. The new High Representative's priorities include continued comprehensive support for Ukraine "for as long as it takes", while the Defence Commissioner will focus on implementing the European Defence Industry Strategy (EDIS) and overseeing the legislative process for the European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP, see *'The imperative of cooperation: the European Commission's strategy for the defence industry'*). Due to the detailed procedure for approving commissioners in the European Parliament, the new European Commission is unlikely to begin work until late 2024 or early 2025.

Commentary

- **The selection of two former leaders from the Baltic states to lead key EU posts related to security and defence policy indicates that Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has influenced the thinking of European elites, including von der Leyen herself.** While Kallas and Kubilius come from different political groups, they share a common understanding of the reality of the Russian threat and view EU actions in the field of security and defence as complementary to those undertaken by NATO. Both have been given written instructions by the European Commission President to work with other members of the College in a way that reflects the diversity of priorities and sensitivities of the individual member states and political groups. This necessity is likely to be

emphasised during the hearings before the European Parliament committees.

- **The priorities of the new European Commission will include promoting integration within the European defence industry and creating a "Single Market for Defence."** In this context, Kūbilius' portfolio will focus on strengthening the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). Meanwhile, navigating the conflicting interests of large and small member states, as well as major European arms corporations, **may** pose a significant challenge for a politician from a smaller country. Kūbilius **could** support the interests of small and medium-sized defence enterprises and highlight the need for geographic parity among beneficiaries of EU funds supporting EDTIB, and countries that spend at least 2% of their GDP on defence.
- **High Representative Kaja Kallas' role is likely to be crucial in initiating new sanctions against Russia and Belarus, as well as in providing military support to Ukraine.** Kallas will also be expected to play an active role in shaping the new Mediterranean Pact and the EU's Middle East strategy.
- **A strong political voice from the High Representative and the Defence Commissioner will be necessary during the upcoming negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework to increase EU funds aimed at strengthening the security of EU member states.** Both may also play a significant role in convincing EU countries to enhance financial support for military mobility, the crisis response mechanism, and civil defence.
- **Cooperation and coordination with NATO remain central to EU defence policy.** Until now, efforts to enhance this cooperation have been hindered by the opposition of individual member states to either organisation. Kallas and Kūbilius, however, may work to prevent competition and duplication of structures and competencies between both organisations in areas such as planning structures, staff, and the certification of military products.