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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee
EU strategy to support, protect and empower civil society
(opinion requested by the European Commission ⁽¹⁾)

(C/2025/5160)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was established in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome as an advisory body to the EU institutions. It enables organised civil society to express its views at European level and channels its voice into the EU policy-making process. The EESC has played a significant role in advancing civil dialogue throughout history, and with this opinion will provide the European Commission with a blueprint for a civil society strategy and a proposal for a joint civil society platform.

1.2. The EESC welcomes the European Commission's initiative for a comprehensive civil society strategy and a civil society platform. This is all the more urgent in the current landscape where democracy is threatened and civil society spaces are shrinking, both in Member States and globally.

1.3. An EU strategy for civil society should introduce measures based on:

- a safe and enabling environment for civil society;
- sustainability and independence (through funding); and
- stronger civic participation and civil dialogue (by structuring and reinforcing existing mechanisms).

⁽¹⁾ Opinion based on an item from the Commission working programme in advance of the publication of the Commission document, and requested by the Commission in its letter of 13 May 2025.

1.4. The strategy should include an interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue, facilitated by the EESC, to ensure consistent civil dialogue practices across EU institutions.

1.5. The EESC also stresses that a civil society strategy and a civil dialogue platform should be accompanied by stronger interinstitutional cooperation and more structured and inclusive dialogues regarding the EESC's recommendations.

1.6. Based on its experience and its network, the EESC proposes launching a pilot project in partnership with the European Commission that would establish a broad dialogue starting at the early stage of the political process. The primary focus would be issues related to democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, which would be discussed in cooperation with the EESC's Ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL group). Similar broad dialogue processes on other key topics relevant to civil society could be proposed once the project's implemented and evaluated.

1.7. This platform would:

- guide dialogues (facilitated by the governing bodies) on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, and later contribute to key political processes, for example to the Commission's annual work programme;
- be host to an annual civil dialogue conference to present and refine draft recommendations together with all involved stakeholders;
- monitor civil dialogue through an annual scoreboard, feeding into biennial civil dialogue reports; and
- lay the groundwork for an interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue, facilitated by the EESC, to ensure consistent civil dialogue practices across EU institutions and following the principles listed in point 3.7.1.

1.8. The EESC recommends that the European Commission set aside adequate provisions for strengthening European civil dialogue at all levels, and provide funding to roll out the civil society platform. The proposed pilot project would allow the Commission to test the proposed broad consultation initiative using limited additional resources, given that most parts of the tools are already operational.

2. General comments

2.1. In her mission letter ⁽²⁾ to the Commissioner-designate for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law, Michael McGrath, the President of the European Commission indicated that in order to step up engagement with civil society on democracy, the rule of law and related issues, Mr McGrath would be tasked with building a civil society platform to support more systematic civil dialogue, and with working to strengthen protection of civil society, activists and human rights defenders in their work.

2.2. The relevant paragraph of the Commission's 2025 work programme states that 'civil society organisations play an important role in protecting our democratic systems and institutions', and that 'this Commission will step up its engagement to support, protect and empower civil society'. Under 'new initiatives' in the Annex to the work programme, the Commission lays out a commitment to building an 'EU strategy to support, protect and empower civil society (non-legislative, Q3 2025)'. In its public consultation on the Have Your Say Portal, the European Commission announced that the provisional key objectives of the strategy would be 'to strengthen meaningful engagement with and protection of civil society organisations working on a broad range of EU policies'. It went on to mention that the strategy would 'propose initiatives to support an enabling environment, with actions at EU level to prevent civic space from shrinking. It [would] also propose actions for better dialogue between public authorities and civil society organisations on democracy, the rule of law and related issues. At EU level, this [would] include engagement through a civil society platform' ⁽³⁾.

⁽²⁾ Mission letter by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, to Michael McGrath, Commissioner-designate for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law, 17 September 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/907fd6b6-0474-47d7-99da-47007ca30d02_en?filename=Mission%20letter%20-%20McGRATH.pdf.

⁽³⁾ Call for evidence initiative entitled 'EU civil society strategy' from the European Commission's Have Your Say Portal, published on 13 June 2025.

2.3. The Treaty of Rome established the European Economic and Social Committee as a consultative body involving representatives of economic and social categories and general interests from the Member States. Article 300 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) expands on this: 'The European Economic and Social Committee shall consist of representatives of organisations of employers, of the employed, and of other parties representative of civil society, notably in socio-economic, civic, professional and cultural areas.' The EESC's task is to contribute to the decision-making process with its own independent opinions on issues within its remit, as designated by the Treaties. Among the many innovations that the Treaty of Rome has introduced into the European and global landscape is the beginnings of participatory democracy by way of direct and structured consultations with organised civil society. The role of the Committee is derived directly from participatory democracy, allowing representatives from national social partner and civil society organisations to deliver opinions on EU legislation, working together in a spirit of compromise and applying democratic principles, giving a voice to civil society, including minority groups, in a transparent way.

2.4. Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which lays the foundations for genuine, structured civil dialogue at European level, brought significant prospects for further developing participatory democracy. Civil dialogue must go hand in hand with social dialogue with the social partners, thereby ensuring the long-term participation of organised civil society in the European decision-making process.

2.5. As the house of participatory democracy, the EESC works as a platform for the widespread participation of civil society and as a driver of efforts to give civil society a place at the EU table. The EESC acts like a lighthouse, guiding civil society towards the EU's decision-making processes. Its core function is to promote, organise and channel participatory democracy among the EU institutions.

2.6. Since 1992, the Committee has produced a significant body of opinions, studies and statements on civil dialogue and participatory democracy. All of this is summarised in the continuously updated *Compendium on Participatory Democracy: A success story written by the EESC* ⁽⁴⁾.

2.7. The following is a list of accomplishments and publications worth particular mention.

- EESC *Information report on The Citizens' Europe* of 8 April 1992, which opened the topic of dialogue with citizens and their representatives.
- Own-initiative opinion on *The role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe* of 22 September 1999, which stimulated and accompanied the adoption of Article 11 TEU.
- The creation of the Liaison Group in 2004 (with European civil society organisations and networks) to provide a framework for political dialogue and cooperation on cross-cutting issues of common interest. The group is made up of EESC members and 47 European organisations and networks. It should be noted that the EESC was the first EU body to adopt a participatory democracy process.
- The annual Civil Society Week event hosted by the EESC to engage with civil society organisations and civil society in a broader sense to foster dialogue on key issues facing Europe. The EESC is the house of organised civil society, providing a platform for these groups to voice their opinions and contribute to EU policy-making.

⁽⁴⁾ EESC, *Participatory Democracy – A success story written by the EESC*, 2020, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-04-19-663-en-n.pdf>.

- The establishment of the Ad hoc group on the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) in 2013, which is tasked with steering the EESC's policy on the ECI and making recommendations for institutional actions to further develop this instrument. The ad hoc group maintains regular contacts with both ECI organisers and civil society organisations that actively support the ECI and active citizenship. Several of these are permanent partners in the EESC's flagship annual event, ECI Day (held during Civil Society Week since 2024).
- The EESC's external relations bodies, which monitor the EU's trade and development policies through dialogue with civil society organisations from the non-EU countries and regions with which the EU has formal relations.
- The establishment of the Ad-hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law in 2018 to counter the rise of populism and shrinking civil society spaces. The FRRL group aims to assess the state of fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law in the Member States. It pays particular attention to the rights that are key to civil society, including the social partners, such as freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression (including freedom of the media), the right to non-discrimination, and the more general rule-of-law situation. Its final annual report feeds into the Commission's annual Rule of Law Report.
- The EESC's long cultivation of a network of national economic and social councils (NESC). These links help build trust between citizens, civil society and public authorities, and ensure economic and social stakeholder participation in public decision-making.
- EESC opinion SOC/526 of October 2016, which first put forth the possibility to convene an annual forum for CSOs to discuss democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law. In SOC/627, adopted in June 2019⁽³⁾, the EESC reiterated its proposal to establish an 'EU-level annual forum on fundamental rights and the rule of law'.
- Proposal 39 of the Conference on the Future of Europe, held between 2021 and 2022, which recommends 'reform[ing] the way the European Union works by better involving social partners and organised civil society. Strengthening the existing structures in order to better reflect the needs and expectations of EU citizens in the decision-making process, given their importance in the European democracy life. Within this framework, enhance[ing] the institutional role of the EESC and empower[ing] it as facilitator and guarantor of participation democracy activities like structured dialogue with civil society organisations and citizen panels'. It goes on to say that 'a lively civil society is crucial for the democratic life of the European Union'. Proposal 36 recommends including 'organised civil society and regional authorities and existing structures such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) in the citizens participation process'.
- EESC opinion SOC/728 on *The EU Youth Test*, which is a tool designed to strengthen youth participation and youth mainstreaming in policy-making based on consultation, impact assessment and mitigation measures, making the EESC the first EU institution committed to its implementation. At the EESC, this means involving youth representatives in opinions. In April 2024, the EESC Bureau approved a methodology drafted by the EESC Youth Group for applying the EU Youth Test at the EESC.
- The 2017 establishment of the EESC's Ad hoc group on the European Semester, which is a horizontal body that strengthens and supports the work carried out in the EESC's sections. It focuses on examining proposals from European civil society on sustainable growth and employment, ensuring a continuous EESC contribution to the annual European Semester cycle.
- EESC opinion SOC/782 on *Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward*, which is a strategic opinion on civil dialogue that was adopted in February 2024 and includes many essential elements for creating a strategy for civil dialogue.

⁽³⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council – Further strengthening the Rule of Law within the Union State of play and possible next steps'(COM(2019) 163 final) (OJ C 282, 20.8.2019, p. 39).

- The EESC's involvement in either organising or facilitating different civil society contributions and platforms, such as the European Migration Forum (EMF), the Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (together with the Commission) and the youth round tables. During the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030, the EESC facilitated civil society's contribution to the first EU voluntary review.

3. **An EU strategy to support, protect and empower civil society**

3.1. The EESC welcomes the European Commission's initiative for a comprehensive civil society strategy and a civil society platform. This is all the more urgent in the current landscape where democracy is threatened and civil society space is shrinking, both in the Member States and globally. All resources in society must be mobilised to build a resilient EU, particularly in the face of current crises and given the general geopolitical landscape.

3.2. The EESC stresses the importance of launching a comprehensive civil society strategy to safeguard a strong and autonomous civil society and to create a civil society platform at EU level where the European institutions can engage with civil society in concrete and meaningful cooperation.

3.3. The EESC reiterates the importance of fully implementing Article 11 TEU to complement the current provisions on consultations.

3.4. An EU strategy for civil society should introduce measures based on:

- a safe and enabling environment for civil society;
- sustainability and independence (through funding); and
- stronger civic participation and civil dialogue (by structuring and fostering existing mechanisms and at EU level through a civil society platform, as described below).

3.5. The EU must ensure a safe and enabling environment for civil society by:

- promoting and communicating the role and specific features of organised civil society as a key pillar for democracy, cohesion, participation and social innovation at regional, national and European levels;
- developing a protection mechanism for civil society players and human rights defenders within the EU;
- strengthening the role of the EESC as a hub, bridge-builder, channel and facilitator for organised civil society at EU, international and national levels; and by
- adopting the European Commission's proposal for a directive on European cross-border associations (ECBAs) and discussing developing a similar legal instrument for foundations.

3.6. The EU must promote sustainability and independence through funding, ensuring that:

- multi-annual, consistent and flexible funding is accessible for civil society players, and that adequate resources are provided in the multiannual financial framework;
- CSOs are involved in implementing, monitoring and evaluating funding programmes that are relevant to them;
- administrative, regulatory and fiscal obstacles to access to funding and donations are overcome, including across borders;

- all laws that affect CSOs and their activities are fully compliant with EU and international legal obligations and fundamental rights, and that CSOs are consulted on legislative changes that affect them;
- measures that restrict access to funding are not implemented, and that administrative, legal and financial mechanisms are not misused to restrict public participation, civic action or media freedom;
- people are encouraged to report harassment or attacks against CSOs and human rights defenders, and that these violations are properly recorded, investigated and prosecuted to uphold the rule of law;
- EU laws on protecting organised civil society are properly enforced, including through interim measures where necessary; and that
- CSOs are supported through sustainable funding for their work and capacity-building mechanisms.

3.7. The EU must ensure stronger civic participation and civil dialogue by fostering the right conditions and setting benchmarks, and fostering dialogue structures at all levels.

3.7.1. Fostering the right conditions and setting benchmarks

3.7.1.1. Meaningful civil dialogue requires the right **conditions** to enable all parties to engage, ensuring that each party is given clear roles and responsibilities. It also requires that institutions be responsive and accountable, both within and outside dialogue mechanisms, in accordance with standards governing the right to good administration. Civil dialogue at European level cannot properly function without well-managed civil dialogue at national level. In order to create an enabling environment for effective and constructive civil dialogue, certain conditions must be met. These include trust, accountability, transparency and conditions conducive to participation. The Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process, adopted by the Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs, summarises key principles and conditions which can act as a guide. The EESC proposes that the civil society strategy provide objectives and define indicators with clear benchmarks for the Member States and for the EU institutions concerning civic spaces and civil dialogue at national level.

3.7.1.2. The EESC recommends that civil dialogue at all levels, including EU level, have the following **characteristics** ⁽⁶⁾.

- It must be meaningful. Civil dialogue is meant to be a real and concrete part of the decision-making process that provides for genuine exchanges and space for CSOs to express their views. It should be real, and not a simple window dressing for democracy.
- It must be results-oriented and provide for civil involvement, both in debates on the aims and the content of legislative measures and provisions that concern civil society, and during the evaluation stages.
- It must be regular.
- It must be transparent, with publicly available rules and criteria on how stakeholders are selected and what the dialogue will cover, and ensure CSOs have access to all relevant information.
- It must be legitimate. CSO accreditation must be based on real legitimacy and representativeness. CSOs must abide by the principles of internal democracy, autonomy, independence and transparency, follow a not-for-profit model, and work in the service of either general interests or specific interest groups.
- It must allow all parties to share ideas. CSOs must be able to integrate their own initiatives and priorities into Member State and European institution agendas. Jointly deciding on dialogue timelines can increase impact and prevent capacity issues on all sides.

⁽⁶⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (exploratory opinion requested by the Belgian Presidency) (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj>, 23.4.2024, ELI: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj>).

- It must be inclusive and representative, particularly of the most vulnerable. Ensuring a Union of equality means ensuring that gender, LGBTIQ+, migrant, disability and Roma perspectives are considered.
- It must be structured and coordinated. A coordinating service should be involved in the work and proposals of the CSOs.
- It should involve an outcome and follow-up. At European level, the EU institutions should react to CSO contributions via a public scoreboard, detailing follow-up action or explaining why no action was taken. Feedback from participants should also be collected.

3.7.1.3. Civil society organisations should speak with one voice in order to strengthen their actions.

3.7.2. Fostering and enhancing dialogue structures at all levels

3.7.2.1. In a world increasingly shaped by conflict, misinformation and social polarisation, the EU must urgently reconsider the role of civil society and strengthen civil dialogue – not only as a foundation of institutional legitimacy, but also as a vital pillar for building a more resilient, inclusive and participatory Europe ⁽⁷⁾.

3.7.2.2. A strategy for civil society should address all types of civil dialogue, including transversal dialogue, vertical/sectoral dialogue and horizontal dialogue (dialogue among civil society itself).

3.7.2.3. Ensuring stronger civic participation and structured civil dialogue will require time. We need to assess existing practices, learn from them and draw up principles and guidelines that could ultimately be codified in an interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue at EU level. The EESC is therefore proposing the adoption of an interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue, facilitated by the EESC, to ensure consistent civil dialogue practices across EU institutions, following the principles listed in point 3.7.1 of this opinion.

3.7.2.4. The EESC also stands ready to proactively engage in meaningful dialogue with the EU institutions. It proposes that the Commission hold an annual meeting with the Committee to discuss how it implements the recommendations from EESC opinions (in addition to the written feedback the EESC already receives) to ensure a feedback loop. The European Parliament could invite the EESC to participate in relevant committee meetings when legislative or policy files linked to its opinions are on the agenda. Similarly, the Council could periodically involve the EESC in the legislative process to examine and discuss its recommendations.

3.7.2.5. In addition, the EESC proposes starting a broad dialogue process (described as part of a pilot project in point 4.3 of this opinion). This could help set up the governance and structure for sectoral dialogue further down the line ⁽⁸⁾.

3.7.2.6. Civil dialogue practices currently differ widely in terms of quality and quantity at European level. Creating coordination mechanisms between and within institutions would arguably help to reduce overlaps and minimise resource use.

⁽⁷⁾ CEPS, *Mapping civil dialogue in the EU institutions*, 2025, a study commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Civil Society Organisations' Group.

⁽⁸⁾ Excluding sectoral social dialogue.

3.7.2.7. As pointed out in a new EESC study ⁽⁹⁾, the challenge now is to ensure that the relevant units within the institutions adhere to core principles – providing adequate space for civil society voices to be heard and establishing transparent mechanisms to incorporate meaningful input into policy-making. While there are grounds for optimism, further work remains to be done. An interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue could assign different roles and dialogue outcomes according to the roles of the institutions involved, starting from existing mechanisms.

- For the Council, the European Semester should be used, in addition to any other tool for continuous dialogue.
- For the European Parliament, the role of the delegated vice-president and the ability to influence within the parliamentary groups and committees should be strengthened.
- For the European Commission, the efforts of the delegated commissioner should be coordinated with the Directorates-General (DGs).
- For the EESC, the role of the Liaison Group should be strengthened.

3.7.2.8. These points, which are of great importance, concern strengthening civic participation by empowering CSOs and establishing structures that support training and capacity-building for community involvement. This step is crucial for wrapping up the entire strategy in the best possible way. The EESC believes that it is a fundamental economic investment for the future of Europe.

4. Building a civil society platform

4.1. General comments

4.1.1. The diversity of civil society actors, local initiatives, NGOs and national platforms must be duly considered. Without recognising and providing for the specificities of each, thereby ensuring a broad participation, the platform will not be effective or legitimate. The EESC can play a central role in providing this legitimacy.

4.2. Drawing on the EESC's expertise and networks

4.2.1. Any analysis must begin by examining whether there are existing structures or institutions that could and would be willing to host it. The EESC could and would host such a platform. Given its experience in facilitating dialogue and consultation, it is also well-placed to do so. Proposals 38 and 39 of the Conference on the Future of Europe appear to support this idea. According to Proposal 39, **'the institutional role of the EESC should be enhanced and empowered as facilitator and guarantor of participation democracy activities like structured dialogue with civil society organisations and citizen panels'**.

4.2.2. Mandating the EESC to host this platform would help support the EESC's remit, advisory functions and working methods, allowing it to act as a relay vis-à-vis civil society. Given its experience, expertise and networks, the EESC must be involved from the outset. This **expertise** includes Committee members' in-depth knowledge of their respective fields; their know-how in promoting the harmonious development of EU policy; and strong representativeness, as members are officially mandated to make decisions on behalf of those they represent. The Committee's work is organised to ensure interaction between 'technical' or 'sectoral' ⁽¹⁰⁾ dimensions and more 'horizontal' aspects. This approach ensures that all opinions, which are prepared by study groups comprised of members with specialist knowledge, are underpinned by excellent technical work. It also provides a kind of democratic filter in its standing sections, where more than 100 members discuss the text, allowing most of the Committee's opinions to be adopted unanimously, which reflects the Committee's particular approach to achieving social consensus.

⁽⁹⁾ CEPS, *Mapping civil dialogue in the EU institutions*, 2025, a study commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Civil Society Organisations' Group.

⁽¹⁰⁾ This is different to sectoral social dialogue.

4.2.3. The EESC enjoys access to a vast and unique network. EESC members are rooted in national civil society, allowing them to contribute to EU policies from the grassroots and carry European debates back to local communities.

4.3. *The civil society platform's structure and governance*

4.3.1. Based on its experience and its network, the EESC proposes launching a **pilot project** in partnership with the European Commission that would establish a **broad dialogue** starting at the early stage of the political process. The primary focus would be on issues related to democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, which would be discussed in cooperation with the EESC's FRRL group. The civil society platform would aim to broaden the participation of civil society organisations that deal with democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, in order to identify issues of particular concern to CSOs from the grassroots level and contribute to EESC and European Commission reports on these issues. The EESC proposes setting up a steering group within the platform consisting of the European Commission, the EESC and the Liaison Group, based on the EMF model. The platform would feed into the EESC's annual conference on the rule of law and fundamental rights. Contributions from Civil Society Week would also feed into the platform's work, in ways to be defined by the steering group (e.g. by dedicating one day to the work of the platform).

4.3.2. The steering group would be responsible for launching the pilot project and would agree on relevant governance and participation arrangements. A concrete proposal for a process should be further developed. After its implementation, it would evaluate the project and propose future developments in order to facilitate similar broad dialogue processes on other key topics relevant to civil society. Each year, the steering group would agree on the precise topics and timelines for the project.

4.3.3. The EESC also believes that the strategy (including the platform) could, in the future, contribute towards:

- a report, to be drafted every second year, on the activities of the strategy and all civil dialogue activities carried out through the platform and by each DG;
- setting up an annual scoreboard, in the form of a public forum for discussions on the results of the follow-up activities to the dialogues; and
- an annual forum, organised in partnership with the European Commission, which could be part of Civil Society Week.

4.3.4. This pilot project would be an opportunity to further build on and give formal structure to the existing structured engagement with civil society organisations. The EESC has already experimented with different ways of establishing systemic engagement with civil society organisations, including through: i) the EMF; ii) the 'convening spaces' provided by the EESC's Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT section) for CSOs to meet and prepare joint contributions to feed into EU and international processes; and iii) the Liaison Group's input in the EESC's contribution to the Commission's annual work programme. These initiatives and others could become part of the pilot project under one single governance structure (comprising the European Commission, the EESC and the Liaison Group). As it is based on existing structures and instruments, the pilot project could be implemented swiftly and without delay. At the same time, its success would depend on the provision of adequate resources and capacity-building activities targeted towards CSOs.

4.3.5. This platform would:

- guide dialogues (facilitated by the governing bodies) on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, and later steer contributions to key political processes, such as the European Commission's annual work programme;
- be host to an annual civil dialogue conference, possibly during European Civil Society Week, to present and refine draft recommendations together with all involved stakeholders;

- monitor civil dialogue through an annual scoreboard, feeding into biennial civil dialogue reports; and
- contribute to the interinstitutional agreement.

4.3.6. The European Commission should set aside adequate provisions for strengthening European civil dialogue at all levels, and more specifically provide funding to roll out the proposed pilot project. Without adequate funding, a civil society strategy cannot be implemented. After 2,5 years (the middle of the EESC's term of office), there would be an evaluation between the EESC, civil society organisations and the European Commission in order to improve the process and identify the next steps for development.

Brussels, 17 July 2025.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE
