

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT HEARINGS
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONNAIRE FOR COMMISSIONER
Ms Androulla VASSILIOU
(Health)

Part A –General questions

1. What aspects of your personal qualifications and professional experience do you feel were of particular relevance with regard to your nomination and your prospective role as Commissioner?

First and foremost, I believe that my parliamentary experience is particularly relevant for my appointment as Member of the European Commission. I am no stranger to political or European affairs, having served as Member of the House of Representatives in Cyprus for 10 years. During this time, I participated actively in, among others, the European Affairs Committee, dealing specifically with the harmonisation process of Cyprus with the Acquis Communautaire, and also in the EU-Cyprus Joint Parliamentary Committee.

As Alternate Representative of the Cyprus Parliament to the Convention on the Future of Europe I had the opportunity to participate in the discussions on issues that today are included in the Treaty of Lisbon, and which will constitute the interinstitutional framework for our work together in the future.

I have also always had a strong personal involvement in public health issues. I recently served as Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the Cyprus Oncology Centre - up until my appointment as Commissioner.

My experience in the field of gender mainstreaming, particularly as President of the Cyprus Federation of Business and Professional Women, also allows me to have a practical and ambitious approach on this particularly sensitive issue, which constitutes a major European social value.

At the same time, I am confident that my strong legal background, having practiced law for 20 years, will stand in me in good stead vis-à-vis the day-to-day requirements that will arise in the handling of this very important portfolio and contribute to the Commission's role as guardian of the Treaties.

2. How would you describe your obligation to be independent in carrying out your duties and how do you concretely envisage putting this principle into practice?

I am very conscious of the multitude of interests that are at stake in policy-making at European level. The independence of Commissioners is set out in the Treaties and constitutes a central feature of how the Commission works and how it is able to discharge its duties. I fully subscribe to the provisions of Article 213 of the Treaty and intend to take all the necessary precautions in order to avoid any possible conflict of interests in the performance of my duties. In this regard, I have recently resigned from my position as Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the Cyprus Oncology Centre.

The knowledge and degree of independence of each Commissioner contributes to ensuring collegiality, which is central to the effective functioning of the Commission.

Listening to all stakeholders before taking a decision constitutes a guiding principle for the Commission which I intend to apply consistently especially as I am very conscious of the extremely high influence of public health on our citizens' lives. The definition of the general interest of the Union in the particular area of food safety requires the consideration of all interests at stake, whatever the origin of these interests may be - national, regional, professional, commercial. But the guiding objective for me will remain the protection of the health and safety of the European consumer, the patient, and in general the European citizen.

3. Could you provide the European Parliament with details of your recent and present business, financial and political interests and positions, and of any other commitment that might clash with your prospective duties?

I wish to reiterate my determination to comply fully with the institutional and ethical requirements inherent in the exercise of my duties as a Member of the European Commission.

Upon taking up office on 3 March, I submitted and published the declaration of all my financial interests and assets, which the Honourable Members can find on the Commission's website.

I hereby confirm the contents of this declaration, and wish to underline that no other source of potential conflict of interests exists in general or as regards the new policy areas conferred on me.

Obviously, I intend to strictly respect all requirements included in the Code of Conduct for Commissioners during the duration of my mandate, and to update and publish all

relevant information. Should a conflict of interest arise at any time, I will of course apply full transparency and comply with the specific provisions of the Framework Agreement.

I can also declare that the activities of my spouse do not entail any conflict of interests with my duties as Member of the Commission.

4. The Lisbon Strategy is a ten-year strategy to make the European Union the world's most dynamic, competitive and sustainable economy by 2010. The Lisbon strategy comprises the three pillars of sustainable development: the economy, social affairs and the environment. The date of 2010 will coincide with the term of your mandate. What would you do, as Commissioner, to accelerate progress towards the Lisbon goals and what in your views should be the main priorities?

I welcome the fact that the renewed Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs is beginning to deliver results in terms of increased employment and strong productivity growth, although Member States still have work to do to close the implementation gap. As a Member of the College I will do all I can to help them to do so.

While reaffirming the original objectives, the Commission's strategic report for the next cycle of the Lisbon process rightly places the social dimension and climate change at the heart of our work over the coming three years. By ensuring the sustainability of our social systems and investing in green technology, I believe we can bring tangible benefits for citizens while promoting long term growth and employment. I am glad that the European Council endorsed this approach at its meeting of 13/14 March. In this context, I intend to continue to work at the international level to tackle global health and safety challenges.

By working with Member States to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent disease wherever possible, we can improve the well-being of our citizens, increase their healthy life years, and help to promote the sustainability of Europe's health care systems.

I am acutely aware that the European food industry is one of our leading economic sectors and export earners. Taking advantage of the access to global markets also forms part of the external dimension of the Lisbon Strategy. I will continue therefore to work with them to help relieve unnecessary administrative burdens on industry, through simpler and better regulation.

5. How do you intend to improve the public image of the Commission?

Citizens' expectations of the EU have grown over the last 50 years. This is both a recognition of the EU's increased relevance and a challenge to all Europe's leaders. The Commission has been given a set of tasks under the Treaties – and performing these tasks

professionally, with high quality, and with the highest standards of public service conduct, is ultimately the right way to secure a good image for the Commission.

The Commission also has a particular responsibility for communication which is an integral part of all EU initiatives. EU citizens want a greater understanding of, and say in, what the EU does and how it does it.

On a more personal level, I believe that the personal involvement of Commissioners is also very important, inasmuch as they are the public faces of the Commission and are key communicators, not only on their own portfolios but also on other priority issues. The nature of the Health portfolio is such that it touches each and every European citizen directly and immediately.

I therefore intend to devote the necessary time and energy engaging in activities which will promote awareness of the Commission's actions in the area of public health. I will also take the necessary actions to promote dialogue and transparency. Indeed, consultation with stakeholders and the public at an early stage of policy shaping will help improve the policy outcome and enhance the involvement of interested parties and the public at large.

"Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate" the "White Paper on a European communication policy" and the recent Commission communication on "Communicating Europe in Partnership" have highlighted the vital importance of a renewed commitment to communication with European citizens. Its success depends fundamentally on a partnership with all key players in European politics and, in my view, notably the European Parliament. In this regard, I look forward to continued close cooperation with MEPs through both formal and informal contacts at regular intervals and whenever this is required by specific circumstances.

Moreover, I intend to make a point of visiting national parliaments in EU Member States in the framework of my mission so as to discuss public health matters with the representatives of our citizens within their national context.

The Commission has developed and put in place various stakeholder fora in a number of policy areas, such as the Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health which permit a balanced, informed and fair approach on various topics of European interest. I intend to rely on these mechanisms to stay in touch with European citizens in order to better understand their needs.

6. How do you envisage your accountability to the European Parliament?

As a former parliamentarian, I am very conscious of my responsibility towards the elected representatives of EU citizens. I am convinced that it is of fundamental political importance to the democracy, effectiveness and legitimacy of the European Union that the College is accountable to the European Parliament.

Parliament has played and continues to play a central role in pushing the process of European integration forward, offering vision to the European project and bringing Europe closer to its citizens. The advances of the Lisbon Treaty will help to consolidate this role by making co-decision the ordinary procedure for legislation. This is something that I strongly supported during my work on the Convention for the Future of Europe, and I am looking forward to seeing it take shape and form with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty.

I believe that a close day to day co-operation between the Parliament and the Commission is essential for constructive political dialogue between the two institutions, and of course I intend to participate in all plenary debates falling under my portfolio competence. I am determined to make myself available and accessible for MEPs, provide prompt and clear information, listen carefully to Parliament's concerns and take real account of Parliament's views. I have already had the opportunity to speak to many MEPs about their concerns and interest in my field of competence, and look forward to continued close collaboration in the course of the mandate.

I will fully respect and implement the Commission's commitments already entered into under the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the Commission, including the principle according to which each Commissioner takes political responsibility for actions in his/her field of competence, without prejudice to the principle of Commission collegiality. I will also ensure adherence to the Agreement by pursuing constructive dialogue and flow of information between the two institutions, and strengthening cooperation as regards legislative procedures and planning.

6a. From a strictly political standpoint, do you consider that, in case a hearing should lead to a negative conclusion, the concerned Commissioner designate should withdraw his/her candidacy?

Following the resignation of my predecessor, Markos Kyprianou, my appointment has taken place pursuant to the provisions of Article 215 of the Treaty, which sets out the legal conditions for replacement of a Member of the Commission. At the same time, I am happy to have the possibility to present myself before Parliament and I fully acknowledge the political dimension of this procedure.

Equally, I fully accept the principle defined in the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the Commission that, if Parliament decided to express a lack of confidence in a Member of the Commission, the President of the Commission, having given serious considerations to that decision, should either request that Member to resign or explain his decision to Parliament.

6b. To what extent do you consider that you are responsible for the answers provided by your services to the Parliament as a result of requests emanating from its Committee on Petitions or other responsible committees? If called upon to justify or explain previous acts of the Commission, or previous omissions, to what extent do you consider yourself as being accountable to Parliament?

The Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the Commission clearly states that "each Member of the Commission shall take political responsibility for action in the field of which he or she is in charge, without prejudice to the principle of Commission collegiality". I interpret this to imply that I take indeed responsibility for the answers provided by my services to requests emanating from the European Parliament.

I intend to ensure that there is no break in the accountability of the Commission to Parliament in relation to my areas of responsibility as well as institutional continuity and coherence. If I were to decide that previous acts needed to be modified or changes made, I would ensure that Parliament is informed. I have already asked my Directorate General to inform me on a daily basis on its work, the risks and occasional problems that may arise and the relevant responsibilities that I carry. I intend to act effectively to deal with any problem or specific situation requiring handling and I have a full sense of the duty towards the European Parliament which must be informed whenever necessary.

6c. What do you understand by the concept of political responsibility before the Parliament for the activities of your Directorate(s)-General? What steps do you intend to take to ensure your Directorate(s)-General are well-managed?

I intend to follow strictly the Code of Conduct for Commissioners, according to which, each Commissioner is answerable to the College for his/her activities and those of his/her department. The Director-General is answerable to the Commissioner and the College for the proper implementation of the guidelines set by the College and the Commissioner and, in particular, for the management of the Directorate-General or Service in line with the distribution of powers as defined by the Staff Regulations, the Financial Regulation, the Rules of Procedure and the rules laid down as part of the administrative and financial reform of the Commission.

Arriving mid-mandate, I have found a number of mechanisms already in place, which I find to be satisfactory at this point. I will, however, not hesitate to make the necessary changes in order to introduce improvements, should they be deemed appropriate. I attach the utmost importance to the correct execution of budgetary obligations and resource management.

I will continue to ensure regular meetings with the Directorate General's Management and continuous contacts between my Cabinet and the Services of the Directorate General. I also intend to organise meetings with all staff members of the Directorate General.

Finally, I am committed to the transparent execution of the Work Programme of the European Commission, and to respecting the prioritisation and allocation of resources and priority tasks which have already been set in place in order to ensure that the tasks set upon the Commission under the Treaties are performed professionally, to a high quality, and with the highest standards of public service conduct. I will also seek that gender mainstreaming is ensured in the Directorate General for which I am responsible.

7. How important would you consider implementing the interinstitutional co-operation (Commission-Parliament), in particular with the relevant parliamentary committees in your area of competence? In this new context, what does transparency mean for you, in the interinstitutional legislative procedure between the European Parliament, Council and Commission, as well as in the interinstitutional relations in general?

Interinstitutional co-operation is central to the way that the European institutional system works – and to the efficiency, legitimacy and good governance of the EU decision-making process. It should be based on openness, transparency, mutual trust, efficiency, constant dialogue, regular reporting and exchange of information.

I undertake to fully implement the provisions laid down in all relevant agreements, such as the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the Commission, the bilateral agreement on implementation of the comitology procedure, and the Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-Making.

I believe that good relations between Commissioners and "their" committees are essential. Nevertheless, we should always be looking for ways to improve these relations further, in terms of dialogue, presence and exchange of information, as well as follow-up of the views expressed by the committee. I also wish to consolidate my relationship with the relevant committees through obtaining and incorporating, wherever possible, their views.

I consider it an important part of a Commissioner's duties to be available to Committee Members, to regularly attend Committee meetings (on the Committee's invitation but also on the initiative of the Commissioner him/herself). I would also like to establish direct communication with MEPs, and continue the close relationship that my predecessor enjoyed with the relevant Committees of the European Parliament, so that I can be aware of concerns and provide prompt and clear information.

I attach great importance to transparency. It entails open communication at all stages of the interinstitutional legislative process, information sharing, close consultation with all parties, deliberation and discussion among all actors involved. Transparency enables citizens to participate more closely in policy development and decision-making, strengthens legitimacy and accountability, and contributes to efficiency and good governance. Many important objectives for the way in which the EU works – improving the quality of law-making, applying subsidiarity and proportionality, ensuring legal certainty – are supported by transparency.

I therefore welcome the progress already made to promote greater openness, transparency and accessibility in the working of the EU institutions, both with regard to the public but also among the institutions themselves. In this respect, I will make sure that the principle of public access to documents, as enshrined in Regulation 1049/200, is adhered to in full.

8. What concrete measures do you consider necessary in order to ensure that the concept of gender mainstreaming is implemented in your specific policy area? Do you have a policy strategy, and what financial and human resources do you think are necessary to implement gender mainstreaming in your portfolio?

I take a particular and personal interest in gender equality, as demonstrated by my background at the national level, as President of the Cyprus Federation of Business and Professional Women, and at the European political level, as Chairperson of the European Liberal Women's Network. I plan to promote this matter in all policies of the College, including of course public health, that I am responsible for. I will support any additional measure to earmark the financial and human resources considered necessary for achieving results on this issue.

Regarding public health, I will seek to obtain gender data which will allow me to put emphasis on gender specific problems that need to be addressed at EU level. In this respect, I also count on Parliament's input.

In exercising my responsibilities, I will try to achieve equality for all Commission staff, regardless of their location or whether they work directly in the Commission's services or in one of the related bodies. I am pleased that a good level of gender mainstreaming is reflected in the administration of both the Directorate-General for which I am responsible, and my Cabinet. This balance I intend to maintain and, where possible, improve.