

QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE**Raffaele FITTO****Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms****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?

Growing up when Europe was deeply divided, my education was inspired by respect for the values and principles enshrined in the European Treaties: freedom, democracy, the rule of law, pluralism, equality, respect for human dignity, defence of civil rights, and equality between women and men.

I started my political career in the party whose values I shared, including its European vocation: the “Democrazia Cristiana”. Throughout my career, I have held positions at different levels. Locally, after being first elected in 1990 as a Regional Councillor of Puglia, I was elected President of the Region in 2000. In addition to serving multiple times as a member of the Italian Parliament, I have been the Minister for Regional Affairs and Local Autonomies (2008), then Minister for Cohesion (2010), and Minister for European Affairs, the South, Cohesion Policies, and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) since 2022. At the European level, I was first elected as a member of the European Parliament in 1999 and then again in 2014 and 2019. From 2000 to 2005, I was a member of the Committee of the Regions, where I served as President of the Committee on Territorial Cohesion Policy from 2002 to 2004.

I have always been a firm supporter of the European project, as well as of the fundamental principles and values of the rule of law that underpin it. In a continent emerging from a devastating fratricidal war, European integration offers an unprecedented path forward, and, alongside the Euro-Atlantic alliance, represents the primary tool to ensure peace, well-being, prosperity, and security for Europeans. The brutal aggression by Russia against Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East demonstrate that this should not be taken for granted. Our unity and determination are our best weapons for safeguarding these accomplishments and the values upon which they are founded.

Throughout my various roles, I have gained firsthand knowledge and have been able to “experience” cohesion and regional development policy from different viewpoints, both as a regional President and as a Minister, thus participating as a member of the relevant Council formation. As a European Parliament member, I have been part of the REGI Committee and have followed cohesion policy as a member of the Committee of the Regions.

Cohesion policy is a fundamental pillar of the European project. In my appointment letter, President-Elect von der Leyen wrote that “European cohesion is about bringing Europe closer to citizens and bring Europeans closer to each other.” I agree, and if I am confirmed, I will commit fully to working toward this goal.

In the next five years, the European Union will face significant challenges, such as the green and digital transitions, security in a complex geopolitical context, the relaunch of its competitiveness in a rapidly evolving global economy, the defence of our social model and democracy, and preparation for future enlargement. In this framework, cohesion policy should contribute to the European Union’s objectives, as outlined in the political

guidelines presented by President-Elect von der Leyen. In this context, it will be essential to secure adequate resources and work together toward a solid budget.

My experience as Minister responsible for the implementation of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the largest in Europe by size, has allowed me to witness firsthand the significant opportunities that NextGenerationEU represents for the European Union, as well as the challenges and sensitive aspects of this major and historic joint project.

If I am confirmed, I intend to make use of this experience by working together with the Commissioner for Economy and Productivity for, as indicated in my mission letter, delivering on the agreed reforms and investments set out in Member State's recovery and Resilience Plan, by the 2026 expenditure deadline.

During my career, I have engaged at various levels with numerous European policies and recognized the importance of coordinating their conception and implementation. If confirmed, as Executive Vice President I commit to collaborate with colleagues responsible for Agriculture and Food, Sustainable Mobility and Tourism, Fisheries and the Blue Economy, and others, so that these policies are integrated and operate synergistically to contribute to the prosperity of the European Union and its citizens.

My commitment to gender equality is absolute as I believe that attention to gender equality is, before being a duty, a significant opportunity for the functioning of any society. Therefore, I am dedicated to promoting gender balanced leadership, starting with my Cabinet, confident that this will lead to a more efficient structure capable of expressing the diverse sensitivities necessary for optimal decision-making. I will work to ensure a gender perspective in cohesion policy and all other areas of my portfolio.

I have always encouraged and invested in young people as they make society healthier, more innovative, and dynamic. In line with President-Elect von der Leyen's political priorities, I commit to making integration of youth perspectives into policy shaping a priority within my portfolio. Youth Dialogues will be an excellent opportunity to listen to the needs and views of young people. I therefore look forward to holding my first dialogue within the first 100 days in the office.

I have always acted in the exclusive public interest. If I am confirmed, as Executive Vice President I will perform my duties in the exclusive European interest, fully respecting the spirit and letter of the Treaties particularly the obligations defined in Article 17, paragraph three, of the Treaty on European Union (TUE). Independence has always characterized my personal and political action and, as a member of the Commission, I will neither seek nor take instruction from any Member State, any other institution or any other body. I will respect and honour to the letter the Code of Conduct for Members of the European Commission and its provisions on conflicts of interest. I commit to promptly updating my declaration of interests if any changes are necessary.

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?

Should I be confirmed, as Executive Vice-President I commit to providing comprehensive and detailed information on the actions within my responsibilities.

The European Parliament and the Commission, in the light of their historic institutional relationships, act in close coordination, as both are interpreters of the will of integration and the European spirit. I do not intend to deviate from this vision.

For this reason, I also believe it is essential to ensure transparency and accountability towards the European Parliament. Having served as a Member of the European Parliament for over 10 years and as Minister for European Affairs, the South, Cohesion Policies, and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, I consider it crucial to ensure its adequate involvement for the successful functioning of the democratic legislative process.

In my view, accountability to Parliament should not be limited to reporting decisions but it also requires a constant and fruitful dialogue, which is the foundation of the good governance. It will be essential to initiate these dialogues from the very beginning.

I will regard both Parliament and the Council as equally important when acting as co-legislators, and I will ensure that this principle is reflected in the sharing of relevant information under my area of responsibility. This is not only a legal obligation but also a fundamental requirement for a member of the College who is directly accountable to the elected members of the European Parliament.

In the guidelines and mission letter from President-Elect von der Leyen, the intention to further strengthen the special relationship between the European Parliament and the Commission is emphasised. I fully share this vision and will ensure a regular flow of information with the relevant parliamentary committees and make myself available for bilateral meetings. I will participate regularly in interinstitutional negotiations and, when requested I will attend plenary sessions and structured dialogues of parliamentary committees. Additionally, I will ensure prompt and accurate answers to questions from committee members related to my portfolio.

To ensure transparency, I will be available to organise structured dialogues with the relevant parliamentary committees and I will fully adhere to the provisions of the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the Commission, as well as the Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Regulation.

President-Elect von der Leyen has committed to ensuring that Commissioners continue to respond to parliamentary resolutions adopted by the majority of its members with legislative proposals in full respect of proportionality, subsidiarity and better law-making principles. Additionally, the President-Elect believes it is necessary to strengthen the cooperation outlined in Article 225 TFEU, urging Commissioners to engage in structured dialogues with parliamentary committees regarding the resolutions in question. I fully support these goals, and, if confirmed, I will work with Parliament at every stage of the discussion on resolutions. Having served as a Member of the European Parliament for a long time, I firmly believe this will positively impact the outcomes of our work.

I strongly support President-Elect von der Leyen's vision regarding the importance of being more present on the ground. If confirmed, I will commit to regularly visiting Member States and their regions to assess the results of cohesion policy. It will be essential to meet with citizens across the Union, both in cities and in rural and less populated areas.

The coming months will be crucial for the EU to continue supporting long-lasting reforms and investments that directly contribute to strengthening European growth. To achieve these goals, in line with the Treaties, it will be essential to work in synergy with the European Parliament, the Council, and the Committee of the Regions. Listening to the voices of individual regions and local entities, each with its own sensitivities and specificities, will also be important to ensure their needs are adequately considered when designing a strengthened, modernised cohesion policy. I would be honoured to serve in the European Commission, a crucial institution as the guardian of the Treaties. In the name of the common interest of the Union, I will defend our values and always act in accordance with the principle of collegiality. I will closely collaborate with the other members of the College to realise the priorities identified by President von der Leyen.

Questions from the Committee on Regional Development

3. Future of cohesion policy - key lessons learned - simplification

What is your vision for the future of cohesion policy post-2027 and which are, in your view, the key lessons that the European Commission and Member States should have learned from the previous programming periods in this respect? Do you consider the objectives of overcoming regional disparities and economic and social cohesion valid and how will you ensure that the principle of 'do no harm to cohesion' is reflected in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)? Will you continue to uphold the cohesion policy as an investment and solidarity mechanism for all regions, and how will you ensure the development of less developed regions and provide adequate response to challenges faced by urban areas? How will you protect the core purpose of cohesion policy and secure a robust budgetary envelope under the MFF proposal? How, at the same time, will you increase its flexibility to manage emerging needs, enhance its transparency, accelerate the implementation processes and ensure its simplification? In particular, should cohesion policy funds be reformed on a performance-based model similar to the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)? In this context, how will you guarantee the continuity of

cohesion Policy, preserving its initial objectives, and ensure that future management and funding of the policy respects the shared management model, the place-based approach, the multilevel governance and the partnership principles, and preserves the role of local and regional authorities? Will you explore creating an effective mechanism under the next financial programming period for direct access to cohesion funds by regional and local authorities, cities and municipalities in each Member State, based on their specific development needs?

Economic, social and territorial cohesion is one of the main objectives of the Union and vital for the full development and enduring success of the Union. Cohesion Policy embodies the European Union's core values of unity, solidarity, and fairness for all regions. Strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion enhances productivity, innovation and competitiveness. My vision for Cohesion Policy post-2027 is focused on driving convergence, reducing regional disparities, and supporting all regions - particularly the less developed ones - to ensure sustained economic, territorial and social cohesion. The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is an opportunity to design a strengthened, modernised cohesion and growth policy, in partnership with national, regional and local authorities. Cohesion policy in the next MFF must be aligned with wider EU priorities. It must also become more focused, simpler and more impactful. We will tackle regional and social disparities by providing tailor-made solutions to regional and local challenges and supporting regions, including islands and outermost regions, to catch up. As part of this process, we will need to mobilise reforms and investments to help build what a community needs to thrive.

Cohesion Policy is anchored in its core principles: the place-based approach, multi-level governance, and partnership. As we develop the MFF post-2027, I will ensure that these founding principles are preserved. Regional and local authorities will need to be at the core of the design and implementation of the plans to ensure the broadest possible ownership. Cohesion Policy must be able to adapt to emerging challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, demographic shifts and reinforce social inclusion. These evolving realities demand that we remain flexible and forward-looking while staying true to Cohesion Policy as a cornerstone of the Union's unity and strength.

While progress is undeniable, regional disparities persist and new ones arise, with some regions stagnating due to challenges notably in effectively utilising resources. Investments alone are not enough. Cohesion Policy investments and reforms should go hand in hand to address long-standing challenges, accelerating the upwards convergence of our territories and the delivery of investments on the ground. Sustained regional growth requires a more balanced approach, encompassing the right regulatory framework, capacity building and strategic planning. Strengthening national and regional administrative capacities and improving governance are equally vital to managing funds efficiently, implementing reforms and achieving tangible outcomes.

Further simplification, reducing administrative burdens and enabling beneficiaries - particularly small and medium-sized enterprises and local communities - to access funds more efficiently is required. Streamlining processes, cutting 'red tape', and enhancing transparency through risk-based management verifications and further aligned eligibility rules will significantly ease access. Engaging local and regional authorities earlier in decision-making processes will ensure more effective fund utilisation, better alignment with regional needs, and greater empowerment of local actors in shaping their development. Performance is another critical objective. Every Euro from the EU budget should make a difference. We also need to be able to better communicate to all EU citizens what the EU budget finances. Looking forward, we should also draw lessons from experience with simplified disbursement models as they have brought some administrative burden reduction without compromising financial oversight. These changes will be pivotal in making Cohesion Policy more agile and responsive.

When reflecting on the future of cohesion policy, consideration will have to be given to different options, assessing the merits of each of them and taking into account the views of relevant stakeholders. We will need to have transparency on final recipients of EU funds to allow traceability and accountability and we will need to find ways to limit the administrative burden on beneficiaries and implementing authorities. We will also need to assess the best ways to make the cohesion policy more flexible for addressing emerging challenges.

Fostering cohesion is a shared responsibility between the EU and its Member States. I will work closely with my fellow Commissioners to ensure that economic, social and territorial cohesion remain central to the next MFF.

Cohesion Policy will continue to support all regions, with particular attention to the less developed ones. In these regions, our priority will be investments that improve access to employment, services, and infrastructure, while ensuring that regions lagging behind in the green and digital transitions receive the necessary support.

Urban areas face distinct challenges - ranging from affordable housing to congestion and environmental sustainability. If confirmed, I will propose a comprehensive Policy Agenda for Cities that provides a clear vision for urban development, defines the EU's approach to sustainable urban growth, and translates EU priorities into tangible local actions. To ensure that no city is left behind, cities and towns must have ownership and active participation in both policy design and implementation. If confirmed, I am committed to working closely with the European Parliament to ensure that cities and local and regional authorities have more efficient access to funding.

4. Link to reforms, rule of law, European Semester, conditionality

The Ninth Cohesion Report highlights the need to explore ways to further strengthen the link between investments and reforms to maximize the impact of cohesion policy. However, there are concerns that the objectives of cohesion policy, as outlined in Articles 174 and 175 TFEU, may be compromised by the potential introduction of conditionalities. Consequently, do you support the introduction of a stronger link between cohesion policy funding and key national reforms? If so, what types of reforms should be linked to the access of funds? Are you considering linking the access to funds to the European Semester or macroeconomic conditionality in particular? Will you ensure that Member States or regions with limited administrative capacity are not disproportionately penalised? Do you intend to reinforce the link between cohesion policy and compliance with the rule of law, by enforcing stricter application of the horizontal enabling conditions, particularly the implementation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights? Lastly, how will you ensure that national governments' reluctance to pursue certain reforms does not impede regions' access to funds?

The Commission's 9th Cohesion Report underscores the importance of further strengthening the link between investments and reforms to maximise the impact of Cohesion Policy. The connection between convergence and structural reforms will continue to be crucial, as demonstrated during the 2021-2027 period, where the Union has already enhanced this link particularly via a close alignment with the European Semester. The country-specific recommendations issued in recent years serve as a compass to identify Member States' reform and investment needs and will continue to guide the Mid-term Review. To align reforms with investment and effectively promote regional growth and development, we have also integrated regional and territorial dimensions into programmes such as the Just Transition Fund.

Linking the European Semester and the disbursements of EU funds showed its merits under the Recovery and Resilience Facility. This allowed the EU to provide direct support to Member States to develop and implement long-lasting reforms and investments that address national challenges and directly contribute to strengthening sustainable European growth and the rule of law. The combined support to reforms and investments under one plan has proven effective and has enhanced coherence and efficiency and increased synergies.

In addition, under the Cohesion Policy funds, the enabling conditions have been streamlined for the 2021-2027 period to ensure that the necessary frameworks are in place for the effective implementation of the Funds. For example, the enabling condition on the governance of the energy sector has prompted adaptations and the establishment of energy performance certification systems. Similarly, Smart Specialisation Strategies, required under the enabling condition relating to the specific objective of 'developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies' and 'developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship', have transformed how innovation is financed at the regional level.

In the implementation of the budget, the Member States and the Commission must ensure compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and must respect the Union values enshrined in Article 2 TEU relevant in the implementation of the budget. All operations funded under the Common Provisions Regulation must comply with applicable law, which includes adherence to the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The horizontal enabling condition on the Charter has provided strong incentives for structural change, notably in the area of judicial reform. This was done in conjunction with the Recovery and Resilience milestones and the annual Rule of Law reports, which identified key elements for reform to ensure effective judicial protection. In addition, the rule of law Conditionality Regulation applies to all EU funds, including Cohesion Policy. I am fully committed to these principles.

President-elect von der Leyen has emphasised in her political guidelines that the future long-term budget will invest in upholding the rule of law and will have safeguards to continue to ensure respect for the rule of law. First, they would build on the continuous application of the general regime of conditionality applying to all funds. Second, we will need to draw lessons from the experience gathered with the implementation of the current budget and NextGenerationEU including a closer link between reforms and strengthening the rule of law. The application of the different instruments has shown that there is potential to harmonise the rules to be even more effective.

Cohesion Policy is designed with the flexibility to tailor investment support to regional and local needs. If confirmed, as Executive Vice-President for cohesion and reforms, I will ensure that reforms are carefully aligned with regional realities and that Cohesion Policy remains a driving force for growth and convergence across all regions, enhancing productivity, competitiveness, and innovation, without leaving any region behind. To that end, I will maintain a close dialogue with all regional and local authorities to identify any impediment in access to EU funds and will pay specific attention to ensuring that these authorities are at the core both at the level of the design and implementation .

Ensuring adequate administrative capacity in Member States and in regional and local authorities is essential for the implementation and absorption of EU funds. I am aware of the administrative capacity weaknesses in certain Member States and regions. If I am confirmed, my intention is to continue supporting the capacity building of Member States both in: (a) strengthening public administration and governance and (b) strengthening the capacity to deliver (i.e. design and implement) reforms, also through an enhanced digitalization.

5. Eastern regions, enlargement, ECBM

In the context of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, EU border regions, especially those Eastern and Northern regions on its external borders with Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, face the dual challenge of strengthening security while revitalising their economic and social development. Do you plan any initiatives or special support measures to help these border regions address their severe economic downturn? What types of assistance and policy initiatives will you prioritise? In addition to the pressure on the cohesion policy budget from those Eastern and Northern regions, the planned enlargement towards Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans and possibly Georgia will further affect the cohesion policy budget. How will you ensure that the cohesion policy budget is sufficient to meet the growing needs? Moreover, it is important to note that persistent administrative and legal cross-border obstacles exacerbate the economic downturn not only in regions affected by the Russian war, but across all EU regions. These obstacles fragment the Single Market, resulting in the loss of billions of euros and millions of jobs at EU level. In this urgent context—on the one hand, addressing the needs of border regions impacted by the war, and on the other, preparing for enlargement—will you prioritise the conclusion of inter-institutional negotiations on the long-stalled Regulation on a Mechanism to resolve legal and administrative obstacles in a cross-border context?

EU border regions, particularly those along its external borders with Russia and Belarus, face the dual challenge of enhancing security while revitalising their economic and social development. The security and economic development of these regions was severely impacted as a direct consequence of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

To mitigate this impact on border regions, several initiatives have been introduced. First, resources from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), initially allocated for Interreg programmes with Russia and Belarus, have been reallocated to internal Cross Border Cooperation programmes, amounting to EUR 150 million. This ensures that all EU regions neighbouring Russia and Belarus can participate in at least one internal Interreg programme. Second, the Commission has reinforced its commitments to the Interreg programme by launching targeted calls, establishing information points, and providing additional support for regions bordering Russia. For example, in collaboration with the World Bank, the Catching-up Region Initiative (CuRI) supports the Baltic States in developing regional resilience.

Regions bordering Ukraine, in contrast, have not only continued but intensified their cross-border cooperation with Ukraine over the past three years. The Commission has redirected an additional EUR 135 million, initially planned for cooperation programmes with Russia and Belarus, to cross-border programmes with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. This funding supports key sectors such as the environment, health, education, and border management. The cross-border programmes with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania contribute nearly EUR 400 million in EU funding, including EUR 67 million to the EU's Solidarity Lanes Initiative. By maintaining and expanding these cross-border programmes, we aim to foster closer cooperation between EU regions and Ukraine, helping to manage these challenges while supporting both local and Ukrainian economic recovery.

If confirmed, I will work on continuing to provide support to the eastern border regions most affected by Russia's war of aggression, notably in their efforts to reorient their local economy. The Catching-up Regions Initiative could for example provide interesting leads as regards building new innovation hubs, or using the regions' potential to support renewable energy production, developing new manufacturing ecosystems, etc. For regions bordering Ukraine and Moldova, efforts could focus on intensifying interconnections at all levels (infrastructure for transport and digital flows, innovation clusters, access to public services) and preparing for accession. I will also work with

the Commissioner for Enlargement to ensure close monitoring of the progress made by enlargement countries in terms of their economic convergence with the EU, their gradual integration into the Single Market, and their implementation of key reforms needed to make the most of EU funds – all of which will be crucial for enabling a smooth accession to the EU.

Addressing the persistent administrative and legal cross-border obstacles these regions are facing is also a priority for me. I fully support the conclusion of inter-institutional negotiations on the long-stalled Regulation on Facilitating Cross-Border Solutions. I recognise how important this is for the citizens living and working in border areas. Therefore, I intend to work closely with Member States to address their concerns and count on the continued support from the Parliament so that negotiations can begin swiftly. This will be a critical step towards removing the barriers that hinder economic development and cooperation in border regions.

As regards the impact of enlargement on the EU's cohesion policy, the EU's cohesion policy objectives remain valid in a wider Union, both in current and future Member States. In the past, cohesion policy has proven to be successful in contributing and amplifying the benefits of the Single Market, reducing territorial disparities and spurring upward socio-economic convergence between Member States and regions. To prepare for a wider Union, there is a need for a comprehensive reflection on the future of Cohesion policy. But this is not the first time that the EU faces enlargement and we can draw lessons from the past to ensure that the EU's policy continues to deliver. This will be subject of the pre-enlargement policy reviews the Commission will carry out early 2025.

6. Islands, depopulation, right to stay, outermost regions (Art. 349 TFEU), housing, territories with geographical and natural particularities (Art. 174 TFEU)

In accordance with Article 174 TFEU, the Union pays special attention to addressing the challenges of disadvantaged regions, particularly those suffering from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps. In the spirit of the effective 'right to stay', what concrete measures will you take to tackle depopulation, especially in rural areas and small towns, while ensuring equal access to essential public services? How will you improve the regional connectivity and housing conditions to enable people living in islands, outermost regions, peripheral and cross-border regions to remain in these areas? What specific measures will you advocate to reduce bureaucracy and improve the access to EU funding and the internal market for SMEs of these regions? Do you believe it is time for the Commission to develop a European strategy for islands (Islands Pact) and a POSEI (programme of options specifically relating to remoteness and insularity) transport programme?

I am convinced that the specific economic and social challenges of islands such as housing, transport, education, healthcare, water and waste management and of outermost regions must be considered. These regions face different development issues making it difficult to approach them as a single group. Cohesion Policy has always given special attention to islands and outermost regions, in line with the Treaty and, if confirmed as Commissioner, I will continue to strengthen this work.

Islands are very diverse and face a variety of different challenges, including varying levels of economic growth and demographic trends, with some islands experiencing population growth, while others face decline. These distinct needs require tailor-made approaches. This is precisely what Cohesion Policy will do: encouraging national and regional programmes to address these challenges. I will continue to support islands with funding, best practice and specific territorial strategies. In addition, I will work with my fellow Commissioners to ensure that the specificities of islands are taken into account in all relevant EU policies. The Commission's 9th Cohesion Report highlights the significant risks that depopulation and an ageing population pose to rural areas, small towns, and other disadvantaged regions. I believe we should focus on concrete measures to tackle these challenges ensuring that citizens can stay in their local communities. First, enhancing public services and quality of life - the "right to stay" depends on access to essential services like healthcare, education, housing, and public transport. I will advocate for continued investments in these areas to help prevent depopulation and attract new residents, including young families and professionals. Second, addressing the digital divide is essential. Enhancing digital literacy and providing reliable online services, including high-speed internet and 5G networks, will boost competitiveness of these regions. This will reduce outmigration and enable remote work and online education, offering new opportunities and therefore encouraging young professionals and families to stay or return to these areas. Third, supporting local economies and fostering innovation is crucial for creating jobs and retaining young talent. Promoting entrepreneurship in rural areas will be key, continuing to support SMEs, sustainable agriculture, and the circular economy. Building innovation ecosystems in these regions can foster economic resilience and long-term growth. Fourth, promoting sustainable development is a key priority for Cohesion Policy, particularly in rural and border regions, focusing on the green and digital transitions. Investments in renewable energy, sustainable transport, and environmental protection will improve living conditions and create new green jobs.

Tailoring support to regional needs is essential. I will ensure that Cohesion Policy remains flexible and place-based, adapted to specific challenges. Through close partnerships with local and regional authorities, we can tailor investments and reforms to meet the unique needs of these regions, ensuring that no region is left behind. Turning to regional connectivity and housing, I will prioritise improving transport and digital infrastructure to ensure that people in islands, outermost regions, and peripheral and cross-border regions can stay connected to broader European hubs. Transport connectivity is crucial for accessing jobs, essential services, education, and healthcare as well as the movement of goods. I will work with the Commissioner in charge of Transport to improve rail, and public transport links between these regions and main European hubs, with investments in sustainable mobility and multimodal transport.

Digital connectivity is equally important. I will advocate for investments in high-speed internet and 5G networks in rural, peripheral, and cross-border regions to facilitate remote work, online education, and the digital delivery of services and making these areas more attractive places to invest and live. Addressing mobility challenges in remote and insular regions is also crucial.

It will be essential to integrate essential services such as healthcare, education, and childcare into Cohesion Policy investments to prevent depopulation and make these regions more attractive to residents. This will be achieved by reinforcing cross-border cooperation, enabling shared services, and promoting smart solutions like telemedicine and e-learning. These will complement the ‘Clean Energy for EU Islands’ initiative financed by the EU, which helps islands generate their own sustainable, low-cost energy, thus contributing to access to affordable and sustainable energy for the island communities.

Ensuring an effective right to stay will also require access to quality jobs, especially for those who have been outside the labour market for too long and are looking for new opportunities. The Quality Jobs Roadmap to be developed together with social partners is one concrete initiative in this respect. On this I will support the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness. As regards access to services and in particular to essential services, the future EU Anti-Poverty Strategy will play a strategic role, including in addressing territorial aspects of poverty.

Cohesion Policy will continue to contribute to affordable and sustainable housing. I will work towards introducing flexibilities in the legislation, to enable Member States to double their cohesion investment in affordable housing. Investments could include renovating existing housing stock, improving energy efficiency, and supporting new developments tailored to regional needs. The New European Bauhaus can provide a valuable framework for this work. We will also provide technical assistance and capacity building to cities and stakeholders, ensuring the integration of housing projects with broader urban infrastructure. In parallel, the Executive Vice-President for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition will lead the revision of state aid rules to enable housing support measures, especially for affordable energy-efficient and social housing.

I am committed to advocating for tailored place-based support, ensuring regions’ specific needs are reflected in future cohesion policy. This includes simplifying application and reporting processes to reduce administrative burdens on SMEs, cutting red tape and making it easier for local businesses to access EU funding and participate in the Single Market. Early engagement with local and regional authorities is essential to align EU funding with local realities. Initiatives such as the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) and the European Cluster Collaboration Platform provide crucial support to SMEs by helping them navigate complex regulations, secure EU funding, and connect with business partners. The EEN plays a key role in remote regions, offering tailored guidance on programmes like Horizon Europe and InvestEU. It also facilitates cross-border partnerships, allowing SMEs to tap into new markets and expand their operations more effectively.

I will also promote continuous dialogue with stakeholders to ensure that funding mechanisms are responsive to their evolving needs and that any bottlenecks are swiftly addressed. This continuous engagement will ensure that islands and peripheral regions, including outermost regions are not left behind in EU development efforts.

Cohesion Policy encourages all Member States and regions to support their islands. In addition, rural areas on islands are covered in the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and its Rural Action Plan, as well as the Rural Pact. Regarding the proposed POSEI transport programme, my priority will be to maximise the use of existing tools and identify gaps before considering new solutions.

7. Natural disasters, emergencies

Europe has been experiencing an increase in the number and severity of weather-related disasters, such as extreme temperatures, storms, inland and coastal flooding, droughts and wildfires. How would you address both the immediate and long-term impacts of such disasters more effectively? In particular, how would you improve the budget allocation, the eligibility and the management of the current EU Solidarity Fund? What other specific measures, also in terms of prevention, would you suggest to tackle natural disasters within the future Multiannual Financial Framework post-2027, while preserving the main purpose of cohesion policy? With regard to water management, in terms of both floods and droughts, what actions would you propose to mitigate their impact on the most vulnerable regions? Moreover, would you propose updating the EU strategies to reduce the vulnerability of coastal and mountain regions to climate change?

President-elect von der Leyen emphasised in her political guidelines the great risks to our safety resulting from the impact of climate change. Extreme weather continues to ravage areas of Europe through floods, fires and droughts throughout the year and across our Union. She committed to a European Climate Adaptation Plan with specific measures to prevent natural disasters. If confirmed, as Executive Vice-President I will contribute to this Plan. Addressing natural disasters requires immediate action and a strong focus on national, local, and regional preventive measures. Priority will continue to be given to nature-based solutions (reforestation, wetlands and other green infrastructure). To effectively mitigate risks, proactive strategies must be in place across all governance levels, supported by targeted investments and reforms.

Cohesion Policy is currently the largest EU funding source for disaster risk management, focusing on prevention and preparedness measures in regions across the EU, with EUR 14 billion provided for disaster risk management (flood and fire risk reduction; ecosystem-based approaches; non-climate related natural and man-made risks) during the 2021 – 2027 programming period. The Commission has recently proposed to increase the flexibility of the cohesion policy funds to rapidly provide additional, effective support in case of natural disasters.

The EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF) is a post-disaster support that is available only in the event of serious disasters and is a tangible European contribution to emergency and rebuilding recovery efforts. The EU Solidarity Fund is intended to complement national efforts, not replace them. Therefore, enhancing national disaster risk finance schemes and building capacity at the national level are essential steps. Member States must be equipped to handle smaller-scale disasters, with the assurance that the EU Solidarity Fund is available when the scale of the disaster exceeds their capacities. We need to strengthen the solidarity measures in the face of intensifying climate related disasters. The only affordable way is to ensure every investment can withstand climate impacts by design, as it is much cheaper than rebuilding after disasters.

Looking ahead at the longer-term impacts, I intend to emphasise preventive measures more strongly. Nature-based solutions should be prioritised. These measures have effectively reduced natural disasters' impact while contributing to biodiversity and climate adaptation.

A comprehensive approach to water management is also needed, addressing both flood prevention and drought mitigation. While Cohesion Policy already supports water management measures, disaster risk management plans must be designed to consider climate change impacts.

Flood protection and drought resilience investments must be closely aligned with national and regional risk management strategies. The enabling condition framework has enhanced the effectiveness of these investments, and we should explore ways to further tailor these conditions to the specific needs of individual Member States and regions. This could include strengthening infrastructure to withstand extreme weather, improving early warning systems, and fully integrating climate adaptation measures into local and regional planning. Climate change exacerbates existing isolation, making it harder for residents in coastal, mountain, or remote areas to access healthcare, education, and clean water. Enhancing transport and digital infrastructure will not only help mitigate the impact of natural disasters but also make these communities more resilient.

Finally, protecting the interests and resilience of the EU's coastal communities will remain a priority, with coastal communities and regions hosting 40% of the EU's population. Economic damages from coastal flooding in the EU, which currently amount to EUR 1 billion annually, are projected to rise sharply in the coming years due to global warming. The Oceans Pact, under the lead of the Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans, will look at how coastal communities can be supported. This Pact will foster a holistic approach, integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions, ensuring that all stakeholders, including local coastal communities and

industries, are engaged in ocean governance. It will set a framework for a healthy, resilient, and productive ocean and coastal areas, thus reducing their vulnerability to climate change.

Question from the Committee on Budgets

8. What do you intend to put in place in practice to fulfil the mission you have been entrusted with “to align cohesion policy to wider EU priorities, be more focused, simpler and more impactful and help mobilise reforms and investment”? How will cohesion policy fit into the President-elect’s demand for a policy-based approach to the next EU long term budget? In particular if the implementation is to be based on “a plan for each country linking key reforms with investments”, how will you ensure that there is sufficient flexibility while maintaining a clear audit trail, clear European added-value with discernible cross-border dimension to spending involving regional and local authorities, real value for money and that the Parliament plays a role on equal footing with the Council in the implementation and the monitoring of the funds?

President-elect von der Leyen has entrusted me with the mission of making cohesion policy a key driver of EU reforms and investments. I see this as an opportunity to modernise and reinforce its role in reducing economic, social and territorial disparities, fostering upward convergence, enhancing productivity, innovation and competitiveness, and supporting regional and local authorities. I am committed to ensuring that cohesion policy aligns with the broader EU priorities, becomes simpler and more focused, and continues to deliver tangible benefits for our citizens and companies.

First and foremost, while promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion in itself is an objective of the Union, cohesion policy must be fully aligned with the EU’s strategic priorities, including competitiveness, the green and digital transitions and economic and social resilience. In doing so, it will ensure that no region, whether urban, rural, or outermost, is left behind as we work towards a stronger, more sustainable Europe. The next MFF will provide a unique opportunity to do that.

Partnership with regional and local authorities will be at the heart of future cohesion policy. These authorities are key to ensuring that our policies can rely on broad ownership and that our investments are well-targeted and impactful on the ground. I have been expressly tasked in my mission letter to pay particular attention to the involvement of regional and local authorities. If I am confirmed, as Executive Vice-President I will maintain a close dialogue with all relevant regional and local authorities to identify any impediment to accessing EU funds and I will pay specific attention to their close involvement to support ownership and implementation of investments and reforms on the ground.

In view of the preparations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, and in order to ensure that cohesion policy is well focused, we will work closely with national, regional and local authorities. By focusing on shared EU priorities - such as reducing disparities, promoting economic, social, and territorial cohesion, and boosting competitiveness - we will ensure that our investments have a measurable impact. To this end, I will work with Member States to ensure that cohesion funding is used to support crucial reforms in public services, education, healthcare, transport, and digital connectivity. These reforms will create the conditions necessary for businesses to thrive and for communities to grow stronger, particularly in regions that are at risk of falling behind.

Cohesion policy will also continue to foster cross-border cooperation as an essential part of European integration. By improving transport, digital connectivity, and public services, cohesion policy will enhance connectivity between regions, contributing to social cohesion and economic growth.

A simpler cohesion policy will also help reduce administrative burden and improve efficiency. Furthermore, impact will be achieved by leveraging cohesion funding to attract additional private and national investments. This approach will not only maximise the impact of EU’s financial resources but will also ensure that every euro spent from the cohesion budget delivers clear European added value, fostering convergence and competitiveness across all territories.

While cohesion policy must be more focused and strategic, flexibility is essential for success.

At the same time, we must maintain a clear audit trail and a robust financial oversight. Cohesion policies will live up to the highest standards of protection of the EU financial interests. Cohesion policy must ensure value for money, and every investment must demonstrate its European added value. To this end, I am committed to maintaining rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that ensure transparency, accountability, and

efficiency in the use of EU funds. The European Parliament will play a crucial role in overseeing the implementation of cohesion policy, ensuring that democratic scrutiny is fully respected.

I will insist on an approach that ensures a transparent flow of information and will be available for a high-level engagement between the institutions throughout the implementation phase.

Question from the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs

Implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility

9. Given the absorption rates of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), do you consider that the RRF has been sufficiently quick and targeted to stimulate the economy following the Covid-19 crisis? How will you as the responsible Commissioner ensure that the RRF funds are used most effectively? Will you proceed with a claw-back of funds transferred to Member States in cases where investments are unlikely to be finished by 2026? Do you see the RRF as a precedent to address crisis and significant funding gaps?

I believe the Recovery and Resilience Facility was both swift and targeted in stimulating the economy after the COVID-19 crisis. As a matter of fact, by the end of August 2024, more than 40% of the funds committed under the Facility had already been disbursed to Member States, nearly 50% of grants and over 30% of loans. This is a historic rate of absorption compared to past EU spending programmes.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility has made a decisive contribution to supporting the economic recovery after the pandemic in several ways. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, public investment not only held steady, but actually grew from 3% of GDP in 2019 to 3.5% in 2023, with almost half of that growth driven by EU support, particularly the Recovery and Resilience Facility. In addition, the announcement itself of NextGenerationEU in 2020 contributed, with other national and EU policy action, to the narrowing of sovereign bond spreads. At the same time, pre-financing under the Recovery and Resilience Facility played a key role in kick-starting EU recovery, as it provided immediate additional fiscal space to Member States, playing a stabilising role in the aftermath of the pandemic, while the delivery model of the Facility, which rewards progress in implementation, provided sustained financial support to Member States.

However, the Recovery and Resilience Facility was not only a crisis instrument, but also an instrument to boost the EU's resilience and make our economies and societies stronger and fit for the future. The Recovery and Resilience Facility stimulated the economy while supporting convergence, as its allocation key was tailored to concentrate support on lower-income and more vulnerable Member States hit hardest by the pandemic. Furthermore, the requirement for recovery and resilience plans to address all or a significant subset of challenges established in country-specific recommendations allowed the Recovery and Resilience Facility to target each Member State's specific needs, while supporting EU common priorities.

As analysed in the mid-term evaluation, the Recovery and Resilience Facility was very effective in supporting common EU priorities and the implementation of key, long-awaited, structural reforms. Ambitious recovery and resilience plans fostered progress across all the six pillars defining the scope of the Facility, including in particular the green and digital transitions and socio-economic cohesion.

But this endeavour is far from over. The best way to ensure that the Facility is used most effectively is to help Member States deliver in full their commitments by 2026. This is our collective responsibility and a key upcoming challenge for both Member States and the Commission. Therefore, if I am confirmed, as Executive Vice-President I will work hand-in-hand with the Commissioner for Economy and Productivity in order for the Member States to deliver on the agreed reforms and investments set out in the Recovery and Resilience plans by the 2026 expenditure deadline, as set out in my mission letter. The goal is and remains to reach full implementation of the commitments and therefore full disbursements of the funds committed under the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

It is important to bear in mind that the Recovery and Resilience Facility was designed with clear rules and a robust performance-based framework. The Recovery and Resilience Facility funding is linked to results. Member States' progress in implementing reforms and investments is measured by milestones and targets that are appropriately distributed over the lifetime of the instrument, to follow implementation with clear baselines and goals to be achieved. The Recovery and Resilience Facility rewards this progress by disbursing amounts linked to the achievement of milestones and targets.

As we approach the final 2026 deadline, the Commission will be assessing continuously whether Member States deliver on their commitments and the final milestones and targets are likely to be fulfilled by then. Should that not be the case, according to the current legislative framework I will engage with the relevant Member States on how to amend their plans and ensure that funds are focused on equally ambitious alternative investments that can be completed within the lifetime of the Facility. If, despite these efforts, some of the last milestones or targets are still considered as not satisfactorily fulfilled, the corresponding disbursement will not be made.

For the next five years, the Commission's ambition is to be an "Investment Commission", as indicated by President-elect von der Leyen in the Political Guidelines. In the previous mandate, Europe has set course on an ambitious programme of modernisation. NextGenerationEU is providing a significant investment boost, helping unlock the financing needed for the green, digital and social transition. From the Recovery and Resilience Facility, we have learned about the need for simplicity and flexibility, speed and strategic focus in our spending. We have also however learned about the need to improve the involvement of local and regional authorities, stakeholders, and social partners and the current audit and control framework. These lessons should be reflected in our future funding policies.

But Europe's investment needs cannot be financed through the public purse alone. As highlighted in both the Draghi and Letta reports, the majority of these investments will need to come from the private sector. While the public sector plays also a decisive role in setting the right framework conditions, e.g. through the Capital Markets Union, the EU can also provide incentives and leverage for the private sector.

Question from the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

10. Your mission letter insists "for all citizens to have an effective right to stay [...] by supporting what a community needs" notably by "tackl[ing] regional disparities". Among other policies, this touches upon employment and social policies, including social inclusion. What concrete proposals and measures do you foresee to address this challenge and to improve access to quality social and employment services, and how do you see the Recovery and Resilience Facility plans contributing to this objective, and more generally, to the effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights?

In particular, given the EU's commitment to promoting deinstitutionalisation and ensuring that persons with disabilities, children, and other groups in a vulnerable situation live with equal rights, how do you plan to ensure that future EU funding and cohesion policy does effectively support community-based services and affordable housing solutions? How do you intend to work on this with Commissioner-designate Jørgensen?

If confirmed, I will take concrete steps to ensure that overcoming regional disparities remains a priority at the core of Cohesion Policy. I will strive to ensure that citizens have an effective right to stay in the place they call home and can remain in their communities by improving access to public services and private activities, quality jobs, education and skills, health, transport and digital connectivity. This will involve directing investments to regions facing economic stagnation, depopulation, and development traps, particularly those lagging behind in the green and digital transitions. I will work closely with local and regional authorities to strengthen their administrative capacities for effective fund management, ensuring that development strategies are tailored to their specific needs.

When it comes to the social dimension of cohesion policy, to deliver on the ambitious goals set out in my mission letter, I will further build on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. We have strong foundations in place already for the current programming period for 2021-2027. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) notably helps to improve the accessibility and quality of social services across all regions of the EU, in particular for vulnerable groups and persons with disabilities.

Looking ahead, a strong social dimension in cohesion policy is vital to ensuring an effective right to stay. I will work closely together with my fellow Commissioners, and especially the Executive Vice President for People, Skills and Preparedness, to achieve this. I will also actively work with Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management, responsible for equality, to enhance accessibility and services to persons with disabilities. The Union should continue to facilitate making the right of persons with disabilities to independent living and inclusion in the community a reality on the ground. Here again, EU funds have an important role to play to support deinstitutionalisation.

I will also build on the lessons learned from the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The Facility has been essential in contributing to the EU social agenda and the European Pillar of Social Rights, including in the areas of gender equality and equal opportunities. Under the Facility, the share of measures covering the social area and contributing

to the European Pillar of Social Right is sizeable, amounting to almost EUR 163 billion, which is more than 25% of the entire recovery and resilience financial support. For example, almost all national plans include measures to strengthen the healthcare systems and to boost skills, education and training. Most national plans include also active labour market policies and actions to make the public employment services more effective. Finally, a majority of national recovery and resilience plans also include measures aimed at improving social protection and social services and at supporting social housing.

In addition, the affordability of housing is an important concern of European citizens, and they expect a robust response. President-elect von der Leyen announced the first-ever European Affordable Housing Plan in the Political Guidelines. If confirmed, I will work closely with the Commissioner for Energy and Housing on the aspects related to the housing challenge. In accordance with my Mission Letter, I will contribute to the New European Bauhaus and the European Affordable Housing Plan, notably by injecting liquidity into the housing market and ensuring that Member States are able to double the planned Cohesion Policy investments in affordable housing. From the perspective of Cohesion Policy, this work will be closely interlinked with ensuring an effective right to stay for citizens.

The quality of the building stock, which is the single largest energy consumer in Europe, is key for reaching our climate and energy targets, and for reducing the cost-of-living. Renovations are an important opportunity to enhance buildings' energy performance and resilience as well as to increase the availability of living space, in particular in urban areas. While requiring upfront investment, renovations reduce energy consumption and can tackle the root causes of energy poverty, which affected 10.6% of Europeans in 2023 who were unable to keep their home adequately warm. Energy poverty will also be addressed through the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy by considering structural measures, notably energy efficiency in housing and access to renewable energy.

The European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund are already financing the construction and renovation of affordable homes, improving energy efficiency, and supporting urban development. They will continue to do so in this period, together with other instruments, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

Question from the Committee on Transport and Tourism

11. According to the corresponding mission letter, President von der Leyen tasked the future Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms to “guide the work on sustainable mobility and tourism to connect different parts of Europe and underpin a thriving Single Market”. In this regard, you are meant to support the work of the future Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism. How do you intend to pursue this cooperation and what would be your strategy and priorities both for transport and tourism? As Executive Vice-President responsible for cohesion policy and regional development, you will also have an impact on the completion of the TEN-T network for which TRAN is responsible. How would you ensure that the implementation of the TEN-T network is adequately financed and underpinned by the EU cohesion policy? Also as responsible for the development of outermost regions, islands, rural areas and cities, what role do you see for transport, as a tool for social cohesion and connectivity, and how do you intend to approach tourism in these areas to promote a resilient, sustainable and competitive tourism sector?

I believe that both sustainable transport and tourism are crucial to strengthen Europe's cohesion and prosperity. Connectivity is essential to ensure the proper functioning of the Single Market. Guaranteeing that all citizens and businesses, regardless of their location, can access reliable and affordable transport to ensure that they are connected to the rest of the EU and to the world at large is a prerequisite for economic and social development and for people's livelihoods.

At the same time, tourism has an important territorial dimension, and many EU regions are heavily dependent on it. If developed sustainably, tourism is a driver for the economic and social cohesion of European regions, in particular in remote and rural areas, where it may be a major source of income and livelihood for local communities.

In close collaboration with the Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism, I will support efforts to align EU policies with regional needs. This will ensure that each region's specific challenges are met while fostering economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Together, we will leverage EU funding to drive both sectors' green and digital transformations, making them more resilient and future-proof. We will ensure that investments in sustainable transport and tourism balance the economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, allowing regions to easily integrate into the single market and unlock their economic potential while supporting the EU's climate and territorial cohesion goals, and improving the quality of the environment. In

addition, I am convinced that improving the availability, accessibility and affordability of transport plays a crucial role in social and economic development, and cohesion. In this context, I will work with a view to ensuring wide access to affordable transport options for all Europeans. Tackling transport poverty will also be addressed as part of the first-ever European Anti-Poverty Strategy for which the Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness will be in the lead and to which I will gladly contribute.

First, I want to make sure that the implementation of the TEN-T network is successful. The key objective is completing our TEN-T network within the agreed deadlines and making the EU's infrastructure more resilient to natural disasters. This includes focusing on Member States lagging behind in infrastructure development and investing in national sections of the TEN-T to meet EU standards and connect with cross-border sections. These investments will prioritise sustainable transport options, ensuring that infrastructure development contributes to both territorial cohesion and environmental sustainability. Moreover, if confirmed, I intend to continue working on enabling affordable connectivity, mobility and access to critical services in regions with poor-quality transport systems, such as rural, peripheral, cross-border, and outermost regions and foster sustainable mobility in urban areas.

Second, I will strive to ensure that tourism has a just place in funding programmes while providing for sufficient flexibility. Because of its multiple angles, tourism can and should benefit from support in various policy areas. In particular, I will look at challenges of tourism in cities, islands and outermost regions. The intention is to build on the current initiatives to promote sustainable urban tourism models as well as tackling the connectivity, climate change impacts and high dependency challenges, working to support diversification of the economic model and testing new solutions. I will build on ongoing work to ensure that our tourism businesses and cultural venues find it easier to find funding opportunities, also at national and regional levels.

I strongly believe that investment opportunities should benefit from strategic and integrated approaches to tackle the challenges of both sectors, focusing on simplification and taking into account the needs of local stakeholders, involving them for the definition of the needed interventions.

Transport investments should be included in comprehensive transport planning, encompassing a multi-modal mapping of existing and planned infrastructures, including sustainable mobility strategies and investments in the TEN-T networks, with a focus on TEN-T European Transport Corridors work plans. This strategy will help connecting regions more effectively to larger transport networks, contributing to the completion of the single market and fostering economic development, in line with the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy.

Tourism actions should be included into broader territorial development strategies. By linking tourism investments with local development plans, Smart Specialisation Strategies, and territorial cooperation initiatives, we can ensure that tourism boosts local economies and contributes to social cohesion and environmental sustainability. This approach is well defined in the Transition pathway for tourism and European Agenda for Tourism 2030. Its full implementation requires a strategic approach at EU level so that all available tools, from funding to policies, are mobilised for the same objective.

Consolidating the key role of the sustainable transport and tourism ecosystems will be of utmost importance. We have all witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic what happens when there is no tourism and mobility of people is curtailed. This had a devastating effect on the strength of Europe's economic and social fabric. Both sectors have recovered since. If confirmed, my job is to build on this recovery and to make sure that it is sustainable and equitable. Particularly important will be ensuring that remote areas are not only well connected, but also that transport remains affordable. Without it, it will be hardly possible for them to benefit from sustainable tourism.

Question from the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

12. As Executive Vice-President of the European Commission, how would you pursue the cross-Directorate-General objective of addressing the causes and challenges of maintaining and improving life quality in rural areas? How would you reduce the urban-rural gap, promote the development of infrastructures, support the digital transition, facilitate access to services and generally make rural areas more attractive for farmers as well as businesses? How do you view the Rural Pact and its further development? In terms of funding, how do you intend to ensure that EU funds and policies are complementary in supporting rural areas and that information is accessible to local stakeholders?

I fully subscribe to the objectives of the long-term vision for EU's rural areas. This forward-looking document describes the existing challenges to improve quality of life in rural areas, as well as the opportunities that are still

to be grasped. I intend to ensure coordination between different sectorial policies that have an impact on rural areas, especially Cohesion Policy and the Common Agriculture Policy, which are complementary in contributing to social, economic and territorial cohesion in Europe and to make the sector more sustainable. A key aspect would be strengthening the implementation of rural proofing of the European Commission legislative and non-legislative initiatives, as requested by the European Parliament upon initiative of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development in its resolution of 13 December 2022. I commit to organise the necessary cooperation among Commissioners, to ensure that the economic development, the competitiveness, sustainability and the attractiveness of rural areas are embedded in future planning and budgetary efforts.

Access to services, infrastructure, digital connectivity and skills are cornerstones for making the entrepreneurship more attractive in these areas, starting with the agricultural and food industry that over the years has become a pillar of the countryside. However, especially remote and depopulated rural areas suffer from lack of services. We need to ensure that health care, education, and social services are not luxuries. We should ensure that they are widely available to the public as envisaged in the European Pillar of Social Rights. If confirmed, I commit to continue work on the Action plan of the long-term vision for EU's rural areas, where business creation, the support to the existing ones, improvement of services and support to innovation, in particular the digital one, should become central. We must align national and regional policies with EU priorities and funding streams to maximize their impact. This can be achieved through encouraging the implementation of holistic strategies for rural areas at national and regional levels ensuring comprehensive planning and collaboration between all governance levels, in line with the Rural Vision. I will make sure to establish a dialogue with rural communities, particularly with rural youth. The Rural Pact has proven to be an important forum for cooperation and is following the example of interaction among urban stakeholders. The activities of the Rural Pact have contributed to amplify rural voices, enable networking, and encourage action for rural areas. In the light of its successful approach, I commit to continue supporting and where necessary deepening and improving, the Rural Pact.

Today, EU policies are equipped with a wide range of territorial tools and other policy instruments effective in addressing rural challenges, notably within the second pillar of the CAP, which includes programs such as LEADER, community-led local development which had demonstrated their added value, as well as Smart Villages but also strategies for integrated territorial development. In the first year after entering in the office I will take stock of what exists and assess how to make the current tools more efficient to support the rural communities and the farmers accompanying them towards production models that best combine the three levels of sustainability: social, economic and environmental.

Cohesion policy also provides wide-ranging support to rural areas, notably through integrated territorial interventions, including those aimed at strengthening urban-rural interactions in the context of sustainable urban development. Rural areas also benefit from support to small urban areas, which act as anchor points and infrastructure and service hubs for rural areas.

Regardless of the design of the next EU funds architecture, whose definition is ahead of us, we must guarantee that the needs of rural people are clearly identified and properly addressed and put at the core of the different policies. An assessment on how rural communities are targeted is necessary. In this respect, it will be crucial to have specific objectives and indicators for rural areas in the future EU funds and policies. Strengthening the recently created Rural Observatory will contribute to this objective. It will be key to ensure that effective tools are in place to allow local and rural stakeholders, starting with farmers and agri-food producers to be fully involved in the process. Building their capacity to access EU funding, communicating on the existing opportunities via networking activities and initiatives such as the toolkit on EU funding for rural areas will be my priority.

Question from the Committee on Fisheries

13. How would you make the fisheries sector more resilient, sustainable and competitive in the global market, contribute to generational renewal and bringing benefit to coastal communities and Outermost regions, while assuring the cohesion of these territories and within the objectives of the European Green Deal?

The future of fishing, both economically and as an attractive sector for young people, depends on a healthy ocean, abundant fish stocks, and a commitment to safety and innovation. Striking the right balance between managing fishery resources, protecting our marine environment, and investing in the future of fisheries, will be key to safeguarding the long-term viability of the fishing industry, in particular the small-scale fleet.

If confirmed, I will support the Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans in his mission.

To boost resilience, both the cohesion policy funds, and the European Maritime, Fisheries, and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) should continue prioritising investments in innovation and modernisation within the current legal framework. Through EMFAF we will continue support the green and digital transition, looking for an ambitious balance between the necessary safeguard of the fish stocks and strengthening of the resilience of the sector. Both the cohesion policy Funds and EMFAF have a pivotal role in addressing the unique challenges faced by the EU's coastal regions, from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic coasts, and outermost regions, which are often highly dependent on fisheries. These areas are more vulnerable to economic fluctuations and environmental changes, so it is essential to provide targeted support to ensure their resilience, developing solutions that guarantee an equivalent of the productive standards with the trade partners of the third Countries. We will continue to prioritise funding for infrastructure development in these regions, improving connectivity and access to markets. Furthermore, we will support the fisheries sector and its decarbonisation and digital transition, but also sustainable aquaculture and new emerging blue economy sectors, to make it possible for coastal communities to benefit from diversified economies. If confirmed, I will give special attention to addressing the social and economic disparities in outermost regions. Both the cohesion policy Funds and the EMFAF can help promote inclusivity, offering targeted financial assistance to small-scale fishers and promoting social innovation projects that integrate fisheries, notably small-scale fisheries, into broader regional development strategies.

Finally, I will strongly support the Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans in developing a clear vision for a resilient, sustainable and competitive fisheries sector with a 2040 perspective, in rolling out a holistic, forward-looking and ambitious strategy for the ocean, through the European Oceans Pact, and in promoting the Union's priority to ensure level playing field between EU and third countries.