

QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE

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Commissioner-designate for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education
and Youth

General competence, European commitment and personal independence

1. What aspects of your personal qualifications and experience are particularly relevant for becoming Commissioner and promoting the European general interest, particularly in the area you would be responsible for? What motivates you? How will you contribute to putting forward the strategic agenda of the Commission? How will you implement gender mainstreaming and integrate a gender perspective into all policy areas of your portfolio?

What guarantees of independence are you able to give the European Parliament, and how would you make sure that any past, current or future activities you carry out could not cast doubt on the performance of your duties within the Commission?

I feel deeply honoured and humbled to be a candidate for the position of Member of the European Commission, led by President von der Leyen.

The accession of Bulgaria to the European Union in 2007 has been a defining moment for my country and also for me personally. I saw this historic step as an opening door for new and common European opportunities, for free exchange across borders and prosperity. I felt it as a call for me to share in the responsibility that citizens have for the future of the European dream. It was at that time that I was first elected in office in the City Council of Sofia. And it was in the spirit and context of this new beginning that I joined the European Parliament in 2009. My experience since then has sharpened my conviction that the idea and method of European integration offers the best future for our continent.

During my time as Member of the European Parliament, my main mission in my role as vice chair of the CONT Committee was to scrutinise the impact of public policies and their benefits for citizens. Since 2013, after becoming Member of the European Court of Auditors and being elected three times as Dean of the Chamber for Investment in Cohesion, Growth and Inclusion, I continued to further build upon the objective to enhance the added value, effectiveness and efficiency of EU policies.

My deep commitment to the European project and its values is reflected in the recommendations that I issued to improve the quality of EU spending, in my role as Member of the Court of Auditors. In this context I have acquired extensive knowledge and experience on a wide variety of important areas of European policy making: the European digital and innovation agenda, industry 4.0, the circular economy, digital skills, education, and youth policies, regional development, cohesion policy and social policies. In all these policy areas which have relevance for the portfolio assigned to me by President von der Leyen, I have authored special reports and reviews, addressing how to better assess the funding needs, ensure the implementation of appropriate strategies with clear objectives and targets, and ultimately guarantee the proper monitoring and reporting of the progress achieved. I have always attached the highest importance to the presentations and debates with the relevant Committees of the European Parliament (ITRE, CULT, REGI, EMPL, CONT). I have taken these formal contacts as opportunities to share critical assessments and identify weaknesses but also realistic steps towards results-oriented European action. This has been in line with my motivation in all my

endeavours so far, which is to make sure that every euro spent is having a concrete impact on the lives of European citizens, with tangible, proven and measurable results.

I feel honoured to be entrusted with the portfolio for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth by the President von der Leyen because of its strategic importance for our common future in the European Union. I am delighted that the portfolio reinforces the connection between education, research, innovation and societal impact, in order to reap the benefits of all possible synergies. If appointed, I will dedicate all my leadership experience to this enormous task. I would like to be the guardian of efficient investment in the fields of Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth .

In accordance with the Union values enshrined in article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), implementing equality mainstreaming, notably integrating a gender perspective in policies, will be at the heart of my mandate. It is clear that at a time of unprecedented challenges, more than ever we need to harness all available talent. It will be a privilege for me to serve as a Member of the first gender-balanced Commission. I will support the various mechanisms within the portfolio from specific requirements for public support to visibility measures for role models. I will also pay special attention to their thorough evaluation, with a view to identifying what are the most effective ways to make a concrete difference for European citizens.

The beginning of my term would come at a particular moment, in the last year of the mandate, and only some months ahead of the European elections. This will make it even more important for me to ensure the smoothest cooperation, within the Commission, with the European Parliament as well as with the other institutions.

During this last year of the current Commission's mandate, given the unprecedented challenges following the pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, climate change and heightened geopolitical tensions, I am determined to contribute fully to the overarching strategic agenda of the Commission in line with the efforts for the green and digital transitions, and to promote our inclusive society. Therefore, I am committed to ensuring the effective implementation of the programmes from the portfolio and ensure the transparency of the results, also to support the upcoming budgetary negotiations.

I understand that the highest degree of independence is required in the role of Member of the College of the Commissioners. Over the past 10 years, as a member of the Court of Auditors, I have maintained strict independence. In my service, I have been guided exclusively by the European general interest, and I have been acting in line with the Treaties, financial rules, and applicable procedures. I will maintain these ethical standards of independence, professional integrity and general interest. I will act only in the European interest, I will not take or seek instructions from any government or other institution, body, office or entity, and I will honour the code of conduct of Members of the Commission, notably its provisions on conflict of interests.

Management of the portfolio and cooperation with the European Parliament

2. How would you assess your role as a Member of the College of Commissioners? In what respect would you consider yourself responsible and accountable to the Parliament for your actions and for those of your departments?

What specific commitments are you prepared to make in terms of enhanced transparency, increased cooperation and effective follow-up to Parliament's positions and requests for legislative initiatives? In relation to planned initiatives or ongoing procedures, are you ready to provide Parliament with information and documents on an equal footing with the Council?

I understand that close cooperation with the co-legislators is essential for the successful management of the Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth portfolio. As a former Member of the European Parliament, I will always have at heart my close relationship with the Members of the European Parliament. I will also work closely with fellow Members of the College of Commissioners.

In the mission letter addressed to me by President von der Leyen, transparency in the policy process and strengthening the special partnership with the European Parliament are two key pillars of delivering effective policies. They are instrumental to increase citizens' trust in the European project.

If appointed, I will live up to the highest standards of transparency, to make sure that every euro spent under my responsibility will be accounted for. It is of paramount importance to me to be the guardian of efficient investment in the fields of Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth .

I commit to being fully accountable before the representatives of the European citizens. I will be accountable for the policy initiatives in my portfolio, for the budgetary execution of the programmes with a combined financial envelope of over EUR 120 billion in the current programming period, as well as for the actions of the staff in the corresponding Directorates-General of the Commission and Executive Agencies.

My accountability is reflected in concrete commitments. I will personally attend all relevant plenary sessions, committee meetings and trilogues. I will also set up dedicated internal procedures between my future cabinet and services to ensure that all parliamentary questions under my responsibility receive a timely response.

I acknowledge the importance of equal access to information for the co-legislators and I will instruct my teams accordingly. I will establish regular channels for communication with the chairs, vice-chairs, and coordinators of the ITRE and CULT Committees of the European Parliament. In line with the already established practice, I will systematically offer to meet with these key interlocutors during plenary sessions. Furthermore, I commit to do my utmost to make myself available for meetings at the request of Members of the European Parliament. In light of the European Parliament's role as the budgetary authority, I will pay particular attention to the views expressed by the BUDG and CONT Committees in relation to the implementation of Horizon Europe and the other programmes under my responsibility.

In my contacts with the Members of the European Parliament, I will act in line with the legal framework strengthening the relationship between the Commission and the European Parliament, including:

- The 2010 framework agreement between the Parliament and the Commission, which strengthens cooperation, information-sharing, and the exercise of democratic control over the Commission's activities.

- The 2016 interinstitutional agreement on better law making, which improves the quality and transparency of the legislative process and reinforces the role of the European Parliament in shaping legislation.

Similarly, I commit to working closely and constructively with the European Parliament within the framework of Article 225 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), including by being active and present during the preparation of Article 225 TFEU resolutions in the relevant parliamentary Committees. I refer here to President von der Leyen's commitment in her Political Guidelines to respond to such resolutions with a legislative act, in full respect of the proportionality, subsidiarity and better law-making principles.

I will consider it my duty not only to meet the requirements of these texts, but also to enhance in all ways possible cooperation with the European Parliament.

In the run-up to the European elections, I will specifically tailor my communication in order to provide clear and relevant information to the European citizens in the areas for which I will be responsible.

Within the Commission, I will effectively work, as required by the working methods of the current College, and invest special efforts to work across administrative boundaries on all my files, engaging with all relevant Members of the College. In a context of overlapping crises, the challenges call for streamlined action and wide political endorsement. To make the most of the remaining months, I will proactively identify synergies and build bridges between the areas under my responsibility and all other relevant Commissioner policies and services.

Questions from the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy

3. What are the main policy priorities you intend to pursue within the part of your portfolio that falls within the remit of the ITRE Committee, namely Research and Innovation? What are the specific legislative and non-legislative initiatives, including financial instruments, you envisage for achieving those priorities? What would be the main content and timetable for those initiatives? How will you concretely apply the 'One In, One Out' principle as well as the 'Innovation Principle' in relation to any legislative proposals in your portfolio?

Despite the limited time remaining in this mandate, I believe that it is important to both focus on policy initiatives and actions to be implemented, as well as to identify what could be done better.

If appointed, my first priority will be to safeguard Europe's position as a world leader in science, research, and innovation by making sure that every euro in the existing budget is used in the most useful manner and thus to encourage stronger research and innovation (R&I) investments and reforms where needed and continue the successful implementation of Horizon Europe.

I will focus my efforts to put the EU at the forefront of the new technological race and increase its competitiveness in the face of increased economic competition. To this end, I want to rely on all existing instruments to attract additional funding, as well as to look for innovative ways for doing so, such as the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform, which will support the development of advanced technologies. I am eager to continue our efforts to deliver on the European Green Deal and the digital transition. In this context, it is urgent to develop products that are sustainable by design. As a concrete step, I will support the upcoming Coordinated Action Plan with Member States on advanced materials which will be essential for our ability to coordinate actions and find adequate substitutes. Creating stronger ties with like-minded countries is essential in this challenging geopolitical context and associating them to Union programmes is key in this regard. I will continue the efforts to complete the ongoing negotiations with a number of strategic international partners for the EU.

At the same time, I will be led by the principle that fostering cooperation with our international partners will also reinforce our economic and technological security. The EU's strategy for international cooperation in research and innovation provides a sound policy framework to strike the right balance between supporting openness to international cooperation and ensuring that the EU's strategic interests and autonomy are safeguarded.

I will also continue to deliver on implementing the New European Innovation Agenda, aiming to position Europe at the forefront of the new wave of deep tech innovation through targeted actions in funding scale-ups, experimentation, strengthening innovation ecosystems and bridging the innovation divide, fostering, attracting and retaining talents as well as improving policy-making tools, while making sure that no person, or region are left behind.

Despite the progress already made in reducing the research and innovation divide, efforts are still needed to maximise the effects of the widening measures implemented so far. While Horizon Europe is a competitive programme, the cumulative outcome of the pursuit of excellence and widening must be to ensure that the EU can compete globally in the most inclusive and sustainable way. Therefore, I will focus my efforts on pursuing a more holistic approach to address this challenge during the remaining time of the mandate.

Achieving a European Research Area in which researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely is of crucial importance. In this context, implementing the package on research careers will be a priority for me as well. I will promote the uptake of the

forthcoming Council recommendation on research careers, currently under discussion in the Council, putting in place the observatory for careers in research and innovation, developing a new paradigm for research assessment and adopting a pilot action for young researchers.

Strengthening science and scientific advice for policy at all levels of policy making, by fostering a culture of evidence-based policymaking, enhancing the communication of scientific research and findings to policymakers in a clear, accessible, and timely manner will be another priority I would pursue. The Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) and the Scientific Advice Mechanism (SAM), which fall under the portfolio's remit, provide independent, evidence-based knowledge and science, supporting EU policies to positively impact society.

As part of the better regulation toolbox, the innovation principle is applied across the Commission to ensure that new legislation is designed with innovation in mind. I fully subscribe to its application and will ensure its application to legislative proposals under my remit, if I am appointed, and when such a need arises.

To achieve all these priorities, I will rely on the results of our EU Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation, the current Horizon Europe and its predecessor Horizon 2020.

The Horizon Europe mid-term evaluation and the Horizon 2020 ex-post evaluation will be essential tools in this respect, as they will enable us to take stock of what is working well and what can be improved, and will serve as a basis for developing our next Framework Programme for research and innovation. For instance, one important area where I see room for improvement concerns the simplification measures put in place to attract newcomers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to Horizon Europe. We need to reduce administrative burden wherever possible. In this context, I fully stand behind the new 'One In, One Out' principle, developed by this Commission, even though most of my initiatives in the remaining part of this mandate will be non-legislative proposals.

I will also work on strengthening the Partnerships for Regional Innovation and the proposed New European Bauhaus Mission.

I am committed to fully engaging with the European Parliament, particularly the ITRE Committee, as well as with Member States, the research community and civil society. I will strive to make our cooperation a genuine example of how joint efforts on research and innovation can propel us towards a sustainable, fair and prosperous future.

4. Horizon Europe is an essential part of the European research and innovation landscape, as it stimulates mobility of researchers and promotes synergies in funding, with the view to addressing global challenges and foster innovation. However, the first years of implementation of Horizon Europe have demonstrated that the Programme is significantly underfunded, since 71% of scientifically excellent proposals were not able to receive support due to lack of resources. At the same time, new initiatives proposed by the Commission often tend to rely on Horizon Europe for their funding, thereby adding further pressure on the limited resources of the Programme. How do you intend to ensure that Horizon Europe has a financial envelope that meets the needs of the EU research community and is able to fund a larger number of excellent projects?

I acknowledge and applaud the fact that the European Parliament always recognises the importance of supporting research and innovation, and defends the Framework Programme budget.

I am well-aware that only 30% of high-quality proposals could be funded with the budget available, even if this is already slightly better than in Horizon 2020 (25%). An additional EUR 34 billion would have been needed to fund all of the high-quality proposals submitted. It is

evident to me that the Programme alone, even being the largest public funding programme for research and innovation in the world, cannot bridge the funding gap that we observe for many years now. This is why, if appointed, I will do my utmost to explore all possible sources of funding, from synergies with other programmes within the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and attracting additional national or private sources.

For example, the transfer of funds could be such a possibility to meet the needs of the EU research community and fund a larger number of excellent projects. It allows Member States to transfer up to 5% of Cohesion Policy funds to support proposals from Horizon Europe. It boosts projects in countries' smart specialisation areas, allows more effective support for innovation, and preserves countries' administrative capacity. So far, only two countries have already foreseen to use this possibility and I will continue supporting this good practice.

Another example to attract funding is through association of like-minded countries, which has further increased the Horizon Europe budget, as in principle all associated countries are financially contributing, in line with the rules for their participation in the programme. We can also explore the possibilities for attracting private funding through the preparation of the 10 new partnerships that will be proposed in 2024.

As built-in resilience has its limits, new solutions for Horizon Europe have been recently proposed in the framework of the MFF review such as the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP).

In a similar context, the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF) offers up to EUR 48 billion additional funding for investments and reforms related to research and innovation.

It is clear to me that with the EU having to respond to a series of unprecedented challenges and in today's geopolitical context, the current possibilities under the MFF have been stretched. So far, albeit with some difficulties, we have been able to count on the Horizon Europe programme's built-in agility and flexibility to respond to unexpected events and emerging priorities.

It is important to note that Horizon Europe's contribution to emerging needs is fully in line with the programme objectives and only concerns the R&I component of any emerging priorities, for example in the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA), the Chips Act to overcome the stress in the international chips supply chains, or the Union Secure Connectivity Programme to ensure Europe plays a role in the next-generation of secure communication. I will insist, whenever it is the case, that these contributions from Horizon Europe to critical R&I needs consider all relevant views and will be visible and widely recognised.

In any case, I will make sure that ambitious, stable and sustainable funding is spent in the most economical, effective and efficient way so that it reaches our researchers, businesses, especially SMEs, and puts citizens at the heart of these objectives.

5. If we really consider that the EU should achieve its open strategic autonomy and be competitive at global level, we need to create the conditions to stimulate fundamental research and its link to the innovation process. One of the greatest success stories of the past two Framework Programmes is the European Research Council (ERC), which supports the most prominent European scientists. Although much of the responsibility lies in the hands of Member States, the European Research Council should play a significant role in addressing the current challenges by injecting greater competition at European level in funding fundamental research and researchers. What role should the ERC play to face current and future challenges and what should be done for increasing the number of researchers, in particular women, based in the EU? How do you intend to strike the right balance along the whole value chain, from blue-sky research to close-to-market and scale-up actions, in individual as well as in collaborative projects?

Fundamental research is key for fostering the EU's strategic autonomy, by increasing its ability to attract the best scientists and become a global hub of excellence in the field.

The European Research Council (ERC) is the premier European funder for frontier research. With a budget of more than EUR 16 billion under pillar I "Excellent Science" of Horizon Europe, the ERC funds the best and most creative researchers of any nationality and age to run projects - primarily based in Europe - to conduct ground-breaking research.

I fully commit to continuing to support the crucial role that the ERC plays for the EU to remain a scientific powerhouse in the world today.

Research activities funded by the ERC tackle key global challenges with projects on clean tech, quantum computing, climate adaptation and artificial intelligence, among others.

For the ERC to continue to deliver the highest quality projects it needs to attract and retain the best talent, in facilities that provide state-of-the-art equipment and technologies to the research community. If appointed, I will work together with the Member States to ensure all steps are taken to guarantee adequate funding, create attractive conditions for our researchers as well as appropriate research infrastructures to be further developed.

Completing the package of measures to advance on the development of the European Research Area, supporting the dialogue with Member States in their efforts to reach the target of 3% of GDP invested in research and innovation (R&I), as well as taking steps to enhance the academic freedom are examples where we can work together helping to create incentives to attract graduates and increase the number of researchers.

It is equally important to ensure the fine balance between the different types of research and participants and I believe the ERC is well positioned to fund a variety of projects at different levels of technology and maturity, thereby covering the entire value chain through the strategic planning process.

To make individual research topics less prescriptive and impact-driven, the ERC's frontier research grants operate on a 'bottom-up' basis without predetermined priorities. Additionally, continuity is fostered with the European Innovation Council (EIC), where EIC Transition projects follow up on results from ERC proof of concepts.

The share of women among ERC Principal Investigators has increased from 28.1% under Horizon 2020 to currently 31.8% under Horizon Europe, showing some progress but also that there is still room for improvement. Under Horizon Europe, beneficiaries of ERC grants must take all measures to promote equal opportunities between men and women in the implementation of the action and aim for a gender balance at all levels of personnel assigned to the action, including at the supervisory and managerial level, as set out in the model grant

agreement used for ERC actions. ERC Principal Investigators must also assess the relevance of integrating sex and gender analysis into their research.

I will fully support the achievement of the ERC main strategic objectives to explain the added value of all types of research that contribute to tackling societal, economic, environmental and policy challenges. I will actively encourage the most efficient ways to communicate how scientific achievements improve directly or indirectly the lives of the European citizens.

6. According to Article 179 of the TFEU, the Union shall have the objective to achieve a European Research Area and promote its competitiveness. Which measures, and possibly legislative initiatives, do you envisage to contribute to the realisation of the European Research Area and to allow the EU to assert itself as an excellent partner on the global scene? What initiatives should be taken to enable Member States to introduce structural reforms in order to create a continent where research and innovation flourish in all EU territories? By which concrete means do you intend to attract worldwide talents to the EU and to reduce any further “brain drain”?

I stand fully behind the formulation of establishing a continent where research and innovation flourish in all EU territories. This is exactly the European Research Area (ERA) I would like to see accomplished, where researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely.

I will focus my efforts to address one of the main remaining obstacles for its completion which is the fragmentation of national research and innovation systems. The Pact for Research and Innovation is the response that establishes priority areas for joint action, and the ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024 translates these priorities into concrete actions that are currently being implemented. They cover a wide spectrum of areas such as open science, research assessment, careers, gender equality and inclusiveness, academic freedom, research infrastructure, hydrogen and green transition, bringing science closer to citizens and improving access to excellence.

If appointed, I will support an efficient and transparent ERA governance process, through the ERA Forum, bringing together Member States, associated countries and stakeholders, and I will remain fully open to explore all possible avenues to accelerate the achievement of the ERA.

In relation to the structural reforms, improving the overall research and innovation performance of the EU requires fit-for-purpose approaches, taking into account the different contexts in Member States. The EU has several tools at its disposal. We need to continue supporting Member States with their national reforms, for example through the European Semester and the Policy Support Facility.

To attract talent and reduce the brain drain, I believe in openness and talent circulation to foster the best ideas and ensure scientists can spread excellence and innovation. However, we also observe that the EU and many Member States or regions within the EU face an unbalanced situation and are failing to keep the talents they helped to train, with researchers leaving and not being replaced. My ambition is that our continent remains attractive to conduct excellent research and innovation everywhere. To this end, actions are undertaken within Horizon Europe, particularly the widening measures, the European Semester, the Policy Support Facility, and the ERA Policy Agenda.

Under Horizon Europe, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) accounted for about half of the total number of participations from organisations from third countries in Horizon 2020. The first data from Horizon Europe also confirms that MSCA continues to attract talents

strongly and R&I organisations from third countries, as highlighted by the fact that 38% of individual researchers selected under postdoctoral fellowships are from outside the EU.

To be effective and widely accepted, proposed solutions have to reflect the views and engagement of the R&I community. I will certainly want to listen to them, ensuring focus on harnessing talent in Europe through increasing the attractiveness of careers in science and innovation.

I commit to continuing the work on the tools to support the implementation of the Council Recommendation on research careers. This includes the proposal for a European framework for research careers - a competence framework, an ERA Talent Platform as a one-stop-shop, mutual learning exercises for Member States, and a new Research and Innovation Careers Observatory being developed together with the OECD. The agreement on reforming research assessment complements these measures.

The priorities of the New European Innovation Agenda include dedicated actions on the attraction and retention of talent, as well as on accelerating and strengthening innovation in European Innovation Ecosystems across the EU and addressing the innovation divide. One of their central elements is the creation of regional innovation valleys, fostering concrete collaborations between more and less advanced territories across the EU with a clear focus on priority areas that are key for Europe's competitiveness.

I look forward to the European Parliament's continued support to initiatives such as the "Science meets Regions", implemented with the support of our services, the JRC and in consultation with the European Committee of the Regions.

7. How will you coordinate and interact with Commissioners whose policy areas have a critical research component, such as the EU industrial policy, the EU digital policy, the EU defence policy, the EU climate policy, the EU transport policy, the EU maritime policy or the EU space policy?

I am a firm believer in teamwork. Therefore, I plan to collaborate with my future colleagues in the College openly and honestly, in line with the principle of collegiality.

If appointed, I will work closely together with the responsible Members of the College to make sure that the full potential of research and innovation policy is harnessed for the purposes of achieving the EU's policy objectives. I will work hard to ensure that EU policies, in whatever domain, draw on state of the art knowledge, not least the knowledge generated by the research funded by the EU research and innovation programs (R&I), and the JRC. More specifically:

- I will do my part to deliver on the European Green Deal, knowing full well the crucial role that R&I has in accelerating the transition to a climate-neutral economy. With the different instruments at our disposal, I will ensure that Horizon Europe continues to play an essential role in fostering the successful implementation of the Fit for 55 package.
- We will further work on the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform with the European Innovation Council, contributing to the EU's competitiveness and resilience in strategic R&I sectors.
- We will continue the implementation of the European Strategy for Universities, digital skills and work closely on supporting Ukraine's reconstruction in the education and research sectors.
- We will also work closely to support the digital transition and a future-ready EU industry and Single Market, achieving digital leadership and technological sovereignty

by investing in key digital technologies like semiconductors and Artificial Intelligence as well as the next frontier of technologies. In light of the current geopolitical context, coordination between Union-funded defence and civil research as well as international cooperation in R&I is vital to promote and protect the EU's interests.

- We will put forward this year a revised Strategic Energy Technology Plan to adjust it to the new policy context of REPowerEU and the Net Zero Industry Act. We will also cooperate closely on the other follow-up R&I actions from REPowerEU, notably the forthcoming Roadmap on Hydrogen Valleys.
- We will continue to seize innovation opportunities created by the increasing need for clean transport and the rising demand for connected and automated mobility.
- I would like to contribute to further strengthening the work on mental health, including of young people, as well as of young cancer survivors' mental health in the context notably of the EU Cancer Mission.

Finally, I believe that it is of utmost importance to apply an integrated approach to all these policy areas. In this context, the role of the JRC is pivotal: thanks to its multidisciplinary portfolios, our science hub is able to use its convening power, based on scientific evidence, to bring together policy DGs for better integrated policy proposals in such areas. In this way, it will support the agenda of the Commission in a coordinated, cross-sectorial way.

8. In the context of the Commission's ambitious agenda for climate, how will you make sure that Horizon Europe meets the climate mainstreaming requirements and contributes to the 2050 climate neutrality target?

I am firmly committed to dedicating 35% of the Horizon Europe budget to climate action. This is not only a legal requirement but also a key political priority, in line with the European Green Deal, aiming at EU's climate-neutrality by 2050. This objective also reflects the EU's commitment to global climate action under the Paris Agreement.

All parts of society and economic sectors will benefit from investments in research, leading to innovative solutions, from the energy sector to industry, mobility, buildings, agriculture, food, forestry, and other bioeconomy sectors.

Horizon Europe has established a system of constant ex-ante estimation of climate action-related expenditure. This allows the Commission to monitor and steer the biannual work programmes and ensure that a sufficient budget is earmarked for climate action. According to the latest research and innovation (R&I) annual report, 34% of climate action-related expenditure was achieved from the 2021 budget. For the budgetary years 2022-2024, the ex-ante estimate is just above 35%.

I am committed to ensuring that efforts will be increased to meet the 35% objective. Specifically, the second Horizon Europe strategic plan for 2025-2027 will integrate the first years' insights and focus actions towards the 35% objective. If appointed, I will work with the services under my responsibility to monitor closely the state of implementation of this target using a sound methodology and making the data publicly available online in an easily accessible manner. A Horizon Europe-funded study on a long-term research and innovation agenda towards 2050 climate neutrality (LTR 2050) will provide a blueprint for prioritising R&I actions, focusing on breakthrough low-/zero-carbon technologies and solutions.

European partnerships and Missions under Horizon Europe significantly contribute to the Green Deal and climate action. Out of the 49 partnerships featured in the first Horizon Europe strategic plan, 67% of collective partnership resources are planned to be allocated to R&I,

contributing to the Green Deal objectives, representing a 38% increase compared to Horizon 2020.

Four of the currently running five EU missions under Horizon Europe are devoted to tackling challenges associated with the Green Deal: Adaptation to Climate Change, A Soil Deal for Europe, Climate-neutral and Smart Cities, and Restore our Ocean and Waters. The proposed New European Bauhaus Mission will also contribute to the climate objectives.

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) contributes to the Union's policy priorities on climate action, for example, through the EIT Climate Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC) and I will make sure that it continues to contribute actively to these priorities by accelerating innovation and integrating the education, business, and research worlds.

Since 2021, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) have a Green Charter, which promotes the sustainable implementation of research activities. The MSCA Green Charter is a code of good practice for individuals and institutions who receive MSCA funding. All participants are expected to adhere to the Green Charter on a "best effort" basis and to commit to as many of its provisions as possible during the implementation of their projects. I will ensure that such good practices are shared and followed by more participants in all pillars of the programme.

I am convinced of the need to link up research, industrial sectors and other actors who will create a strong push for the innovative solutions, so urgently needed to reach our climate goals by 2050 and I am fully committed to this effort.

9. Whereas previous Framework Programmes were open to the association of EU's neighbouring countries, Horizon Europe offers also the possibility to associate countries located anywhere in the world that have a good capacity in science, technology and innovation and share common values with the EU. Apart from countries where negotiations are ongoing or already finalised, with which other countries do you intend to propose association agreements? What is your approach to association agreements under Horizon Europe in general? In that regard, how do you intend to ensure that Parliament's right of consent is not circumvented through decisions taken by bodies (joint committees) set up by such agreements? Particularly, how do you intend to respond to Parliament's clear and consistent position that such agreements should be structured in a way that allows Parliament to give its consent for future associations under the agreements? What is your approach to other forms of cooperation with third countries?

I am convinced of the added value of international cooperation in a fast-changing world with so many challenges surrounding us. I also believe that the EU Global Approach to Research and Innovation should continue to consist of two main elements. Firstly, openness to the world allowing our European researchers and innovators to maximise their interaction with the world's best minds and the latest scientific and technological knowledge. Secondly, targeted EU-led activities based on preserving EU strategic interests, reciprocity and respect for fundamental values and principles.

Most recently, the Commission and New Zealand have signed the association agreement on the participation of New Zealand to Horizon Europe. The association agreement will be concluded once the European Parliament will have given its consent. In line with previous commitments within this Commission's mandate, the association of Canada, South Korea and Japan will be among the goals in the remaining time of that mandate.

Regarding the UK, talks between the Commission and the UK are ongoing to find a common ground on some remaining issues before a full association to Horizon Europe can be envisaged

and I truly hope that an agreement will soon be reached. Negotiations with Switzerland will also be a priority for me in the context of the ongoing exploratory talks on the future of the overall EU-Swiss relationship.

I fully acknowledge the concerns of the European Parliament in the context of the association agreements for like-minded third countries falling under Article 16(1)(d) of the Horizon Europe Regulation (such as The Faroe Islands and New Zealand), particularly regarding the way in which the European Parliament will be involved in the adoption of similar future associations under the Framework Agreement. The Framework Agreement establishes a Joint Committee empowered potentially to associate the concerned country to new Union programmes. Given its role as co-legislator under the Treaties, the European Parliament participated in the shaping of Horizon Europe (the current Framework Programme on research and innovation (R&I)). The Regulation establishing Horizon Europe clearly lays down the terms and conditions for third countries' participation in EU programmes, including the financial contribution requirements.

Taking this into account and in line with the current legislative framework, I will ensure the utmost transparency vis-à-vis both co-legislators in the process of negotiating and concluding Horizon Europe association agreements. If appointed, I will see to it that the services under my responsibility continue to share with the European Parliament the Commission Recommendations to launch negotiations, EU proposals for draft Horizon Europe association agreement texts before tabling them in negotiations, and the consolidated texts of the agreements initiated by the Union negotiator. I am willing and open to working together with the European Parliament proactively at all appropriate levels. I am also open to listening to concerns and finding a way forward within the existing Treaty and inter-institutional legal framework.

On other third countries, I believe that openness in international cooperation should be balanced with safeguarding the EU's interests and values. This is required by the Treaties and in line with the EU Global Approach to R&I. Multilateralism and purposeful openness can go hand in hand with promoting a level playing field and reciprocity underpinned by fundamental values and common framework conditions in R&I cooperation. I believe that the EU is well equipped with instruments to safeguard its interests and strengthen its position in the world, including through the tools available under the Horizon Europe Regulation, such as Article 22(5) to limit participation in actions related to strategic assets, interests, autonomy or security; Article 22(6) allowing additional eligibility criteria to take into account specific policy requirements; and Article 40(4) providing the right to object to transfers of ownership and granting of exclusive licences.

10. Ukraine is a valued member of the international research community and a strong partner of the EU in research. How do you plan to mobilise new concrete funding opportunities for the Ukrainian research and innovation sector, in order to restore Ukraine's research infrastructure and provide specific support to scientists and researchers remaining in Ukraine?

If appointed, support for Ukrainian researchers will remain high on my list of priorities, following up on and taking inspiration from ongoing initiatives. Special initiatives were already created under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), European Research Council (ERC) and Human Frontier Science Programme (HFSP). These actions concretely support displaced researchers from Ukraine in their work.

In February this year, the Commission announced the results of the MSCA4Ukraine fellowship scheme, which was part of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and set up to support displaced researchers from Ukraine. The scheme allows organisations to host these researchers for

periods of eight months and up to two years. I am particularly pleased that the scheme foresees that, once conditions permit, selected researchers can re-establish themselves in Ukraine to help rebuild and safeguard the country's research and innovation (R&I) capacity. Available support will allow them to maintain links with their research and innovation communities, carry out research placements and develop new projects.

The Commission also supports Ukraine's innovation capacity through a dedicated EUR 20 million action by the European Innovation Council for deep-tech start-ups in Ukraine, which will be launched very soon. The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) Jumpstarter programme has been successfully taken up in Ukraine, helping early-stage start-ups develop their business ideas through mentoring and pitching events. The Girls Go Circular Initiative has trained close to 300 Ukrainian girls in secondary school, focusing on digital and entrepreneurial skills related to the circular economy.

I also intend to continue the ERA4Ukraine portal, a one-stop-shop to support researchers of Ukraine, which has attracted over 120 000 visitors and the EURAXESS Science4Refugees Initiative, through which more than 4 800 part-time and full-time jobs have been posted.

Regarding the future reconstruction of Ukraine, scientific expertise, innovative approaches, and new technologies will help rebuild modern transport and energy infrastructures and housing. We would also need to revive Ukraine's research infrastructures to ensure that talent is harnessed in the country and contribute to Ukraine's sustainable future. Ukraine currently seeks R&I cooperation in strategic sectors, and I intend to broaden its scope, first and foremost, by swiftly establishing the Horizon Europe Office in Kyiv. I will also ensure the establishment of a European Institute of Technology Hub, considering the crucial role of innovation in the reconstruction.

While the JRC does not have the possibility to mobilise funding, it can contribute to the design of funding opportunities that would build on the long-standing work that the Commission has been carrying out with Ukraine.

Given that numerous research infrastructures in Ukraine are destroyed, I also see a role for the JRC programme to provide open access to its state-of-the-art research infrastructures to work as a bridge for Ukrainian researchers to continue/advance their research in certain areas.

The New European Bauhaus community has been supporting Ukrainians since the start, combining emergency actions with longer-term needs, aiming to provide tangible and practical help for rebuilding local communities while improving competencies and expertise of Ukrainian actors.

11. The low engagement of researchers from the widening countries in Horizon Europe is a persistent problem of the Programme. Which are in your opinion the main drivers for this challenge? How will you further encourage widening actors to participate in Horizon Europe and allow them to improve regional and local R&I capacities?

The European Parliament played a crucial role during the Horizon Europe Regulation negotiations, supporting the strengthening of the share dedicated to widening participation, which increased to 3.3%, compared to approximately 1% in Horizon 2020. This was complemented by several new measures to facilitate access to research networks, such as, for example, the hop-on facility.

The latest statistics show that widening countries are becoming more successful thanks to the measures taken. Success rates of applications increased from 13.2% in Horizon 2020 to 20.3% in Horizon Europe. The financial return improved from 7.2% in Horizon 2020 to 13.1% currently.

However, in order to overcome the persistent disparities, a lot more still needs to be done and I see the process of widening not only as a series of actions to solve the research and innovation divide. It is a constant effort that requires all parties involved, the Member States concerned, the Commission, the research community and the other stakeholders together, to continue to implement the necessary structural reforms, create the appropriate environment, ensure infrastructures and funding for the researchers.

If appointed, I will pay particular attention to the low engagement of researchers from the widening countries, for example, via measures ranging from targeted training, improving the quality of proposals, access of widening countries partners to selected consortia, helping with ensuring the sustainability of the centres of excellence, and looking for ways to better integrate them in European networks.

In addition, I will also encourage Member States to support high-quality projects receiving recognition through the Seal of Excellence, which cannot be funded by Horizon Europe due to budget constraints. In these cases, Member States can mobilise funding from other EU programmes, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), or national and regional programmes to maximise opportunities for excellent proposals.

Since individual countries' situations differ, widening participation can be tackled in the framework of the enhanced dialogue – a tailor-made exchange with the Member States. Targeted activities in the Member States, aimed at increasing their participation, have proven effective and should continue. I will further encourage the use of regular monitoring on the information flow that should show where we would need targeted efforts and better information campaigns. I will ensure the quality and timeliness of information to be equally disseminated amongst all countries and regions. Providing specific services and effective dissemination channels, including through formal and informal contact points, to improve the quality and quantity of proposals from widening countries is a concrete action I would encourage to be pursued. I will also support the use of the special hop-on facility which enables the integration of additional partners from widening countries into beneficiaries' consortia, including in the partnerships, that do not yet have any participants from this category of countries.

I am committed to following up on the Court of Auditors' remark about the sustainability of centres of excellence by considering future action in the next strategic plan 2025-2027, involving also the University Alliances and building on potential synergies with education and innovation.

There are also opportunities in the context of Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions to foster the circulation of tens of thousands of excellent researchers, including the return to their home countries.

It is important to note that EU level actions are not the panacea for addressing the participation gap in the research and innovation (R&I) Framework Programme. Tangible results are best achieved by matching efforts based on sustainable investments and reforms at national level and ensuring sufficient quality and timely information for all participants. Together with the Member States and with targeted EU support, I intend to continue the efforts to reduce the regional disparities in this remaining year of the mandate.

12. Horizon Europe includes a commitment from the European Commission for extensive exchanges with the European Parliament in the Strategic Planning process. Will you commit to establishing, together with Parliament, a process that ensures that all the information pertaining to the Strategic Planning of Horizon Europe reaches Parliament in a structured, timely and regular manner? Furthermore, how will you ensure regular reporting to the European Parliament on the implementation of the Programme, the funded projects and their impact, in order to allow thorough parliamentary scrutiny?

As a former Member of the European Parliament, I fully understand the significance of cultivating fruitful and regular relations between our institutions. The European Parliament plays a pivotal role in this respect and, if appointed, I will ensure that the flagship programme of the Union to support R&I undergoes meticulous periodic parliamentary scrutiny. This endeavour is essential to bolster the transparency and democratic accountability of the Commission's efforts.

To this end, I am committed to fully implementing the provisions enshrined in Art. 6(6) and 8(2) of the Horizon Europe Regulation and facilitating extensive exchanges with the European Parliament concerning the implementation of the Framework Programme and the strategic planning process. It is my firm intention to be available for regular meetings with your esteemed committee or any other configuration that you deem appropriate on the R&I strategic planning process.

In full compliance with the 2010 Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the Commission, and in line with the Comitology acquis, I will fully honour the commitment to provide the European Parliament with access to the agendas of the Horizon Europe Programme Committee's meetings. Furthermore, I will also ensure the availability of draft implementing acts that require the committees' opinions, as well as information on final draft implementing acts following the delivery of the committees' opinions.

In its commitment to transparency, the Commission already grants unrestricted access to the Horizon Dashboard, which offers real-time information on projects, their outcomes, outputs, programme-wide statistics, and dedicated views of critical initiatives like the European Innovation Council.

I will also continue the regular meetings with the coordinators of the political groups within your committees. This proactive approach will enable me to provide timely updates on the policies under my portfolio and respond to any pertinent inquiries you may have.

13. Under Horizon 2020, the norm was that Work Programmes were published at the latest in the autumn of the year preceding the year covered by the Work Programme. Under Horizon Europe, the publication of most parts of the Work Programmes takes place in Q1 of the year concerned. This leaves applicants significantly less time to prepare for calls compared to what was the case under Horizon 2020. How do you see this development? Do you intend to address it?

Our programmes are designed to offer opportunities to the research community to propose their best ideas and to build pan-European collaborative networks. It is therefore very important to allow them enough preparation time that is linked with early availability of the programmes associated with dissemination activities.

Preparation time may have suffered from some initial delays in the interinstitutional agreement on the Horizon Europe legal texts agreed by the co-legislators.

The Commission started the implementation of the Horizon Europe programme in the beginning of 2021, before the Framework Programme and Specific Programme came into force and in anticipation of their adoption.

The first two Horizon Europe Work Programmes and the first strategic plan were adopted by the Commission and calls had been opened already during the first three months of 2021.

The full breadth of the actions for 2021-2022 were then rolled out in an amendment to the 'main' Work Programme 2021-2022 in June 2021. This caused some calls to be launched later than would have been desirable. Nevertheless, the Commission made particular efforts to ensure that all calls were launched in 2021. An effort was made to provide applicants with more time to prepare for the 2022 calls.

The 'main' Work Programme 2023-2024 was adopted in December 2022. It should also be noted that deadlines for calls continue to be distributed across the year, which means that applicants for many calls have more time to prepare.

All necessary efforts will be made during this mandate to make sure preparatory steps are taken for the adoption of the 2025 Work Programme in due time.

If appointed, I will certainly pay a close attention to these important timing aspects.

14. Given the role to be played by regional innovation ecosystems in the re-industrialisation of the EU in order to address the main societal challenges of our times, how do you intend to create meaningful synergies between existing Union programmes and initiatives, in particular pillars II and III of Horizon Europe, the R&I actions under the cohesion policy framework, and the EU industrial alliances launched by the Commission?

I believe that synergies between EU programmes have a great potential and can be a European game changer for competitiveness.

Besides Horizon Europe, Cohesion Policy funds will mobilise up to EUR 43 billion in research and innovation (R&I) investments. and the Recovery and Resilience Facility will provide nearly EUR 48 billion to strengthen R&I in Member States.

Regarding synergies with the Cohesion Policy funds, synergy-friendly rules exist already and are mirrored in the relevant regulations, also thanks to the European Parliament. Dedicated guidelines to support their implementation were jointly prepared with Commission services overseeing the cohesion funds.

If appointed, I intend to continue these efforts, to reinforce the impact of both policies in all critical areas identified by the European Court of Auditors in a recent synergies' audit, for example, by widely disseminating and promoting the new synergies opportunities; improving the information flow on the Seal of Excellence projects to facilitate alternative funding; improving cooperation between Member States' authorities responsible for R&I policy and Cohesion policy by a dedicated expert group under the European Research Area (ERA) Forum called RIMA (European Network of Research and Innovation and Managing Authorities which brings these communities closer together and encourages the exchange of knowledge and practices); facilitating the implementation of sequential synergies in the Dissemination and Exploitation Strategy framework, such as the Horizon Results Platform or the Horizon Results Booster.

I will also engage in supporting the Partnerships for Regional Innovation as an effective way to develop territorial transition strategies addressing shared societal challenges.

The interplay of Horizon Europe instruments such as partnerships (pillar II), the European Innovation Council (EIC), the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and the

European Innovation ecosystems (pillar III), has also an important role to play in strengthening the synergies' objectives of aligning policies, adding resources, and aggregating R&I public and private stakeholders. For example, the EIC "Plug In" scheme is an important new step towards bridging Horizon Europe with existing national or regional programmes regarding access to the EIC innovation accelerator. I intend to continue the work with the participating countries to implement this new approach. Another example is the flagship initiative of the New European Innovation Agenda to create Regional Innovation Valleys across the EU - notably involving regions with a lower innovation performance - by building on strategic areas of regional strength and specialisation in support of key EU priorities. The Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP), proposed by the Commission in June 2023, also aims at creating synergies between Union programmes, including Horizon Europe.

Concerning the EIT, I will support its multiple roles in fostering industrial competitiveness in critical areas with regional impact, such as critical and advanced materials, batteries etc, and on preparing Europe with new skills for the twin transition through their academies. I see possible extended synergies, which I will support with the development of new curricula discussed by the European Universities Alliances and the inter-sectorial mobility of researchers, between academia and industry, supported by MSCA (pillar I).

Regarding the role of industrial alliances in the context of synergies and regional innovation, I am fully committed to promoting the engagement of industrial stakeholders, big and small as active shapers of place-based innovation. The industrial technology roadmaps under the new European Research Area, are an important driver that I intend to support. They are an instrument to align and link Horizon Europe partnerships with industrial ecosystems. Industrial alliances are key interlocutors in this process as demonstrated while developing the roadmap on low-carbon technologies for energy-intensive industries, which identified synergies for accelerating results by linking Horizon Europe partnerships to the alliances. Similarly, industrial alliances in sectors such as energy, mobility or circular economy must have a role in advising on the ERA industrial technology roadmaps. In that spirit, I would engage in fostering a closer dialogue, through the ERA Forum, to discuss long-term policies and bring the views of the industry into the Commission's reflections on strategic programming.

15. The budget for Cluster 2 of Horizon Europe has increased by approximately 80% compared to Horizon 2020. This was clearly linked to the need to increase support for the Cultural and / Creative Industries (CCIs) in Europe, whose importance is also emphasised in recital 25 of the Horizon Europe Regulation. However, only 9% of the funding under the 2023-2024 Work Programme of Cluster 2 was dedicated to CCIs. How do you intend to ensure that the share of funding for CCIs under Cluster 2 will increase in the coming years?

Horizon Europe Cluster 2 "Culture, Creativity and Inclusive society" is divided into three destinations, and decisions for this Cluster are taken in line with the obligations set out in the Horizon Europe Regulation and Cluster 2 as well as in view of the substantial contributions which all three destinations can make to the most pressing societal challenges of our day.

The total budget of Cluster 2 is EUR 2.28 billion for 2021-2027, of which roughly one-third is dedicated to cultural heritage and Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs). Funding for the cultural and creative sectors and industries has increased greatly under Horizon Europe compared to previous research and innovation (R&I) Framework Programmes, and for the first time there is an envisaged destination exclusively dedicated to cultural heritage and CCIs. In line with the agreement with the European Parliament, this destination prioritises strengthened research and innovation support to CCIs and the establishment of the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage. This means that, according to the established plan, in the first four years of Horizon Europe, EUR 110 million are foreseen to support research and innovation

actions dedicated to CCIs, representing 14% of Cluster 2 budget for 2021-2022 Work Programme and 9% of Cluster 2 budget for 2023-2024 Work Programme. Hence budget execution is proceeding as planned.

If appointed, I intend to maintain a strong focus on the cultural and creative sectors and industries under Cluster 2 during the remaining part of Horizon Europe (2025-2027). More substantial investment into the CCI sector will be set out in the strategic plan for Horizon Europe for the period 2025-2027, on which I will be happy to report to the European Parliament.

I also consider very relevant the substantial investment foreseen in the Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC) 'EIT Culture and Creativity', dedicated to supporting and boosting innovation among cultural and creative sectors and industries. It has a budget of EUR 6 million during its start-up year in 2023, and a business plan for 2024-2025 will be submitted for approval in September 2023. The KIC aims to be fully operational by January 2024, with a budget of EUR 50-70 million for the first two years. This investment will complement and reinforce the initiatives funded under Cluster 2 for a strong impact and thriving, innovative and competitive European CCIs.

Finally, significant support is also provided through the Creative Europe Programme, with an overall budget of EUR 2.4 billion for 2021-2027, entirely dedicated to all cultural and creative sectors.

16. Bridging the innovation divide between regions is crucial to unlock the full potential of the European research and innovation ecosystem as well as to ensure that all Europeans can benefit from European innovation. Which elements do you perceive as the main drivers for this divide and how do you intend to address them?

If appointed, I will pay particular attention to addressing the innovation divide and to enhancing the capacity of all EU regions to attract private and public actors to invest in research and innovation. To this end I will seek to strengthen the role of the part of Horizon Europe dedicated to European Innovation ecosystems, but also to pillar II and pillar I.

I perceive underinvestment in both public and private research and innovation (R&I), structural weaknesses in national and regional innovation ecosystems, as well as weak links between academic and business sectors, as the main causes of the innovation divide. Tackling these obstacles will require coordinated support which sets the key enabling conditions for innovation and relies on the various funding opportunities offered by Horizon Europe. Formal elements, such as administrative, legislative, and regulatory frameworks as well as informal aspects, such as the creation of innovation cultures and the development of local knowledge networks, are important to achieve such enabling conditions.

Addressing the innovation divide has remained a priority for EU policies, notably cohesion and R&I policies. This is reflected in the very significant amounts devoted to R&I in the current MFF under Cohesion Policy, Horizon Europe as well as under Next Generation EU with the Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs).

I am committed to ensuring that the European Semester is used to the greatest possible effect in this regard. Identifying needs for structural reforms in national R&I systems under the European Semester and linking the semester with the reforms and investments contained in Member States' RRP will be particularly valuable, because it focuses on the R&I needs of many lower-performing Member States in a targeted manner. The implementation of this combination of reforms and investments should boost national R&I systems particularly in these countries and thereby narrow the divide.

There are a number of further actions to address the innovation divide, which I will continue to support. The Work Programme 2023-2024 for European Innovation Ecosystems focusing on improving the interconnections between innovation ecosystems across the EU could be such an example. Several specific actions by the European Innovation Council are under way, including targeted funding for start-ups and SMEs from widening countries to apply to the EIC Accelerator. The European Innovation Ecosystems actions (pillar III of Horizon Europe) bring together emerging and moderate innovators with strong and leader innovators. The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) launched a Regional Innovation Scheme (RIS) to widen its regional outreach to modest and moderate innovator countries. Actions under the dedicated widening part of Horizon Europe - such as the new Excellence Hubs - address a significant cause of the innovation divide, namely the weak linkage between academic and business sectors in widening countries. EU Missions can also play a role here as they facilitate the exchange of best practices, foster capacity building between regions and accelerate the implementation of innovative solutions.

From a broader European perspective, I see a need for a more holistic policy approach in tackling the innovation divide challenge. I will count on your support, as well as on that of the Committee of the Regions and of Member States to bring forth excellence and innovation in every corner of Europe.

17. Innovative companies, and in particular innovative SMEs, have a decisive role to play in the deep transformations that must take place throughout the Union to address present and future societal challenges. Innovative SMEs in industrial sectors can be a tremendous lever for the green re-industrialisation of European territories. However, they face specific challenges, for instance in terms of access to finance due to their need for significant amounts of patient capital. How do you intend to address the specific challenges faced by innovative SMEs in industry?

Innovative SMEs face several challenges, many of which are addressed in the recent New European Innovation Agenda and are mostly related to access to finance, innovation-friendly framework conditions, and access to the necessary talent.

I will point out a few concrete actions on how I plan to address these challenges, if appointed, during the remainder of the mandate:

On access to finance, to address the specific challenges of innovative SMEs, the Commission has set up the European Innovation Council (EIC) that focuses on promising but riskier and non-bankable SMEs. Since its launch under Horizon Europe, the EIC has received applications from over 8 500 SMEs, about 450 of which have been selected for a total funding of approximately EUR 2 billion. There could be follow-up investments and more prominent investment tickets for EIC. Also, additional measures to close the gap to the higher developed US venture capital market could include better exit opportunities, the promotion of venture capital networks. Enhancing the visibility of European start-ups, especially outside the country of headquarters of the mother company would help increase the deal flow across national borders and sectors of activity.

In addition to the access to finance, I will continue the efforts to spread best practices and explore new ways for reducing red tape, including with regard to applications, implementation and reporting for SMEs.

On the framework conditions and the need for more pro-innovation regulation, including experimental approaches to regulation, the regulatory sandboxes, as well as test beds and living labs, can be used to support policymakers and innovators in their approach to experimentation in the EU.

On strengthening the innovation ecosystems and the innovation divide, I see the increasing role for connected Regional Innovation Valleys across the EU, notably involving regions with a lower innovation performance, by building on strategic areas of regional strength and specialisation, in support of key EU priorities. This initiative is also a concrete example of synergies between two programmes – European Regional Development Fund and Horizon Europe working hand in hand to reach a common objective.

Through its innovation networks that bring together education, research and business, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) offers support to innovative SMEs, through a mix of grants, services and access to external funding.

Lastly, several initiatives have been launched to enable SMEs from widening countries to participate in the EIC, including capacity building for National Contact Points, and specific funding for the Enterprise Europe Network to support 300-400 applications from SMEs in widening countries and various outreach events.

On talents, given the sizeable challenge to attract and retain skilled persons in the EU, which has a direct consequence for the innovative SMEs, there is a specific flagship in the New European Innovation Agenda on developing and channelling essential deep tech talent, both within and towards the EU.

The EIT is taking forward a deep-tech talents initiative with the aim to reach a target of 1 million deep-tech talents over three years across all Member States, to ensure sufficient offers of deep-tech talents in the labour market. The EIC and the EIT will launch the Next Generation Innovation Talents Scheme in the first quarter 2024.

I will also be happy to support the designing of an EU-wide Innovation Talent Platform, a matching tool to help European businesses, including startups, find the talents they cannot find in the European labour market. In addition, as one flagship initiative of the European Year of Skills, the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative launches the NEB Academy on skills for sustainable construction.

18. Considering that women remain underrepresented in start-ups and in investment funds, which is detrimental to Europe's innovation powerhouse, what do you intend to do as Commissioner to address this structural issue in the long run?

I truly believe that women have a lot to offer and bring a different perspective on the challenges that Europe faces. However, women face multiple barriers when bringing new ideas to the market and when raising capital for their companies. This negatively affects the success rate of women-founded businesses. Women represent less than 11% of patent holders, while all-women teams founded only 8% of European startups, and only 25% are founded by a team with at least one woman.

Addressing the persistent gender gap in critical skills early in education is a prerequisite for tackling women's underrepresentation later in their career. This is one of the priorities under the European education area. If appointed, I will engage in dialogue and support to Member States and education stakeholders in developing effective actions through Horizon Europe and the Erasmus+ programmes.

Many specific measures and initiatives have already been taken under the New European Innovation Agenda and through pillar III of Horizon Europe and the European Innovation Council in particular. For the first time, a funding scheme specifically dedicated to increasing the number of women-led startups was launched, Women TechEU. 180 deep-tech companies founded by women have been launched in 2021-2022 with the help of grants and access to mentors and tailored courses.

Another recent initiative to support women's innovation was launched last year by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). Women2Invest helps women start their careers in venture investment and gives investors access to a group of promising women with technical backgrounds that will add diversity to their investment teams.

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) make an important contribution to gender equality across the European Research Area and beyond, support a growing number of young women in research and innovation and contribute to achieving full and equal access of women and girls to science. Female researchers make up more than 42% of the programme's fellows, far above the average EU research population. This inspires many other women to opt for a research career in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) and to create innovative businesses in Europe.

In addition to these actions, I commit to continuing or launching the following initiatives:

- The Women2Invest Programme launched last spring. The programme seeks to help women with STEAM studies launch their careers in venture investment by training them in the fundamentals of this profession and matching them with investors.
- Young women need support and role models. The new Supernovas programme, launched in Spring 2022 by the EIT Community, offers dedicated support by proposing a transversal approach to enhance the presence of women in key roles of the entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem, not only as nascent entrepreneurs, but also in other key decision-making roles, reshaping entrepreneurship and innovation for the future.
- Under the new European Innovation Agenda, these efforts will be multiplied by strengthening synergies among EU programmes. The EIC Women Entrepreneurship and Leadership scheme will open to support women in the EIT Community and provide concrete support for early-stage women-led tech startups, including through an enhanced 'WomenTech EU' call.
- The EIT will organise a joint Prize with the EIC on Women Innovators 2024 to increase the visibility of the excellent ideas and work of female innovators that will take place in early 2024.
- An example of when I would like to continue mainstreaming the gender angle is in the Deep Tech Talent initiative - one of the flagship actions of the New European Innovation Agenda, which aims at skilling, re-skilling and upskilling one million talents in deep tech by 2025.

Innovative solutions and excellent science depend on diversity. We need diverse teams for solving complex societal challenges and I commit to encouraging more participation and inclusivity along all levels of the programmes related to research and innovation within the remit of the portfolio.

19. Since 2021, the implementation of the EIC Accelerator has been challenged by delays and administrative changes, all stemming from internal issues within the Commission. Many of these challenges were related to the management of the EIC Fund. How do you intend to ensure that the implementation of the EIC does not face additional issues due to internal problems in the Commission? What is the role you see for the EIC and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) and the external (alternative investment) fund manager (AIFM) for the implementation of the equity support under the EIC?

The European Innovation Council (EIC) suffered delays in its first two years of implementation under Horizon Europe. Companies selected under the first calls had to wait, in some cases, for over one year to receive funding due to the need to restructure the EIC Fund, which provides equity support.

However, in the last year, substantial progress has been made in the time-to-grant which has been more than halved since 2021 as well as the application platform for the EIC Accelerator which was simplified in response to stakeholder concerns.

I understand that following the delays in 2021 and 2022, the EIC Fund has been fully operational since the end of September 2022, and the external fund manager has made over 140 investment decisions, helping to overcome the backlog. Moreover, the achievement of the objectives to invest in high-risk, early-stage startups and attract other investors to co-invest where possible to allow these companies to scale up has improved. For me it is crucial that the implementation of EIC continues to proceed smoothly.

Although the planned restructuring from direct to indirect management is already underway, if appointed, I will make sure that the concerns raised by the European Parliament are heard and addressed to the greatest extent possible. In this context, I will ask for clear guarantees that the EIC keeps the investment profile of high-risk companies and that investment decisions are strictly taken according to the investment guidelines set by the Commission. I will also watch carefully not to allow further delays or any unreasonable costs for management fees. I will listen also to the concerns raised by universities on intellectual property rights and the balance between the interests of researchers and organisations. I will make sure that the issues with the IT platform for applications under the EIC Accelerator are addressed in a sustainable way and changes are implemented with the least disturbance for the applicants. In addition, I recognise the concerns of the European Parliament for the EIC Fund to have the option to be the sole investor in companies. Although this option has not been used so far, I acknowledge that the possibility exists in special cases and in order to protect strategic interests.

I will instruct all my services dealing with EIC matters to work closely with colleagues from other DGs, clarify any outstanding issues and collaborate in finding the best solutions to these issues.

I will expect EISMEA to manage smoothly the selection process, grant management and provision of business acceleration services, and the external fund manager to take investment decisions for those high-risk companies passing the selection process.

I also plan to fully engage with the European Parliament, and in particular the ITRE Committee to clarify any other outstanding issues and concerns and work towards the completion of the restructuring of the EIC Fund this autumn, by temporarily transferring its shares to the management of the EIB and while maintaining a policy steer over all the main decisions of the Fund.

20. Interdisciplinarity, Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) are crucial to unleash the full transformative potential of innovation, given that transitions are a co-evolution of society, technology and techniques. How do you intend to accelerate the various transitions in order to tackle the most pressing societal challenges, for instance by systematically considering SSH disciplines alongside technical and technological matters?

I see the role of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) as an important key to understanding, coping with, and finding solutions to the challenges posed by present and future socio-economic transformations, as well as to value, preserve and make the most of the EU's rich cultural heritage. In the context of climate change for instance, SSH can inform policies that consider social equity, gender equality, community engagement, and behavioural changes to develop effective mitigation and adaptation strategies, or in the context of artificial intelligence advancements, the integration of SSH can guide the development of ethical frameworks and ensure transparency.

Horizon 2020 was the first large-scale research programme to foster cross-sectoral collaboration through systematic SSH integration. Almost a third of the Horizon 2020 budget was allocated to SSH-flagged topics. Within these topics, EUR 2.1 million was allocated to SSH partners, representing, on average, 7% of the total budget. The share of SSH-flagged projects involving SSH partners remained between 71% and 86%. The findings from Horizon 2020 showed us how to integrate SSH in Horizon Europe (HE) in a new and more efficient way.

The regular monitoring of SSH integration is a legal obligation. Therefore, if appointed, I will develop and table a new monitoring methodology for SSH integration in 2024, moving from input-oriented monitoring to output-oriented findings. The methodology will be based on the lessons learned from Horizon 2020, the input received from the scientific world, the results of research projects and new initiatives at national and regional levels. I will pay attention that the design of the work programmes and calls give due consideration to the social-human dimensions and that they encourage interdisciplinary research through, for example, joint calls such as the EUR 40 million joint call between the Mission for '100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030' and the Mission 'Adaptation to Climate Change'. This interdisciplinary call will cover solutions for urban greening and re-naturing for urban settings while also focusing on increasing social awareness. Another example is the EUR 15 million joint call between the Mission 'Restore our Ocean and Seas by 2030' and the Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe', which should create and disseminate the best socio-ecological practices for end users, namely farmers, water management authorities and landscape managers to ensure landscape water and soil water retention capacity in the long term.

21. How will you personally ensure the good quality of legislative and non-legislative initiatives within your portfolio, full transparency of lobbying activities directed at you and your services, and consistent and balanced consultation of all stakeholders taking also into account the need to carry out thorough impact assessments, in particular concerning the impact of all proposed legislation on SMEs?

I will fully respect the interinstitutional agreement on better law-making and to ensure, as set out in the agreement, that EU legislation better serves citizens and businesses. If appointed, my work and that of my services will continue to be based on transparency, and I will work in very close collaboration with the European Parliament.

In the mission letter that was addressed to me, President Ursula von der Leyen asked me to "strengthen the links between people and the institutions that serve them, [and] to narrow the gap between expectation and reality and to communicate about what Europe is doing". To meet

this requirement and adequately communicate and ensure the flow of information between the institutions and stakeholders, I commit to being fully transparent in the meetings with different stakeholders/lobbyists, respecting the ethical standards of the Commission. I also commit to meeting regularly with stakeholders and participating in policy dialogues with European and national actors in every EU Member State on issues included in my portfolio. I want to ensure that everyone, from universities to researchers and innovators, citizens, SMEs, institutions, and foundations, plays their part in strengthening the link between people and EU institutions, notably on the future of Europe.

Impact assessment is a crucial part of the Commission's Better Regulation agenda through which we can achieve our objectives most efficiently and effectively. Therefore, I strongly support the fact that any proposed legislative initiative with significant impact has to go through a rigorous impact assessment and is checked by the Regulatory Scrutiny Board. Impact assessments contribute positively and improve the quality of EU legislation, and this can be reached by continuously involving citizens and stakeholders. Consultation with key stakeholders should be carried out from the very outset of the drafting of legislative initiatives, for instance at the point of data collection which informs the impact assessment. For the latter, the role of modelling remains pivotal. The JRC runs some of the key models and has unique data for supporting, amongst other, regional policies, as well as some unique infrastructures in the EU. I will continue to invest in supporting this work. Also, JRC's work on foresight is certainly a tool that we can rely on to outline scenarios which take into account the complex - and sometimes unprecedented - challenges that Europe is facing. I look forward to working closely with Vice-president Šefčovič in this regard.

I will ensure that the European Parliament is regularly informed, notably before major events and at key stages of international negotiations, and on the evolution and implementation of programmes and initiatives falling under my remit. I will also work closely with the relevant Committees and be active and present during the preparation of resolutions inviting the Commission to propose legislation.

22. How will you and your services ensure enhanced cooperation with the ITRE Committee? What concrete steps will you take to ensure that the ITRE Committee is given in a timely and proactive manner the same information, as Council and Member States, with respect to all planned legislative or non-legislative initiatives? How will you facilitate scrutiny by the ITRE Committee of legislative and non-legislative procedures, providing at an early stage all necessary information concerning the preparation of legislative acts, delegated and implementing acts, and facilitate monitoring of their implementation? How do you intend to ensure that ITRE is kept appropriately informed and involved in relation to any international agreements in your policy area?

As a former Member of this House, I am fully aware of how critical it is to cooperate closely and fruitfully with the European Parliament and, in particular, the ITRE Committee. My unwavering commitment lies in ensuring that this Committee receives timely and comprehensive information on all significant developments concurrent with the information shared with the Council. I am entirely at your disposal to actively participate in regular meetings of your Committee and engage in constructive exchanges of views. Understanding the importance of transparency, I know that the Commission already provides you with up-to-date information on and detailed explanations of legislative, non-legislative, delegated and implementing acts, including their implementation. Building upon this foundation, I will relentlessly advocate for robust collaboration between the Commission and the European Parliament, fostering an environment of mutual trust and respect. By upholding these

principles, we can collectively ensure that our shared endeavours are undertaken with utmost transparency and efficiency.

The Common Understanding on Delegated Acts provides for both the transmission of the indicative planning of delegated acts and for timely information of the European Parliament and of the Council on the work of the expert groups helping the Commission in the preparation of delegated acts. Set up in 2017, the Interinstitutional Register of Delegated Acts provides information on the life cycle of delegated acts, from planning to publication, thereby allowing the European Parliament to be fully up-to-date on the Commission's work in this area. Similarly, the Comitology Register provides information on the meetings of comitology committees. Whenever a committee meets to discuss a draft implementing act, the European Parliament is actively informed. As previously stated, the Commission diligently utilises the register. I pledge to continue to maintain this seamless flow of information.

Regarding international cooperation, I am fully committed, in accordance with the Commission's legal obligations, to informing the European Parliament of negotiations of association agreements with the Horizon Europe Programme, as well as to renew science and technological cooperation agreements.

I intend to ensure the utmost transparency towards co-legislators in the Horizon Europe association agreements process. With category d) third countries, the Commission will continue to ensure that all essential political, strategic and budgetary elements of association agreements are presented to Parliament for its consent before concluding them. I also reiterate my willingness to engage with Parliament proactively at all appropriate levels and within the Treaties and inter-institutional legal framework.

Questions from the Committee on Culture and Education

1. Education policies

How do you envisage the future of the EU's education policies?

Education is at the core of the European way of life and the key to making Europe competitive in the global knowledge economy. Improving access to and quality of education is central to addressing many of Europe's biggest challenges, and therefore of strategic importance for our future.

In line with the limited competences of the Union in the area of education, I will do the utmost to encourage cooperation between Member States and support them while fully respecting their competences and responsibilities. I will undertake this task with the objective to help Member States to develop quality education, based on quality teaching and organisation of education systems as well as their cultural and linguistic diversity. I fully realise that this important endeavour requires constant and common efforts of all stakeholders and will maintain my focus on it during the time remaining in this mandate. It will be an important moment to take stock of the progress we have made so far and to address rapidly the remaining challenges ahead.

2. Which concrete steps and measures will you take to make the European Education Area (EEA) a reality by 2025, and how do you envisage to develop the EEA further beyond 2025?

The work towards making the European Education Area (EEA) a reality by 2025 and beyond is a key part of my mission letter from President von der Leyen. This is a joint endeavour and I will continue our cooperation towards this shared vision in line with the priority areas and the concrete actions that have been agreed upon to guide and support Member States' action.

The mid-term review process on the implementation of the EEA is currently underway. Throughout 2023, this process of listening, dialogue and joint reflection with Member States, EU institutions and stakeholders will help us take stock and ensure the momentum towards the achievement of the EEA by 2025. The outcomes of this process, which includes the mid-term review event co-organised with the European Parliament on 10 October 2023, will contribute to the evidence base for the Commission's final evaluation report on the EEA, to be adopted in 2025.

Looking at the evidence already available: the November 2022 Commission report on the EEA showed that it is on the right track, with positive upward convergence on several longstanding indicators such as early school leaving, participation in early childhood education and care and tertiary educational attainment. I take good note of this positive evolution, but I am particularly interested in the areas where efforts must be stepped up to improve quality and equity in education and training. The report clearly states that the share of pupils with a very low achievement in reading, mathematics, and science is unacceptably high, a challenge intensified by COVID-19. Young people with poor basic skills will likely encounter obstacles later in life, be it on the labour market or in their private lives. Data also show that Europe is not doing well in comparison to many of our global competitors. As education and skills are essential for Europe's global competitiveness, we cannot be complacent.

Therefore, if appointed, I will focus my work on the ongoing initiatives under the Commission's remaining term of office and facilitate progress in the areas that need our particular attention towards making the EEA a reality by 2025. My aim is to move forward with the implementation of the EEA by supporting reforms in the Member States. This ongoing work will facilitate mutual learning to enable high-quality, inclusive, and equitable education along the lines of the different initiatives taken and Council Recommendations adopted since the launch of the EEA. Member States have a shared interest in strong and well-performing

education systems across the entire Union. The forthcoming publication in early December of the latest results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment will show where we stand on the basic skills levels and well-being of 15-year olds. I will analyse the results and commit to working together with all relevant stakeholders to tackle any challenges arising from this survey based on the toolbox provided by the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success, which is one of the key initiatives launched under the EEA. It focuses on preventing early school leaving, boosting completion of upper secondary education and for the first time gives strong emphasis to well-being in school to achieve results. In this context, I will present in spring 2024 the result of the work of the expert group on well-being in education and supportive learning environments, that will give advice to policy makers and schools on how to address well-being and mental health through and within education.

One of the topics that I am particularly eager to discuss is the challenges faced by the teaching profession, namely its attractiveness and teacher shortages, and how EU initiatives such as the Erasmus+ teacher academies, the European Innovative Teaching Award or the forthcoming proposal for a learning mobility framework can help in addressing them. All of this will serve as a basis for the Commission to prepare the next phase until 2030 and to inform the Council's review of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the EEA and beyond. Without prejudice to the results, I can only underline my commitment to the crucial role to be played by teachers in the successful development of the EEA until 2025 and beyond.

Improving the quality and competitiveness of higher education and making it more inclusive and accessible to a wider range of learners remains at the heart of our action. I will work towards achieving the aim of expanding the European universities initiative to 60 European universities alliances involving more than 500 higher education institutions across Europe by mid-2024. This will give a critical mass to the initiative. I am glad that we are well on our way to this goal, having just reached the total of 50 alliances.

A report published in early 2023 shows significant fragmentation in the mutual recognition of qualifications. More work will be needed and I will focus efforts within the Commission, but also with Member States, to come closer to making the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications, a reality.

Furthermore, on higher education, I will continue to explore the options and necessary steps towards a possible joint European degree based on co-created European criteria, in close cooperation with Member States, higher education institutions, student organisations and stakeholders, as well as a possible legal status for alliances of higher education institutions. Moreover, I will oversee the further development of the European Student Card initiative to facilitate the mobility of the students and higher education institutions involved.

In parallel, the Commission is well advanced in preparing its proposal for a Council Recommendation for the revision of the existing learning mobility framework, for which consultations and a citizens' panel have been organised.

In any case, I am certain that all our joint efforts should continue beyond 2025 as the evolution of our economies based on the green and digital transitions requires constant change and adaptation of all systems. This starts with an education that reflects the growing and changing needs of businesses and responds to the new demands of the labour markets, as well as fulfilling its broader societal roles.

3. How do you want to address the digital skills gap and which instruments will you use to support projects and promote strategies to improve the level of digital skills in Europe?

Expanding digital education remains a priority, in a context where digital skills, as well as handling information in a critical and informed way have become essential in our day-to-day lives. The EU today faces a significant digital skills gap. Moreover, the gap between men and women's participation in the digital sector is growing, with only 24 out of every 1,000 female tertiary graduates having an ICT-related subject, of whom only six go on to work in the digital sector – and this, despite high female performance in digital skills, as measured by the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS). At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented shift to online and blended learning, together with the increased use of digital technologies.

The 2021-2027 Digital Education Action Plan already outlines an EU-wide strategic vision for achieving high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education. I am committed to accelerating the work on the action plan's two priorities, namely the development of digital skills and the use of technology in education. It is at the heart of the Commission proposals for Council Recommendations on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training and on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training digital skills, put forward in April 2023. The proposals aim to address the two main common challenges jointly identified by the Commission and Member States: the lack of a whole-of-government approach to digital education and training and the shortcomings of education and training systems in equipping people with the necessary digital skills. These two proposals on digital education and skills are also a contribution to the 2023 European Year of Skills. Improving the situation needs attention to digital education from early in the education system and throughout all levels of education and training. Particular attention must be paid to priority or hard-to-reach groups. Adoption of the recommendations by Council this autumn will allow us to work together with Member States within a clear framework, engaging closely with Commissioner Schmit, the relevant Vice-Presidents, and other Members of the Commission in a whole-of-Commission approach.

Supporting the digital transformation is one of the overarching priorities also of the current Erasmus+ programme, and I will continue to support actions aiming at enhancing digital skills and competence development at all levels of society. To give you only two concrete examples: firstly, the free, multi-lingual and web-based SELFIE tools, developed by the Joint Research Centre, which allow schools and teachers to assess their strengths and weaknesses in using digital technologies. And secondly, the European Digital Education Hub has been set up to provide a platform for the exchange of good practices in digital education and to connect national authorities, the private sector, experts, researchers, education and training providers and civil society.

4. What is your vision for EU education policies in the long-term, and how do you intend to foster European citizenship education across EU Member States?

I am convinced that for the future we must continue our joint efforts with Member States to improve the quality of, and access to education. Education is the basis without which we cannot do quality research, nor innovate. It is also fundamental to coping with and succeeding in the ongoing need to change and adapt in the context of the twin green and digital transitions. Education also must cater for the needs of the businesses and the new demands on people to be successful in the labour markets.

Beyond these more 'functional' contributions of education, I see an important role for citizenship education because citizens' participation is the very essence of democracy. The

European Parliament's report on the implementation of citizenship education actions offers a strong basis for the Commission's reflections on how to boost the combined efforts of the European institutions and Member States in this area. We also expect Council Conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship. Citizenship education will be an important topic at our event on the European Education Area midterm review on 10 October, and the European Education Summit in November. Supporting teachers and schools with dedicated tools should continue to make an important contribution. Some examples are the free teaching materials available on the Commission's learning corner and the wide range of information on education policy issues and professional development opportunities for the wider school education community, as well as networking tools, available on the European School Education Platform. The Erasmus+ funded Jean Monnet for schools' actions will continue to support teacher training and innovative teaching projects in Europe's schools in the field of EU studies.

5. What concrete actions do you envisage to address the lessons learned from the implementation of the current Erasmus+ programme so far? How will you tackle the pressure on Erasmus+ resulting from high inflation and increasing interest rates for NextGenerationEU?

'Erasmus' is for me, undoubtedly one of the most successful European brands.

I will commit fully to continuing the strategic implementation and further promoting Erasmus+, our flagship EU programme in the areas of education, training, and youth, and sport. Over 13 million people have participated in Erasmus+ so far, making it an emblem of EU action, in education, but also more generally. We are in the middle of a review process: the Commission is preparing the launch of the public consultation to feed into the evaluation simultaneously for the previous Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) and for the current Erasmus+ at the middle of its programming period (2021-2027). I look forward to the feedback.

All this will inform future decisions on Erasmus+, particularly on its post-2027 edition. Erasmus+ prioritises inclusion, digital transformation, sustainability, and youth participation. I am particularly attached to the priority on inclusion and diversity. It involves actively reaching out to potential participants who, because of their background, may be facing barriers to participation. To make the programme even more accessible to those who need it most, I will build on the current inclusion and diversity strategy. Erasmus+ has already shown that, thanks to its in-built flexibility, it was able to address consecutively the dramatic consequences of COVID-19 and of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

I am fully aware of the current challenges for programme participants due to the rising costs of living and the pressure on the EU budget overall, although the current programme budget almost doubled compared to its predecessor. As a first response, funding was swiftly adapted for certain cost categories of individual support for mobility in Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. The need for further support is being analysed. I intend to use the results of the analysis to argue for maintaining a high level of inclusiveness and accessibility of our programmes.

I also want to be frank and pragmatic: there is no policy-making without appropriate financial resources. If appointed, I will make the most of my budgetary expertise to advocate for this programme whose very high EU value added is evident. I will do everything in my power to ensure that our flagship mobility programme continues to do what it has been doing for 36 years – connect people across borders, open horizons, and provide opportunities for all to learn and develop, under these difficult financial circumstances.

6. How do you intend to address growing infringements on academic freedom globally, including certain EU Member States?

Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research are safeguarded by article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. It is a basic prerequisite for the creation of the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). However, academic freedom and the autonomy of universities and research institutions, are not easy to assess and the situation globally and across Europe is varied. Where existing regulations and organisational set-ups violate the Charter of Fundamental Rights or clearly create conflicts of interest, access to EU funding needs to be reviewed. If appointed, I will not hesitate to examine whether the Commission should, in full respect of applicable procedures as provided for in the applicable legal instruments, recommend the suspension of EU funding in cases where beneficiaries do not respect rules concerning EU values set out in the Article 2 of the Treaty and in particular the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Although that decision is not based directly on infringement of academic freedom but rather on considerations of risks created to the EU budget, it is perhaps good that in this context I mention the Council Implementing Decision of 15 December 2022 on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in one Member State. I understand that the Commission is in constant contact with the relevant national authorities to assess implementation of the requested remedial measures under the conditionality mechanism. The Commission has given and will continue to give feedback to the national authorities concerned, in a spirit of sincere cooperation and with a view to finding solutions.

Promoting and protecting academic freedom, freedom of scientific research and European democratic values is a key objective of the European strategy for universities. I see many instruments in place to promote and defend academic freedom and I will pay close attention that they fulfil their purpose. I welcome the ongoing work on guiding principles to protect fundamental academic values, based on the Rome Communiqué of 2020 and the work to define and monitor these values, as a follow-up to the April 2022 Council Recommendation on building bridges for transnational cooperation.

I will also continue supporting the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) aiming at fostering academic freedom through the Inspireurope (2019-2022) and Inspireurope+ (2022-2025) projects. Both projects gather highly experienced organisations engaged in promoting academic freedom, to spread good practices and defend academic freedom across Member States and associated countries. With the help of the Inspireurope consortium, the Commission has developed the MSCA Guidelines on the inclusion of researchers at risk. The Parliament-supported Preparatory Action on a European fellowship scheme for researchers at risk is another proof of commitment to defending academic freedom. This pilot initiative will develop a structure for a European fellowship scheme for researchers at risk. It will also develop procedures to assess the levels and types of risks, the quality of the proposals and relevant selection criteria, and will allow for awarding around 30 fellowships for researchers at risk to continue their work in a safe environment, academic or non-academic.

Finally, the European Research Area also has a dedicated action on academic freedom that focuses specifically on the freedom of scientific research and on tackling research and innovation (R&I) foreign interference.

7. Culture policies

How do you envisage the future of the EU's culture policies and cultural diplomacy?

European culture is in the heart of our identity and diversity as Europeans and it is shaping our image and action at global level.

Similarly, within the limits of the competence conferred upon the Union by the Treaties in the area of culture, I am committed to contributing to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, supporting their national and regional diversity while, at the same time, bringing their common cultural heritage to the fore. If appointed, I will do my utmost to encourage cooperation and support the Member States in their efforts to improve the knowledge and dissemination of our cultural history, conserve our cultural heritage and promote cultural exchange, also with third countries and organisations.

I consider that cultural diplomacy has an increasingly important role to play in the exchange with partners and interlocutors across the globe and in the projection of Europe's formidable "soft power". I regard promoting cultural cooperation and policy dialogue with countries outside the EU through regional groups, international organisations and relations with individual countries as a vital element in the Union's international relations. I will support efforts to unlock the potential of culture and creativity for sustainable social and economic development, promote peace and fight radicalisation through intercultural dialogue, and strengthen cooperation on cultural heritage as part of the EU's international cultural cooperation.

With 4% of the EU GDP, culture is not only an important contributor to Europe's economy, but also an integral part of our European way of life, citizens' well-being, and European attractiveness as a whole. The cultural and creative sectors were severely hit by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 32% of their workforce is self-employed. The lockdown and subsequent crisis have aggravated their vulnerability and put a spotlight on the precarious working conditions of artists and cultural professionals.

8. How will you ensure the implementation of the current Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 in a joined-up and coherent EU policy and funding approach, and with which priorities? What is your vision for Creative Europe? How will you ensure greater international visibility for Europe's culture?

The EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, which was recently adopted by the Council, addresses these challenges and sets out the priorities, which shape EU cooperation in this field. I fully support the four priority areas that comprise actions to support artists and cultural professionals, enhance cultural participation and the role of culture in society, ensure the sustainability of culture, and strengthen the cultural dimension of EU external relations. The implementation started swiftly in early 2023, and, if appointed, I will encourage the further implementation of the 21 actions defined by the Work Plan.

Joined-up policy and funding approach for culture have become a substantial priority, as culture cuts across many policy fields, from education to research, from social cohesion to external relations. Significant EU funding is available for culture. The 2021-2027 Creative Europe programme, with a budget of EUR 2.44 billion, compared to the EUR 1.47 billion budget of the previous programme (2014-2020), supports cultural networks, cooperation platforms and projects, the Culture Moves Europe mobility scheme, the European Capitals of Culture, cultural prizes and the European Heritage Label. In addition, other major EU funds reach the cultural and creative sectors, including Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, Invest-EU, as well as provisions for culture-related activities under the cohesion policy Funds. Through

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, we strengthen young people's awareness of cultural heritage and help them take ownership of it. In the context of the COVID-19 recovery, the cultural and creative sectors and industries are being substantially supported by Member States' National Recovery and Resilience Plans under the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility. In this context, I will continue to work closely as part of the College of Commissioners, with Member States and representatives of the EU's regions to promote investment in culture as part of EU and Member States' policy making.

My vision for the Creative Europe programme is to continue using it as a tool for the reinforcement of the cultural and creative sectors at European level, enabling these sectors to make the most of the globalised cultural playing field. By doing so, the unique richness of European culture will keep on being asserted both within Europe and outside. I am very attached to the double rationale for action of the programme, which puts on an equal footing cultural diversity and the competitiveness of the sectors.

With the funding available through Creative Europe I will continue to promote and work towards the implementation of the Commission's flagship initiatives contributing to the joint goals of the 2018 New European Agenda for Culture, such as the European Capitals of Culture, Music Moves Europe or the EU Prize for Literature. I will also take forward and further develop two new key initiatives, namely Culture Moves Europe, a new action for individual mobility of artists and cultural professionals, and the recently established Day of European Authors. The first edition of the Day of European Authors on 27 March 2023 marked a milestone in promoting the power of reading and European talents in literature, with more than 1,000 events organised across Europe. Similarly, the first call of Culture Moves Europe enjoyed broad success, showing a strong interest in the scheme. The number of applications submitted within the first eight months of existence of the scheme exceeded four times the number of available grants, which clearly demonstrates its relevance for the sector.

Culture is also a powerful leverage for the EU's international relations, as acknowledged in the third objective of the New European Agenda for Culture. Culture plays a vital role in promoting peace, preventing conflicts, and supporting prosperity globally. It connects people, transcends borders, and fosters understanding. Based on experience gained from EU cooperation on culture over the last decade, my work will be driven by strong cooperation with Member States, international partners and stakeholders, including civil society organisations. I will build upon successful examples, such as the EU's 'European Spaces of Culture' initiative, initiated by the European Parliament, which works on the environment, peace-building and human rights through 25 projects in 35 countries. Its extension is funded under Creative Europe, which is open to participation, subject to certain conditions, of countries of the European Economic Area, candidate and potential candidate countries, as well as European Neighbourhood Policy countries and other third countries, helping to further promote cultural co-operation across borders.

9. How do you intend to foster the protection of cultural heritage, in particular in conflict zones, and to ensure the success of the EU's Action Plan against trafficking in cultural goods? How do you envisage embedding culture at the heart of European policy-making?

I am committed to protecting cultural heritage in all its forms. If appointed, I will continue the successful actions in this field, including the European Heritage Label, the European Heritage Awards, and the European Heritage Days. I intend to take forward the work of the Commission's expert group on cultural heritage, which is a unique multi-stakeholder cooperation and policy dialogue launched during the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018. This year, two sub-groups are being added: one on "Safeguarding Cultural Heritage in Ukraine" and a second on "Dialogue with the Art Market". I fully acknowledge that the cultural

heritage of Ukraine is particularly under threat in the context of Russia's war of aggression against that country I am particularly glad that the work of this first sub-group has already begun in mid-June, involving representative organisations and renowned experts from across Europe, including of course Ukraine.

A sound legislative framework, international cooperation (including with partners like UNESCO and Interpol), a solid base of evidence and well-targeted projects are needed to efficiently protect cultural heritage against illicit trafficking. The EU contributes to this fight with a tailor-made response at EU level, as laid down in the EU Security Union Strategy 2020-2025 and the EU Strategy to Tackle Organised Crime 2021-2025. In December 2022, the Commission presented the EU action plan against trafficking in cultural goods. I commit to working on the plan together with the Commissioner for Home Affairs.

While the competences regarding culture at EU level limit the scope for a systematic mainstreaming of culture throughout all EU policy making, I intend to work closely with the other members of the College of Commissioners to this end. I will also continue to work closely with Member States and representatives of the EU's regions to ensure that policy-making and investment in culture maintains its ambition at all levels.

If I earn your trust, I will advance the implementation of the dedicated cluster for Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society under Horizon Europe. I will support the work of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology's (EIT) Culture & Creativity Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC). I also see that Member States place significant emphasis on culture in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans, which outline measures providing support in excess of EUR 10 billion – approximately 2% of the total expenditure of the 27 national plans. Finally, I hope that the Commission's report on culture and democracy published in June 2023 will encourage policy-makers at all levels to support our cultural sector in view of deepening democracy and promoting an inclusive and engaged society.

10. Do you commit to support an EU framework to improve the professional and social situation of artists and other CCS professionals, covering also their access to social security and the portability of entitlements? Which further EU measures do you deem necessary to support and promote the EU's cultural and creative sectors?

In early summer 2023, the Commission published the recommendations of an Open Method of Coordination (OMC) group, gathering experts from Member States, who explored how to improve the working conditions of artists and cultural and creative professionals. The current EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 foresees further activities on this topic, such as thematic workshops, as well as an online platform on artists' and creative professionals' working conditions, which will be based on data gathered by the OMC group. These are soft measures, but they hold the power to pave the way for effective cooperation on future measures. I am convinced that there can be no real artistic freedom without fair working conditions. Therefore, I look forward to the final version of the Parliament's own-initiative report. If appointed, I will - while remaining realistic within the legal framework in which we are operating - be happy to be the defender of the cultural and creative professionals in the College of Commissioners and address the topic with the Commissioners primarily concerned by your report.

To unlock Europe's great potential, we need to bring creativity to the fore, as one of the key competences for a competitive and sustainable Europe. I believe that a genuine European strategy for the cultural and creative sectors and industries needs to be based on an understanding of existing good practices and future challenges. It is crucial to look across sectors, to help them work as one ecosystem for better impact, and thus make a stronger contribution to societal challenges, such as sustainability. The Commission is already well on

its way in this direction, with the set-up of a new Knowledge and Innovation Community of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology dedicated to cultural and creative industries, EIT Culture & Creativity. I will dedicate my efforts to making it fully functional in early 2024. The Commission's approach seeks to test new ideas and promote contacts between the industries, connect entrepreneurs with each other, and with the best research, and solve what I see as the major challenge in these sectors – i.e. their fragmentation. The round tables that took place earlier this year identified key challenges for the ecosystem, namely enhancing sustainability; cross-sectoral innovation and support; centre-periphery, regional, local dimensions; new technologies, artificial intelligence, platforms, fair remuneration, digital skills; and outreach and audience development. I will build upon these conclusions with a view to strengthen the ecosystem and diminish its fragmentation.

11. Youth and sports policies

How do you envisage the future of the EU's youth and sports policies?

The priorities for youth and sport are, indeed, intertwined, as the two sectors possess a horizontal and multi-sectoral reach. I admire their major cohesive power for our societies.

Through the 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy, the Commission aims to 'engage, connect and empower young people' seeking to involve young people in democratic life, and ensure that all of them have the necessary resources to take part in society. Meanwhile, sport builds community cohesion, enhances social inclusion and promotes a greater sense of European identity. Through our efforts to promote a European dimension to sport, we aim to reach out to marginalised members of our societies, bringing them into inclusive communities, while promoting a healthy lifestyle for all. In this sense, sport policies make a decisive contribution to the achievements of the objectives of the youth strategy. My main priorities for youth policy are to make sure that more young people benefit from EU policies and programmes, ensure that they have their say in the policy areas that affect them, and ultimately that this involvement brings a result: to empower European youth to be better prepared for the future challenges in their lives.

12. What measures do you foresee to ensure a strong and meaningful legacy of the European Year of Youth 2022 as well as the European Year of Skills 2023, and how do you see your cooperation with Commissioner Schmit to that aim? How will you address specific demands of young people raised during the EYY 2022 and the Conference on the Future of Europe? Do you commit to establish a mandatory and meaningful "Youth test" for future EU legislative proposals? How will you ensure that the Youth Strategy, to be evaluated in 2023, makes a tangible difference to young people?

The European Year of Youth 2022 (EYY) represented a unique opportunity to place young people at the top of the political agenda. The EYY came at a critical time, as young people were struggling to rebound from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its consequences exacerbated the challenges already faced by young people, youth workers and civil society organisations across Europe.

The EYY created mobilisation and momentum for doing more for young people, for creating opportunities, spaces, and tools for them to engage, to speak up and "voice their vision", as they requested themselves. The EU should build on the very large number of events which showed a European dimension as a natural part of youth initiatives.

Platforms and tools launched during the EYY, such as Voice Your Vision platform and Youth Talks, allowed young people to express their views on the future and voice their concerns. High-level policy dialogues were held with all members of the College to give young people

space to speak up and share their insights at the highest level across all policy areas. Indeed, the EYY brought a youth perspective to all policy areas. The EYY mobilised all Commission services in favour of youth and the European Youth Portal showed the multiple ways in which young Europeans actively engaged with the EU.

As a concrete element of legacy of the EYY, the national coordinators and youth stakeholder group will become a permanent platform. I acknowledge the role played by the Parliament in this. I am convinced that together the coordinators and the group can contribute to improving the consultation on legislative proposals. In addition, the EU Youth Dialogue will continue to serve as a forum for continuous consultations and interactions for young people and youth organisations with policymakers on topics relevant to them.

To ensure a meaningful legacy, the objectives of the EYY must be seen in the context of the 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy, which sets out a vision for our younger generations and a policy framework supported by Erasmus+, DiscoverEU, the European Solidarity Corps and other EU programmes. It also can act as guide to Member States' national youth policies.

Taking all of this into account, it is important to draw lessons from the European Year of Youth to ensure an effective legacy. If appointed, I will make sure that these lessons are reflected in the report, foreseen in Article 7 of the EYY decision, to be submitted before the end of 2023. This will also be the moment when the Commission will finalise its interim evaluation of the 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy and will start work on the implementation report covering 2022-2024. All this paves the way to further expand the EYY's legacy in the coming years. The Report on the EYY, together with the Commission's interim evaluation of the 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy, can lead to a possible mid-term review of the EU Youth Strategy by the Council in 2024 and better cooperation in the field of youth in the future.

I will work together with the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, to ensure that the EYY legacy combines well with the ongoing actions undertaken as part of the European Year of Skills. The Decision on the Year of Skills was adopted on 10 May 2023 and will involve numerous activities until the 8 May 2024. Many of them have already been implemented. For instance, the EuroSkills competition taking place in September and a thematic seminar on apprenticeship mobility in November.

To respond to the wishes expressed by young people to make mobility a realistic possibility for all, I plan to table a proposal for a European learning mobility framework, which will be part of a wider talent package to be adopted in the autumn of this year.

The EYY demonstrated clearly that the Commission promotes the active involvement of young people at all levels of policymaking, from conception to implementation and evaluation.

Youth is also part of targeted consultations. Young people's input is reflected in the impact assessments and evaluations and in the annex on consultation activities, the synopsis report. Impact assessments also analyse if there are expected adverse effects on youth and, where needed, define the necessary mitigating measures. Some impact assessments and evaluations have already focused primarily on youth, such as the youth employment initiative, Europass, child guarantee, individual learning accounts, etc. As a follow-up to the 2022 European Year of Youth, the national coordinators and youth stakeholder group, established in the framework of the EYY and in which the European Parliament also takes an active role, will become a permanent platform, which can play a key role in the consultation processes.

I personally welcome the idea of a "youth test" and acknowledge the European Parliament's interest in that regard. This was a clear request of the representative organisation during the European Year of Youth. If appointed, I commit to steering our common work on exploring

what this could include in practice and setting the realistic expectations about potential results that it could deliver.

In complement, following the commitments made in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, Citizens' Panels have become a permanent part of public participation and young people will continue to play a major role in them. Where appropriate, a 'citizen report' will inform the impact assessment process, summarising the outcome of this citizen deliberation.

With these three elements – the Better Regulation framework, strong participation of youth organisations and the Citizens' Panels – I believe that the Commission will come a long way to ensure a youth perspective in the EU's decision-making.

13. How do you envisage to strengthen and further support the European Solidarity Corps?

Solidarity is a fundamental pillar of the European integration project, providing a clear compass to guide EU citizens, and especially younger ones. The importance of solidarity among individuals and communities, within or across borders, became even more apparent in 2022 following the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. This has drastically increased the importance and visibility of volunteering. The European Solidarity Corps is the flagship programme for volunteering. Since 2016, more than 2 million applications have been received and almost 77,000 opportunities financed and currently there is high over-subscription to the European Solidarity Corps actions. For the 2023 budget we have a co-delegation from the Horizon Europe missions budget to the European Solidarity Corps (of more than EUR 16.5 million). My intention is to use this delegation to allow young people to volunteer in concrete activities on the ground and support the aims of Horizon Europe missions. This is a good example of synergies between programmes that would be under my remit, offering a boost both for the missions and for young people. If appointed, I would look forward to further exploring these synergies.

In 2022, the reach of the European Solidarity Corps was extended, opening it up to the world, by offering new cross-border volunteering activities to individuals between 18 and 35 years old in support of humanitarian aid operations in third countries.

The EU's continued focus on volunteers and volunteering led to the revision of the 2008 Council Recommendation on cross-border volunteering through the new Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU, adopted in April 2022. This was an important deliverable of the European Year of Youth. The Recommendation is another building block to facilitate transnational youth volunteering in the coming years under the European Solidarity Corps or other schemes at national level, in line with the EU Youth Strategy.

14. How do you see the role of the EU in shaping the future of sports policies and which are the particular areas in the field of sports where EU measures should be taken?

Regarding sport, my aim is to support and strengthen its European dimension. I acknowledge that sport is an important part of the lives of millions of Europeans, contributing to boost health - including mental health -, cohesion of society, inclusion of communities, on top of athletic and leisure purposes. It also leads to jobs, growth, and innovation.

In line with article 165 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the EU has a supporting competence in sport. Through our efforts to promote a European dimension to sport in cooperation with the sport movement, we promote the design of sport inspired by European values. Through Erasmus+ Sport Actions and annual events, we aim to promote fair play, sport participation and a healthy lifestyle for all.

Cross-sectoral cooperation is essential, as sport and physical activity touches upon multiple facets linked to various policy areas, such as education, health and well-being, youth, inclusion, equality, employment, innovation, sustainability and the economy.

The 2021-2024 EU Work Plan for Sport sets out key topics for sport actions, partnerships and initiatives. If appointed as Commissioner, I will fully play my role in the dedicated dialogue between the Commission and Member States. I commit to address integrity and values in sport, the socio-economic and environmental dimensions of sport, equal participation in sport, as well as health-enhancing physical activity. I will also support the renewal of the dialogue to be discussed next year.

I am convinced that sport is a strong vehicle to promote values and human rights in our societies. In this vein, I will defend and promote the European Sport Model, including the autonomy of sport governing bodies, the openness of competitions, the value of merit, solidarity and interdependence between elite and grassroots sport, and the so-called 'pyramidal structure' of sport. I am prepared to work in close cooperation with the Parliament and all stakeholders concerned, in full respect of the autonomy of sport organisations.

If I am appointed as Commissioner, I will use the leverage of sport to enhance the health of all European citizens, regardless of their age or level of fitness, and also promote social inclusion and gender equality. My ambition is to give visibility to the positive impact of sport on many other policies, in the context the upcoming global sporting events to be organised in Europe, such as the Rugby World Cup, the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship, and the next summer and winter Olympic Games. I will make sure that the Commission's actions combine high-level events with proven grassroots initiatives, such as the European Week of Sport, the EU Sport Forum and the BeActive awards.