

QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE**Ekaterina ZAHARIEVA****Startups, Research and Innovation****1. General competence, European commitment and personal independence**

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? How will you contribute to implementing the political guidelines of the Commission? How will you implement gender mainstreaming and integrate a gender perspective into all policy areas of your portfolio? How will you implement youth mainstreaming?

What guarantees of independence are you able to give 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?

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?

I am very honoured to be a candidate for the position of Member of the European Commission, led by President von der Leyen. In the start of my professional path, I have been working relentlessly towards the accession of my country Bulgaria to the European Union. When we became part of the Union, I always tried to contribute to a strong and united European family which holds the place it deserves in the world. Having lived part of my childhood under a totalitarian regime, I know very well the price of the values underpinning our European democracy and I will always defend them.

Following the conclusion of my law degree, I have worked 2 years as a lawyer before joining the Bulgarian administration where I have worked almost seven years as Legal Counsel and Director in the Ministry of Environment and Water. I have then joined politics for the following 15 years, first as a Deputy Minister for Regional Development and then as Head of Cabinet and Secretary-General of the President of the Republic. As Deputy Minister for Regional Development I also steered regional and cohesion policy.

Subsequently I became Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Policy and Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, Minister of Justice and finally Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria. In 2018, Bulgaria held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union and as a Foreign Minister, I chaired the General Affairs Council and I participated to meetings with the European Parliament. This gave me the unique experience in seeing important dossiers from a wider European perspective and promoting the European general interest.

As Secretary General and Minister, I have had the political and management responsibility over large administrative structures. This is an important asset as, if confirmed, I will have political oversight for two large Directorates-General (DG Research and Innovation and the Joint Research Center).

My recent position as Member of the Bulgarian Parliament gives me also a deep understanding of parliamentary work. It will help me in co-operating closely with the European Parliament.

I am confident that this broad background – of administrative and political experience at the highest level – will equip me very well in dealing with my upcoming tasks as European Commissioner.

How will you contribute to implementing the political guidelines of the Commission?

Sustainable prosperity and competitiveness are at the center of President von der Leyen's political guidelines, with the ambition to put research and innovation at the heart of Europe's economy. The recent report of Mario Draghi on EU competitiveness offers both a very valuable analysis of the current shortcomings of the EU's research and innovation policy and an agenda of reform.

There is a strong momentum for the European research and innovation policy. My mission letter further details various elements of reform and I intend to fully implement all of them. One top priority will be the development of the next Framework Program for Research and Innovation. I will work to increase our research spending, in line with the Political Guidelines. I will also aim for simplification, and focus the framework program more where it matters and has the highest European added value, taking into account the recommendations of the Draghi report. I am ready to play a critical role in this ambition, driving the EU's scientific and technological progress, from basic research to applied innovation. Research and innovation must become an ever-greater part of our competitive edge in today's global economy.

How will you implement gender mainstreaming and integrate a gender perspective into all policy areas of your portfolio?

Mainstreaming gender equality and integrating a gender perspective on R&I would be a core priority of my mandate. This is not only a moral imperative, but necessary to harness all talent. I personally have a proven track record as Minister in promoting women in high positions in the ministries I have been in charge of.

I will be able to build on the progress achieved so far particularly through the European Research Area and the implementation of Gender Equality Plans under Horizon Europe. However, there is still a wide gender gap in research, innovation and in particular start-ups. I will therefore contribute to the post-2025 Gender Equality Strategy, and specifically to efforts to combat gender-based violence. We will work to further integrate the gender dimensions in funded projects and ensure effective monitoring to track progress, ensuring no backsliding. I would also support research on gender equality, including its intersection with other social categories. Finally, I would also make sure that a gender dimension is included in the EU Start-up and Scale-up Strategy, deploying all available instruments to support women innovators.

I will also ensure gender balance in my team.

How will you implement youth mainstreaming?

Supporting youth is a key focus of R&I policy and will be an important priority for my mandate, if confirmed. I will organise annual Youth Policy Dialogues starting within the first 100 Days, in order to listen to the needs of young citizens and in particular young researchers.

In the context of the European Research Area (ERA), I commit to strengthening the youth component to improve mobility, career development, and employment conditions for researchers, in particular those in their early careers. The future ERA Act and the ERA Talent Platform will be particularly relevant in this context. In parallel, I also plan to continue supporting young researchers across Europe through various programs. Examples include the Marie Skłodowska Curie actions for doctoral education and postdoctoral training, the EU Contest for Young Scientists (EUCYS), and the EU TalentOn, calling scientists aged 21 to 35 to contribute innovative ideas on critical issues for the Union.

What guarantees of independence are you able to give 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?

If confirmed as Commissioner, I commit to continue complying without fail with the Treaty obligations on independence, transparency, impartiality, and availability, as defined in Article 17(3) of the Treaty on European Union and in Article 245 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

I will fully respect the letter and spirit of the Treaty, in particular the obligation to act in the European interest and without taking any instructions from any government or other institution, body, office or entity. I will honor the Code of Conduct of Members of the European Commission and its provisions on conflicts of interest. My

Declaration of Interests is complete and accessible to the public and, as during the past mandate, I will update it without delay should any change be required.

2. Management of the portfolio and cooperation with the European Parliament

Can you commit to duly informing Parliament about your actions and those of your departments? In what respect do you consider yourself accountable to Parliament?

What specific commitments are you prepared to make in terms of your engagement with and presence in Parliament, both in committee and in plenary, transparency, 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 timely information and documents on an equal footing with the Council?

Due to my experience as a Member of the Bulgarian Parliament and as a Minister I see the close co-operation between the European Parliament and the European Commission as crucial. During my four successive ministerial terms in Bulgaria, I always kept the national Parliament closely informed about my initiatives and considered its Members essential partners to design policies. I fully commit to duly inform the European Parliament regularly about my actions and those of my departments.

I will work in line with the guiding principles that allow an effective interinstitutional cooperation and an efficient and legitimate EU decision-making system. These include openness, mutual trust, efficiency, and regular exchange of information. I fully stand by the President-elect's Political Guidelines and the Mission Letters, which fully reflect these principles, and the intention to reinforce the special partnership between the European Parliament and the Commission. I will do my utmost to uphold these principles, and in doing so I will fully respect the provisions of the 2016 Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-Making and the Framework Agreement.

I commit to take part in all relevant plenary debates, committee meetings and trilogue discussions. I will make sure that the relevant Committees of the European Parliament are involved in any major developments under my responsibility, and ensure equal treatment of the Parliament and the Council as co-legislators. Specifically, I will ensure full transparency in the regular flow of information with the Chair of relevant parliamentary committees, directly communicate with committee members, and ensure that I am available for bilateral meetings. I will also ensure that the questions from Members of the European Parliament to the Commission that come under my responsibility are responded to swiftly and accurately. I will appear before the European Parliament's plenary and Committees whenever called to answer a question or provide any particular response.

As part of the next College's commitment to deliver together with the European Parliament on the Political Guidelines, I will work hand in hand with Parliament at every stage in debating resolutions under Article 225 TFEU, in full respect of proportionality, subsidiarity and better law-making principles.

Questions from the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy

3. What is your vision for your portfolio over and above your mission letter and what would you like your legacy to be? What legislative proposals and other initiatives will you suggest to the College of Commissioners for adoption in the next five years and in particular in the first 100 days? How will you ensure that these proposals, as well as the implementation of existing legislation, would strengthen European competitiveness? Do you intend to base those legislative proposals on dedicated impact assessments?

Putting Research and Innovation at the heart of Europe's economy is a pillar of the President-elect's Political Guidelines. Both the Draghi and Letta reports have given strong impetus to significantly strengthening research, innovation and start-up/scale up financing conditions at EU level. Building on this momentum, my vision for the R&I portfolio consists in reinforcing both the Research and Innovation dimensions. Research spending will be one of the key areas of the next Multiannual Financial Framework and the next Framework programme, to ensure we accelerate innovation and enhance our competitiveness.

If confirmed, I plan to help construct a true European Research and Innovation Union with a number of important initiatives in the next five years.

On fundamental and applied research, I will work to expand the European Research Council and the European Innovation Council in the next budgetary period, to focus more on strategic priorities, on groundbreaking fundamental research and disruptive innovation, and on scientific excellence. A new European Research Area Act

will be at the core of my efforts to foster free movement of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology. It will address the fragmentation of research and make the European Research Area more attractive, with more aligned Research and Innovation priorities. It will support the target of investing 3% GDP in research and development, will promote reforms of national Research and Innovation systems, enhance co-ordination of Member States and EU level. It will also address skills development and research careers to attract and retain talent, as well as the freedom of scientific research. Finally, a European Strategy on Research Infrastructures will address the accessibility, resilience, and security of our infrastructures, to allow researchers to test and develop their ideas.

On innovation, I will propose an EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy and a European Innovation Act in order to provide the right environment for our start-ups to grow. They will address legal barriers and administrative burden thanks to an EU-wide legal status for start-ups and innovative companies ('28th regime'). I plan to expand the European Innovation Council to further boost support for start-ups and scale-ups in strategic fields, for example quantum, artificial intelligence, biotech, advanced materials and space. This will also benefit from private co-investment. The European Innovation Council Fund already leverages substantial amounts of private venture capital investment. However, in line with the conclusions of the Draghi report, more needs to be done to stimulate financing of innovation with high growth potential and private investment in Research and Innovation. The Trusted Investor Network will play a key role in developing our ecosystem of venture capital investors and in mobilising private investors to co-invest and help our best and brightest companies to scale up. A Start-up Taskforce will be created within the Commission in the first months of my mandate to coordinate efforts in this domain. I will organise a new European Start up and scale up forum in the first half of 2025 to involve external stakeholders and start up founders.

I will advance work aligning research, industrial innovation, and investment to meet technological demands and reduce strategic dependencies. I will put forward a Strategy to increase and to guide the AI uptake in science. To further support a faster green and digital transition, I will also engage with the relevant players to develop a Strategy for European Life Sciences, which will cover also biotechnology. I will also propose targeted actions for critical sectors and deliver an Advanced Materials Act, supporting manufacturing and deployment of advanced materials in Europe. I will also propose an action plan to promote women in the research, innovation and start-ups/scale-ups system.

To ensure that these initiatives strengthen the EU's competitiveness, I will build on the analysis of the Draghi report. I will aim to address the investment gap highlighted therein, which is of over 120 billion euros annually. I will champion the 3% of GDP in research and development target, by mobilising private capital, including through European partnerships. I will work on better monitoring, guidance, and co-ordination methods, to secure strong national Research and Innovation budgets and reforms, including via the European Semester. This could be reinforced through the European Research Area Act. Finally, I will focus on commercialisation and deployment, promoting knowledge valorisation and industry-academia collaboration.

In implementing my work, I will adopt an inclusive and evidence-based policymaking approach. Proposals I will promote will follow the applicable better regulation standards. In addition, I will organise a Youth Policy Dialogue in the first 100 days of the mandate.

4. What do you envisage for the European Research Area, the European Research Council, the European Innovation Council (EIC), the European Institute of Innovation and Technology and the European Artificial Intelligence Research Council and how would they relate to the European Innovation Act?

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I intend to address the fragmentation of the European Research Area. Despite progress achieved in the past four years, much more needs to be done in order to create a true European Research and Innovation Union. If confirmed, I will address the too low investments in research and development, well below the 3% GDP investment target, and the insufficient co-ordination of Member States' Research and Innovation systems. I plan to do it via the European Research Area Act, that will propose minimum standards to improve research careers and working conditions. It will ensure the mobility of talents within Europe with equal opportunities for men and women and will foster open science practices. In line with the European Parliament's resolution of January 2024, freedom of scientific research will be a core element of the ERA Act.

The European Innovation Act, complementary to the European Research Area Act, will support the simplification of our regulatory framework, accelerate the deployment of innovation, facilitate access to venture capital and support start-ups and scale-ups testing such as with "sandboxes". It will support all that are ready to become entrepreneurs and grow in Europe, whatever their sectors of operations or the underpinning technologies, with also

a specific attention to women. Together with the development of a Savings and Investments Union that encompasses the Capital Markets Union as well as the Banking Union, this Act would be a ground-breaking move for Europe, helping our innovations reach the market at scale, bringing value both to the economy and to society. It will also promote the use of innovative tools like innovation procurement. It will be developed in synergy with a 28th regime of an EU-wide legal status for innovative companies.

If confirmed, I plan to expand the European Research Council and the European Innovation Council, which have proven their added value. Thanks to its autonomy, that I commit to safeguard, the European Research Council fosters excellence-based basic and frontier research to addresses humanity's most pressing challenges. In parallel to boosting our scientific base, disruptive innovation needs to be strengthened and expanded. The European Innovation Council Fund is already the most active deep-tech start-up investor in Europe, leveraging over four euro for each euro invested. However, more needs to be done: If confirmed, I will initiate an even stronger focus on high-risk investments from early-stage research to demonstration and market deployment, with a focus on key strategic technologies for the EU's competitiveness. Better financing and support of scale-up investments will be a particular focus of a reformed European Innovation Council. I will look into the possibilities of a more intensive and strategic co-operation with the European Investment Bank and ensure that we maximise the synergies of our respective instruments.

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology, together with its Knowledge and Innovation Communities, bringing together universities, research institutions, and industry partners is one of the innovation instruments of Horizon Europe. Based on the knowledge triangle, it factors education and training into the innovation pipeline ensuring that students with an entrepreneurial mindset, researchers and innovators reach the labour market and that the present workforce is upskilled and reskilled according to the needs of industry in the priority sectors. It has also played a key role in the implementation of several of the skills academies, including those established by the Net-Zero Act.

If confirmed, I will explore ways to further streamline its mission, improve synergies with the other innovation instruments, reinforce transparency and expand its focus on nurturing emerging talents and building entrepreneurial skills. Its work on skills development can lead to synergies with initiatives such as the sectoral European degree, boosting the development and recognition of trans-national programmes, also for the benefit of researchers working in the higher education. To achieve these objectives, I will work closely with the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness to develop a joined-up approach between different workstreams under the strategic framework of Union of Skills.

According to the Draghi report, promoting Artificial Intelligence (AI) on all levels will be a key element in the EU's competitiveness agenda in the years to come and I am committed to strongly contribute to this work. With respect to the new European AI Research Council, as mentioned in my Mission letter, I will work in close cooperation with the Executive Vice President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy and other Commissioners. This will be a key implementing element of our Strategy to guide the uptake of AI in science and foster skills development, in complementarity with the AI Innovation package and with the AI Office. By pooling resources and incentivising public-private collaboration, the European AI Research Council will build the critical mass needed to preserve our scientific edge in the age of AI. In parallel, the European Research Council and the European Innovation Council will continue to support frontier research and breakthrough innovations in and by AI at large, and their contribution will be fully considered in the development of the European AI Research Council. Extensive consultation of stakeholders will inform the development of the European AI Research Council.

5. What do you see as the main purpose of the EU framework programmes for research and innovation and the added value of EU funding? How will you address the persisting need for simplification of the programme? Will you support a substantial increase to the budget of Horizon Europe and of its successor programme? How will you protect in general the EU budget dedicated to R&I policies? How do you plan to increase SME participation in the programme and boost public-private partnerships?

For 40 years, EU framework programmes for research and innovation, as embedded in the Treaties, have been instrumental for the EU's progress in science, technology, and innovation. The Framework Programme tackles global challenges ranging from climate to health and boosts the EU's competitiveness through ground-breaking research and innovation.

Strengthening Europe's scientific and technological foundation can be achieved by boosting scientific excellence, cross-border collaboration, innovation, and our dynamic ecosystem of researchers, innovators, and industries. A balanced approach in international cooperation is, and must remain, a crucial part of our policy, bridging research and innovation ecosystems to address global challenges, pursuing reciprocity, a global level-playing field, and Europe's strategic autonomy and economic security.

The value-added of EU funding lies in its ability to enable cooperation on a large scale and create opportunities that Member States could not achieve individually. It harnesses the collective strength of our Member States, fostering collaboration across borders and sectors. EU funding can help overcome market failures, particularly in high-risk disruptive technologies, reduces duplications, and establishes unified standards. It facilitates access to infrastructure and enhances mobility. The results of Horizon 2020 attest to the economic and societal benefits of EU funding: every euro invested is expected to generate between five and eleven euros in benefits by 2040.

The design of the future multiannual financial framework and its instruments is ahead of us. In cooperation with the Commissioner for Budget Anti-Fraud and Public Administration, our reflection will need to start with "what we want to finance" to then see "how" we can best deliver on our objectives and maximise results on the ground, building on the lessons learnt with Horizon Europe. A new and strengthened framework programme 10 will benefit from the results of recent evaluations including of the high-level group report ("Align, act, accelerate") and the recommendations of the Draghi report. If I earn your trust, I want to ensure simpler and faster access to EU research funding, more impactful funding and alignment with the EU's policy priorities, and less reporting burden for project promoters. Simpler and clearer rules will increase its impact and attract more new participants from more diverse horizons and sizes, including SMEs, start-ups, and scale-ups. We must enhance the use of digital tools, including AI, to better inform and support participants and increase the use of simplified funding forms like lump sums and personnel unit costs. I will also strive to reduce administrative burden, including redundant reporting requirements.

As proposed by the President-elect in her Political Guidelines, I firmly stand in favour of putting research and innovation, science and technology, at the centre of our economy, with an increase in research spending to focus more on strategic priorities, on groundbreaking fundamental research and disruptive innovation, and on scientific excellence in the next Framework Programme. I commit to work towards a research and innovation policy that drives Europe's competitiveness. The Draghi report has made very important recommendations in this respect and strongly highlights the importance of today's investments for our competitiveness in the medium and long-term. I will also work on strengthening research and innovation systems, start-up and scale-up financing in all Member States and regions in cooperation with them.

Reaching our 3% GDP target of investment in research and development, is a shared responsibility between the EU and Member States. I will advocate for stronger coordination between EU, national, and regional investments to maximize impact to achieve a true European Research and Innovation Union. Building on lessons learnt from the European Innovation Council and InvestEU, we will use the power of our budget to leverage and de-risk private investment in our common goals.

Finally, if confirmed, I will work to increase SME participation and boost public-private partnerships. SMEs are key drivers of growth and innovation. The new European Innovation Act will foster an innovation- and SME-friendly environment, remove legal barriers, and align regulatory conditions across Member States. I will streamline access for early-stage companies and attract new participants through simplification and tailored support, integrating them into business networks and enhancing their technological capacities. I will further explore the potential of European Partnerships, including Joint Undertakings, to leverage public and private investments. My approach will reflect evolving priorities and promote synergies with other instruments and funding programmes, like Important Projects of Common European Interest and Cohesion funds.

The support of the European Parliament for all these tasks is critical and I intend to work closely with you.

6. What concrete measures do you consider necessary for the long-term strategy to boost the European Research Infrastructure, including technology infrastructures? How do you see the role of research and innovation ecosystems? How do you plan to tackle the innovation and research divide in the EU? What widening actions do you envisage in that regard? How will you address the current challenges in the STEM fields, including low participation of women? How do you plan to promote research and academic freedom? How will you contribute to further developing the New European Bauhaus?

If confirmed, I will present a European Strategy on Research Infrastructures to ensure European researchers and innovators have access to world-class facilities and services and make full use of them, with a focus on industry, SMEs and startups.

Strong and connected research and innovation ecosystems are fundamental for a competitive, sustainable, and resilient Europe. In the EU, those ecosystems are built on our solid research base, making us second globally for scientific output. However, other advanced economies have outpaced us in some domains. The fragmentation of our research and innovation ecosystems is partially responsible for this, with stark performance differences between countries and regions. If confirmed, I will strengthen Europe's ecosystem for innovation through financing and regulatory tools supporting disruptive innovators, startups, and scaleups. Building on the actions of the New European Innovation Agenda, the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy and the European Innovation Act will be key in this respect.

If confirmed, addressing the research and innovation divide is a must if we are to maximise Europe's potential, wherever it comes from. Widening actions are already working in this respect, with increased success rates for beneficiaries from widening countries in Horizon Europe compared to Horizon 2020. The European Institute of Innovation and Technology contributes to tackling the innovation divide in the EU, notably through its place-based approach as the largest innovation ecosystem in Europe with an on-the-ground presence in EU Member States and beyond, and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology Regional Innovation Scheme. I will hold in high regard the views of the European Parliament on addressing the research and innovation divide and will duly consult with Member States and stakeholders.

Many European countries face a significant shortage of graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM fields), while demand for such professionals is increasing across industries. This shortage seriously threatens Europe's competitiveness in strategic sectors like renewable energy and advanced manufacturing. If confirmed, I will support students graduating from STEM programmes to gain more hands-on experience in research, problem-solving, and real-world applications. This will help to fill the gap between academic knowledge and industry needs, and facilitate the transition of graduates into the workforce. I will strongly support initiatives to increase the share of women graduating in STEM fields as part of my action plan on women in research, innovation and start-ups/scale ups.

I fully commit to continue upholding the freedom of scientific research. This is central to academic freedom as spelled out in Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. I support the European Parliament's timely resolution on the protection of the freedom of scientific research of January 2024, asking the Commission to present a proposal to protect and promote the freedom of scientific research, and I commit to address it as part of the European Research Area Act. This will build, inter alia, on the European Parliament's work.

In line with my mission letter, if confirmed, I will support the Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy in her endeavour to further developing the New European Bauhaus. I will bring forward the contribution of research and innovation to its development and implementation of, from fundamental research, to testing and demonstration. R&I can support the New European Bauhaus in revitalising Europe's neighbourhoods through innovative, inclusive, and sustainable design.

7. What is your vision for an EU start-up and scale-up strategy and what measures will you propose to stimulate their development? What initiatives will you take to scale up innovation in the EU? How do you plan to strengthen the ties between research, innovation, industrial and cohesion policies? What concrete measures do you think should be included in the Advanced Materials Act?

My overarching vision for the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy is to foster an innovation-friendly environment that makes it simpler and faster for European innovative companies to grow and scale up in the single market.

The main challenges that weigh on the development of our European start-up ecosystem are difficulties in access to capital and market and regulatory fragmentation, which generates administrative hurdles. This results in talent

drain and the more successful companies deciding to leave the EU. We must enable Europe's start-ups and scale-ups to grow, thrive in Europe, and compete globally.

One of the most critical challenges for startups and scaleups in Europe is securing access to capital, especially for disruptive and high-risk ventures. The strategy would include measures to expand access to venture capital, improve funding through the expansion of the European Innovation Council (EIC). I will liaise with Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, and the Rule of Law in charge of the development of a 28th regime to help innovative companies grow and benefit from simpler, harmonised set of rules throughout the Union. I will also collaborate with the Commissioner for Financial Services and the Savings and Investments Union to improve access to diverse funding sources by developing a Savings and Investments Union (SIU) that encompasses the Capital Markets Union (CMU) as well as the Banking Union (BU).

To help start-ups to scale up, the strategy should also include actions to improve access to markets. The upcoming revision of the Public Procurement Directive announced in the Political Guidelines would notably aim to modernise and simplify our public procurement rules, in particular with EU start-ups and innovators in mind.

Strong ecosystems are essential for start-ups and scale-ups to thrive. The strategy would support actions to foster collaboration among universities, research institutions, industry, and start-ups. Startups also need technology infrastructure, including digital, to innovate and grow, which should also be tackled.

Finally, concrete actions will be put forward to attract and retain talents, building on existing initiatives while identifying and bridging possible skill gaps, and addressing the gender gap in the R&I and start-up/scale-up system.

It is clear that the strategy would need to reflect a “whole of government” approach and close cooperation with Member States, identifying levers across policy areas that can make EU start-ups and scale-ups more successful. The priorities set in the strategy will be tackled and turned into concrete measures, including legislative proposals, through the new European Innovation Act, under my leadership, if I will be confirmed.

Work on the EU start-up and scale-up strategy should start with a comprehensive analysis based on the Draghi report. If confirmed, I would launch a call for evidence and a targeted consultation of stakeholders.

In this process, I am fully committed to engaging with the European Parliament and conducting wide consultations with stakeholders from our R&I ecosystem.

Strengthening the ties between research, innovation, industrial and cohesion policies is fundamental for a coherent approach that will put R&I at the heart of our economy. I will make sure that my portfolio will work in synchrony with EU industrial and cohesion policy and engage meaningfully within the College. In line with my mission letter, I will contribute to initiatives such as the Clean Industrial Deal and the Industrial Decarbonisation Accelerator Act, bringing an essential research and innovation dimension. Regarding synergies between EU funding programmes, my focus will be, together with the other Commissioners, on harmonising rules, avoiding duplication, and maximising the impact of Member States research and innovation investments. I will put emphasis under the current budget on making sure that research results funded by our Framework Programmes are deployed and scaled-up through the European Regional Development Fund, the Innovation Fund, InvestEU, and the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP), which mobilises funding across 11 EU programmes towards the development and manufacturing of strategic technologies.

Advanced materials are crucial to succeed in the green and digital transition. If confirmed, through the Advanced Materials Act, I will aim to establish a framework to enhance the access and the production of advanced materials in Europe. The Act will align research, industry and investment efforts to meet our technological needs, while reducing strategic dependencies. By working with research and industry, and with the rest of the College, I will identify gaps as well as priority needs for advanced materials, especially for clean technologies and circular economy. The Act will promote private investments, public procurement, and Important Projects of Common European Interest, and develop crucial digital infrastructure.

Question from the Committee on Culture and Education

8. How do you see the interplay between the European Education Area, the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area? What, in your view, are the synergies between the funding programmes in these different fields and the EU support to the next generation of researchers, taking into account cooperation between academic, private and public sector entities and the progress of the “European University Alliances” initiative?

Linked to the above, how do you intend to make the European Higher Education Area more accessible and inclusive for all, while also improving the collaboration and exchange with Universities globally?

Higher Education Institutions are fundamental actors in research and innovation in Europe, and, as such, a central part of the European Research Area. An effective articulation of the European Education Area, the European Higher Education Area, and the European Research Area forms the springboard for Europe's ambition to be a leader in the global knowledge-based, highly competitive economy. I am committed to creating further synergies between education, research and innovation, and contributing to simultaneous implementation of European Education Area and European Research Area policies. If confirmed, I would work towards this objective in close collaboration with the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness.

The European Education Area builds a framework where quality education is accessible to all, supporting lifelong learning, seamless mobility and transnational cooperation. It builds on the larger intergovernmental Bologna process, fostering more coherence in European higher education. The European Research Area is facilitating a seamless environment for excellence in research and innovation.

Both the European education and research areas foster more cooperation between academic institutions and non-academic partners such as industry, and governments. Their shared goal is to bring down the barriers to knowledge creation and circulation within the EU, remove obstacles to the free circulation of talent and enable people to move easily between education and research systems, and the non-academic sector. If confirmed, together with the Executive Vice President for People, Skills and preparedness, I will contribute to creating a true European space where knowledge, skills and talents can freely circulate for studying or working in another Member State. I would also continue efforts to build bridges between academia, business, and government sectors by focusing on creating interconnected environments that fuel innovation, progress, and opportunities for all.

Higher education institutions have a unique position at the crossroads of education, research and innovation. It is key that universities across Europe work closer together, and with the private and public sectors. Transnational cooperation is a condition for equipping the current and future generation of researchers with the competences and skills that European societies need to thrive in an ever more interconnected world - for example through joint European degrees in specialised sectors. The European degree will facilitate to pool resources and expertise, offering learners access to cutting-edge skills and knowledge that are critical in emerging sectors such as green technologies and digital industries. Most universities in Europe seek to pool expertise and to combine complementary strengths not available at any single institution, in order to equip graduates and lifelong learners with these strategic and future-oriented skills. This has been one of the driving forces behind the emergence of the 64 European Universities alliances, in synergy with the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology.

European Institute of Innovation and Technology initiatives such as the Deep Tech Talent Initiative or the skills Academies provide much needed sector-specific skills for critical industrial sectors (European Battery Academy, European Solar Academy, Raw Materials Academy, Advanced Materials Academy, and Wind Academy).

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions illustrate how synergies across higher education and research support the training, skills, and career development, and mobility of researchers, enabling excellent, high-impact research, and innovation. These work in tandem with Erasmus+ to provide vital support to the next generation of researchers, promoting intersectoral cooperation between academic and non-academic actors. Facilitating the participation of female scientists in these actions would be a particular focus of my plan to support women in research, innovation and start-ups/scale-ups.

Inclusivity and accessibility remain a top priority for our research and higher education sectors. I want to continue supporting these goals, including by supporting the work to strengthen the European Universities alliances that involve universities from all parts of Europe, including from rural areas and outermost regions. European Universities alliances have also more than 30 universities from Ukraine associated to them. If confirmed, I will work to deepen collaboration with universities worldwide, fostering joint education and research activities. By building strong global partnerships, Europe can enhance its global influence and attract and retain the best talent. This is a prerequisite for a more prosperous Europe.