

Questionnaires to the Commissioners-designate

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QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE

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Trade and Economic Security, Interinstitutional Relations and Transparency

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 believe I hold the right qualifications and professional experiences to contribute to the European general interest.

My work has been dedicated to EU affairs for more than two decades now. I have acquired detailed knowledge of the EU institutions and shown steadfast commitment to our common European project. First, as Permanent Representative of Slovakia to the EU (2004-2009). Later, as Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth (2009-2010), then as Vice-President of the Commission: for Interinstitutional Relations and Administration (2009-2014), the Energy Union (2014-2019), Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight (2019-2023), and currently, as Executive Vice-President of the Commission for the European Green Deal, Interinstitutional Relations, and Foresight.

Throughout these mandates, I have constantly strived to promote the European interest, while building and fostering strong relations among the EU institutions and notably with the European Parliament.

I am particularly proud of our initiatives that have significantly contributed to strengthening Europe's standing at home and around the world, such as to create a strong industrial basis for new and emerging clean technologies in the EU; promoting joint purchases of strategic commodities like gas, hydrogen and critical raw materials; or deepening the EU's partnerships with its neighbouring countries, for example by concluding post-Brexit negotiations with the United Kingdom that resulted in the 2023 EU-UK Windsor Framework.

I have also actively contributed to College debates and decision-making, with strong sustainability and social dimensions always paramount to my work.

As is laid out in my mission letter, Europe needs a new foreign economic policy, driving our prosperity and ensuring a global level playing field. If confirmed as Commissioner, I will therefore strive to ensure that free and fair trade benefits European businesses and consumers, by developing sustainable partnerships around the world, by modernising our customs system, by taking a more assertive stance against unfair competition and by putting economic security at the front and centre of our efforts.

A close relationship and constructive cooperation with the European Parliament have been – and will remain – my key guiding principles throughout my service as a Member of the College.

During my previous mandate as Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Administration (2009-2014), I negotiated the Framework Agreement with the European Parliament on behalf of the Commission.

As part of the current mandate, I have worked closely with Members in preparing the annual Commission Work Programme as well as the Joint Declaration on legislative priorities, in line with the Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-Making. Additionally, I have monitored the follow-up as regards Parliament resolutions and have ensured that the Commission has delivered on its commitment under Article 225 TFEU.

If confirmed as Commissioner for the next mandate, I will seek to build on this experience to strengthen further the cooperation between the European Commission and the European Parliament and thus help improve democratic legitimacy in Europe.

The European Parliament is central to President-elect Ursula von der Leyen's vision to deliver for EU citizens, as outlined in her political guidelines and mirrored in my mission letter. This includes the work to swiftly revise our Framework Agreement, as well as advancing our cooperation on Article 225, by asking Commissioners to take part in structured dialogues with Parliamentary committees on these resolutions, thus giving the Parliament a stronger role in initiating and shaping legislation.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will further strengthen the implementation of gender mainstreaming. I will share and support efforts to strive for gender equality in our daily work, including by applying this principle to my team, and will continue to build on the gender mainstreaming policy I steered under my previous mandate as Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Administration (2009-2014).

I remain equally committed to youth mainstreaming, building on my previous track record. By way of example, the Commission Work Programmes under my remit responded to the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe, a unique exercise with a strong focus on youth. If confirmed as Commissioner, I will maintain this commitment, including by holding annual Youth Policy Dialogues, with the first one to take place within the first hundred days of the next Commission mandate.

Finally, if confirmed as Commissioner, I commit to comply without fail with the Treaty obligations on independence, transparency, impartiality, and availability.

During my previous and current mandate as Member of the College, I have met all obligations towards the institution, including by submitting and updating all declarations of interests as required. I have also fully respected the letter and spirit of the EU Treaties and the obligation to act in the European interest.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will continue to fully respect the letter and spirit of the Treaty. In particular, I will respect the obligation to act in the European interest and without taking any instructions from any government or any other body. I will also honour the Code of Conduct of Members of the European Commission and its provisions on conflicts of interest. My Declaration of Interests is complete and accessible to the public, and I will update it rapidly, should any change be required.

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

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

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

Engagement with the European Parliament is of paramount importance to me, as demonstrated throughout the course of my service in the European Commission.

I attach great importance to the principle of collegiality and, if confirmed as Member of the College, I will collaborate fully with other Members of the College to that effect.

I would particularly strive to ensure that we build robust policies based on a wide consensus amongst pro-European forces, through our strategic partnership with the European Parliament. I believe that unity is our strongest asset.

Genuine and effective interinstitutional cooperation is essential for the EU's institutional system to work, as well as for the legitimacy of the EU's decision-making system. It relies on certain guiding principles reflected in President-elect Ursula von der Leyen's Political Guidelines and mission letters, such as openness, mutual trust and the regular exchange of information, that I am fully committed to follow.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will continue to vigorously work on reinforcing the cooperation between the Commission and the European Parliament, notably through the revision of the Framework Agreement on relations between the Parliament and the Commission, to help strengthen our joint political responsibility and our dialogue as well as to increase the flow of information and transparency.

As a rule, I will support President-elect Ursula von der Leyen in her objective to strengthen our dialogue with the European Parliament. Therefore, I will lead the efforts to ensure that Commissioners will be systematically present in their respective committees and plenary.

I believe we need to work hand in hand with the European Parliament at every stage of the policy-making process. In this context, if confirmed as Commissioner, I will ensure that parliamentary committees are involved in any major developments under my responsibility.

A stronger role of the European Parliament in initiating and shaping legislation:

In line with the Commission President-elect's continued pledge to give the Parliament a stronger role in initiating and shaping legislation, I will – if confirmed as Commissioner – uphold our commitment to respond to Parliament's resolutions under Article 225 TFEU with legislative proposals in full respect of proportionality, subsidiarity and better law-making principles. I will help to ensure that Commissioners take part in structured dialogues with Parliamentary committees on these resolutions. We have made good progress on this commitment under the Commission's current mandate, providing us with a solid basis to build on.

Trade and customs policies:

If confirmed as Commissioner, I intend to uphold all the commitments related to trade and customs policy stipulated in the Treaty. I also intend to engage regularly with the Parliament's relevant Committees, including through dedicated briefings to its members.

On economic security, I will ensure transparency and regular engagement with the Parliament on relevant developments regarding the three pillars of the European Economic Security Strategy. I will further support the work of the Parliament on an equal footing with that of the Council as regards decision-making when both institutions are co-legislators on economic security legislation.

I also look forward to working together with all relevant Committees on the external dimension of the EU internal legislation across various policy areas with a view to managing any possible trade restrictive impact.

The Commission will continue to provide the Parliament with the same trade policy documents it provides the Council, while respecting specific rules on the handling of sensitive information to ensure its protection and prevent unauthorised disclosure.

Transparency:

Given the current economic, environmental and geopolitical challenges, I see the need to create as wide a consensus on EU trade policy as possible.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will ensure that transparency and evaluation remain a cornerstone of EU trade policy in order to maintain legitimacy and public trust.

President-elect Ursula von der Leyen's Political Guidelines highlight greater transparency as one of the main objectives of a revised Framework Agreement between our institutions. I will work closely with the European Parliament and the Council for more transparency throughout the legislative process. The review of the Interinstitutional Agreement on the Transparency Register of the Parliament, Council and Commission, due by July 2025, is therefore of high importance. I believe that this can contribute to boosting trust in the EU institutions.

Provision of information and documents:

I am fully aware that the provision of information and documents is an essential aspect of deepening the partnership between the European Parliament and the Commission. I therefore commit to fully implement the relevant provisions both of the Framework Agreement between the two institutions, and of the 2016 Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-Making.

Questions from the Committee on International Trade

3. The Union trade, investment and competitiveness strategy for the next five years

A strong trade and investment agenda is indispensable for stimulating economic growth and sustainable development, creating jobs and increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of our single market. Please elaborate on your trade and investment strategy:

- *On the plurilateral and multilateral fronts, how will you build a coalition for the modernisation of the WTO, overcoming the challenges to its rule-making function and ensuring we have a fully functioning dispute settlement system? How do you plan for the Union to lead preparations for a successful 14th Ministerial Conference? Will you initiate and advance negotiations for multilateral and, if necessary, plurilateral agreements on gaps in the WTO rule book, including state intervention in support of industrial sectors, the establishment of a multilateral investment court and the implementation of agreements already reached?*
- *On the bilateral front, which bilateral trade negotiations will you prioritise and according to what timelines? How will you ensure a level playing field with non-EU countries and address China's unfair trading practices? How will you address trade irritants with the US, and safeguard and strengthen the Trade and Technology Council to promote transatlantic leadership in trade and key technologies?*
- *How will you ensure that the common commercial policy (CCP) effectively remains an area of exclusive competence for the Union? Will you decisively tackle any form of circumvention or unilateral practices by Member States and how will you do this? How will you ensure that the ratification of trade and investment agreements containing only provisions falling within the EU's exclusive competence is determined solely at EU level? Will you commit to ensure that no provisional application of trade and investment agreements, including trade chapters of broader agreements, is requested before Parliament has given its consent on those agreements? Will you promote sectoral agreements as an option when comprehensive agreements are not feasible? How will you promote digital trade to the benefit of companies and consumers?*
- *How will you ensure that the CCP promotes fundamental values, international conventions, and global climate, environmental and labour standards and that it defends the interests of consumers and workers, including with regard to digital trade? How will you implement the new approach on trade and sustainable development in existing and future agreements, in particular with regard to the SDGs, the Paris Agreement, ILO Conventions and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework?*

Trade and investment are vital for the EU. The EU is the world's largest trading block accounting for 16% of global trade, as well as being the world's top foreign investor. Our trade links enable economies of scale, contribute to EU productivity and innovation and strengthen our resilience – all of which are essential in a global environment characterised by geopolitical and geoeconomic competition. More than 30 million jobs in the EU are supported by exports with almost 10 million the result of foreign investments within the Single Market. To achieve the competitiveness, security and sustainability objectives of the new mandate, the EU needs to further strengthen its trade and investment policies.

If confirmed as the Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, I will pursue these objectives through actions in a number of areas. First, opening markets and removing trade barriers, thus providing the space our businesses need to adapt and thrive, including by defending them from the unfair trade practices of others while ensuring a global level playing field. Second, strengthening the resilience of the Single Market by securing, de-risking and diversifying sources of supply of critical raw materials and other key inputs for the EU's competitiveness. Third, working with our partners to ensure our respective transitions toward greener and more sustainable economies. Fourth, seeking and upholding stability in the rules-based trading system.

I will continue to lead efforts towards the reform and strengthening of the **World Trade Organization (WTO)**. The 14th WTO Ministerial Conference will be a milestone in this process. The EU should continue to lead preparations for substantive results – in particular in the negotiations on fisheries subsidies, but also on development, agriculture and food security matters, as well as seeking a way forward on the e-commerce moratorium. If confirmed as Commissioner, one of my key priorities will be to work with other WTO Members, including the US, to reach a consensus on restoring an effective dispute settlement system, which preserves elements that are essential for maintaining rules-based trade, notably an impartial appeal review function. While this process is underway, I will continue to sustain and enhance the operation of the Multi-Party Interim Appeal

Arbitration arrangement (MPIA). For the WTO to regain its central role in international trade, it needs to update its rulebook and adapt to today's realities. Consequently, I will work with a wide range of WTO members to address key challenges, including the negative spillovers of state intervention in the economy, the nexus between trade and climate and environment, integrating plurilateral agreements – including on investment facilitation for development and e-commerce – into the WTO framework as well as improving decision-making processes.

In parallel, I will continue to work towards the finalisation of the negotiations on the establishment of the Multilateral Investment Court by 2027, which are taking place in the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL).

Pursuing the EU's strategic objectives will also require an ambitious **bilateral trade and investment agenda**, which strengthens our competitiveness and resilience, while providing a platform for closer cooperation on sustainable development.

If I am confirmed, I will approach engagement with partners in a **proactive and flexible way**, ensuring that the EU's interests are fully addressed. On the one hand, I intend to advance our ongoing agenda, focusing on the Indo-Pacific, Latin America and Africa. The EU is already negotiating agreements with India, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and other trade partners, as well as finalising pending issues in the negotiations with Mercosur and Mexico. I will seek to bring them over the finish line in a timely manner, subject to our interests being met and our values being respected. On the other hand, I will explore new ways of developing and deepening ties with partners, reflecting specific areas of common interest, including sectoral interests. Such alternative forms of engagement – which include Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreements, Digital Trade Agreements, Mutual Recognition Agreements and the new Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships – should allow the EU to advance more quickly on targeted issues, providing both concrete benefits to the EU and an attractive offer to our partners.

The EU's bilateral relationships with the **US and China**, with the dynamics of their strategic competition, will continue to affect our trade policy.

The **US** remains our number one trading partner and I intend to further develop our bilateral relationship through dialogue as well as through an assertive defence of our interests. One avenue will be through a revamped EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC), adapting its structure to evolving needs and priorities. In parallel, I intend to work towards amicable solutions to bilateral issues, including by finding lasting solutions to the large civil aircraft dispute and the US tariffs on steel and aluminium, and by addressing measures that affect our trade relationship, such as the Inflation Reduction Act and 'buy America(n)' requirements.

With regards to **China**, I will work towards a more balanced and reciprocal trade relationship, including by addressing significant level playing field concerns linked to the negative externalities of China's state driven economic model and industrial policy, as well as the overcapacities that are distorting global markets and supply chains. Addressing these challenges will require continuous dialogue as well as the strategic use of our updated toolbox of autonomous instruments whenever necessary.

When faced with challenging policies and actions, I will take all necessary actions to defend EU interests in these bilateral relationships.

While geopolitical and geoeconomic concerns are on the rise, I firmly believe in the importance of supporting **sustainable development** through trade policy, by strengthening compliance with global **climate, environmental and labour standards**. If confirmed, I will work to ensure that the EU's policy on sustainability issues will continue to be rooted in internationally agreed approaches. I will continue to strengthen the pursuit of sustainable development objectives, including with regard to SDGs, the Paris Agreement, ILO Conventions and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. I will do so in the WTO, as well as bilaterally, for example through the trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters of our trade agreements. Our bilateral agreements provide a much-needed platform to deepen dialogue, understanding and cooperation, while also foreseeing the possibility of strengthened dispute settlement procedures.

Defending the interests of **consumers** and **workers** must continue to be a central plank of the EU's trade policy, and this extends to **digital trade**. If confirmed, I will pursue further negotiations with trading partners on binding rules on digital trade and data flows that project the EU's human-centric and values-based model globally.

EU unity will continue to be critical for our economic and geopolitical standing. Consequently, I intend to make full use of the tools available to enforce the Union's exclusive competence including through informal dialogue and, if necessary, formal infringement procedures.

At the same time, the EU's exclusive competence and unity need to be mirrored in our ability to ratify our trade agreements – our credibility depends on it. I will, as a matter of principle, seek to build a common understanding with the European Parliament and Council for concluding as many trade and investment agreements as possible as EU competence agreements. This would ensure a swift entry into force of those agreements, thus providing tangible benefits for EU citizens, SMEs and businesses more widely. Of course, this would be subject to the necessary vetting by Member States and the European Parliament at EU level. If however certain agreements are concluded as mixed, I will honour and uphold – if confirmed – the commitment to seek the consent of the European Parliament prior to provisional application.

4. Economic security

Economic security aims to minimise risks while preserving the highest possible level of economic openness and competitiveness and should never be used as an instrument to restrict trade unduly. In this regard:

- *How will you ensure that economic security, trade and investment are all part of an integrated approach? What steps will you take in designing and implementing the economic security agenda? How do you see the role of trade within the concept of a 'new foreign economic policy' and how will you ensure that trade is used as a geostrategic tool?*
- *How do you intend to use the toolkit of trade defence measures adopted during the ninth and previous legislative terms as part of a new economic security doctrine? Do you see any gaps in the existing toolkit? What will be your next steps with regard to export control and outbound investments?*
- *How will you reinforce the partnering pillar of the economic security strategy? What will Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships consist of? How will you ensure consistency and synergies with the Global Gateway? Will Parliament be in a position to provide consent following the conclusion of such agreements? How will you promote access to critical raw materials from non-EU countries in a mutually beneficial way and how will you ensure more scrutiny for Parliament?*
- *How will you support and cooperate with other Commissioners on the economic recovery of Ukraine and other partner countries affected by Russia's war of aggression, notably through an ambitious review of the EU-Ukraine DCFTA, macro-financial assistance, vigorous enforcement of the sanctions regime against Russia and the avoidance of any form of circumvention?*

Today's turbulent geopolitical and geoeconomic environment requires the EU to step up its efforts and make full use of the internal and external policies and tools at its disposal. This is reflected in the **enabling role** that trade policy plays in the new Political Guidelines, contributing to the achievement of multiple EU objectives. It is further mirrored in the external sphere by the new **foreign economic policy**, which will bring together **economic security, trade and partnerships** to more effectively pursue the EU's interests. If confirmed as Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, I will make sure that trade, investment and economic security policies form an integral and coherent part of the EU's comprehensive response to the challenges we face.

The EU's economic security is rooted in a vibrant, open and resilient Single Market. As the world's largest trading bloc, the EU is deeply integrated within the global economy and its vast value chains, which allow us to source the inputs we need at all stages of production and to scale up through access to foreign markets. If confirmed, my objective will be to preserve the highest possible level of economic openness and competitiveness, while ensuring that there is a solid understanding of the vulnerabilities we have and the risks we face, and that we deploy the necessary mitigation measures to limit them.

My approach will be based on **risk assessments** and on continuing to deploy measures across the **'promote', 'protect' and 'partner' pillars** of the Economic Security Strategy. In this regard, I will work closely with other Commissioners including the HRVP, EVP for Prosperity and Industrial Strategy as well as with the European Parliament, Member States and the relevant stakeholders to enhance the exchange of information, build a common understanding of the challenges we face and jointly develop appropriate responses. As we advance the ongoing risk assessments, there will be a need to integrate their results in the mitigation measures we take.

First, I will make the utmost use of trade policy to achieve our **partnership** objectives, reflecting its enabling role in the new foreign economic policy, the EU's competitiveness and prosperity and as a geostrategic tool. This means deepening and strengthening our current network of agreements and expanding our offer with new types of

engagement. The new **Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships** will help secure supplies of raw materials, clean energy and clean technologies, while supporting the development of our partners through enhanced investment and making sure that clean tech products, clean energy and raw materials can flow freely across borders between the partners. To make our offer as attractive and competitive as possible, we will need a whole-of-Commission approach which brings together financing (including under the Global Gateway), rules (so as to ensure greater stability for investors and supply chains) and regulatory cooperation (in order to support our partners in adapting to our regulatory requirements). Our Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships will also follow a new flexible approach both in terms of their content and format, while reflecting the interests and positions on the third country's side. I stand ready to engage with the Parliament throughout this process.

If confirmed, I will pay particular attention to the **diversification, de-risking and resilience** potential of our trade agreements and other forms of engagement with partners. This will include developing **economic security standards for key supply chains** with the G7 and other like-minded partners, which could *inter alia* support the development of stable supplies of critical raw materials (CRMs). It will also include **deepening dialogues** with partners to better understand the risks we face and exchange good practices on potential mitigation measures. Building on the network of Digital Trade Agreements, I will explore the possibilities to develop stronger and more beneficial ties with our closest and like-minded partners, to create a rules-based space for Data Free Flow with Trust and help our companies to diversify their access to data.

Second, I will ensure assertive deployment of the tools we have to protect the EU's economic security interests in a targeted and proportionate way. While the EU has a broad range of tools at its disposal, some of which are only starting to be deployed, the challenge for the coming mandate will be to ensure their coherent and coordinated use so as to best pursue the EU's objectives in relation to its trading partners. This will form a central plank of a new **economic security doctrine**, which will be based on a common understanding with the European Parliament and Member States and will serve to enhance deterrence and thus defend EU businesses increasingly affected by measures taken by third countries.

Third, I plan to continue ongoing efforts to **strengthen the EU's toolkit**. I look forward to working with the European Parliament and the Council to reach a swift agreement to update the **Foreign Direct Investment Screening Regulation**. I will also deepen discussions with the Parliament and Member States to strengthen our approach to **dual-use export controls**. In addition, I intend to evaluate in 2025 the effectiveness of the existing export controls regulatory framework in line with the Better Regulation principles and required procedural steps. With regard to **outbound investments**, I will seek, in cooperation with the Member States and businesses, a deeper and better understanding of the risks we face, by systematically reviewing and assessing transactions taking place in certain selected sectors. On this basis, I will consider further policy responses in dialogue with the European Parliament and the Member States.

Finally, in view of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, I remain fully committed to supporting the development of our **bilateral relationship with Ukraine** and to the continued, effective use of **trade and economic sanctions against Russia**, including by preventing sanctions circumvention, in cooperation with other members of the College and the EU Sanctions Envoy.

I will also continue to work to **support Ukraine** including by leveraging the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and the EU's financial assistance to foster Ukraine's gradual integration into the internal market ahead of accession. I will also replace – in close cooperation with the Commissioner in charge of Agriculture – our temporary Autonomous Trade Measures upon their expiry in June 2025 by a permanent and reciprocal further trade liberalisation, as foreseen under the DCFTA. Its objective will be to maintain on a permanent basis meaningful market access for Ukrainian products linked to gradual compliance with relevant EU standards and to improve the access to the Ukrainian market for European agricultural products, while catering for the sensitivities of the EU agricultural sector.

In the context of the EU's overall **sanctions** policy, I will continue ensuring the effective design of trade sanctions that include import and export restrictions covering dual-use items, entities in Russia and in third countries, industrial goods and business services provision. I will contribute to the implementation of sanctions and the prevention of circumvention by engaging with the EU's industry, reaching out to third countries and proposing further regulatory measures. This will include working with customs authorities, which play a crucial role in the detection and control of trade in goods (codified in the Customs Tariff Management system (TARIC)) and in the identification of potential risks of circumvention. I will work to ensure that customs authorities continue and reinforce their analytical and enforcement roles.

5. Implementation, enforcement and communication

A good policy that is poorly implemented, enforced and communicated can lead to pushback, both internally and externally, against the Union and its trade policy. To ensure the success of the CCP:

➤ *How will you ensure that trade and economic security policies are front and centre in your role as Commissioner, also given your double portfolio? How will you break down the silos in which the CCP and other Union internal and external policies operate, as well as the silos of DG Trade and other parts of the Commission and the EEAS?*

➤ *How will you foster cooperation, ownership and uptake by companies and non-EU countries notably with respect to CBAM, EUDR, CSDDD, the Forced Labour Regulation, revised ETS as well as the regulation on packaging and packaging waste? How will you help ensure that all these new instruments are applied fully and consistently and that the trade aspects of our internal legislation are sufficiently taken into account when instruments are designed, implemented and revised? What measures will you take to render the Union's customs system more efficient, thus contributing to the effective implementation of some of the Union's recent trade-related instruments? How will you continue to ensure that any future Union measures are compatible with WTO rules?*

➤ *What concrete actions will you take to ensure that EU trade policy is better communicated and explained to stakeholders, the general public, Member States' institutions and non-EU countries, including with the support of the Commission's representations and EU delegations around the world?*

➤ *How will you strengthen the participation of SMEs in the global market? How do you plan to support companies, especially SMEs, in the implementation of newly adopted legislation with the objective of easing the regulatory burden, streamlining procedures and ensuring they reap the benefits of increased market access in trade agreements? Will you ensure that all major trade-related initiatives are accompanied by an impact assessment that also covers the external impact of potential Union measures?*

➤ *How do you intend to engage with and take into account the views of business representatives, trade unions and NGOs, including via Domestic Advisory Groups that have been set up to advise on the implementation of EU trade agreements?*

I am convinced that the different elements of my portfolio are mutually reinforcing and will help me deliver on all priorities in the most effective way.

Trade is at the heart of the EU's economy and **enables** the achievement of our competitiveness, security and sustainability objectives. The synergies created by linking trade policy with economic security as well as customs, will greatly enhance the EU's ability to navigate today's geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges. If confirmed as Commissioner, I will advance the EU's interests, on the basis of regular exchanges with the European Parliament, Member States and civil society. I will work closely with other Commissioners with a view to breaking down silos and strengthening effective implementation, enforcement and communication.

First, I will work closely with other Members of the College to ensure the **coherent and coordinated use of the tools and policies at our disposal** to pursue the EU's interest. This objective is at the heart of the new **foreign economic policy**, which will bring together economic security, trade and partnerships. One practical outcome of this approach will be the new Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships, which should be designed to overcome silos and present an integrated EU offer to third countries.

Second, the EU needs to deal more effectively with the criticism we have faced from our partners as regards the **external impacts of some of our legislation**. The development of our tools needs to consider external impacts from the outset with suitable support measures being considered alongside their deployment. In this regard, I will work closely with the HRVP and other Commissioners on ensuring a better link between internal and external EU policies (in the spirit of *policy coherence for development* as foreseen in Article 208(1) of TFEU), to further improve our leverage and to address the concerns of our partners, including supporting them in their efforts to comply. Our efforts must continue ensuring that the measures we take are in compliance with our international obligations, including those stemming from WTO agreements. Doing so in a proactive manner will ultimately provide a basis for closer engagement with our partners on trade, resilience and sustainability issues.

Third, the success of our trade and economic security policies will depend on **effective implementation and enforcement**. This was at the heart of the EU's 2021 trade strategy – An Open, Assertive and Sustainable Trade Policy. If confirmed as Commissioner, I commit to further strengthening efforts to ensure that EU businesses reap the benefits of our agreements and that they are protected from unfair practices which seek to exploit our openness.

I will further build relationships with the EU's trading partners and engage actively with my counterparts to facilitate implementation and resolve differences as quickly as possible. Over the last years, we have also developed a new set of **trade policy instruments** addressing unfair trade, economic security, reciprocity and sustainability concerns. I will prioritise their **robust and coherent use**, coupled with recourse to dispute settlement, which will remain a key part of the EU's implementation efforts.

This will include making the **Union's customs system**, including its digital environment, more efficient. I am fully committed to the finalisation of the current Union Customs Code digitalisation and of the Single Window, but most importantly the timely conclusion of the negotiations on the **Customs Reform Package**. The establishment of the **EU Customs Authority** and the EU Customs Data Hub will bring the Customs Union to the next level. It will strengthen customs and equip it to address current and future challenges. It will simplify customs processes and reduce administrative burden in a new partnership with trade. It will be a data revolution for customs, helping ensure that Europe remains the attractive trade and logistic hub it is today. I will also conduct an evaluation of the **EU's rules of origin** as well as of the **autonomous tariff suspensions and quotas scheme**.

Strengthening implementation and enforcement efforts will be particularly important for our **SMEs**. They represent 95% of all EU exporters, accounting for roughly a third of EU export value, but less than 5% of EU SMEs export directly outside the EU. They suffer from lack of transparency and burdensome administrative procedures in third countries as they have fewer resources for internationalisation in comparison with larger firms. I intend to continue prioritising their needs, including through dedicated SME chapters in trade agreements, by facilitating access to information that SMEs need to trade internationally (the Access2Markets portal is the main tool in this regards) and by removing trade barriers that SMEs encounter in third countries, including those conveyed through the Single Entry Point.

Finally, the success of our policies will depend on engagement with civil society and effective communication, which makes use of the Commission's network of representations in Member States and the EU's delegations worldwide. Trade policy has a well-established track record in terms of transparency and dialogue with various stakeholders. If confirmed, I will dedicate time and effort to deepening exchanges, including in particular through annual Civil Society Dialogue meetings. And the first of those can take place as early in the new mandate as possible. I will also very much support the Domestic Advisory Groups on the implementation of trade agreements, in cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee.

Questions from the Committee on Constitutional Affairs

6. Framework agreement and Treaty changes under Article 48

The Framework agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission has been in force for more than 13 years and there is a need for certain provisions to be added or adjusted in view of developments that have taken place after the last revision.

Could you indicate which concrete commitments you are ready to take to implement fully the principle of equal treatment and the Commission's role of honest broker in line with Article 13(2) TEU, notably concerning trilogues, urgent procedures, budget and access to information and expert meetings? How do you intend to strengthen the political responsibility and accountability of the Commission to the European Parliament, specifically the individual responsibility of each Commissioner?

Can you commit that the use of Article 122 TFEU and recourse to Parliament's urgent procedure will be limited to what is strictly necessary and be properly justified explaining the reasons for the choice of the legal basis, the main objectives and elements of the proposal as well as the potential budgetary implications so that Parliament can exercise proper scrutiny? What steps will be taken to improve access to information for the European Parliament regarding expert meetings and budgetary decisions?

Can you commit to ensure that the Parliament and its relevant committees are immediately and fully informed, on an equal footing with the Council, on all aspects of international agreements, at all stages, from the earliest preparatory steps to implementation, especially through full and early access to negotiating texts and documents and that Parliament's position is duly taken into consideration when drafting the negotiating mandates? Moreover, whenever the Commission negotiates a 'non-binding' agreement, including Memoranda of Understanding or "clubs" with third countries, can you commit to provide Parliament with full and immediate information and that Parliament's views on them are duly taken into account?

Moreover, with its resolutions of 9 June 2022 and of 22 November 2023, the European Parliament voted to invoke Article 48 submitting proposals for amendments to the Treaty. What is your position on the need to update the framework of the Lisbon Treaty? In light of the Commission President's expressed support for targeted Treaty amendments, to what extent are you prepared to commit your support and what would you practically do to enable treaty change? In light of the Commission President's expressed support for targeted Treaty amendments, to what

extent are you prepared to commit your support, specifically also to qualified majority voting in Council, including but not limited to foreign policy? Which Treaty provisions do you consider as absolutely necessary to modify in the current EU configuration, and which ones should be modified in view of enlargement? How would you assure that EU accession is a horizontal issue taking on board the possible EU reform process, rather than an issue often seen through the foreign policy angle?

Given my longstanding responsibility for interinstitutional relations, I am very familiar with the 2010 Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission, as I negotiated this file on behalf of the Commission.

Building on our collective experience over the last 14 years and in line with my Mission Letter, I am committed to lead the work on the revision of the Framework Agreement. The renewed framework for our relations should aim at strengthening our joint responsibility and dialogue, increasing the flow of information and improving transparency. In the negotiation process, I will be open to discussing Parliament's requests and expect the same from the Parliament when it comes to the Commission's legitimate expectations. In this exercise, we will build on the joint assessment conducted by the Commission and the Parliament earlier this year.

During the revision process, we should be mindful of the Council's prerogatives as some of the issues can only be discussed in a trilateral format. Our interinstitutional system can only work if we preserve the balance and respective prerogatives as foreseen in the Treaties.

If confirmed, I will ensure that the Commission will continue acting in full respect of the duty of sincere cooperation in interinstitutional negotiations and will operate wherever necessary to ensure that the Parliament and the Council are treated equally.

In trilogues, the Commission will continue to facilitate agreement between the co-legislators and will continue acting with full respect of the prerogatives of the Parliament and the Council.

I will ensure that the Parliament can attend all relevant meetings of expert groups where delegated acts are being discussed, and that in such cases, it has access to the same information sent to national authorities.

With regard to political accountability, Article 17(8) TEU provides that the Commission 'as a body' shall be responsible to the European Parliament. Thus, the Treaty is clear that the Commission has a collective responsibility towards the Parliament. In line with the Political Guidelines, I will ensure that Commissioners are regularly present in the parliamentary committees to improve the flow of information in both directions, for example during the regular structured dialogues that feed into the Commission annual work programme and the discussions on Parliament's resolutions on Article 225 TFEU.

The Commission has taken note of Parliament's concerns regarding the use of Article 122 TFEU. As stated by the President in the Political guidelines, we will ensure that Article 122 TFEU will only be used in exceptional circumstances. The President has committed to fully justify its use to the Parliament. I will ensure that the Members of the College comply with the commitment to provide comprehensive justification and information on the exceptional cases where the proposals by the Commission are based on Article 122 TFEU.

I have already demonstrated my personal commitment to keep the Parliament regularly informed in the context of negotiations with Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

If confirmed, I will ensure that the Parliament and its committees are immediately and fully informed at all stages of the procedure for the negotiation of international agreements. This requires that the necessary arrangements are made to ensure the confidential treatment of information where necessary.

On the issue of non-binding agreements, I am ready to look at ways to ensure that Parliament is informed, at the appropriate moment in time in the procedure, and in full respect of Council's prerogatives as confirmed by the Court.

I am fully aware that the issue of Treaty change is high on the Parliament's agenda and I fully support President von der Leyen's statement that we need treaty change where it can improve the functioning of our Union. With the resolution from 22 November 2023, the Parliament has formally triggered the treaty revision process in Article 48 TEU and I can confirm that the Commission stands ready to play its institutional role in the procedure set out in the Treaty, and in particular to give its opinion if and when consulted by the European Council.

The EU's governance can be swiftly improved by using the potential of the current Treaties to the full, in particular when it comes to enhancing the Union's capacity to act swiftly and efficiently by moving from unanimity to qualified majority voting in Council whenever possible.

The Commission made recommendations to activate the 'passerelle clauses' that would allow the shift from unanimity to qualified majority voting in four Communications in 2018 and 2019, notably in the areas of energy, taxation and important aspects of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. None of them was taken forward by the Council. We need to find ways together to address the concerns of Member States about the transition from unanimity to qualified majority voting. I am fully committed continue engaging with Member States to move this agenda forward to enhance Europe's capacity to act.

Another area where we could move from unanimity to qualified majority, even without amending the Treaties is enlargement. As mentioned by the Commission Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, while the need for unanimity for admitting a new Member State is fully justified, the possibility of empowering the Council to decide by qualified majority could be explored for certain interim steps of the enlargement process.

7. Improve follow-up to Parliament's initiatives

How would you ensure that Parliament's right of initiative under Article 225 TFEU is strengthened, providing detailed information and giving substantial follow-up, and not only complying with formal deadlines for replies? Could you indicate which other concrete commitments you are ready to take to strengthen Parliament's right of initiative - in general terms or in specific policy areas - in particular as regards proposals to amend or revoke existing law and a new interinstitutional agreement between the three institutions devoted to procedures relating to Parliament's own composition, the election of its Members and their Statute, as well as Parliament's right of inquiry to avoid files being institutionally blocked? In particular, what are you ready to do to favour the negotiations within the Council on Parliament's proposal for the reform of the European Electoral Law of May 2022? How do you plan to engage with Member States to facilitate this process?

As national parliaments have developed a practice of reviewing the proportionality of EU legislative initiatives, along the subsidiarity review currently allowed under Protocol II of the Lisbon Treaty, would you consider a reform of the current system needed so as to allow national parliaments a more effective way of engaging with the (EU) legislative procedure?

From the Commission's side, we can look back at a good track record in the last mandate:

Already in her 2019 Political Guidelines, President von der Leyen pledged to strengthen the partnership between the Commission and the Parliament. She committed that the Commission would respond to Parliament resolutions under Article 225 TFEU with legislative proposals in full respect of proportionality, subsidiarity and better law-making principles.

The Commission has kept that promise, and I believe the figures speak for themselves: in the current mandate, the Commission has responded positively to 24 out of 25 resolutions under Article 225 TFEU by tabling legislative proposals, committing to making such proposals, or committing to further assessing how to take forward Parliament's request. The only exception was one resolution on Multiannual Financial Framework contingency planning from May 2020. We did not need to follow-up to the Parliament's resolution as we managed to agree on the review of the MFF soon thereafter.

Following our commitments, the Commission already adopted 40 legislative proposals responding to Article 225 resolutions by the Parliament. One more proposal is under preparation and is expected to be adopted early next year. All initiatives stemming from Article 225 TFEU initiatives were marked as such in the annual Commission Work Programme.

To further strengthen our cooperation with Parliament on Article 225 TFEU, in her 2024 Political Guidelines the President has committed to ask Commissioners to take part in structured dialogues with parliamentary committees on Article 225 TFEU Resolutions.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will continue to work closely with all Members of the College to ensure that the Commission complies with this commitment. I will also continue to monitor the implementation of the Commission's responses to the Parliament's resolutions and will be available to regularly discuss the Commission's follow-up during the structured dialogues with AFCO.

I have taken good note of the demand to reflect that commitment of the Commission President in the Framework Agreement. This will have to be subject of negotiations with the Parliament in order to find ways to respect the inter-institutional balance.

I fully support Parliament's call for smooth cooperation between the institutions on files under special legislative procedures and I share the Parliament's view that all institutions must comply with their obligations under the Treaties. I welcome the successful conclusion during the current mandate of the special legislative procedure on the composition of the European Parliament for the 2024 elections.

In relation to the Parliament's proposal for a reform of the Electoral law, while the Commission does not have a formal role in the special legislative procedure set out in Article 223 TFEU, under the guidance of the Commissioner-designate who has responsibility for the file, I will continue to support the Parliament and the Council to find workable approaches to advance discussions on this proposal.

National Parliaments have a significant role in the policymaking and good functioning of the EU. They frequently review the Commission's legislative initiatives not only for their compliance with the subsidiarity principle, as stipulated by the Lisbon Treaty, but also with the proportionality principle. For the latter, they provide valuable feedback via written opinions under the 'political dialogue' with the Commission and in direct contacts with the Commission and other EU institutions. The Commission replies to all national Parliament opinions. Therefore, while I do not see the need for any new administrative procedures or for Treaty change in this respect, I stand ready to explore with national Parliaments how to facilitate in practice their proactive, early input, and targeted reactions, to all Commission initiatives.

8. EP right of inquiry

What tools do you consider indispensable for a meaningful right of inquiry for the Parliament?

Should the Council refuse relaunching the stalled negotiations and since there is not a specific order in providing consent by Council or Commission, can you commit to initiate a bilateral legislative negotiation with Parliament on a new Regulation on its inquiry powers, in accordance with the obligation enshrined in Article 226 TFEU? In parallel, will you engage with Member States to encourage their support for advancing the right of inquiry?

Moreover, in case the Council continues to refuse to enter into legislative negotiations with Parliament and Commission on the Right of Inquiry, and if Parliament decides to apply Article 265 TFEU, would you propose to the College of Commissioners to bring an action before the Court of Justice of the European Union because of the failure to act of Council?

The Commission and me personally have always recognised the importance of the European Parliament's right of inquiry and cooperated with the committees of inquiries in full compliance with the Treaties and based on Decision 95/167/EC on the detailed provisions governing the exercise of the Parliament's right of inquiry.

I fully support the Parliament in its intention to modernise that Decision which requires the consent of both Council and Commission.

If confirmed I will continue supporting the Parliament and the Council in finding solutions to unblock the modernisation process by using all available interinstitutional channels as well as through informal outreach and consultation. I am ready to engage and discuss possible new ways ahead with the rapporteur and the relevant Committee.

If confirmed, I would renew my efforts to find common political ground on this file between the Parliament and the Council, which the Commission could also support.

Question from the Committee on Foreign Affairs

9. The Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029 set out, inter alia, that the EU's new foreign and security policy must be designed with the current global reality in mind. Furthermore, your mission letter specifies that you will work on managing and deepening our partnerships around the world, particularly leading the work on relations with the UK, Switzerland and other partners in Western Europe. Without prejudice to the Commission's decision-making processes, what would be your concrete priorities and objectives/goals in the short, medium and long term for the duration of your mandate in regards to:

- *strengthening relations with the United Kingdom on issues of shared interest, and mirroring the same level of commitments as those undertaken by President von der Leyen in Plenary on 27 April 2021 in relation to the parliamentary scrutiny of the implementation of the EU-UK Agreements? In particular, in regards to preparing for the review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and fully associating the Parliament to the process, and finalizing the agreement between EU and the UK in respect of Gibraltar?*

- *advancing in the negotiations with Switzerland to secure a modernised relationship based on a package agreement that creates stability, trust, and a level playing field?*

- *ensuring that Parliament is immediately and fully informed of the activities of different bodies under an Agreement or future Agreements with partners in Western Europe within your area of responsibility, including briefing and debriefing before and after their meetings as well as sharing all documents pertaining to these joint bodies at the same time as the Commission shares them with the Council; that Parliament is involved as appropriate and necessary when important decisions are taken under an Agreement (amendment, termination, etc.), including taking into account its possible comments or explaining the reasons for not doing so; and that the European Parliament is sufficiently informed in advance of the Commission's intentions to propose new decisions linked to the implementation of an Agreement?*

Strengthening the relations between the EU and the United Kingdom in line with the 2024-2029 Political Guidelines of President von der Leyen will be a key objective during my mandate. This includes ensuring that the existing agreements are fully implemented, as well as strengthening relations with the United Kingdom on issues of shared interest.

In particular:

- The **Withdrawal Agreement**, including the **Windsor Framework**, and the **Trade and Cooperation Agreement** are the cornerstone of EU-United Kingdom relations. These agreements need to be implemented fully, faithfully and in a timely manner.
- The **Trade and Cooperation Agreement** provides a good balance of rights and obligations for both Parties taking into account the United Kingdom's red lines (no Single Market, no Customs Union, no freedom of movement). I will work to further exploit the potential of this agreement.
- **Security and resilience** will be an important pillar for our new agenda with the United Kingdom. Europe and its neighbourhood are facing unprecedented geopolitical challenges and the case for deeper cooperation in this area is clear. This holds true for cooperation on security and defence, but also, more generally, for resilience to geopolitical crises. I will work with the HRVP on these issues.
- **People-to-people** contacts will be an essential component of a strengthened relationship. This means that all citizens should be able to enjoy their full rights under the Withdrawal Agreement, in the United Kingdom and the EU, now and in the future. An EU-United Kingdom "**youth experience scheme**" is one initiative in this area which could be explored.
- I will advance our cooperation on the **protection of our planet and its resources**, including **sustainable fisheries, climate and energy**. We have to ensure continued access to United Kingdom waters for EU fishing fleets. On energy, I will lead efforts to fully exploit the potential of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, including deepening cooperation on security of supply, and work on the implementation of electricity trading arrangements.
- Since October 2021, significant efforts have been dedicated to the negotiations for an EU-United Kingdom agreement on **Gibraltar**, aiming at removing checks and controls for people and goods for the benefit of the whole region. I will continue efforts to conclude these negotiations.

On all these issues, I will work closely with the European Parliament in a spirit of transparency, trust and preserving the EU's unity.

The focus of our relations with **Switzerland** is the conclusion of a broad package of agreements. Our aim is to conclude the negotiations by the end of this year and thereafter work towards signature, conclusion and entry into force of the package. This will allow us to modernise, balance and deepen our cooperation with this close and like-minded partner. The rules governing Swiss participation in the EU's Single Market must ensure legal certainty and predictability, as well as fairness and a level playing field for our citizens and businesses.

The relationship with Switzerland is guided by the same principles applied to all our Western European Partners: protecting the integrity of the internal market and the autonomy of the EU's decision-making and ensuring a proper balance of rights and obligations.

Throughout the previous parliamentary term, I have paid particular attention to fully inform, brief and debrief, and involve the Parliament in all matters relating to the Western European Partners. I intend to continue our close cooperation.

For example, in respect of the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement – the most comprehensive agreement of its kind concluded with a third country – I will continue to apply the commitments made by the Commission when the EU-United Kingdom Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) was ratified in 2021, such as those on sharing information with Parliament.

Question from the Committee on Development

10. The trade and development nexus means inter alia that trade is one of the most important tools to help partner countries on their path to sustainable development. How will you ensure that the EU's trade with developing countries contributes to this goal, against the backdrop of a strengthened focus on the EU's own economic interests and economic security, so as to achieve a win-win situation for both sides? In that context, the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) Plus instrument is meant to give developing countries a special trade incentive to pursue sustainable development and good governance, but it seems that the number of countries making use of that possibility is so far rather limited. What, if any, are the plans to make this incentive work better? Similarly, Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) have enjoyed rather limited popularity among partner countries so far, for fear that they could put pressure on import-competing industries. EPAs are also criticised for being too narrow to foster sustainable development (not covering trade in services, investment, public procurement, competition, digital trade, or climate change). How do you plan to ensure that EPAs are more comprehensive and that they become more attractive for partner countries?

International trade has changed the face of the global economy by integrating developing countries into regional and global value chains, boosting their productive capacities and enhancing the prosperity of their people. In doing so, trade has become one of the most important tools to help partner countries on their path to sustainable development. While geopolitical and geoeconomic competition may affect certain aspects of international trade, they do not change the **win-win nature of the EU's partnerships** and our interests in **continuing to deepen ties with developing countries**.

First, while the EU is devoting significant attention to its own **competitiveness** and **economic security**, these are intricately linked with the development of closer partnerships, in particular with the Global South. Such **partnerships** reflect our joint interest in diversifying supply chains, strengthening the supply of critical inputs needed for the green and digital transition, fostering investment and green industrialisation. These objectives are reflected in the EU's bilateral trade agenda and are at the heart of new initiatives such as the **Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships**. Such partnerships will support investments in certain clean strategic supply chains in third countries, reinforcing the sustainability, value-addition and economies of our partners while making sure that clean tech products, clean energy and raw materials can flow freely across borders. In doing so, they will move beyond the limitations of previous approaches. If confirmed as Commissioner, I will work to build on and deepen the EU's partnerships with developing countries and, together with the Commissioner for International Partnerships, ensure that trade and investment relations with those partners continue contributing to the delivery of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

Second, in view of the attractiveness of the Single Market and the EU's long-standing interest in supporting partner countries on their paths towards sustainable development, if confirmed, I will pay particular attention to the effective use of the EU's tools, including the **Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+)**. In particular, I will ensure that GSP+ remains an effective tool by ensuring continuous EU engagement with the GSP+ governmental authorities, securing a space for civil society and businesses to push for changes on the ground, and paying particular attention to advancing the rights of women and children, the fight against torture and ill treatment and the eradication of child labour and forced labour. At the same time, GSP+ is a tool that the EU can leverage in order that its own interests in other policy areas, such as migration and readmission cooperation, should be ensured.

The ongoing legislative review of the GSP aims precisely at facilitating access to the GSP+ for the growing number of least developed countries (LDCs) graduating out of the LDC category over the next few years. If confirmed, I will seek to reach an agreement on the review of the GSP Regulation to continue to support our developing partners' integration into international trade flows as well as their respect of international standards on human rights, labour rights, environment, climate and good governance.

Third, I will continue to support the implementation of our **Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs)** and explore the extension of their scope. EPAs have had a positive impact on the economies of the countries concerned. For instance, EU investments in EPA partner countries in the last five years increased by 63%, compared to only 20% in non-EPA countries. Although most EPAs mainly concern trade in goods, the recent EU-Kenya EPA that entered into force on 1 July 2024 has broadened our approach and contains strong commitments on trade and sustainable development. The EU-Kenya EPA is open for other East African Community countries to join and as such aims at becoming a regional EPA. We are also in the process of modernising the existing EPA with five states of Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA5: Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and Zimbabwe) in force since 2012 to go beyond trade in goods and economic and development cooperation.

If confirmed, I will also pursue other avenues of deepening the EU's strategic partnership with Africa, both at bilateral and continental level. Bilaterally, we are deploying Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreements (SIFA), the first of which was concluded with Angola. I will explore using this type of agreement with other African partners (Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Cameroon). I will explore the potential of Trade and Investment Dialogues with other strategic countries, such as South Africa and Nigeria, as well as other means of engagement to pursue a growing set of policy objectives, like CTIPs. At continental level, I will invest in further developing the High-level Dialogue on Economic Integration and Trade with the African Union.

If confirmed, I will continue to develop the attractiveness of our EPAs and the GSP+ to our partners through effective and flexible rules of origin allowing African, Caribbean and Pacific countries to make use of the preferences they are entitled to, combined with appropriate technical assistance and training. At the same time, monitoring activities on GSP beneficiaries will ensure that only eligible products obtain preferences. If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will conduct an evaluation of the EU's rules of origin, to assess their fitness for purpose and engage in a reflection on their possible modernisation.

Question from the Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection

11. What would be your objectives to bring the Customs Union to the next level and ensure efficient and modern customs, in particular to tackle challenges as that of e-commerce platforms, as announced in the political guidelines of the President of the Commission and what further action would you envisage in this regard? Even though the customs reform would create a centralised Customs Data Hub with benefits for both customs authorities and businesses, how would the Commission aim to finalise the transition towards a fully digital customs environment and avoid further delays by Member States in the implementation of IT systems? In the meantime, do you intend to improve the cooperation between market surveillance authorities and to put forward targeted changes, such as additional financing to customs authorities, to address the challenges posed by e-commerce platforms established in third countries, including the circumvention of EU rules by parcelling of orders?

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will lead efforts on the negotiations and implementation of the EU Customs reform and the establishment of the EU Customs Authority. The measures proposed in the reform present a world-class, data-driven vision for EU Customs, which will massively simplify customs processes for businesses, especially for the most trustworthy traders. They will bring the EU Customs Union into the 21st century, supporting the 27 EU Customs Authorities in acting as one at our common border and strengthening economic security while facilitating trade. Embracing the digital transformation, the reform will cut down on cumbersome customs processes, simplifying traditional declarations with a smarter, data-led approach to import and export supervision. At the same time, customs authorities will have better information and means to properly assess and stop illicit imports and, where applicable, exports which pose real risks to the EU's citizens, economy and environment. A new EU Customs Authority (EUCA) will develop and oversee an EU Customs Data Hub which will act as the engine of the new ecosystem. Over time, the Data Hub will replace the existing customs IT infrastructure and systems in EU Member States, saving them up to EUR 2 billion a year in operating costs. The EUCA will also help deliver on an improved EU approach to risk management and customs controls over the entire supply chains of goods.

Through the Customs Programme, we ensure that similar improvements on digitalisation and risk management are made in our enlargement and pre-accession countries as well as in our Customs Union with Türkiye, thereby reinforcing the control of our external borders for goods, in particular for critical supply chains and sanctions.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will work with other members of the College to help tackle challenges linked to e-commerce platforms, with the growing number of often non-compliant goods in parcels valued below EUR 150 being imported directly from third countries, bought on online platforms.

In 2023, there were 2.3 billion items directly imported to the EU and 4 billion items are expected in 2024. Public authorities in just seven Member States (the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Hungary, Italy, Spain and Germany) were responsible for supervising over 90% of these goods. Customs controls require close cooperation with market surveillance authorities which are in charge of ensuring that the goods comply with the applicable laws and regulations, including environmental, health, safety and security requirements.

The steep increase in e-commerce imports requires actions on several fronts, addressing three main challenges: the compliance of the goods, notably in terms of safety; the unfair competition between EU-established businesses and third-country traders and marketplaces targeting EU-based consumers, which often do not comply with EU legislation and take advantage of the EUR 150 customs duty exemption threshold; and environmental sustainability.

The Commission has proposed and developed tools to address this phenomenon, covering different aspects of the online sales of goods, from sales to import or placing on the EU market. Among those, the Digital Services Act, the Market Surveillance Regulation and the General Product Safety Regulation will play a vital role in ensuring that products offered for sale online comply with all applicable EU rules. The EU should now make full use of the available toolbox to increase the compliance of goods sold online and the import of e-commerce goods.

On the customs front, the EU Customs Single Window already enables automated and digital cooperation between customs and market surveillance authorities by facilitating real-time data exchanges. The proposed EU Customs reform will bring long-term and systemic solutions to the e-commerce challenge. It will reinforce the capacity of customs to supervise and control the flows, thanks to the EUCA and the EU Customs Data Hub, enabling an improved EU approach to risk management. It will also build on the successful experience of the VAT legislation, with the introduction of the concept of 'deemed importer', in this case for an e-commerce platform, who would be responsible for the correct payment of duties and taxes, but also for product compliance with relevant EU rules.

The Customs reform will also abolish the EUR 150 duty exemption and introduce a simplified tariff treatment grouping the duty rates in ‘buckets’ as a voluntary simplification, avoiding the current practice of splitting parcels to remain under the exemption threshold.

It is important that the co-legislators adopt the Customs reform package as quickly as possible, as this reform brings a real strategic capability for the EU to act as one in responding to the threats posed by illicit and non-compliant e-commerce traffic, enabling us to better protect our citizens from harm and our jobs, innovation and industries from unfair competition. At the same time, I will with the Commissioners responsible for the respective files to ensure an approach that covers all angles. If the business model is deemed to exploit the structural difficulty to apply sufficient compliance checks to the enormous volumes of items individually packaged and sent from abroad, we should also be open to other measures.

Turning to the IT implementation of the Union Customs Code, while the Commission’s development is on track, delays caused by a variety of factors in Member States are impacting overall delivery. Delays in one Member State have a ripple effect on others, delaying the use of certain trade facilitations, as mentioned in the Union Customs Code Annual progress report for 2023. The Commission is carrying out different mitigation actions, which I intend to continue and intensify. In particular, I refer to enhanced supervision and monitoring of the implementation of the Union Customs Code via on-site visits, reinforced and dedicated assistance to Member States facing issues with the trans-European systems, dedicated flagship funding under the Technical Support Instrument for 2024, and overall, dedicated and tailor-made support within the limits of the Commission’s mandate and budget.

Question from the Committee on Legal Affairs

12. Third countries’ accession to conventions and respect for Article 218(6) TFEU

Several international conventions to which the European Union is a party, in particular in the context of the Hague Conference, provide for the accession of third States by means of clauses establishing a 'silence/non-objection' procedure at international level. In its Opinion 1/13 of 14 October 2014, the Court of Justice of the European Union held that the act of accession and the declaration of acceptance of such accession constitute an international agreement within the meaning of Article 218 TFEU. In its resolution of 15 June 2023 on supporting the accession of Ukraine to the Convention of 2 July 2019 on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Judgments in Civil or Commercial Matters (2023/2689(RSP)), Parliament considered that the procedure set out in Article 218(6) TFEU should be followed in matters concerning the establishment of the EU position regarding the accession by third states to the Hague Conference Conventions. In this sense, for each accession of a third country to a Hague Convention falling under a non-objection mechanism, the Commission should submit a proposal for a decision to the Council, which would take such a decision with the assent of the Parliament. If the Council, with the assent of Parliament, decides to "object" to the establishment of relations under the Convention with a new Contracting State, the Commission would have to notify the Depositary accordingly. Only such a procedure would allow the allocation of powers under the Treaties to be respected, in accordance with the case law of the Court of Justice on international agreements. However, the Commission has considered, notably in the debate on this issue in Plenary on 14 December 2023, that its obligations in this respect are merely information obligations: the Commission undertakes to inform Parliament and the Council and to take account of their views. The Commission would therefore, when deciding whether to propose an objection decision, inform Parliament of any intended accession of a third country to the relevant Hague convention, taking due account of the views expressed. If, following discussions in the Council and Parliament, it appears that there is no reason to object to the accession of the third State, the Commission does not formally take a position, as is the current practice. Given that this procedure is only triggered when the Commission decides to make a proposal and to raise an objection, the allocation of powers in the decision-making process as laid down in Article 218 TFEU is indeed distorted. If your appointment as Commissioner were confirmed, how do you intend to ensure that the Commission, in case of the accession of third States to international agreements containing non-objection clauses, respects the procedure set out in Article 218(6) TFEU thereby ensuring that the correct decision-making procedure and the distribution of competences under the Treaties are observed?

I am fully committed to ensuring full respect of the procedures laid down in the Treaties and the institutional prerogatives of the European Parliament and the Council. I recall that the Commission already consistently informs both the European Parliament and the Council of each intended accession of a third country to the Conventions with a no-objection procedure, with a view to discussing whether an objection should be considered. The Commission takes full account of the views expressed in the European Parliament and the Council. I stand ready to look further into ways of optimising interinstitutional cooperation in this respect.

Question from the Committee on Petitions

13. Transparency of the infringement procedures as well as communication to petitioners on the state of play of infringement procedures need to be improved for the benefit of the petition's process. In addition, infringement procedures remain open for years often without any progress. PETI Committee would appreciate more proactivity and automaticity in receiving summary information on the state of play of infringement procedures linked to petitions as part of the structured dialogue between PETI and the Commissioner responsible for petitions. With this in mind, what specific actions would you put in place to ensure improved handling, better coordination and regular and timely information on the state of play of infringement proceedings and EU Pilots linked to petitions; accelerate the resolution of related long-standing open infringements cases to ensure that citizens are not left waiting indefinitely for an outcome; implement a new inter-institutional IT tool between the Commission and the Parliament which would make easier the access for this latter to all relevant information linked to petitions and include these requirements for the Commission in the revision of the Framework Agreement?

The Commission attaches great importance to the transparency of its activities to enforce EU law because this allows the wider public to engage in the shared responsibility of enforcement and can contribute to promoting faster compliance by Member States.

The Commission has already taken several steps to make the relevant information public. A public register on infringement cases provides up-to-date information on the latest step taken in each case. Press releases are published on the most important infringement decisions adopted in regular infringement cycles. In addition, the Commission publishes an annual report on monitoring the application of EU law, setting out key trends, detailing cooperation with Member States and identifying areas where additional efforts are necessary. The Parliament can also ask for information on specific, ongoing infringement cases, in line with the 2010 Framework Agreement.

It is also important to make the system more user-friendly for citizens. The public register can now be used to search for petitions, with a link to the Petition Portal of the European Parliament. These developments make it easier for the public to find existing infringement cases on specific topics, to track progress and to verify if there is any linked petition to ongoing investigations.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will build on these actions of enhanced transparency and propose to further inter-link the Commission's public register of infringement decisions and the European Parliament's Petitions Portal. A simple click for a petitioner in the Petitions Portal should be sufficient to arrive at the relevant infringement case in the Commission's public register, and vice versa. Replies from the Commission to the European Parliament on petitions linked to infringement procedures and EU Pilot dialogues need to consistently refer to the relevant case and state of play.

I will also reinforce the transparency of our enforcement action, with new webpages giving user-friendly information on infringement cases (including trends and time to comply with a Court ruling, or average handling time of cases), transposition deficit, conformity deficit and EU Pilot dialogues. In particular, I have heard the call for more transparency about our EU Pilot dialogues and would propose to start publishing more information on our webpages, such as the number of EU Pilot dialogues launched, closed and open at the end of each year, as well as more overview of the Member States, policy areas or topics involved. As regards the question on the creation of a new interinstitutional IT tool, I am ready to assess the feasibility between the Commission and Parliament, within the limits of available budgetary resources.

As regards including these elements in the Framework Agreement, the Commission will carefully consider the Parliament's requests.