

COMMITTEE ON INDUSTRY, RESEARCH AND ENERGY

INVITED COMMITTEE:
COMMITTEE ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION

HEARING OF EKATERINA ZAHARIEVA

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE
(Startups, Research and Innovation)

TUESDAY, 5 NOVEMBER 2024

BRUSSELS

1-0002-0000

IN THE CHAIR:**BORYS BUDKA***Chair of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy*

1-0003-0000

(The hearing opened at 09:03)

1-0004-0000

Borys Budka, *Chair of the ITRE Committee*. – Good morning everyone. First of all, I would like to welcome Ms Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate for Start-Ups, Research and Innovation, to this confirmation hearing. Welcome to our committee.

I'd like also to welcome the members of the ITRE Committee, the committee responsible for this hearing, as well as the members of the invited Committee on Culture and Education, and everyone present in the room today, not forgetting those watching us live on webstream.

Before the start of the hearing, please allow me to make some remarks. First of all, I know that there was a proposal and request for our friend Diego Solier to have a minute of silence because of the victims in Valencia, in Spain, because of the floods. Yesterday, this minute of silence took place at the very beginning of our working period of the hearings. It was asked by our friends. So stand up, and we will have one minute of silence.

(The meeting rose and observed a minute's silence)

So now we will start our procedure. First of all, in line with the guidelines for the approval of the Commission, Parliament evaluates the Commissioner-designate on the basis of their general competence, European commitment, and personal independence. It also assesses the knowledge of their respective portfolio and their communication skills.

The Committee on Legal Affairs has raised no objection to the holding of this hearing. Before the hearing, Ms Zaharieva replied in writing to a questionnaire. The written answers have been distributed to members in all languages. We acknowledge Ms Zaharieva's readiness to cooperate with the European Parliament. This is important in the context of the revision of the Framework Agreement between Parliament and the Commission, in particular regarding your engagement to be regularly present in committees and plenaries to follow up on Parliament's legislative work and to timely share information with Parliament as the co-legislator and arm of the budgetary authority.

We count on the full implementation of these commitments and emphasise the Commission's role as an honest broker, ensuring equal treatment of Parliament and the Council. We equally count on your full cooperation to inform our committees in advance of all upcoming proposals, with detailed justifications for those requiring urgent action.

Today's hearing will be structured as follows: Ms Zaharieva will be invited to make an opening statement of no longer than 15 minutes. She will also have five minutes at the end for the closing statement.

After the introduction, we will have four rounds of questions and answers: a first round of political group coordinators, with a five-minutes slot each, with one minute for the question and two minutes for the answer from the Commissioner-designate, with the possibility of a follow-up

question from the same Member of no longer than one minute, with one minute for the reply; then a second round of questions with a three-minute slot each, based on the overall distribution of speaking time among the political groups, including a representative from the non-attached Members; then a third round of questions by the chair of the invited Committee with a three-minute slot; then a final round of questions by the political groups in reverse order, also with a three-minute slot each.

All the slots of three minutes will be divided into one minute for the question and two minutes for the answer from the Commissioner-designate. Interpretation is provided in all 23 languages.

A last remark: in order to ensure the smooth running of the hearing, I will be very strict with the speaking time and will not allow speakers, MEPs and Ms Zaharieva to exceed their allocated time – so I'm sorry in advance for my role today!

1-0005-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, *Commissioner-designate*. – Chair, I want to start by expressing my sincere condolences to those affected by the devastating floods in Valencia. And I now, in the beginning, will start in Bulgarian and I will continue in English.

Уважаеми председатели, уважаеми членове на комисията по промишленост, изследвания и енергетика и на комисията по култура и образование, за мен е голяма привилегия да бъда днес с вас. До неотдавна седях в подобна зала в София, служейки на българските граждани като народен представител. Благодарение на този си опит изпитвам най-дълбоко уважение към тази институция, като гласът на европейските граждани.

Сърдечно благодаря на българското правителство за номинацията. За мен е голяма чест, че получих доверието на председателя на Европейската комисия, г-жа Урсула фон дер Лайен, която ми повери отговорността за този стратегически ресор. Вярвам, че моят административен и политически опит на високо равнище ще ми помогнат да изпълня по най-добрия начин възложените ми задачи като европейски комисар.

Областта на политиката, за която съм предложена, е в основата на Европейската програма за конкурентоспособност. Трябва да поставим науката и иновациите в центъра на нашите политики, за да осигурим бъдещето на Европа. Това беше подчертано в три важни доклада — на Лета, на Драги и на Хейтор. В този контекст имам честта да представя пред вас визията си за ресора „Стартиращи предприятия, научни изследвания и иновации“.

As President von der Leyen outlined, R&I must be at the heart of a stronger and more competitive Europe. To unleash the full potential of R&I, we clearly need to invest more resources, more strategically and in more coordinated way. Generative AI alone is estimated to add between EUR 2 and 4 trillion to industries, from pharmaceuticals to manufacturing. One third of the CO2 reductions we need by 2050 will come from green technologies that are not yet on the market. Our R&I investments are lower than those of the US, China and Japan. Uncoordinated research efforts across Member States also weigh on our innovation performance. If confirmed, I will work tirelessly to shift this course. Our biggest strength is our people, with their talent and creativity. We have 2 million bright minds that make Europe a global R&I powerhouse, with the second-highest research output in the world. This is the heart of our solid research and innovation base. Europe's successes rest upon the cooperation and partnership of all its parts.

If confirmed, five key priorities will guide my action, for which I am asking your trust and cooperation in the mandate ahead. They are united by my vision to construct a real European

research and innovation union that will enable Europe to become the most competitive region in the world.

My first priority will be to strengthen the European Research Area with a new ERA Act. First, we must strive harder to reach our 3% GDP target for R&I. Today, we are only at 2.3% and this is clearly not enough. Here, our ambitions should be matched by pragmatism. I believe that commonly agreed national trajectories can help to achieve this goal despite different starting points. Second, 27 excellent but fragmented research strategies do not make a good European one. Ninety percent of European public R&I comes from national and regional funding – a firepower nine times bigger than Horizon Europe. Lack of coordination creates inefficient funding systems, discourages mobility, and fails to exploit opportunities for cross-border cooperation. Third, we must make sure that talent remains in the EU and avoid further brain drain. The fifth freedom of movement of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology needs to be ensured. Freedom of research will also be a core element of the act. I fully support the Parliament's position on this matter. I also support investment in research and technology infrastructures. EU funding has created a world-class public network of supercomputers, and our Joint Research Centre hosts unique infrastructure. These successes should inspire us in more critical sectors.

Next to the ERA Act, I will significantly expand our European Research Council to fund more excellent research.

My second priority for the research and innovation union will be to make a leap forward for European innovation and European start-ups and scale-up companies. The key challenge of Europe is to mobilise more private investment into research and innovation. We must support our companies much better to commercialise and scale up the innovation here in Europe. As Mr Draghi highlights, many of them often fail to successfully pass the growth stage. Every start-up moving to third countries to seek capital represents a waste of European resources, a loss of European jobs and missed opportunities for our communities. We must stop Europe's innovation drain. This starts by addressing the two most critical challenges for our innovators: access to capital and excessive red tape. This is why I will strongly expand and enhance the European Innovation Council, offering more opportunities, especially for disruptive and high-risk venture. The EIC is currently only able to fund a tiny minority of excellent projects, only 8%. It highlights the enormous demand for innovation funding. I will strengthen cooperation with the European Investment Bank and the recently launched Trusted Investors Network to foster private co-investment with the EIC fund.

But funding is not enough. I will present a comprehensive start-up and scale-up strategy and organise a European start-up and scale-up forum as quickly as possible. Specifically, our new European Innovation Act will address regulatory and administrative burden for our innovative companies. We need a 28th regime that will provide an attractive EU-wide status. I will also advance promising instruments like innovation procurement and regulatory sandboxes.

My third priority will be to boost our research and innovation capacity in key technologies. Mr Draghi pointed out that Europe cannot afford to remain trapped in middle technologies and industries. This is why I will ensure that R&I efforts are coordinated and concentrated in key technologies and areas with disruptive potential where we can build a global competitive advantage, from green technologies to biotech and productivity-enhancing digital tech. We witnessed the power of EU collaborative efforts in the rapid development of COVID vaccines that saved so many lives.

A European strategy to promote life sciences by 2040 is imperative. This strategy, to be proposed in 2025, will allow life sciences and biotech to remain a major driver of Europe's competitiveness.

If confirmed, I will also propose a strategy to increase the uptake of AI in science, which carries a huge productivity potential. I also help to set up a European AI research council to support these efforts. I will propose an Advanced Materials Act to enhance their development and production in Europe.

Our research and innovation union must be inclusive in methods and substance. This leads me to my fourth priority. As a minister, I built a track record in promoting women. You can count on me to work relentlessly to promote women in R&I. Women outnumber men at graduate levels, yet hold just one in four highest academic positions. This is not due to lack of talent, but to structural barriers. I will present an action plan on women in R&I and start-ups, covering initiatives from gender research to a safer workplace. I will strive to achieve the target of 50 % women in all Horizon-related boards, expert groups and evaluation committees. I will work to enhance the Marie Skłodowska Curie actions, which is very successful in attracting female researchers. I want to strengthen university alliances to provide more attractive career perspectives for our researchers, including women and young people. Within the first 100 days of my mandate, I will organise a youth dialogue, which I commit to hold annually.

My last, but certainly not least, priority will be an ambitious budget for our next framework programme. For the past 40 years, our framework programmes have been a unique European and global tool with clear impact. Not only they have supported unicorns and many Nobel Prizes winners, including this year's Nobel Prize winner of chemistry, Professor David Baker, they also improved our citizens' quality of life, created jobs and growth. Horizon 2020 returned between 5 and 11 euros for each euro invested, and Horizon Europe's long term impact is estimated between EUR 800 and 900 billion. Not bad. In line with President von der Leyen's political guidelines, I will do my utmost to increase our research and innovation spending. This simply makes economic sense. We will need to continue to make sure that the whole of Europe benefits from the framework programme. This is at the heart of the debate on widening, where progress has been made recently, but much more needs to be achieved. And let me underline: for widening measures to be successful, strong national efforts in R&I spending in all Member States will be crucial. To make the framework programme even more impactful, I will strive for radical simplification and clear priorities.

From a global perspective, I remain committed to promote international research and innovation cooperation through a balanced approach that fosters reciprocity, a level playing field, and protects our strategic autonomy and economic security. And I am committed to include and work with Ukrainian researchers and innovators as much as possible. If confirmed, I will also visit all our Member States to seek their support and to hear the views of our universities, research organisations, start-ups and SMEs. To achieve these goals, I will count on the experience in these committees and work as a team with Executive Vice-President Séjourné and Executive Vice-President Virkkunen, but also Commissioner Serafin and other commissioners.

Honourable Members, I'm humbled to be the candidate to lead such a key portfolio for Europe's future. If confirmed, I will draw on my ministerial experience to oversee the work of two directorates-general, but also on my true European commitment. I promise to engage in strong and intensive cooperation with the European Parliament. Next to the regular structured dialogue with the ITRE Committee, I am ready to meet the coordinators of political groups on a regular basis to discuss topics related to my portfolio. If confirmed, I plan extensive exchange with all of you honourable Members on key aspects on R&I policy and on the next Framework programme.

I look forward to answering your questions in detail and in full transparency. Thank you for your attention.

1-0008-0000

Borys Budka, *Chair of the ITRE Committee*. – Thank you very much for the opening statement. This is now the time for the political groups. I want to once again mention the rules for the first round.

I will pass the floor to the coordinators of the political groups in the ITRE Committee in the order EPP, S&D, P/E, ECR, Renew, Greens, The Left and ESN. Please remember that we have five-minute slots. So first, Christian Ehler from the EPP. The floor is yours.

1-0009-0000

Christian Ehler (PPE). – Madam Commissioner-designate, first of all, good morning. Secondly, take a deep breath. That's not a tribunal – it's a hearing. But I think we strictly come to the beef. I mean, the high-level group chaired by Professor Heitor recently published its report. The report highlighted the importance of an increased budget, as well as a more decentralised and flexible governance structure. This is the only way, from our point of view, to ensure that the Europeans will get a programme delivered that also works for the scientists and innovators.

My question will be: how will you stand up to ensure the independence of the programme, and secondly, including the more expert-driven governments, and as you had been mentioned yourself, a budget, which had been described as minimum of EUR 200 billion for the next Framework Programme?

1-0010-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, *Commissioner-designate*. – *Danke sehr*, Mr Ehler, thank you so much for your encouraging words. Yes, we have really three very important reports, and the last one was Mr Heitor report, and I did have a chance to speak with Mr Heitor for short, and I hope if I'm approved today to have much more intensive dialogue with all the experts that proposed this very, very important report for preparation of the next Framework Programme.

Because I have only two minutes, I will start with commitment to fight for an independent and increased Framework Programme and support more expert-driven governance. I see clear benefits on increased budget of R&I, and I will count on your support to convince the Member States, and this is my goal, to work with them, to visit all of them, to meet finance ministers and convince them that the best investment that they can do is in education and in R&I.

The evaluation of the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe clearly shows this is really important for the growth and for European competitiveness. So, I'm in favour in decentralisation, in pillar two and pillar three. Take the good example that we have of pillar one of the European Research Council which is excellent, excellent, Council. I met with them and I'm really impressed of what they're doing. Take this good example and implement this in pillar two and pillar three.

1-0011-0000

Christian Ehler (PPE). – *(start of speech off mic)* ... would be the Commission wants to make a consideration of the 'do no significant harm' principle as part of the evaluation of horizon proposals. However, there is no legal base for this in the Horizon Europe Regulation, the MFF package or the Financial Regulation. It's a political legacy from the Timmermans agenda, not a legally sound approach. Will you commit to assessing the legal base of this approach, to sharing the assessment with the Parliament, and if it's necessary, to change the approach where it's appropriate?

1-0012-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Ehler. As you mentioned in your question, the Commission already took some measures and they introduced amendments, in the strategic plan for 2025-2027, which foresees that, in the future, applicants will not do this self-assessment of the 'do no significant harm' principle, but this will be done by the Commission, and the goal is to decrease the unnecessary administrative burden. But I am committed to assess the current approach and the new approach, and to share the assessment with the European Parliament. And of course, if change is needed, to discuss with all of you possible changes if these measures that are taken are not enough to decrease the unnecessary administrative burden to our applicants.

1-0013-0000

Dan Nica (S&D). – Doamnă comisară desemnată, aveți în fața dumneavoastră o provocare teribilă, și anume aceea de a putea să corecți ceea ce nu a funcționat bine în cadrul programului Horizon Europe. Avem o problemă de competitivitate la nivelul Uniunii Europene, iar în raportul Draghi este spus foarte clar: una din cauzele principale o reprezintă modul în care, pe de o parte, resurse insuficiente sunt alocate cercetării și inovării în Uniunea Europeană și, pe de altă parte, către ce direcții merg acești bani. Există un sentiment, la nivelul cetățenilor Uniunii Europene, destul de mare, de nemulțumire, pentru că ei nu văd care sunt beneficiile acestor programe de cercetare și dezvoltare și mai ales, aplicarea lor în viața de zi cu zi.

Aveți o problemă și avem cu toții o problemă cu faimosul EIC. Deci partea de cercetare, până când devine un proiect comercial, lipsește această legătură, iar modul în care EIC a funcționat până acum a făcut ca multe din aceste programe să nu poată să fie *Commercial Ready*, deci să nu poată să fie disponibile din punct de vedere comercial și acest lucru reprezintă o provocare pentru mandatul dvs.

A treia chestiune, doamnă comisară desemnată, o reprezintă modul în care se face evaluarea. Sunt foarte multe situații în care contează mai mult cine scrie un proiect, care sunt cei care depun proiectele, decât care este conținutul aceluși proiect. Și acest lucru este împărtășit în special de țările care sunt mai la începutul dezvoltării activității de cercetare și dezvoltare: România, Bulgaria, Grecia și alte țări, care se simt discriminate pentru că ele pierd un avantaj competitiv, în primul rând pentru că ceea ce li se pune în discuție este care este numele și din ce țară provin aceștia. Cum comentați, doamnă comisară desemnată?

1-0014-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Nica, for your questions. In two minutes I will repeat that we have momentum with these three very important reports – the Draghi report and the Heitor report, and before that the Letta report – so we should really work relentlessly to achieve an increased budget for research and innovation, but not only through the European funds. I would say this is clearly not enough.

In my introduction, I mentioned that actually Horizon is only one tenth public resources. So we should work with Member States to motivate them to achieve the goals of a 3 % target to which we all committed 22 years ago. It was 22 years ago that we all committed to reach the 3 % GDP target for R&I. Private sector investments are really crucial. Actually, Europe is not doing bad in public funding compared to the United States and China, even a bit better, but we are really lagging behind in private sector investment.

I agree that we should work to have a more focussed framework programme, more targeted priorities. I see six clusters in Pillar 2, but in reality it's more than 15 priorities. In my opinion, if we have 15 priorities, this means that we have zero priorities. So we should be more focussed over the

next framework programme. I commit to work with you and to manage to plan a much more focussed framework programme with increased funding.

On your last question, I hear your worries. I heard these worries not only from you, but from some of the stakeholders, coming not only from the widening Member States, that the problem is too complicated, with unnecessary administrative burdens. So, because my time is running, I'm in favour of implementing the blind evaluation and know that one pilot project already was implemented. The DG is assessing now the implementation of this pilot project. But I'm in favour to continue this blind evaluation process because we should increase trust in the programme.

1-0015-0000

Dan Nica (S&D). – Este o veste extraordinară: după trei ani de zile, DG RTD va începe să aibă un proiect pilot pentru evaluarea fără nume. Doamna comisară desemnată, sunt 31 de documente pe care trebuie să le producă cineva care vrea să depună un proiect pentru cercetare. În loc să se ocupe de cercetare, nu credeți că sunt prea multe, 31 de documente?

A doua chestiune, revin la ceea ce v-am spus mai devreme: primii 10 recipienți care au primit bani din programul de cercetare Horizon Europe la nivelul Uniunii Europene, toți au câștigat mai mulți bani decât România. Nu este un pic ciudat, așa, că sunt zece entități, marea lor majoritate private, și cam aceleași care de 10-15 ani primesc aceste sume de bani mai mult decât un stat membru care, întâmplător, este al șaptelea stat membru al Uniunii Europene, și acest lucru duce la o lipsă de credibilitate a modului în care sunt alocate resursele și cum sunt evaluate aceste proiecte? Cum comentați, vă rog?

1-0016-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – As I said in my introduction, there's some progress in the Widening measures, but still a lot have to be achieved. The data are positive: since the FP7 Widening countries have tripled their share in the programme. If this trend is preserved in Horizon Europe, 15% of the grants, we will reach at the end of the programme from the Widening countries, compared to nine under Horizon 2020.

Yes, I agree with you. It's absolutely unnecessary for the applicants to provide 31 documents and assessment and self-evaluation, et cetera, et cetera, so I plan to work for strong simplification in this programme. I don't want to focus and to wait three years for the next framework programme. We are in the middle of implementation of this one. So we plan to work on so-called 'two-phase application'. The first phase to be only focused on the project, the core of the project, and if the project is approved, the applicants will be asked to provide the other assessments and documents and this will spare a lot of time and money for our beneficiaries.

1-0017-0000

Paolo Borchia (Pfe). – Thank you and welcome. Well, the resources assigned to SMEs within Horizon Europe are around 20 % of your overall budget. The European Innovation Council has achieved its target of allocating 70 %, but the participation of the category remains lower than in Horizon 2020.

In your written answers, you address the issue of creating a favourable environment for SMEs. So, could you tell us more about your vision on this framework, and which further measures you intend to adopt to break down administrative barriers, ensuring a more meaningful participation in Horizon Europe and other programmes for SMEs, given the fact that SMEs represent around 98 % of European enterprises?

In this context, I would also like to know whether and how you intended to strengthen the PRIMA Partnership in order to improve scientific cooperation between the EU and the Mediterranean area.

1-0018-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Borchia. Do give me a chance to develop a bit more my answer to Mr Nica about simplification. As you rightly said, actually, 99 % of the EU economy is SMEs and they give two thirds of the jobs in Europe. And the data that you quote as well – 20 % of the funding to SMEs is clearly not enough in Horizon, if they represent 99 % of the European economy.

In EIC, yes, it's really focused on SMEs: 75 % of the funds go to the SMEs. But, speaking with SMEs, with the stakeholders, actually their number one priority is simplification: 54 % of the SMEs known from SMEs being start-ups or others, they want from us to simplify to reduce the red tape. Twenty-one mentioned funding, so we should start with simplification. Just funding, increasing funding, will not work if we don't simplify.

So the European Innovation Act will be the main legislative vehicle for simplification, which will include this first legislative qualification of what is start-up, which we miss, is very important, regulatory sandboxes, innovative procurements and EU-wide status for our start-ups to be able to work in the whole of Europe, and to shorten the time of award funding.

Today, it's 238 days in EIC. It's clearly too much. And this is only for closing date to signing contract – actually, it takes more than a month and a half for the applicants to prepare their application. So in general, this means one year only to sign a contract. So I hope that there will be many questions on simplification. So I'll stop here and develop my ideas later during the hearing.

1-0019-0000

Paolo Borchia (Pfe). – Thank you very much. Second question, very brief and straight: in your opening statement, you stated that the European Parliament is the voice of the European people and every one of us is very happy with it. But I would like to ask you, what is your position on the so-called *cordon sanitaire* and how do you assess the decision to support it by your political group? Well, yesterday, some of your future colleagues gave us some 'paste and copy' feedback, so I would appreciate your sincere assessment on this topic.

1-0020-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Borchia, I'm, of course, aware of the so-called *cordon sanitaire*. I'm ready to work with every Member of European Parliament who is in favour and supports the European values, to make Europe stronger, to make Europe more competitive. And in my portfolio for increased budget, focused programme, focused priorities, simplification – this is my answer to this question. And of course, support our security as well because we are not going to be competitive without being secure.

So, I really believe and this is my firm belief, it's not a talking point, that European Union security is very much connected with what happened in Ukraine. And to be more precise, to help Ukraine to win this war and to support them as long as necessary. So, I work with all of the Members in the Parliament who support these values.

1-0021-0000

Elena Donazzan (ECR). – Un tema che non è stato abbastanza trattato e per noi particolarmente rilevante, è quello della transizione energetica e del nucleare in particolare. C'è una crescente

domanda di energie pulite e sicure. La ricerca nucleare avanzata, inclusa la ricerca sugli *small modular reactors* e nel campo della fusione, potrebbe svolgere un ruolo fondamentale per garantire quell'autonomia energetica di cui anche Lei ha parlato, in termini anche di ricerca, e contribuire quindi alla riduzione delle emissioni di carbonio. Ebbene, quali azioni intende adottare per rafforzare la ricerca e l'innovazione nel settore nucleare, tema sempre abbastanza, troppo delicato e contraddittorio, in particolare con la valorizzazione delle tecnologie di nuova generazione e della sicurezza? La seconda domanda: come pensa di promuovere una cooperazione più stretta tra gli Stati membri? Lei – l'ha sottolineato – vuole creare un ecosistema europeo: sul tema del nucleare, ci sembra la cosa da fare immediatamente.

1-0022-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Grazie mille. We met during my preparation and quite a lot of Members of Parliament asked me about my position of development of nuclear energy. I know it's a very controversial topic, but I'm going to speak about research and innovation. Nuclear research is really important to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. My plan is to propose you and the Council to extend the Euratom research and training programme for the next years, 2026 and 2027, and it's Member State choice, the energy mix. And I'm going to stick to the long-standing European Commission position to be technology neutral. But it doesn't mean that we are not going to support research in nuclear. It's important for nuclear safety. It's important, as I said, and it's mentioned in the Draghi report as well, actually, to achieve our climate-neutrality goals by 2050. So, for SMRs, I continue to support the already established small modular reactor alliance and, through the research and innovation programme and Euratom, to support research in safety of small modular modular reactors, or SMRs, as is well known.

1-0023-0000

Elena Donazzan (ECR). – La risposta piace. Piace perché dà indicazioni anche chiare. E allora la seconda è ancora più approfondita, ma diciamo che tocca il tema delle piccole e medie imprese, che anche Lei ha sottolineato nel precedente intervento. Ci piace sottolineare che, come Lei ha detto, la neutralità tecnologica deve fare da filo conduttore. Allora, come proviamo ad aiutare gli investimenti privati? Lei l'ha detto nel suo precedente discorso: gli investimenti privati hanno bisogno di chiarezza – anche Lei l'ha sottolineato – e di direzione, hanno bisogno di tranquillità, e quindi una programmazione che possa essere nel lungo termine, e anche la proroga di Euratom credo che sia una questione da sottolineare. Allora, l'ultima domanda è quella legata proprio – trattando di ricerca – alla mancanza di competenze che abbiamo. Lei ha parlato prima di cervelli da trattenere, di ricerca che esiste: come possiamo diffonderla? Questa è la domanda diciamo principale per noi: che tipo di interventi vorrà fare per migliorare le competenze in questo ambito, cioè quello della ricerca nucleare per le piccole e medie imprese?

1-0024-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – The Euratom research and training programme is a really excellent programme that we have, and it is a key programme for preserving our skills in nuclear energy, so I will focus to develop the programme, and I rely on your support, as I already mentioned. The key action includes support for the European SMR Alliance, as I already mentioned, funding R&I projects for the safety of SMRs, education and training, including a nuclear skills initiative. This initiative will be launched in the beginning of 2025, and I'm optimistic that we can attract and support start-ups in this sector. We have already positive examples of some companies like a nuclear fusion unicorn that recently relocated from UK to EU, and it particularly mentioned that is because of the possibilities of European funds.

1-0025-0000

Morten Løkkegaard (Renew). – Thank you very much, Chair, and good morning to you, Commissioner-designate. I will follow up on what my colleagues already started the discussion about SMEs and start-ups. I guess I will not be the only one in this room. This will not be the first time. But since I had the chance now to talk about the bureaucratic hurdles that many start-ups are facing.

In your written answers you outline strategies for reducing administrative burdens, such as simplifying funding applications, streamlining reporting, creating a unified regulatory environment, and so on and so forth, through the 28th regime. And this 28th regime, I think is key here.

So my first question to you would be, what immediate actions will you take to start work on the 28 regime? Because I think it's turning into a ghost some somewhat. We need to be more specific about specific about it. So what would you do immediately when starting on this?

1-0026-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Løkkegaard. What I immediately plan to do is to organise as soon as possible, in the beginning, maybe January, February, this start-up and scale-up forum. We want to hear the stakeholders, actually what they need. I think we should start simplification from the most urgent demand of our stakeholders.

As I already mentioned, actually the first priority for them, it's double more than funding, it's simplification. I will work very closely with my colleague, the Commissioner of Justice, to propose, in 2025, the framework of this 28th regime, which is very, very needed and very expected from our stakeholders, from the SMEs and start-Ups and scale-ups.

On simplification, I start to develop my question, but two minutes is really quite few time. So my plan is to have a client-centric policy. I really like what was mentioned in the Heitor report: trust first, evaluate later. And I already mentioned this two-stage, so to say, two-phase application form. And I plan to introduce the pilot project of this two-phase application in 2025. This will cut at least half the time that is needed from the SMEs. Now it's more than 35 days. And this is for the simple project with not many applicants, 35 working days for them to prepare the application. Which is too much. Really too much.

We have to use AI to help SMEs identify the funding opportunities. We have quite a lot of funds that finance R&I. And sometimes it's difficult for them to find the the right funding instrument for their project.

1-0027-0000

Morten Løkkegaard (Renew). – Thank you very much for that answer. To follow up immediately on that one, I think the two of us could agree that start-ups have the best understanding of their own obstacles they face, so it's important to listen to them. You already mentioned that you will start this forum in February or March.

Yet we often hear complaints from the very same start-ups that, of course, people listen to them, but that when it comes to the next step, it sort of stops and you can't find a politician not supporting start-ups, but that the next step is sort of a problem. How would you change this and actually include the start-ups so we can be sure that this next step will be fulfilled?

1-0028-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – That's a really good question. Unfortunately it happens, and they are right sometimes. I don't plan this to happen. I have already actually started meeting their communities – and they have quite well-established organisations in Europe. The plan for this forum is exactly this, I mean to meet, and I don't want to make some new body.

I mean, we are very good in creating different structures, but actually my goal is to have this forum as a more informal forum and really to meet on a regular basis, to discuss with the stakeholders and to discuss in advance also what we propose. I really don't want to start with simplification and in the end to have even more complicated legislation, which unfortunately happens sometimes. So my plan is to have this consultation process very smooth through the whole legislative work – from the idea to the first proposal to the draft – with coordination with the stakeholders.

1-0029-0000

Ville Niinistö (Verts/ALE). – Ms Zaharieva, you already answered that you are going to work for an independent Horizon Europe Framework Programme, and in that context, I would also like to expand on it a bit more. Obviously, we will need a lot more research in Europe to be competitive in the future, but more broadly as well in the long term, to invest in excellence as well, to make sure that it's high-quality research that we have in Europe, and we evolve our societies as a whole and progress.

How do you make sure that we have guarantees to exclude any rechannelling of R&I money for short-term needs in the EU budget? Because, you know, a robust and independent Framework Programme needs to be robust and independent also during its mandate.

Secondly, we will also need a lot of basic research. We can't have short-term industrial needs answered by only moving money away from basic research to short-term innovation, because innovation is based on the high quality of basic research in the long term. So how do you make sure that we have also a stronger focus to reinforce basic research and to strengthen also social sciences and humanities?

And thirdly, R&I spending is obviously something where we need to make sure that the Member States are doing also more. How do you make sure that the leverage effect of the EU budget of R&I increases the national spending? We overcome the 3 % of GDP target and even work to introduce a new target of 4 % by 2030.

1-0030-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Niinistö – very important questions you raised. We start from the from the end: the 3 % target was agreed 22 years ago, and I think we should use the mechanisms that we have, like a European Semester, to motivate the reforms and to reach the 3 % target as soon as possible. It's really 22 years ago. And the problem is, as I already mentioned, the private investments, as you also mentioned in your in your question: how to motivate the private investment.

I think we should use better the European funds, like for example, create a mechanism which decreases the risk like cover for risk mechanisms, like guarantees, et cetera, et cetera. So I have quite a lot of ideas. Of course, if I'm approved, I'm ready to share more details with you and work very closely with the European Parliament on the budget.

We have a ring-fenced budget now – you're right – but at the end, we are almost always not able to prevent that the budget is cut in the mid-term revision like it happens, actually, with EUR 2.1 billion,

as far as I remember. And when the Commission proposed the annual budget, for example, this year it happened that the Council decided to cut the proposal of the Commission by EUR 1 billion. So, unfortunately, ring-fenced doesn't protect the money for research and innovation.

And my plan is, and I really rely a lot on you, to work with the Member States, as I already mentioned – otherwise, having ring-fenced doesn't mean protected – to work with the Member States and to show the results of Horizon, which are not well known, unfortunately, among the citizens, even among maybe the finance ministers, to show them, to convince them that it's really not useful, it's not good for European competitiveness to use Horizon Europe, our Framework Programmes as a savings account for arising new emerging priorities.

1-0031-0000

Ville Niinistö (Verts/ALE). – More concretely, what's happening now in Valencia and many other places in Europe has a relation to climate change unfortunately, as well. People are losing lives and also, concerning possibilities to continue with European investments in agriculture, and so on, we need to also adapt to climate change, and we need to have solutions on that.

Research and innovation plays a key role also in climate solutions and we have the target of 35 % spending today for climate in the framework programme. We would like to hear from you, as Greens, that you commit to continue this commitment to achieve and even increase it beyond 35 % of spending into climate solutions, in order to make sure that our societies are also resilient to the unfortunate changes that are happening around us, and also find ways to mitigate climate change.

So how do you see that? Are you committed to make sure that we have effective, high-quality spending on climate and that we achieve 35 % and also have it more as societal resilience spending?

1-0032-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Yes, Mr Niinistö, I commit to the 35 % target. I spoke with the DG and we are really close to reach the target. I think we reached the 35 % target. Unfortunately, we are 8.7 % on biodiversity at that stage, but this is a good development and I think we will be able to achieve the 10 % target on biodiversity by the end of the programme.

As you rightly mentioned, it's really important for our competitiveness, but also for our people's lives. Still half of global GDP depends on nature or the environment. So definitely we should invest in research and innovation to reach our climate goals. It's a must. It's not a matter of choice. I don't want to choose between competitiveness and the environment. They should go hand by hand. We are not able to be competitive without preserving our environment. It's the opposite: we are not going to reach our climate goals without being competitive.

1-0033-0000

Per Clausen (The Left). – Over 42.000 palæstinensere er blevet dræbt, siden Israel begyndte sin militære offensiv i Gazastriben. FN mener, at der er tydelige tegn på, at Israel har forbrudt sig mod folkedrabskonventionen. Alligevel er EU fortsat med at allokere midler til israelske våbenfirmaer gennem EU-Horizon Europe-programmet. Det inkluderer bl.a. Aerospace Industries, Israels største luftfarts- og militærvirksomhed, som har modtaget midler til nogle af deres projekter. Det sker på trods af, at Horizon-Europe-finansiering skal overholde menneskerettighederne, international lov, og at EU-traktaten forbyder finansiering af operationer, der har militære eller forsvarsmæssige implikationer. Vi ved også, at der er blevet finansieret programmer gennem EU-Horizon, som i dag bruges i Israels militære aktiviteter i Gaza. Så mit spørgsmål er: "Hvordan vil du sikre dig, at der ikke

tildeles Horizon-Europe-midler til israelske universiteter eller programmer, der er baseret på besatte områder eller samarbejder med militære aktiviteter, der direkte eller indirekte bidrager til menneskerettighedskrænkelser og krænkelser af international lov?"

1-0034-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you for this question. Horizon Europe will continue to fund – I'll be very straightforward – Israeli researchers, but we will closely monitor that the ethical rules and international law are respected, as actually we do with all of our applicants. Israeli research companies and entities and organisations must comply with EU and international law.

No project funded by Horizon Europe, which is Israeli participant, foresees defence relevant funding. So there is no such kind of case. The DG evaluates and checks all the projects that we have with Israeli researchers. We have a very strict monitoring system, which we implement under Horizon, its compliance with the ethical principles, exclusive focus on civilian applications as you all know, so no exception allowed to search approach.

Non-compliance will lead to recovery of EU funding or termination of the participation. But as I already said, there is no project with participation of Israeli research organisations or universities or companies which finance defence-relevant research.

So I think to conclude my answer, I'm not supportive to the idea to close the program based on nationality. I don't support this, this would be discrimination.

1-0035-0000

Per Clausen (The Left). – Jeg er meget glad for at høre, at du er enig med mig i, at det er af afgørende betydning, at de projekter, som vi finansierer, at det er projekter, som ikke konflikter med menneskerettigheder og international lov. Det håber jeg, man vil holde fast i fremover, fordi det er ikke desto mindre sådan, at nogle af de militære aktiviteter, Israel har i dag, jo er baseret på nogle projekter, som er finansieret i EU-Horizon, for eksempel droneprogrammet Skylord. Men jeg noterer mig, at det vil der være stærk opmærksomhed på fremadrettet, og det er jeg selvfølgelig glad for. Et supplerende spørgsmål: En af konsekvenserne af krigshandlingerne i Gazaområdet er jo også, at den palæstinensiske forsknings- og universitetsverden er blevet rigtig, rigtig hårdt ramt. Jeg kunne derfor godt tænke mig at spørge, om du har nogle overvejelser omkring, hvordan man igennem EU-Horizon-programmet kan medvirke til at gennemføre en genrejsning af de palæstinensiske forskningsaktiviteter i forlængelse af de begivenheder, der er nu.

1-0036-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you for this question. Horizon Europe and the DG tries to reach Palestinian researchers, but the truth is, in practice it's difficult. We have two projects now with engagement of Palestinian researchers and I can commit that we continue to do our best with this really difficult situation, to find ways to support Palestinian researchers.

1-0037-0000

Petar Volgin (ESN). – Уважаема госпожо Захариева, общото разбиране за Европа, включително и това, което беше отразено в доклада на Марио Драги за конкурентоспособността, е, че Европа силно изостава от Съединените щати и Китай в областта на високите технологии и иновациите. Широко разпространено е мнението, че заради войната в Украйна периодът на геополитическа сигурност е приключил и Европа ще бъде принудена да харчи огромно количество пари за сигурност.

Има предложение да се създаде агенция в Европа, по примера на Агенцията за перспективни изследователски проекти за отбрана на Съединените щати DARPA, която да финансира революционни технологии. Вие, госпожо Захариева, считате ли, че основната линия на европейската политика в областта на иновациите трябва да е свързана предимно със сектор отбрана, каквато тенденция се очертава? И може ли една милитаризираща се Европа да осигури в действителност достатъчно средства за истинско икономическо развитие, както и добра социална среда, която да създава условия за стартъпи, изследвания и иновации?

Вашият ресор изисква спокойна среда и благоденствие, а не тревожност и високи военни бюджети.

1-0038-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, кандидат за член на Комисията. – Благодаря, господин Волгин, за въпроса. Не Европа или Украйна започнаха тази война. Започна я Русия. Така че, да, имаме нова геополитическа ситуация и Европа трябва, Европейският съюз трябва да работи за подобряване на сигурността си.

И изследванията, и иновациите в гражданската част съвсем не е противопоставяне на това да имаме — и аз лично подкрепям, да — повече средства за изследвания и иновации в областта на отбраната, но едното не се противопоставя на другото. "Хоризонт Европа" е фокусирана върху гражданското. Няма връзка с иновациите и науката за отбраната. Но да, ние трябва — и аз подкрепям — тук не е в моя ресор, но, ако бъде одобрена като член на колежа, за това Европа да увеличи значително ресурсите, свързани с изследвания и иновации в областта на отбраната.

Вие споменахте DARPA. На мен лично ми се иска нашите изпълнителни агенции в Европейския съвет за иновации да имат по-скоро такъв подход на работа. Мога да дам един пример. Например, DARPA е най-голямата финансираща институция в САЩ за борба с рака. Тоест, много често изследванията и иновациите, свързани с отбраната, водят до изключително висока добавена стойност за населението.

1-0039-0000

Petar Volgin (ESN). – Благодаря, и ето уточняващият ми въпрос.

Ще напомня, че преди време италианският вестник La Stampa много точно отбеляза, че целият план на Марио Драги може да бъде резюмиран с констатацията, че в основата на всичко е военната икономика, която трябва да стане мотор за развитието на всякакви сфери, включително и на иновациите, за които Вие ще отговаряте. Вече се говори, че трябва да се увеличат военните бюджети на страните членки от сегашните 2% от БВП поне на 3%. Драги иска и реформиране на Европейския съвет за иновации. Целта е и той да заприлича на Американската агенция за напреднали изследователски проекти в областта на отбраната. На фона на очакваното милитаризиране на Европа съвсем логично е концепцията за реструктуриране на Европейския съвет за иновации да бъде подчинена на задачите за повишаване на сигурността в Европа.

Ще успеете ли, госпожо Захариева, да предотвратите превръщането на изследванията и иновациите в поредната област, в която войната ще победи мира? Или смятате, че трябва да жертваме всичко в името на това да подкрепяме управляващите в Киев неясно докога?

1-0040-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, кандидат за член на Комисията. – Аз силно се надявам мирът да победи войната и мисля, че нашата сигурност, и съм убедена и вярвам, че нашата сигурност е свързана с това Украйна да победи в тази война. И, да, считам, че ресурсите и усилията, които ние полагаме да

подпомогнем Украйна да победи, не са загубени пари за нас. Те са инвестиция в нашата сигурност. Украйна воюва за нашата сигурност.

По отношение на доклада на Драги — аз не чета точно така доклада на Драги. Да, той акцентира върху това, че ние трябва да увеличим, както казах, изследванията и иновациите в областта на сигурността. И аз подкрепям това, но две от трите глави в неговия доклад, ако се не лъжа, са посветени на изследванията и иновациите и как да увеличим и да подобрим този важен и стратегически сектор.

1-0041-0000

Borys Budka, *Chair of the ITRE Committee*. – We have just finished the first round and we are about 15 minutes over time, so let's switch to the second round and immediately to the ITRE members.

1-0042-0000

Ева Майдел (PPE). – Уважаема госпожо кандидат за европейски комисар, добре дошла в нашата комисия! Ние, тук в комисията ITRE, сме добре запознати със статистиката и данните, а те са, че в някакъв вид Европа е една научна суперсила. Защото около една трета от световните научни публикации идват от Европейския съюз. В същото време Европа има непропорционално голям брой носители на Нобелови награди. Само за 2020 година имаме около 150 000 патента, които са подадени в Европейското патентно ведомство.

Въпреки това обаче, като континент изоставаме в сферата на конкурентоспособността, като се съпоставим с държави като САЩ и Китай. Аз винаги съм смятала, че една от основните цели трябва да бъде как да настигнем тези страни чрез внедряване на иновациите и модернизиране на европейската икономика. В момента разполагаме с около 95 милиарда за научни изследвания, като най-големият дял от този бюджет е именно в програмата "Хоризонт" — над 53 милиарда евро.

Затова моят въпрос към Вас е: Имате ли идея как да се преориентира финансирането за научни изследвания, за да може европейската наука да създава иновации, които да допринасят за модернизацията на икономиката и в същото време, разбира се, това да стимулира икономическия растеж?

1-0043-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, *кандидат за член на Комисията*. – Благодаря Ви, г-жо Майдел. Ще се опитам да бъда кратка, макар че това е въпрос, който със сигурност няма да събере отговора ми в две минути.

Така е, права сте. Голямата разлика между нас и Съединените американски щати, но и Япония, и изобщо близките до нас държави е в частните инвестиции в изследвания и иновации. Ще дам едни други данни, 40, само 40% от европейските дружества инвестират в изследвания и иновации, 56% е делът в Съединените американски щати, още по-висок е той в Япония и в Южна Корея. Права сте, това е стълб 2. Аз мисля, че вече успях да спомена, там е, така да се каже, най-големият ресурс от "Хоризонт" е в стълб 2, който би трябвало да стимулира сътрудничеството в иновациите и науката между частния сектор и университетите, и другите организации, които се занимават с наука и изследвания.

Какво трябва да направим? Трябва да сме много по-фокусирани. Трябва да приоритизираме. Това, което забелязвам в програмата, е, че особено по стълб 2 като че ли липсва фокус. Направен е опит и то нелъш в "Хоризонт Европа" да се намали броят на партньорствата, от над 140 в момента са предвидени 60, стартирани са 49 от тях, ако се не лъжа. В същото време обаче това, което се забелязва, е сложно управление и не достатъчно ефективна система за измерване на размера на

частните инвестиции, т. е. приноса на индустрията по този съгласен. По-добър фокус и по-добър механизъм за измерване и инструменти, които да създават стимул в частния сектор да инвестира в иновации и наука.

1-0044-0000

Цветелина Пенкова (S&D). – Здравейте, г-жо Захариева, добре дошли на днешното изслушване. Ще насоча моя въпрос в конкретика към стартовете, тъй като в края на изминалия мандат Европейският парламент прие един доклад, в който ясно се показва необходимостта от укрепване и създаване на работеща европейска екосистема за подпомагане на стартиращите предприятия. В заключението на този доклад беше ясно казано, че една от основните пречки е липсата на хармонизирана дефиниция за стартиращите предприятия.

Въпросът ми е: На какъв етап е Европейската комисия при изготвянето на тази дефиниция? В каква посока се формира тя? Защото това е единственият начин, по който можем да гарантираме финансиране и развитие на нашите стартиращи предприятия и тяхната конкурентоспособност.

Втори въпрос: Какви са конкретните законодателни инициативи, за да можем наистина да задържим стартиращите предприятия и младите предприемачи в Европа?

И на последно място: Освен настоящите субсидии, заеми и гаранции, какви реално допълнителни финансови механизми могат да се предвидят, така че да се насърчат частните инвестиции в сектора на иновациите и технологиите? Тъй като съм съгласна с това, което казахте, че единствено и само с публични средства няма как да изградим конкурентоспособна икономика. Благодаря Ви.

1-0045-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, кандидат за член на Комисията. – Благодаря Ви, г-жо Пенкова. Искам да започна с благодарности към Парламента за този доклад и лично към Вас, защото, доколкото знам, Вие сте докладчик по този доклад и той наистина е много добра отправна точка и е страшно полезен за работата на Комисията по тази тема. Така че благодаря на Парламента и лично на Вас за този наистина важен доклад.

Това, което вече имах възможност да спомена, е, че най-важната задача, една от първите задачи, които ще имаме, е наистина среща със сектора, защото, както Вие споменахте, и както мисля, че е и в доклада, наистина има много различни идеи за определения, а без легална дефиниция за това какво е стартър или иновативни компании, няма как да определим обхвата на този 28 режим, който целият сектор очаква с голямо нетърпение. Различни са идеите, така е. За тези идеи наистина много ще разчитам на това на какво определение в крайна сметка ще се спрем, на експертизата и в Парламента, но и на дирекцията GRC, която единствена предоставя научните данни. Вече имаме няколко данни, тоест анализ на това колко компании, регистрирани към момента в Европа, ще бъдат засегнати. И това е изключително важна работа и ще се позовавам и на науката, когато предложим на вашето внимание проект на определение.

Европейският акт за иновации обаче няма да се отнася само за това, защото съвсем не е само липсата на общ статус за целия ЕС, който ще подпомогне компаниите да работят в държавите членки, като единен пазар. Те имат сериозни проблеми в тестването на продуктите си, знаете иновативните. Тоест, трябва да бъдем по-гъвкави. Вече има, между другото, различни законодателни инициативи, които подпомагат тестването в реална среда, но те съвсем не са достатъчни, тоест, трябва да имаме един по-гъвкав и по-унифициран подход в тази сфера.

Споменати бяха и обществените поръчки или така наречените "иновативни обществени поръчки". Изключително изостава Европа в сравнение с Американските щати, почти не се прилагат такива

обществени поръчки, което намалява, а това е един екстра инструмент за финансиране на иновациите. И ще спра дотук, защото вече съм много извън времето. Благодаря ви.

1-0046-0000

(Diego Solier interrupted and stated (off mic) that he would not be using his speaking time)

1-0047-0000

Eszter Lakos (PPE). – Commissioner-designate Zaharieva, you're certainly aware of the interinstitutional fight related to the association agreements to Horizon Europe. I'm referring to category D countries and the novel solution adopted via the chapeau agreements and the establishment of joint committees that they are entitled to scrutinise and also to conclude the association agreements to different EU programmes.

And they bypass, basically, the European Parliament consent, and the European Parliament disagrees with this novel structure that is running across the MFF, because it does not allow the Parliament to exercise its powers and its prerogatives based on the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU – I'm referring to Article 218(6) – and in addition, it also neglects the interinstitutional balance. So this approach, in our view, should be revisited.

So my question to you would be: what are the guarantees that you give to the European Parliament that in the future you will refrain from tabling these kind of general agreements and you will ensure that the Parliament is fully involved in the decision-making process?

And if we talk about the association, please allow me an additional question, which is dear to my heart. It's related to the Western Balkan countries. What are your plans to support the integration of these countries to the European Research Area? And I would be happy if it was not only widening participation measures.

1-0048-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Ms Lakos. I will start with your first question. I am aware I have spoken with many of you, and many of you have raised this concern. What I can say in this stage is that I am really open to find ways with the European Parliament to give you a greater say on future association agreements.

Transparency vis-à-vis the Parliament is a really high priority for me. And I'm committed to timely share on the equal basis as co-legislators all the relevant information during the negotiations and implementation phases to these agreements, and I stand ready to offer additional information upon request, and to really to work with you to find a solution to this long-standing dispute between the Parliament, the Commission and the Council.

About the Western Balkans, it's also a topic dear to my heart. During Bulgaria's first presidency of the Council, we put it very high. I think it was a priority of the priorities of Bulgaria. It was a European perspective of the Western Balkans.

So I'm very happy that they are fully integrated into the European Research Area. They were included with all the Western Balkans countries and partners in this year's area monitoring report. So we have to work with them very closely. They will be members of the European Union someday, so it's a win-win, and I'm ready to discuss with you other ideas and proposals, if you have any direction.

1-0049-0000

Julie Rechagneux (Pfe). – Madame la Commissaire-désignée, le 21 mars 2024, lors du sommet sur l'énergie nucléaire, plusieurs industriels ont adopté une déclaration commune appelant à une plus grande prise en compte de l'énergie nucléaire dans les politiques environnementales, sociales et de gouvernance du système financier international. La Banque européenne d'investissement était en réalité particulièrement visée lors de ce sommet puisqu'elle a, ces dernières années, préféré favoriser le financement de projets d'énergies renouvelables aux projets d'énergie nucléaire.

Sur la seule année 2021, par exemple, la BEI a accordé plus de 10 milliards d'euros d'investissements pour les énergies renouvelables, alors qu'elle n'a accordé, depuis l'an 2000, qu'un milliard d'euros pour des projets nucléaires. Thomas Östros, vice-président de la BEI, avait d'ailleurs annoncé lors de ce sommet que la BEI se concentrerait en priorité sur les énergies renouvelables jusqu'en 2030.

Le nucléaire, vous l'avez rappelé, est une énergie sûre et décarbonée, et c'est surtout un maillon essentiel pour atteindre l'objectif de neutralité climatique que l'Union européenne s'est imposé. Concrètement, comptez-vous donc, dans le cadre de votre mission, encourager la Banque européenne d'investissement à financer les projets liés à l'énergie nucléaire?

1-0050-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you for this question. Yes, I already mentioned that, nuclear is important for reaching our climate goals for 2050. I already spoke with the President of the EIB, discussing not nuclear in particular, but discussing how we can cooperate better to increase the funding in innovations and to support our start-ups and SMEs in our joint endeavour to boost and pull more private investment. So I will continue discussion with the EIB. I think that we have to work very closely with the EIC and EIB instruments that we have, and I will sum up that in innovation and research, it's really important to reduce our emissions. So we have to continue this focus that we have in Horizon and actually I think 48 % of the projects under pillar two, which is a collaborative pillar, are linked with climate projects, and majority of them are linked to it with energy.

1-0051-0000

Carlo Ciccio (ECR). – I paesi dell'Unione europea si trovano ad affrontare la trappola dello sviluppo dei talenti, caratterizzata da un esodo giovanile, frequentemente extraeuropeo, di proporzioni strutturali. Di più, paradossale, questi paesi formano i talenti, investono nell'istruzione e poi li perdono. Sappiamo che il nostro mercato unico è un potente motore di scambio territoriale e che la libertà di movimento ha generato grandi benefici. Tuttavia, questa narrativa spesso non rispecchia la realtà delle regioni meno strutturate, dove la fuga dei cervelli rappresenta una grave minaccia allo sviluppo locale con l'impoverimento del territorio. Le iniziative come il SER, lo Spazio europeo della ricerca, puntano sulla mobilità dei ricercatori e dei giovani talenti, ma non si parla di diritto a restare per coloro che desiderano contribuire allo sviluppo delle proprie comunità locali. Quali azioni concrete intende adottare nella legge sullo Spazio europeo della ricerca – inclusa nella Sua lettera di missione – per garantire un equilibrio tra il sostegno alla mobilità e la creazione di un ambiente attrattivo, che valorizzi e trattienga i talenti nelle loro regioni di origine? Contiamo molto sulla Sua competenza.

1-0052-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, grazie mille, for this question. It's very dear to my heart. I'm coming from Bulgaria. In all the so-called central or eastern European Member States, one of the biggest challenges that we face is brain drain, so it's a topic very dear to my heart.

So, yes, I'm committed to work, and I mentioned in my introduction that the biggest asset that we have is the talent. We can double, triple the money, we can simplify our procedure, but I think the most important goal that we should have is to retain the talents in Europe and to attract new ones, not only to retain ours to remain here, but to attract new ones. Because without the talent, there will be no research and innovation. I didn't have the chance to speak that much about the ERA Act, one of the most important act, I think, in my portfolio. One of the focusing areas will be also this retaining talents. How? I think it's naive to think that we will be able to have an equal payment in all the Member States because the development of GDP is different, but at least what we can have is minimum standards for young researchers and innovators and for women innovators and researchers, and I'm ready to work with the regions as well, with the university alliances, which is a very powerful tool in the instrument that we created to listen to ideas. But what is really urgent is to create and to propose minimum standards. Better salaries, better conditions, good contracts for our researchers. But last but not least, it's really important the research infrastructure, so that's why one of the priorities for my mandate will be to propose research and technology in strategy to develop our infrastructure.

1-0053-0000

Ivars Ijabs (Renew). – Thank you Commissioner-designate for your answers, but I have a little bit more specific question. Thank you for your commitment to Widening, we fully support that in the Renew group, and also the issue of the blind evaluation, which was mentioned at the very beginning. I think this is really an important step to improve the governance of the Framework Programme.

But you mentioned already several times that it's really necessary to induce the domestic spending, the public spending in the Member States. What are the ways you propose to do that? Because we have been speaking about this issue for a very long time, and they say that basically, especially taking into account the recent challenges, meaning the Covid pandemics, and also, of course, the Russian full-scale aggression in Ukraine, the research spending in some Member States has gone down and not up.

So what are your proposals? How would you, as a Commissioner, work with the Member States to make this happen?

1-0054-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Ijabs. I think, as you rightly mentioned, national budgets face quite a lot of challenges. You mentioned Covid, the war – completely right –, the increases prices of electricity and the measures that all the Member States took to support the industries and the households to survive, it was a matter of survival for some of them during these difficult periods when Russia was blackmailing us with gas and other sources that we are really very naive to think that if they rely on us, they are not going to start this war, if we are buying the products from them.

How? Really by dialogue. I don't have other tools. The tool that I already mentioned is the European Semester, and I am committed to work on the European Semester and to have a stronger focus in the European Semester on research and innovation spending, but also reforms, which are really important because without reforms, the funding is not enough. This is my motto: funding is not enough itself. We should implement the reforms as well. So, through dialogue, speaking with finance ministers, that's why I'm mentioning them, not only with research and innovation ministers or ministers of science – depends on the structure of the Member States – because they are all supportive, of course, but we should have a really very intensive dialogue with the finance ministers, with the ministers of economy, to show them the results, to show them the added value.

And I think we have a really good momentum with the Draghi report, which is very economy-oriented report. I mean, we have real momentum and we should use this momentum.

1-0055-0000

Lina Gálvez (S&D). – Ms Zaharieva, welcome to the European Parliament. As we have discussed, you will have a very key portfolio for achieving European competitiveness, but also for doing it in a just and inclusive way. So we are glad to hear about your commitment to a strong budget for research and innovation, to international cooperation, to territorial cohesion, and also for achieving climate goals and for regulating the use of artificial intelligence on science, which is very much linked to open science and data and is showing already great possibilities, but also worries among the scientific community.

Of course, I'm glad to see your clear commitment to gender equality on research and innovation. So will gender equality plans continue to be an eligibility criterion in the next 10th Framework Programme?

1-0056-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Yes, I'll be very much focussed on gender equality. The data are really not positive. As I already mentioned, women outnumber males in graduate levels, but when it comes to highest possible academic positions, we are really not doing well. It's even worse in innovation. In only 1 % of the projects that the EIC granted, the companies were managed by, or the CEOs were, women. So can you imagine? It's nothing.

We will continue to implement the gender balance plan to be part of the evaluation process of the projects, to work to reach the target. Horizon is unique in that perspective, actually, as I think it's one of the few programmes that have a clear target, like 50 % participation of women in all related Horizon boards, expert groups and evaluation committees.

So I'm very much committed to work with you, with the Member States – it's really important with universities and research organisations. How to increase the share of women in research and innovation has links also with what I was mentioning, considering the previous questions about how to retain talent. I mean, these minimum standards. It's really very important to make this profession attractive for women, because the data shows that they start working and they leave very often their work as researchers and innovators.

1-0057-0000

Angelika Niebler (PPE). – *(Beginn des Redebeitrags bei ausgeschaltetem Mikrofon)* ... Verehrte Frau designierte Kommissarin, die Förderung von Start-ups, Scale-ups und KMU ist, Sie hatten es angesprochen, ja für die Zukunft Europas entscheidend. Das künftige Forschungsrahmenprogramm und auch der *European Innovation Council* werden dabei eine ganz wesentliche Schlüsselrolle spielen. Sie hatten angekündigt, dass Sie den *European Innovation Council* reformieren möchten. Und Sie hatten jetzt schon mehrfach auch hier angesprochen, dass privates Investment gerade für Start-ups und Scale-ups von ganz entscheidender Bedeutung ist. Ich freue mich, dass Sie auch den Draghi-Bericht schon mehrfach erwähnt haben. Draghi hatte ja in seinem Bericht davor gewarnt, dass wir in Europa in der sogenannten *middle technology trap* stecken bleiben könnten, durch die das Potenzial disruptiver Innovationen nicht ausreichend ausgeschöpft und damit Europa auch im Wettbewerb gerade mit globalen Technologieführern zurückfallen würde.

Meine Fragen – ganz konkret erste Frage: Was wollen Sie machen, um Start-ups, Scale-ups und KMU im kommenden Forschungsrahmenprogramm besser zu fördern? Zweite Frage, auch konkret:

Haben Sie schon Vorstellungen, wie die Reform des *European Innovation Council* ausgestaltet sein könnte? Und drittens noch mal das Thema, privates Investment zu mobilisieren: Ich halte das auch für ganz zentral, und wenn Sie das noch konkreter ausführen würden, wäre ich sehr dankbar.

1-0058-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – *Danke sehr, liebe Frau Niebler.* I will try to be very focused. You raise a really important question. Creation of strategic of task force for start-up and scale up – I am very focused to do this as fast as possible to be able to deliver really very fast on strategy. I'll propose a very comprehensive strategy, but strategy is not enough.

What is important is to implement the strategy, like the European Innovation Act. The measures that I already have had a chance to introduce, answering the previous questions. To shorten the time to award funding is really important. Today is 238 days in EIC. Yes, I'm in favour of implementing ARPA style in EIC and more specifically in the first part, which is really useful. That means to strengthen the competencies of managers. They are very skilled people. They have to have bigger flexibility and autonomy to decide where to finance, how to finance, and also to decide to stop financing, which is very important, I think, with the limited resources that we have. We should not continue to finance projects that obviously don't give results, so we should be brave to recognise this.

We have to implement – I think it's really important – the novelty that should start to be implemented – and I hope to be successful – the strategic technologies for Europe platform, the so-called STEP novelty, which is EUR 300 million and give opportunity to finance our start-ups with a big amount of money. Now it's up to EUR 15 million. It will be up to 30 million, which is also very important. But it's really key – you mentioned the private investor – how to de-risk projects and allow more private investment funding and, of course, create a grant and work very closely with the so-called institutional investors. Without them, we are not going to succeed in this.

1-0059-0000

Benedetta Scuderi (Verts/ALE). – Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Commissioner-designate, for your commitment in research and development, which is essential for the European Union to address the urgent societal challenges our citizens face today, from the climate emergency to health crisis and digital transformation. As you also said, it cannot only be about growth and competitiveness. It's also about addressing the most pressing societal issues and improving the lives of our citizens.

From your answers we perceive your commitment also towards military research and investments. On this, we want to remind that military research and development already has a dedicated programme called the European Defence Fund, with almost EUR 8 billion over 2021 and 2027, and which already has an increase of EUR 1.5 billion via the STEP Regulation recently.

In this context, would you commit to maintain strict boundaries between civilian and military research and development activities, meaning notably not opening the next framework programme to military stakeholders?

Can you guarantee that in the research and innovation and development sector, military priorities will never be at the expense of civilian research and investment priorities, and in particular to climate and environmental protection emergencies?

1-0060-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Currently, Horizon Europe is really strictly focussed on civil R&I, and it will be preserved. But having in mind the new realities – and it's not only the Russian war of aggression, I'm mentioning our competitiveness as well – we should analyse the current approach and discuss really very frankly dual use – not military, that's different. You rightly said we have military fund. It will be separate from Horizon. It will continue to be like that. I will develop the dual use. Heitor mentioned, and he was very clear to us, as far as I remember, that the experts said in his report 'do not make this artificial distinction' because in modern research and innovation actually you are not sure what will be the result at the end. Actually, almost all civil innovations can be used for dual. I can give you quite a lot of examples: in medicine; in drones; internet – almost every example, a lot of examples.

So we will continue to evaluate, and you know that the Commission has released a study among the stakeholders and the Member States, a white paper, and the study shows that more or less the stakeholders are split. Most research organisations and universities are in favour of preserving the status quo. Some of the Member States – though not all – and, of course, industry are in favour of opening the programme for dual use as well.

So what I can say is that we are going to evaluate and to discuss with the stakeholders, with the Member States, but of course with you, the next framework programme. But Horizon Europe is civilian research only.

1-0061-0000

Paulo Cunha (PPE). – Senhora Comissária, com grande parte do conhecimento dos nossos investigadores comercialmente inexplorada, como referiu na sua intervenção inicial, que medidas específicas irá tomar dentro da nova estratégia europeia para *startups* e *scaleups* para resolver este desequilíbrio e impulsionar a nossa competitividade global?

Como irá garantir o desenvolvimento de *clusters* de inovação que integrem eficazmente universidades, *startups*, grandes empresas e investigadores de capital de risco?

Por outro lado, que ações irá defender no âmbito do Conselho Europeu da Inovação para fortalecer polos de inovação em cidades de média dimensão, como as que caracterizam a economia portuguesa? Como irá garantir que estes polos consigam contribuir significativamente para a coesão regional, o crescimento do produto nacional bruto, assim como o estabelecimento de *clusters* de inovação globalmente competitivos?

1-0062-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Cunha, for the question. Three challenges ahead for the start-ups and I will work the start-up strategy to address these challenges.

First, administrative burden. I always will start with this administrative burden. Simplification of the next framework program is also very important. I didn't have a chance to touch on this, but cut the text in half. I think we should start simplification by simplifying our language, with more focus and more precision.

Second is access to funding, as I already mentioned and I will touch on other dimensions, widening countries. They are underperforming the start-ups from widening countries compared with not widening. There is a really important, I think, project that will start from the beginning in 2025, which is called 'pre-accelerator', which will support capacity-building and training in start-up management from the widening Member States and to support them to have better access to the

very complicated programme that we have. I think why also I didn't mention it is because it's not in my portfolio in particular, but I'm very committed to work very closely with the Commissioner who is in charge of this and support the capital market union completion. Because without this, we will be not able.

And to finish, yes, universities are really important. They're one of the main beneficiaries in Horizon Europe programme, and I am ready to work with alliances of universities to increase and to support the research and innovation dimension in these alliances.

1-0063-0000

Νίκος Παππάς (The Left). – Έχουν παρατηρηθεί δυσκολίες συνεργειών μεταξύ διαφορετικών προγραμμάτων της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης που σχετίζονται με τη χρηματοδότηση ερευνητικών προγραμμάτων εξαιτίας γραφειοκρατίας, πρακτικών ζητημάτων που σχετίζονται με τους κύκλους χρηματοδότησης, τους κανόνες και τους στόχους των προγραμμάτων, γεγονός που παρεμποδίζει τις κοινές δράσεις στην έρευνα. Θα ήθελα λοιπόν να μας εξηγήσετε πώς σκοπεύετε να ξεπεράσετε αυτές τις πρακτικές δυσκολίες στο πλαίσιο του προγράμματος-πλαίσιου έρευνας και καινοτομίας «Ορίζων Ευρώπη». Επιπλέον, σε χώρες όπως είναι η χώρα μου, η Ελλάδα, με μικρότερες δυνατότητες έρευνας και καινοτομίας, ποιες συγκεκριμένες πρωτοβουλίες θα πάρετε για την περαιτέρω στήριξη της ερευνητικής δραστηριότητας και των πανεπιστημίων των χωρών αυτών; Επίσης, ποιες συγκεκριμένες δράσεις θα αναλάβετε για να ενισχύσετε την ενσωμάτωση των κοινωνικών, ανθρωπιστικών και καλλιτεχνικών επιστημών στο πρόγραμμα-πλαίσιο; Τέλος, πώς σκοπεύετε να διασφαλίσετε ότι οι τομείς αυτοί θα λάβουν ειδική υποστήριξη και νέες ευκαιρίες;

1-0064-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you for this question. I have to be short. Horizon has a dedicated programme in Pillar 2, and it's very close to my heart to continue this. It's really important, and I'm going to discuss with experts, as I already mentioned, because there are quite a lot of proposals in the Heitor report and they mentioned as well to find the best way how to improve the governance of the programme.

I'm really committed to work with the widening Member States. What is important is to increase the capacity of universities and research organisations. But I will be clear: no matter what we are doing here on the European level, how supportive we are, without engagement from the Member States to increase their budget for research and innovation we are not going to fill this gap between the widening Member States and the rest of Europe.

1-0065-0000

Thomas Pellerin-Carlin (S&D). – The European Innovation Council was established to support innovative start-ups and scale-ups to deliver breakthrough innovations. But the EIC has faced several challenges in recent years, and we have competitive increasing pressure from the USA as they are implementing the Inflation Reduction Act. So Europe needs more than ever an adequate EIC to keep its competitive edge, especially on clean tech.

If you were confirmed as commissioner, would you commit to deliver an honest assessment of the EIC, to understand what worked and what did not work?

Furthermore, how do you intend to build synergies between the EIC and the European Union research and innovation missions, especially those that relate to climate-neutral cities and climate-change adaptation?

Finally, to nurture a more human-centric innovation process, what do you envisage to do to guarantee that social science research is better included from the outset of the Horizon Europe funded projects, especially those that are technological in nature?

1-0066-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Pellerin. I remember the discussion with you. I'm really supportive of what you said. Yes. I'm committed to being honest, to make an honest assessment of what works and what does not. Actually the discussion I had with you before my hearing was really very useful. I already started to think and to reflect what works, what we can improve during this programming period, not to wait for the next to come, because we have three years of implementation of the programme. Discuss with the EIC board members and different stakeholders, so yes, I'm committed to being honest, to see what works and what doesn't.

Obviously there's quite a lot of room for improvement. Too long process, not enough flexibility of decision-making process for program managers who are really skilled experts. Not sufficient funding. We are discussing about scaling up EUR 15 million. It's obviously not enough. So I'm committed to be very honest, to make a real assessment of what works, what doesn't, and to improve even in this programming period, in this Framework Programme, what can be improved.

1-0067-0000

Filip Turek (PFE). – Madam Commissioner-designate, your nomination is deeply troubling. We are not looking for a diplomat to manage paperwork. We need someone to lead Europe's technological future. Your quoting of the Draghi report is no substitute for first-hand expertise in innovation. The 13.8 million workers in our automotive sector deserve someone who understands technology, not someone learning it from PowerPoint slides. Your written answers are full of references to reports and frameworks, but empty of actual technology management.

Two questions arise: firstly, how will you ensure R&D funding is based on technical feasibility rather than political ideology? Your answers focus heavily on start-ups and scale-ups. Secondly, how will you protect traditional industrial jobs while having no experience with their technological challenges?

Madame Zaharieva, Europe's industrial future needs more than diplomatic skills. The stakes are simply too high for on the job learning.

1-0068-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – I think actually we need both: diplomatic skills, political experience and administrative capacity. Of course, I will rely a lot on the huge expertise that I saw in the two DGs. I will rely a lot, of course, on the opinion of the stakeholders.

Yes, I'm not a scientist, but I have a rich political experience. I have been Minister of Regional Development, Minister of Justice, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Minister of Regional Development, a director in a ministry.

Actually, I started my career really from the bottom. I was an expert and then a director, then a deputy minister and minister and then a deputy prime minister. So I believe that this quite big political experience will equip me with the necessary skills to support our companies and our own business, and I am really devoted to do so.

And I will rely on the expertise in this room. I see huge expertise here, and I am very grateful to exchange ideas with you during my preparation and now during this hearing, as well as, hopefully, in the future, if I have a chance to implement my mission.

1-0069-0000

Fernand Kartheiser (ECR). – Thank you, Ms Commissioner-designate, for your statements.

As in other key technological and scientific sectors, Europe seems to be lagging behind in space exploration as compared to some major countries. The United States, Russia, China, Japan and India have landed on the moon, the EU has not.

The European Space Agency, has outlined ambitious plans through its Explore 2040 initiative. This strategy envisions sending European astronauts to the Moon, and ultimately to Mars. As we look to the future, it is clear that space innovation will play a transformative role in Europe's strategic autonomy, economic competitiveness and scientific leadership. Could you please outline, Ms Commissioner-designate, what role the European Union and its investments in research and innovation can contribute to Europe's and the European Space Agency's plans to make Moon and Mars exploration a reality, and thus highlight European innovation and expertise on a global stage.

1-0070-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Kartheiser, for this really important question. Yes, we have really good space companies who develop R&I in space. I already met actually the programme manager for space in the EIC and we discussed a lot what we can do to support even more this huge potential that we have in European space companies and their competitiveness.

Clearly, the funding is not enough. I think now we have EUR 1.9 billion for this programming period, but I saw a lot of skilled people who understand the business very well and we are going to present a plan to increase the money, to increase the funding of start-ups in the space industry.

So yes, we can be competitive. We have quite a lot of knowledge in the space start-up industry.

1-0071-0000

João Cotrim De Figueiredo (Renew). – Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Ms Zaharieva. Your mission letter puts you in the centre of the role to bridge several important gaps: the innovation gap that Draghi said was the main reason why we keep falling behind the US; the R&I gap; and the start-up financing gap. And in all these, your work could make life easier for SMEs and start-ups or just add more red tape. You could make a real impact or just allow the EU to fall further behind.

So therefore, we want to have the chance to ask two very concrete questions about two other gaps. The bureaucracy gap: how are you going to actually help innovative companies grow? And specifically, how are you going to accelerate the 28th regime, making sure that it's not just another empty promise? Because at its present pace, it is not likely to come into force before 2030. What difficulties do you expect and how do you want to overcome them?

And the other gap is the impact assessment gap. How will you prioritise resource allocation and how will you track the real impact of EU investments and make sure we're not just wasting taxpayers' money? This is something that the Renew Europe group always wants to take care of. Your clear and concrete answers to these questions are the first step to truly bridging these gaps.

1-0072-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr De Figueiredo. Yes, we have this gap. I'm not sure about bureaucracy – is it a gap or is it something different? But, as I already mentioned, I'll be really much focused on proposing together. I'm not leading in this, but I'm very devoted to work very closely with the Commissioner for Justice to propose this 28th regime. You're right: it will be not easy.

Maybe we will start with enhanced cooperation, because I'm not sure that we are going to have all of the Member States on board from the beginning, but I rely a lot on your support also to work with the Member States to convince them to accept this regime. So we are going to propose the legislative proposal and work with the Member States to convince them. But if we don't have all on board, we can at least start with enhanced cooperation not to wait, as you said, until 2030.

Implementation, yes, as our President outlined in her speech, our legislation is as better as its implementation. So if we don't implement our legislation, good – we didn't create a good legislation. For the programme itself, I saw the data, and there my assessment is that it's a huge bureaucratic burden. Still we don't have final data about the evaluation of the programme. But the preliminary assessment shows between 12 and 20 % of the administrative costs for our beneficiaries, which is huge. Obviously, the programme is too complicated, and we have simplified drastically.

1-0073-0000

Hildegard Bentele (PPE). – Die öffentlich-privaten Partnerschaften im Rahmen des Forschungsrahmenprogramms zielen ja eigentlich darauf ab, Forschungsinvestitionen in der Industrie zu steigern. Wir müssen aber feststellen, dass die europäischen Unternehmen trotz der Anreize und der Möglichkeiten des Forschungsrahmenprogramms ihre Forschungsinvestitionen kaum gesteigert haben und Europa sein Drei-Prozent-Forschungsinvestitionsziel weiterhin nicht erreicht. Wie wollen Sie bei der zukünftigen Umsetzung des Forschungsrahmenprogramms dafür sorgen, dass es nicht nur mehr öffentlich-private Partnerschaften gibt, sondern dass vor allem auch unsere europäischen Unternehmen ihr Investitionsverhalten fundamental ändern und damit angesichts der verschärften internationalen Konkurrenz ihre Zukunftsfähigkeit erhalten?

1-0074-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Danke sehr, Frau Bentele. I agree with you. I think that what we should do is that the two pillars and instruments that we have in the framework programme, EIC and pillar 2, must attract more private investment. The data are not bad. It's 36% as far as I remember from the pillar 2. Commitments are coming from industry and EIC fund attract for every euro invested four additional private funding. But obviously it's not enough. For example, we spoke about 2.3% of GDP in average in Europe compared with 3.6 of GDP. But the difference came from the private sector. European private sector investment in R&I is 1.3%. American private sector investment in R&I is 2.4%. We should really motivate the private sector through different incentives on the European level to use our funds better.

The trust in the investor network – that was launched, actually, at the end of last month by Iliana Ivanova and I'm really grateful to her for this initiative and I am ready to develop it. It is also a very valuable tool. It's the first step.

We raised the expectations of the private sector, and now we have to deliver. How to deliver? To work closely with them and also to implement what we promise: less red tape, and simplification.

1-0075-0000

Sofie Eriksson (S&D). – Forskare ska ägna sig åt forskning, men när man pratar med forskarna själva blir det tydligt att själva forskningen ofta blir en bisyssla, vid sidan av en allt högre administrativ börda. Offentliga medel är ofta utspridda, och forskare måste söka pengar från olika håll.

Varje bidragsgivare har egna regler. Forskarna måste därför hela tiden ändra sina planer och sina arbetssätt för att passa in i olika ramar. Det blir splittrat, tidskrävande och skapar en dålig arbetsmiljö.

Vi vet ju alla härinne att Europa halkar efter på olika sätt. Du skriver själv i dina svar till oss att du vill sätta forskningen främst i EU:s politik för stärkt konkurrenskraft.

Men forskningen kan inte vara i framkant om inte forskare får ägna sig åt det som de gör bäst. Då undrar jag först och främst, hur kommer du att jobba för att göra det enklare för forskare att bedriva sitt arbete? Jag undrar också, mer lite vid sidan av, hur du ser generellt på de här uppdragen i Horisont.

1-0076-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – I'll be very direct. One of the possibilities is this two-phase application. Because if it's two-phase application – that means that researchers, so the companies, the start-ups who apply – there will be the first part, they will be focused on present the project, as you said, to describe the project, the research project or the innovation project – not work between 35 plus 15 more days if they have complicated collaborative projects. So just to field all the documents and papers that we ask from them. So I think this is very concrete.

Also, what is very important, I didn't mention the lump sums, but I'm very supportive of the lump sums. The results and the additional assessment show that the researchers and innovators are very supportive as well – big research organisations and universities not that much, but individual researchers and innovators are very much supportive. It gives them a possibility to focus exactly on what you said: research and innovation, not only reporting.

So those are very concrete initiatives that I'm going to develop – if I'm approved, of course.

1-0077-0000

Jüri Ratas (PPE). – Thank you, dear madam Ekaterina Zaharieva. Thank you for your remarks and answers that clarified a lot. My question to you is a follow up to the written answers you have provided us.

As you know, Parliament has requested a Union legislation of the freedom of scientific research that should be applicable across the Union, including on Union institutions. In your written answers, you write that you will include the freedom of scientific research in your proposal for the ERA Act.

Can you confirm that your proposal will indeed be in line with the Parliament's resolution, and will therefore propose legislation that will be applicable across the Union and will offer a basis for a course to protect the freedom of scientific research?

1-0078-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Yes, Mr Ratas, I commit to propose the legislative proposal, and I'm very grateful to the Parliament for the resolution that was issued and adopted in 2024. As you know, together with the Parliament, the DG implemented a study on this resolution

to prepare the legislative proposal. And I'm ready to work with you, to discuss with you, and I'm very supportive because, unfortunately for our academic freedom index and freedom of scientific research, we have worrying trends in Europe since 2008. And this is a very worrying trend, as I mentioned, and we should work with the Member States, with the researchers to address their worries, because if they are not free to research in what they want, we are not going to have this excellent research.

And I think we have a really good example in the ERC, to implement for this bottom-up approach. I mean the ERC is a good example, but yes, I am ready to commit and I am committed to the legislation, a legislative proposal.

1-0079-0000

Raffaele Stancanelli (Pfe). – Signor Presidente, signora Commissaria, secondo la relazione di luglio sulla partecipazione delle piccole e medie imprese a Horizon Europe, il 20 % di tutti i finanziamenti è stato a esse assegnato, con un aumento rispetto agli esiti registrati da Horizon nel 2020. Tuttavia, il finanziamento a fondo perduto è stato di appena 0,3 punti percentuali superiore. Intende rivedere l'allocazione delle risorse per aumentare i fondi destinati alle PMI nel prossimo programma? E questa è la prima domanda.

Poi: intende mantenere la definizione di micro, piccole e medie imprese, come prevista dalla raccomandazione n. 361 del 2003, salvaguardando così l'autonomia di tali categorie? Come immagina in generale il nuovo controllo PMI e competitività per la nuova legislazione raccomandata da Ursula von der Leyen nella lettera di missione? E infine come immagina l'architettura del nuovo, onnicomprensivo fondo per la competitività in rapporto alla necessità di salvaguardare i fondi per la ricerca, che sicuramente devono essere più cospicui?

1-0080-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you for this question. I'm sure that I have all the questions that you want to ask me, but I will start with SMEs.

Yes, it's not enough. It's only 20 %. SMEs represent 99 % of the European companies, and definitely something is wrong when only 20 % of the Horizon Europe funding goes to SMEs. If they represent 99 % of the companies in Europe.

The reason I think is that it's too complicated a programme, and we should work to simplify it. And that's why all the measures that I have a chance to present to you today, by answering the questions, will be linked to increasing the participation of SMEs. It maybe sounds cliché, but it's true, without simplifying our rules, our programmes, we are not going to increase the participation of SMEs in all the programmes in Europe. They think that this is too complicated, it takes a lot of resources to prepare the applications. Some of them don't have these resources. That's why their participation is low.

1-0081-0000

Bruno Gonçalves (S&D). – Senhor Presidente, Cara Comissária indigitada Zaharieva, Portugal e Bulgária, os nossos países de origem, apesar de estarem em lados opostos da Europa, enfrentam problemas comuns, um dos principais é a emigração jovem.

As novas gerações são as mais qualificadas, mas não são as mais bem pagas, nem de perto. Essa perda constante de cérebros tem um impacto demográfico na coesão territorial e no desenvolvimento económico dos diferentes Estados-Membros.

A presidente Ursula von Leyen atribuiu-lhe competências nas áreas da investigação e da inovação, fundamentais para mudar este rumo, por isso, pergunto-lhe:

Primeiro, como é que a área europeia de investigação pode aproximar o conhecimento produzido nas nossas universidades da economia real, colocando os setores inovadores a criar emprego de qualidade em todos os países, e podem ou não os *clusters* de competitividade ser um exemplo para a Europa?

Em segundo lugar, se se pode comprometer firmemente com uma estratégia para os fundos europeus de inovação que ofereçam oportunidades para todos, em particular e sobretudo para os mais jovens?

1-0082-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, *Commissioner-designate*. – Thank you, Mr Gonçalves. As a couple of you said, in order to increase the EU's productivity, we have to become better at translating our excellent research into innovation and competitive products, and I remember a discussion with you as well. This will also be very important and will lead the young people from Portugal, Bulgaria, and in general in Europe, and young researchers and innovators, to remain in Europe.

You mentioned the ERA Act as well. Hopefully it will be proposed in 2026, at the latest. The goal is to develop a true EU-wide ecosystem of research, innovation and growth to create these minimum standards for researchers and innovators to keep the talents in Europe, but also to support their collaboration and research. And they are training and researching, in the so-called free movement of research, innovation and knowledge.

I think this is the way forward, to create a better environment for our young researchers to improve the research and innovation infrastructure as well. It's really important because it matters for their work. And we have to better coordinate the strategies among the Member States. This will be the key aspects in the ERA Act, and it also also linked with keeping talents in Europe.

1-0083-0000

Sabine Verheyen (PPE). – Commissioner-designate, freedom of research and freedom of academia are strongly interconnected. Given your commitment to strengthening the European Education Area and the European Research Area as frameworks for seamless mobility and transnational cooperation, how would you concretely address the need for a timely implementation of comprehensive recognition of educational degrees within the EU, which is also a main target in the Erasmus+ programme?

Such recognition is essential for fostering greater student, researcher and worker mobility, especially in light of global talent competition and skills shortages in key sectors.

How would you ensure more robust EU-wide standards for degree equivalency to facilitate free movement of talent?

And how might this align with current European initiatives like the European Universities Alliance, the European degree and sector specific academics in equipping Europeans with further oriented skills?

And how will you cooperate with the Commissioners responsible in the field of education?

1-0084-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, madam. Very kind indeed. This is a really important question. I already met with my colleague, and we discussed actually in advance how we work together. You mentioned university alliances, (*inaudible passage*), ERA – European Research Area – which is very, very linked with European Education Area and European Higher Education Area. So, I can commit that we are going to have a really good cooperation and work in the same direction.

You mentioned now, on your point, how we will do this to advance on implementation of the blueprint for a European degree? We have to work with the Member States to convince them to implement this and the European University alliance is actually a really good instrument that we have for increasing the trust, because without increasing the trust among the Member States and universities, we will not be able to reach the goal that all young people actually dream of. And we work for years for this. So only trust can lead to recognition of qualifications and diploma.

1-0085-0000

Damian Boeselager (Verts/ALE). – Dear Commissioner-designate, some of us fear that the EU's competitiveness agenda will once be State aid for dinosaurs, and your job would be to focus it instead on new industries, such as green tech. But for that, as you said, we need access to capital and to talent.

On talent, will you make it easier for start-ups to hire across EU borders to become more attractive for digital nomads?

Will you expand labour migration channels, for example, the start-up visa and youth mobility schemes?

And on capital, what will you do exactly to enable institutional investors to invest in VCs? Do you commit to a mandatory 10 %, for example, start-up quota and public procurement in combination with compensation for bidding?

And on simplification, and without undermining our policy goals, how do you want to foster the digitisation of the administration and of reporting specifically one-stop shops for start-ups?

And how will you apply the 'think small first' principle and *de minimis* clauses in regulation?

1-0086-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you. Quite a lot of questions. I'm not able to address all of them in two minutes. I will start from the simplification. You know that I'm really committed. And one-stop shop, actually, it's what we try to do for ENIC. I'm not sure that we succeed, but actually this is the goal, the three stages, the three pillars that we have there.

So, yes, this is for Horizon. I'm not able to commit with the 10 % of all procurement, innovative procurement to be preserved for start-ups. First, because we don't have yet a legal definition of 'start-up'. So step by step, we should first create a legal definition for start-ups.

And what is more important actually is to improve the legislation, to boost this innovative public procurement, because in Europe we have only 0.05 % of public procurement from the grants. Of all public procurement that we have in Europe, only 0.05 % are linked with innovations. So obviously we didn't create the ground in legislation for innovative public procurement.

So we work with other Commissioners – as is mentioned in the political guidance of President von der Leyen – on amendments of the directives linked with public procurement.

1-0087-0000

Mariateresa Vivaldini (ECR). – Gentilissima Commissaria designata, vorrei condividere con Lei alcune riflessioni sulla ricerca in agricoltura, strumento essenziale per permettere al settore di diventare più sostenibile, promuovendo pratiche che riducono l'impatto ambientale e migliorano la salute del suolo e la conservazione della biodiversità.

Sappiamo che le discussioni sulle nuove tecniche di evoluzione assistita sono ora a un punto di stallo, che occorre assolutamente sbloccare, anche perché possono essere la chiave per affrontare la sfida del cambiamento climatico che sta mettendo in ginocchio l'agricoltura. Vorrei chiederle quale sia la Sua posizione in merito e se gli agricoltori europei potranno utilizzarle, mettendoli così in una posizione di *level playing field* con gli altri agricoltori mondiali.

Vorrei inoltre farle presente che gli allevatori europei si trovano anche a dover affrontare epizootie e fitopatie che compromettono i loro redditi e la loro produttività. In particolare nella zona italiana da cui provengo, assistiamo al dilagare della peste suina africana e dell'influenza aviaria. Le chiedo quindi cosa ha intenzione di fare per rendere i vaccini disponibili il prima possibile e se riuscirete a produrli in quantità tali da poterli distribuire a prezzi accessibili?

1-0088-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Ms Vivaldini, I really understand your questions, because actually in Bulgaria, our agricultural sector faces the same challenges with the African swine fever. So I really know how difficult it is for the country, for the farmers, how big a loss it is for the agricultural sector. It's a big tragedy, I would say, because it's their work, their life.

So, yes, definitely. I will support to step up research for such disease and the problem must be urgently addressed. And we have the instruments, we have the tools. And I'm very supportive on this and you can rely on me in this endeavour.

On your first part of the question, I'm not sure that I managed to understand everything. What I know is that there was a proposal from the Commission, but it's blocked in the Council. So my portfolio, I mean the portfolio of research and innovation, and it's a politically sensitive issue, I think the role of research in innovation should be to explain to people, to help politicians to take decisions. But it's a controversial topic and it depends on the Council to take a decision now.

1-0089-0000

Oihane Agirregoitia Martínez (Renew). – ¿Cómo piensa la Comisión garantizar la transparencia y el buen gobierno de aquellos proyectos de investigación e innovación que usan tecnologías disruptivas para que se puedan supervisar dobles usos —y abusos, a veces— de dichas tecnologías?

¿Cómo va a garantizar la Comisión la igualdad de condiciones en todos los Estados y regiones para garantizar una innovación disruptiva y orientada al mercado basada en comportamientos éticos y el respeto a los derechos humanos?

¿Qué mecanismos se van a establecer para garantizar que todos los equipos de innovación y de investigación europeos, especialmente aquellos que están situados en regiones y en Estados más avanzados en materia de derechos humanos y laborales, no se vean desfavorecidos en comparación con otros actores que trabajan con estándares muchísimo más bajos?

1-0090-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – The Horizon Europe programme is focused on civilian research and innovation and all the projects have to implement high ethical standards. So there is no exception to this principle.

On dual-use, we have evaluated, we have reflected and the new realities that I already mentioned are not only Russia's war of aggression towards Ukraine, but also our competitiveness. And it's also what the scientists think, that this is an artificial division. But we are going to continue this evaluation, maybe to start and to propose a new study because the first study actually was not representative enough. There were quite a few participants in this study. This I was told from the DG and of course speak with the Member States, speak with you in the Parliament, with the experts, as I already mentioned, with the industry, with the universities and research organisations and find the right balance.

So how we can guarantee, I think, depends on the researchers and innovators, because, first, the programme is focused on civilian, but second, when the researcher innovators have their patents depends on them for what purposes their research or innovation will be used. So they have these intellectual rights. It depends on them. So this is the guarantee. It will depend on the researchers and innovators.

1-0091-0000

Fulvio Martusciello (PPE). – Signora Commissaria, ho letto le Sue risposte scritte, le ho trovate esaurienti. Nella Sua risposta scritta, Lei fa riferimento all'intenzione di contribuire alla costruzione di una vera e propria Unione europea della ricerca e dell'innovazione con una serie di importanti iniziative nei prossimi cinque anni, occupandosi degli investimenti troppo bassi in ricerca e sviluppo, ben al di sotto dell'obiettivo di investimento del 3 % del PIL e dell'insufficiente coordinamento dei sistemi di ricerca e innovazione degli Stati membri. La frammentazione dei nostri ecosistemi di ricerca e innovazione è la causa di forti differenze di prestazioni fra paesi e regioni. Quali misure concrete ritiene necessarie al fine di colmare il divario in termini di innovazione, incrementando la partecipazione di Stati membri in ritardo al programma quadro?

1-0092-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, signore Martusciello, for your question. Three key elements. First investments, European Semester, I'm going to repeat it. Work with the Member States, use European Area Act, to recommit, with a minimum of 3 % of GDP.

Second, better coordination. With the limited resources that we have and even if the resources reach 3 %, it's still not sufficient enough. We should be better coordinated. In the Member States, between the regions, but between the European Union funds, in the European Union funds themselves, in the programme, I see overlaps even in the Horizon Europe programme, a lack of synergy sometimes in the different programmes, in Horizon Europe itself, like EIT, EIC. I see some overlaps there. So use our resources better. Focus better, coordinate better, don't overlap.

And on Widening, again, it's a question very dear to my heart. As I already mentioned, we are better than FP7 and Horizon 2020, but still, a lot has to be achieved. We have a good part of Widening that works well, but for example, Hop-on is still not developed. I hear some of your complaints about this. Still, some of the Member States are not using these possibilities enough.

So obviously we should improve our work in Commission, like work with those who are not performing (*inaudible*). Maybe the problem is also in how we structure the programme, what we can improve in the programme itself. So I'll be very, very much focussed on the Widening measures,

but not only on the measure itself, but how to improve the participation of Widening Member States in all Horizon parts, not only Widening.

1-0093-0000

João Oliveira (The Left). – Senhor Presidente, Senhora Comissária Zaharieva, as políticas que aqui tem defendido têm vários problemas. Elas acentuam os desequilíbrios entre países no nível de desenvolvimento científico e tecnológico, no acesso a fundos europeus e na capacidade de atração e fixação de cientistas e investigadores, acentuam a concentração dos fundos europeus num número reduzido de beneficiários de grande dimensão, continuam a olhar para a ciência e a investigação em função da capacidade de gerarem lucros para as grandes empresas multinacionais e não como instrumentos de resposta a problemas sociais.

O que quero pedir-lhe é uma resposta a três propostas alternativas:

Primeiro, dar prioridade a políticas de apoio aos países em situação de maior atraso científico e tecnológico.

Segundo, criar políticas de apoio a redes públicas de ciência e tecnologia que tenham como prioridade o desenvolvimento nacional e a resposta a problemas sociais.

Terceiro, apoiar políticas nacionais de valorização dos cientistas e investigadores, das suas carreiras profissionais, das suas condições de trabalho e da sua fixação em territórios de menor desenvolvimento científico e tecnológico.

1-0094-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Mr Oliveira, I'm ready to support all of your proposals. And I'm committed to work with you on these ideas. I don't know what else to add. I'm really supportive of what you said. So the time is running and I think we are quite above the time, Chair. So you can count on my support on this.

1-0095-0000

Borys Budka, Chair of the ITRE Committee. – We have just finished the second round, so let me give the floor to the Vice-Chair of the Committee on Culture and Education, Mr Bogdan Zdrojewski. I'm pleased to welcome the Members of the invited committee, and the floor is yours.

1-0096-0000

Bogdan Andrzej Zdrojewski, wiceprzewodniczący komisji CULT. – Chciałem zadać pytanie dotyczące aktywności związanych z zapewnieniem synergii między europejskim obszarem edukacji, europejskim obszarem szkolnictwa wyższego i europejską przestrzenią badawczą. Krótko mówiąc, w jaki sposób zamierza Pani współpracować z wiceprzewodniczącą Mînzatu w kwestiach związanych z Europejskim Sojuszem Uniwersytetów?

Ale dodam jednocześnie, że bardzo mnie interesuje Pani ocena systemu bolońskiego. To już 25 lat. Miał on dwa zadania – jedno zadanie, aby wyrównać stopnie naukowe, a z drugiej strony, by uczelnie europejskie dogoniły uczelnie amerykańskie. To pierwsze się udało, to drugie – nie. Czy nie należałoby rozpocząć prac nad nowym systemem, nowym programem, nową perspektywą?

1-0097-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Mr Zdrojewski. Linking education, higher education and the European Research Area is really key for the European Research

Innovation Union to be created – as you know, it's one of my primary goals – and for competitiveness. Without good education we are not going to have good higher education, without good higher education we are not going to have a quality research and innovation.

I work closely with Roxana Minzatu. I met her. We discussed quite intensively our ideas, mainly about university alliances. Because this is the part that we are going to work in close synergy with her.

For European university alliances it was a big success. It was created quite fast. We have now 500 universities in a really good network, but we should also work to create the sustainability in the finance. Now we have financing through Erasmus+, but what I think we should work, elaborate and collaborate on with you and with the respective DGs, but also with alliances itself, is to create sustainability in the financing.

My goal will be really to improve this research-innovation dimension. I don't want to predetermine the negotiations for the next Framework Programme, but I will be very much focussed on strengthening this focus in university alliances, on preserving excellence as the main principle and this competitive principle that we have in Horizon Europe.

1-0098-0000

Borys Budka, *Chair of the ITRE Committee*. – Now let's start the final round.

1-0099-0000

Dario Tamburrano (The Left). – Buongiorno, Commissaria designata Zaharieva. La manifattura additiva, più conosciuta come stampa 3D, ha raggiunto un livello di maturità tecnologica assai avanzato in ripetibilità dei manufatti, gamma di materiali utilizzabili, economicità della produzione e resilienza rispetto alle forniture extraeuropee. Tale soluzione presenta quindi diversi vantaggi rispetto alla tradizionale manifattura con stampi, come flessibilità della produzione, rapidità di immissione sul mercato e soprattutto accessibilità da parte di PMI e start-up.

Tuttavia, oggi vi sono delle difficoltà in Europa nel certificare e immettere sul mercato i prodotti così realizzati a causa delle vigenti regole tecniche UE. Come esempi parziali: i prodotti da costruzione, i giocattoli, i dispositivi medici non su misura e i pezzi di ricambio per lo sviluppo dell'economia circolare. Allo stesso tempo, diversi materiali di input oggi non ricadono in alcuna sorveglianza né *labeling* che ne certifichi qualità e requisiti.

Lei, come Commissaria per le Start-up, la ricerca e l'innovazione, come intende adoperarsi, in team con la squadra dei commissari, affinché i vigenti requisiti tecnici e norme armonizzate europei vengano aggiornati per permettere a quest'area dell'industria 4.0 di avvantaggiarsi della tecnologia e svilupparsi sul territorio UE, pur mantenendo i requisiti di sicurezza e protezione del consumatore con specifiche etichettature dei materiali di input?

1-0100-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, *Commissioner-designate*. – Thank you, Mr Tamburrano. We already had the chance to discuss this very dear to your heart issue with standardisation. What I know at this stage is, as I understand it, that the current legislative framework of EU standardisation is being evaluated, so obviously that the Commission heard the words coming from the sector and started this evaluation. Also, specifically on medical devices, a targeted evaluation of the legislative framework for medical devices is currently ongoing. And I will work with the Commissioner in charge, like

Executive Vice-President Séjourné, on these issues because if the sector has worries, that means that something is wrong in our legislation.

On my perspective, I will make sure that the life sciences strategy and the biotechnology strategy will support regularly science that can facilitate approval of safe new technology. That means that also in life science strategy, regulatory complexes will be addressed as well.

1-0101-0000

Alexandra Geese (Verts/ALE). – Commissioner-designate, considering President von der Leyen's EUR 100 billion commitment to a European AI initiative akin to CERN, how will you work with the Vice-President for tax sovereignty to ensure that the European AI ecosystem meets the competitiveness challenges highlighted in the Draghi agenda?

What will you do in the European Innovation Act to ensure that the European Innovation Council prioritises substantial investments to support high-potential European AI Start-Ups and helps to build open, sovereign and sustainable digital infrastructures?

How do you envision the EC's role in fostering a competitive, autonomous AI ecosystem that strengthens European tax sovereignty and reduces dependency on non-European technologies?

Last but not least, how will you ensure that sustainability is a crucial factor for AI? We know that current large-language models are not compatible with our climate goals. Because of the huge energy consumption assumptions, data centres would compete for energy with our industry, thus further jeopardising competitiveness.

At the same time, Europe is already excellent when it comes to developing much more sustainable computing capability. So what will you do to strengthen sustainable digital technologies made in Europe?

Not a question now, but a comment. I very much welcome your commitment to gender equality. Gender equality in science and research is not only good for women, but for all of us, because there's ample evidence that it improves the quality of our science and research and also the competitiveness of our businesses. So thank you very much for that.

1-0102-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you, Madam Geese. It's really a topic that is very dear to my heart. On AI, I will work closely with the Executive Vice-President on artificial intelligence. I'm committed to consulting the scientific community to develop a joint roadmap and to procure a study exploring implementation options.

We need four very important for developing AI. It's of course funding, computers, computer power, data and skills. Without the four of them we will be not able to advance with the strategy that we want to implement in front of you, and none of the Member States is able to have the whole four alone.

So this council, because a lot of you have asked me what exactly this council is going to do, the goal of this council should be to pool our resources effectively – all these four ingredients that I already mentioned. So I work very closely with Henna Virkkunen and with the scientific community to present the strategy and the launch of the AI Research Council in Science.

1-0103-0000

Христо Петров (Renew). – Уважаема госпожо Захариева, в контекста на Новия европейски Баухаус въпросът ми е какви възможности виждате за използване на цифрови инструменти по програма "Хоризонт Европа" за подобряване на опазването на културата и достъпа до култура? И ще има ли специална подкрепа за по-малки или отдалечени културни институции, за да им се помогне в този цифров преход?

1-0104-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, кандидат за член на Комисията. – Благодаря, господин Петров, за въпроса. Мисля, че той е изключително важен, защото инклузивност на образованието и на културата са едни от най-важните приоритети. Ние много говорихме в първата част на моето изслушване за това как трябва да бъдем инклузивни и да създадем условия във всички държави - членки на ЕС. Но аз мисля, че трябва да се фокусираме и върху регионите, това, което Вие казвате. Така че моето портфолио не е пряко свързано с културата и образованието, но със сигурност програма "Хоризонт" финансира изследване и наука в така наречените "социални науки", което включва и изследванията в областта на културата. И всичките мерки, при които говорихме за така наречените *widening* държави или държавите, които все още не са стигнали средното ниво по отношение на изследвания и наука, важат и за културата и изследванията в областта на културата.

Така че, да, имате моята подкрепа в това отношение да бъдем инклузивни и съм готова да работя с Вас, за да постигнем тези цели.

За да постигнем това обаче, трябва да имаме и държавите членки на нашата страна. Защото каквото и да правим на европейско ниво, по-добре от мен знаете — без инвестиции, сериозни инвестиции в държавите членки, няма да постигнем това. Затова отново ще повтарям всеки път, че да, колкото и да увеличим тук програмите, без реформи и без повече средства за образование, наука и култура, в това число ще сложа изследванията и иновациите, ние няма да постигнем целите си, а именно Европа да бъде най-конкурентоспособното място на света.

1-0105-0000

Kris Van Dijck (ECR). – Mevrouw Zaharieva, bedankt voor de zeer vele antwoorden reeds, maar ik heb nog een zeer concrete en acute vraag. In de zoektocht naar decarbonisatie en nieuwe duurzame energiebronnen speelt kernfusie een cruciale rol. De Joint European Torus, het grootste kernfusie-experiment van Europa, heeft zijn waarde al bewezen in het maken van doorbraken die ook essentieel zijn voor projecten als ITER die we zelf aan het opzetten zijn in Cadarache. Maar deze infrastructuur dreigt verloren te gaan. Straks, binnen enkele weken start de ontmanteling, wat een decennialange leemte zou creëren in onze Europese kennis en expertise, aangezien ITER nog minstens vijftien jaar zal duren. Ik denk dat we dus een kapitale fout maken. In uw opdrachtbrief wordt gewezen op de noodzaak van een langetermijnstrategie om de Europese onderzoeksinfrastructuur te versterken. Mijn vraag is dan ook zeer concreet: welke acties zal u binnen uw bevoegdheden nemen voor het behoud van JET zodat opgebouwde kennis niet verloren gaat, onze onderzoekers en studenten verder kunnen werken en we de opgebouwde Europese voorsprong op o.a. China kunnen behouden?

1-0106-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you for this question on JET, what we would do if, of course, approved. It's to connect and discuss with the United Kingdom, to manage to convince them not to stop financing the JET project, because after Brexit, it was part of the negotiation agreement that we reached, Joint European Torus is the full name of the JET facilities, the ownership was transferred to the United Kingdom, and they decided to stop the financing. They also, after the Brexit negotiations, that we have now ongoing, decided also not to cooperate with

the EU through the Euratom Research and Training Programme, which was one of the possibilities to continue financing the JET facilities.

So on that stage, what we can do, and I can commit is to, if I'm approved, is to talk with the United Kingdom colleagues to convince them to continue financing because the European Commission doesn't have neither legal base and even with the finances and resources that we have to continue financing this project without having United Kingdom on board. This is what I can commit for JET project in particular.

1-0107-0000

András Gyürk (PFE). – Madam Commissioner-designate, in the past almost three hours, you've been stressing the importance of speeding up access to research funds, as well as the improvement of accessibility of European research cooperation. I agree with you, and this is exactly why I would like to draw your attention to the fact that since 22 December, based on the Commission's proposal, 21 Hungarian universities have been excluded from the funding of the Horizon Europe Framework Programme.

As a result of this discriminatory measure, for instance, projects of Hungarian medical universities aimed at developing rehabilitation treatments have been excluded. This step also made impossible the formation of an international cooperation programme on a European disease-forecasting system, led by Nobel Prize winner, Professor Ferenc Krausz.

It is clear that this policy causes direct damage to the lives of citizens. With this in mind, if you take office, when exactly do you plan to respond to the Hungarian Government's legislative proposal submitted a year ago?

When will you abolish this unprecedented and discriminatory situation?

1-0108-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – I will start by saying that our collective interest is to welcome back these Hungarian universities and companies that the measures were taken to them.

It's also important to mention that they can participate in Horizon Europe actions, but without receiving EU funds. So I'm aware that Hungarian Government has created a guarantee fund, and they can use this guarantee fund to continue their participation in Horizon Europe. I think it's important to ensure a clear understanding for the R&I community that these entities can participate. As I told you, I'm not sure that all of them know.

So of course the measures, as you mentioned, can be lifted only at any point, in any time, when further notification by the Hungarian Government is proposed to the Commission of new remedial measures. So I am committed to work with the Hungarian Government, to look at the measures, and to see where more need to be to be done to leave these measures.

1-0109-0000

Matthias Ecke (S&D). – Madam Commissioner-designate, I would like to skip the question that I actually intended on high-tech research, because I would like to draw my attention and your attention to a question that I think you have failed to answer twice in this hearing.

It is about R&I Missions because Missions provide societal guidance over many components of Horizon Europe. And I think of Missions like the Climate-Neutral Cities, Beating Cancer or Adaptation to Climate Change. So I think they are very important also in the framework of research policy.

So what is your assessment of the Missions and how do you want to continue them, invest more in them, and which role are they supposed to play in your future research policy? I would really like you to get back on that because you did not in the previous answers.

1-0110-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you. Sorry that I didn't. I try to stick to two minutes. Missions, yes. You said – I agree with you – they're important. There are five Missions, as you already know very well. And they're delivering, but the evaluation that I read is that we should do better.

First, we should improve the governance of the Missions and ownership, because obviously there's not enough engagement from some of the DGs. So there are different ideas that I'm going to discuss with other Commissioners to increase the political ownership, so to say, at the highest level of the Missions, maybe by some ideas to some of the Commissioners to become something like patrons, so to increase the ownership, the political ownership of the Missions.

Second is, unfortunately, the Missions fail to pull private investments or resources, not only private investments, but also other funds, funding from the Member States, for example, through the Cohesion Fund, which was initial idea, not only funding from Horizon Europe programme, which is dedicated, as you know, on research. So we should do more better to pull these resources from other European instruments, but also national regional funds and private investments.

And the third is what we should improve is also to citizens' engagement, which is not sufficient at that stage, maybe because of lack of information. These are my three goals for the Missions, to work in these three dimensions.

1-0111-0000

Virgil-Daniel Popescu (PPE). – Dear Commissioner-designate, I want to ask you some questions about the Strategic Energy Technology Plan. What specific measures will you implement to ensure a balanced energy mix that includes advanced technology like generation for nuclear reactors, more modular reactors, alongside renewable sources such as offshore, wind, solar and hydrogen to enhance energy resilience with meeting EU safety and sustainability standards?

Additionally, how will you ensure that the ICT plans, research, innovation and deployment priorities are effectively integrated and funded within the upcoming framework programmes? In particular, how will you support early-stage research, foster collaboration between Member States and establish robust accountability mechanisms?

1-0112-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate. – Thank you for this question. I fully support research to achieve a balanced energy mix and intend to support the STEP plan through our funding instruments. Cluster 5 of Pillar II is dedicated to, and very focussed on, energy projects.

I'm in favour of continuing to support research in SMRs, as I already mentioned in my previous questions. I have the data here, and the EIC, the European Innovation Council, it's obviously quite a

lot. They have financed 250 projects until now, and 113 of them, almost a half, almost 50 %, were linked with energy technology. This is about EUR 338 million, which is quite a lot keeping in mind that the EIC doesn't have sufficient funding. So I'm in favour. I think the STEP plan is a really good instrument that can pool resources from the private sector and support us to reach the 3 % GDP, which will discuss so many times, this time.

How to make the STEP plan a more impactful tool for the future? Simplify the governance structure, more focus on concrete targets to support the EU's competitiveness, convert the good STEP implementation plan into European strategic R&I agendas. I mean it's really important to make this synergy.

My time is running. I'm very much supportive in research innovation to achieve this balanced energy mix.

1-0113-0000

Borys Budka, *Chair of the ITRE Committee*. – Thank you. We have finished the final round. So, this is the time for concluding remarks. So the floor is yours. It is five minutes, but it is not necessary to use all the time, of course.

1-0114-0000

Ekaterina Zaharieva, *Commissioner-designate*. – Yes, this is my plan. Thank you, Chair. I would start by, of course, thanking the European Parliament and in particular the Members of the ITRE and CULT Committees for this, in my opinion, very useful and fruitful discussion that we had today, and of course, the Parliament, the new Chair, on the very fair way the hearing was conducted.

I pay tribute to the immense expertise on this committee. It was very visible today during your questions. You are really masters of your portfolios. You are very well aware of the problems, but also of what we have to improve by working together both for the next framework programme, and for the existing one.

It's a very moving moment for me to stand here today because I was a teenager when the Berlin Wall fell and I have memories. I was 14 years old and it opened a brand new world for me, like essential freedoms that we missed before the fall of the Berlin Wall. So it's really a moving moment for me to stand in front of you today, with you today, to ask for your support to be able to implement my vision, which I hope I was able to present today in front of you.

So, I don't want to repeat. My team has prepared for me a five minute speech to repeat again all the priorities, but I'm not going to do that. I just want to repeat what I already stated in my introduction that I'm really committed to working closely with all of you, honourable Members of the Parliament, to discuss with you on all stages our proposals and important initiatives for my portfolio, discuss with you the next framework programme, and to meet on a regular basis when I am asked to meet you. But not only that – my door will be always open for the Members of the European Parliament.

So with that, I want to conclude my closing remarks. Once again, a sincere thank you for this very positive exchange of opinions today.

1-0115-0000

Borys Budka, *Chair of the ITRE Committee*. – Thank you very much. I'd like to thank all Members who took part in this hearing for your questions, as well as Commissioner-designate Ms Zaharieva for all your replies. Of course, you will be always warmly welcome at our Committee.

So the evaluation meeting will be held in camera today at 1 p.m. – remember – and I'd like to announce that this meeting is now closed. Thank you very much.

1-0116-0000

(The hearing closed at 12:07)