Dear ladies and gentlemen,

- Let me first wish you a warm welcome to the house of organised civil society. The European Economic and Social Committee is very glad to contribute to this fifth meeting of the European Forum on Migration, an event that has developed from the European Integration Forum and that we have been organising jointly with the European Commission for 10 years.

- This meeting focuses on how to ensure safe and regular pathways to the EU. In essence, the first and third meeting of the Forum also dealt with this issue.

- Already in 2015, the Forum conclusions emphasised that EU policies should prioritise ensuring access and legal pathways to the EU, not only for people searching international protection, but also for those wanting to work, study or join their family members in Europe.
• In 2017, when the focus was on migrants’ access to the EU, one of the conclusions was that irregular migration and residence can only be efficiently addressed if there are also more legal avenues for migrants wanting to reach Europe.

• As the EU body representing organised civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee is primarily dedicated to the human dimension of European policy. We have therefore repeatedly expressed concern over the fate of the large number of refugees and other migrants trying to reach Europe.

• We were therefore glad to see that developing orderly legal pathways for persons in need of protection and creating channels for labour migration has been a top priority of the current Commission. In 2015, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stated that ‘A truly united, European migration policy also means that we need to look into opening legal channels for migration […] if there are more, safe and controlled roads opened to Europe, we can manage migration better and make the illegal work of human traffickers less attractive.’

Almost five years later, however, as President Juncker's mandate is coming to an end, there is still a lot of work ahead of us. The options for coming to Europe in a safe and regular way are still limited. One reason why many persons embark on highly dangerous journeys over sea is the lack of legal alternatives.

In 2018, around 150,000 irregular crossings were detected across the EU's external borders. Although this is a significant drop compared to the numbers of 2015, it is still much too high, given the dangerous nature of these irregular journeys. Only in the first two months of 2019, over 200 people already went missing or died on their way to Europe.

The EU needs to be prepared for migration towards Europe to continue. It should develop strong tools to address large scale arrivals in the future and become better prepared to address ever-changing realities. If we want to manage migration better, we will have to work together. The EU needs a truly common migration policy that is supported by all member states.
• It is not acceptable that some member states opt out from our joint obligations and it is not acceptable either that some member states are left alone to carry a disproportionate burden.

• Safe and legal routes will not only decrease irregular arrivals, they may also alleviate the pressure on the EU asylum system. Civil society organisations play a significant role in making the resettlement, travel and reception of migrants and refugees more safe and humane. They should therefore be involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of the actions of all competent authorities involved in managing migration.²

• The EESC also considers it important to ensure that there is a transparent, predictable and just system of legal migration to the EU that could help the EU compete for skilled migrant workers with other regions of the world.³

² EESC opinion on "Establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration"

³ EESC opinion on "A European Agenda on Migration"
• Because as we all know that Europe has an ageing population and faces a skills shortage. Immigration is not the ultimate solution for tackling the consequences of demographic ageing in Europe, but it could be a remedy to shortages of labour and skills\textsuperscript{4}. However, for that the EU must have a more effective immigration policy in place.

• To design this, the EU and its Member States must go beyond the current model. Because as long as there is demand for labour, there will be migration: regular or otherwise. In e.g. the care sector, domestic work, social services, construction demand will grow\textsuperscript{5}.

• The EESC looks forward to the comprehensive evaluation of the EU's legal migration framework that the Commission plans to present shortly\textsuperscript{6} and hopes that this will provide a solid base for further steps in developing a sustainable system of legal migration that would be capable to prevent and mitigate future challenges.

\textsuperscript{4} EESC opinion on "The costs of non-immigration and non-integration" (own-initiative)
\textsuperscript{5} EESC opinion on "The costs of non-immigration and non-integration" (own-initiative)
• Migration should not be a divisive factor, but should be considered an investment in the future— not least in the current pre-European-election period. We sometimes tend to forget what Europe would look like without migration.

• In our recent opinion on "The costs of non-immigration and non-integration" we paint an awakening picture of Europe without migration. Available data suggest that job markets would come under strain, industries would go bust, agricultural production would drop, and construction would not be able to keep up with demand; pension systems might become unsustainable, the health and care sector could collapse, depopulation of certain areas would proceed at a swift pace. In effect, social cohesion would be undermined and therefore racism and xenophobia would flourish even more than at present.

• Ladies and gentlemen, we need a Europe that shows responsibility and solidarity, towards migrants and towards each other. Member states need to show political will to address this issue at European level. We should not look at migration as a problem to be solved, but rather as a potential solution to various challenges.
Before I conclude, I would like to thank Commissioner Avramopoulos for the excellent cooperation between our institutions in the area of migration. We look forward to continued cooperation on the European Migration Forum and to organising more public events with and for you.

I wish you all very fruitful discussions throughout this event and wish you good luck with drawing up balanced and strong conclusions that can be shared with the new European Commission and Parliament later this year.