

QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE**Dubravka ŠUICA****Mediterranean****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?

In full transparency, I declare that I was not born in a democracy! Although living under a non-democratic regime, I still felt a connection through shared common values with others outside of that regime. The hope of a better life for generations to come helps bind people across many shores! This experience makes me a strong advocate for democracy. Democracy is a privilege and responsibility that drives my support for the Political Guidelines 2024-2029 based on democracy and social fairness, sustainable prosperity and defence and security. Our best option as Europe's choice: Union!

This is the second time I seek European Parliamentary approval as Commissioner-designate, this time for the portfolio on the Mediterranean. The story of people like me is indicative of the geopolitical, strategic power of the European Union, as a regional and global actor. My career as a teacher and as a politician elected at all levels of governance over three decades provides an excellent foundation to deliver at the European level. My experience as a two-time mayor of Dubrovnik (2001 to 2009) is enriching as all politics is local! During this time I founded the first Children's City Council. Representative democracy must deliver for citizens on the ground. I was elected to the Croatian parliament from 2000 to 2011. I served for 10 years (2004-2014) as Vice-President of the Congress of Local & Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, whose main pillars are democracy, rule of law and human rights.

As a convinced European, I have extensive experience in the process of Croatia's integration into the European Union, in particular as Vice-Chair of the European Integration Committee of the Croatian Parliament. I have been elected as an MEP for 4 consecutive terms and was vice-chair of the Committee for Foreign Affairs. My 5 years as European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography have solidified my collegial approach to my work and laid the ground for our work in the next mandate. Collegiality is essential to ensure the coherence, effectiveness, and quality of the policies we deliver for citizens. I will deliver on the European Union's priorities together with the President, and all my fellow colleagues! I have a robust track record in fully respecting the EU Treaties and obligation to act in the European interest. My independent role is non-negotiable. If confirmed, I will fully respect the letter and spirit of the Treaty and act in the European interest without taking any instructions, in line with the Treaty obligations (Articles 17.3 TEU, 245 and 339 TFEU). I commit to avoid any situation where my independence, impartiality and availability to the Commission could be questioned. I will continue to honour the Code of Conduct of Members of the European Commission and its provisions on conflict of interest. My Declaration of Interests is complete and publicly accessible. I will continue to update it rapidly, as required. My record as a long-standing Member of the European Parliament demonstrates concretely that I met all obligations towards the institutions.

I will again apply the principle of gender equality in all areas of my responsibility, in alignment with the objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the Gender Action Plan III. In my current cabinet women are well

represented. I see no justification to change my approach. Fighting for gender equality also means implementation. As a former MEP from 2013 and as a Vice-President of EPP Women, I am an active advocate on gender equality across all European policies and within the European decision-making processes. In the FEMM Committee, I worked on improving the legislation on equality. Serving in the first ever gender-balanced European Commission has enriched our policymaking. In my current role, I led the Strategy on Children's Right. I have extensive experience engaging with children and youth, including from an intergenerational perspective. Young people form one-third of the European Citizen Panels (based on the panels of the Conference on the Future of Europe which I co-chaired). I will organise annual Youth Policy Dialogues as part of my overall approach to embedding citizen participation in our work. If confirmed, I will focus my efforts on increasing the EU's strategic role in the region and prioritise the new Pact for the Mediterranean, a comprehensive strategy based on a bilateral and regional agenda with concrete initiatives, including on energy and clean tech cooperation, on education and creating job opportunities for youth. Leading the Croatian Parliamentary delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, I got large support for my report on the main challenges ahead in the Mediterranean, including the impact of demographic factors. This provides a long-standing back-drop to my future work on the Mediterranean, if confirmed.

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?

My career, including my current role, indicates the importance I attach to interinstitutional relations, in particular with the European Parliament. Respect for the Members has always been a guiding principle in my work and I will continue to maintain this approach if confirmed in this new role. When an MEP, I called for full transparency from the European Commission. If confirmed, I will once again honour that call, as part of a well-functioning and resilient representative democracy. I am not just pledging to do it. My record speaks for itself. First speech as Commission's Vice-President, I delivered to the Parliament on the 15th of January 2020. I said then that I considered the Parliament a close friend and a reliable partner to deliver results for our citizens. Through open dialogue and efficient collaboration with the Parliament, I will ensure that our initiatives reflect the aspirations and needs of Europeans as we advance with agenda for a strengthened Mediterranean partnership. I have regularly met with esteemed MEPs working as rapporteurs, shadow-rapporteurs and coordinators.

In 2019, I committed in writing to always be an advocate of deeper cooperation with all European institutions. An example is the Conference on the Future of Europe, when we set up the Joint Declaration and established the unprecedented Common Secretariat to facilitate our common work. When the deliberative phase came to an end, we continued to work together on the follow-up and feedback on the Conference, each institution within its own field of competence. As outlined in the President von der Leyen's Political Guidelines, I will support the College by being present in the plenary debates, committee meetings and trilogues exchanges linked to my proposed portfolio. To continue strengthening the special relationship between the Parliament and the Commission, I will foster an environment of respect and trust, including in-camera exchanges with the AFET Committee and other relevant committees and working groups. My work on Democracy and Demography included regular exchanges on both new proposals and state of play of the various initiatives, with a number of the committees, namely EMPL, AFEC, LIBE and FEMM. If confirmed, I will continue to advocate transparent flow of information.

Cooperation with the Parliament, the only institution that directly represents European citizens, is essential given your role as a co-legislator. I commit to fully implementing the provisions of the Treaties in our collaboration. I will ensure that services under my responsibility consistently and proactively offer to brief and inform the Members in an appropriate format. Our relationship will be based on loyalty, trust, transparency, a two-way information flow and mutual assistance. I will continue to be guided also by the principles detailed in the 2010 Framework Agreement. I also endorse the President's commitment to continue supporting Parliament's stronger role in initiating and shaping legislation, to treat Parliament's Article 225 resolutions with legislative proposals as high priority on the Commission's agenda and follow up with a structured dialogue with the responsible committees.

My work on a New Pact for the Mediterranean will bear the hallmark of the European Parliament, given your experience in the neighbourhood and in deepening the strategic and comprehensive partnerships in the region. I commit to engaging with the Members of the European Parliament in a timely, relevant and comprehensive way.

I take this opportunity to also underline the importance I attach to interinstitutional relations in a general sense and more specifically to maintaining an excellent collaboration with the consultative bodies of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions.

Questions from the Committee on Foreign Affairs

3. The Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029 underline the need for a more strategic approach to the EU's wider neighbourhood, especially the Mediterranean. Your portfolio includes not only the Mediterranean region, but also the wider Southern Neighbourhood, including the Middle East. How do you envisage the division of tasks and complementarity of roles with the Vice-President/High Representative regarding the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)? Without prejudice to the Commission's decision-making processes, what would be your concrete priorities and objectives/goals for this portfolio in the short, medium and long term (for the duration of your mandate), and what are the main challenges (international, regional, bilateral, institutional, etc) that you see on the way of pursuing those priorities and objectives, and how do you intend to overcome them?

I am honoured that the President has designated me to lead this strategically important portfolio. I am fully conscious of the great responsibility this entails: namely reframing the relationship between the EU and the wider southern neighbourhood at a particularly challenging time.

If confirmed, my overarching objective will be to leverage the full range of the EU's policies and instruments in:

- a. economic and development cooperation,
- b. energy,
- c. transportation,
- d. digital connectivity,
- e. migration including Talent Partnerships
- f. and other policies,

My vision is to use them to help bring stability, peace and prosperity to the region. We must nurture our partnership and elevate further the reputation and credibility of the EU as a reliable and essential partner. However, I am also fully conscious of the numerous **challenges** that stand in the way.

1. The level of instability in the Middle East is unprecedented resulting in significant need for humanitarian assistance and risks of displacement of refugees. As regards North Africa, challenges linked to climate change and high levels of unemployment among younger people call for greater investments.
2. Our rivals are making strides in the region. Countries such as China and Russia are imposing their own narratives and promoting their own interests, while the reputation of the EU is under pressure.
3. Civic space is shrinking in many countries, and there is backsliding on democracy and fundamental freedoms. This hampers economic prosperity and stability, as well as long-term security at national and regional levels.
4. Many economies of the region are fragile and afflicted by high inflation, a poor balance of payments, slow growth and high structural unemployment.
5. While the region is experiencing rapid population growth, women and young people are not sufficiently integrated into the labour market, leading to missed opportunities and economic underperformance.

6. Challenges linked to climate change and access to resources are putting further pressure on most vulnerable populations and key economic sectors like agriculture and tourism, with negative spillover effects.

We aim to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation with the Southern Neighbourhood based on shared interests and values. And making use of a range of policies we can provide mutually beneficial opportunities.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I am committed to **work in close partnership with the High Representative/Vice-President**. Having already been a member of the College, I am very familiar with the principle of Collegiality to deliver for our citizens. Working closely with the HRVP, we will ensure a unified EU response to the complex challenges in the Mediterranean region including the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf states. Effective and close coordination between policy offers, their implementation, underpinned by diplomatic efforts, will be crucial to strengthen the EU's voice and role in the region. If confirmed in this role, I will lead the preparation of a **new Pact for the Mediterranean**, working closely with the High Representative/Vice-President and other relevant colleagues in the College. There is a common understanding with our partners that a strengthened Mediterranean partnership is a strategic imperative, essential for our common sustainable prosperity, security and resilience. This is a strong point of departure on which to build in the present - for the future. There is no doubt that the EU remains the region's most important partner in terms of trade, financial support and mobility. With this role, as I said, comes great responsibility. A New Pact for the Mediterranean would offer a more focused, integrated approach, providing a concrete operational framework for the EU's engagement and a clearer offer of mutually beneficial cooperation to our partners. I am sure our partners will consider this as a constructive and positive step change in our relationship.

That is why I see the Pact as a **threefold opportunity**: firstly, to underline that the EU considers its relationships with and in the region as a political priority; secondly to rebuild trust through extensive dialogue and consultation; thirdly to craft a bold and focused agenda of agreed and concrete priorities in areas of mutual benefit. It should build on the existing Agenda for the Mediterranean focusing on areas of mutual interest, such as investments, trade, economic stability, job creation, connectivity, energy, transport, food, security and migration, as well as education and science. I insist on the fact that it needs to be people-centred and developing further, together with the partner countries, initiatives based on common values and dialogue, supporting good governance and contributing to protection of human rights and civil liberties.

The Pact would promote a **genuine partnership** based on a pragmatic and mutual interest centred approach.

This approach should help the EU become an even more effective partner in promoting stability, prosperity and conflict resolution in the region.

The **Comprehensive and Strategic Partnerships** with interested partners alongside initiatives of regional dimension could be the first pillar of the new Pact. These Partnerships will significantly deepen collaboration in priority areas of mutual interest and strengthen the EU's presence in the region. Our common aspirations for prosperity, competitiveness, well-managed migration and security should be guided by respect for fundamental values.

Regional investment initiatives could constitute the second pillar of the new Pact, to mobilise investments at a large scale and contribute to job creation and growth in the region. If confirmed in this role, I will aim to substantially scale up bilateral economic cooperation with partners in the region, notably in the energy and clean tech manufacturing sectors. Together with the Commissioner for Energy and Housing, and partners in the region I would set up a **trans-mediterranean energy and clean tech cooperation initiative** to increase renewable energy trading and boost clean tech manufacturing in the region, notably through the Global Gateway. This will lead to triple wins for the EU and our partners in terms of decarbonisation, access to cost competitive renewable energy, and socio-economic development stemming from investment and job creation in these high potential sectors. This initiative could be followed by other regional investment initiatives focusing on digital and transport connectivity.

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will also work with the High Representative/Vice-President in developing a new **Middle East Strategy**, with a view to the day after the war in Gaza focusing on promoting all steps needed for a two-state solution and strengthening partnerships with key regional stakeholders. The strategy would include a programme to accompany **the Palestinian Authority** in much needed reforms and the modernisation process as well as initiatives to support the **recovery and reconstruction of Gaza** once the situation allows. I will work to strengthen our cooperation with Lebanon to ensure that immediate needs are addressed, in full coordination with the High Representative/Vice-President and the Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management.- We will

have to increase our efforts to support refugees across the region, including as regards voluntary return, and in Syria, finding ways to support them more effectively within the political framework as defined by the European Council. Involving our international partners and international organisations will be key for the success of these efforts.

Furthermore, engagement with the **Gulf countries** is essential. The EU and this region have much to gain, in terms of economic opportunities and security objectives, from a stronger and more strategic partnership. As an important gateway between Europe, Asia and Africa, the security and stability situation of the Gulf region has direct consequences for the EU. Likewise, the EU has a lot to offer to the Gulf partners as the world's biggest single market, trading bloc and investor, a leader in research and innovation, and an important mediator and promoter of multilateralism, democracy and social transformation. Together with the High Representative/Vice-President and other responsible Commissioners, if confirmed I will take forward our initiative to strengthen regional and bilateral cooperation including the pursuit of **Strategic Partnership Agreements with each of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** countries in view of further enhancing our bilateral relations with structured, tailor-made and legally binding frameworks of cooperation on areas of mutual interest. These agreements could play an important role in recentring our cooperation agenda on modern objectives and fostering security, stability and economic growth between the two regions. If I am confirmed, I will follow-up to the first-ever EU-GCC Brussels Summit of 16 October 2024 and in this vein also ensure the EU and Gulf region join forces for the reconstruction of Gaza and on investment initiatives in the Mediterranean region.

A robust and strategic communication plan is a vital tool to enable the EU and its partners to truly reap the benefits of our ambitions. I will work closely with the High Representative/Vice-President to jointly **present a strategic communication plan** to promote the EU's role in the Southern Neighbourhood but also counter anti-EU narratives. It goes without saying that recipients of EU funding must acknowledge the origin and ensure visibility. This is about going local too. My experience at various levels of governance will contribute to ensuring that we can engage with local communities in this work. Our communication must match our ambitions and should include awareness-raising, transparency and visibility requirements.

If confirmed as Commissioner, working hand in hand with other members of the College, and closely liaising with the Member States and the European Parliament will be essential to leverage our collective strengths, and maximising the impact of our policies across the region.

4. Following the general guidance by the Commission President for strengthening Commission's relationship with the European Parliament, could you please provide details on how you intend to:

- *proactively and effectively involve Parliament (as an integral player of "Team Europe") from the earliest stages in the processes of elaborating and developing your priorities and objectives;*
- *maintain regular exchanges of views in Plenary and with the Committee on Foreign Affairs; ensure 'structured dialogue' and your ad hoc presence in the Committee at short notice in case of significant events or major developments; ensure your attendance at Inter-Parliamentary Conferences on CFSP/CSDP when relevant;*
- *ensure that the positions of Parliament are duly taken into account in proposals for legal acts and new or updated EU communications and strategies, and ensure that the Parliament and notably its Committee on Foreign Affairs is in a systematic and timely manner informed of and consulted on such proposals and documents (including consultation on EU foreign policy priorities and positions with regard to the MENA region, such as the proposed New Pact for the Mediterranean) and better synchronisation of Commission and Parliament's activities (for example through the systematic advance sharing of planned timelines for the release of official strategic documents, ministerial meetings and summits, proposals to open negotiations on international agreements, human rights dialogues, etc.);*
- *ensure that Parliament receives relevant information and documents with relevance to your portfolio, including those shared with the Council, and that the Committee on Foreign Affairs is immediately and fully informed, in writing and orally, and of negotiations of international agreements, including memoranda of understanding, and that Parliament's views are duly taken into consideration before negotiations start and throughout the process;*
- *ensure that pertinent and relevant non-public information is provided to Parliament during in-camera meetings;*
- *maintain and ensure further cooperation, coordination and efficiency of democracy support activities between the Commission and Parliament?*

If confirmed as Commissioner for the Mediterranean, I intend to proactively and effectively involve the European Parliament from the earliest stages of the processes of elaborating and developing my priorities and objectives. My record as European Commission Vice-President provides evidence of the importance that I attach to relations

with European Parliament. I will maintain regular exchanges of views in Plenary and with the parliamentary committees through structured and ad hoc dialogues, as appropriate. Including at short notice in case of significant events or major developments. I stand ready to brief the Parliament and the Council at various stages of preparation and implementation of new Strategic and Comprehensive Partnerships, preserving institutional balance in full respect of the Parliament's prerogatives for democratic scrutiny and the applicable legal framework.

I will ensure that Parliament receives relevant information and documents and that the Committee on Foreign Affairs is fully informed of negotiations of international agreements. I will also ensure that Parliament's views are duly taken into consideration. Furthermore, I will provide pertinent and relevant non-public information to Parliament during in-camera meetings, with due regard for the need to ensure protection of confidential or highly sensitive information.

If appointed, I will ensure that in the framework of the bi-annual High-Level Geopolitical Dialogue (HLGD) on the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe), the Parliament will receive meaningful information on how EU funds are programmed and implemented when it comes to the Mediterranean countries. I will remain open to the view of the Parliament on how to ensure better implementation of the financial resources under my remit.

I am open to exploring how I could engage with the work of the inter-Parliamentary delegations, , and with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean, to developing a mutual understanding on common challenges and solutions to be found.

I will also work closely with the European Parliament and the Council to ensure that transparency guides the various processes related to the Southern Neighbourhood and to ensure coordinated and coherent follow-up to recommendations of Electoral Observation Missions and other initiatives aimed at fostering democratic standards and enhancing political stability in the region.

As a former Member of the European Parliament myself, I fully value the role that the European Parliament plays, also through parliamentary diplomacy and missions. As former Vice-chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs I have a strong appreciation of the importance of the work of this Committee and will continue facilitating its role in our policy making process.

5. The Mediterranean region continues to face major challenges, such as conflict, crises, and irregular migration, that constitute major obstacles to political stability and development, as well as to peace and security. You have been tasked with leading the work on (working with the Vice-President/High Representative) the New Pact for the Mediterranean, which would come not long after the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean. How has the 2021 New Agenda really contributed to improve the situation, how will this New Pact provide a better response to them, and how do you justify the need for a fuller-fledged Pact? How will you ensure a participative process including Parliament and partners countries in the elaboration of the strategy, unlike the way the New Agenda was developed? How will you proactively and effectively engage with the European Parliament from the earliest stages in the processes of elaborating and developing this New Pact and in its operationalisation and implementation, as well as the new strategic communication plan to promote the EU's role in the Southern Neighbourhood which should aim to counterbalance false narratives and disinformation, particularly where financial commitments are concerned, including in the run-up to the next Multiannual Financial Framework? How will you ensure that human-rights will be considered in the operationalisation of the New Pact?

In the post-Covid context, the 2021 Agenda for the Mediterranean set out our common goals for peace, stability and prosperity on all shores of the Mediterranean. These remain valid today. The five priorities of the New Agenda for the Mediterranean have framed the cooperation with our partners, and its accompanying Economic and Investments Plan is enabling the mobilisation of up to EUR 30 billion of projects and investments in key sectors such as energy, environment, water/sanitation, agriculture, digital, transport, human capital and private sector development. As of September 2024, the figure of mobilised funds amounts to EUR 23.5 billion.

Nevertheless, the situation in the region has evolved significantly recently due to the overall geopolitical developments, particularly exacerbated by conflicts in the region or its vicinity, such as Gaza, Sahel or Horn of Africa. There is an urgent need for a more focused and strategic approach if the EU is to have the influence and impact commensurate with its investment, given the strategic importance of the Mediterranean for our own security, stability and prosperity, and our close ties with the region.

The Pact should strengthen the EU's diplomacy and build on the new comprehensive and strategic partnerships developed with Tunisia and Egypt concluded in July 2023 and June 2024, respectively. These partnerships have created a positive momentum, bringing tangible progress in areas of critical interest to the EU. They have given us useful tools to reinforce dialogue with national authorities in line with our joint wish for genuine partnerships.

In order to provide a more ambitious and a more impactful offer from the EU under the new Pact for the Mediterranean I would suggest to focus on two strands of work: first – to pursue strategic and comprehensive partnerships with partners of the region, and second – to take the regional dimension to a new level by proposing regional investment initiatives in areas such as energy, digital and transport connectivity, security, and Talent Partnerships amongst others, with concrete initiatives to ensure implementation, such as the Trans-Mediterranean Energy and Clean Tech Cooperation Initiative referred to in my Mission Letter.

To develop this Pact, I will work hand in hand with the High Representative/Vice-President, and with the countries of the region, including governments and non-governmental / civil society actors and stakeholders, as well as Member States. In particular, engagement with **youth** will be a priority given the region's demographic trends.

I believe the European Parliament has an important role to play and I am eager to use the Parliament's input in designing the strategy towards the region and in strengthening its delivery at all levels.

I am committed to using the available instruments responsibly in line with identified priorities and in respect of all applicable institutional rules, including a regular exchange in the context of the high-level geopolitical dialogue. For the next Multiannual Financial Framework, we will need to do everything in our power to ensure that all necessary tools are available to deliver our partnerships in the region as well as sufficient flexibility to cater for emergencies and new priorities, and an efficient cooperation with the European Parliament in clarifying and advocating for these priorities will be crucial.

I will promote the EU's visibility through positive and proactive, but also tailored communication. To that end, and as foreseen in my Mission Letter, I will work closely with the High Representative / Vice President throughout the region to develop a **strategic communication plan** to promote the EU's role in the Southern Neighbourhood but also counter anti-EU narratives. In this context I will also work closely with the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and Rule of Law to further develop strategies to address disinformation, foreign information, manipulation and interference (FIMI) aimed at discrediting or undermining the EU and our actions. Convincing narratives that **resonate with local populations and take into account local sensitivities** are needed. Engaging with public-service, independent media and civil society organisations is also key to countering misinformation, disinformation and FIMI. If confirmed, I will discuss the strategic communication plan with the Parliament to support its development.

At the same time, the EU policies towards the region, including financial support, will need to be better explained to **European citizens and taxpayers** to enhance awareness that the EU's continued engagement in the region is an investment in Europe's very own security, better migration management, stability and prosperity. If confirmed, my objective would be to raise awareness of the Mediterranean region as a source of opportunities for the EU, based on concrete initiatives such as the trans-mediterranean energy and clean tech cooperation which can generate mutual benefits for the EU and our partner countries. I will take some of the lessons learnt from the Conference on the Future of Europe when it comes to communicating towards our citizens on the impact of engagement in the Southern Neighbourhood.

Respect for human rights and democratic principles are the cornerstones of the European Union and are central to the EU's partnerships with other countries. The Treaties also set out the principles on which the EU's external action is based as well as its goals. This includes safeguarding democracy, rule of law, human rights as well as the principles of international law and identifying strategic interests and objectives. The operationalisation of the Pact for the Mediterranean, including the conclusion of the strategic and comprehensive partnerships, are no exception. If confirmed, I commit to remain guided by the respect and the promotion of these guiding principles in the preparation as well as in the implementation of the New Pact.

6. How do you intend to support the Vice-President/High Representative in the Middle East, and what novelty would the new EU Middle East Strategy constitute with respect to the existing Joint Strategy for Palestine, building on the Peace Day Effort of the previous Commission and aiming at ensuring a stronger diplomatic role for the EU in order to achieve a long-lasting peace based on the Two-State solution? How can Parliament help you, not least

also through democracy support tools, such as mediation and capacity building and human rights initiatives? How will your overall engagement in the Middle East region take into account the presence of State and non-State actors in the region that are openly hostile to the EU and its values? How do you intend to deliver, and cooperate with the Vice-President/High Representative, on the Gulf countries falling under your portfolio, which are not part of the Southern Neighbourhood?

If confirmed as Commissioner, I will support the High Representative/Vice-President to develop the EU Middle East Strategy with the aim of promoting our interests in a mutually beneficial manner, as well as stabilising countries and territories in crisis. The new Middle East Strategy should spell out the EU's response to the ongoing challenges in the region with a view to the day after the war in Gaza, focusing on promoting all steps needed for a two-state solution and strengthening partnerships with key regional stakeholders. The strategy would include a programme to accompany **the Palestinian Authority** in much needed reforms and the modernisation process as well as initiatives to support the **recovery and reconstruction of Gaza** once the situation allows.

The economic cooperation agenda of the new Strategy should have a significant role to play, as the EU is the largest donor and trading partner of many countries in the region. The economic cooperation pillar of this strategy would be based on the following guiding principles: linking economic development and prosperity with peace and stability, building on stronger strategic and comprehensive partnerships with countries in the region and promoting regional initiatives, which contribute to facilitate de-escalation. Reviving the Middle East peace process, focusing on promoting all steps needed towards a two-state solution and responding to humanitarian needs will be important building blocks of the Strategy. Furthermore, developing a comprehensive EU-Middle East Strategy will require establishing strong partnerships with key regional stakeholders, in particular with the Gulf countries and other key players.

In this context, cooperating specifically with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members on the development of the trans-mediterranean energy and clean tech cooperation initiative in the Mediterranean and looking at joint investments of our respective financing institutions in the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, especially in Central Asia, may prove attractive. The EU also stands ready to engage in the implementation of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) with GCC members, a key initiative with the potential to strengthen connectivity between our regions. These initiatives will not only bring concrete business opportunities for our respective regions and those in which we engage jointly, they will in parallel also foster security and stability in the region – a key concern shared by both the EU and the Gulf States.

Other areas of cooperation and alignment including talent and citizen mobility will be explored as an integral part of the new comprehensive partnerships with individual Gulf countries, based on their specific interests and achievements, including in the area of security.

Together with fellow Commissioners, I would continue to work in this direction during my mandate.

I see an important role for the interparliamentary delegations, when it comes to ensuring a stronger diplomatic role for the EU in the region. The EP Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group is also supporting the EU's efforts to promote democracy and human rights internationally and I intend to support its work.

Continuous engagement with State and non-State actors, including those that do not necessarily share our views, is important as part of overall efforts to avoid further destabilisation. It is an essential channel to continue advocating for universal core values including respect for international law, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

7. With regard to the external financing instruments, how will you improve the consistency, efficiency and transparency of assistance in the Southern Neighbourhood, applying strict conditionality and ensuring a genuine role of the European Parliament in the strategic steering of the external financing instruments, including through the timely provision of written information on their implementation? What is your position regarding the recent dominant use of macro-financial assistance in the assistance packages given to partners in the region and do you plan to continue the practice of the previous Commission in this regard?

The Commission has started to establish new strategic and comprehensive partnerships with countries in its southern neighbourhood. The key principle of these partnerships is to combine the EU's financial offer with its policy instruments in a more joined-up fashion to maximise the positive and mutually beneficial impact that our

cooperation can have, generating sustainable economic growth and prosperity in the region as well as addressing other direct EU interests. These comprehensive offers are grounded in support for universal values and principles and tailored to the specific economic and political situation to take account of both the EU's and our partners' strategic interests and needs.

These principles underpin the strategic and comprehensive partnerships concluded with Tunisia and Egypt. In both countries, this approach aims to unlock the huge potential for EU private sector investments. The Commission services together with the European External Action Service are following their implementation and developments in the countries to ensure that all conditions set are duly met. While the strategic and comprehensive partnerships have so far resulted in positive developments on many fronts including with respect to economic cooperation and stabilisation, I am concerned by some developments in certain of the partner countries, in particular as regards the shrinking space for civil society and media.. I intend to pursue the "more for more" logic with an approach with enough flexibility to foster good cooperation and support positive developments. I am committed to ensure that the EU Delegation and our partners will continue to follow developments on the ground very closely, and work with the authorities to address such issues constructively. As concerns the use of specific financing instruments, it is important to remember that these partnerships are tailor-made and build on a limited set of targeted identified priorities and areas of joint interest with potential for mutual benefits. Depending on the economic context of the partner country at the time, and its political will to reform, this may include Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA – concessional loans) as was the case for Egypt. It is to be noted that EU loans are highly concessional with the beneficiary country benefitting from the credit rating of the EU. They also ensure that partner countries are strongly focused on their proper use given the repayment needs in the future.

Going forward, I am committed to ensure that the use of all possible instruments in the context of strategic and comprehensive partnerships will continue to be based on solid analysis of the opportunities as well as the risks related to the use of such instruments. While being mindful of financial constraints, I will make the case for keeping all necessary tools in the upcoming discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework. Again, we need to remain flexible. I strongly believe that the involvement of the European Parliament is important in that respect, and I am committed to engage in discussions with all relevant stakeholders during my mandate.

In this regard, I see the high-level geopolitical dialogue playing a key role and I will ensure that both my services and I remain available for exchanges with the European Parliament.

Question from the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

8. In the context of the changing world of work, how will you address Europe's demographic challenges and its consequences for individuals and their families, such as population ageing, brain drain and a shrinking working-age population? What long-term incentives for living and working in the European Union do you foresee? And what measures will you implement to increase the participation in the labour market for under-represented groups? What do you think in this legislative term should be the main focus points in this field?

Having served as Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography since 2019, I am well aware of the challenges linked to the **demographic reality in Europe** today. I am pleased to have the opportunity to build on the expertise gained over the last 5 years in the current mandate.

Europe's population is ageing, and its workforce is projected to shrink by almost 1 million workers each year between now and 2050. This affects many aspects of our society, including our overall competitiveness, the productivity and dynamism of our economy, the functioning of the labour market, our youth, education, and health policies, as well as our public budgets and the fiscal sustainability of welfare systems. Our ability to address demographic change also speaks to our ability to show that democracy can deliver what is needed, where it is needed for our citizens, whether younger or older, urban or rural etc. Demographic change also affects our ability to make progress towards strategic priorities, such as the green and digital transitions. Demographic change also has an important territorial dimension and can exacerbate disparities between and within Member States. Some regions in particular are harder hit than others as they experience population decline and a significant outward mobility of young workers.

If I am confirmed as Commissioner, I will build on what the current College and I have achieved during the previous mandate. I will bring my knowledge and experience to the table and make sure we tackle the root causes of demographic change and adapt to new realities, as envisaged in the President's Political Guidelines 2024-2029.

As underlined in my Mission Letter, my priority will be to **implement the Demography Toolbox**, which outlines a comprehensive set of existing regulatory instruments, policy frameworks and funding tools available at EU and national level to support Member States in managing demographic change. The toolbox aims at better reconciling family aspirations and paid work; empowering younger and older generations to thrive; and where necessary helping to fill labour shortages through legal migration.

Together with the other Members of the College, I will continue to engage with Member States in order to help them implement the Demography Toolbox at the national and regional levels. We must leverage synergies with the work on equality and intergenerational fairness. As part of our science for policy-making approach, I will work on further strengthening the research and evidence base of our work, for instance on low birth rates in the EU and the measures needed to support people to realise their personal aspirations.

Moreover, I will work on supporting to further **increase the labour market participation of under-represented groups**, including women, young people and older adults (55+), as well as third-country nationals. We can use untapped talent and achieve higher activity rates by meeting their specific needs. For older people, for example, we can support Member States to implement flexible work arrangements and adapt workplaces, to promote policies incentivising flexible retirement patterns, support health and financial planning across the life-cycle, and tackle stereotypes and discrimination. Increasing the participation rates in particular for women and older workers can partially offset the decline of working age population.

To these ends, I will collaborate across the College to design new policy initiatives to complement and expand our efforts. I will work in particular with the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness, among others on the Quality Jobs Roadmap and on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy to support disadvantaged groups with targeted active inclusion measures while ensuring access to social and essential services. The European Care Strategy and its accompanying Council Recommendations will enhance care services, an ambition that will be supported by the new initiative on a more coherent framework for long-term care workforce challenges. This will complement the Commission's efforts on labour migration to help attract people with the right skills to match EU labour market needs, in particular through the launch of the EU Talent Pool and continued work on Talent Partnerships.

As part of my work, I will use every tool at my disposal to achieve these goals. The Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Social Fund Plus and other Cohesion Policy funds are already addressing the challenges posed by demographic change. We will continue these investments and, where needed, make use of the upcoming mid-term review of Cohesion Policy programmes to better target our funding in the Member States. I will therefore support the Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms in addressing the challenges linked to economic and demographic decline in some EU regions and reducing regional disparities, so people can stay and work in their home regions. I will continue to promote the integration of demographic opportunities and challenges into EU policymaking in all relevant areas and will work to reinforce our guidance and support to enable Member States to pursue a broad reform mix, including in the context of the European Semester.

Question from the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

9. According to your mission letter, you should work on building comprehensive and mutually beneficial partnerships with third countries in the region you are responsible for, that would include migration aspects such as operationalising 'border controls and the fight against smugglers', in full respect of human rights. What measures will you undertake to ensure that this operationalisation takes place effectively? How will you ensure that Parliament can exercise its oversight throughout the process of building such partnerships, especially when some of their aspects could impact its legislative prerogatives?

If appointed Commissioner for the Mediterranean, I would aim at delivering on the Pact on Migration and Asylum, and notably its external policy aspects, in full cooperation with the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration. I would also collaborate with the other members of the College on further strengthening a strategic and coordinated approach to the external dimension of the EU's migration policy, building on results achieved so far.

Working together with Mediterranean countries and third countries offers opportunities to address migration challenges in a mutually beneficial manner. Considering that countries in the Mediterranean region are often both countries of transit and origin, the whole-of-route approach needs to be strengthened to ensure sustainability and

long-term impact of EU action, also taking into account the broader context and the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement.

Within the comprehensive and strategic partnerships under the New Pact for the Mediterranean, migration cooperation will figure among the key priorities, together with other areas of mutual interest, including security. I would see to it that we work with and continue providing support to partners on all migration-related areas as part of the partnerships, including on protection of persons in vulnerable situations, migration governance and management, fighting against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, voluntary returns and reintegration, readmission as well as legal migration and mobility. Our cooperation with the southern neighbourhood goes well beyond migration and is vested in many areas of mutual interest which include investment in education, infrastructure, and the wider economy.

In this respect, out of mutual interest, it is important that opportunities are created, in particular for young people in these countries, to enable legal pathways, while at the same time reducing irregular migration. Talent Partnerships provide frameworks for cooperation on labour mobility and can help reinforce partnerships on other aspects of migration management. I would work with other Commissioners on their further development, with the aim of addressing shortages on the EU labour market in selected sectors and occupations while also contributing to skills development and economic growth in countries of origin.

It is clear that the fight against migrant smuggling and rights-based migration management will remain among the EU's top priorities, together with support provided to partners in the area of protection of migrants, voluntary returns, addressing root causes of migration and legal migration.

The support provided so far has already brought positive results across the various areas, also contributing to reduced irregular migratory flows to the EU and so reducing the risk of loss of life during often dangerous journeys across the sea. I am committed to continue this path, deliver on commitments made and effectively operationalise the EU's objectives.

The EU's comprehensive approach to migration should remain rooted in solidarity and respect for human rights. Respect for human rights and human dignity of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are fundamental principles of the EU's migration policy, in line with obligations under international law. Our partners are required to fulfil these international obligations, including the respect of the principle of non-refoulement.

I will support the members of the College, also in the enhancement of international cooperation through the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling and new Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnerships (including through actions undertaken in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)).

Building on the Association Agreements concluded with our partner countries, the strategic and comprehensive partnerships remain non-binding instruments. If confirmed as Commissioner, I am committed to providing the Parliament's with the necessary information, including early discussions and exchanges of views, to allow it to exercise its democratic oversight at various stages of the process.

Question from the Subcommittee on Human Rights

10. What concrete measures do you intend to take to ensure that the relations with partners in the wider Southern Neighbourhood are guided by the promotion of human rights, democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms? How do you intend to apply human rights conditionality in this region, particularly in light of the recent Memoranda of Understanding signed (Egypt, Tunisia, etc.)? Are you committed to devoting more resources to programmes and staff working for democracy and supporting civil society in the region?

The respect for human rights and democratic principles are the cornerstones of the European Union and are integral to the management of our external financing including as regards the strategic and comprehensive partnerships. They are based on shared goals and mutual interests and are designed to help the EU to better address many crucial issues.

If confirmed as Commissioner for the Mediterranean, I will ensure that EU values and principles on human rights are at the heart of the new Mediterranean pact and our overall engagement in the wider Southern Neighbourhood. The new Pact will be underpinned by continued, steady and direct support to human rights NGOs and to human

rights defenders and journalists, including through NDICI-Global Europe Thematic Programmes. This should include resources for programmes and staff working for democracy and supporting civil society. As mentioned in my Mission Letter, we will deploy an integrated approach in which economic, humanitarian, development, peace and security policies all contribute. Considering the opportunities that come from inclusion, I intend to pursue our steady support to civil society organisations working with youth, children, persons with disabilities, refugees, migrants, host communities, women's rights organisations, as well as with other vulnerable groups. I would like to highlight that, with the support of EU delegations, I will continue working through local networks to ensure that EU funds can be channelled to local and grassroots organisations, with a particular priority for youth-related initiatives such as EU Youth ambassadors in our Neighbourhood. I will also not shy away from raising any issues pertaining to the safeguarding of these values and principles in an open and constructive manner in the context of regular political dialogues.

In this vein, I also intend to focus on programmes that support anti-corruption, transparency of public finances, democratic participation, legal and institutional reform efforts, as well as capacity building. The Union has the instruments to do so. For example, EU budget support operations promote reforms in the area of public finances. Furthermore, the Commission is working with international Organisations such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to provide targeted assistance for the design and implementation of reforms. I will continue to work with civil society organisations to look at how to increase transparency. The work on budget transparency with the Open Budget Partnership is an excellent example on how to bring more openness in public finances.

Finally, our financial cooperation with third countries applies a rights-based approach which means that the international commitments that our partners have subscribed to in terms of human rights have to be complied with and that robust monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure that this is the case. I will monitor the effectiveness of these mechanisms and stand ready to take action where a need is identified.