



Cyprus Forum.

Shaping Policy Together

Annual Report



1-3 October 2025



Nicosia Old Town Municipality, Cyprus

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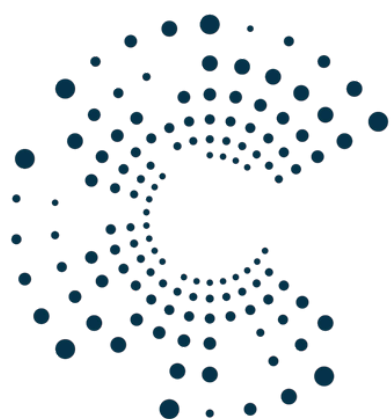


This report offers a comprehensive summary of the Cyprus Forum 2025, capturing the key discussions and insights shared during the event. We extend our gratitude to all participants, including political leaders, professionals, media representatives, academics, and members of civil society, for their valuable contributions.

The views expressed in this report are solely those of the respective speakers and do not necessarily represent the official positions of the Cyprus Forum, its organisers, or partners. Our goal remains to ignite dialogue and inspire change by fostering inclusive and meaningful conversations on critical issues.

Readers are encouraged to reflect on the perspectives presented and contribute to the ongoing discourse.

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June 2026



**Cyprus
Forum.**

Shaping Policy Together

1-3 October 2025

Nicosia Old Town Hall | Ledra Palace

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 Ledra Palace Hotel

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Peace and Democracy Award

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Giulia Bertezzo, Head of the Cyprus Settlement Support Unit, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (European Commission)



DAY 1

01 October 2025

Nicosia Old Town Hall

Opening Ceremony

On Wednesday, October 1st, the Cyprus Forum 2025 officially opened with its inaugural ceremony at Nicosia Town Hall.

The opening ceremony included a series of welcome addresses, laying the groundwork for the discussions and sessions of the main forum beginning the following day, with an emphasis on innovation, governance, and urban development.

Welcoming remarks were delivered by the Executive President of the Cyprus Forum, Mr Nicolas Kyriakides, followed by Keynote addresses from Mr Nikos Christodoulides, President of the Republic of Cyprus, Mr Costas Kadis, European Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans, Ms Marta Kos, European Commissioner for Enlargement, Mr Mario Nava, Directorate-General for Employment Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission, and Mr. Constantinos Yiorkadjis, Chairman of The Nicosia District Local Government Organisation.



Welcome Address

***Nicolas Kyriakides,
Executive President of the Cyprus Forum***

Mr Nicolas Kyriakides, Executive President & Founding Member of the Cyprus Forum, opened the event by noting its growth into an international platform with presence in major policy centres, while highlighting initiatives to strengthen democratic institutions in Cyprus.

He warned that democracy today faces internal threats, as political discourse becomes increasingly polarised and hostile, stressing that disagreement must remain respectful and constructive. Kyriakides also underlined the importance of rebuilding trust between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities.

He concluded by reaffirming the Forum's role in promoting dialogue, unity, and more effective, responsible policymaking.



Keynote Address

*Nikos Christodoulides,
President of the Republic of Cyprus*

In his welcoming address, and reflecting on the symbolic timing of the event, the President referred to the sixty-fifth anniversary of the proclamation of the Republic of Cyprus, expressing regret that the country remains divided. “As long as the occupation continues... the future of our country cannot be what we envision”, he stated, stressing that the division of Nicosia as the last divided capital of Europe continues to limit Cyprus’s full potential.

President Christodoulides reaffirmed that the resolution of the Cyprus problem remains the government’s “number one priority”. He pointed to recent developments, including statements by the UN Secretary-General, indicating prospects for the resumption of negotiations aimed at a “functional and sustainable solution” based on the agreed framework and EU principles. While acknowledging ongoing challenges, he noted that “small steps” allow for cautious optimism and emphasised a policy of “assertive realism”. Referring to past deadlocks, he highlighted that current diplomatic progress would have seemed unlikely in 2023, when demands for sovereign equality were set as preconditions for dialogue. Reiterating the government’s position, he stressed that “we will never discuss a two-state solution”, adding that “the wall of occupation is not impenetrable” if efforts remain consistent, methodical, and credible.

Outlining the government’s broader strategy, the President emphasised efforts to strengthen both internal and external pillars of state power. He referred to ongoing reforms aimed at modernising institutions, strengthening the rule of law, combating corruption, managing migration, and enhancing security and social welfare. These reforms, he noted, are underpinned by a “strong and resilient economy”.

Highlighting economic performance, President Christodoulides pointed to high growth rates, full employment conditions, and a declining public debt trajectory as indicators of success. He described these outcomes as the result of “responsible fiscal policy” based on social liberalism, enabling targeted support for vulnerable households and businesses. He also referred to continuous upgrades by credit rating agencies and positive assessments by international institutions as a “vote of confidence” in the Cypriot economy.

On the international stage, the President presented Cyprus as a “pillar of security and stability” in the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East. He emphasised the country’s role as a reliable partner, highlighting initiatives such as facilitating the safe evacuation of civilians and the provision of humanitarian aid corridors. Cyprus, he noted, is leveraging its geographical position to act as “a safe harbour in troubled waters” and a “beacon that illuminates the path of peace”.

Looking ahead, President Christodoulides referred to the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2026 as a “very important milestone” and a “national mission”. He expressed confidence that Cyprus will contribute meaningfully to addressing European challenges and promoting further integration, while also showcasing its role as a credible and responsible member state.

He concluded by expressing confidence that the Cyprus Forum will once again contribute to enriching public debate with constructive ideas and proposals, reinforcing its role as a platform that connects policy discussion with decision-making processes.



Keynote Address

Costas Kadis
Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans

In his keynote address, Costas Kadis underlined the growing importance of the European blue economy, describing it as a key catalyst for economic growth and transformation within the European Union. He noted that the sector supports approximately five million jobs and contributes more than €250 billion annually in added value, making it one of the fastest-growing areas of the European economy.

Kadis stressed the strategic relevance of the blue economy, linking it directly to broader policy priorities such as resilience, energy security, climate neutrality, food sufficiency, and innovation. He outlined both traditional sectors, including maritime transport, fisheries, aquaculture, and coastal tourism, as well as emerging industries such as renewable marine energy, blue biotechnology, the bioeconomy, and ocean research. Addressing the challenges facing the sector, he pointed to biodiversity loss, pollution, overfishing, and the impacts of climate change as key threats to the sustainability of oceans. He emphasised that these issues require coordinated and forward-looking responses at the European level.

Referring to ongoing policy efforts, Kadis highlighted the role of the European Commission in developing comprehensive strategies to safeguard marine ecosystems while ensuring economic sustainability. In this context, he presented the recently introduced European Ocean Pact as “the first holistic strategy for the conservation and sustainable management of our seas”.

He concluded by reiterating the importance of continued collaboration and policy-driven action to ensure that Europe’s seas remain a source of life, prosperity, and stability for future generations.



Keynote Address

Marta Kos
European Commissioner for Enlargement

In her address, Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos highlighted the importance of European unity, recalling that Europe is “in a fight... for a continent that is whole and at peace, for a free and independent Europe”. She presented EU enlargement as a key tool in achieving this objective.

She noted that enlargement offers opportunities to boost economic growth, strengthen partnerships, and enhance the Union’s collective security, while also improving its ability to address challenges such as migration and organised crime. At the same time, she stressed the need to uphold core values, democratic principles, and institutional efficiency within the Union.

Referring to Europe’s history, Kos emphasised that reconciliation remains at the heart of the European project, pointing to examples such as Nova Gorica and Gorizia as symbols of transformation from division to cooperation. She underlined that enlargement continues to play a crucial role in fostering stability, particularly in the Western Balkans and in the context of Ukraine and Moldova.

She made clear that accession is a strict, merit-based process, requiring tangible reforms and a genuine commitment to democratic standards. “Our aspiration for an independent Europe cannot come with any discounts”, she stressed.

Looking ahead, she referred to Cyprus’s upcoming EU Council Presidency as an important opportunity to maintain momentum on enlargement. She concluded by calling for collective effort to advance European integration, noting that “the time to unify Europe is now”.



Keynote Address

Mario Nava
*Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion,
European Commission*

In his remarks, Mario Nava highlighted the particular significance of this year's Forum, pointing to the broader geopolitical context. Referring to recent statements by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, he noted that Europe is currently facing a period of heightened challenges, where geopolitical developments are increasingly shaping the Union's priorities alongside economic competitiveness and social policy.

Nava also stressed that this edition of the Cyprus Forum is especially important as it precedes Cyprus's upcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Reflecting on Cyprus's 2012 Presidency, he recalled its pivotal role during the peak of the eurozone crisis, including key developments such as the "whatever it takes" moment and the advancement of the banking union.

Looking ahead, he outlined several major policy priorities on the European agenda, including the Savings and Investment Union, the forthcoming Quality Jobs initiative, and the EU's first Anti-Poverty Strategy. He noted that these initiatives will be central to discussions during the Cypriot Presidency and are critical to Europe's economic and social future.

He concluded by expressing confidence in Cyprus's preparedness to assume the Presidency, highlighting ongoing cooperation between the European Commission and Cypriot authorities. While acknowledging the scale of the challenges ahead, he conveyed optimism that Cyprus will successfully lead during this important period for the European Union.



Keynote Address

Constantinos Yiorkadjis
Chairman of The Nicosia District Local Government Organisation

In his address, Constantinos Yiorkadjis expressed both pride and appreciation for the evolution of the Cyprus Forum, noting how the initiative has grown over the past six years into a significant platform for dialogue and engagement. He commended the organisers for developing an event that continues to expand in scope and impact.

He emphasised that the Cyprus Forum is “not just another conference”, but a space that brings together stakeholders from across the public sector, local government, European institutions, the private sector, and civil society. This diversity, he noted, allows for the exchange of knowledge, experience, and ideas on issues that shape the country’s future.

Yiorkadjis placed particular emphasis on the Forum’s role in encouraging youth participation. He highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for young people to engage, express their views, and contribute to public discourse, describing this as a key step towards strengthening civic engagement.

He further underlined that by fostering dialogue and collaboration, the Forum encourages decision-makers to listen and work towards practical solutions. In doing so, it contributes to building a more inclusive and connected community, where citizens feel a shared sense of responsibility for the future of the country.

He concluded by wishing the Forum every success, expressing confidence that it will continue to promote meaningful dialogue and constructive participation.



Zeno of Citium Address

The panel featured a fireside discussion with:

- Michalis Arghyrou Professor of Economics, Head of Economics Office of the Prime Minister of Greece
- Kyriakos Iordanou, General Manager, ICPAC

Knowledge partner: ICPAC

Geopolitical instability, rising uncertainty, and structural economic challenges are reshaping Europe's economic landscape, Professor of Economics and Head of the Economic Office of the Prime Minister of Greece, Michalis Arghyrou, argued.

The discussion took the form of a fireside chat with Mr Arghyrou and the General Manager of ICPAC, Mr Kyriakos Iordanou.

Opening the discussion, Mr Arghyrou highlighted the increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, referring to successive crises including the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and ongoing tensions in the Middle East. He noted that these developments have led to significant economic disruptions, particularly through energy shocks and inflationary pressures, while also increasing uncertainty for businesses and households. This, he explained, negatively affects investment, planning, and overall economic activity.

He further emphasised the growing importance of defence spending across Europe, noting a shift in economic priorities as countries seek to strengthen their security capabilities. This reallocation of resources, he said, carries fiscal implications and reflects a broader transformation of the European economic model in response to geopolitical realities.

Addressing the issue of Cyprus potentially joining the Schengen Area, Mr Arghyrou stated that, in principle, the free movement of persons is a fundamental and beneficial aspect of the European project. However, he acknowledged that current migration pressures and geopolitical conditions require careful consideration in assessing such a step.

Turning to global trade, Mr Arghyrou pointed to increasing fragmentation, trade tensions, and the rise of protectionist measures. While reaffirming Europe's commitment to rules-based free trade, he expressed concern over growing trade barriers, particularly in relation to the United States. Nevertheless, he welcomed recent agreements that provide

greater stability and predictability, while stressing the need for the European Union to diversify trade partnerships and strengthen internal trade within the single market.

He also highlighted the growing importance of the services sector, noting that while global trade in goods has plateaued, trade in services continues to expand. This, he argued, presents significant opportunities for economies such as Cyprus and Greece.

On European competitiveness, Mr Arghyrou acknowledged that the EU has fallen behind in certain areas, particularly in digital technologies, and stressed the need for reforms based on the Draghi report. He identified key priorities including reducing bureaucracy, advancing the Capital Markets Union and Banking Union, investing in education and skills, and developing a more integrated European energy market.

He further emphasised the need to balance competitiveness with cohesion, arguing that economic growth and investment should be distributed across all member states to ensure sustainable and inclusive development. At the same time, he stressed that while foreign direct investment is essential for growth and technology transfer, it must be carefully managed to avoid creating strategic dependencies.

Referring to recent economic policy measures in Greece, Mr Arghyrou outlined a series of tax reforms aimed at increasing labour market participation, boosting investment, and enhancing productivity. He explained that these measures focus on reducing income taxes, particularly for young people and middle-income groups, in order to incentivise employment, support economic activity, and address the long-standing issue of brain drain.

Concluding the discussion, both speakers highlighted the importance of coordinated European action in addressing current challenges, underlining the need for structural reforms, strategic investment, and deeper integration to ensure long-term economic resilience and growth.



Peace and Democracy award

Speakers:

- Charalambos Prountzos, Mayor of Nicosia Municipality
- Mehmet Harmancı, Mayor of Nicosia Turkish Municipality
- Giulia Bertezzolo, European Commission

The Peace and Democracy Award ceremony underscored the importance of cooperation, dialogue, and civic responsibility in advancing reconciliation in Cyprus. Jointly presented by the mayors of both sides of Nicosia and a European Commission representative, the award symbolised a shared commitment to honouring individuals who have contributed meaningfully to peace and democracy on the island.

Charalambos Prountzos highlighted the Cyprus Forum as a platform for “concrete results” and stressed the need to overcome division through practical collaboration, noting that “hope is built step by step through small but meaningful successes.”

Mehmet Harmancı reinforced the urgency of action and deeper engagement between communities, emphasising that the goal is not simply to advocate for peace but to “build the peace” through tangible cooperation.

Giulia Bertezzolo placed the discussion in a broader context, describing peace as “a daily practice” that requires compromise, dialogue, and continuous effort. She stressed that inclusive solutions and mutual understanding are essential for sustainable progress.

The awardees, Türkan Aziz and Xenophon Kallis, were recognised for their lifelong contributions to society and reconciliation. Aziz was honoured for her pioneering role in healthcare and her service across communities, while Kallis was recognised for his dedication to addressing the issue of missing persons and promoting closure for affected families. Their legacy was presented as a powerful reminder that peace is built through consistent, human-centred action.

Overall, the ceremony conveyed a clear message, advancing peace and democracy in Cyprus requires sustained cooperation, practical initiatives, and a commitment to shared values.



DAY 2

02 October 2025

Nicosia Old Town Hall

Panel I – Fireside discussion on digital policy, AI, and the role of tech giants in democratic societies

Moderator: Ioanna Theodosopoulou, Legal Advisor at Zenox Public Affairs

- Nicodemus Damianou, Deputy Minister of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy
- Flavio Arzarello, Public Policy Manager, Economic and Regulatory policy at Meta

Zeno Room

Opening the discussion, Mr Damianou outlined Cyprus’s priorities in the digital sphere, emphasising support for SMEs, the protection of minors online, and strengthening Europe’s competitiveness. He highlighted that while Europe produces a high number of startups, “we maintain less than a 10% global share”, as many companies relocate abroad. He pointed to the European Innovation Act and upcoming funding instruments as key tools to address this gap, alongside initiatives in AI, dual-use technologies, and space policy.

Mr Arzarello stressed the transformative impact of artificial intelligence, noting estimates that AI could significantly boost global GDP. He argued that Europe has “all the ingredients” to succeed, including talent and research capacity, but faces structural challenges, particularly regulatory complexity. Referring to “around 270 regulators” and over 100 legislative instruments, he called for simplification through the Digital Omnibus initiative.

He specifically identified the AI Act and GDPR as areas requiring adjustment, arguing that the current framework creates uncertainty and may discourage innovation. He proposed a “stop and talk period” to reassess the AI Act and suggested embedding a “right to innovation” within EU legislation to better balance regulation with technological development.

Responding, Mr Damianou emphasised the need for what he described as “smart simplification”, maintaining Europe’s core values of human rights, transparency, and security, while making regulation more practical and accessible. He rejected approaches that would isolate Europe from global tech actors, noting that large technology companies are already embedded in the European digital ecosystem and can support SMEs in scaling and innovation.

At the same time, he stressed that these companies must “be part of the solution and not part of the problem”, particularly in areas such as the protection of minors, tackling disinformation, and ensuring algorithmic transparency. He also underlined the importance of cooperation with international partners, stating that Europe should not become isolated in pursuit of digital sovereignty.

On the role of big tech, Mr Arzarello highlighted Meta’s contribution to economic activity and employment in Europe, arguing that digital platforms support business growth, particularly for SMEs. He also emphasised the importance of open-source AI models, such as Meta’s LLaMA, as tools that enable wider access to innovation.

Addressing concerns around privacy and regulation, Mr Arzarello reiterated that services such as WhatsApp rely on end-to-end encryption, stressing that “anything that would disrupt [it] would be detrimental to our service”. He argued that privacy protection and innovation must be balanced, with innovation seen as a means of expanding rights, including in areas such as healthcare and scientific research.

During the discussion, questions from the audience focused on issues such as surveillance concerns linked to proposed EU regulations, misinformation and deepfakes, and the broader impact of AI on society. Mr Damianou acknowledged that there is “no easy answer” to balancing innovation with consumer protection but stressed that Europe’s regulatory foundations remain strong and will not be compromised.

Both speakers agreed that cooperation between regulators and industry is essential to address challenges such as misinformation, online safety, and the ethical use of AI. They also highlighted the importance of education and digital literacy as key tools in enabling citizens to navigate the evolving technological landscape.

In summary, the discussion underscored that Europe’s challenge lies in achieving a balance between fostering innovation and safeguarding fundamental rights, with “simplification, cooperation, and trust” identified as key elements in shaping the future of digital policy.



Panel II – Citizens discuss with MEP

Moderators: Avgoustinos Kitromilidis, Policy Officer at Oxygen for Democracy and Evie Theocharous, Policy Officer at Zenox Public Affairs

- Costas Mavrides, MEP

Knowledge partner: European Parliament Liaison Office in Cyprus

Zeno Room

In his introductory remarks, Mr Mavrides described the European Union as the “common home” of its citizens, acknowledging both its “serious possibilities” and its weaknesses. He clarified that his criticism is driven “not by deconstruction, but by improvement”, adding that the future of the Union “depends more on you young people” than on current political actors.

He identified three key issues currently shaping the European agenda. On common defence and security, he stressed that “threats are real”, particularly in the case of Cyprus, noting that “a few hundred metres from here begins the illegal Turkish occupation of European Union territory”. However, he criticised the absence of a clear political orientation, questioning “what exactly are we defending?”, and highlighted that the European Parliament, despite being directly elected, “had no role” in shaping key defence decisions.

Referring to the SAFE regulation, he explained that it provides €150 billion in loans to member states, emphasising that Turkey “cannot take even one euro directly”. At the same time, he acknowledged concerns about indirect participation, noting that companies linked to third countries may be involved under certain conditions, raising questions about strategic dependencies.

On housing, Mr Mavrides described it as “a huge issue, not just social but socio-economic”, linking it to broader challenges such as living conditions, demographic trends, and economic stability. He welcomed the decision to assign responsibility to a dedicated EU Commissioner and indicated that the issue will feature prominently during the upcoming Cypriot Presidency.

On illegal immigration, he called for a “rational” and non-ideological approach, stressing the need to distinguish clearly between refugees, migrants, and illegal immigration. He warned that dismissing citizens’ concerns risks fuelling political extremism, stating that “millions of sensible citizens... through despair, choose intolerant leaders”. He pointed to Denmark as an example of a country applying strict policies within a social democratic framework.

Addressing the issue of trust, Mr Mavrides noted a significant shift among younger generations, who increasingly recognise that their challenges are “not only Cypriot, but also European”. However, he acknowledged persistent dissatisfaction, linking it in Cyprus to corruption scandals, housing pressures, and limited access to quality employment. He also pointed to structural weaknesses in the EU’s institutional framework, noting that the European Parliament “does not even have the right to propose” the President of the European Commission, which undermines democratic legitimacy.

Responding to questions from the audience, he reiterated that key shortcomings in EU defence policy stem from earlier political choices, suggesting that “the battle of battles was not given” at the appropriate time. He emphasised that member states, including Cyprus, still retain the ability to intervene, particularly through unanimity requirements, in order to safeguard national and European interests.

In summary, Mr Mavrides argued that while the European Union “is not perfect”, it remains a vital project that must be strengthened through “responsibility, participation, and realism”, with citizens playing an essential role in shaping its future.



Panel III – Fireside discussion on institutional reform and democratic resilience

Discussant: Nicolas Kyriakides, Executive President & Founding Member, Cyprus Forum

- Irene Piki, Deputy Minister to the President, Government of the Republic of Cyprus

Knowledge partner: Oxygen for Democracy

Zeno Room

The discussion focused on institutional reform, transparency, anti-corruption policy, democratic resilience, and the modernisation of the Cypriot state. Nicolas Kyriakides welcomed Deputy Minister Irene Piki to the Cyprus Forum for the third consecutive year, noting the value of this annual exchange in reviewing progress on governance and rule of law issues.

Irene Piki opened by describing the Cyprus Forum as an important space for dialogue on democracy, the rule of law, and public accountability. She then referred to Cyprus' latest GRECO evaluation, explaining that the fifth evaluation round concerned the central government and the police. Out of 22 recommendations, six had been fully implemented, while significant progress had been made on thirteen more. She noted that approximately 85 per cent of the recommendations had either been implemented or were close to implementation, exceeding the average compliance rate of other countries at the same stage.

Among the key developments, Piki highlighted the code of ethics for ministers, the appointment of an ethics adviser for officials and ministers, the online consultation platform, and the strengthening of the Independent Anti-Corruption Authority. She stressed that ethical governance often involves grey areas and that officials need access to independent guidance.

The discussion then turned to the anti-bribery ISO standard supported by the Ministry of Justice. Piki clarified that this was an existing anti-bribery and anti-corruption standard, with the Ministry providing grants to companies, public authorities, and local government bodies for consultancy and certification. She noted that 90 applications had been submitted, including 40 from public bodies. Departments such as customs, taxation, and radiology were mentioned as examples where such systems could help prevent bribery and improve public trust. Implementation was expected to take approximately one year to eighteen months.

On the Independent Anti-Corruption Authority, Piki said that the government's role was to provide the resources required for the Authority to operate effectively while respecting its independence. She noted that its budget had increased by 70 per cent since 2024 and that legislation was being discussed to allow the Authority to hire its own staff. Kyriakides added that the Authority had already contributed to progress in lobbying regulation, with more lobbyists registered, meetings reported, and public bodies becoming more aware of their obligations.

The final part of the discussion addressed the reform of the Legal Service, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Audit Office. Piki said these reforms were part of a wider effort to modernise institutions that had remained largely unchanged since 1960. She explained that the proposed Legal Service reform would separate the role of the legal adviser of the state from that of the public prosecutor and would introduce oversight of prosecutorial decisions. She also emphasised the importance of single non-renewable terms for key officeholders, arguing that this reduces dependency and strengthens institutional independence.

Regarding the Audit Office, Piki referred to proposals for financial autonomy and the creation of an audit board. She explained that the Audit Office would receive an agreed total budget and would then decide internally how to allocate it, within the general fiscal rules that apply to public expenditure. This, she said, would reduce executive interference and strengthen the Office's independence.

During the audience discussion, questions addressed the financial autonomy of the Audit Office, the practical effectiveness of the Anti-Corruption Authority, and the operation of e-consultation. Piki explained that public comments submitted through the consultation platform are collected after one month and accompany the bill when it is submitted to Parliament, together with explanations of whether and how they were addressed. She also referred to the gov.cy governance platform, through which citizens can monitor government decisions, follow implementation of the government programme, and submit suggestions.

Kyriakides closed the discussion by thanking Deputy Minister Piki for her participation. The discussion underlined the government's stated commitment to transparency, anti-corruption safeguards, institutional reform, and greater public participation, while also highlighting the continuing importance of independent oversight and accountability in strengthening democratic resilience in Cyprus.

Cyprus EU Presidency in 2026



Panel IV – Cyprus EU Presidency in 2026

Moderator: Elena Lazarou, Director General at ELIAMEP

- Eleftheria Aristotelous, Deputy Head, Programme and Policy Division, Secretariat of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU 2026
- Cleopatra Kitti, Certified Independent Director; Advisor to international organisations and governments; Founder The Mediterranean Growth Initiative, Cleopatra Kitti Limited

Knowledge partner: ELIAMEP

Zeno Room

The discussion featured Ms Eleftheria Aristotelous, Deputy Head of the Programme and Policy Division of the Secretariat of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU, and Ms Cleopatra Kitti, certified independent director, adviser to international organisations and governments, and founder of the Mediterranean Growth Initiative. The discussion was moderated by Ms Elena Lazarou, Director General of ELIAMEP.

Opening the discussion, Ms Aristotelous said Cyprus is preparing “methodically and intensively” for its second Presidency, describing it as an “ambitious, results-driven and forward-looking presidency”. She stressed that both Cyprus and the European Union have changed significantly since 2012, noting that Cyprus is now “a more mature Member State”, more experienced, and more committed to deeper European integration.

Referring to the broader context, she highlighted growing global instability, including Russia’s war against Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East, migration pressures, climate change, and attempts to undermine the rules-based international order. She noted that the Presidency will take place at a time when the EU must respond to citizens’ expectations, strengthen competitiveness, and address major strategic priorities reflected in the Union’s current agenda.

Ms Aristotelous identified several issues expected to dominate Cyprus's six-month programme, including Ukraine, competitiveness, defence and security, migration, enlargement, and the next Multiannual Financial Framework. She noted that the new EU budget negotiations will be "the most important dossier" Cyprus will inherit, requiring it to act as an "honest broker" in moving the discussions forward. She also referred to Cyprus's intention to focus on the EU's southern neighbourhood, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and relations with Gulf partners.

Among the priorities she highlighted were simplification and competitiveness, deepening the single market, advancing the Capital Markets Union, water management, housing, and the implementation of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum. She also noted that Cyprus plans to host 27 high-level meetings, including an informal meeting of heads of state or government.

Ms Kitti argued that Cyprus's Presidency is taking place in a "completely different world" from that of 2012, pointing to the erosion of multilateralism, the disruption of trade and capital flows, the rise of more nationalist agendas, and growing challenges to Europe's unity, security, competitiveness, and values. She described the Cypriot Presidency as a case of "small state, big opportunity", arguing that smaller member states can often perform well by listening, building coalitions, and acting as trusted conveners.

She said the key test for Cyprus would be whether it can carry the Union's business forward smoothly, particularly on the MFF, while also defining a wider theme "bigger than itself". In this regard, she suggested that Cyprus could use water as a unifying issue for Europe, while also building a legacy of compromise and peace. She further argued that Cyprus should use the Presidency to remind Europe of its own reality as a divided island with part of its territory under occupation and EU law suspended there, while also presenting itself as "part of the solution, not part of the problem".

On the Euro-Mediterranean dimension, Ms Kitti was sharply critical, stating that "the EU has failed in its Euro-Mediterranean policy completely". She argued that despite the scale and importance of the region, there has been no meaningful progress in regional integration over the past decade. In her view, Cyprus has an opportunity to bring forward new thinking and help make the EU's Mediterranean engagement more strategic, institutional, and long-term.

Responding to audience questions on water, mediation, and the region, Ms Aristotelous said that Cyprus's role as Presidency is to facilitate discussions, elevate issues of concern, and create space for meaningful policy debate, rather than set an entirely new EU agenda from scratch. On water management, she said Cyprus hopes to build on existing momentum and previous regional work, including discussions held under the Med9 format, in order to encourage more tangible solutions. On the Mediterranean and foreign policy, she stressed that Cyprus's added value lies in its close knowledge of the region and its strong bilateral and trilateral ties with neighbouring countries.

Ms Kitti, for her part, argued that progress on regional issues such as water and migration requires a return to basics, beginning with reliable data and informed policymaking. She stressed that the Euro-Mediterranean region needs long-term frameworks built on evidence rather than short-term political priorities, adding that issues such as peace, prosperity, and collaboration depend on more serious and sustained policy foundations.

In summary, the discussion underlined that Cyprus's 2026 EU Presidency will unfold in a demanding geopolitical and institutional environment but also offers an opportunity for the country to act as a credible convener, advance strategic priorities, and bring greater attention to both Mediterranean challenges and Cyprus's own European reality.



Panel V – The future of work: Advancing job quality, skills and social prosperity

Moderator: Maria Hambi, Editor in Chief, Stockwatch

- Yiannis Panayiotou, Minister of Labour and Social Insurance, Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance
- Mario Nava, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion European Commission
- Nicholas Yatromanolakis, Founder, Policy Lab; former Deputy Minister of Culture, Greece
- Anna Diamantopoulou, President of Diktio - Network for Reform in Greece and Europe
- George Pantelides, Chairman, Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation (OEB)
- Filokypros Rousounides, Secretary General, Cyprus Chamber Of Commerce and Industry

Zeno Room

Opening the discussion, speakers were asked to identify the key challenge or opportunity for the future of work. Mr Nava pointed to the growing “skills gap”, stressing that competitiveness will depend on higher skills rather than reduced wages or labour rights. Mr Panayiotou highlighted “social justice” as the central challenge, warning that technological progress must not lead to greater inequality or a shrinking middle class. Mr Yatromanolakis emphasised the need to “learn to learn”, underlining that lifelong learning is becoming essential in a rapidly changing labour market. Ms Diamantopoulou focused on “adaptation”, arguing that institutions, education systems, and social policies must adjust to fast-moving changes, while Mr Pantelides and Mr Rousounides stressed “adaptability”, “capacity”, and workforce availability as key priorities.

Expanding on these themes, Mr Panayiotou outlined Cyprus’s efforts to prepare its labour market for the digital and green transitions. He noted significant progress in employment, with the country achieving over 80% employment and a sharp reduction in youth unemployment. He highlighted that participation in training programmes increased by 86% over two years, while training in digital and green skills rose by over 700%, describing lifelong learning as no longer optional but necessary to remain “relevant and competitive”. He also referred to ongoing efforts to regulate teleworking and promote flexible forms of work based on productivity rather than hours worked.

Mr Nava distinguished between unemployment and employment rates, arguing that while unemployment has significantly declined across Europe, the “real battle” now is increasing labour market participation. He pointed to 51 million people in Europe who could work but do not, including a large proportion of women, often due to insufficient social support systems such as childcare. He also highlighted migrants as an underutilised workforce and stressed that improving inclusion and social infrastructure will be key to future productivity.

Focusing on skills, Mr Yatromanolakis presented data-driven insights, noting that up to 70% of skills required for current jobs are expected to change within five years, largely driven by artificial intelligence. He emphasised that new roles are emerging rapidly, with a growing share of jobs that did not exist two decades ago. Beyond technology, he pointed to the need for skills related to remote work and intergenerational collaboration, describing the transformation as “systemic” rather than purely technological. He stressed the importance of data in shaping both government policy and business strategy, enabling better alignment between labour supply and market needs.

Ms Diamantopoulou highlighted the scale of disruption ahead, noting that up to 50% of professions may be affected by artificial intelligence and automation. She argued that policymakers must move beyond gradual reform and embrace structural change across three areas: labour markets, education systems, and the welfare state. She stressed the need for new institutional frameworks, stronger lifelong learning systems, and a rethinking of education, including combining humanities with digital skills. She also called for a new social contract to ensure income security and support workers through transitions, particularly as job stability declines.

From a business perspective, Mr Pantelides emphasised that up to 85% of jobs are expected to change or adapt by 2030, while the relevance of skills is shortening dramatically. He called for closer collaboration between government and industry to develop targeted training systems and criticised existing limitations on investment in human capital. He stressed the need for education systems to better align with market needs and encouraged a stronger focus on entrepreneurship and innovation.

Mr Rousounides highlighted the challenges facing small and medium-sized enterprises, which make up the vast majority of businesses in Cyprus. He stressed the need for simplified regulatory frameworks and greater flexibility to allow SMEs to adapt quickly to technological changes. He argued that businesses must remain competitive while also fulfilling their social responsibilities, particularly in protecting workers’ rights during this transition.

Concluding the discussion, Mr Panayiotou emphasised that managing the future of work requires cooperation between governments, businesses, and European institutions. He argued that the challenges ahead are matched by significant opportunities and that Europe is well-positioned to address them. He stressed the importance of strengthening the middle class, noting that sustainable social cohesion depends on ensuring that economic growth translates into improved wages and broader prosperity.

In summary, the discussion highlighted that the future of work will be shaped by rapid technological change, demographic shifts, and evolving skills requirements, requiring a coordinated response centred on “skills, adaptation, and social justice” to ensure both competitiveness and social cohesion.



Panel VI – Tax reform in Cyprus: Challenges and the new tax reality

Moderator: Georgia Channi, Finance Editor, Politis Newspaper

- Makis Keravnos, Minister of Finance (keynote speech read by Maria Heracleous)
- Marios Tannousis, CEO, Invest Cyprus
- Michalis Grekas, Indirect Tax Expert, KPMG, Chairman, VAT Committee, ICPAC
- Eftychios Eftychiou, Chairman of the ICPAC Tax Planning and Policy Committee, ICPAC
- Grigoris Kamperis, Philip Morris Cyprus

Zeno Room

In remarks delivered on behalf of the Minister of Finance, Ms Heracleous said the reform is intended to create “a tax system that is fair, efficient, competitive and modern”. She stressed that the current effort is not merely a technical exercise, but “a substantial political choice and act”, aimed at supporting business and growth, reducing tax evasion and tax avoidance, cultivating trust, and serving the citizen. She noted that around 20 years have passed since the last major tax reform and argued that Cyprus now needs a framework better adapted to a changing international environment and a more diversified economic model.

She outlined the government’s core objectives, including a fairer distribution of the tax burden, stronger support for households and the middle class, and a stable environment for business and investment. As examples, she referred to proposed exemptions for families with children, first-home loan instalments, rental costs, and household energy upgrades. She also stressed that the reform aims to strengthen competitiveness, improve tax compliance, and preserve fiscal neutrality while broadening the tax base. According to Ms Heracleous, the process was supported by a study from the University of Cyprus’s Economics Research Centre, input from experts, and extensive consultation with social and economic actors.

Opening the discussion from the investment perspective, Mr Tannousis stressed that tax reform should not be prolonged unnecessarily, as delays create uncertainty for both local and foreign investors. He said stability is a key factor in investment decisions and argued that for Cyprus, tax policy remains one of the most important differentiating factors in attracting foreign investment. He noted that Invest Cyprus had consulted foreign investors and domestic stakeholders before the bills were published, and said there was broad willingness to support a reform that is balanced and in the country's wider interest. While acknowledging that tax reforms elsewhere can take years, he said Cyprus should aim to move ahead "as soon as possible", provided the outcome is sound.

Mr Grekas focused on the absence of VAT and indirect taxation from the centre of the reform debate, calling this a major omission. He argued that VAT is the largest source of tax revenue both in Cyprus and across Europe, and also the area most vulnerable to tax evasion. For that reason, he said, excluding it from a reform that claims to prioritise the fight against tax evasion is "somewhat contradictory". In his view, the reform should have included technological tools such as electronic invoicing and real-time digital reporting, which could help authorities identify suspicious transactions and prevent evasion more effectively. He argued that the state should focus more on prevention and modernisation rather than relying primarily on stricter penalties and expanded enforcement powers.

Mr Eftychiou was more critical of both the process and the substance of the reform. On procedure, he argued that consultation had been limited and insufficiently structured, and said he did not share the Ministry's assessment that there had been serious or extensive dialogue. On content, he questioned whether the package could genuinely be described as a "holistic reform", suggesting that in practice it amounted largely to changes in tax rates combined with a wide range of so-called anti-abuse provisions. He argued that many of these measures are not truly anti-abusive, but instead amount to an expansion of the tax base.

He also expressed concern that the increase in the corporate tax rate to 15 per cent could harm Cyprus's attractiveness, especially for foreign-interest companies that, he argued, contribute significantly to corporate tax revenues. In his view, the reform risks being a "spectacular own goal" if it weakens Cyprus's competitive position without external pressure requiring such a move. He further argued that the measures proposed do not properly target the black economy and that more attention should first be paid to collecting already confirmed but unpaid taxes. He also criticised the absence of new incentives to support the further inflow of foreign companies, especially given competition from jurisdictions such as Malta, Ireland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

Mr Kamperis addressed excise taxation and tobacco policy, arguing that while tax increases on tobacco products are often presented as a way to boost revenues and discourage smoking, excessive increases can have the opposite effect by pushing consumers towards the illegal market. He referred to the concept of an “ideal tax rate” that maximises revenue without generating harmful distortions, and argued that if taxes rise beyond that point, neither fiscal nor public health objectives are achieved. Referring to Cyprus specifically, he said that illegal consumption of traditional tobacco products is already significant and entails substantial revenue losses for the state. In that context, he welcomed the revision of the European tobacco tax framework, but argued that Cyprus must take into account its own specific conditions, including the Green Line, illegal trade, and the emergence of alternative products. He pointed to Greece as an example of a more consistent tax policy that reduced illicit trade, while warning against the sudden increases seen in countries such as France and the Netherlands.

In a final round of comments on concerns over the tax commissioner’s powers, speakers broadly called for balance and caution. Mr Tannousis said reform must remain fair and proportionate, warning against granting “superpowers” that could undermine investor confidence. Mr Grekas again stressed that the focus should be on prevention and the use of technology rather than primarily on punitive measures. Mr Eftychiou referred to earlier expert findings suggesting that excessive discretionary powers should be removed from legislation rather than expanded, and argued that current proposals move in the opposite direction. At the same time, he clarified that there is no opposition in principle to anti-abuse measures, provided they are properly designed and actually target the problem.

In summary, the discussion reflected broad agreement on the need for tax reform, but significant differences over its scope, priorities, and implementation, with speakers underlining that any successful reform must be fair, competitive, technologically modern, and carefully balanced between enforcement and economic attractiveness.



Panel VII – Wildfire prevention: Building resilient futures

Moderator: Georgios Chrysanthou, Journalist, Alpha Cyprus

- Kostas Papageorgiou, Department of Forests
- Fábio Silva, Fire Behaviour Analyst, greenflame
- Pierantonios Papazoglou, Research Associate in Civil Protection and Safety of Responders, European University Cyprus (EUC); CERIDES Research & Strategy Manager, Centre of Excellence in Risk and Decision Sciences (CERIDES)

Knowledge Partner: CERIDES

Aphrodite Room

Opening the discussion, Mr Chrysanthou referred to the July 2025 fire as a “national tragedy” and noted that while public attention has focused on operational failures, prevention remains harder to assess because it develops over time. He said the key question is what Cyprus is doing, and what more it must do, to avoid treating climate change as a convenient excuse instead of addressing deeper structural causes.

Mr Papageorgiou stressed that forest fires are a “very, very complex phenomenon” shaped by the interaction of climate, topography, and fuel. While climate change is clearly worsening the problem, he argued that abandonment of the countryside has also transformed the Cypriot landscape, with former agricultural land increasingly turning into continuous fuel, allowing fires to spread more easily and more quickly.

Mr Papazoglou said the discussion has now moved beyond “climate change” to a “climate crisis”, meaning that natural hazards are becoming more frequent and more intense. Drawing on both field experience and research, he said recent fires are not only larger in area, but also more intense in flame behaviour and speed of development. Referring to the recent Limassol fire, he noted that what stood out was how quickly it escalated into a major fire.

Both Cypriot speakers underlined the importance of active landscape management. Mr Papazoglou said there are strong indications that where land is cultivated and forms a managed agroforestry mosaic, fires are delayed and, in some cases, stopped. He noted that in recent fires, the spread was often slowed where vineyards and agricultural plots were maintained but accelerated dramatically in abandoned areas. Mr Papageorgiou agreed, arguing that restoring this kind of managed landscape must become central to prevention policy.

Drawing on Portugal's experience, Mr Silva said Mediterranean countries face similar wildfire conditions because they share both climatic pressures and comparable socio-economic challenges. He argued that the key issue is not only suppression or prevention in isolation, but whether countries are able to manage their landscapes in a meaningful way. Referring to Portugal, he noted that even after major reforms and increased investment in prevention, wildfires continue, which shows that public policy must also create social and economic conditions that allow communities to care for the land.

Mr Silva stressed that if land “doesn't have value, we will not manage the landscape”, pointing to Portugal's experience with privately owned land and regional differences in fire behaviour. He argued that where there is stronger economic activity and better land management, wildfire impacts are lower, even where climatic risk remains high.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of supporting local communities and creating incentives for people to remain active in rural areas. Mr Papageorgiou said the key challenge is whether socio-economic changes can bring people, especially young people, back to the countryside. Mr Papazoglou added that resilience requires a broader “palette of solutions”, including stronger local communities, organised volunteering, managed grazing, agricultural activity, and local profit cycles that make land management viable.

On technology, Mr Silva argued that effective fire management now depends on combining empirical knowledge from practitioners, scientific knowledge, and technological tools. Mr Papageorgiou said the Department of Forests has invested in drones, sensors, GIS systems, and a more integrated digital system to improve coordination between services. However, both speakers stressed that more personnel, vehicles, or aerial assets alone cannot solve the problem without a broader strategy.

In summary, the panel underlined that wildfire prevention in Cyprus and the wider Mediterranean requires an integrated approach centred on landscape management, rural regeneration, community resilience, and better use of science and technology, rather than relying only on suppression capacity.



Panel VIII – Fireside discussion on Migration Policy: Challenges, Realism, and Prospects for Cyprus and Europe

Nicholas A. Ioannides, Deputy Minister, Deputy Ministry of Migration and International Protection

Discussant: Nicolas Kyriakides, Executive President & Founding Member, Cyprus Forum

Aprodite Room

Opening the discussion, Mr Kyriakides noted that the European Union has not sufficiently supported frontline states such as Cyprus. Mr Ioannides agreed, stating that the EU was “caught unprepared” during the 2015 migration crisis, leaving frontline countries to manage disproportionate pressures. This, he said, led to fragmented responses and “inconsistent policies” across Member States.

He emphasised, however, that the EU is now moving in a more coordinated direction, particularly through the Pact on Migration and Asylum. Describing it as “a step in the right direction”, he highlighted that it introduces, for the first time, a more unified system for migration management, including faster procedures, stricter border controls, and elements of responsibility-sharing. Cyprus, he noted, will prioritise the “proper implementation” of the pact during its upcoming EU Council Presidency.

At the same time, he acknowledged that structural challenges remain, particularly as the Dublin system “remains largely as it is”, continuing to place pressure on first-entry states.

A key theme of the discussion was the need for practical solidarity. Mr Ioannides stressed that for Cyprus, solidarity must go beyond financial assistance. “Relocations are vital for us,” he said, noting that over 3,000 asylum seekers have been relocated from Cyprus to other Member States since 2022.

On national policy, he highlighted returns as a central pillar. Cyprus recorded nearly 11,000 departures in 2024, with similar figures expected in 2025. He also pointed out that “95% of asylum applications are rejected”, arguing that this indicates misuse of the system and reinforces the need to preserve resources for those genuinely entitled to protection.

Infrastructure and capacity were also discussed, with ongoing upgrades to reception centres aimed at ensuring dignified conditions and faster processing. Mr Ioannides noted that improved management of numbers is essential “to provide proper protection” in line with EU obligations.

On integration, he described migration as “a natural phenomenon” and stressed the need for a structured approach to social cohesion. A national integration strategy is expected to be adopted soon, focusing on language, employment, and participation. He also underlined the importance of addressing public perceptions, noting that “there is an incorrect image and stereotypes” about migrants in Cyprus.

Finally, the discussion touched on security concerns, particularly the “instrumentalisation” of migration through organised flows via the occupied areas. Mr Ioannides confirmed that Cyprus has taken stricter measures to address this, stressing the need to combat smuggling networks that exploit human vulnerability.

In summary, the discussion highlighted a shift towards a more pragmatic migration approach, combining EU-level coordination with national enforcement and integration policies, while emphasising that frontline states require sustained and tangible support.



Panel IX – Spotlight on long-term care in Cyprus

Moderator: Marios Kantaris, Health Services Research Centre

- Michalis Damianos, Minister of Health (keynote speech read by Rebecca Kokkinofta, Director, State General Laboratory)
- Dr Irene Cotter, Doctor working at the Medical and Public Health Services, Ministry of Health
- Stavroula Georgiou, Administrative Officer, Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare
- Christos Koulouteris, Team Leader-Cyprus Team, DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
- Dr Irshad Shaikh, Head of Country Office, World Health Organization
- Marina Polycarpou, Gerontologist, M.Sc. Managing Director, Materia Group
- Dimitris Lambrianides, President of the Cyprus Paraplegics Organisation

Knowledge Partner: Health Services Research Centre

Aphrodite Room

The discussion was moderated by Mr Marios Kantaris, who framed long-term care as a critical yet under-prioritised pillar of social policy, directly linked to “quality of life, dignity, and social protection.” He emphasised that, despite rising needs, Cyprus continues to rely heavily on informal care, with public spending significantly below EU levels.

Opening remarks on behalf of the Minister of Health stressed that population ageing is “no longer a future challenge but a present reality,” requiring a systemic response. The national strategy for healthy ageing was presented as a first step, focusing on prevention, community-based care, and active ageing.

From a European perspective, Mr Christos Koulouteris outlined the EU’s approach through the European Care Strategy, highlighting four key pillars: adequacy, availability, quality, and workforce. He noted a clear correlation between low public support and high out-of-pocket costs, a pattern particularly relevant to Cyprus.

Dr Irshad Shaikh of the WHO placed long-term care within the broader framework of universal health coverage, stressing that care must be “accessible, when needed, without financial hardship.” He emphasised workforce capacity, community-based care, and the growing role of digital tools such as telemedicine.

From the Ministry of Health, Dr Irene Cotter underlined prevention as central to reducing long-term care needs, noting that many chronic conditions stem from modifiable risk factors. She highlighted the importance of primary care, patient empowerment, and integrated services, while also stressing that long-term care is “not about us and them, it affects all of us.”

The Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare presented ongoing reforms, including a national strategy on active ageing, expansion of home care, and new subsidy schemes. However, Ms Stavroula Georgiou acknowledged that the strategy is “not enough, but a beginning,” pointing to the need for continuous development and stronger coordination.

From a service delivery perspective, Ms Marina Polycarpou described the system as fragmented, with limited options and heavy reliance on families and NGOs. She stressed the need for better assessment tools, community-based services, and support for carers, noting that the sector suffers from a lack of professional identity and workforce shortages.

Mr Dimitris Lambrianides provided a critical intervention from the perspective of persons with disabilities, highlighting the gap between policy planning and lived reality. He noted that many individuals “live at home without help” due to insufficient financial support and lack of services. He emphasised that long-term care is fundamentally about “the ability to live as you want, ideally at home,” and called for greater investment, formal recognition of caregivers, and stronger support for informal carers.

Across the discussion, several common themes emerged: the need to shift from institutional to community-based care, to strengthen the workforce and support informal carers, and to reduce financial burdens on individuals and families. The idea of moving towards a system of universal long-term care coverage was raised as a necessary next step.

The panel concluded that while Cyprus has taken initial steps through strategies and reforms, a more comprehensive, well-funded, and coordinated approach is required to meet the growing demand and ensure dignity and quality of life for all.



Panel X – The next day of capital markets: Digitalization, FinTech, and Crypto-Assets

Keynote speech

George Theocharides, Chairman, CySEC

Aphrodite room

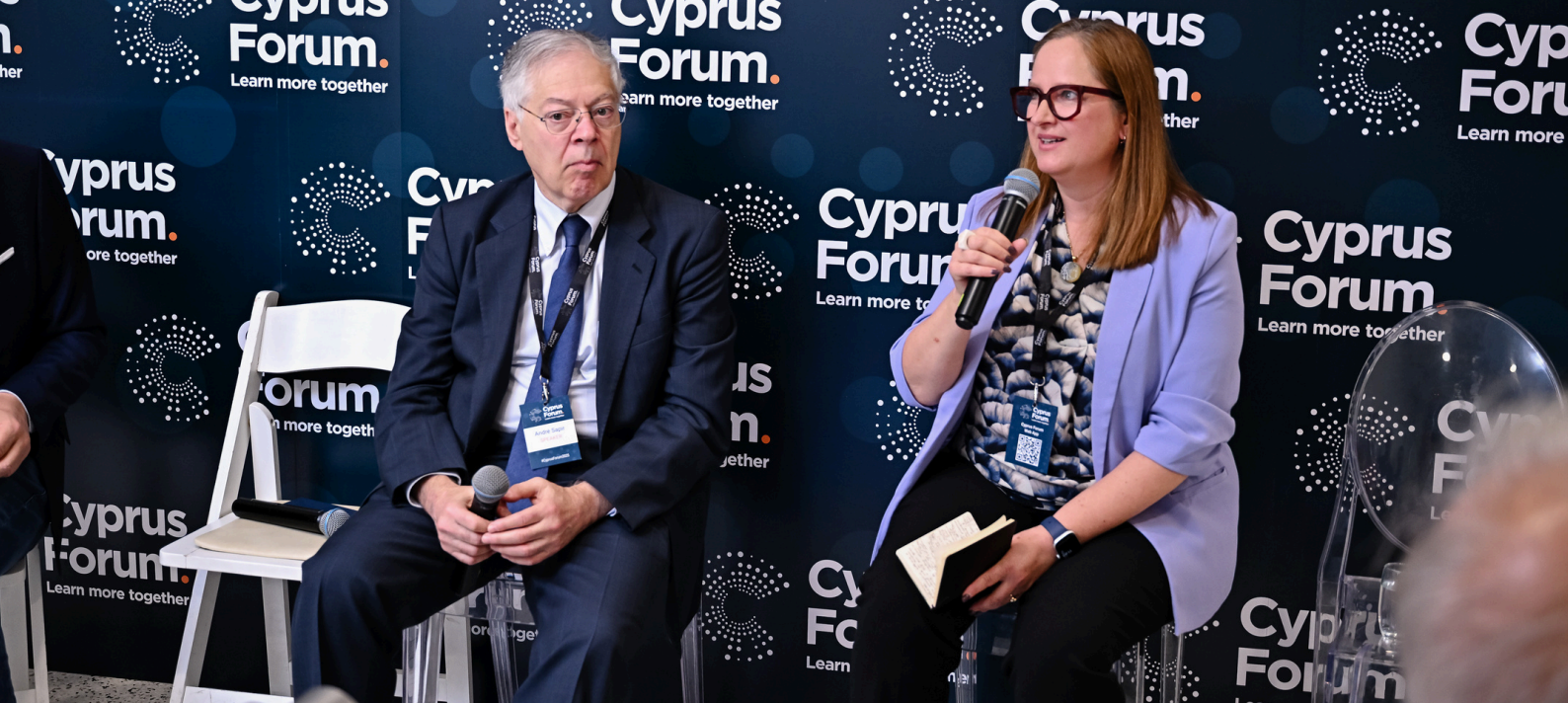
George Theocharides presented Cyprus' approach to the digital transformation of capital markets, emphasising the need to balance innovation with strong investor protection. CySEC's objective is to position Cyprus as a "safe, reliable, and innovative investment destination," while maintaining effective supervision in an increasingly complex environment.

He noted that financial services are being rapidly reshaped by technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, algorithmic trading, and social trading platforms. While these developments improve accessibility and efficiency, they also introduce new risks, particularly for younger and less experienced investors influenced by social media, describing the growing impact of "financial influencers" on investment behaviour.

At the European level, he highlighted the emergence of a comprehensive regulatory framework governing digital finance, including MiCA, which he described as a "landmark legislative act" providing a unified rulebook for crypto assets. However, he cautioned that it is "only the starting point," with important areas such as DeFi and NFTs still outside its scope.

CySEC is responding by strengthening supervision through a risk-based approach and investing in advanced tools, including AI-driven analytics and real-time monitoring systems. He stressed that regulators must “strike a balance between enabling innovation and safeguarding investors,” while also promoting financial literacy to address the risks of an increasingly digital market.

Looking ahead, Theocharides argued that the future of digital finance will be defined by “resilience, collaboration, and inclusion.” He concluded that digital transformation is already underway and must be guided by accountability and trust, ensuring that technology becomes “a source of trust rather than uncertainty” in the financial system.



Panel XI – The future of Europe under new economic and geopolitical challenges

Moderator: Ioannis Tirkides, Economic Research Manager, Bank of Cyprus

- André Sapir, Senior Fellow at Bruegel and Professor Emeritus at Université libre de Bruxelles
- Oksana Antonenko, Professor, Florence School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute

Knowledge Partner: Cyprus Economic Society

Aprodite Room

This session is held in memory of the late Nikos G. Sykas, Strategy and Innovation Consultant, who was a steadfast supporter of the Cyprus Forum, actively engaging with its work and contributing his insight and passion to numerous discussions over the years. Opening the session, Ioannis Tirkides dedicated the discussion to the memory of Nikos G. Sykas and set the tone by describing the current moment as one in which “the old order is being demolished... and a new one is not being born yet.” He pointed to the rise of China, Russia’s war against Ukraine, the return of great power politics, and rapid technological change as the key forces reshaping the global system.

Oksana Antonenko argued that the liberal order “has never been truly global,” and said the world is now moving towards “several orders coexisting with each other.” She stressed that Russia’s war against Ukraine, which she noted began in 2014, is no longer only a Ukrainian issue but a European one, as hybrid attacks, cyber warfare, and sabotage are increasingly affecting countries across the continent. She warned that Europe is being tested not only on values, but on its ability to provide security in practice.

André Sapir agreed with this analysis, but added what he called “a twist”: Europe was prepared for challenges from Russia and China, “what we were not prepared for is the United States.” He argued that Europe’s relationship with China and Russia has always been transactional, but its relationship with the US has been deeply structural, making the current uncertainty far more difficult to manage. “The heart of the question at the moment is the EU-US relationship,” he said, noting that Europe must now think seriously about autonomy not only from Moscow and Beijing, but also from Washington.

Antonenko reinforced this point with polling data, saying that while Russia remains the top perceived threat, the United States now ranks second, with “more than 20% of Europeans” seeing US power as a major risk. She added that concern about the US is also linked to stronger support for Ukraine, because many Europeans now feel “Europe is on its own.”

Tirkides then shifted the focus to Europe’s internal weaknesses, pointing to lagging productivity, weak innovation, and high debt. In response, Sapir said Europe’s answer should be to “shape up our own economy,” rather than rely on reactive trade retaliation. He criticised the slow pace of implementation of the Draghi competitiveness agenda and argued that Europe now needs to combine competitiveness with strategic autonomy, especially in sectors where dependence on the US is greatest.

On energy and defence, Antonenko rejected the idea that Europe faces a simple “guns versus butter” trade-off. She argued that defence investment should be seen as part of a new industrial strategy, and that “investing more in defence is... a foundation for us to be able to sustain the welfare state in the future.” She also noted that modern warfare is increasingly driven by innovation, particularly in AI and drone technology, making defence spending directly linked to technological progress.

Sapir agreed that Europe must spend more effectively, especially in defence, where fragmentation remains a major obstacle. He argued that the EU can reduce the pressure between security and social spending if it “spends the money better,” but warned that political constraints, especially around common debt, are becoming more severe. He highlighted the rise of nationalist forces across Europe and warned that Europe now faces “not only Trump outside, but also Trump-kind movements inside the EU.”

In the final exchange, the panel addressed leadership. Sapir acknowledged that “the issue ultimately is one of leadership,” but cautioned that leadership depends on strong national mandates, which are currently fragile in several key member states. Antonenko, by contrast, argued that Europe’s strength lies less in individual leaders and more in institutions, saying that what Europe needs is “slowly but firmly moving in the right direction” through regulation, consensus, and joint action.

In summary, the panel concluded that Europe is entering a more difficult era in which economic competitiveness, geopolitical autonomy, and institutional resilience must be strengthened at the same time. As Sapir put it, “we are in a coercive age,” and Europe’s ability to adapt will depend on whether it can move from diagnosis to implementation.



Panel XII – Building an open urban data future: The case of Cyprus

Moderator: Nadia Charalambous, Associate Professor, University of Cyprus; Director of Society and Urban Form (SURF) lab, and Ilaria Geddes, Research Lead of the Society and Urban Form (SURF) Research Lab at the Department of Architecture, University of Cyprus and a Senior Researcher on the Horizon Europe project Twinning Towards Research Excellence in Evidence-Based Planning and Urban Design (TWIN2EXPAND).

- Marios M. Polycarpou, Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering and the Director of the KIOS Research and Innovation Center of Excellence at the University of Cyprus
- Marina Neophytou, Professor at University of Cyprus, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Research Group Leader of the Laboratory-Isle of Excellence in Environmental Fluid Mechanics
- Valentina Martin, Associate director at Space Index Limited in London
- Gareth Simons, Senior Research Fellow in Building Stock and Energy Modelling, Bartlett School Environment, Energy & Resources
- Pavlos Loizou, Founder and CEO, Ask Wire

Knowledge Partner: Surf Lab

Aphrodite Room

Opening the discussion, Nadia Charalambous framed the session around the need to move from data availability to actionable urban intelligence. She explained that the panel builds on the Horizon Europe TWIN2EXPAND project, which aims to strengthen evidence-based urban planning through spatial models applicable both in data-rich and data-scarce environments such as Cyprus. The central challenge, she noted, is how to “open, standardise and govern urban data” so that it becomes useful for decision-making, while bridging the gap between EU frameworks and local realities.

Marios Polycarpou began by emphasising the centrality of data in the age of artificial intelligence, noting that “AI is kind of taking over... in education, healthcare, and many applications,” but depends fundamentally on data availability. While Cyprus has made progress in data collection, he argued that the key gap remains infrastructure: “we don’t have the infrastructure to actually collect the data together and relate data from different fields.” He highlighted the development of a Cyprus “digital twin” integrating over 80 datasets as an example of how interconnected data can support decision-making, particularly in crisis scenarios.

Marina Neophytou shifted the discussion to climate change, stressing that while Cyprus's global emissions contribution is small, "climate is not only global, it's also local." She underscored the need for integrated and representative data, pointing in particular to the lack of data from the northern part of the island, which distorts the overall picture. Neophytou argued that effective policymaking requires "a holistic picture" based on interconnected datasets across disciplines and geographies.

Valentina Martin focused on governance and structure, arguing that effective urban data systems must be goal-oriented rather than data-driven for its own sake. "We need to focus on questions, not only on datasets," she said, warning that without clear priorities, data risks becoming fragmented and ineffective. She highlighted three key pillars: defining clear policy goals, ensuring coordination across institutions, and linking data across scales. Without a unified framework, she warned, "you don't have a standard," but rather competing and incompatible systems.

Gareth Simons reinforced the need to connect technical, institutional, and cultural dimensions, arguing that "to get data to be useful... we need to connect all three of these threads." Drawing on UK experience, he pointed to successful models where government demand, available datasets, and institutional research capacity align. He also stressed the importance of demonstrator projects, suggesting that tangible use cases, such as heat vulnerability mapping, can help bridge the gap between theory and implementation.

Pavlos Loizou offered a more critical and pragmatic perspective, arguing that data ecosystems are ultimately shaped by incentives. "Everything is driven by money," he stated, warning against over-ambition without practical foundations. Using Cyprus as an example, he pointed to basic gaps such as the absence of a unified address registry, arguing that "we need to dream big... but start with baby steps." He also cautioned that data availability does not guarantee usability, and that without clear use cases, public data may be irrelevant for decision-making.

In the second part of the discussion, moderated by Ilaria Geddes, the panel explored how data can become a "living resource." Polycarpou highlighted the persistence of institutional silos, noting that "people traditionally don't talk to each other," particularly across government and private sectors. He suggested that universities can act as intermediaries to bridge these divides.

Neophytou emphasised the need for data classification and shared platforms, arguing that while some data should remain restricted, a core set must be openly accessible. She stressed that implementation, rather than legislation, remains the main challenge, noting that "the European legislation is already there, but we lack... implementation."

Martin expanded the discussion beyond open data to include “open methods, open software, and open training,” arguing that data alone is insufficient without the tools and skills to interpret it. She emphasised that the goal should be to move “from information to action,” enabling local authorities and communities to use data effectively.

Simons reiterated the importance of pilot projects and capacity building, arguing that demonstrating how open data can be used in practice is key to wider adoption. He stressed that creating space for experimentation and innovation is essential for unlocking the value of existing datasets.

Loizou returned to the issue of incentives and inequality, warning that in practice “rich people will win,” as they are better positioned to access and act on data. He also highlighted structural issues in how public data is produced, noting that datasets are often designed for internal administrative purposes rather than public use, limiting their broader value.

The discussion also touched on the role of qualitative data. While acknowledging its importance, speakers noted the challenges of interpretation and integration. As Polycarpou observed, “what people say is not necessarily what they believe,” highlighting the complexity of translating qualitative insights into reliable inputs for decision-making.

In summary, the panel underscored that building an open urban data future in Cyprus requires more than data availability. It demands coordinated governance, clear use cases, institutional collaboration, and investment in skills and tools. While there was consensus on the potential of data-driven planning, the discussion made clear that progress will depend on moving from fragmented initiatives to a coherent, practical, and inclusive data ecosystem.



Panel XIII – Guardians of democracy: The battle for institutional independence

Moderator: Christophoros Christophi, Legal Matters.

- Laura Codruța Kövesi, European Chief Prosecutor (recorded message)
- Demetris Demetriou, President of the Parliamentary Committee on Institutions, Merit and the Commissioner on Administration, DISY
- Irene Charalambides, Head of Delegation, Vice-President of the OSCE PA, Special Representative on Fighting Corruption, President of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, AKEL
- Dr. Odysseas Michaelides, Leader, ALMA Movement

Knowledge Partner: Oxygen for Democracy

Zeno Room

Opening the discussion through a recorded message, Laura Codruța Kövesi warned that “the rule of law, justice and security as we understand and cherish them are under acute threat”. She argued that the starting point for any collective response is trust, and that trust depends on truth, clarity, and accountability. Referring to the work of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, she stressed that justice is not only about protecting the EU budget, but about fairness and showing citizens that “rules apply to everyone”.

Introducing the panel, Christophoros Christophi described the participants as a “dream team” for a discussion on institutional independence and corruption. He opened with the issue of political and party interference in appointments to supposedly independent offices, asking whether the appointment of politically connected figures inevitably affects the way such institutions function.

Demetris Demetriou argued that Cyprus suffers from deep constitutional imbalance, describing the President of the Republic as holding “perhaps the most powers that a president of a democratic country has”, and even suggesting that the powers of the Attorney General are greater still. He said the current system creates suspicion, associations, and potential conflicts of interest, particularly when officeholders are asked to scrutinise decisions in which they were previously involved. While acknowledging that some individuals have acted with integrity despite political backgrounds, he insisted that Cyprus needs stronger institutional counterweights, including parliamentary approval for appointments to independent offices.

Irene Charalambides took the argument further, saying there is no real political will to fix the problem because parties are reluctant to give up powers they may later wish to use themselves. In her view, “the constitution cannot be used as a tool for opacity, for lack of accountability”. She argued that Cyprus formally has independent institutions, but in practice they are appointed by one person and remain shielded from meaningful scrutiny. Charalambides pointed in particular to the role of the Attorney General, whose decisions to suspend or not pursue prosecutions are often beyond effective review. She also argued that Cyprus has reached a point where international bodies such as the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, GRECO, and the OSCE have become essential allies in the fight against corruption.

Odysseas Michaelides, reflecting on his experience as former Auditor General, said the first serious threat to his removal came only a year and a half after his appointment. He described a pattern of repeated political pressure and argued that one of the greatest institutional weaknesses in Cyprus is the lack of proper judicial protection for independent officials once dismissal procedures begin. At the same time, he stressed that institutions must also protect themselves by acting rigorously and lawfully: “the primary and greatest protection of an institution is itself”. Still, he agreed that the deeper problem lies in the constitutional framework, which leaves too much power concentrated in too few hands.

The discussion then turned to the proposed reform of the Legal Service and the separation of the roles of Attorney General and Public Prosecutor. Demetriou welcomed the fact that reform is finally on the table, especially the proposed separation of roles and the introduction of term limits but warned that the current package remains incomplete. In particular, he argued that unless the “uncontrollable” nature of prosecutorial decisions is addressed, the result will be “half a reform”. He stressed that there must be some mechanism to scrutinise or at least explain decisions not to prosecute.

Charalambides agreed that the reform, as currently framed, is insufficient. She argued that if the President continues to appoint the key officeholders without broader approval mechanisms, Cyprus risks reproducing the same problems under a new structure. Drawing on international examples, including Montenegro, she pointed out that other systems require parliamentary supermajorities for such appointments, thereby encouraging consensus and limiting unilateral control. She also criticised what she described as decades of constitutional misinterpretation and institutional convenience, arguing that many entrenched practices in Cyprus have been wrongly treated as immutable.

Michaelides also supported reform but was sharply critical of the proposed model for the Audit Service. He said the introduction of an external council to review the Auditor General's work before publication is "a patent that was invented by the government of the Republic of Cyprus", arguing that no comparable model exists internationally. While he supported term limits and financial independence for the Audit Service, he warned that the proposed oversight structure would undermine rather than strengthen institutional autonomy. More broadly, he argued that both strong individuals and strong procedures are essential, noting that democratic systems must be robust enough to withstand even the worst officeholders.

The audience discussion brought in broader questions about citizen engagement, institutional silence, and the role of public pressure. In response, the panel broadly agreed that citizens are the ultimate guardians of democracy but emphasised that institutions exist precisely because democratic societies require safeguards beyond elections alone. Charalambides noted that public frustration with the established political system was visible in recent electoral behaviour, while Michaelides said plainly that "the supreme power belongs to the citizens", even if institutions are necessary to protect democracy from abuse and deviation.

In summary, the panel presented a stark but detailed diagnosis of Cyprus's institutional weaknesses. The speakers agreed that the concentration of power, especially around appointments and prosecutorial discretion, continues to undermine public trust and accountability. While there was support for ongoing reforms, the overall message was that partial fixes will not be enough. As several speakers made clear, Cyprus needs a deeper constitutional and institutional reset, one that strengthens transparency, limits unchecked authority, and restores confidence that independent institutions are truly independent.



Panel IXX – Balancing the scale: gender equality in policies

Moderator: Stefanos Stavros Evangelides, Advocate/Board Secretary, Accept – LGBTI Cyprus

- Josie Christodoulou, Commissioner for Gender Equality
- Dr. Stella Mourouzidou Damtsa, CFA, DEI Chair, CFA Board of Directors

Zeno Room

Setting the tone for the discussion, Stefanos Stavros Evangelides questioned whether true gender equality exists in politics, stressing that representation alone is not enough. “Gender equality isn’t just about presence. It’s about meaningful participation,” he noted, arguing that political systems cannot serve society fully if they reflect only part of it.

Josie Christodoulou responded by emphasising that while numbers are important, the deeper issue lies in “essence and substantial equality”. She highlighted the current imbalance in Cyprus, where women’s participation remains low in Parliament, local authorities, and the European Parliament, despite improvements in government representation. This gap, she argued, means that “the experiences of the other half of the population” are missing from decision-making. Rather than proposing a single solution, she called for a “holistic approach”, including better work-life balance structures, childcare support, targeted political training, and safer environments in politics free from harassment and toxic discourse.

Bringing a private sector perspective, Stella Mourouzidou Damtsa underlined that diversity is not only a social objective but also an economic advantage. Diverse teams, she said, “make better decisions, manage risk more effectively... and drive profitability”. She pointed to structural inequalities such as the low number of women in leadership positions in Cyprus and the significant gender pension gap. To address these, she highlighted mentorship as a key tool for building leadership pipelines, alongside legislative reforms such as pay transparency and improved pension policies.

The discussion then turned to the deeper structural challenges within institutions. Evangelides argued that current systems often require individuals to adapt to outdated, male-dominated norms rather than evolving to accommodate diverse experiences. He warned against treating inclusion as superficial, noting that many institutions “invite difference on the surface, but require conformity underneath”.

Christodoulou agreed, arguing that what is needed is not just reform, but transformation. “We need to change the system and the narrative,” she said, supporting the use of quotas while acknowledging their limitations if not accompanied by broader cultural change. She stressed the importance of dismantling stereotypes and what she described as the underlying patriarchal system, noting that progress in Cyprus has been gradual but visible, particularly within the European context.

On measuring real impact, Mourouzidou Damtsa emphasised that commitments to diversity must be backed by clear metrics and accountability. She outlined practical steps such as inclusive hiring practices, transparent promotion data, and the integration of diversity indicators into broader performance frameworks. In her view, organisations should be evaluated not only on financial results but also on how effectively they promote inclusion.

In the final part of the discussion, the panel addressed the growing backlash against diversity and inclusion initiatives globally. Christodoulou suggested that part of the challenge lies within the movement itself, acknowledging that in some cases DEI efforts have been reduced to “ticking the boxes without substantial change”. She called for renewed reflection and a stronger, more coherent narrative. She also made a key clarification: “Women are not the minority”, but half of society, and should be treated accordingly.

Mourouzidou Damtsa concluded by reframing the debate around meritocracy, arguing that DEI ultimately supports fairer systems. Her closing message focused on individual responsibility: “open doors, share knowledge, and challenge biases”.

In summary, the panel highlighted that achieving gender equality in politics requires more than representation targets. It demands structural reform, cultural change, and sustained collaboration between institutions, the private sector, and society at large, ensuring that equality becomes an integral part of democratic governance rather than an afterthought.



Panel IXX – Fireside discussion on the introduction of natural gas and the transition from diesel and fuel oil to natural gas

Discussant: : Charles Ellinas, CEO - Also Councillor, eCNHC - with Atlantic Council

- George Papanastasiou, Minister of Energy, Commerce and Industry

Knowledge Partner: Atlantic Council

Zeno Room

Setting the context, Charles Ellinas described the energy sector as “one of the hottest topics in Cyprus”, focusing the discussion on the transition to liquefied natural gas (LNG), the functioning of the new competitive electricity market, and broader energy strategy. He emphasised that the key issue underpinning all questions is the cost of electricity.

George Papanastasiou framed the discussion around a single objective: “the destination is low-cost, affordable electricity to the consumer”. He stressed that electricity is a commodity defined almost entirely by price, and that all policy decisions must ultimately serve affordability and supply adequacy. The challenge, he noted, lies in how Cyprus structures its energy system to reach that destination.

Addressing the transition to natural gas, Papanastasiou acknowledged long-standing delays linked to the Vasiliko LNG terminal. He explained that the introduction of natural gas is critical because Cyprus operates under the EU “target model”, where electricity prices are determined by the most expensive production method. In Cyprus, this remains conventional generation using diesel and fuel oil, making electricity costly across the board. “The most expensive technology today... is conventional electricity generation,” he said, underlining why replacing it with natural gas is essential.

On timelines, however, the Minister remained cautious, declining to provide a firm date for completion of the terminal. He explained that a key technical assessment, the CAP analysis, will determine whether discrepancies between design and construction require minor adjustments or a more fundamental redesign. While noting that the floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) is “99% complete”, he acknowledged that other components remain incomplete and subject to delays, particularly due to public procurement procedures.

Turning to the newly launched competitive electricity market, Ellinas described it as a “significant development” after years of preparation, but questioned whether it would actually reduce prices. Papanastasiou responded that outcomes are uncertain in a liberalised system: “no one knows which direction it will go”. He explained the structure of the market, where suppliers purchase electricity from producers and sell it to consumers, stressing that consumer behaviour will be decisive. If consumers actively seek better prices, competition may drive costs down; if not, “prices will either stay the same or go up”.

He also warned of potential distortions, particularly in a small market like Cyprus, where suppliers may focus on large commercial clients and neglect residential consumers. In such cases, the government may intervene through regulatory measures, but only after allowing the market to operate independently.

On renewable energy, the discussion highlighted the growing role of storage as a prerequisite for further expansion. Papanastasiou explained that renewable energy production is time-limited and must be supported by storage solutions to ensure stability. Cyprus has prioritised battery storage, alongside incentives for hybrid renewable systems, centralised storage infrastructure, and household-level solutions. He also outlined plans for energy communities, including a pilot project in Tillyria, where local production could potentially provide “completely free” electricity to residents.

The conversation then moved to larger structural projects, including the proposed electricity interconnection (GSI). Papanastasiou emphasised that this is a European project, backed by significant EU funding, and not solely a national decision. He identified three main challenges: financing, technical feasibility, and geopolitics. Despite these obstacles, he argued that abandoning such projects due to external pressures would halt development entirely: “if every time someone reacts geopolitically we cancel the projects... we will stop doing anything”.

Finally, the discussion touched on developments in Cyprus's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Minister highlighted progress in the Aphrodite and Kronos fields, noting that Kronos is on a faster development track due to proximity to existing Egyptian infrastructure. He described plans to export gas through Egypt, with a target for initial production by 2027, though he acknowledged this as "a stretched target".

In closing, Papanastasiou reiterated the government's consumer-focused approach, stating that while the energy supply chain must remain viable, profitability must be balanced against affordability. "Profitability cannot be in the supply chain and the consumer suffers," he said, emphasising that the ultimate goal is a sustainable energy system that reduces reliance on subsidies and supports a competitive economy.

Overall, the discussion highlighted both the progress made and the significant challenges ahead in Cyprus's energy transition, with affordability, infrastructure completion, market behaviour, and geopolitical realities all shaping the path forward.



Panel XX – The end of an era? New political formations, upcoming elections and the credibility of polls

Moderator: Giorgos Charalambous, Associate Professor, School of Law, University of Nicosia

- Yiannos Katsourides, Associate Professor, School of Law, University of Nicosia
- Filippa Chatzistavrou, Assistant Professor, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
- Petros Demetriou, former Deputy Minister to the President, Government of the Republic of Cyprus
- Andromachi Sophocleous, Political Analyst, Co-president, Volt

Knowledge Partner: Unit for Comparative Democratic Studies, University of Nicosia

Zeno Room

Introducing the panel, Giorgos Charalambous framed the discussion around two overlapping developments: the deterioration in the quality of democracy through democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies, and the wider transformation of party systems, electoral behaviour, and governance models in democratic states. He noted that these dynamics are shaping both Cyprus and Greece, and are creating “new political, social and electoral data”.

Yiannos Katsourides argued that Cyprus has been undergoing a long process of political change, one that has accelerated significantly since the 1990s and even more so after 2004. In his view, the country is experiencing “a paradigm shift” in the way politics is organised and expressed. He pointed to the weakening of the large traditional parties, the loosening of party identification, high electoral volatility, and rising abstention as signs of a more liquid political landscape. According to Katsourides, the Annan Plan, EU accession, and especially the 2012-13 economic crisis all contributed to reshaping the field of politics and weakening older party loyalties.

Asked why most new party formations in Cyprus have emerged from the centre, right, or far right, rather than the left, Katsourides argued that this is rooted in Cyprus's political history. He described AKEL as a uniquely dominant force on the left, one that historically captured working-class and broader popular representation so effectively that little political space remained for alternative left-wing formations. By contrast, he suggested that the right has traditionally been more fragmented and personality-driven, making it easier for new parties to emerge.

Filippa Chatzistavrou widened the lens to include Greece and Europe more broadly. She argued that countries such as France and Germany are now also entering a period of instability that Southern Europe has already experienced, warning that Greece and Cyprus may soon face deeper forms of “state crisis”. At the same time, she emphasised that public dissatisfaction has not yet translated into cohesive political mobilisation. In Greece, she said, there are fragmented expressions of anger and frustration, but no sustained political movement capable of reshaping the landscape. She also highlighted a troubling trend across Europe: younger voters are becoming increasingly conservative, with many turning towards the far right without the taboos that shaped earlier generations.

On the issue of opinion polls, Chatzistavrou offered a strongly critical view. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's famous phrase that “public opinion does not exist”, she argued that polling is deeply shaped by who asks the questions, how they are asked, and who is reachable. She said that the legitimacy of opinion polls in Greece is under serious strain, especially because of the close relationship between media ownership, economic power, and polling agencies. At the same time, she stressed that citizens themselves have become more volatile and less stable as political subjects, making polling increasingly fragile as a research and political tool.

Petros Demetriou approached the discussion from the perspective of governance and public trust. Responding to criticism about democratic quality, transparency, and accountability during the Anastasiades period, he argued that such issues cannot be understood in “black or white” terms. He suggested that some important steps had been taken, including platforms for publishing cabinet decisions and monitoring state projects, but acknowledged that public perception of corruption remained overwhelmingly negative. In his words, “a lot has been done but certainly more could have been done”. He also underlined that transparency tools only matter if society is able and willing to use them effectively.

Turning to the crisis of parties more generally, Demetriou argued that traditional formations are declining because they can no longer understand or solve the problems of modern citizens. He pointed to growing insecurity, inequality, corruption, and social fragmentation as forces eroding trust in parties across the ideological spectrum. In his view, many parties are worsening the problem by relying on image, media, and social platforms instead of producing serious politics. He also argued that both the election of President Christodoulides and the rise of Phidias Panayiotou should be understood as symptoms of popular disappointment with established political forces.

From the perspective of a newer political formation, Andromachi Sophocleous said Volt is operating in precisely this climate of distrust. She described Cyprus as facing “a substantial crisis in representative democracy”, made even more acute by the unresolved Cyprus problem. For Sophocleous, the key political divide today is not simply left versus right, but also progressivism versus conservatism, and pragmatism versus populism. She stressed that Volt sees itself as a progressive party that refuses to retreat on rights and social demands, while also insisting on the need for realistic politics rooted in the European context. At the same time, she argued that parties must re-establish genuine links with society through neighbourhood-level organisation, social presence, and serious policy production, rather than through “clicktivism”.

Addressing the rise of Phidias Panayiotou, Sophocleous argued that he should not be treated as the problem in himself, but as “a symptom of a broader situation”. In her view, his election reflects the wider de-ideologisation of politics in Cyprus, something that can be seen across the political system and not only in outsider candidacies. She also linked this to the decline of collectivity, noting that politics today is increasingly shaped by individualism, influencer culture, and the idea that one person alone can solve everything.

In the later exchanges, the panelists disagreed but also converged on the question of pragmatism. Chatzistavrou challenged the term directly, arguing that what is often called pragmatism today amounts to accepting the destructive terms of globalised capitalism, low wages, housing precarity, and labour deregulation. “This is not pragmatism. This is irrational politics,” she said, calling instead for a politics that serves the public interest and places limits on unchecked capital. Sophocleous responded that pragmatism does not mean abandoning principles but finding ways to defend them effectively within present realities, including at the European level. She cited labour rights, tax distortions in Cyprus, and consistency on international law, from Ukraine to Palestine, as examples of what principled pragmatism should look like.

Returning to the broader picture, Katsourides warned that the current fluidity is deeply connected to de-ideologization but insisted that the left-right divide remains meaningful because it reflects real social interests. He argued that the deeper problem is the failure of political organisations to give those conflicts meaningful expression. He also cautioned against both technocracy and vague anti-ideological politics, suggesting that these often end up feeding populism and the far right rather than containing them.

In summary, the panel portrayed Cyprus and Greece as operating within a wider European moment of instability, volatility, and democratic strain. The speakers agreed that traditional party systems are weakening, that public distrust is deepening, and that political representation is entering a more fluid and uncertain phase. At the same time, the discussion made clear that this is not only a crisis of institutions, but also a crisis of ideas, organisation, and political imagination.



Panel XXI – Breaking the silence: Journalism, political influence, and the fight for truth

Moderator: Ralli Papageorgiou, Journalist, CNA – CYBC

- Giorgos Frangos, President, Editors Association of Cyprus (keynote speaker)
- Kostas Pliakos, Journalist- Supervising producer at CNN Greece, CNN Greece
- Ayşemden Akin, Editor in chief, Bugun Kibris
- Takis Hadjigeorgiou, Former MEP, European Parliament
- Andreas Cosma, Researcher, OCCRP, Investigative Journalist, CIRen
- Ilias Nikolaidis, Content Director, diaNEOsis

Zeno Room

Introducing the discussion, Ralli Papageorgiou posed a central question: how easy it is for journalists, politicians, and citizens to face the truth in a landscape shaped by political interests, economic power, and long-standing narratives. She framed the panel around the tension between truth and the “convenient lie”.

In his keynote intervention, Giorgos Frangos argued that journalism in Cyprus operates under pressure from both political and economic forces, pressures made worse by the island’s small and fragile media market. He noted that journalists face job insecurity, editorial pressure, and self-censorship, while media owners are vulnerable to influence through advertising, sponsorships, and state funding. He also warned of legislative and institutional threats to press freedom, and called for full transparency over media ownership, so that the public can know who controls the information it consumes.

Ayşemden Akin delivered one of the panel’s strongest interventions, speaking from personal experience as a journalist who has faced threats against both herself and her family. She explained that her reporting on the links between mafia networks, dirty money, and politics in Cyprus led to intimidation and surveillance. For Akin, the message behind such threats is always the same: “silence, don’t speak, don’t write”. She placed Cyprus within a wider international pattern, referring to cases in Malta, Slovakia, Mexico, and Palestine, and insisted that journalism must continue to defend the public’s right to know.

Andreas Cosma focused on the role and difficulties of investigative journalism in Cyprus. He pointed out that major revelations about Cyprus often come through international collaborations but are then dismissed domestically as foreign interference. Through the Cyprus Centre for Investigative Journalism, he said, efforts are being made to provide an independent platform for serious reporting in Greek, Turkish, and English, while also supporting journalists with security and publishing opportunities. He stressed that investigative work could have real impact, citing cases where reporting led to parliamentary scrutiny, tax investigations, and wider public debate.

Takis Hadjigeorgiou reflected on the similarities between journalism and politics, arguing that both involve pressure, risk, and the difficulty of telling uncomfortable truths. He spoke of a long-standing “culture of silence” in Cyprus, where journalists are often pushed into reproducing official narratives rather than challenging them. He also warned that concentrated media ownership and hidden influence continue to undermine trust and independence.

Kostas Pliakos broadened the discussion by describing the Greek media landscape, where political and economic power are deeply intertwined. He noted that Greece ranks very low on press freedom and public trust, with major media controlled by a small group of powerful business figures whose main interests often lie outside journalism. He also warned that artificial intelligence is likely to deepen the sector’s crisis, as old advertising-based business models become increasingly unsustainable and only original journalism retains value.

Ilias Nikolaidis approached the issue through public opinion research, noting that trust in the media in Greece is extremely low and forms part of a wider collapse in confidence in institutions. At the same time, he argued that the problem cannot be explained only by political interference or ownership structures. Misinformation, social media, changing audience habits, and the wider transformation of the media economy also play a major role in weakening trust.

The discussion with the audience highlighted the importance of cross-community cooperation between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot journalists, as well as the need for more critical and demanding news audiences. It also raised questions about alternative journalism models and whether citizens can play a more direct role in strengthening democratic media culture.

In closing, the panel made clear that journalism in Cyprus and Greece faces intense pressure from political influence, economic dependency, technological disruption, and declining public trust. At the same time, the speakers insisted that independent journalism remains essential to democracy, and that defending it requires not only courageous journalists, but also informed and critical citizens.



Panel XXII – Green Deal in practice: Cyprus implementation agenda

Moderator: Andreas Papallas, Architect / Researcher, ADP

- Charalampos Theopemptou, Chair of the Environment Committee, Cyprus Parliament
- Savvas Vlachos, Director, Cyprus Energy Agency
- Eleni Stylianopoulou, Chief Senior Environment Officer, Secretariat for the Coordination and Support of the Government Programme
- Nicoletta Neophytou, Director, PwC Cyprus

Knowledge Partner: SURF lab

Aphrodite Room

Introducing the discussion, Andreas Papallas described the European Green Deal as the EU's most ambitious plan and stressed that, in Cyprus, it is not a theoretical agenda but one that directly affects “the energy we produce and consume, the water we use, the protection of our nature, and how our businesses operate”. He framed the discussion around a central question: how Cyprus can turn European targets into practical local action.

Savvas Vlachos argued that the energy transition is something Cyprus “must pursue” and should not treat as an external burden. He said the country should not hide behind its size, but focus on practical steps that can already be taken at household, community, and municipal level. For him, the transition is not only about large infrastructure projects, but also about changing everyday behaviour, promoting renewables, and building energy communities. As he put it, “we should not justify ourselves that we are a small country that cannot do many things”.

Nicoletta Neophytou explained that the Green Deal is also transforming the business environment through new sustainability reporting requirements. She outlined the arrival of the CSRD framework and the new European reporting standards, noting that businesses are now being pushed to collect comparable environmental, social, and governance data. While this creates costs and adjustment pressures, she argued that it also creates a real opportunity for companies to rethink how they operate and become more sustainable. In her words, “the opportunities are even greater” than the initial difficulties.

Charalampos Theopemptou focused on the legislative and policy side, but was highly critical of Cyprus’s overall approach. He argued that European rules are often applied in ways that make things more difficult rather than more effective, particularly in energy and buildings. Referring to the country’s broader performance, he said bluntly: “we are doing the bare minimum”. He also warned that Cyprus still lacks real energy planning, despite the scale of the challenge ahead, especially in relation to zero-emission buildings, public infrastructure, and transport.

Eleni Stylianopoulou turned to the new nature restoration regulation, explaining that the challenge is no longer only to protect areas on paper, but to restore habitats and species that are already in poor condition. She said this is a major challenge for Cyprus, especially since even the management of protected areas remains difficult. The effort, she noted, requires coordination across state services, academia, local authorities, and citizens, because “the solutions are not simple, they are difficult”.

In the second part of the discussion, the focus shifted to partnerships and implementation. Vlachos said organisations such as the Cyprus Energy Agency cannot replace the state, but can act as valuable partners by helping to implement projects on the ground. He stressed the importance of climate resilience, a just transition, and preparing the labour force for the scale of change required. At the same time, he warned that without proper support, many people could be left behind.

Theopemptou raised the issue of democratic participation, referring to the rights guaranteed under the Aarhus Convention: access to information, participation in consultation, and access to justice. In practice, however, he argued that Cyprus still performs poorly, with public consultation often reduced to a formality. His criticism was sharp: “they are trying to avoid everything”, he said, referring to the way consultation processes are often handled.

Stylianopoulou acknowledged many of these weaknesses, especially poor coordination, weak digital systems, and the absence of long-term planning mechanisms inside the state. She argued that Cyprus now needs “to move very quickly” and develop a different framework of cooperation, with stronger planning capacity, better use of evidence, and more meaningful involvement of local authorities and citizens.

Audience interventions reinforced these concerns, particularly on the weakness of consultation, the lack of long-term thinking, and the gap between planning and implementation. Questions on energy storage, water policy, and the fairness of the transition underlined a wider concern that Cyprus still reacts too slowly and too narrowly to the scale of the challenge.

In summary, the panel agreed that the Green Deal in Cyprus cannot succeed through targets and legislation alone. It requires coordination, consultation, long-term planning, and a stronger implementation culture. As Nicoletta Neophytou concluded, sustainability should not be seen as abstract or optional, but as “a way of life”.



Panel XXIII – The shrinking of civil society space: Challenges and prospects

Moderator: Foteini Sokratous, Project Manager and Researcher, CARDET

- Konstantina Karacosta, Founder and Cost Consultant at K. KARAKOSTA Q.S. L.L.C, Vice President of Civil Society Advocates and President of NGO “ένα εμείς”
- Dimitris Lambrianides, President of the Cyprus Paraplegics Organisation
- Andreas Kyprianides, Secretary General of the Cyprus Youth Council

Knowledge Partner: Civic Champions project, CARDET

Aphrodite Room

Opening the discussion, Foteini Sokratous highlighted that civil society organisations are essential for democracy, human rights, and social justice, yet face increasing pressure. She noted that across Europe there is a growing “shrinking of civic space”, affecting organisations’ ability to operate effectively.

Andreas Kyprianides began by defining civic space as the environment where citizens can “freely express themselves, organise, and assemble”. Shrinkage, he argued, means the erosion of these fundamental freedoms. He pointed to bureaucracy, funding difficulties, and what he called “virtual participation”, where young people are included symbolically but not meaningfully. He also highlighted digital risks, noting that online attacks and intimidation discourage engagement, especially among youth.

Konstantina Karacosta focused on structural and institutional barriers, emphasising a lack of transparency and dialogue between the state and civil society. She argued that NGOs face increasing financial and regulatory pressures, including problematic risk assessments that classify organisations without clear criteria. As she noted, “we are talking about criteria that were not adjusted to the needs of each NGO”, which ultimately limits their capacity and credibility.

Dimitris Lambrianides added a societal dimension, stressing declining participation, particularly among young people. He warned that many have “lost hope that their voice will make a difference”, which undermines activism and collective action. He also highlighted the state’s failure to consult representative organisations adequately, despite legal obligations, arguing that without specialised bodies “you will not be able to turn somewhere and easily find understanding”.

Expanding on these points, Kyprianides outlined broader trends identified at European level, including excessive bureaucracy, restrictions on assembly, and the “criminalisation and targeting of those who defend human rights”. He also warned that civil society space is increasingly being replaced by actors aligned with government agendas, reducing independent voices.

The discussion then turned to technology. Lambrianides described digital tools as “a one-way street” for organisations, essential for communication and outreach, but warned about online harassment that discourages participation. Kyprianides agreed, noting that while technology can “democratise participation”, it also brings risks such as surveillance, misinformation, and intimidation. He stressed the need for digital education and safer platforms, adding that online engagement “cannot replace physical or institutional participation”.

Karacosta emphasised the need for institutional solutions, proposing structured digital platforms that ensure transparency and accountability in consultations. She argued that the key issue is not whether dialogue exists, but whether it leads to real outcomes, noting that “we rarely see the change put into practice”.

Audience interventions reinforced concerns about weak state support, lack of funding frameworks, and ineffective consultation processes. Practical issues such as inaccessible systems, absence of training, and even lack of physical meeting spaces for organisations were raised as barriers to participation.

In conclusion, the panel highlighted that the shrinking of civic space in Cyprus is driven by a combination of bureaucratic, institutional, and cultural factors. While technology offers new opportunities, meaningful participation depends on transparency, structured dialogue, and trust. As the discussion made clear, without genuine engagement and support, civil society risks becoming symbolic rather than impactful.



Panel XXIV – Accelerating the energy transition through pragmatic solutions

Moderator: Charles Ellinas, CEO - Also Councillor, eCNHC - with Atlantic Council

- Julian Popov, Senior Fellow, Strategic Perspectives Professor
- Theodoros Zachariadis - Professor and Acting Director of the Energy, Environment and Water Research Centre of the Cyprus Institute
- Professor Konstantinos Tsimaras - Board Member RAAEY - Vice-President MedReg
- Costas Papanicolas, Professor, The Cyprus Institute

Knowledge Partner: Atlantic Council

Aphrodite Room

Introducing the discussion, Charles Ellinas set out the scale of the challenge facing Cyprus. Despite its strong solar potential, renewables accounted for only around 22 per cent of electricity generation in the first quarter of 2025, well below the European average. He also underlined the wider structural problem: Cyprus continues to rely heavily on expensive diesel-based generation and remains one of the most expensive electricity markets in Europe. Against this backdrop, the panel focused on how the country can accelerate the transition through realistic, workable solutions.

Julian Popov began by stressing that serious policy requires serious evidence. His first recommendation was simple: Cyprus needs transparent, publicly available energy data, because without data, debate quickly slips into what he described as a “social media style” discussion. He argued that Cyprus should continue to build around solar power, while rejecting the idea that renewables have some fixed technical ceiling. Drawing on the Bulgarian experience, he said that system operators always claim new levels of renewables are difficult, yet “it manages and manages and manages”. He pointed in particular to the rapid growth of batteries, which are increasingly competing directly with gas in balancing the system. For Popov, the key question is not whether Cyprus can move beyond gas, but “why do we need gas?”, especially as storage technologies become cheaper and more effective.

Theodoros Zachariadis struck a somewhat more cautious but still optimistic tone. He argued that Cyprus should see “the glass half full”, noting that the country has already doubled its renewable electricity share within a few years despite lacking hydro potential and having limited wind resources. In his view, the transition does not have to be excessively costly, especially given the availability of European funding. He also emphasised that, unlike many other countries, Cyprus does not face a major employment shock from the green transition because it has no large fossil-based industrial sectors at risk. The bigger challenge, he suggested, lies in affordability for households, especially with the future extension of emissions trading to transport and heating fuels. Even so, he insisted that the costs are manageable and that decarbonisation can improve Cyprus’s trade balance by reducing dependence on imported fossil fuels.

Konstantinos Tsimaras highlighted the importance of planning, system balance, and interconnection. He argued that the development of renewables in Cyprus must be guided by proper spatial planning so that solar and wind projects are matched more effectively with grid capacity. Storage, he said, is essential, and improving battery technology is already making it possible to cover much more of the period between sunset and sunrise. But he also stressed that the long-term answer cannot rest on one technology alone. Interconnections, in his words, are “a very important element” for system stability, security of supply, and the proper functioning of the target model in electricity markets. He also raised the possibility of offshore renewables, desalination linked to clean energy, and even carbon capture and storage as part of a broader energy strategy.

Costas Papanicolas focused strongly on the need to think beyond narrow or simplified solutions. He argued that Cyprus already has access to the knowledge and technologies it needs, yet continues to pay far too much for electricity. In his view, this means the problem is not purely technological, but also institutional and structural. On storage, he was particularly clear that there is no single answer. Storage ranges from seconds to seasons, and Cyprus needs a combination of batteries, thermal storage, pumped hydro, hydrogen-based options, and other technologies. Because Cyprus has major seasonal peaks in demand, especially in summer, he argued that the country also needs seasonal storage solutions. One of his strongest points was that desalination should be treated not only as a water policy issue, but also as part of energy storage and system balancing. He suggested that Cyprus could use periods of excess renewable generation in spring and autumn to produce and store water, thereby linking the water and energy systems in a much more strategic way.

This energy-water nexus became one of the most important themes of the discussion. Both Papanicolas and Tsimaras noted that desalination can help solve two critical problems at once, especially in a country facing both water scarcity and an unstable electricity balance. Papanicolas also warned that many desalination technologies are themselves inflexible, and therefore cannot simply be plugged into a renewables-heavy system without rethinking the broader design. More broadly, he argued that one of Cyprus's central institutional weaknesses is that water and energy are treated separately, often by different ministries that do not coordinate effectively.

As the discussion moved towards concluding reflections, all speakers emphasised the importance of policy. Popov argued that Cyprus is particularly well-suited to “very ambitious electrification”, especially in transport, because of its size and geography. He also described energy efficiency as perhaps the “biggest energy storage”, because reducing waste is one of the most effective ways to manage demand. Zachariadis called for an end to the “monoculture of solutions”, arguing that photovoltaics and batteries alone cannot do everything and that Cyprus needs integrated, long-term governance. Tsimaras returned to the issue of interconnections, saying they are essential if the target model is to work properly in a relatively isolated system such as Cyprus. Papanicolas concluded with a broader political point, arguing that while EU policies are strong, they are often designed around northern European conditions. Southern countries such as Cyprus, he said, need to work together more actively to shape a European agenda that reflects their own realities, including solar dominance, desalination, heat, and cooling demand.

In summary, the panel agreed that Cyprus has no shortage of technological options or natural advantages. The real challenge lies in combining them intelligently, planning over the long term, and creating the governance structures needed to connect energy, water, storage, interconnection, and market design. The message was not that the transition is impossible, but that it requires Cyprus to move beyond narrow fixes and adopt a more integrated and pragmatic strategy.



Panel XXV – What really happened in Cyprus: A critical assessment since independence and the day forward

Moderator: Evie Phillips, Journalist, Cyprus News Agency

Keynote address by the author of the book: Andreas Theophanous, Professor of Economics and Public Policy, President of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs

- **Discussant:** Michalis Kontos, Associate Professor of International Relations
- Şevki Kiralp, Associate Professor of International Relations

Knowledge Partner: Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs

Aphrodite Room

Evie Phillips opened the session by framing it as both a retrospective and forward-looking discussion, centred on Theophanous’s newly published book. The focus, she noted, was not only on understanding “what really happened”, but also on identifying realistic pathways for the future.

In his keynote address, Andreas Theophanous explained that the book is the outcome of more than four decades of research, combining historical analysis with engagement with policymakers, academics, and international actors. His objective, he said, was to offer “an objective account, as objective as one can have” while also addressing the fundamental question of how Cyprus can move forward. A central theme of his intervention was the tension between international law and realpolitik. While Cyprus traditionally placed strong faith in international law, he argued that in practice outcomes have been shaped primarily by power dynamics. Reflecting on 1974, he stressed that both internal and external factors contributed to the crisis, but that “if I were to weigh what factors mostly pushed things to this direction, I would certainly say it’s exogenous”.

Theophanous traced Cyprus's trajectory from independence through the breakdown of the 1960 constitutional order, the events of 1974, and the decades of negotiations that followed. He argued that Greek Cypriots progressively accepted significant concessions, including the shift towards federation, without achieving a sustainable settlement. In his view, several of the proposed plans risked undermining the functionality or sovereignty of the state, stressing that "no serious state negotiates its own existence".

Looking ahead, Theophanous outlined a three-pillar framework for addressing the Cyprus problem. The first pillar involves constitutional reform aimed at establishing what he described as a "normal federal state", supported by concrete proposals on governance, security arrangements, institutional balance, and decision-making mechanisms. The second pillar focuses on confidence-building measures and practical cooperation between the two communities, alongside engagement with guarantor powers and other international actors to create conditions for mutual benefit. The third pillar is an "evolutionary approach", grounded in the recognition that "you cannot move from one state of affairs to another in 24 hours". He argued that decades of conflict, mistrust, and diverging narratives require a gradual process of rebuilding trust and developing shared interests over time.

Michalis Kontos focused on the intellectual significance of the book, describing it as a serious attempt to move beyond entrenched ideological narratives. He argued that Theophanous has sought to "inject pragmatism" into a debate often shaped by emotion and political dogma. Kontos highlighted the author's reassessment of Makarios's pragmatism in the late 1960s as an example of this approach, noting that such positions would have been highly controversial in earlier decades. He also emphasised the importance of challenging the widespread perception that the Cyprus problem can be resolved through a single, decisive agreement, arguing instead that the book convincingly demonstrates the need for a gradual and structured process.

Sevki Kiralp placed the discussion within a broader contemporary context, emphasising how global political trends are reshaping the environment in which the Cyprus problem is addressed. He argued that "the time has changed, the world has changed, the humanity has changed", pointing to the impact of post-truth politics, declining ideological attachment, and reduced civic engagement. In his view, younger generations are less driven by traditional national narratives, but also less engaged in political processes, which complicates efforts to mobilise support for solutions. Kiralp suggested that an evolutionary and practical approach may be better suited to these new realities, as it focuses on tangible improvements rather than abstract political settlements.

In the discussion, Theophanous rejected both maximalist and overly simplistic approaches. He argued that calls for a unitary state are unrealistic, while the notion that “any solution is better than the status quo” is equally flawed. While he made clear that he does not favour partition, he cautioned that a poorly designed settlement could produce worse outcomes. His approach, therefore, emphasises moderation, institutional realism, and long-term planning.

Questions from the audience brought in the role of the European Union and broader geopolitical considerations. Theophanous argued that Cyprus joined the EU with high expectations that were not fully met and suggested that the Union has not consistently treated Cyprus as a test case for its commitment to international law and territorial integrity. He pointed to differences in how similar situations are framed internationally, highlighting the influence of geopolitical interests.

Overall, the panel provided a comprehensive reflection on Cyprus’s political trajectory and the challenges ahead. Theophanous’s intervention underscored the need for realism, institutional depth, and gradualism, arguing that progress requires both internal political maturity and an understanding of external constraints. The discussion highlighted that any viable path forward must balance principle with pragmatism, while recognising that sustainable solutions will take time to develop.



DAY 3

03 October 2025

Nicosia Old Town Hall

Panel I – Strengthening the parliamentary system and democracy in Cyprus: Discussion on the role of parliament in enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in political processes

- Annita Demetriou, President of the House of Representatives (Keynote Speech)

Zeno Room

In her keynote speech, Annita Demetriou emphasised democracy as a system grounded in pluralism, respect, and active citizen participation, noting that it is “never static” and must continuously evolve to meet modern challenges.

She highlighted that disagreement is an essential element of democratic life but must be guided by “respect,” describing this as “the magic of democracy,” where through dialogue and argument “the majority decides on the result.” At the same time, she acknowledged a growing “distancing from the institutions of a significant portion of society,” stressing the need to rebuild public trust through meaningful reforms.

A central focus of her address was transparency, stating that “it is not enough for procedures to be fair, they must also appear fair.” She outlined steps taken by the House of Representatives, including the broadcasting of plenary sessions, reforms on asset declarations so that “nothing remains hidden,” and ongoing efforts to improve digital access and communication with citizens.

On accountability, she reaffirmed Parliament's constitutional role in overseeing the executive, emphasising that criticism is "political and institutional" rather than personal. She stressed that "no one is above the law," particularly public officials, and that effective parliamentary scrutiny is essential for democratic functioning.

She also underscored the importance of citizen participation, noting that laws are "never static" and must evolve based on real societal needs. This, she argued, makes engagement with civil society and platforms such as the Cyprus Forum particularly valuable.

Concluding, Demetriou encouraged active civic involvement, especially among young people, expressing confidence that "you can change the world" through sustained participation in democratic processes.



Panel II – Power to the people: Unleashing the future of Citizen Democracy

Moderator: George Isaia, Executive Director, Oxygen for Democracy

- Maria Miltiadou, Deputy Executive Director, ONEK
- Clélia Chevrier Kolačko, Ambassador of France
- Georgia Klefti, President, Paralimni Youth President, Paralimni Youth
- Dominik Hierlemann, Senior Advisor, Bertelsmann Stiftung
- Anastasia Karatzia, Associate Professor in Law, University of Essex

Knowledge Partner: EU-CIEMBLY: Democracy for all

Zeno Room

Opening the discussion, George Isaia emphasised the diversity of perspectives on the panel, spanning public service, academia, diplomacy, and youth engagement, and framed the conversation around a central question: how to make citizen participation in democracy more meaningful and effective.

Maria Miltiadou began by stressing that democratic participation is “not a given” and should not be limited to elections, but rather seen as “a living, continuous process”. She presented the Ekfracy platform, a digital tool designed to connect young people directly with the executive branch. The platform allows users aged 18–35 to submit opinions and respond to structured consultations on issues such as housing, mental health, traffic, and bureaucracy. Crucially, she highlighted that participation is paired with feedback, noting that the goal is to ensure young people see how their input is used in policymaking. For Miltiadou, rebuilding trust requires showing that engagement leads to tangible outcomes.

Ambassador Clélia Chevrier Kolačko offered the French perspective, acknowledging a broader “democratic fatigue” and mistrust towards institutions. She outlined two key approaches used in France: participatory democracy and open government. Citizen assemblies, such as the Climate Convention, brought together randomly selected citizens to deliberate and produce policy recommendations, with “over 60% of proposals” ultimately influencing legislation. She also highlighted participatory budgeting at the municipal level, where citizens directly decide on the allocation of public funds, and open data initiatives that increase transparency and public trust. These tools, she argued, help “legitimise public decisions” and reconnect citizens with the state.

Georgia Klefti shared the experience of Paralimni Youth, presenting it as a successful model of grassroots participation. She emphasised that its strength lies in democratic legitimacy, volunteerism, and a strong sense of ownership among young people. All members are elected, and the organisation operates on principles of equality, accountability, and active engagement. Reflecting on their success, she argued that participation increases when people feel that “something is theirs” and that their voice genuinely matters. She also underlined the importance of local government support, noting that empowering youth structures can lead to significant social impact.

Anastasia Karatzia focused on the broader European context of participatory mechanisms, including citizens’ assemblies, petitions, and the European Citizens’ Initiative. Drawing on the EU-CIEMBLY project, she highlighted the importance of designing these mechanisms in ways that ensure inclusion and meaningful participation, particularly for marginalised groups. She pointed to two key challenges: how participatory tools are designed, and how decision-makers respond to their outcomes. Without clear impact and follow-through, she warned, such mechanisms risk undermining trust rather than strengthening it.

Dominik Hierlemann provided a wider reflection on democratic participation in Europe, noting that many citizens feel underrepresented and disconnected from political systems. While numerous participatory tools exist, he argued that awareness and usage remain low, describing the current landscape as a “participation patchwork” rather than a coherent system. He stressed the need for a more holistic approach, combining institutional innovation with civic education and cultural change. Importantly, he cautioned against framing democracy solely in terms of crisis, instead calling for a more positive and realistic perspective that recognises both its strengths and its need for continuous adaptation.

A central theme of the discussion was how to make citizens care and engage. Panellists converged on several key points. Education emerged as critical, particularly the need to strengthen civic and political education from an early age. Equally important was ownership and trust: people are more likely to participate when they feel heard, when processes are transparent, and when outcomes are visible. As Klefti put it, engagement grows when individuals see that their contribution leads to action. Miltiadou reinforced this by stressing the importance of feedback mechanisms, warning that delays or lack of response can quickly erode trust.

Ambassador Chevrier Kolačko concluded by emphasising that participation itself can create a “positive circle”, where citizens feel part of something larger and develop a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility. Visible impact, she argued, is key to sustaining this engagement.

Overall, the panel highlighted that while tools for participatory democracy are expanding, their effectiveness depends on design, accessibility, trust, and follow-through. Strengthening citizen democracy requires not only new mechanisms, but also a broader cultural shift that embeds participation into everyday life and ensures that citizens’ voices genuinely shape public decision-making.



Panel III – Fireside discussion on shaping the future of education: Teacher’s evaluation, civic education and systemic reform

Discussant: George Isaia, Executive Director, Oxygen for Democracy

- Athena Michaelidou, Minister of Education, Sport and Youth
- Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
- Charalambos Vrasidas, Executive Director-Professor, CARDET

Knowledge Partner: CARDET

Zeno Room

Opening the session, Charalambos Vrasidas underlined that education is central to how societies respond to today’s challenges, from democratic participation to the quality and resilience of institutions. He framed the discussion around three connected issues: civic education, teacher evaluation, and broader systemic reform.

In her opening remarks, Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen stressed that democracy in Europe cannot be taken for granted. While many Europeans still feel a strong sense of belonging to the Union, she warned that democracy is under pressure from disinformation, political polarisation, and growing distrust. In this context, she argued that “the fight for European democracy starts in our schools”, and even earlier, in early childhood education. For her, education is not only about economic competitiveness, but also about equipping young people with the ability to think critically, understand institutions, navigate the digital world, and act as active citizens. She placed special emphasis on what the Commission now calls the “fifth basic skill”, citizenship skills, alongside literacy, maths, science, and digital competence

George Isaia then turned to the Minister with a question on civic education and whether there is a genuine intention to restore it more centrally in schools. Athena Michaelidou replied that citizenship education is indeed a priority, but not as a narrow or isolated subject. Instead, the Ministry is trying to reclaim it “from preschool” and embed it across the system. She explained that citizenship-related themes have now been strengthened in curricula, particularly through life skills and health education, while at the same time being extended more clearly into gymnasium and lyceum. For her, the issue is not simply whether one more lesson is added to the timetable, but whether schools actually cultivate values such as justice, freedom, rights, and participation in daily practice. She stressed that these skills cannot be taught “only through a book on a piece of paper”, but must be experienced in practice through workshops, teacher training, and school culture more broadly.

Hansen welcomed this direction and said that it fits closely with the European Commission’s growing emphasis on citizenship skills as part of the Union of Skills agenda. She noted that Cyprus’s upcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU offers an important opportunity to push this issue higher on the European agenda, especially as the Commission is working on building a stronger European Education Area in which civic participation is treated as a core educational objective.

The discussion then moved to the quality of education and teacher evaluation. Vrasidas asked the Minister to explain the new proposal on evaluating teachers and why it matters. Michaelidou was clear that the reform is not intended to punish teachers, but to create a framework for professional development. She argued that the most important factor affecting the quality of education is the teacher, and that Cyprus needs a scientifically grounded system that supports strong educators, allows good teachers to progress, and improves school leadership. In her words, the goal is to “improve the quality of the education system” by giving teachers opportunities to grow rather than flattening everyone into the same model. She also emphasised that the reform opens pathways for career development within teaching itself, rather than forcing advancement only through administrative roles such as becoming a headteacher.

Michaelidou acknowledged that reform in this area has been blocked for decades, largely because of resistance to change, but noted that this is the first time in 50 years that a proposal has actually reached Parliament. She argued that the question is no longer whether reform is needed, but whether there is enough political will to finally move forward. Referring to the Recovery and Resilience Plan, she added that Cyprus has also made commitments at European level, which increases the pressure to deliver.

Hansen responded positively, saying that the Cypriot discussion on teacher evaluation and support is highly relevant to the work the European Commission is currently doing on its future European teachers agenda. She stressed that across Europe the same issue is emerging: teaching needs to become a more attractive profession, and this requires better support, better development opportunities, and a stronger recognition of the central role teachers play in educational and democratic life.

In the final part of the discussion, Vrasidas raised the broader challenge of education quality and skills, noting that many young people still struggle with basic competences and that employers across Europe often cannot find people with the skills they need. Michaelidou responded that this requires multidimensional action. For her, the answer lies in three things: improving content through curriculum reform, strengthening continuous professional development for teachers, and maintaining strong political commitment to education as a national priority. Without that commitment, she suggested, even the best-designed reforms remain incomplete.

Overall, the discussion presented civic education and teacher development as two sides of the same challenge. The panel made clear that if Cyprus wants a stronger democracy and a more effective education system, it must invest both in what students learn and in the people who teach them. The message from both the Cypriot and European side was that these reforms are no longer optional, but necessary for the future of both education and democracy.



Panel IV – The triple threat to democracy: Corruption, cronyism and mediocrity Revisiting the institution of the Attorney General

Moderator: Kriton Dionysiou, Advocate, Lecturer of Law, University of Limassol, Board Member of Institute of Studies for Politics and Democracy

- Christina Karakosta, Policy Officer, Rule of Law Unit, European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers
- Achilles Emilianides, Dean of the School of Law, University of Nicosia
- Nikitas Hatzimihail, Professor at Department of Law, University of Cyprus, Senior Research Fellow of Institute of Studies for Politics and Democracy

Knowledge Partner: ISPD

Zeno Room

Opening the discussion, Kriton Dionysiou framed the intended reform of the Attorney General's institution around two main questions: whether the reform is necessary and whether it is constitutionally permissible. He stressed that the issue remains central in Cyprus because of the Attorney General's powerful role within the legal and constitutional order.

Christina Karakosta began by noting that the European Commission has repeatedly identified concerns regarding the Cypriot model, especially since 2023. These concerns focus on two connected issues: the concentration of roles in the office of the Attorney General, and the absence of effective review over decisions not to prosecute or to discontinue prosecutions. She explained that the Commission's recommendations have been repeated in successive Rule of Law Reports and are linked not only to legal accountability, but also to citizens' trust and economic development. In her words, reform is necessary to "strengthen the independence of the prosecution service, strengthen accountability and citizens' trust in these institutions". She added that this was not a sudden concern, but one already reflected in earlier domestic discussions and international evaluations such as GRECO's

Achilles Emilianides then addressed both constitutionality and substance. On constitutionality, he was unequivocal, arguing that “the reform is constitutional” and suggesting that the issue had effectively been settled decades ago through constitutional practice and amendment. In his view, the more important question is not whether reform is legally possible, but whether it will actually solve the problems it claims to address. He supported the separation of the two roles in principle, describing it as a positive development, but warned against treating the reform as a cure-all. For Emilianides, the deeper issues lie elsewhere, especially in the autonomy of public prosecutors and in the wider internal functioning of the legal service. He stressed that this was the real “hot issue”, one that has largely been avoided in public discussion.

A substantial part of his intervention focused on the question of review over prosecutorial decisions. He argued that the lack of review is not primarily a constitutional problem, but “a jurisprudential construct”, meaning that it stems from the case law and mentality of the courts rather than from the constitutional text itself. In his view, Cypriot courts could already have developed stronger forms of review by applying the European Convention on Human Rights more directly. What is missing is not constitutional permission, but judicial willingness. He also cautioned that if reform simply creates a formal review mechanism without considering how it will work in practice, it may produce very little real change.

Nikitas Hatzimihail developed this critique further by situating the office of the Attorney General within the wider architecture of the Cypriot state. He argued that the institution still reflects, to a large extent, a colonial design that has since accumulated even more power through legal, symbolic, and administrative functions. The Attorney General, he noted, combines “hard power” and “soft power”, influencing prosecutions, legislation, legal advice to the state, and the broader legal profession. In his view, this concentration of influence helps explain why reform is necessary, but also why it must go beyond the simple splitting of two titles.

Hatzimihail argued that the public debate has remained trapped in one simplified idea: separating the office into two parts. While this may be useful, he suggested that the real challenge is to redesign the institution in a way that improves governance, creates meaningful autonomy within the prosecution service, and strengthens coordination without reproducing the same problems in a new form. He outlined an alternative vision involving a high-level Attorney General with strategic oversight, but with day-to-day powers distributed across autonomous prosecutorial and legal advisory structures. This, he argued, would preserve institutional continuity while addressing concentration of power, workload imbalances, and the need for greater specialisation.

He also stressed that any serious reform must deal with the broader culture of accountability, not just the headline issue of a few highly publicised cases. In his view, the danger is that a reform designed around political dissatisfaction with specific decisions may end up encouraging over-prosecution or fear-based decision-making within the legal system. The challenge is therefore to build a structure that is both independent and responsible, rather than simply more politically palatable.

Across the discussion, a recurring theme was that the reform should be seen “as a whole”, not as two disconnected elements. Karakosta made this point explicitly, warning that separating the roles without also creating effective review would be incomplete. Emilianides and Hatzimihail, from different angles, agreed that the quality of the reform will depend on whether it addresses the deeper structural problems of governance, institutional culture, and prosecutorial organisation.

Overall, the panel showed broad support for reforming the institution of the Attorney General, but also strong caution against superficial or symbolic change. The central message was that while separating roles and introducing review are important steps, they will only matter if they are part of a wider redesign that improves independence, strengthens accountability, and makes the legal system work more effectively in practice.



Panel V – Fireside discussion on women's leadership and democracy

Discussant: Georgina Athanasiou, President of the Board of Directors, Oxygen for Democracy

- -Philippa Karsera Christodoulides, First Lady of the Republic of Cyprus

Knowledge Partner: Oxygen for Democracy

Zeno Room

Georgina Athanasiou set the framework by highlighting that the role of the First Lady is often perceived as ceremonial, yet in practice it can exert meaningful influence on diplomacy, society, and the international image of a country. Drawing on Karsera Christodoulides's dual identity as both diplomat and First Lady, the discussion explored how personal agency shapes an otherwise non-institutional role.

Addressing Cyprus's position in an increasingly unstable international environment, Karsera Christodoulides challenged the notion of Cyprus as a "small country", arguing that influence is not determined by size alone. She stressed that what matters is how a state represents itself and promotes its interests, noting that credibility, consistency, and professionalism can significantly elevate a country's standing. "Cyprus first" remains, as she underlined, the guiding principle across all her roles.

On the upcoming Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the European Union, she described it as a strategic opportunity to reinforce Cyprus's role as a reliable and constructive actor. Reflecting on her experience during the 2012 presidency, she noted that Cyprus now enters this process with far greater institutional maturity and expertise. She emphasised that the presidency allows Cyprus to act as an "honest broker", capable of facilitating consensus among member states, while also projecting its role as a stabilising force in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In discussing soft power, Karsera Christodoulides expanded the concept beyond formal diplomacy. She argued that a country's image is shaped collectively, not only by officials, but also by citizens, professionals, and young people representing Cyprus abroad. Within her own role, she places particular emphasis on hospitality, cultural projection, and consistency in messaging. However, she stressed that the most powerful form of soft power remains domestic: "the best image for foreigners is to see a country that is prosperous", one that addresses its internal challenges and prioritises the wellbeing of its citizens.

The conversation then turned to the relationship between the First Lady and society. Karsera Christodoulides made clear that she approaches the role with a focus on substance rather than visibility. While acknowledging the ceremonial expectations attached to the position, she emphasised the importance of tangible impact. Her work has centred on organisations supporting vulnerable groups, particularly through the Independent Social Support Body, which provides scholarships to economically disadvantaged students, as well as initiatives linked to the Radiomarathon and support for people with disabilities.

She described the role as a potential bridge between society and the state, but only when it is grounded in active listening and practical intervention. Her approach has involved visiting communities across Cyprus, including rural areas, identifying specific needs, and facilitating targeted support, often in collaboration with private sector actors through corporate social responsibility initiatives.

A significant part of the discussion focused on women's leadership and the structural challenges that persist. Karsera Christodoulides acknowledged that progress has been made, particularly in terms of representation, but stressed that real equality depends on practical support mechanisms. She pointed to the multiple roles women are expected to fulfil, as professionals, mothers, and caregivers, and argued that without systemic support, participation in leadership will remain uneven.

She highlighted recent policy developments aimed at addressing these challenges, including extended parental leave, the expansion of all-day schools, teleworking arrangements, school nurses, and targeted support for families. These measures, she noted, are essential not only for gender equality, but also for broader societal goals such as addressing the low birth rate and improving work-life balance.

At the same time, she emphasised that women in leadership should retain key characteristics such as empathy, fairness, and a sense of responsibility towards others. She reflected that leadership must remain human-centred, noting that women who advance professionally should remain conscious of the challenges faced by younger women and actively support them.

In her concluding remarks, Karsera Christodoulides outlined the legacy she hopes to leave. This includes strengthening access to education through scholarships, improving conditions for vulnerable groups and people with disabilities, and promoting culture and environmental responsibility. She also referred to her initiatives to restore and modernise the Presidential Palace, transforming it into a space that reflects Cypriot history, culture, and sustainability, including its transition into a zero-waste building and the development of educational and cultural programmes.

Beyond specific projects, she emphasised the importance of public discourse and personal example. She expressed a clear intention to promote a more constructive and empathetic tone in public life, noting that leadership also involves shaping attitudes and behaviours. As she concluded, public roles should be approached as a mission, with the ultimate aim of leaving a positive and lasting impact on society.

Overall, the discussion highlighted how the role of the First Lady, while not formally defined, can evolve into a platform for meaningful contribution. Through diplomacy, social engagement, and advocacy for women's empowerment, Karsera Christodoulides presented a model of leadership grounded in practicality, responsibility, and public service.



Panel VI – Cyprus and the EuroMed region: Diplomacy, trade and security in a region of shifting balances

Moderator: Petros Petrikkos, Adjunct Faculty, University of Nicosia

- Michael Tatham, British High Commissioner, British High Commission
- Dorothee Schmid, Head of the Turkey-Middle East program at IFRI
- Ilkay Demirdag, Co Founder, Energy Shift Capital
- Nvard Chalikyan, Research Fellow, APRI Armenia

Knowledge Partner: APRI Armenia

Aphrodite Room

Opening the discussion, Petros Petrikkos invited the speakers to identify the most consequential shift shaping the EuroMed region today. Their responses reflected a region increasingly defined by overlapping geopolitical instability, energy transformation, and shifting global power dynamics.

Michael Tatham framed the key challenge as the need to move from instability to stability. He highlighted ongoing conflicts, particularly Gaza and Syria, as central to the region's fragility, stressing that long-term economic, trade, and energy opportunities depend on political stabilisation. He also emphasised Cyprus's growing importance as a regional partner, able to maintain constructive relationships across different actors in a complex geopolitical environment.

Ilkay Demirdag placed the EuroMed within a broader global context, arguing that it is no longer a purely regional space. Instead, it sits at the intersection of global competition over energy, technology, and security. She pointed to the accelerating energy transition, the increasing importance of electrification over traditional hydrocarbons, and the dominance of China in critical materials and battery technologies. For Europe, she argued, this creates both strategic vulnerabilities and difficulties in scaling innovation and attracting capital.

Nvard Chalikyan offered a comparative perspective from the South Caucasus, describing it as a “microcosm of global geopolitics”. She highlighted the consequences of unresolved conflicts, particularly Nagorno-Karabakh, warning that the use of force risks setting dangerous precedents. At the same time, she pointed to Armenia’s gradual shift away from reliance on Russia, alongside increased engagement with the European Union and the emergence of new actors such as India and China, as signs of a broader geopolitical realignment.

Dorothee Schmid identified the consolidation of Arab diplomacy as a defining shift. She noted that, particularly after October 7, there has been greater coordination among Arab states, signalling a return of regional diplomacy and a move towards shaping a new security architecture from within the region. This, she argued, reflects a growing capacity of regional actors to manage their own stability and economic development.

The discussion then turned to security and energy. Tatham reiterated that stability remains the UK’s primary objective, as it underpins all other forms of cooperation. Demirdag expanded on this by explaining how geopolitical competition is directly affecting energy markets, highlighting the scale of global energy investment and Europe’s structural challenges in competing with China in technology and resources.

Turkey’s role featured prominently in the discussion. Schmid described Turkey’s ambition to act as a “structuring power” across the Mediterranean and beyond, combining hard and soft power tools while maintaining strategic autonomy. She also highlighted the strong perception of external threats shaping Turkish policy. Chalikyan added that Turkey’s ambitions in the South Caucasus, particularly through initiatives such as the proposed Zangezur corridor, could expand its regional influence and have implications for the Eastern Mediterranean. Demirdag offered a complementary view, noting that Turkey operates in a highly complex environment and is attempting to balance multiple alliances and security pressures.

On Syria, Tatham emphasised the importance of international engagement to support stabilisation, humanitarian recovery, and the elimination of chemical weapons, alongside an inclusive political transition. Schmid added that the priority for the region is the restoration of functioning state structures, arguing that long-term stability depends on strong, effective states rather than fragmented authority.

In the final part of the discussion, attention turned to Cyprus and its potential role in regional energy and connectivity. Demirdag highlighted the opportunity for Cyprus to act as a hub for energy corridors, including LNG and hydrogen, but stressed that such projects require significant capital, long-term planning, and, crucially, political cooperation. She noted that while geopolitical tensions remain a constraint, collaboration is essential for both regional stability and the global energy transition.

Overall, the panel underscored that the EuroMed region is undergoing a period of profound transformation, where geopolitical tensions, energy transition, and global competition intersect. While instability remains a defining feature, the discussion highlighted emerging opportunities for cooperation, provided that diplomacy, coordination, and political stability can be strengthened.



Panel VII – Policy priorities and challenges through the lens of the European Parliament and the EU budget for 2028-2034

Moderator: Yannis Seitanides, Chief Finance Editor, Politis, Daily Newspaper

- Charis Polycarpou, Economist - Head of the Economic Policy Department of AKEL
- Yasar Aydin, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS)
- Sophia Russack, Research Fellow, CEPS

Aphrodite Room

As the European Union prepares its 2028–2034 budget, the debate centres on how to balance security, competitiveness, and social cohesion within limited financial resources and a more fragmented political environment.

In a recorded intervention, Sophia Russack highlighted significant shifts within the European Parliament following the 2024 elections. Increased fragmentation and the rise of far-right parties, combined with a greater willingness of the European People's Party to seek majorities to the right, are reshaping decision-making dynamics. This evolution, she noted, is likely to affect both policy direction and budget negotiations.

Yasar Aydin focused on Turkey's role in European security and energy. He described Turkey as a key strategic partner, citing its NATO membership, role in the Ukraine context, and growing defence industry. At the same time, he acknowledged ongoing challenges, including democratic backsliding and tensions with EU member states. While arguing that the EU retains leverage through economic ties, he pointed to the absence of a coherent European strategy towards Turkey.

Charis Polycarpou offered a more critical perspective, stressing that any upgrade in EU–Turkey relations must be linked to respect for international law and member state sovereignty, particularly Cyprus. He also argued that the EU faces structural economic weaknesses, including high energy costs, lack of industrial policy, and a worsening social crisis, especially in housing and living standards.

Polycarpou further noted that the EU is falling behind the United States in technology and China in the green transition. He criticised the proposed budget for prioritising defence spending without adequately addressing these gaps, warning that this risks placing additional pressure on citizens without resolving underlying economic issues.

The discussion raised broader concerns about whether the EU can pursue strategic autonomy while maintaining social balance. While investment in security and innovation is necessary, participants questioned whether sufficient attention is given to everyday economic challenges faced by citizens.

In the Q&A, Aydin acknowledged weaknesses in Turkey's opposition but pointed to signs of renewed political mobilisation. He maintained that the EU can still influence developments, provided it adopts a more consistent and strategic approach.

Overall, the panel underscored the tension between geopolitical priorities and social needs, highlighting that the success of the next EU budget will depend on aligning political choices with long-term economic and institutional reform.



Panel VIII – The Eastern Mediterranean strategic significance to European and global processes

Moderator: George Hadjipavli, Programme Coordinator, Eastern Mediterranean programme at Oxford

- Shri Manish, Ambassador of India
- Amira Oron, Israeli Diplomat and Ambassador to Egypt
- George Pamboridis, Senior Partner, Pamboridis LLC
- Aziel Philippos Goulondris, Secretary-General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA)

Knowledge Partner: SEESOX

Aphrodite Room

Situated at the intersection of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean is increasingly emerging as a pivotal space where global trade routes, energy security, and geopolitical strategies converge.

The discussion centred on how large-scale connectivity and energy initiatives are reshaping the region's strategic importance. Ambassador Shri Manish introduced the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as a major geopolitical and economic project aimed at linking India to Europe through the Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean via a combination of maritime, rail, and digital infrastructure. He stressed that the corridor is designed not only to reduce logistics costs and transport time, but also to provide an alternative to traditional trade routes, enhancing resilience and diversification in global supply chains. While progress has been significant in the southern segment connecting India with Gulf partners, the northern corridor towards Europe has faced delays due to ongoing regional instability. Nevertheless, he underlined that IMEC continues to enjoy strong political backing and is seen as a long-term strategic investment with benefits for India, Europe, and transatlantic partners alike.

Amira Oron shifted the focus from planned connectivity to existing regional cooperation, presenting the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) as a concrete example of successful multilateral engagement. She highlighted how energy cooperation between countries such as Israel, Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece has evolved into a structured framework that supports both regional integration and European energy security. The EMGF, she explained, has facilitated the development of cross-border infrastructure, enhanced coordination between governments and the private sector, and created a platform for dialogue even in times of political tension. In her view, the forum demonstrates that pragmatic, interest-driven cooperation can contribute to stability and economic growth, while also strengthening Europe's diversification away from traditional energy dependencies.

George Pamboridis addressed the implications of these developments for Cyprus. He noted that although Cyprus is not physically central to corridor routes such as IMEC, it can still derive significant economic and geopolitical benefits through strategic positioning and infrastructure investment, particularly in sectors such as shipping and services. More importantly, he argued that participation in broader regional initiatives reinforces Cyprus's alignment with a network of states that share common strategic interests. Both IMEC and the EMGF, he suggested, contribute to shaping new political realities in the region, where economic interdependence can gradually support stability and strengthen alliances.

Aziel Philippos Goulandris broadened the discussion by examining the role of multilateralism and the United Nations in this evolving environment. While acknowledging the pressures facing the international system, he cautioned against narratives suggesting its decline. Instead, he argued that the UN continues to serve as a foundational framework for international cooperation, providing rules and mechanisms that help manage, rather than eliminate, conflict. He emphasised that regional initiatives should operate within this broader system, reinforcing rather than undermining it. In this sense, projects like IMEC and the EMGF can be seen as complementary layers of cooperation built on the foundations of international law and multilateral governance.

In the concluding exchange, speakers reflected on both the opportunities and the challenges ahead. IMEC was described not only as an infrastructure project but as a potential catalyst for a shift in regional thinking, encouraging cooperation over competition. At the same time, persistent geopolitical tensions, unresolved conflicts, and the exclusion or contestation by key regional actors remain significant obstacles to full realisation. The importance of inclusive approaches and sustained diplomatic engagement was repeatedly emphasised.

Overall, the panel highlighted that the Eastern Mediterranean is assuming a central role in global strategic calculations. As connectivity, energy, and diplomacy increasingly intersect in the region, its future will depend on the capacity of states to translate shared interests into durable cooperation, while navigating a complex and often fragmented geopolitical landscape.



Panel IX – Foreign Direct investment: Growth engine or dependency trap?

Moderator: Evangelos Tryfonos, Economy and Competitiveness Council

- Omiros Pissarides, Managing Director, Ominthia Capital Ltd
- Konstantinos Panitsas, Economist, ESF Center, The Conference Board Anastasios Yiasemides, KPMG

Aphrodite Room

Framed as a question of strategy rather than scale, the discussion examined whether foreign direct investment can sustainably support economic growth or risks creating structural dependencies, particularly in small economies such as Cyprus.

Setting the tone, Evangelos Tryfonos emphasised that foreign direct investment should be treated as a policy tool rather than an objective in itself. Its value, he noted, lies in its contribution to long-term development goals, including competitiveness, social cohesion, and economic resilience. The central challenge for Cyprus is therefore not simply attracting capital, but ensuring that investment aligns with national priorities and delivers tangible benefits to society.

Konstantinos Panitsas approached the issue from a European perspective, outlining the conditions under which foreign direct investment can function as a genuine growth driver. These include the transfer of know-how, job creation, skills development, and enhanced competition. He pointed to recent large-scale investments in Europe, such as semiconductor and electric vehicle production in Germany and cloud infrastructure in Spain, as examples of high-quality investment aligned with strategic objectives like the green and digital transitions.

At the same time, he highlighted a shift in Europe's approach to foreign direct investment, shaped by geopolitical tensions and increasing competition with China. While Chinese investment in Europe remains relatively limited in volume, it is often concentrated in strategic sectors, raising concerns about dependency and lack of reciprocity. In parallel, European investments in China create their own vulnerabilities, as economic exposure can influence political positioning. As a result, the European Union is increasingly prioritising strategic autonomy and introducing stricter screening mechanisms to assess both incoming and outgoing investments.

Focusing on Cyprus, Anastasios Yiasemides underlined the country's role as a stable investment destination within a volatile region. He noted that recent years have seen a shift towards more substantive investments, with companies establishing a physical presence and integrating into the local economy. This has had a broader economic impact, particularly through job creation and increased demand for services.

However, he also pointed to emerging challenges, including pressure on real estate, infrastructure, and urban planning. While foreign direct investment remains essential for a small, open economy like Cyprus, he stressed the importance of monitoring its social impact and ensuring appropriate regulatory oversight, particularly in sensitive sectors such as banking and healthcare. He also highlighted the need to diversify the economic base, including strengthening sectors such as agriculture and exports, to reduce structural vulnerabilities.

Omiros Pissarides provided a broader assessment of the Cypriot investment model, noting that while foreign direct investment has been a key driver of economic recovery, particularly following the financial crisis, its composition has evolved. Historically concentrated in real estate, investment is now increasingly directed towards financial services and technology, with the latter emerging as a significant contributor to employment and growth.

He cautioned, however, that Cyprus's small size imposes structural limitations, requiring realistic expectations about the types of investment the country can attract. At the same time, he raised concerns about the sustainability of an investment model heavily reliant on low taxation, warning that it can create pressures on social cohesion, particularly in areas such as housing, infrastructure, and public services. He argued for a more strategic approach, including clearer sectoral priorities, quality criteria for investments, and policies that ensure broader societal benefits.

The discussion also addressed regulatory developments, particularly in relation to European-level screening mechanisms and sanctions compliance. Yiasemides noted that Cyprus has strengthened its institutional framework, including the establishment of specialised units and stricter controls within the banking sector. While these measures enhance credibility, they can also create practical challenges, including delays and increased complexity for legitimate investors.

Pissarides added that Cyprus, like many European countries, faces the broader dilemma of balancing increased regulation with the need to remain competitive, particularly in comparison to more deregulated environments such as the United States. He observed that while regulatory improvements are evident, effective implementation ultimately depends on institutional capacity and decision-making at the individual level.

In conclusion, the panel converged on the view that foreign direct investment remains indispensable for Cyprus, but its success depends on quality, not quantity. Strategic planning, sectoral diversification, and robust regulatory frameworks are essential to ensure that foreign investment acts as a driver of sustainable growth rather than a source of dependency.



Panel X – Security Vs Defence: The militarisation of Europe

Moderator: Constantinos Hadjisavvas, Senior Research Fellow, École des Ponts Business School (EPBS), Paris Member, Cyprus Defence Industrial Council

- Panayiotis Hadjipavlis, Defence Director, Ministry of Defence
- Tomasz Obremski, Program Manager of the Warsaw Security Forum, Casimir Pulaski Foundation
- Marek Szczepanowski, Ambassador of Poland to Cyprus

Knowledge partner: École des Ponts Business School

Aphrodite Room

Opening the exchange, Constantinos Hadjisavvas highlighted the growing complexity of Europe's security landscape, shaped by hybrid threats, cyberattacks, energy vulnerabilities, and geopolitical instability. He also pointed to structural weaknesses, including fragmentation in defence systems, reliance on non-European suppliers, and limited technological sovereignty, raising the question of whether increased defence spending is translating into genuine resilience.

Panayiotis Hadjipavlis challenged the premise of "militarisation", arguing that Europe is instead correcting a long period of underinvestment driven by an assumption of lasting peace. Recent developments, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have exposed this vulnerability. He emphasised that defence should be understood as an integral component of broader security, enabling the normal functioning of societies. For Cyprus, security threats are not abstract but embedded in lived reality, including ongoing occupation and regional instability. He stressed that future European security must account for a wider spectrum of risks, including hybrid and asymmetric threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa, not solely Russia.

From a European policy perspective, Ambassador Marek Szczepanowski outlined the practical steps taken during Poland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. These included initiatives such as the Security Action for Europe instrument, a €150 billion financing mechanism aimed at strengthening the European defence industry, alongside broader efforts to address security in its multiple dimensions, from external threats to economic and informational resilience. He argued that the European Union's role is complementary to NATO, focusing on capability-building, institutional coordination, and financial support, rather than replacing the Alliance's core deterrence function.

Tomasz Obremski brought a societal and economic lens to the debate, stressing that the scale of defence spending reflects a perceived existential threat, particularly in countries on NATO's eastern flank. Using Poland as an example, he noted that defence expenditure exceeding 5% of gross domestic product enjoys broad public support, driven by proximity to Russia and direct exposure to hybrid threats. However, he warned of the long-term trade-offs, as increased military spending places pressure on social investment and economic stability. While necessary in the current context, such policies may generate social tensions if sustained over time.

A key point of convergence across the panel was the recognition that European security is not solely a military issue. The evolving nature of conflict, including cyber warfare, disinformation, and technological disruption, requires a more integrated approach. The European Union was seen as better equipped to address these non-conventional threats through regulatory, economic, and institutional tools, while NATO remains central to collective defence and deterrence.

The discussion also addressed the relationship between the European Union and NATO. While concerns were raised about Europe potentially needing to assume greater responsibility for its own security, the prevailing view was that the two frameworks are complementary rather than competing. Strengthening European capabilities within the Union was presented as a way to reinforce, rather than replace, the transatlantic alliance.

Cyprus's role in this evolving architecture was framed in terms of perspective and experience. Positioned at the intersection of multiple regions, Cyprus brings insights into crisis management, regional instability, and the need for a broader understanding of threats. The importance of avoiding a narrow, single-threat focus was emphasised, alongside the need for inclusiveness and solidarity within the European Union.

In concluding remarks, the panelists converged on a pragmatic assessment. The current increase in defence spending is not driven by abstract policy choices but by a perceived and shared threat environment. As Obremski noted, the stakes extend beyond regional stability, carrying global implications for the rules-based order. Hadjipavlis reiterated the principle that deterrence underpins peace, while Szczepanowski emphasised the importance of unity and open dialogue among European partners in identifying and addressing threats.

Overall, the discussion suggested that Europe's trajectory is less about militarisation in a traditional sense and more about recalibrating security policy to match a more volatile and contested international environment.



Panel XI – Basketball’s legacy: Growth inclusion, and Cyprus on the international stage

Moderator: Theodoros Tsiolakis, Sports journalist

- Andreas Mouzourides, President, Cyprus Basketball Federation
- Evripides Manoullou, Founder and CEO, Parallax Experience
- Sotiris Themistokleous, Ph.D., Director of Strategic Development, Center for Social Innovation (CSI)
- Professor Dikaia Chatziefstathiou, Professor of Applied Olympic Studies, Director of the Olympic Studies Research Centre for Safe Sport and Human Rights, Associate Dean REKM, Canterbury Christ Church University

Aphrodite Room

Theodoros Tsiolakis set the tone by describing basketball as “much more than a sport”, stressing that it can promote values such as teamwork, respect and perseverance, while also creating opportunities for social cohesion and international projection. He framed EuroBasket 2025 as a turning point for Cyprus, both in terms of sporting infrastructure and international visibility.

Andreas Mouzourides focused first on the diplomatic and strategic significance of the event. He described sport as “the best diplomat of our country abroad”, noting that Cyprus used the EuroBasket bid and hosting process to build relations across Europe, including in politically difficult environments. He stressed that the tournament was the result of a long and difficult journey that began in 2021 but was built on years of consistency by the Cyprus Basketball Federation in successfully organising smaller European events. That consistency, together with transparency and institutional credibility, helped convince FIBA Europe to trust the smallest country ever, in population terms, to host such a major tournament. Looking back, he said what he would keep most from the tournament was the image of families and children leaving the arena full of enthusiasm. For him, the real challenge now is to convert that excitement into long-term participation, not only in basketball, but in sport more broadly.

Evripides Manouillos approached the issue through the lens of sports tourism and event legacy. He argued that EuroBasket should be seen not just as a successful event, but as an economic and developmental opportunity that must now be used intelligently. In his view, the renovation and use of the Spyros Kyprianou arena should not end with the tournament. Instead, Cyprus should develop a strategic model that turns such facilities into living assets capable of hosting international sporting, cultural and entertainment events. He also highlighted the value of the EuroBasket fan zone and the way the wider public engaged with the event beyond the matches themselves. For him, the biggest lesson was that Cyprus has the capacity, partnerships and professionalism to deliver large-scale events successfully. What is needed now is a clear strategy, the right people in the right positions, and a long-term plan linking sport, tourism, facilities and community engagement.

Sotiris Themistocleous focused on the social dimension of basketball. Drawing on the work of the Center for Social Innovation, he argued that sport, and basketball in particular, can be used as a vehicle for inclusion, youth empowerment, local development and the strengthening of social skills. He referred to initiatives such as Sisters, Mentors, and Basketball 4 All, as well as three-on-three basketball events in areas such as Anthoupoli and Kaimakli, to show how the sport can bring young people together and create positive alternatives in local communities. He stressed that basketball can build adaptability, teamwork, leadership and critical thinking, qualities that are essential in a rapidly changing world. What he wants to see after EuroBasket is the “hype” and excitement transferred into schools and neighbourhoods, so that basketball becomes part of everyday life and not just a one-off spectacle.

Professor Dikaia Chatziefstathiou brought a broader academic and international perspective to the discussion. She emphasised that one of the most important signs of legacy was that basketball was being discussed at the Cyprus Forum at all, within a broader setting of politics, democracy and economics. She spoke about participation, safe sport, inclusion and the need to create a culture where sport is accessible, educational and socially transformative. Referring to research she had conducted, she argued that physical education and sport can be powerful tools for socialisation in diverse communities, but only if taught creatively and supported properly. She also underlined the importance of safe sport frameworks, human rights protections and strategic planning. One of her strongest observations concerned culture: she noted that Cyprus must address everyday attitudes towards movement, sport and public space if it wants to create a real legacy. Her point was that no matter how successful a major event is, it will not have lasting impact unless it is accompanied by a cultural shift in how people live, move and engage with sport.

A particularly practical part of the discussion emerged during questions from the audience, where the issue of school facilities and local access to courts was raised. Mouzourides responded forcefully, arguing that many existing school sports halls remain underused because of institutional barriers and a mentality that prevents their broader opening and use. He criticised arbitrary rental increases and the lack of a fair, strategic framework for the use of school facilities by clubs and communities. This point was reinforced by audience interventions, including a former senior sports official, who argued that the state bears significant responsibility for not ensuring better use of sports infrastructure already financed with public funds. Manoulios added that Cyprus needs professional management of major venues, possibly through new public-private partnership models, so that facilities are not left underutilised after high-profile events.

In their final reflections, the speakers converged on the same message: EuroBasket 2025 was a major success, but its true value will be judged by what follows. Mouzourides stressed the need to capitalise on the enthusiasm generated by the tournament. Manoulios emphasised the importance of strategic planning, synergies and continuity. Themistocleous called for sport to become part of everyday life and community participation. Chatziefstathiou underlined that the event showed Cyprus what it can achieve, but also what gaps it must still address if it wants to move to the next level.

Overall, the panel presented EuroBasket 2025 as more than a sporting event. It was described as a proof of capacity, a diplomatic tool, a tourism opportunity, a social intervention, and above all a test of whether Cyprus can move from one successful moment to a broader and more sustainable sporting culture.



Panel XII – Bridging the divide: The future of the Cyprus problem in light of recent developments

Moderator: Harry Tzimitras, Director, Peace Research Institute Oslo-PRIO Cyprus Centre

- Menelaos Menelaou, Negotiator of the Greek Cypriot side for the Cyprus Problem
- Niyazi Kızılyürek, Former Member of the European Parliament
- Giulia Bertezolo, Head of the Cyprus Settlement Support Unit, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (European Commission)
- Dr. Marvin Suesse, Associate Professor in Economics, Trinity College Dublin

Knowledge partner: PRIO Cyprus Centre

Ledra Palace Hotel

Moderator Harry Tzimitras opened by asking for an update on the process following recent meetings in New York and Geneva, focusing on the implementation of confidence-building measures and whether these can support a broader political breakthrough.

Menelaos Menelaou outlined the current diplomatic landscape, stressing that recent technical progress should not be seen as a substitute for a comprehensive political process but as a means to facilitate its resumption. He acknowledged that while some initiatives have advanced, others have stalled, largely due to the enduring shift of the Turkish Cypriot side towards a two-state solution, which remains the central obstacle since 2020. Despite this, he emphasised that inaction would lead to deterioration rather than stability, arguing that “lack of developments does not mean things remaining static, it means things becoming worse”. He highlighted ongoing efforts under the United Nations framework, including the role of the Secretary-General and the appointment of a personal envoy, as well as the continuation of enlarged-format meetings. On confidence-building measures, he noted progress in areas such as cemetery restoration, youth engagement, and environmental cooperation, while acknowledging difficulties in achieving breakthroughs on crossing points. He maintained that such measures are not prerequisites for political progress but should reinforce efforts towards a comprehensive settlement based on a bizonal, bicomunal federation.

Niyazi Kızılyürek provided a more structural and critical assessment of the conflict, arguing that Cyprus remains fundamentally where it was decades ago, with core questions of sovereignty, self-determination, and power-sharing unresolved. He identified clear limits based on historical experience: neither union with Greece, nor a unitary state, nor a recognised two-state solution is feasible. In his view, the only realistic path remains a federal settlement based on shared sovereignty. However, he pointed to two major obstacles: the persistence of incompatible political narratives, and a growing “conformism” around the status quo, with vested interests on both sides benefiting from its continuation. He also introduced the impact of regional geopolitical tensions, particularly between Turkey and Israel, as an additional complicating factor. Looking forward, he shifted the focus from traditional confidence-building measures to what he termed “community-building measures”, advocating for deeper intercommunal integration in areas such as culture, education, economy, and political participation. For him, building shared spaces and everyday cooperation is essential while waiting for broader geopolitical conditions to align.

Giulia Bertezzolo offered the perspective from the European Union, emphasising that the existence of an active United Nations process should not be underestimated after years of stagnation. She acknowledged fatigue and scepticism but argued that each past effort has generated valuable experience that can inform future negotiations. She highlighted the European Union’s sustained engagement on the ground, both through practical projects and through efforts to bridge understanding between the two communities. The appointment of a European Union special envoy was presented as a significant political step, reinforcing the Union’s commitment. Bertezzolo stressed that successful negotiations require compromise and a genuine effort to understand the other side, noting that “no community can be built on the basis of misunderstanding”. She also pointed to practical cooperation tools such as Green Line trade, which can foster both economic and human connections. On the issue of Schengen accession, she clarified that while membership is an obligation for European Union member states, it must be implemented in a way that respects the specific realities of Cyprus and does not undermine intra-island crossings or the reunification process. More broadly, she warned against complacency, stressing that so-called frozen conflicts continue to evolve and can deteriorate rapidly.

Marvin Suesse introduced comparative insights from the Irish peace process, highlighting lessons that could inform the Cyprus case. He emphasised the importance of external actors aligning their positions, as occurred with the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which reframed the conflict as an internal issue to be resolved through power-sharing. A central lesson from Northern Ireland, he argued, is that peace agreements often emerge not from trust, but from a situation where the status quo becomes more costly than compromise. He also stressed that successful agreements may require deliberate ambiguity, allowing contentious issues to be postponed rather than resolved upfront. Importantly, he noted that intercommunal trust and integration develop very slowly, even decades after formal agreements, with persistent segregation in housing, education, and social life. He also highlighted the role of economic incentives, particularly trade, as a powerful driver of cooperation, pointing to how Brexit reinforced economic interdependence on the island of Ireland.

In the final round of discussion, the panel addressed future scenarios, including the implications of regional instability, institutional challenges within the United Nations, and the debate over Cyprus's potential accession to Schengen. Menelaou reiterated that Cyprus should pursue all available opportunities without allowing the political problem to impose limitations, drawing parallels with the country's accession to the European Union. Bertezolo confirmed that Schengen accession is a long-term obligation but must be carefully managed in light of Cyprus's unique circumstances. Kızılyürek returned to the need for practical, everyday cooperation, criticising what he described as a "recognition phobia" that blocks even basic initiatives, and calling for greater use of European Union tools to promote integration. Suesse concluded by reinforcing the importance of economic interdependence as a stabilising force.

Overall, the panel highlighted a clear tension between political stagnation and practical cooperation. While the formal negotiation process remains fragile and constrained by entrenched positions, there are ongoing efforts at technical, societal, and economic levels that could gradually reshape conditions on the ground. The discussion suggested that progress is unlikely to come from a single breakthrough, but rather from a combination of sustained diplomatic engagement, societal integration, and shifting incentives that make the status quo increasingly untenable.



Panel XIV – Enhancing collaborative frameworks across the divide

Moderator: Fiona Mullen, Owner-Director, Sapienta Economics Ltd

- Theodoulos Ioannou, Office of the Negotiator
- Amalia Avraam, Lawyer, Michael Kyprianou & Co LLC, Vice president of the youth board Cyprus, Greek Cypriot co-chairwoman, Youth Technical Committee
- Christoforos Dimitriou, Legal Counsel, EU Law Across the Divide
- Nadia Kornioti, Associate Lecturer in International and Comparative Public Law, School of Law, UCLan Cyprus
- Meltem Onurkan Samani, Founding Director, Cyprus Peace and Dialogue Centre

Ledra Palace Hotel

This panel explored how cooperation across the divide can be strengthened, highlighting both structural challenges and practical ways forward.

Meltem Onurkan Samani set the tone by stressing that “the aim is not cooperation for its own sake but a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem”. She underlined that collaboration operates within an unresolved political reality, where even basic engagement is shaped by non-recognition and mistrust. While technical committees and initiatives can deliver results, she warned that without a clear political direction, “cooperation remains fragile” and risks becoming symbolic. She framed collaborative efforts as “the rehearsal for peace”, not a substitute for it.

Amalia Avraam presented the work of the Youth Technical Committee, emphasising its role in reaching new audiences. She noted that their first event brought in participants who had “for their very first time” interacted across the divide, showing the importance of inclusivity and outreach. For Avraam, trust must be built from the ground up: “every decision must come from the ground up... how can they collaborate on a political level” if people have never even spoken to each other?

Theodoulos Ioannou highlighted the tangible impact of the technical committees, pointing to examples such as providing urgent medicines and restoring cultural heritage. He described these moments as evidence of success, noting that when a committee helps “saving a life... that’s a job well done”. At the same time, he acknowledged that their effectiveness is often constrained by the broader political environment, as technical work cannot always be fully insulated from political tensions.

Nadia Kornioti offered a more critical perspective, focusing on transparency and public awareness. She argued that much of the committees’ work remains invisible, asking whether collaboration is meaningful if it does not reach ordinary citizens. Using a vivid example, she stressed that success should be measured by whether “my aunt who lives in a remote village” understands what is happening, highlighting the gap between elite-level cooperation and societal awareness.

Christoforos Dimitriou presented a different model through the EU Law Across the Divide initiative, where professionals from both communities collaborate on practical issues. He noted that “communities... lawyers, bankers, entrepreneurs” naturally form across the divide when given the opportunity, and that similar challenges on both sides create space for cooperation. His example illustrated how informal, expertise-driven engagement can bypass political barriers and build trust through shared interests.

In the second part of the discussion, solutions focused on expanding participation, improving transparency, and creating stronger links between cooperation and the broader peace process. Ioannou referred to the idea of a consultative civil society body, aimed at giving “a meaningful role for civil society engagement”. Avraam stressed the need to move beyond Nicosia, noting that the Cyprus problem is often perceived as “a bit of a Nicosia problem”, and called for outreach across all regions.

Samani proposed a more structural shift, advocating for citizen assemblies to directly involve the public in shaping the future. She criticised elite-driven processes, arguing that “the fate of this island was left in the hands of a few men in a closed room”, and called for broader societal ownership to ensure accountability and continuity.

Overall, the panel highlighted that while collaborative frameworks have produced concrete results, their impact remains limited by political constraints, lack of visibility, and insufficient public engagement. The discussion converged on the need for more inclusive, transparent, and participatory approaches, ensuring that cooperation not only delivers practical outcomes but also builds momentum toward a comprehensive settlement.



Panel XV – Unlocking the potential of regional organisations in the Mediterranean for peace and stability

Moderator: Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria, Co-Founder, Member of the Executive Board, Diplomeds, The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy and Bilun Gunes, Founding Editor in Chief & Platform Lead, Policypress

- Dr. Alessandro G. Lamonica, Manager, Public Policies Unit, Anna Lindh Foundation Adjunct Professor, Brussels School of Governance
- Marie-Claire Boillot, Senior Energy and Climate Change Expert, Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat (UfMS)
- Androulla Vassiliou, Vice President, Europa Nostra
- Harry Tzimitras, Director, PRIO Cyprus Centre, Expert, Diplomeds – The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy

Knowledge Partner: Competence Center MENA Peace & Security-Cyprus Branch, Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, Diplomeds-The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy

Ledra Palace Hotel

The panel explored how regional organisations in the Mediterranean can contribute to peace and stability amid geopolitical fragmentation, institutional constraints, and declining multilateralism. Opening the discussion, Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria framed the challenge bluntly, noting that “peace has never been such a high-hanging fruit in our region”, while questioning how regional organisations can be leveraged when “military might cannot be the only game in town”.

Marie-Claire Boillot highlighted the stabilising role of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), describing it as “an island of hope... the only forum where 43 member states sit together and continue to sit together”. While acknowledging its limits as a non-political body, she stressed its value in sustaining dialogue and advancing sectoral cooperation in areas such as energy, climate resilience, and civil protection. This, she argued, constitutes “a path to stability”, even if not directly to peace.

Dr. Alessandro Lamonica positioned the Anna Lindh Foundation as a complementary actor, focusing on civil society and intercultural dialogue. He underlined its unique structure linking governments and over 4,000 civil society organisations across the region, emphasising youth engagement and policy influence. Beyond project implementation, he noted the importance of translating grassroots knowledge into policymaking, particularly in times of crisis.

Harry Tzimitras provided a more critical geopolitical perspective, arguing that the erosion of the rules-based international order requires “principled realism”. He warned that multilateralism is weakening amid “the normalization of the exception and the legitimization of bullying”, making regional cooperation frameworks more necessary than ever. At the same time, he cautioned that not all cooperation is beneficial, noting that “cooperation is a little bit like cholesterol, you can have good cooperation and bad cooperation”.

Androulla Vassiliou shifted the discussion to culture and youth, presenting culture as a transformative tool for peacebuilding. Drawing on her experience as European Commissioner, she argued that cooperation begins with mutual understanding, adding that “through culture and through sport, we made these unhappy young people happy and peaceful”. She highlighted missed opportunities in Cyprus, including the collapse of a bicommunal youth orchestra due to lack of funding, as an example of unrealised potential.

The second part of the discussion focused on the structural limitations of regional organisations. Boillot explained that consensus-based decision-making among 43 states inevitably slows progress, but noted that ongoing reforms aim to make the UfM “more efficient and more impactful”, focusing on shared priorities such as energy, water, and resilience.

Lamonica pointed to increasing geopolitical tensions and “a certain degree of self-censorship” within organisations, alongside the risk of over-reliance on low-politics cooperation. In response, he outlined efforts to strengthen cooperation with the UfM, enhance civil society participation, and invest in youth and evidence-based policymaking.

Tzimitras reinforced the urgency of action, warning that “there is no such thing as a frozen conflict” and advocating for practical cooperation on issues such as environment, migration, and human security. He also stressed the importance of preserving existing institutions, arguing that despite their flaws, “imagine the world without them”.

Vassiliou presented Europa Nostra’s Heritage Hub in Nicosia as a practical example of regional cooperation through culture, connecting European and Middle Eastern civil society actors. However, she emphasised that financial constraints remain a key obstacle to scaling such initiatives.

In concluding reflections, panelists addressed the relevance of the Mediterranean as a framework for cooperation. Boillot stressed that shared challenges, from climate change to conflict, require collective responses, noting that “we cannot afford the luxury of saying that we are not together”. Lamonica described the region as “an area of shared destiny”, highlighting renewed EU engagement through upcoming policy initiatives. Tzimitras added that both risks and opportunities in the region are inherently interconnected, requiring coordinated action.

The discussion concluded that while regional organisations face structural and political constraints, they remain indispensable platforms for dialogue, cooperation, and incremental stability. Their effectiveness, however, depends on adaptability, inclusivity, and the ability to bridge high-level diplomacy with grassroots engagement.



Panel XVI – Powering peace: The bi-communal solar future of Cyprus

Moderator: Michel Vedrenne Gutiérrez, Head of Section, European Commission

- Fikri Toros, Member of the Republican Turkish Party (CTP)
- Charis Psaltis, Professor of Social and Developmental Psychology, University of Cyprus

Knowledge Partner: Cyprus Settlement Support Unit, DG REGIO of the European Commission

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Opening the discussion, Michel Vedrenne Gutiérrez highlighted the paradox of Cyprus's energy landscape: despite over 300 days of sunshine annually, the island ranks only 17th in the EU in solar capacity per capita, while maintaining some of the highest electricity prices. He stressed that energy is no longer merely a resource but “a tool for diplomacy and a driver for conflict management”, framing the European Commission's proposal for a bi-communal solar plant in the buffer zone as a potential “peace project for Cyprus”.

Fikri Toros emphasised the symbolic and practical value of solar energy as a shared resource, noting that “the sun is one natural resource that no division can recognize nor obstruct”. He argued that a joint solar project could generate tangible benefits for both communities, including reduced energy costs and increased energy security, thereby fostering trust through shared gains. Drawing on past examples such as the bicomunal sewage treatment plant and electricity grid interconnection, he underlined that cooperation has already proven possible and effective.

Toros structured his argument around three key dimensions: shared benefit, shared responsibility, and shared systems. He noted that climate change and energy insecurity affect the entire island, making cooperation not optional but necessary. Importantly, he described interconnected energy systems as “links of interdependence”, essential for building a future federal partnership. Ultimately, he framed the solar project as “a very powerful confidence-building measure” capable of transforming “the Cypriot sun into a bridge rather than a dividing line”.

Charis Psaltis presented new empirical findings on public attitudes towards energy cooperation, revealing that a bi-communal solar project is the most widely accepted confidence-building measure among Greek Cypriots. Using conjoint analysis of different peace package scenarios, the research found that energy collaboration, particularly solar, significantly increases public support. Notably, he highlighted that even politically sensitive cooperation with Turkey becomes acceptable when embedded within a comprehensive solution, with support reaching around 65 percent.

Psaltis interpreted these findings as evidence that solar energy appeals across constituencies, combining economic incentives with environmental concerns. He argued that such projects “manage to combine the economic benefit... with a very feasible confidence-building measure that will also benefit the pockets of every citizen”. However, he also cautioned that transparency is essential, noting widespread public scepticism about political motives and the need to ensure that “nobody [is] trying to make money out of these projects”.

The discussion then turned to the central challenge of aligning technical implementation with political realities. Toros acknowledged that while the project is technically straightforward, its execution is “heavily politically charged”. He stressed that success depends on embedding political considerations from the outset, including governance, ownership, and revenue-sharing arrangements. He also highlighted the importance of EU involvement in ensuring neutrality and credibility.

Both speakers emphasised that technical excellence, transparency, and visible shared benefits are critical to building trust. Psaltis added that beyond technical design, political will remains decisive, pointing to successful regional examples where economic incentives and political leadership aligned to deliver results.

Audience discussion raised broader questions about whether such a project could break the current deadlock in Cyprus. The moderator argued that the bi-communal nature of the project is its defining feature, noting that “you can build a solar power plant anywhere... but you cannot buy a bi-communal solar power plant”. Trust and risk-taking, he suggested, are inherent to any joint initiative and essential for moving forward.

Toros reinforced the urgency of cooperation, linking renewable energy development to EU climate targets and warning that without coordinated political will, Cyprus risks falling further behind. He also connected the discussion to wider regional energy dynamics, including natural gas cooperation, arguing that broader energy integration depends on progress in resolving the Cyprus problem.

In concluding remarks, the panel underscored that while a bi-communal solar project will not in itself resolve the Cyprus issue, it represents a meaningful and practical step forward. By delivering tangible benefits, fostering interdependence, and building trust, it has the potential to act as a catalyst for broader cooperation and, ultimately, contribute to a more favourable environment for a comprehensive settlement.



Panel XVII – Urban dynamics across the UN buffer zone: Famagusta and Nicosia

Moderator: Müge Akkar Ercan, Professor of Urban Planning

- -Byron Ioannou, Professor of Urban Planning at the Department of Architecture, Frederick University
- Gizem Caner, Urban Planner (PhD)
- Münevver Özgür Özersay, Architect (PhD)

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The final session examined Cyprus' division through the lens of urban planning, focusing on Nicosia and Famagusta and asking how urban dynamics might either reinforce separation or help create cooperation, sustainability, and a shared future. Moderator Müge Akkar Ercan framed the discussion around three themes: the present impact of the buffer zone, the possibility of shared planning visions, and the challenges and opportunities for future collaboration.

Byron Ioannou argued that the real question is not simply urban development, but sustainable urban development across the island. He noted that planners often speak about “Nicosia” while in reality referring to only half of it, and warned that without understanding the whole city, meaningful planning remains incomplete. He stressed that the impact of division on mobility, exchange, environment, and local economies has still not been properly measured, while the environmental costs are already clear. As he put it, “the environment is the loser of this division.”

Gizem Caner focused on existing examples of collaboration, especially the Nicosia Master Plan, which she described as innovative because it enabled urban rehabilitation and strategic planning even without reunification. She also referred to the technical committees established in 2008, but stressed that many of the most meaningful developments have come from grassroots and bicommunal initiatives such as the Home for Cooperation and the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research. For Caner, real progress often depends on presenting urban interdependence in practical and human terms rather than trapping it in purely political narratives. She argued that Cyprus should aim to build “one single common public identity.”

Münevver Özgür Özersay reflected on two projects she described as especially meaningful in her life: the Home for Cooperation and Hands-on Famagusta. She explained that Hands-on Famagusta brought together planners, architects, students, municipalities, and citizens from both communities to co-create a mobile city model through surveys, mapping, and 3D printing. The most important outcome, she said, was not the model itself but the process of working together and building a shared way of seeing the city. For her, the project created “a shared vocabulary and a toolkit” that could support future planning and policymaking.

In the second part of the panel, the speakers turned to challenges and opportunities. Ioannou stressed the need to work within current restrictions rather than wait passively for politics to change. He pointed to opportunities in stronger cooperation between municipalities, professional chambers, and local actors, especially on mobility, environment, and urban governance. Caner argued that Cyprus remains too inward-looking and too trapped in the logic of division. She said the island also needs to think about how its cities can become outward-looking, connected, and globally relevant. Özersay added that many bicommunal initiatives remain fragile because they depend on temporary funding and informal networks, and she urged a more deliberate effort to “move from separation to cooperation, and from exclusion to shared responsibility for a common future.”

The audience discussion reinforced these themes. Questions were raised about the relationship between earlier projects and current efforts, the use of the data already collected, and the fact that many valuable bicommunal initiatives remain trapped in a “bubble”, without reaching the wider public. The speakers acknowledged that communication has often been weak and that many such efforts need stronger visibility and better links to policy and society.

In her closing remarks, Müge Akkar Ercan underlined that sustainable urban transition requires both grassroots energy and a clear roadmap, with leadership, governance, and long-term commitment. The overall message of the panel was that division continues to shape urban life in powerful ways, but Nicosia and Famagusta also offer important examples of how cities can become spaces of cooperation. The challenge now is to turn these experiences into more visible, institutionalised, and lasting forms of shared urban practice.



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