



Annual Report



29 - 30 April 2025



Limassol, Cyprus

Organised by:

oxygen.
for Democracy



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This annual report provides a summary of the Cyprus Forum Cities 2025. These pages offer a brief overview of the discussions held during the forum. We express our gratitude to all participants, including political leaders, professionals, media representatives, academics, and contributors from civil society, for their insights and contributions. The views presented in this edition solely represent those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official stance of the organisers or partners.

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November 2025



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Cyprus Forum Cities is the unification of the 2040 Series, an initiative of the non-governmental, non-profit organisation Oxygen for Democracy (formerly Oxygono), together with the Cyprus University of Technology (TEPAK) and the Municipality of Limassol. Brought together under a single platform, it has become the most prominent local government conference in Cyprus, dedicated to fostering dialogue, collaboration, and innovation in urban and regional development.

Each year, Cyprus Forum Cities hosts a series of panels addressing key issues across all districts of Cyprus: Nicosia, Larnaca, Limassol, Paphos, Famagusta, and the rural regions, as well as topics of shared national relevance. Every panel is organised in collaboration with at least one knowledge partner and brings together politicians, technocrats, academics, and civil society representatives from Cyprus and abroad.

At its core, the Forum seeks to shape long-term, sustainable development strategies for Cyprus's cities and rural areas through high-level dialogue and evidence-based policy exchange. It also aims to empower municipalities and communities by promoting new technologies, innovative practices, and citizen engagement, ultimately enhancing the quality of life and strengthening the relationship between local authorities and the public.

The inaugural conference was co-organised with the Municipality of Limassol and TEPAK within the framework of Limassol's participation in the European Mission "100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030." This initiative involves the co-design of a City Climate Contract with citizens and stakeholders, setting out the city's roadmap toward climate neutrality by 2030.

More than an annual event, Cyprus Forum Cities serves as a dynamic catalyst for positive change, creating the conditions for meaningful interaction between citizens and institutions, and building a more inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking future for Cyprus.



Cyprus Forum. Cities

DAY 1

29 April 2025

Limassol Town Hall

OPENING CEREMONY

Welcome addresses

Yiannis Armeftis, Mayor of Limassol, Limassol Municipality

Panayiotis Zaphiris, Rector, Cyprus University of Technology

Nicolas Kyriakides, Executive President, Cyprus Forum

Liu Yantao, Ambassador of China to the Republic of Cyprus

Presentation of the Local Government Survey by IMR

OPENING CEREMONY

On Tuesday, 29 April, the Cyprus Forum Cities 2025 officially opened with its inaugural ceremony at the Limassol Town Hall.

The opening ceremony featured a series of welcome addresses, setting the stage for the discussions and sessions that would follow during the main forum starting the next day, with a focus on innovation, governance, and urban development.

Opening remarks were delivered by the Mayor of Limassol, Mr Yiannis Armeftis, followed by Professor Nicolas Tsapatsoulis, Vice Rector for Academic Affairs of the Cyprus University of Technology. The Executive President of the Cyprus Forum, Mr Nicolas Kyriakides, then welcomed participants with an inspiring address, emphasising the importance of collaboration and forward-thinking in shaping the cities of tomorrow.

A highlight of the opening ceremony was the keynote speech by His Excellency Mr Liu Yantao, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the Republic of Cyprus. His address was accompanied by a compelling presentation on urbanisation and the future of cities, drawing on successful examples from Chinese urban development to offer valuable insights and lessons.

The session also featured the presentation of the Local Government Survey conducted by IMR (Insights Market Research). The survey explored public perceptions of the newly elected mayors, the roles of District Local Government Organizations, and the wider framework of local self-governance. A dedicated portion of the event was devoted to unveiling the survey's key findings, analysing public sentiment, and discussing the broader implications for the future of local governance in Cyprus.



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DAY 2

30 April 2025

Cyprus University of Technology

From theory to practice; challenges, solutions, and best practices

Nicolas Kyriakides, Executive President, Cyprus Forum

In his opening statement of the conference, Mr Nicolas Kyriakides remarked that Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia - the good life - cannot be achieved "without a humane and effective local government." He emphasised that local government is "the level of governance closest to the citizen."

Mr Kyriakides also addressed the reform of local government, acknowledging that while it has brought hope, it has also introduced challenges. He referred to "bureaucratic obstacles, unclear responsibilities, insufficient resources", as well as a "lack of trust."

Referring to European and international best practices, he questioned how we might bring professionalism and accountability into the Cypriot context, stating that local government should, above all, be a space of trust, not a space of power. "The goal," he said, "should not be the service of institutions but the service of citizens."

In closing, he extended his sincere thanks to the Municipality of Limassol and its Mayor, Mr Yiannis Armeftis; the Cyprus University of Technology and its Rector, Professor Panayiotis Zaphiris; the Union of Cyprus Municipalities; and Mr Marc Cools, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, for their valuable support and collaboration.

"This, then, is the mission of Cyprus Forum Cities: not to remain in the realm of theory, but to propose practical solutions and to co-shape a new model of local governance, one adapted to our realities, but inspired by the best international examples."

A shared responsibility for sustainable cities

Yiannis Armeftis, Mayor of Limassol, Limassol Municipality

Welcoming attendees to the third edition of Cyprus Forum Cities, Mr Yiannis Armeftis stated that the initiative brings together “leading experts from the public and private sectors, the academic community, and civil society.” He emphasised the importance of collaboration and dialogue in addressing the modern challenges facing Cyprus’s cities, as well as in shaping and implementing sustainable development strategies.

“Limassol recognises its responsibility, co-organises, and actively stakes its claim,” he declared, referring to the city’s participation in the European Mission for 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030.

In conclusion, the Mayor of Limassol remarked that “the challenge ahead of us is great, but the opportunity is unique,” encouraging participants to make full use of the conference as a space for “exchanging ideas, highlighting new solutions, and strengthening our cooperation” towards the creation of more sustainable, human-centred, resilient, and inclusive cities for all citizens.

He expressed sincere thanks to all co-organisers for their excellent collaboration and support of the Cyprus Forum Cities initiative, as well as to the distinguished speakers whose contributions are helping to achieve shared goals.

From campus to city: How TEPAK is transforming urban sustainability in Cyprus

Panayiotis Zaphiris, Rector, Cyprus University of Technology

Panayiotis Zaphiris, Professor and Rector of the Cyprus University of Technology (TEPAK), delivered a compelling address. He emphasised the critical importance of green cities and sustainable development, with a particular focus on Limassol as a model for urban transformation. Zaphiris described TEPAK as an “authentic city university,” uniquely embedded in the urban fabric of Cyprus, with a strong presence in Limassol and Paphos, and an upcoming expansion into Larnaca. He argued that cities must be restructured to serve the evolving needs of their citizens, underscoring that the smart cities of tomorrow must be more sustainable, more humane, and radically different from the cities of the past.

TEPAK plays a central role in this vision. With over 2,500 students based in Limassol’s city center, the university is deeply integrated into the life of the city. Zaphiris highlighted major upcoming initiatives, including a new undergraduate degree in Maritime Studies set to launch in 2025, and another in Ergotherapy beginning in September 2025. These developments are part of a broader €240 million investment strategy that focuses on revitalising and repurposing existing urban infrastructure rather than expanding into undeveloped land, thus promoting sustainable urban growth.

From campus to city: How TEPAK is transforming urban sustainability in Cyprus

Panayiotis Zaphiris, Rector, Cyprus University of Technology

What sets TEPAK apart is its unwavering commitment to sustainability at both the academic and institutional levels. It is the only university in Cyprus with a highly developed academic ecosystem specifically dedicated to sustainable development, and the only one fully aligned with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This commitment is enshrined in TEPAK's 2024-2030 Action Plan, which envisions the university as a more sociable, green, diverse, and open-minded institution. Zaphiris emphasised that for TEPAK and Limassol, a sustainable city is not a distant ideal but a living, present-day reality; achieved through coordinated intervention plans, forward-thinking educational programs, civic engagement, and continuous collaboration with local communities and youth.

He concluded by asserting that the university's deep connection with the city holds profound meaning, reinforcing the idea that higher education institutions must be active agents in shaping the future of the urban environments they inhabit.

Strengthening local democracy and governance in Cyprus

Marc Cools, *President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authority, Council of Europe*

Speaking at the opening of the Cyprus Forum Cities 2025, Marc Cools, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, reaffirmed the Congress's ongoing commitment to supporting local democracy and the current reform of local government in Cyprus. Expressing his continued admiration for the island, Mr Cools also shared his hopes for its eventual reunification, welcoming the ongoing discussions under the auspices of the United Nations.

Reflecting on meetings held the previous day in Nicosia with the Minister of Interior, the Union of Cyprus Municipalities, and the Union of Cyprus Communities, Mr Cools highlighted the importance of the local government reform, which came into effect on 1 July 2024. He described the reform as a necessary step towards modernising governance, increasing local autonomy, and strengthening the financial and administrative capacity of Cypriot local authorities. "Local democracy is the cement of democracy," he emphasised, noting that the proximity of elected representatives to citizens enables more responsive and effective governance.

Strengthening local democracy and governance in Cyprus

Marc Cools, *President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authority, Council of Europe*

Mr Cools explained that the Congress bases its work on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a binding Council of Europe treaty ratified by all 46 member states. This Charter sets the standards for local autonomy and requires states to ensure that local authorities are granted adequate powers, responsibilities, and resources. The Congress monitors the implementation of these principles across member states and engages in constructive dialogue with national governments. He recalled that the last monitoring report on Cyprus, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, where he served as rapporteur, highlighted a lack of constitutional recognition of local self-government and limited fiscal autonomy for municipalities. However, he expressed optimism that these issues would be addressed through the current reform process, with a follow-up monitoring visit scheduled for 2026 or 2027.

In addition to its monitoring role, the Congress supports reforms through cooperation projects. Mr Cools pointed to the ongoing initiative “Enhancing the Local Government Reform in Cyprus”, launched in January 2023, to help Cypriot authorities align with the Charter and improve governance standards. The project, implemented in close cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and other key partners, includes capacity-building efforts and technical support. One major milestone was a peer review mission held in March 2025, where senior experts from several European countries provided guidance on internal governance procedures, particularly regarding the evolving role of vice-mayors under the new legal framework.

Strengthening local democracy and governance in Cyprus

Marc Cools, *President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authority, Council of Europe*

Finally, he highlighted other Congress initiatives such as election observation missions, thematic reports, and resilience-building toolkits, including the ReBus Toolkit, which assists local authorities in preparing for emergencies and improving crisis management. He specifically referenced the Congress's work on local responses to natural disasters and climate hazards, underlining its relevance to the Forum's broader discussions on sustainable and resilient urban development.

In conclusion, Mr Cools reiterated that local democracy is a fundamental pillar of broader democratic systems and that its strengthening can directly enhance citizens' quality of life. He praised the progress made through the Cypriot reform process and assured participants of the Congress's continued support in the years ahead.



Panel Discussions

Amphitheatre 1
Tassos Papadopoulos Building
Cyprus University of Technology



Local Government Reform and the European Charter: Are We Meeting the Standards?

The panel was moderated by **Michalis Socratous**, Director of the Union of Cyprus Municipalities, and featured the following speakers:

Antonis Economides Director, Local Government Directorate, Ministry of Interior

Aristos Damianou, Member of the Parliament, Chairman, Parliamentary Committee on Internal Affairs

Andreas Vyras, Chairman, Union of Cyprus Municipalities

Constantinos Yiorkadjis, Chairman, Nicosia District Local Government Organisation

Andreas Kitromilidis, President, Union of Cyprus Communities

Achilles C. Emilianides, President, Cyprus Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts

Local Government Reform and the European Charter: Are We Meeting the Standards?

Opening the discussion, Antonis Economides presented the Ministry's role in implementing Cyprus' local government reform, which officially came into effect on 1 July, 2024. He outlined the core objective of the reform: Reducing administrative fragmentation while enhancing service delivery. Economides acknowledged that, ten months on, the reform remains a work in progress. Despite some early successes, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding infrastructure, licensing, and public satisfaction. He noted that coordination between central government and local authorities continues to evolve and called for more inclusive dialogue.

Taking the floor next, Aristos Damianou praised the collaborative effort behind the reform while acknowledging criticism from both media and the public. He emphasised that the reform process required compromises and political maturity from all actors. Damianou stressed that although the resulting system is not ideal, it constitutes a marked improvement over the previous structure. He raised concerns, however, about the limited participation of women on the panel, reiterating a broader need for gender inclusivity in governance. Damianou further emphasised the need for transparency and accountability, especially in areas such as licensing where confusion persists over final responsibility.

Local Government Reform and the European Charter: Are We Meeting the Standards?

Turning to the municipal perspective, Andreas Vyras reflected on the challenges facing municipalities, especially the small and under-resourced ones. He acknowledged that many communities previously lacked the capacity to manage services effectively. Vyras praised the restructuring of water boards and sewerage councils, which went from 60 members to a more streamlined 17-member board under the new Nicosia District Authority. This consolidation, he argued, allows for greater efficiency and better resource allocation.

Similarly, Andreas Kitromilidis highlighted the persistent weaknesses of community councils before the reform. He confirmed that while some critics argue the reform created unnecessary positions, in reality many inefficiencies were eliminated. According to Kitromilidis, the reform enabled cost-saving through unification rather than expansion. However, he cautioned that the reform's success will ultimately depend on how well the public is served, not simply on administrative metrics.

Constantinos Yiorkadjis, representing the newly established Nicosia District Local Government Authority, underscored the need for a cultural shift. He explained that the current reform goes beyond previous efforts, which merely merged or renamed old institutions. The new model introduces a unified interpretation of legislation across municipalities, an important shift from the previous system where 11 different planning authorities in Nicosia could issue 11 conflicting legal opinions. Yiorkadjis stressed that while the new system is still under development, it already shows promise in providing consistent, transparent, and professionalised services.

Local Government Reform and the European Charter: Are We Meeting the Standards?

In a pre-recorded statement, Achilles C. Emilianides commented on Cyprus' obligations under the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which has been binding law since 1988. He critiqued the lingering influence of central ministries on local authorities and called for greater administrative and financial autonomy at the local level. Emilianides warned that without such reforms, the Cypriot government risks failing future evaluations by European institutions. He concluded by calling for long-term political commitment to embed a new culture of local self-governance aligned with EU principles.

In summary, the panel highlighted both the promise and the pitfalls of Cyprus' ongoing local government reform. While legislative groundwork has been laid, the effectiveness of the reform will ultimately hinge on implementation, cultural adaptation, and the willingness of all stakeholders to put citizens first.



From Reform to Reality: One Year of Local Government Transformation in Cyprus

The panel was moderated by **Nicolas Kyriakides**, Executive President of the Cyprus Forum and featured the following speakers:

Giannis Tsouloftas, Chairman, Limassol District Local Authority Organisation

Yiannis Karousos, Chairman, Famagusta District Local Government Organisation

Angelos Hadjicharalambous, Chairman, Larnaca District Local Government Organisation

Charalambos Prountzos, Mayor, Nicosia Municipality

From Reform to Reality: One Year of Local Government Transformation in Cyprus

Opening the panel, moderator Nicolas Kyriakides introduced the discussion by reflecting on the transition from vision to reality in Cyprus' ambitious local government reform, which took effect on July 1, 2024. He posed a critical question: What has truly changed in practice? Expectations were high, have they been met? What administrative challenges remain, and how have local leaders coped with merging services and activating citizen participation?

Giannis Tsoulouftas described Limassol as a particularly complex urban region, comprising multiple municipalities. While the District Local Authority Organisation (EOA) was not directly responsible for coordination between these municipalities, he highlighted the enormous challenges of synchronising services, systems, and personnel across such a fragmented landscape. According to Tsoulouftas, one of the key issues remains administrative capacity, especially when it comes to the seamless unification of diverse institutional practices.

Yiannis Karousos stated that while all local government organisations share common positions, there must be honesty, the current model needs to change in order to succeed. "We are like puppets, especially when it comes to licensing issues. We have no real authority," he emphasised, describing this as one of the main problems they face. Karousos provided specific examples to illustrate these challenges. In the Famagusta district, the situation is different; they started from scratch and are working to build the organisation from the ground up. Due to a lack of staff, other organisations are currently providing services to them.

From Reform to Reality: One Year of Local Government Transformation in Cyprus

Angelos Hadjicharalambous added that while each district faces its own unique hurdles, cooperation and collaboration between various agencies have shown promising signs. He emphasised the importance of proactive water management and praised his district's ability to launch local solutions without leaving anyone behind. This decentralised empowerment, he argued, is a strength that should be further leveraged in the reform process.

Mayor Charalambos Prountzos emphasised the importance of public engagement and accountability in governance transformation. He offered an optimistic case study from Nicosia: The implementation of the Novoville platform, a digital citizen service hub that centralizes service requests, complaints, and feedback. Thanks to Novoville, the city has seen an increase in service effectiveness from 45% to 70%. With over 12,000 requests submitted across 76 categories, all four service points in the city, including call centres and the municipal website, now operate through one transparent and integrated system. Prountzos underscored that public trust is built when municipalities respond visibly and efficiently.

From Reform to Reality: One Year of Local Government Transformation in Cyprus

In a closing remark, Prountzos cautioned against an overemphasis on reform shortcomings. While problems are real and significant, he urged all stakeholders to equally highlight the benefits and successes of the reform. If the prevailing narrative remains negative, it will become entrenched and limit the political capital necessary to advance future changes such as reducing the current number of municipalities, which he argued is a self-evident necessity.

The discussion concluded with a call for greater public dialogue and early implementation of further structural changes. Despite the transition's complexity, the panel agreed that progress is ongoing, and Cyprus stands at a pivotal moment to solidify gains in transparency, efficiency, and local accountability.



Local Leadership and the Power of Effective Governance

The panel featured a fireside discussion with:

Phedonas Phedonos, Mayor of Paphos,
Paphos Municipality

Nicolas Kyriakides, Executive President,
Cyprus Forum

Local Leadership and the Power of Effective Governance

Opening the session, moderator Nicolas Kyriakides introduced Phedonas Phedonos as a case study of effective governance at the local level. While the mayor has been praised for transforming the city of Paphos with visible results and a high implementation rate, the discussion also addressed concerns about democratic process and participatory governance.

Mayor Phedonos began by reflecting on the circumstances under which he took office in 2015. At the time, the city was in a deep crisis; two former mayors had been imprisoned along with key members of the Sewerage Board and the municipal council. Infrastructure was neglected, public services were stagnant, and brain drain was pushing educated young people out of Paphos. Despite these challenges, the city had recently been selected as the 2017 European Capital of Culture.

In response, Phedonos set out a clear and practical vision: to make Paphos the best city in Cyprus for families to live in. Central to this was a commitment to developing infrastructure, restoring public trust, and creating a third pillar of economic activity; university education, to supplement real estate and tourism. According to Phedonos, vision without execution is meaningless. What followed was a series of tangible projects aimed at modernizing the city and improving its livability.

Local Leadership and the Power of Effective Governance

When asked about how such progress was funded, Phedonos challenged the widespread belief that Cyprus suffers from a lack of resources. Instead, he identified the core issue as a lack of administrative will, planning, and political courage. He stressed that the legal framework is not the problem, Cyprus has no shortage of legislation but rather a culture of fear and avoidance when it comes to enforcement. He argued that legality is often misrepresented as authoritarianism, while tolerance of illegality is often wrongly portrayed as democratic openness.

On the matter of enforcement, Phedonos highlighted how his administration applies the law decisively. Whether it involves removing unauthorised commercial setups in public squares or tackling illegal beachfront structures, legal mechanisms are used with strategic precision. He noted that court orders can be obtained quickly when supported by thorough documentation and political will. This strict adherence to legality, he said, helps build long-term public trust and dismantle entrenched networks of impunity.

Addressing citizen engagement, Phedonos acknowledged the growing role of digital platforms in shaping public discourse. Social media, he noted, allows mayors to bypass traditional media filters and communicate directly with the public. At the same time, he expressed strong support for expanding participatory governance. Drawing on examples from cities like Madrid, he advocated for structured citizen consultations and referenda provided safeguards are in place to prevent manipulation by private interests.

Local Leadership and the Power of Effective Governance

Looking ahead, the mayor emphasised education as the city's highest strategic priority. With four universities established in Paphos and a growing student population, the goal is to transform the city's intellectual and cultural character. Phedonos described this vision as a “triangle of development” rooted in economic prosperity, cultural growth, and intellectual advancement. Education, he argued, is the only sustainable foundation that binds these three elements together.

In his closing remarks, Phedonos offered a compelling metaphor for civic culture. In Vienna, he explained, there is no height difference between the road and the sidewalk. In Cyprus, the curb is raised by 15 cm; in Egypt, 37 cm. These physical boundaries reflect societal norms. Where public respect prevails, physical barriers are unnecessary. Until that point is reached, structural enforcement like sidewalk bollards remains a necessary tool.

The panel concluded with a clear takeaway: while legal frameworks are important, the real driver of change lies in political will, cultural transformation, and strategic citizen engagement. Paphos serves as an ongoing case study in what is possible when vision, execution, and civic responsibility align.



National-Local Cooperation to Accelerate Climate Neutrality

The panel was moderated by **Lina Liakou**, Global Director of Engagement and Practice, Resilient Cities Network. The discussion focused on national and local cooperation, with an emphasis on green transition and climate neutrality. The panel featured the following speakers:

Yiannis Armeftis, Mayor of Limassol, Limassol Municipality

Yiannis Karousos, Mayor of Aradippou, Aradippou Municipality

Pantelis Georgiou, Mayor of Kourion, Kourion Municipality

Athanasios Kolyvas, Deputy Municipal Engineer, Strovolos Municipality

Giorgos Ioulianos, City Finance Specialist, Bankers Without Borders

National-Local Cooperation to Accelerate Climate Neutrality

Opening the discussion, Yiannis Armeftis, Mayor of Limassol, presented Limassol's ambitious goal to achieve climate neutrality by 2030, aiming to reduce emissions by 80% within five years. He highlighted the necessity of inter-municipal cooperation, especially concerning traffic networks and reducing emissions, as illustrated by Limassol's urban map. The mayor noted the low public green space per capita in Limassol, less than 2 sqm compared to the European standard of 8-9 sqm and outlined plans to enhance urban green areas. He also addressed urban sprawl and traffic congestion, emphasising the need for sustainable transport and the development of mobility hubs. Key projects include "Cold Iron" and the creation of 20 km of "green routes" to promote micro-mobility and increase tree planting by approximately 10,000 trees, making these routes attractive and providing shade during summer months. He stressed that changing daily routines requires behavioural shifts supported by infrastructure projects, and highlighted the role of initiatives like ClimaNet for collaborations and funding to achieve the transition to a smart and green city.

Taking the floor next, Christodoulos Partou, Mayor of Aradippou, stated that their municipality aims for a net-zero balance of greenhouse gas emissions. He detailed efforts including the conversion of all street lighting to LED, energy upgrades for all municipal buildings, and the establishment of their first photovoltaic park, which makes the municipality energy autonomous for street lighting and municipal buildings. A second photovoltaic park is currently in preparation. The municipality is also enhancing its circular economy initiatives and plans to plant over 15,000–20,000 trees across the municipal area.

National-Local Cooperation to Accelerate Climate Neutrality

Additionally, they are starting pedestrianization projects in the city centre to reduce pollution. Mayor Partou emphasised that local communities and businesses must be catalysts for this change and highlighted the importance of collaborations to achieve desired results.

Pantelis Georgiou, Mayor of Kourion, discussed the development of a strategic plan for the next 30 years, envisioning the Curium Central Park (approximately 2 million sqm) as the green lung for the wider Limassol area. This park will be connected to the rest of the city via linear parks and cycling paths, aiming to solve long-standing issues like floods and pollution. Kourion is also planning two large photovoltaic parks, each with a capacity of 7 MW, with the goal of involving citizens through energy communities. He further elaborated on the adoption of a polycentric model for urban mobility, creating commercial centres, shops, and offices in nine core areas to address traffic problems. The mayor stressed that these ambitious plans, at an estimated cost of €180 million, require significant funding from the European Union and strong partnerships with the private sector.

Athanasios Kolyvas, Municipal Engineer of Strovolos Municipality, mentioned that Strovolos is the third-largest municipality by population and faces significant traffic problems due to its central location within the wider urban area of Nicosia. He stated that Strovolos has implemented a strategic plan for climate neutrality by 2030, based on four scenarios. He highlighted that while funding is available, the main challenges lie in administrative processes and overcoming existing obstacles.

National-Local Cooperation to Accelerate Climate Neutrality

Marios Theophilou began by referring to the overall planning and the national strategy that has been developed to achieve climate neutrality and the targets set for 2030. He also shared examples of projects funded by the Recovery and Resilience Plan. However, he noted that the greatest challenge across this entire framework, despite the multiple planned projects, remains implementation.

Giorgos Ioulianos spoke about his experience with cities in both Cyprus and Greece, emphasising that the goal is not merely to implement individual projects, but to realise the overarching objective of the EU, achieving climate neutrality. He stressed that cities must first understand what is required to reach this goal. As an example, he mentioned the Municipality of Limassol, where efforts are underway to upgrade and staff the Climate Neutrality Office, an initiative in which he is personally involved. However, he noted that what is truly needed is a broader strategic plan supported by a well-structured framework to turn this vision into reality.

Furthermore, he highlighted that cities must recognise their role as coordinators of this effort. While they cannot implement everything alone, they should facilitate the process. This includes finding ways to involve private capital in the transition. He emphasised the need for cities to act as enablers in channelling these funds effectively, while also underlining the importance of mobilizing society at large in this collective mission.

National-Local Cooperation to Accelerate Climate Neutrality

In summary, the panel highlighted the critical role of inter-municipal cooperation, strategic planning, and significant investment in infrastructure and green initiatives to achieve climate neutrality in Cypriot cities. The mayors presented concrete projects and ambitious goals related to renewable energy, green spaces, sustainable transportation, and urban planning. While progress has been made, the speakers emphasized the need for continued collaboration, addressing procedural challenges, and fostering a cultural shift towards sustainable living.





Mobility Hubs with E-Buses, Charging Infrastructure and the Introduction of E-Bikes and E-Scooters

The panel was moderated by **Maria Kamargianni**, Director of MaasLab, Professor of Transport Systems Innovation, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, Oxford University, and featured the following speakers:

Andreas Nikiforou, Head of the Public Passenger Transport Directorate, Public Transport Officer A, Ministry of Transport, Communications and Works (Cyprus)

Dimitrios Rizopoulos, Research Associate, Railways and Transport Lab, National Technical University of Athens (Greece)

Evi Vasileiou, Head of Scheduling Department, OASA (Athens Urban Transport Organisation)

Efi Pavlou, Transport Engineer, Scheduling Department, OASA (Athens Urban Transport Organisation)

George Kyriacou, Chief Executive Officer, EMEL Ltd (Limassol Public Transport)

Neofytos Ioannou, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Nextbike

Michele Pampanini, Board Member and Chief Operating Officer, RideMovi

Charalampos Ioannou, Assistant Director, Studies and Connections Department, Distribution Directorate, Limassol Regional Office, Electricity Authority of Cyprus

Mobility Hubs with E-Buses, Charging Infrastructure and the Introduction of E-Bikes and E-Scooters

Opening the panel discussion, George Kyriacou noted that EMEL Ltd had introduced e-buses in Limassol despite the absence of a formal tender process or a legal framework to support their operation. However, the city still lacks the necessary charging infrastructure, and there have been no concerted efforts to address this gap. Regrettably, two years after their introduction, only 60% of the e-buses are in simultaneous use. Kyriacou stressed that this is not due to a lack of expertise or willingness, but rather stems from persistent coordination issues. He called on all relevant stakeholders to take initiative in identifying suitable locations for charging stations, underlining that action is urgently needed to fully integrate the 35 e-buses into the city's transport system.

As cities across Europe strive for more efficient, sustainable, and inclusive public transport systems, mobility hubs have emerged as a key infrastructure solution. Designed to centralise multiple transport modes such as buses, bikes, and shuttles, mobility hubs aim to improve connectivity, reduce congestion, and support modal shift. In Cyprus, the development of such hubs is becoming increasingly relevant, particularly in urban centres like Limassol, where fragmented routes and limited transfer points hinder smooth travel. The discussion around mobility hubs is also closely tied to access to EU mobility funding, which prioritises investments in projects that align with climate neutrality, smart urban planning, and citizen-focused services. Within this context, George Kyriacou shared valuable insights on the potential and challenges of implementing mobility hubs in Limassol.

Mobility Hubs with E-Buses, Charging Infrastructure and the Introduction of E-Bikes and E-Scooters ⁴

Turning to the successful case study of Athens, Evi Vasileiou explained that 140 e-buses have already been integrated into urban bus routes in Athens. In addition, as of February 2025, a further 100 midi-buses have been acquired through leasing arrangements. Looking ahead, by the end of 2025 or by May 2026 at the latest an additional 125 twelve-metre e-buses are expected to be deployed. The overarching goal is to phase out older vehicles and replace them with sustainable electric alternatives. Addressing operational challenges, Vasileiou highlighted that the most difficult period was during the colder winter months. To meet challenges, OASA revised its routing model to optimise e-bus deployment across Athens, particularly to accommodate charging requirements. She also noted that maintenance costs for e-buses are approximately one-third of those for equivalent diesel buses. Nonetheless, Athens plans to retain 100 CNG (compressed natural gas) buses, maintaining a diversified and resilient fleet.

Focusing on the issue of charging infrastructure, Efi Pavlou explained that although the e-buses and their associated infrastructure were procured simultaneously, the installation of charging stations was delayed due to bureaucratic obstacles. As a result, temporary charging facilities were used during the initial integration phase. By November 2024, the first 40 permanent chargers had been successfully installed. In parallel, Athens' electricity grid was upgraded to support the increased demand brought by e-bus charging. So far, the integration process has progressed smoothly and effectively. Pavlou emphasised that the transition to e-buses was not only necessary but also urgent. The EU now funds only sustainable transport, and the existing Athens bus fleet was in critical need of renewal.

Mobility Hubs with E-Buses, Charging Infrastructure and the Introduction of E-Bikes and E-Scooters

Shifting the focus to micromobility, Neofytos Ioannou of nextbike explained that, in the absence of dedicated charging stations, spare batteries are currently being used as a temporary solution. These charging stations, he noted, will need to be installed in coordination with both local and national authorities. At present, NextBike replaces any e-bike battery that falls below 40% capacity to ensure continuous operation and user satisfaction. Given that Limassol is a major tourism hub, Ioannou emphasised the importance of maintaining full-day functionality, as tourists often use e-bikes for extended periods throughout the day.

Michele Pampanini of RideMovi highlighted that approximately 60% of users engage with both e-bikes and e-scooters, making both types of vehicles commercially significant. He noted regional differences in uptake: e-scooters tend to be more popular in northern Europe, while e-bikes are more common in southern Europe, largely due to historical usage patterns. E-scooters are primarily used by tourists and younger individuals, whereas e-bikes are more commonly used by women and adults. From a financial perspective, scooters generate higher revenue per vehicle per day. Regardless of the vehicle type, Pampanini stressed that three elements are crucial for effective micromobility: order, safety, and quality of service. Thanks to improved GPS accuracy and the integration of artificial intelligence, RideMovi has implemented technology that prevents disorder, for instance, users cannot end their ride unless the vehicle is parked in a designated area.

Mobility Hubs with E-Buses, Charging Infrastructure and the Introduction of E-Bikes and E-Scooters

RideMovi also boasts a low accident rate, just one incident per 10,000 trips which Pampanini attributed to both vehicle quality and preventative maintenance. Regarding service quality, he noted that users expect vehicles to be located exactly where indicated, in good condition, and fully charged. To meet these expectations, at least 95% of the fleet must be fully charged when deployed, a target achieved through strategic planning and advanced technology. On the operational app, battery levels are visualised through colour coding (e.g., green, orange), simplifying fleet management and relocation logistics.

Andreas Nikiforou, speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Transport, addressed the sustainable urban mobility dimension of public transport. He emphasised that public transport is as essential to daily life as electricity and water, and that the state has a responsibility to provide the highest possible quality of service to its citizens. Between 2020 and 2022, all newly signed contracts included provisions for the renewal of the national bus fleet. As a result, 90-95% of buses in Cyprus have now been replaced, primarily with low-emission Euro-6 vehicles, rather than e-buses. However, Nikiforou acknowledged a key challenge: The lack of adequate charging infrastructure for the 40 e-buses currently in operation. While these buses have been introduced, supporting infrastructure has not kept pace. Nonetheless, significant efforts are under way across the country to install the necessary charging points and support further electrification.

Mobility Hubs with E-Buses, Charging Infrastructure and the Introduction of E-Bikes and E-Scooters

Haralampos Ioannou, representing the Electricity Authority of Cyprus, affirmed that the organisation is fully prepared to support the transition to e-buses. “We are fully ready to discuss and ascertain where precisely it is that we need to contribute,” he stated. On the issue of charging, Ioannou noted that the authority recognises the practical realities of operation, acknowledging that “some buses will need to be charged during the day,” especially as daytime electricity rates are significantly lower than nighttime rates. He also highlighted that the Ministry of Energy’s plans include virtual billing systems, which are expected to streamline the charging process. Furthermore, the authority has recently approved the installation of energy storage units at power stations, aiming to enhance grid efficiency, conserve energy, and reduce reliance on power generators. However, Ioannou emphasised that there is now a pressing need for a targeted funding initiative to support these developments. He cautioned that the realisation of these plans will take time, underscoring the importance of long-term commitment and strategic investment.

Dimitrios Rizopoulos, representing the academic and research community as well as the National Technical University of Athens (Metsovian Polytechnic), spoke about his work on charging scheduling optimisation for electric buses. His research aims to determine the most efficient times to charge vehicles and how to operate with the lowest possible number of e-buses, thereby improving cost-effectiveness and energy use.

Mobility Hubs with E-Buses, Charging Infrastructure and the Introduction of E-Bikes and E-Scooters

Rizopoulos explained that his team provides decision-support tools to public transport operators, helping them optimise their operations. While real datasets are invaluable for modelling and planning, he cautioned that they cannot predict unexpected disruptions (“black swan events”), such as the recent blackout in the Iberian Peninsula. As such, while researchers play a vital advisory role, final decisions must ultimately be taken by domain experts within each organisation.

In closing, moderator Professor Maria Kamargianni emphasised that we are at a critical turning point in the journey towards climate neutrality. While some legal frameworks and policies are already in place, she stressed the importance of continuing to bring all relevant stakeholders to the table to develop practical, forward-looking solutions. This process, she noted, must be driven by strong political and institutional will, guided by flexibility, and always aligned with existing legislation—yet without fear of taking calculated risks where necessary.



Shaping a Climate-Neutral Future: The Tilliria Complex Vision and Roadmap

The panel was moderated by **Penelope Vasquez Hadjilyra**, Architect and Project Coordinator, Municipality of Limassol.

The session explored how climate neutrality can be achieved not only through environmental policies but by cultivating systemic, inclusive, and localised change. The discussion focused on standardisation, stakeholder collaboration, and the evolving role of communities in Cyprus' sustainability transition. Speakers

Antonia Theodosiou, Commissioner of the Environment and Animal Welfare, Republic of Cyprus

Anna Dionysiou, Standards Officer, Cyprus Organisation for Standardisation

Monika Heyder, Senior Expert of Green and Digital Transformation, ICLEI European Secretariat

Theodoros Zachariades, Professor, The Cyprus Institute

- **Irene Hadjisavva**, Senior Officer, Department of Town Planning and Housing

Shaping a Climate-Neutral Future: The Tilliria Complex Vision and Roadmap

The discussion began with a video message from Monika Heyder, a representative of ICLEI, who emphasised that standardisation is a critical enabler for climate action. They highlighted that although cities are central to implementation, they often lack representation in shaping standards. The ICLEI network, through its work with European standardisation bodies such as CEN/TC 465, seeks to elevate local voices and ensure that standards reflect on-the-ground needs. The message praised Cyprus' pioneering role in shaping local climate strategies, particularly through the Tilliria initiative.

Penelope Vasquez Hadjilyra set the stage by defining climate neutrality as the balance between emissions and their absorption, achievable through reduction or offsetting. She highlighted that Cyprus must align with EU directives, committing to a 55% reduction in emissions by 2030. Stressing the importance of peer learning, intersectoral cooperation, and participatory design, she introduced the panel with a call to action for embedding these values in Cypriot governance structures.

Antonia Theodosiou explained that her office works to unite state authorities, local governments, private actors, and civil society in co-developing sustainability strategies. Rather than dictating policy from above, her team fosters horizontal coordination and community-based engagement. She described a series of pilot collaborations with municipalities such as Tilliria, Athienou, and the Dhiarizos-Xeropotamos Valley, where models of sustainability are being tested with the support of her team. These models aim to be both economically viable and environmentally sustainable. Theodosiou also highlighted her role in helping establish the National Technical Committee for Climate-Neutral Communities.

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Anna Dionysiou elaborated on the formation and function of this technical committee, known as CYST-29. The Cyprus Organisation for Standardisation serves as the secretariat, while Theodosiou's office holds the presidency. CYST-29 brings together stakeholders from public institutions, the private sector, academia, and NGOs. Its first task is to produce a guiding document to help communities transition towards climate neutrality. This document will include terminology, frameworks, indicators, and best practices, aiming to align all Cypriot communities under a shared roadmap. Dionysiou emphasised that the process is consensus-based and inclusive, with expertise drawn from the committee members.

The panel reiterated that knowledge alone is not enough, what is needed is sustained support, standard frameworks, and robust cooperation mechanisms. Monika Heyder's concept of peer learning was cited as a cornerstone of this transformation, not just as knowledge transfer, but as a system of trust-building and mutual empowerment.

Theodoros Zachariades and Irene Hadjisavva added technical and planning perspectives to the discussion, with Zachariades likely contributing insights on environmental data and emissions metrics, and Hadjisavva addressing the integration of sustainability within urban planning frameworks and regulatory challenges at the municipal level.

In conclusion, the panel made it clear that climate neutrality must be approached as a collaborative, multidimensional process. Cyprus' efforts through initiatives like the Tilliria roadmap and the formation of CYST-29 are setting valuable precedents, but require ongoing investment, institutional commitment, and community trust.



Evidence-Based Urban Design and Planning for Sustainable Cities

The panel was moderated by **Andreas Papallas**, Architect & Researcher. The discussion focused on the critical role of scientific evidence and documentation in urban planning and design for sustainable cities, encompassing economic, environmental, and social criteria. The moderator emphasised the current global context where decisions about the built environment are often influenced by personal opinions, political expediency, or insufficiently documented data, impacting the future of cities and the professionals involved. The Surf Lab's work, which connects academic research with practice through scientific documentation, was highlighted, citing examples such as optimizing public service center locations and analyzing the impact of urban interventions.

The panel featured the following speakers:

Neofytoula Angelidou, Municipal Engineer, Larnaca Municipality

Alkis Dikaios Architect, Athos Dikaios + Associates Architects

Lora Nicolaou Professor, Department of Architecture, Frederick University

Christos Passas, Design Director, Urbanist and Architect, Zaha Hadid Architects

Evidence-Based Urban Design and Planning for Sustainable Cities

Opening the discussion, Neofytoula Angelidou, Municipal Engineer for Larnaca Municipality, stressed that scientific documentation is essential for development plans, as cities are shaped by projects and licensing based on these plans. She questioned the extent to which existing plans are evidence-based and if current tools allow for informed decisions and discussions. She noted that most recent projects are co-funded, requiring strategic planning, prompting reflection on the scientific rigor of adopted strategies. Municipal projects, whether co-funded or financed by municipal/state resources, require municipal council approval. Priorities are thus set based on existing knowledge, beliefs, and the strategic development plans derived from structural funds, cohesion funds, and recovery funds. Angelidou acknowledged numerous administrative and political limitations, including citizen protests, resistance from departments, and conflicting scientific documentation, which lead to delays and discomfort in project implementation. She highlighted discrepancies in project execution speeds between municipalities and governmental departments, noting that some municipal projects conceived strategically are completed within two years, while governmental projects like the Larnaca-Dhekelia coastal road can take 35 years from conception.

Taking the floor next, Alkis Dikaios, President of the Cyprus Architects Association, emphasized the critical importance of architectural competitions. He commended Limassol Municipality for embracing this process by approaching ETEK and the Architects Association to organize four immediate architectural competitions. Dikaios stressed that such competitions foster a plurality of ideas, alternative solutions, and multi-dimensional proposals, leading to superior, holistically designed buildings, squares, or parks that consider sociological, bioclimatic, functional, and accessibility aspects.

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He argued that selecting the best proposal from multiple submissions through a jury ensures the creation of designs that become cultural heritage over time. He expressed concern over the "Design and Build" method favored by some governmental departments, which prioritises the lowest cost and often results in poorly designed structures. Dikaios advocated for architectural competitions as the preferred method, noting that ETEK is increasingly approached by governmental, semi-governmental, and even private organisations to facilitate these competitions. He highlighted two major shortcomings in public projects: a lack of strategic planning beyond short ministerial tenures, leading to short-sighted priorities rather than long-term strategic plans for urban development; and insufficient prior consultation with communities and relevant organisations (environmental, social, etc.) before project conceptualisation, leading to less holistic and properly designed outcomes.

Lora Nicolaou, Professor at Frederick University's Department of Architecture, addressed the challenges of transferring academic knowledge to practical application and policy implementation, noting a gap between research programmes and their real-world impact. She emphasised that while evidence is crucial for design, the challenges lie in how data is collected, processed based on priorities, and translated into design specifications. Drawing on her experience as a "strategic briefer", she noted that Cyprus often overlooks the crucial pre-project phase, where detailed strategic specifications for architectural competitions or local plans should be developed. She highlighted the complexity of urban questions, which involve both quantitative and qualitative data, requiring careful collection and integrated design.

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Citing an example from a Dublin high-rise strategy project, she explained that initial discussions led to 11 research programmes, indicating the extensive data collection needed before a strategy could be written. She also noted the difficulty in measuring the cultural significance of urban elements, citing a study showing Cypriots' surprising preference for dry, urban desert landscapes over green spaces, indicating a significant cultural gap in perception. Nicolaou stressed that every urban question is complex and requires not just data collection, but the strategic design of the collection process and the pre-briefing stage, which requires a shift in mentality, culture, funding, and time.

Christos Passas, Director at Zaha Hadid Architects, emphasised the critical role of the briefing stage in defining the intentions of an architectural study. He stressed that a comprehensive brief must incorporate multiple perspectives to allow for the synthesis of diverse views into a well-rounded design, aiming for an aesthetically, functionally, and ecologically superior urban outcome. He highlighted that good design requires knowing the subject matter and having "X-ray vision" to understand where impactful creative and rational interventions can be made to create enduring works. He also noted the importance of "data-driven design," but cautioned that it always needs a vision and a concept to function effectively, citing an example where a data-driven study on global population distribution suggested a different location for the UN building than New York.

Evidence-Based Urban Design and Planning for Sustainable Cities

Returning to Neophytoula Angelidou, she discussed efforts in Larnaca Municipality to organise data and create an infrastructure for informed decision-making. She noted that SWOT analyses conducted for European funding applications provided valuable data, which needs continuous updating for new programming periods. Angelidou highlighted the importance of integrating green spaces into a coherent network within the city to give them greater impact, acknowledging that while some design details might be debated, a positive outlook is crucial for progress. She stressed that completing strategic projects and feeding back data for better future planning is essential. She urged technocrats to pressure politicians to continue using data-driven practices that leave a positive impact on cities.

Alkis Dikaios further discussed the challenges of integrating diverse views during public consultation, as well as the relationship between public sentiment and scientific evidence, which can sometimes conflict. He underscored that current research programs at universities can be invaluable for municipalities and government departments to prepare programmatic briefs for urban development, viewing this prior research as an integral part of urban environment development. He highlighted two large-scale areas in Nicosia, Sopaz and the State Fair Grounds in Engomi, whose future development is currently subject to political discretion rather than strategic planning. He advocated for these areas to be developed as model sustainable urban environments, emphasising that organisations like ETEK must convey to politicians the critical need for prior research and consultation to ensure proper design. He stressed that this involves not just parks and squares, but the development of entire urban areas or neighbourhoods.

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Christos Passas addressed the challenge of balancing rapid implementation with long-term strategic planning in large-scale urban projects. Drawing on his experience with industrial cities and master plans in countries like Saudi Arabia -a region the size of Belgium, he emphasised that scale dictates the complexity of data management but also allows for a clear hierarchy of core criteria in project development. He strongly advocated for master plans, emphasising that a more effective approach is to create master plans that are 80% complete, leaving 20% for future generations to manage, adapt, and adjust.

In summary, the panel highlighted the urgent need for a fundamental shift towards evidence-based urban design and planning in Cyprus. Speakers underscored that decisions affecting the built environment must move beyond personal opinion and political expediency, embracing scientific documentation, rigorous data analysis, and comprehensive strategic planning. The discussion emphasised the importance of architectural competitions for fostering diverse and superior design solutions, as well as the crucial role of multi-stakeholder consultations and academic research in bridging the gap between theory and practical implementation. Ultimately, the panel advocated for a more holistic, long-term, and adaptable approach to urban development that prioritises citizen well-being and environmental sustainability.



Participatory Tools for Rule of Law in Cyprus: Local Government

The panel, moderated by **George Isaia**, Executive Director at Oxygen for Democracy, focused on participatory democracy and its application within the framework of rule of law, with a specific emphasis on local government. The moderator briefly introduced the panel as part of the "Participatory Tools for Rule of Law in Cyprus" project, an initiative of Oxygen for Democracy under the Build programme, funded by the European Union, the Bodossaki Foundation, and the NGO Support Center. The project has promoted various participatory tools, including workshops on lobbying legislation, contributing to the promotion of significant draft laws on citizen initiative and public consultation (with hopes of their imminent passage), participation in the Rule of Law report from the civil society perspective, and legal research on live parliamentary committee broadcasts. The Nomoplatform, enhanced by the project, now tracks all draft laws submitted by MPs and records nominal votes for each plenary session, providing transparency for citizens. The panel featured the following speakers:

Charalambos Theopemptou, Chair of the Environment Committee, Parliament of Cyprus

Georgia Klefti President, Paralimni Municipal Youth Council

Georgios Sotiropoulos, Co-founder and Strategic Planner, OPU Collective

Participatory Tools for Rule of Law in Cyprus: Local Government

Opening the discussion, Charalambos Theopemptou, MP and Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Environment, highlighted the critical importance of public consultation, noting that Cyprus has signed conventions requiring public participation in local government decisions and environmental policy-making (Aarhus Convention). He explained that the Aarhus Convention grants citizens three rights: access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice. Theopemptou lamented that despite these commitments and a long-standing personal effort to institutionalize public consultation (with a draft law submitted in 2017 and re-submitted in 2022), the process in Cyprus remains largely ineffective. He described how public consultations have devolved from meaningful in-person dialogues to mere online postings that often go unnoticed, leading to significant delays and conflicts in parliamentary committees, citing examples like the "Lampradgia" (wildfires) bill and the two-year debate on dog laws. He stressed that while the government is obligated by EU directives to conduct public consultations for all legislation, they frequently avoid or minimize this process. He suggested that, unlike in the UK where consultation documents clearly outline government dilemmas and incorporate public feedback into final texts, Cyprus lacks this transparent and structured approach, making it difficult for citizens to effectively participate or even be aware of ongoing consultations.

Taking the floor next, Georgia Klefti, President of the Paralimni Municipal Youth Council, provided a contrasting, more successful local perspective on participatory tools. She shared how the Paralimni Youth Council, founded in 2013 with a democratic and open statute (unlike the standard model suggested by the Cyprus Youth Organisation), empowers young people aged 15-35 to actively participate.

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The Council's executive board and committees are democratically elected, and it maintains communication with the municipality through two young municipal councillors. Klefti highlighted various successful initiatives, including the largest summer cinema festival in Protaras, the Moonwalk street music festival, and a recent public survey for a new park near Paralimni Lake, which led to the inclusion of facilities like a calisthenics park and a dog park based on youth feedback. She attributed their success to the dedicated work of volunteer members, including architects, civil engineers, and environmental engineers. Klefti also spoke about their ambitious bid for Paralimni to become the European Youth Capital 2028, currently one of five shortlisted cities. As part of this effort, they aim to create the first local youth strategy, emphasising the essential support received from the Paralimni-Deryneia Municipality. She concluded by inviting attendees to the "Paralimni Forum" on May 17th, where local leaders and youth will discuss local problems and solutions, feeding into their European Youth Capital application.

Turning to the perspective of civil society, Georgios Sotiropoulos, Coordinator and Strategic Planner at OPU Collective (Organisation for Positive Urbanism), described OPU's human-centric approach to making cities better and engaging citizens. OPU, formed by individuals returning to Cyprus after living abroad, started from casual conversations at a public consultation (which was a presentation, not a dialogue) and grew into a multidisciplinary team of architects, planners, strategists, and citizens. He highlighted the importance of their physical space, "OPU House," an open citizens' hub that fosters a community and facilitates engagement with municipalities like Nicosia.

Participatory Tools for Rule of Law in Cyprus: Local Government

Through social media, interventions, placemaking activities, bike rides, workshops, and screenings, OPU aims to raise awareness about urban possibilities and empower citizens to participate in public consultations. Sotiropoulos acknowledged that a lack of public understanding and vocal opposition from a minority can hinder progress, citing the example of negative public reactions to the Minister of Transport's announcement of 30 km/h speed limits on eight Nicosia roads. He believes that the majority of people desire a sustainable future with more cycling and walking, but are often a "sleeping mass" that needs to be awakened to counteract vocal, often misinformed, minority groups.

During the Q&A session, a participant corroborated Mr. Theopemptou's points, sharing his frustration with the public consultation website. He described a scenario where a draft law he had been advocating for eight years was suddenly subjected to a two-month online public consultation, which yielded no public comments. He stressed that such consultations often lack proper structure, failing to define who should be involved at what stage, leading to irrelevant input and delays. He argued that public consultation should be a phased process, allowing different stakeholders (e.g., parents, then universities) to contribute at the appropriate maturity stage of a draft law, preventing endless debates and roadblocks from those with vested interests. Mr. Theopemptou agreed, reiterating that the current process is chaotic, lacks clear procedures, and often results in public officials receiving unacknowledged feedback, leading to repeated conflicts in parliament. He also expressed concern that live broadcast of parliamentary committee meetings, while seemingly promoting transparency, could lead to grandstanding by politicians, diverting focus from substantive work, as observed when cameras were previously present.

Participatory Tools for Rule of Law in Cyprus: Local Government

In closing remarks, Georgia Klefti attributed the Paralimni Youth Council's success to its non-partisan nature, where members are driven solely by the common good of their community, free from political agendas or personal interests. This focus allows them to navigate conflicting opinions more effectively and deliver tangible results for young citizens. Georgios Sotiropoulos noted that while government officials are increasingly open to dialogue, reflecting new mayoralties with progressive visions, the remaining challenges lie in overcoming ingrained agendas and resistance to change. He expressed optimism that increased public engagement, through organizations like OPU and broader civil society, will ultimately generate the political will necessary for the desired urban transformations.

In summary, the panel highlighted the significant challenges and varying successes of integrating participatory tools into governance in Cyprus. While systemic issues persist at the national legislative level, impeding meaningful public consultation, local initiatives demonstrate the potential for effective citizen engagement, particularly when driven by non-partisan, community-focused organizations. The discussion underscored the critical need for a structured and well-defined public consultation process, greater transparency, and a cultural shift towards embracing citizen input as a vital component of robust, sustainable, and democratic governance.



Youth in Local Governments: Municipal Youth Councils

The panel, moderated by **Avgoustinos Kitromilidis**, Policy Officer at Oxygen for Democracy, focused on the crucial role of youth as decision-makers in local governance. The panel featured the following speakers:

Loukas Lingis, Co-founder, Ignite Foundation

Adamantia Zisimopoulou, Project and Policy Officer, Cyprus Youth Council

Mario Grubišić, Head of Sector - FutureLAB, European Committee of the Regions (pre-recorded statement)

Youth in Local Governments: Municipal Youth Councils

Avgoustinos Kitromilidis opened the panel by posing a thought-provoking question: How would our communities differ if an 18-year-old student's perspective was considered in every municipal decision, from park construction to budget allocation? He asserted that youth participation often remains symbolic, with young people given a "seat at the table but no vote." The central question of the panel was how to transition youth involvement from mere participation to genuine influence. He acknowledged the recent discussion in the Cypriot Parliament about lowering the voting age to 17, viewing it as a positive step but emphasising that voting is not merely a privilege but a right, duty, and responsibility. For young people to shape the present and not just inherit the future, they need tools, knowledge, and spaces for meaningful participation, such as youth councils and local initiatives. Kitromilidis proposed an idea: transforming the largely decorative student committees in Cypriot high schools into real platforms for participation, collaborating with municipal youth councils and local authorities, including urban planning bodies. This bottom-up approach, he argued, would cultivate active citizens from a young age.

Loukas Lingis, Co-founder of the Ignite Foundation, introduced his non-profit organisation, which focuses on regional development in the free Famagusta district. The Ignite Foundation was born from Lingis and two friends' realisation, upon returning from studies abroad, that their home region lacked opportunities beyond tourism and agriculture, and its infrastructure lagged behind other parts of Cyprus. Their first step was to engage with local authorities, businesses, academics, and community groups, discovering that while ideas for development existed, coordination and an action plan were missing.

Youth in Local Governments: Municipal Youth Councils

To address this, they launched the Renovate Forum, a conference that brings together local authorities, government bodies, academics, businesses, and youth to discuss the future of the district. The forum covers tourism, agriculture, urban planning especially after the release of the Local Plan, and local government reform. Through memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the two municipalities and the provincial self-government organisation, the Ignite Foundation has established working groups of young scientists who develop costed and detailed project proposals and strategies based on the forum's conclusions, with the aim of presenting them for implementation by local authorities.

Adamantia Zisimopoulou, Project Policy Officer at the Cyprus Youth Council, echoed the moderator and Linki, acknowledging the current framework in Cyprus that largely excludes young people from decision-making processes at both local and national levels. As an umbrella organisation for youth organisations in Cyprus, the Cyprus Youth Council aims to amplify the voices, demands, and ideas of young people, advocating for their inclusion in decision-making bodies. Zisimopoulou emphasised that youth are not just children or teenagers but also young adults and professionals who possess valuable skills and knowledge. She noted a recent positive trend of decision-makers attempting to engage youth, but questioned the true impact of this participation. The Cyprus Youth Council strives to bring good practices from European and national levels to light, highlighting the significant contributions young people can make to national strategies and local communities. She pointed out that the Council of Europe greatly emphasises youth participation in local and community life, recognizing that direct involvement at the local level fosters political engagement and active citizenship. Municipal and community youth councils, youth centers, and other organised youth groups are crucial mechanisms for enhancing youth participation.

Youth in Local Governments: Municipal Youth Councils

Mario Grubišić, from the European Committee of the Regions (pre-recorded statement), highlighted the CR's 2022 European Charter on Youth and Democracy, which provides 49 recommendations to enhance democratic participation of young people at local, regional, and national levels. He mentioned the "Young Elected Politicians" programme for politicians under 36 and initiatives allowing young people to contribute to policy development. Grubišić stressed that Europe's youth live, work, and vote today, and European cities must ensure their prosperity now. He noted that barriers to youth participation are decreasing, citing the lowering of the voting age to 16 in Belgium and Germany for the European Parliament elections. He emphasised the crucial role of local youth councils in strengthening democratic participation, seeing youth's creativity, energy, and knowledge as integral to keeping Europe vibrant and prosperous.

The discussion then shifted to the challenge of engaging young people who feel apathetic or disengaged. Zisimopoulou acknowledged the decline in youth participation in traditional democratic mechanisms, attributing it to disappointment with policies that don't meet their needs, a culture of devaluation "why vote if nothing changes?", distrust in institutions, and a lack of political education in schools. She argued that early involvement in local governance, demonstrating how democratic participation can bring about change at the local level, is crucial for fostering long-term civic engagement. Lingis agreed, stating that young people seek hope and real prospects for participation. He believes that while a small minority will always be resistant, the majority can be swayed if they see that their involvement can make a difference. He stressed the importance of "political literacy" from a young age, rather than just lowering the voting age without proper preparation.

Youth in Local Governments: Municipal Youth Councils

Lingis shared that his organisation initially faced resistance from established figures who questioned the competence of young people, but by demonstrating tangible results, they gained trust and encouraged more young people to participate. He concluded by emphasising the need to politically educate youth and showcase the positive outcomes of their engagement.

The moderator, Avgoustinos Kitromilidis, reinforced the importance of self-initiative, citing the ease with which information about MEPs and the European Parliament can be found online, urging individuals not to wait for others to inform them. A participant highlighted the evident vibrancy of youth in the free Famagusta district, noting the numerous youth councils and the unity of purpose among young people, all striving for improvement in their region. He also reiterated the concern about lowering the voting age without first ensuring that young people are automatically registered to vote and have a clear understanding of the impact of their vote, warning against "directed" voting. Another participant expressed agreement on the need for youth participation but questioned the political structure itself, suggesting that often, individuals create an image for themselves to attract votes, rather than being genuinely qualified. Lingis concurred, acknowledging that while some individuals may not be the most capable, it is crucial for competent individuals to enter politics, breaking the vicious cycle in which a perceived lack of quality discourages capable people from engaging.

Youth in Local Governments: Municipal Youth Councils

In summary, the panel provided a comprehensive overview of youth participation in local governance, highlighting both the systemic barriers at the national level and the promising grassroots initiatives. Speakers underscored the need to move beyond symbolic inclusion towards genuine youth influence, advocating for structured participation, political education from an early age, and practical opportunities for young people to contribute to their communities. While challenges like apathy and resistance from established structures persist, successful examples demonstrate that empowering youth can lead to tangible improvements and foster a more engaged and democratic citizenry.

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November 2025