

**QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE****Hadja LAHBIB****Preparedness, Crisis Management, Equality****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?*

I have spent much of my professional life travelling all over the world, mainly in countries in crisis or at war (Afghanistan, the Middle East, the Democratic Republic of the Congo), in order to understand and report back by asking the right questions. In 2022, I was given the opportunity to help find solutions and put my experience on the ground to good use as Belgium's Minister for Foreign and European Affairs.

During my mandate, which has been intense to say the least, I have had to manage multiple crises and wars, in Ukraine and in the Middle East, to mention just two, and major natural disasters such as the earthquake in Turkey and Syria.

As Chairperson of B-Fast – the Belgian First Aid and Support Unit set up to provide emergency aid in the event of foreign crises and disasters – I worked together with my counterparts in the Governments concerned to coordinate the supply of emergency aid and the dispatch of experts to assist the affected populations. I led the reform of B-FAST, strengthening and preparing its structure for future challenges.

These crises triggered a heavy consular workload, as we had to provide assistance to our Belgian and European citizens, taking extra care to help those most vulnerable.

Whether they are climate, humanitarian or health crises, these crises are inexorably set to occur more frequently over the coming years, both in Europe and elsewhere.

If you do me the honour of appointing me as Commissioner, I will help protect the citizens of Europe by preparing them to better foresee and forestall crises or to respond to them effectively, while at the same time promoting our values in the rest of the world by providing assistance to populations in need, in keeping with the principles of international law and international humanitarian law.

Preparing the European Union to stand united in its handling of natural and man-made disasters, conflicts and crises reinforces the values and principles which underpin our Union. It helps to build a fairer world and more caring world, a Union that protects its citizens and offers them equal rights and equal opportunities.

I have fought against prejudice all my life. Having myself been the victim of prejudice on occasion, I know how much discrimination can at times be unconscious and insidious. In my opinion, the best way to combat inequality is to adopt a cross-cutting approach to tackling all forms of discrimination, and to involve all sectors.

No one is more convinced than I am that a society free of all discrimination is the only foundation that would empower everyone, regardless of their origin or status, to live freely and achieve their full potential. During each

of my missions around the world, I have always attached great importance to cooperating with civil society organisations to promote equality and the right of each individual to be themselves.

As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I am proud to have been able to support Afghan women in their quest for freedom, and to have helped draw attention to LGBTIQ rights in countries where pride marches are still banned.

This commitment will continue over my mandate as Commissioner for Equality. I will lead the work, together with all my colleagues in the College, on mainstreaming equality and gender considerations in EU policies, legislation and funding programs. I will lead by example and ensure equality and gender mainstreaming in the field of crisis management and preparedness, to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of responses to crises. Lastly, during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, I made a point of working in a spirit of mutual understanding with all levels of government and considering respect for diversity as a driving force for our Union. Belgium has fully assumed the role of ‘honest broker’. We have successfully concluded around 70 legislative files in cooperation with all the stakeholders involved, including the European Parliament.

I am convinced that my career and my skills will make me an asset for the general good of Europe. Together, we can build a Europe that can respond to crises fast and effectively. We can break down barriers and combat the inequality our fellow citizens are still facing.

Throughout my career, I have placed significant emphasis on engaging with youth, as the policies we shape today and the decisions we make will impact their future. Therefore, I intend to prioritise dialogues with citizens and stakeholders, and engage actively with young people through the annual Youth Policy Dialogues, the first of which I look forward to holding in the first 100 days in office.

I confirm my commitment to fully respect Articles 17.3 TEU, 245 and 339 TFEU. I commit to informing the President of the Commission of any situation which might involve a conflict of interest in the performance of my official duties, and I vow not to accept any guidance and instructions from any external party.

My declaration of interests foreseen by the Code of Conduct for Commissioners is complete and accessible to the public and will be updated as relevant. In this regard, I also commit to comply with transparency obligations, as set out in the Code of Conduct, as regards meeting only with those organisations or self-employed individuals which are registered in the Transparency Register.

## **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?*

If confirmed, as Commissioner for Preparedness, Crisis Management, and for Equality I will take on full political responsibility for the mission that has been entrusted to me in my Mission Letter and in accordance with the Political Guidelines of the President-elect. This portfolio is one that deeply resonates with my personal values, and I am committed to fulfilling these responsibilities with dedication, which also includes engaging fully with you/ the Parliament in a transparent way.

I view the European Parliament as an essential partner and I see my role as part of an ongoing, transparent dialogue with you, Members of the European Parliament. Should I be confirmed in this position, I will make it a priority to keep the Parliament regularly informed about my legislative activities and engage in discussions and responding to follow-up questions about the policies under my remit. I believe that parliamentary oversight is crucial for ensuring accountability and legitimacy, and I am fully committed to upholding this principle.

In line with the President-elect's Political Guidelines, I will actively participate in plenary sessions and committee meetings, as well as more informal contacts. I will ensure a consistent flow of information to the chairs of the relevant parliamentary committees, fostering a collaborative relationship to ensure effective scrutiny and

contribution. Parliamentary committees will be kept closely involved in all major developments within my areas of responsibility. I will also work closely with the European Parliament to ensure timely follow-up to Parliament's Article 225 TFEU Resolutions.

The outgoing Commission has already developed many legislative and non-legislative initiatives and if confirmed, during my mandate, I wish to focus on their implementation. I am convinced that the Parliament can make a real contribution to ensuring that citizens and business enjoy the benefits of EU policies and laws in practice.

In the field of Preparedness and Crisis Management, if confirmed as Commissioner, my role includes strengthening the EU's ability to respond effectively and in a timely manner to crises. I plan to develop an all-hazards and whole-of society approach, working with the relevant Committees and individual MEPs to achieve the goal of a true Preparedness Union.

In addition, I place great value on the principle of collective decision-making within the College of Commissioners and I strongly believe that we can amplify the EU's presence and influence on the global stage, not only in crisis management, preparedness and response but also in promoting equality and humanitarian principles around the world with a strong focus on fragile societies in line with my portfolio.

Inter-institutional cooperation is vital for the smooth functioning of the EU's system, as well as for the efficiency and legitimacy of its decision-making processes. My approach will be based on the principles of openness, mutual trust, and regular exchange of information, as the foundation of my work with other EU institutions to ensure effective partnership in service of European citizens.

I recognise the critical importance of transparency in the EU's legislative process and I will fully adhere to the Commission's very high standards for meetings with interest representatives. Therefore, we will regularly publish information about these meetings and ensure that both the Parliament and our citizens are kept duly informed.

#### Questions from the Committee on Development

### **3. Humanitarian Funding Gap**

*What specific actions will you take to reduce the increasing humanitarian funding gap, including through the EU's annual and multiannual budgets and, through strategic coordination with the Member States, to implement the Council Conclusions on addressing the humanitarian funding gap, notably when it comes to proposing innovative funding models for humanitarian assistance and achieving a "more equitable responsibility among donors", including emerging and potential donors as well as like-minded partners? How do you concretely intend to "develop a more strategic approach to the humanitarian supply chains" and what does it imply concretely to "encourage joined-up approaches and cost-savings"? Taking into account the humanitarian principles, what steps will you take to ensure that the EU's humanitarian budget is protected from reallocations for political or economic purposes and will there be a framework for monitoring the effectiveness of humanitarian funding allocations and accountability for achieving the intended outcomes? What will you do to increase the percentage of humanitarian assistance going as directly as possible to local actors?*

The number of people in need keeps growing. Tackling this challenge requires collective efforts at different levels, as spelled out in the 2021 Communication "EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles", which proposes a series of actions to address the humanitarian funding gap, including expanding the resource base, supporting a better enabling environment for humanitarian partners, addressing the root causes of crises, reducing humanitarian needs, and boosting an effective and efficient delivery of humanitarian aid in a Team Europe approach.

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, you will find in me a tireless advocate of the EU humanitarian cause and I am sure I will be able to count on the continued support of the European Parliament and the Council throughout the entire mandate. A leading donor should lead by example and leave no one behind. You can rest assured that every time the humanitarian situation will require it, I will work towards using all available to use resources to the full capacity. I will reinforce the EU's humanitarian emergency response tools to ensure that we have the right type of assets, knowledge and expertise to align with new realities,

I will also encourage Member States to respect the voluntary target to dedicate 0,07% of Gross National Income (i.e. 10% of the Official Development Assistance) to humanitarian aid. Among EU Member States, the level of contributions varies widely, de facto weakening Europe's humanitarian impact as well as its advocacy for

increased contributions from third countries. I am committed to follow up on Member States' progress in this regard and I will have regular discussions at political level to ensure strategic coordination at EU and global levels (e.g. at the European Humanitarian Forum).

I will cooperate with you on this central issue as the parliamentary arm of the budgetary authority. I will count on joint advocacy efforts to convince governments and national parliaments to provide humanitarian funding as appropriate.

We need to work towards a broader international donor base. I am convinced that this can be achieved through our sustained and common outreach, in particular to the G20 and other international outreach partners.

Beyond public donorship, I will work on bringing the private sector to the table more effectively. The ambition is not only to explore how they could complement humanitarian funding, but also to enhance the reputation of EU businesses as champions of corporate social responsibility.

Besides humanitarian funding, it is equally important to work on reducing humanitarian needs (e.g. by promoting better respect for International Humanitarian Law, by scaling up disaster preparedness and anticipatory action measures, and by strengthening the resilience of fragile countries) and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the aid we provide.

In this vein, and in line with my mission letter, I will notably develop a more strategic approach to the humanitarian supply chain. For instance, I will encourage humanitarian partners to procure relief items jointly, foster preparedness and optimisation of stocks, pool transport solutions, share expertise and use common digital tools. Joint procurement will reduce high prices triggered by competition for limited resources. Sharing information on stockpiles will ensure that the right items are at the right place for a specific crisis. Pooling transport solutions will reduce transport costs and delays in the delivery of items. A greener response could include the use of recycled items and proper waste management systems. These are some examples of how a strategic approach to humanitarian supply chain and logistics can make cost savings and increase targeting of beneficiaries and ensure efficient budget management.

Furthermore, building on the work done so far, I will continue to reinforce the EU's humanitarian emergency response tools to fill operational gaps and facilitate the swift delivery of aid to people in need.

Importantly, if I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will ensure that EU humanitarian funding continues being allocated in line with humanitarian principles and based on needs, following a solid evidence-based methodology. A modern and reinforced EU budget, should be more targeted to where EU action is most needed, and used in a flexible way. Under my leadership, assisting people in need will be the sole compass of the EU humanitarian aid. Monitoring and evaluation will remain crucial to ensure accountability as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of EU humanitarian interventions.

Recognising the value of quality funding in securing efficient and effective humanitarian action, a more targeted and reinforced EU budget, will help us to address humanitarian needs and ensure operational continuity in protracted crises.

Finally, in line with EU commitments taken in the framework of the Grand Bargain, I will continue to support the localisation agenda. In close cooperation with our implementing partners (including the UN, International organisations and NGOs) and in line with the existing legal framework, I will continue working on increasing the share of EU humanitarian funding channelled as directly as possible to local organisations, for instance by supporting Country-Based Pooled Funds. I will also consistently support capacity building of local partners and promote their inclusion and engagement throughout the humanitarian cycle, from disaster preparedness and anticipatory action, through needs assessment, prioritisation and design of the response stage to knowledge-sharing and participation in coordinating mechanisms, as reflected in the recent Commission's 'Guidance on equitable partnerships with local responders in humanitarian settings'.

#### **4. Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus**

*How will you work to enhance the coordination, cooperation and coherence between the EU's development, humanitarian and peacebuilding actions, including among all EU actors, and to engage with local communities, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders in developing strategies that address the humanitarian-*

*development-peace nexus? Within a “Commission-wide integrated approach to fragility”, will you, together with the Commissioner for International Partnerships and all relevant Commission services, develop policy guidance and concrete mechanisms, for ensuring that development efforts help to both address the root causes of fragility and build the resilience of communities, in order to achieve sustainable outcomes that cannot be attained through humanitarian action only, and how do you plan to measure the effectiveness of those efforts? In that respect, do you commit to boosting investments in anticipatory action and to working with the Commissioner for International Partnerships to develop a joint EU policy on climate resilience, with a particular focus on fragile and conflict-affected contexts?*

*Given the breadth of the portfolio that you have been assigned and the increasing number of humanitarian crises, how do you intend to ensure that sufficient attention is dedicated to the external dimension of humanitarian assistance and humanitarian diplomacy, and in particular to forgotten crises? What measures will you take to promote compliance with and respect for international humanitarian law?*

The challenges, especially in protracted crises, are too large for humanitarian actors to act alone. Saving lives is crucial, but the EU must also contribute to conflict resolution, addressing political tensions, rebuilding social cohesion, reducing environmental risks, and boosting resilience and security.

In today’s complex crises, prevention, relief and recovery actions do not follow a clear linear sequence but they are often needed in parallel. This requires everyone’s commitment, to respond to humanitarian needs, in a coherent and collaborative manner, generate enough funding and address vulnerability, but also tackle the root causes of fragility and conflicts and pave the way for stability and durable solutions.

It is also essential to focus on building resilience and preventing conflicts. This brings huge benefits to populations by limiting the impact when a crisis hits, by facilitating peacebuilding efforts and the post-crisis transition to development. To achieve this, it is critical that there are joint approaches to assessing vulnerability and needs.

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will work towards a Commission-wide integrated approach to fragility, notably through joint analysis and response strategy. By working closely with the High Representative/Vice-President and the Commissioner responsible for International Partnerships, among others, we can ensure a rapid response to humanitarian crises, contribute to the effective management of international partnerships, and addressing root-causes of fragility and conflict to reduce humanitarian needs. This strategy will ensure consistency between global policy making, regional engagement, and country specific responses. I will advocate for a rapid and effective EU response to crises by mobilising all available instruments and aligning policies for both immediate, short-term needs and long-term actions and by ensuring coordination with EU Member States. Of course, we need to ensure accountability for our actions and track progress made. The fragility framework should therefore also include a monitoring mechanism, to regularly assess our engagement and propose adjustments, as needed. For this, I intend to actively engage with colleagues across other EU services and institutions (EEAS, the Council and the European Parliament).

I will work on boosting investments in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action and work with relevant Commission services in implementing the Climate adaptation plan in order to strengthen climate resilience, with a particular focus on fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This will involve finding ways to better cooperate in increasing our collective investment in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action in a coherent and coordinated manner and making our investments climate-resilient while focusing on those that are most vulnerable.

I will also continue supporting the UN’s efforts towards the implementation of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus at system level to have an impact beyond EU funding.

I can assure you that the breadth of the portfolio which I have been proposed is a source of great pride and also an opportunity for me to focus on building synergies between the different strands of work that are all driven by the spirit and value of solidarity. Humanitarian assistance will remain a key priority for me throughout my entire mandate if only because the very dire global humanitarian situation requires it.

From the point of view of Commissioner in charge of humanitarian aid there is no such thing as a “forgotten crisis”. In this vein, I will aim to dedicate a minimum of 15% of the initial humanitarian aid budget to crises that are not in the international limelight. Neglecting immediate needs in these crises would exacerbate suffering and undermine human dignity. By keeping this commitment and advocating for it, I am hopeful that the EU example will be followed by more donors.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) remains more relevant than ever, and an essential protection for civilians affected by armed conflicts. Sadly, in the past years, violations of IHL have become the rule rather than the exception, with critical consequences for civilians and civilian infrastructures, and blocking humanitarian aid from reaching people in need and growing number of casualties among aid workers. That is why I believe we need to redouble and join our efforts to promote respect for IHL. This is also essential to safeguard a rules-based international order and to help tackle the increasing humanitarian needs.

I will work towards elevating IHL further as a political priority, so we can fully leverage the EU's power, and strengthen EU humanitarian diplomacy and the Team Europe approach. In that respect, together with the HRVP, I intend to develop a plan to make our interventions more impactful, focussing on IHL, protection of civilians in conflicts and humanitarian access. The EU and its Member States must speak with a stronger voice. You can rest assured that I will speak out forcefully against IHL violations wherever they occur, but also support measures that promote their prevention. I am committed to promoting IHL, jointly with EU Member States, through diplomatic missions and high-level events in multilateral fora and the European Humanitarian Forum. I am also committed to continuing to work closely with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on prevention and promotion for respect of IHL. During my mandate, I will support measures that reinforce International Humanitarian Law monitoring and promote an evidence-based advocacy.

Engaging in humanitarian diplomacy is not a novel concept for the EU. We are already very active in advocacy and diplomacy efforts to ensure humanitarian access to conflict zones and prevent violations of international humanitarian law, such as the use of starvation as a weapon of war or the protection of humanitarian and healthcare workers from attacks. However, new challenges call for stronger, more concerted approaches. I would like to achieve a more systematic and coordinated approach by all relevant EU actors. In doing so, I look forward to working together with the Member States and the European Parliament to ensure a forceful Team Europe approach on an issue so essential to the lives of so many.

## **5. Food insecurity and malnutrition**

*How will you strengthen the EU's emergency response mechanisms for addressing hunger and malnutrition, as well as the impact of climate change? More specifically, given the devastating impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on Ukrainian grain exports, how do you aim to further ensure those exports to developing countries, in order to prevent aggravating global food insecurity? Beyond immediate emergency responses, what long-term solutions do you propose to address the underlying causes of food insecurity and malnutrition as part of broader development policies and in close cooperation with our international partners? In particular, how do you plan to work with the EEAS and the Member States to scale up the EU's efforts for preventing climate change and conflict-induced hunger and enhancing accountability in situations where starvation is used as a weapon of war?*

The EU is one of the leading humanitarian donors, and food assistance and nutritional support is the number one type of need addressed through the EU humanitarian assistance. Over the past two years alone, the EU has allocated more than EUR 1.7 billion to humanitarian food and nutrition assistance, focusing on countries most in need, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

But needs continue to rise: food insecurity has increased dramatically in the last years and is at record levels, driven by conflict and insecurity, the aggravating impact of climate change and economic downturn, the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, against a backdrop of rampant poverty and inequality. Hence maintaining adequate levels of food and nutrition assistance is likely to remain fundamental in the coming years, and I am committed to ensuring that the EU will deliver on this. However, funding alone is not sufficient. I am convinced that we must deliver food and nutrition support more efficiently by improving targeting and increasing the use of cash-based assistance - as it is more dignifying, cheaper and contributes to the resilience of the local economies. We should also leverage digital tools and promote anticipatory action.

Of course, humanitarian assistance alone cannot resolve the problem of hunger. We must adopt a transformative approach that integrates peace, prevention and development action alongside at-scale emergency efforts to break the cycle of food insecurity and malnutrition. I will step up efforts to enhance cooperation and coordination between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors as well as with the HRVP and the Commissioner for International Partnerships to address both the root causes and consequences of food crises. Food assistance must be combined with longer-term investments in sustainable agricultural and food production, in early-warning

systems to mitigate climate's effect on food production, as well as with strong diplomatic efforts to solve conflicts, one of the main drivers of food insecurity.

In that context, at EU level and as outlined in my mission letter, I will collaborate with other College members on a comprehensive approach to fragility [also see under question 4] to ensure adequate investment in creating climate-resilient food systems and continue to advocate more broadly, including towards Member States to ensure that this remains a priority in all our EU food assistance. I will also commit to stepping up the operationalisation of the 2022 Team Europe response strategy to global food insecurity, working toward common outcomes for humanitarian and development actors from both EU services and Member States.

Beyond the EU, I will ensure our continued engagement in global food security platforms and initiatives such as the Global Network on Food Crises, for the compliance of IHL and for the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2417 which condemns starvation as a weapon of war. I will continue raising public awareness and advocating for accountability in situations where starvation is used as weapon of war and for the respect of IHL. This advocacy effort will also include working with the HRVP and Member States to ensure that no stone is left unturned with respect to ensuring compliance on this issue and will also form part of my approach to humanitarian diplomacy [also see under question 4].

We need humanitarian access, and we need to ensure that food security remains a priority. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significantly worsened the global food security crisis by driving up prices and disrupting markets. Since 2022, the EU's Solidarity Lanes and Ukraine's 2023 Black Sea corridor have been vital in keeping Ukrainian food exports moving and stabilizing global prices. The EU must stay committed to these efforts. At the same time, we must ensure food reaches those who need it most, regardless of its source. To achieve this, I will continue promoting efficient food assistance, using the best approaches for each situation.

To address these challenges and ensure the EU's humanitarian food and nutrition assistance meets the needs, I plan to update the EU's humanitarian policy guidelines on food assistance within the first months of my mandate.

#### Questions from the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

*6. How do you plan to ensure sufficient resources within current and upcoming MFF to improve crisis management and preparedness? How will you ensure equitable access to the necessary financial resources for regions and communities faced with frequent natural disasters like wildfires and droughts? Which concrete measures will you propose to strengthen crisis preparedness, specifically building on the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) and RescEU? What is the concrete timeline for these measures, including the revision of the UCPM? Do you foresee setting up of more permanent pools of resources to respond to different types of disasters, similar to the permanent rescue fleet for the forest fires? Can you elaborate on the nature of the European Civil Defence Mechanism and its interaction with the UCPM? How will you encourage cooperation among Member States in order to improve the preparedness for risks and security and health emergencies?*

With the increase in extreme weather and the changing nature of security threats in the EU, it is key for the EU to develop a more comprehensive and integrated approach to risk and crisis management.

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will steer the development and implementation of an ambitious EU Preparedness Union Strategy, in close collaboration with my fellow Commissioners, building inter alia on the special report on civilian and defence preparedness by former Finnish President Niinistö. I intend to present the Strategy early in the next mandate.

The EU Preparedness Union Strategy could follow a broad definition of "preparedness" also including the concepts of resilience building and disaster risk management, thus providing an overarching strategic and cross-sectoral approach to disaster and crisis management for the years to come. This Strategy could aim for: (1) an all-hazard approach: a shift from a reactive to a more proactive crisis management mode at EU level; (2) a whole-of-government approach: a more comprehensive and integrated approach to Europe's crisis management across sectors and levels of governance, and (3) a whole-of-society approach: a broader development of a culture of preparedness and resilience in Europe.

The Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), its Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) as well as its RescEU capacities will represent important elements of this comprehensive EU Preparedness Union Strategy as they are well-established, reliable, and highly functional instruments at the service of Member States to prevent, prepare, and respond to disasters and emergencies.

That is why, within the scope of the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, I am planning to examine the possible need to propose a revision of UCPM and of its ERCC and RescEU components.

The ERCC has proven to be particularly successful when coordinating the delivery of assistance responding simultaneously to long, complex and cross-sectoral crises (e.g. COVID-19 and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, conflict in the Middle East), and to climate-change induced crises (wildfires, floods or storms). If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will further work to strengthen the ERCC in this role as the EU's crisis coordination hub and reinforce its capabilities to anticipate, prepare for and respond to crises. This will be a matter of priority in terms of timing.

RescEU, the first-ever European strategic reserve of civil protection capacities, is a key component of the UCPM and demonstrates EU solidarity in practice. It is crucial to maintain this strategic reserve and enhance it further, where needed. At the same time, we should maintain a strong system of mutual assistance between Member States that now includes the voluntary 'European Civil Protection Pool', peer-to-peer expertise support and other capacity building tools.

Maintaining and replenishing the existing rescEU capacities is my priority. Moreover, given the rapidly growing climate and security risks, I will work closely with Member States to further expand rescEU capacities, for instance in the areas of forest firefighting, energy equipment, medical countermeasures as well as capacities for medical evacuation and shelters. We will equally need to look into developing new capacities for emerging threats at EU level. This could enhance the EU's preparedness to face a broader range of disaster scenarios, including infrastructure failures, conflict situations, and hybrid threats. I will look into this question more concretely within the work on the EU Preparedness Union strategy.

Moreover, the development of a European Civil Defence Mechanism will be a key dimension of the EU Preparedness Union Strategy. I see this initiative as an opportunity to close an important existing gap when it comes to citizens' and community engagement in strengthening their own resilience as well as active participation regarding civil-military cooperation. Our citizens, non-governmental organisations and the private sector are key partners in enhancing our societal resilience. The discussion about a modern concept of civil defence has already begun to take form in several Member States. I want to build on these reflections, together with Member States and the European Parliament, to further develop societal resilience across the Union.

In order to build upon existing structures, that have proven to be successful, as well as to avoid further fragmentation of the crisis management system, the development of a Civil Defence Mechanism will be closely linked and complementary to existing structures, such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism and the Emergency Response Coordination Centre.

Specifically on health security, I will work under the guidance of the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness and in close collaboration with the Commissioner for Health and Animal welfare to strengthen health preparedness and response capacity in the EU, notably through a new strategy to support the availability of medical countermeasures against public health threats, and a wider EU stockpiling strategy. We will also continue to facilitate the cooperation among Member States and to support them to ensure a high level of preparedness at national level. The Union health crisis and pandemic plan (the 'Union prevention, preparedness and response plan'), is envisaged to be adopted in the first months of the new Commission, will ensure cooperation among Member States in prevention, preparedness and, importantly, during response to serious cross-border health threats. It will be discussed with Member States every year and regularly updated to account for an ever-changing threats landscape.

Cooperation among Member States on serious cross-border health threats takes place through the Health Security Committee, which is and will remain a central element of our preparedness and response framework for health. I will support the efforts to further strengthen the crisis preparedness tools and put them regularly to test. These tools include the EU early warning and response system (EWRS) that ensures a 24 hours / 7 days alert of the



emergence or development of serious cross-border threats to health, the EU reference laboratories for public health which can provide support for the rapid detection of biological threats and the EU Health Task Force.

The design of the future multiannual financial framework and its instruments is ahead of us. What I will want to ensure is that we continue to build a more robust approach to European crisis management and civil preparedness, shifting from reaction to proactive readiness.

*7. Your mission letter sets out a number of ambitions to expand crisis management capacity. With specific reference to health preparedness, how do you foresee to overcome financing challenges with regard to recent budget cuts to other programmes such as the EU4Health Programme and Horizon Europe, and challenges posed by competing political priorities, which have already affected actions and projects to be undertaken by DG HERA? With this in mind, how do you intend to bolster health preparedness and how do you foresee future financing of such actions? Do you foresee an expanded capacity of HERA, if so - how? Can you elaborate on the development of the wider EU stockpiling strategy? How will you ensure that the foreseen preparedness and stockpiling strategies strike the balance between having sufficient reserves and not creating shortages in Member States and other countries, including the Global South?*

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has supported Member States in their efforts to strengthen their health security preparedness and the resilience of health systems. Meeting this challenge meant unprecedented coordination and financial support.

At EU level, the largest and most ambitious ever EU financial programme solely dedicated to health, EU4Health, was established as a cornerstone of the renewed momentum of health security and preparedness policy and the European Health Union. A significant portion of its budget has been dedicated to protecting people from serious cross-border health threats and fostering health preparedness, notably to improve national surveillance systems (some EUR 85 million) and to address anti-microbial resistance (EUR 50 million). Investing in health preparedness actions and the overall resilience of health systems should be seen as an investment and not as a cost at both national and European levels. In addition, EU4Health funding has been mobilised to respond swiftly to other emerging issues, including global health challenges like the mpox outbreak in Africa and to improve healthcare for Ukrainian refugees and displaced persons.

When it comes to funding, while operating within the parameters of the current multiannual financial framework, I will extract maximum use of every euro available.

In relation to crisis preparedness and response, HERA's responsibility is to strengthen health preparedness and response in the EU, amongst others by contributing to ensuring that medical countermeasures are available when needed. If confirmed, I will work with all other relevant Members of the College to develop an ambitious strategy to support access and availability to medical countermeasures from the early detection of threats to the development of new medical countermeasures, their production at-scale and their rapid deployment across Europe and beyond.

I would see this new Medical Countermeasures Strategy as an opportunity to offer an "end-to-end" approach, from threat assessment to supporting research, scaling up of production in times of crises, and stockpiling. As part of the work to prepare for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats (CBRN) and based on a wider stockpiling strategy, this would harness tools such as joint procurement. Furthermore, I will also draw on HERA's expertise for the preparation of the future EU Preparedness Union Strategy, in full complementarity with other Commissioners' portfolios. Last but not least, the preparatory work of HERA for a Critical Medicines Act to prevent shortages of critical medicines, will also be very relevant for averting health crises as a result of such critical shortages. If confirmed, I will work very closely with the Commissioner for health and animal welfare on these aspects.

One of the key lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic is the importance of rapidly deploying essential medical supplies in times of crisis. No one is safe until everybody is safe. This was the reason to create the first EU-wide reserve of critical medical equipment through the rescEU stockpile in 2020. Many other rescEU stockpiles have followed since then. It is paramount for the EU and for the Member States to continue investing in securing the appropriate medical countermeasures in the right quantities. However, we need to rationalise our funding into well targeted strategic priorities.

If confirmed, I intend to work closely with other Commissioners to develop a wide-ranging EU stockpiling strategy. This strategy will further reinforce our stockpiling capacity at EU level and support stockpiling at national level, stepping up the planning, design and implementation of stockpiles, to allow for a swift deployment of medical countermeasures in the event of public health emergencies. I will promote a careful and close coordination with Member States to avoid uncoordinated solutions on strategic inventories, which would create imbalances and increase the risk of shortages in Member States and third countries. I am committed to strengthening our crisis management and response mechanism to continue the shift from reaction to pro-active readiness.

To strengthen EU health security, we should also strengthen our ties with our global partners to reinforce global health security, using the EU's Team Europe approach, tested during COVID-19 and more recently during the Mpox crisis. I would therefore continue to contribute, working together with my fellow Commissioners, to reinforcing the global health emergency preparedness and response architecture, also shaped in the context of WHO through the International Health Regulations and the planned Pandemic Agreement.

*8. Which specific measures will you take to ensure that disaster prevention measures are integrated into other EU policy areas? Given the frequency of extreme weather events due to climate change, what possibilities for synergies do you see between the UCPM and the future Climate Adaptation Plan? Which concrete measures do you envisage to work with Member States facing severe droughts? How will you ensure that climate risk preparedness and adaptation is also adequately embedded in EU policies related to agriculture and food?*

The importance of disaster prevention is increasing with the more and more tangible effects and costs of climate change. If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will engage within the next Commission to take a truly all-encompassing approach in this regard, which is ultimately also at the centre of the future preparedness union.

I will support common policy goals for disaster prevention, especially on key sectors. Crucial initiatives in this respect include the European Climate Adaptation Plan, the Water Resilience initiative, and the Vision for Agriculture and Food.

Climate adaptation is about proactively putting in place measures that limit the destructive potential of the increased climate hazards. I will therefore give my full support to ensuring that every investment is made structurally resilient to future climate related disasters by design. Moreover, I will promote 'smart' prevention which also brings economic and social benefits to our societies and citizens. This includes but is not limited to EU policies on agriculture and food. I will of course seek to ensure that solidarity mechanisms under the UCPM address climate threats as well.

We have all witnessed both the recent dramatic floods in Central Europe, fires and increasing droughts in Southern Europe, which demonstrated again the crucial role of the water cycle in disaster risk management and the urgent need for strengthened prevention to address water related risks I will be ready to support the work on the European Water Resilience Strategy, where a preparedness approach will be needed. Equally, I will work with my fellow Commissioners to promote climate adaptation and contribute to the work on the Climate Adaptation Plan. I will also look into promoting that sustainability of our farming and food sector includes aspects of disaster resilience.

#### Questions from the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

### **9. Preparedness**

*One of the priorities of your portfolio will be Preparedness and Crisis Management. This comes against the backdrop of emerging threats and hybrid attacks, both with an internal and external dimension that put at risk not only the functioning of our critical infrastructures and basic public services but also the security and the well-being of our citizens as well as our economic stability and prosperity. In this regard, you will be in charge of overseeing the development and implementation of an EU Preparedness Union Strategy, aiming at a potential EU Preparedness Law in the future. Which steps will you take to develop this strategy? While respecting national competence, how will you ensure that different levels of administration, private sector and civil society are fully involved in this strategy? And how will you plan to bolster an EU Culture of Preparedness in our public debate?*

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will steer the development and implementation of an ambitious EU Preparedness Union Strategy in close collaboration with my fellow Commissioners, the HRVP and Member States.

I will build inter alia on the special report on civilian and defense preparedness by former Finnish President Niinistö.

In view of Europe's new crisis management reality, with new and escalating internal and external security threats and increasing impact of climate change, an EU Preparedness Union Strategy represents a key tool to develop a common vision around the efficient preparedness of our societies, citizens and critical infrastructure as this is a key condition to safeguard our economic stability and prosperity.

The EU Preparedness Union Strategy will recognise the importance of the Single Market, which contributes significantly to the EU's GDP and impacts almost 450 million citizens. Recent crises have demonstrated how vulnerable the Single Market can be when disruptions occur and how much the European economy rely on a well-functioning Single Market. The Internal Market Emergency and Resilience Act (IMERA), formally signed in October 2024, will serve as a foundation for a functioning Single Market during crisis and will safeguard the free movement of goods, services and persons. IMERA will provide for joint exercises with Member States for large-scale crisis simulations, ensuring readiness for scenarios that could disrupt the Single Market. The IMERA Board, responsible for governance and strategic oversight, will facilitate cooperation between Member States, the Commission and the European Parliament. Additionally, industry stakeholders, including SMEs, may have a seat at the table to ensure that businesses can both contribute to and benefit from the preparedness measures.

The EU Preparedness Union Strategy will follow a broad definition of "preparedness" also including the concepts of resilience building and disaster risk management, thus providing an overarching strategic approach to disaster and crisis management for the years to come. This Strategy could focus on an integrated and all hazards approach, a whole of government and a whole of society approach.

1. An integrated and all-hazards approach: *a shift to a more proactive crisis management mode at EU level* - because disasters and crises are increasingly complex, occurring simultaneously and exacerbating each other and cascading across different sectors and levels of administration. To better understand and anticipate such disasters and crises in the future, I will ensure the strengthening of capabilities in the areas of strategic foresight, anticipation, risk analysis, early-warning, detection and analysis. Moreover, I will work with my colleagues in the College to further mainstream risk management and prevention, and climate adaptation across key sectors of European society and economy; Member States and local authorities need to make better use of existing regional and cohesion funds to increase their level of preparedness.
2. A whole-of-government approach: *a more comprehensive and integrated approach to Europe's crisis management* - because in the event of a complex disaster or crisis, different elements of government, from the regional to the national and EU level, must seamlessly work together for the protection of citizens. I will also assess whether there is a need for legislation on EU Preparedness that could support the setting of joint standards and guidelines and align EU and national efforts as efficiently as possible.
3. A whole-of-society approach: *a broader establishment of a culture of preparedness and resilience in Europe* - because ensuring collective preparedness is only possible with active engagement of all relevant stakeholders, including the private sector, industry and businesses, but also the scientific community, and above all local communities and our citizens.

A comprehensive approach to preparedness for the EU is in our common interest in these times of 'poly-crisis'. I will spare no effort to closely work with Member States to support them in strengthening their national crisis management policies and operations and to get their support for the necessary work at EU level.

## **10. Anti-discrimination and other equality legislation**

*How do you intend to address the gaps in existing EU anti-discrimination legislation and ensure effective enforcement of EU anti-racism and anti-discrimination legislation, as well as the strengthening of the rights of persons belonging to minorities? What are your plans to overcome the political blockage in the Council on the horizontal Anti-discrimination Directive and what are your intentions as regards the existing proposal, taking into account the EP position? How do you plan to unblock the proposal for extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime, and what additional measures will you take to combat these offenses? How will you monitor the implementation of the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence in line with the Istanbul Convention? Do you plan to review the scope of the Directive to include a consent-based definition of rape? Will you support extending the current list of 'EU crimes' as outlined in Article 83 TFEU to explicitly include "gender-based violence" and what other actions are you planning to combat such violence, including*

*gender-based cyber violence? What is your strategy against cyberbullying and, related to online threats, how will you approach the protection of children and other vulnerable groups online, in particular when it comes to dark patterns, deceptive and addictive designs and AI-generated content?*

*How will you collaborate with the other Commissioners in this field, in particular with the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law?*

Important progress has been made in recent years to strengthen the overall EU legal framework on equality and anti-discrimination. Adopting the Equal Treatment Directive would fill nonetheless a major remaining gap in EU anti-discrimination legislation by protecting everyone in our societies, beyond the area of employment already covered by EU legislation, against discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, disability, age, or sexual orientation. I am strongly committed to ensure that the negotiations on this comprehensive proposal remain a priority for the coming mandate, counting on the continued support from the European Parliament. In Council, the recent progress under the Belgian Presidency has created a strong momentum to move forward. I will closely cooperate with the Council Presidencies and use all my efforts to support the work in Council in view of reaching the required unanimity.

Effective implementation and enforcement of equality rules continues to be a challenge. The Political Guidelines make clear that implementation should be a major priority, and especially in the area of equality, what matters is the impact of our rules for individuals. Thus, if I am confirmed, I will use the implementation dialogues with stakeholders set out in the Political Guidelines to discuss progress and identify concrete implementation challenges on the ground: I look forward to discussing the results in the European Parliament so that we can together work on solutions. I will also support Member States in implementing the new legislation, through workshops and guidance that can help national authorities and stakeholders, such as social partners, to apply the rules on the ground. There are many examples of good practice, and we need to promote these. I will closely monitor the implementation of the two new Directives on strengthening equality bodies that assist victims of discrimination.

With the next report on the Racial Equality and Employment Equality Directives due in 2026, I will propose to focus specifically on the sanctions in discrimination cases. I will follow-up with Member States to ensure proper application. Finally, I will use all the powers entrusted upon the Commission to ensure proper implementation of the *acquis*, as well as relevant judgments of the Court of Justice. For example, as regards LGBTIQ equality, I will give full support to the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law to ensure application of the judgements on recognition of marriage and parenthood of same-sex couples between Member States for the purposes of free movement.

Similarly, if confirmed, I will support the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law when it comes to the inclusion of hate speech and hate crime in the list of “EU crimes” in Article 83 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to encourage the Council to adopt the required Council Decision by unanimity. From a specific equality perspective, I will ensure that actions to counter hate speech and hate crime have a prominent place in the post 2025 Union of Equality strategies, relating to gender equality, anti-racism and LGBTIQ equality. I will also strive to address hate speech and hate crime targeting Roma people and persons with disabilities. In addition, if confirmed I will also work closely with the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration to ensure effective coordination between the Union of Equality strategies and the work to combat anti-semitism and foster Jewish life, and to combat anti-Muslim hatred.

Gender-based violence remains a terrifying reality for far too many people in the EU and should have no place in our societies. In the past years, the EU made progress to prevent such violence, protect victims and punish offenders, in particular with the adoption of the Directive to combat violence against women and the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention. Full implementation of this Directive, which requires the criminalisation of *inter alia* online gender-based hate speech and establishes measures on the prevention, protection and support of victims and their access to justice, will now be key. I will support the Member States in implementing their obligations regarding gender-based violence in general, and on the role of consent in sexual relations in particular.

As regards the crime of rape, I regret that an EU-level definition of rape based on a lack of consent could not be agreed in the Directive on violence against women. Empirical evidence and current public cases show that definitions based on the use of force or threat are outdated and that a modern definition based on the lack of consent is needed. Before a review of the Directive on violence against women, however, we should focus first on its full and correct implementation. That said, I will assist the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration in the negotiations on the child sexual abuse Directive, where a similar definition is included and where the Parliament’s support will be essential. Further enhancing the list of EU crimes would require unanimity in the Council, as with the proposals for hate speech and hate crime.

There are a number of steps to take to further tackle cyber violence. In addition to the implementation of the Directive on violence against women, which requires the criminalisation of the most common forms of cyber violence (non-consensual sharing of intimate images, including AI-generated deepfakes, cyber harassment, cyber stalking and misogynistic online hate speech), if confirmed, I will explore a code of conduct with social media platforms on cyber violence against women and girls, contribute to the action plan against cyberbullying and the work steered by the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport. Finally, I will work closely with the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and Rule of Law on safety in politics as cyberbullying, especially gender-based cyberbullying, is a key reason for women not to enter or remain in politics.

## **11. Equality strategies, disability and equality data**

*How will you collaborate with other EU Commissioners to ensure coherence and mainstreaming in other EU policies of various equality strategies, such as the LGBTIQ+ Strategy, the EU Gender Equality Strategy, the Strategy on Roma Equality and Inclusion Strategy, and the EU Anti-racism action plan and Anti-Racism Strategy? Do you envisage new legislative proposals when updating the equality and antidiscrimination strategies? How will you work to ensure that the EU remains a safe and inclusive space for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity? Will you commit to the use of swift infringement procedures in cases of backsliding? What steps would you take to improve the collection of more and better equality data? Furthermore, what actions will you take to ensure the implementation of the UN CRPD within the Member States and within the EU institutions? Which steps will you take for the EU to join to the UN CRPD Optional Protocol?*

Equality mainstreaming is not an objective in itself, but a means to strengthen the foundation of a just and prosperous society, and, by drawing on all its talent, of a more competitive economy and democratic and safe society. This is why we need to keep combining targeted equality initiatives with equality mainstreaming to achieve the Union of equality mentioned in my mission letter.

In line with my Mission Letter, if confirmed, I will lead the work on equality mainstreaming in EU policies, legislation and funding programmes. I will make full use of the Taskforce on Equality with its network of Equality Coordinators in all Directorates-General of the Commission and the European External Action Service, covering all EU policy areas. All Commissioners-designate and Executive Vice Presidents-designate have committed to gender mainstreaming. I look forward to taking this strong commitment forward through exchanges with my colleagues on equality mainstreaming in their portfolios, in particular on the win-win opportunities that emerge when equality is considered. I will work with the Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration, to see how the equality perspective can best be integrated in funding programmes. An example from the past can serve as inspiration: the pilot on gender mainstreaming in the budget.

This should be backed up with training and information across the Commission, focusing on areas such as gender mainstreaming, LGBTIQ equality or disability mainstreaming. Impact assessments and evaluations across EU policy areas can usefully look at the equality dimension.

Several Union of Equality strategies and action plans are coming to their end next year. If confirmed, I will immediately begin working on the new Gender Equality Strategy, on a renewed LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and on a new Anti-Racism Strategy. If confirmed, I will ensure that the design of the new strategies benefits from a broad, consultative process, involving the European Parliament, the Member States, civil society and other stakeholders. I will look at whether and what action is needed to fill remaining gaps or strengthen the existing legal framework, in particular as regards men and women's equal access to goods and services and the impact of the new legislation on artificial intelligence on non-discrimination and equality.

As regards the safety of LGBTIQ persons, I will strive to build safer European societies for people in all their diversity. If confirmed, I will carefully assess what has been achieved, where the remaining gaps are and propose targeted measures to uphold LGBTIQ people's rights and create synergies with the other equality strategies. The renewed LGBTIQ Equality Strategy that I will propose will among other things focus on banning the practice of conversion therapy, in full respect of Member States' competences. There are many dimensions of policy where the particular interests of LGBTIQ people need to be taken into account, including harassment, children's rights and mental health. I look forward to taking these issues forward with Commissioners responsible for these portfolios.

Delivering, implementing and enforcement of equality and anti-discrimination rules will be at the core of my work as Commissioner for Equality, if I am confirmed. I will discuss with Member States where there are deficiencies and will oversee the proper implementation of the recently adopted legislation. Strengthened equality bodies will give more teeth to EU equality and non-discrimination rules at national level. Where necessary and appropriate, I will not hesitate to propose to the College that we exercise the powers given to the Commission as Guardian of the Treaties, including the use of infringement procedures.

I fully agree that we need more accurate and comparable data to enable policy-makers and the public to assess the scale and nature of discrimination suffered, and to build our awareness of trends on a robust basis. Progress has been made, including through work with Member States including through national statistics. I will propose that the Commission will further step up its efforts on equality data when renewing the equality strategies. If confirmed, during my mandate I will work within the Commission, with Member States, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Council Presidencies, the UN Praia group, civil society organisations and other stakeholders towards more and better equality data.

The Commission is currently working on a progress report of the Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030, assessing its implementation, as well as remaining challenges. The Commission, as the EU's focal point under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), is also preparing for the constructive dialogue on its implementation in the EU. These processes are very helpful for identifying the remaining gaps and, where deemed necessary, updating the Strategy's objectives and actions. Not all Member States have acceded to the Optional Protocol to the UNCRPD, and the proposal for a Council Decision for EU accession to the Optional Protocol has been with the Council since 2008. I commit to ensure that the Commission closely follows the progress of accession by Member States to this Optional Protocol.

If confirmed, one of my early priorities would be to close the remaining gaps and contribute to a barrier-free Europe for persons with disabilities. Key areas for attention will continue to be employment, independent living, accessibility, and mainstreaming of disability considerations across all policy areas.

#### Questions from the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

*12. What are your key priority areas and concrete measures for the upcoming Roadmap for Women's Rights and the renewed EU Strategy on Gender Equality? How will they relate to other strategic documents? How will you ensure that women's rights and gender equality are prioritised and properly covered within your own portfolio and across the new Commission, how will you organise the work, ensure cooperation with the Justice Commissioner and DG JUST? How do you plan to maintain and integrate the intersectional approach in your work in the area of health and education and the supply of goods and services, will the strategy include a follow-up to the commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights and guidelines to be developed for comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality and relationship education?*

The Roadmap on Women's Rights will set out our vision on women's rights, engaging a discussion with the European Parliament and with the Member States. It is already clear that areas such as violence against women and economic and political empowerment of women have to remain high on the agenda. If confirmed, I will work closely with the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness and all Commissioners to ensure that the Roadmap reflects the gender equality challenges across all policy areas, be it in work, health, education, justice, political participation or the on-line space. The combination of my two portfolios will also help me in making sure that no one is left behind in times of crisis. Different crises – health, conflict or climate related – all have clear equality dimensions and effective responses to crises must take into account the needs of different groups of people in society.

If confirmed, I will propose to the College a roadmap that will provide a high-level agenda; it will guide us in developing our Gender Equality Strategy post-2025 which will present concrete actions to reach these objectives. The future strategy will draw on several ongoing studies as well as a broad public consultation process. A priority going forward is the implementation of the EU legislation that has been adopted in the recent years, and making sure that the new rights and strengthened protection become a reality on the ground. Another priority could be to develop an initiative to improve women's representation in politics, also linked to the work of the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law, on the safety of political candidates and elected representatives. Other initiatives could serve to strengthen women's financial independence and reduce the gender pension gap and to tackle harmful gender stereotypes, especially in media and advertising. I also intend to look closely into

algorithmic discrimination, taking into account first experiences of the implementation of the new AI Act. The Strategy could also address certain issues related to health, including sexual and reproductive and rights to the extent covered by EU competence. I will strive to ensure, together with the Commissioner for International Partnerships, full coherence of both the Roadmap and the next Gender Equality Strategy with EU external action on these aspects. The new Gender Equality Strategy could also take an intersectional approach, taking into account the particularly vulnerable position of, for instance, women with disabilities, migrant women, or LGBTIQ women, thus ensuring coherence with other Union of Equality strategies. From personal experience, I know how essential it is to pursue an intersectional approach for effective equality policy action.

If confirmed, I will work closely with the Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare to address discrimination in the health area. The EU4Health Programme has been key in fighting inequality in disease prevention, crisis preparedness, health care provision. Under Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, the European Cancer Inequalities Registry has documented inequalities related to age, gender, educational and income level, and disparities in cancer prevention and care between urban and rural areas in cancer.

Given the interlinks of our respective policies, I will work closely together with the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law to ensure that an equality perspective is duly integrated in all policies under his responsibility.

I also intend to work closely with the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness and the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport to tackle issues like discrimination, bullying, and stereotypes in education. Whilst respecting Member States' competence to decide on the content of education, in my view, promoting comprehensive sexuality education, in line with UNESCO Guidelines and international standards, is a critical success factor in preventing gender-based violence and improving young people's health and wellbeing.

Honourable Members are also referred to replies to question 10.

*13. The gender pay gap persists to this day and combined with other structural challenges to women's participation in employment contribute to an equally worrying gender pension gap. What concrete actions are you going to take to tackle the gender pay gap and to lower pay discrimination in particular in female dominated sectors such as care and what are your plans to address and remove the challenges, such as lack of work-life balance and sufficient support and legal framework for care responsibilities faced by women, such as mothers, that contribute to lower women participation in employment and in higher-paid sectors? How will you pay special attention to women in precarious situations or in conditions of vulnerability, such as homeless women, or to the access of women in rural areas or remote regions to essential services and infrastructure?*

Gender inequality is not only an injustice, it is also a massive economic obstacle with long term adverse impact on our competitiveness. While the gender pay gap in the EU has narrowed slightly, from 13.7% in 2019 to 12.7% in 2022, it is still too high in most Member States. As a result of the difficulties women face during their working lives, the gender pension gap was still 25.4 % at EU level in 2023.

Pay transparency measures set out in the recently adopted Directive and the stronger enforcement of the equal pay right will be a real game-changer for women in Europe. These measures will empower workers to claim their rights by giving them access to the information they need. The new rules will also trigger action by companies to address structural discrimination or bias in pay, where it exists.

Member States have until June 2026 to transpose the Directive into national law. If confirmed, I would like the Commission to make a concerted effort to support the proper transposition of the Directive in Member States, and then its full implementation in practice, while avoiding excessive administrative burdens for employers. We can do this by organising implementation workshops and mutual learning exchanges to facilitate the sharing of good practices, and by organising meetings with Member States who have questions on the interpretation of the law. I will work on guidance, for example on how to establish work of equal value and intersectional discrimination in law. EU funding supports national authorities in developing digital tools to facilitate the application of the new rules.

In addition to tackling the pay gap, I would continue to strive to close the gender employment gap. One key measure to do so is the implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive. This Directive aims to facilitate a

better sharing of caring responsibilities to create the conditions for women to enter or remain in the labour market, in particular when there are children or older person in the family to be cared for. It does so by designing family leaves and flexible working arrangements in a manner, which makes them more attractive and thus should thus increase the take-up by men.

The new rules had to be implemented by August 2022. It is now my intention to closely monitor whether the national laws comply with the requirements of the Directive, especially its provisions on parental leave and/or its compensation. As a first step, I intend to enter into dialogue with the Member States concerned to seek to tackle some of the shortcomings and promote funding support available.

Finally, to tackle the 'gender care gap', the renewed Gender Equality Strategy will be opportunities to present new actions to strengthen women's rights and equality, across the EU and the EU institutions.

When it comes to women in precarious situations or conditions of vulnerability, I feel strongly that the Commission's actions must consider their specific needs. For instance, women often constitute the larger share of the so-called 'hidden homeless' who have no permanent homes. I will work with the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness and the Commissioner for Energy and Housing to ensure that the first ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy will also relate to equality challenges, in particular gender equality. To address the situation of the most vulnerable, including homeless people, it is essential to address the root causes of poverty, and focus on insufficient incomes, gaps in access to the labour market and gaps in access to social and essential services.

If confirmed, I also intend to boost efforts to promote equality for women in rural and remote regions. Despite their immense contribution, they often face unequal access to resources, education, and decision-making power. I will cooperate with the Commissioner for Agriculture and Food to make sure that we will build upon the achievements of our policies and available funding to support women in rural and remote areas, including CAP 2023-2027 that includes a specific reference to the need to improve the situation of women living in rural and remote areas. Essential and social services are the main enablers of social inclusion of women living in rural and remote areas. I will make sure that EU funding continues investing into the provision of those services in these areas for the benefit of women.

*14. Gender-based violence is a scourge that affects all women in the EU at home, at work or in the streets. How do you intend to ensure the full implementation of the Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence and of the Istanbul Convention in all parts of the EU? Sexual violence and cyberbullying are mentioned in the Directive but more is needed. What measures will the upcoming Action Plan on Cyberbullying include to ensure that digital spaces are safe from online harassment, hate speech and online abuse? And will it tackle images used to degrade women and tarnish their reputation, including AI generated, through sharing and circulating content such as deepfakes or image-based sexual abuse? How can this be achieved including through prevention by tech companies? Will you take as a priority the production of guidelines for Member States on setting up awareness-raising campaigns on the role of consent in sexual relationships in all Member States as well as on sexuality education and do you plan to put forward any legislative proposals or initiatives on criminalisation of rape with a consent-based definition? Will you work on any new dedicated proposals tackling gender based violence, including the submission of a proposal for a Council decision to extend the current list of so-called 'EU crimes' and identify gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) of the TFEU, as requested by the Parliament?*

Being free from violence and stereotypes is one of the key pillars of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. I am proud that the EU adopted the groundbreaking Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence in May this year. We now need to make sure that the new law becomes a reality on the ground by the date of transposition in June 2027. I will support Member States with the timely and correct implementation of the Directive. The Directive at the same time contributes to implementing the obligations of the European Union under the Istanbul Convention in the area of judicial cooperation in criminal matters in the Member States, including those which have not ratified the Convention.

In addition, the Istanbul Convention must also be implemented as regards the EU's public administration. Each institution, agency, delegation and body will have to have in place a set of measures, including solid anti-harassment policies and frameworks. In cooperation with the Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration, I will strengthen coordination with all EU institutions, including the European Parliament, to ensure that our public administrations live up to the requirements and to exchange good practices.



Already in 2015, a survey from the Fundamental Rights Agency found that one in 10 women in the EU reported having experienced cyber harassment in the form of unwanted sexually explicit emails or text messages or inappropriate advances on social media. Since then, this danger has only grown in magnitude. Online harassment particularly impacts women active in public life, which can have the effect of silencing women, hindering their societal participation and undermining the principle of democracy.

Online and AI generated degrading images are a recent manifestation of the more structural problem of violence against women. We already have tools at our disposal that we need to exploit to the full. The Directive on violence against women criminalises the non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material, ensures that victims receive the necessary support and facilitates their access to justice. The Digital Service Act (DSA) also contains strong rules to tackle online gender-based violence, notably by including clear flagging mechanisms and the appointment of trusted flaggers with expertise on these issues. The DSA requires providers of very large online platforms and very large search engines to carry out a risk assessment and, should they identify risks related to gender-based violence to mitigate such risks in an effective manner. The Commission has already taken investigative actions vis-à-vis several designated entities on the risks stemming from generative AI and works very closely with the experts in the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency to tackle the issue of AI generated content such as deepfakes or image-based sexual abuse.

The AI Act introduces rules for generative AI, namely to label ‘deep fakes’ and to embed technical solutions that enable detection of AI-generated output. This will effectively enable providers of online services to identify such content and take necessary actions, for example removing any content that falsely depicts women as nude. Beyond that, the AI Act prohibits AI that uses such deceptive content to manipulate persons and cause harms. The violation of these rules may result in the imposition of significant fines. The Commission is working on practical guidance to ensure swift and coherent application of the provisions of the AI Act concerning these prohibitions that would become applicable as from February 2025.

As announced in the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, if confirmed, I will help set up a voluntary framework to bring together online platforms and other stakeholders to better protect women online. I intend to launch work with social media platforms on cyber violence against women and girls. These measures taken together will ensure that gender-based cyber violence is effectively addressed across the EU, that victims feel confident that the law effectively protects them, and that illegal cyber violence will not go unpunished.

If confirmed, I will give full support to the Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy in the work to send a strong message on the full implementation of these laws and to ensure the guidance under the AI Act takes into account the potential harms caused by AI-generated images used to degrade women and tarnish their reputation and to effectively tackle cyberbullying, illegal hate speech and gender-based violence.

In recent years we have also seen an escalation in cyberbullying. If I am confirmed, I will support the work of the Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport to bring this work and the equality work strands together.

Finally, as regards a new Eurocrime on gender-based violence, Honourable Members are referred to the replies to question 10.

#### Question from the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

*15. As Commissioner-designate for Equality, how will you mainstream equality concerns across all relevant policy areas and ensure a cohesive and inclusive approach, for example between the various equality strategies in your area of responsibility and the new Anti-Poverty Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and the new European Affordable Housing Plan? Regarding the new Gender Equality Strategy, what actions do you foresee to close the gender pay and pension gap? What legislative measures do you envisage in order to strengthen the position of women in the workplace, and in particular to tackle the many disadvantages faced by women through the ‘motherhood penalty’ as referred to by EIGE? How will the Strategy address work-life balance for parents and carers particularly as regards early childcare provision to facilitate women’s return to the labour market?*

*Do you commit to update the current Strategy for the Rights of persons with disabilities with new flagship initiatives for 2025 - 230 and what priority areas would you focus on for the coming years? How will you ensure*

*the proper implementation of legislation like the European Disability Card and European Parking Card in order to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities? In line with the EU and Member States' obligations under the UNCRPD, what other EU actions do you foresee to improve the social and economic situation of persons with disabilities, in particular to address barriers to their freedom of movement and their ability to reside and work in different EU Member States?*

If confirmed as Commissioner for Equality, I will ensure that equality and anti-discrimination are considered across all policies through the work of the Taskforce on Equality and close contacts with my colleagues. I will work towards better equality data, to bolster the evidence base for addressing equality needs and concerns of different groups. I will promote transparency in accounting for progress towards a Union of Equality overall. I will strengthen dialogue with actors at national, regional and local levels, engaging with the people affected. Across relevant strategies, I will work to identify, include and propose measures for people facing discrimination, for instance marginalised communities such as Roma, people with disabilities, older persons, and single mothers. It is all together that we will advance the Union of Equality.

I will work closely with the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness who will present a new Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as an EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, and with the Commissioner for Energy and Housing, who will put forward the first-ever European Affordable Housing Plan.

Whilst the actions under the next Gender Equality Strategy will depend on the outcome of ongoing studies and a broad public consultation process, it is already clear that we will need further actions to tackle the gender gaps in the labour market. I detailed my position on gender pay and pension gaps in reply to question 13.

The 'motherhood penalty in earnings', is quite simply unfair. It is based on bias and discrimination mothers tend to face from their employers. To counter it, I will further tackle harmful gender stereotypes and work with equality bodies and labour inspectorates to address discrimination of mothers in the workplace – but also of fathers who want to take family leave. We have a strong legal framework in place, and I will look more closely into effective implementation in all Member States. To tackle the unequal division of unpaid work and the issue of care, I will ensure that Member States fully and effectively implement the Work-Life Balance Directive and follow up on the Recommendation on early childhood education and care. I will work with the Executive Vice President for People, Skills and Preparedness to encourage Member States to improve the availability and quality of care services (also for long-term care), including through EU-funding.

As set out in response to question 13, I intend to build on, and further develop, the initiatives put forward by the current College, to close the remaining gaps and contribute to a barrier-free Europe for persons with disabilities. This includes the work on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Key priorities will continue to be employment, independent living, accessibility, and mainstreaming of disability considerations across all policy areas.

I intend to take decisive action to support the proper implementation of the new Directives on the European Disability Card and the European Parking Card. I will liaise with the Member States to support their efforts throughout the transposition process in the next two and a half years. I will also make sure to prepare the delegated and implementing acts to complete the legal framework and enable the introduction of the cards at national level, and in particular a delegated act setting out digital features for the physical cards, to be adopted within a year of entry into force of the Directive.

#### Question from the Subcommittee on Public Health

*16. One of your tasks is to develop a new strategy to support medical countermeasures against threats to public health. In this context, the lack of European strategic autonomy as well as the current overreliance on imports of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) plays a crucial role. It is essential to establish a robust mechanism that supports the production of APIs and affordable and accessible finished medicines for patients within Europe. This would not only prove essential were we to meet a pandemic anew, but be of critical importance for the area of development of prevention and treatment of diseases in Europe in general, both common and rare ones. Could you outline your strategy for enhancing preparedness for health challenges against this background, also considering global solidarity? Please address in your answer in particular the cooperation infrastructure inside and outside the Union, how to achieve a robust mechanism for the production, development and availability of critical medicines and ingredients, how to reduce EU dependence from foreign providers and ensure financing of public health policy including through the EU health programme?*

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will put a strong emphasis on international cooperation together with the Commissioner for International partnerships and the Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare as global health crises require global cooperation and solidarity.

The Commission already works with this mindset and closely cooperates with international partners and third countries. These partnerships have been put to a test this summer when the African continent witnessed the outbreak of a more severe variant of Mpox, spreading across several countries and causing deaths amongst the most vulnerable groups. Building on the cooperation developed over the past years, we were the first to deliver vaccines on the ground in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, within two weeks after the declaration of Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization and allowing vaccination campaigns to start immediately thereafter. This would not have been possible without the relations of trust that were established since the COVID-19 pandemic and the reinforced cross-border health threats framework, including the establishment of HERA. In the exercise, the Commission also took into account and supported the sharing of vaccines donated by Member States. Thanks to the Team Europe approach, we are today a leading partner in the response to the outbreak.

If confirmed, I will support the Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare in his work on the planned Pandemic Agreement, which should improve prevention, preparedness, and response to future pandemics at global level, as well as with the Commissioner for International Partnerships, to reinforce the Global Gateway. Investments should not only focus on the European Union, but also help our global partners to develop their own resilient manufacturing capacities. Existing initiatives, such as the Team Europe flagship on manufacturing and access to vaccines, medicines and health technologies in Africa will be continued and will serve as useful model for strengthening capacities in low and middle-income countries.

At the same time, in order to support procurement and donations, it is necessary that medical countermeasures are available. As shown by the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of reserve manufacturing and supply capacities, complex global value chains for production and distribution of pharmaceuticals, and lack of diversification of sources of dependencies from third countries can quickly result in shortages of essential medical countermeasures. I therefore consider that the European Union should continue to invest in being more autonomous regarding manufacturing of critical medical countermeasures. If confirmed, I will support the work of the Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare on a Critical Medicines Act, aiming to strengthen the resilience of our supply chains and to reduce dependencies on non-EU countries for critical medicines and their ingredients.

The new Medical Countermeasures Strategy that the President-elect has tasked me to deliver is envisaged to cover therapeutics, vaccines, diagnostics, medical devices, and protective equipment. It would propose an “end-to-end” approach from threat assessment to supporting the research and development of new prototypes and products, scaling up of production in times of crises, and stockpiling mechanism of such critical products. As part of the work to prepare for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats (CBRN) and based on a wider stockpiling strategy, this would harness tools such as joint procurement, and stockpiling.

Such a strategy can only deliver impacts on the ground if it follows a coordinated approach, an enhanced EU toolbox of relevant policy instruments. I will count on the European Parliament and on the Council support for its implementation.