



Cyprus Forum. • Brussels

PRESIDENCY EDITION

Held under the auspices of the Cyprus EU Presidency.

Event Report



3 February 2026



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This report presents a comprehensive summary of the Cyprus Forum Brussels: Presidency Edition 2026, organised by Oxygen for Democracy and held under the auspices of the Cyprus EU Presidency.

Within these pages, you will find a brief overview of the discussions and commitments forged during the forum. We express our gratitude to all participants, including political leaders, professionals, media representatives, academics, and contributors from civic society, for their invaluable input.

The views presented in this report, commissioned by Oxygen for Democracy, are solely those of the speakers. They do not necessarily represent the official stance of either organising entity, their associated member states, or affiliated organisations.

Readers are encouraged to examine the presentations and recorded opinions and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

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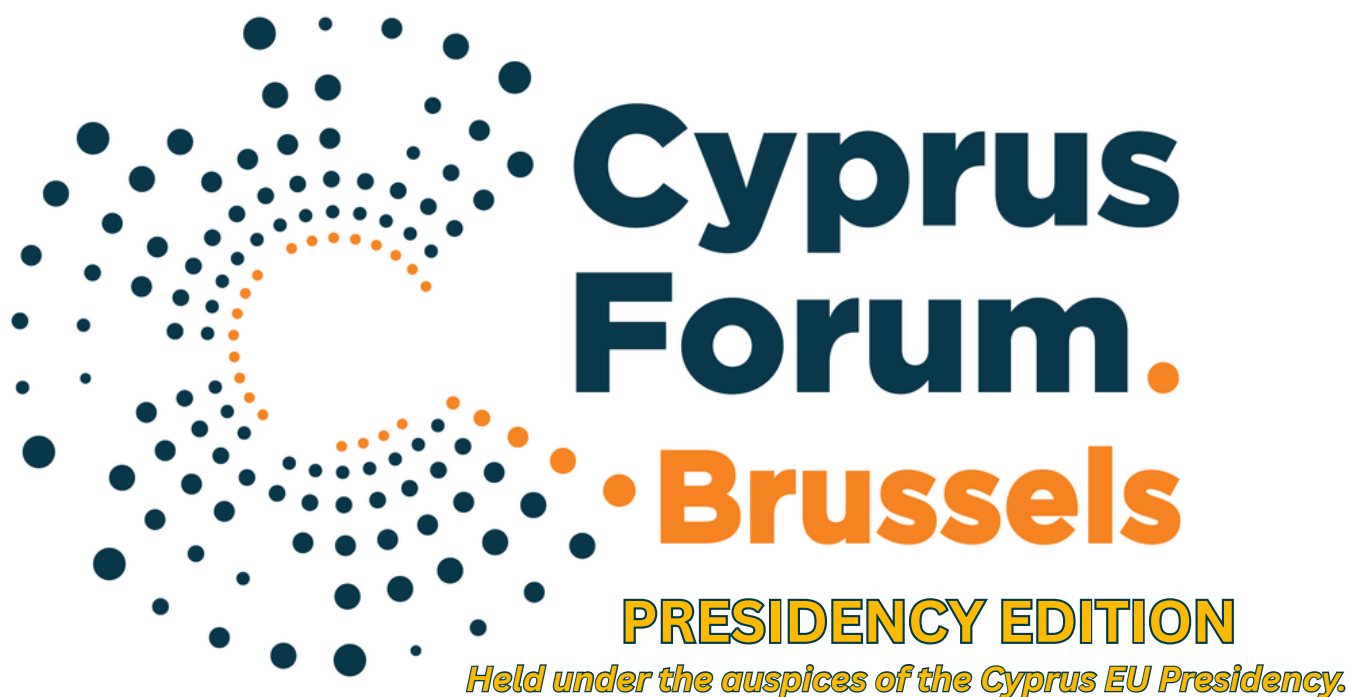


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3 February 2026

Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU, Brussels



Opening Session and Welcoming Remarks

*Petros Mavrikios,
Political and Security Committee (PSC) Ambassador at the Permanent
Representation of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union*

Petros Mavrikios underlined that Cyprus approaches the Presidency of the Council of the European Union ready to coordinate and negotiate as an honest broker at a demanding moment for the Union. He highlighted two realities shaping the work ahead: continuity and a rapidly changing world. The Presidency will not seek to reset the EU agenda, but to build on progress already achieved, while responding to war, geopolitical tensions, economic pressures, and climate change.

Strategic autonomy, he stressed, has become “a practical necessity,” with Cyprus striving for an autonomous Union that remains open to the world. Presidency priorities include autonomy through security, defence, and preparedness; continued support for Ukraine and its accession process; strengthening the European defence industry; reinforcing transatlantic partnerships; advancing the Pact on Migration and Asylum; boosting competitiveness and economic strength; and promoting simplification, access to finance, and savings and investment.

Ambassador Mavrikios also emphasised the Presidency’s priorities of outreach to neighbours, enlargement, strong dialogue with the United States, and particular attention to the southern neighbourhood, including the Mediterranean and the Middle East. He pointed to the importance of promoting deeper regional engagement, including through a summit planned for April. Social cohesion remains central, with a focus on poverty reduction, social rights, affordable housing, and a stronger European Health Union. He concluded: “We take on the Presidency knowing the challenges are real and expectations are high,” noting that more than 200 people in Brussels and hundreds more in Cyprus are working toward this goal.



Opening Session and Welcoming Remarks

*Nicolas Kyriakides,
Executive President of the Cyprus Forum*

Nicolas Kyriakides stressed that Cyprus does not view the EU Council Presidency as a purely institutional exercise. The Cyprus Forum seeks to foster open dialogue, particularly at a time of overlapping crises, political instability, economic uncertainty, climate stress, demographic challenges, and a growing crisis of trust in institutions.

He argued that policy cannot be reactive, ideological, or short-term. Europe does not emerge stronger from crisis by improvisation, but by values and policymaking, he said. The Presidency's priorities therefore reflect political choices about what kind of Europe should be built in an increasingly volatile and fragmented world. As he noted, "Policy without dialogue becomes fragile," adding that every major European crisis has historically become a moment of reinvention.



Panel I – How Do We Finance Competitiveness Challenges in the Years Ahead?

Moderator: Roel Dom, Research Fellow, Bruegel

- Christina Kattami, MFF Attaché, Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU
- Konstantinos Diamantouros, Head of Brussels Office, Permanent Delegate to BusinessEurope, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee
- Karen Massin, Head Government Affairs and Public Policy – EU Institutions, Google
- Cinzia Alcidi, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

The panel examined how Europe can mobilise resources, simplify its regulatory environment, and shape the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to strengthen competitiveness.

Karen Massin underlined the need for simplification and regulatory coherence, noting that companies often face contradictory legislation. While the Omnibus initiative is a positive step, it is also complex and time-consuming. Digitalisation is becoming central across all sectors, and Europe therefore requires both strong human capital and robust infrastructure. She pointed out that artificial intelligence alone could grow Europe's economy by €1.3 trillion.

Cinzia Alcidi cautioned against excessive pessimism, observing that Europe has become hyper-critical of itself. Optimism, she argued, is crucial for investment. While the single market has not reached its full potential due to persistent obstacles, she expressed confidence that current global dynamics could generate momentum to overcome them. Europe holds vast savings, much of which is invested outside the Union, and the challenge is to channel this capital into European projects.

Konstantinos Diamantouros echoed the view that Europe is “too gloomy”, highlighting tangible changes in the current Commission's approach, particularly on simplification. Simplification, he stressed, does not mean deregulation. Energy costs remain a major structural problem, and Europe must diversify its trade relations, as 50% of EU GDP comes from exports outside the Union.

From a member-state perspective, Christina Kattami argued that Europe is no longer in transition, it is already in rupture. The EU budget is one of the Union's strongest tools, and the new MFF proposal represents a narrative shift following the Draghi report. She highlighted the demonstrated value of the single market, citing examples of significant spillover effects across borders.

On the proposed competitiveness fund within the MFF, Cinzia Alcidi described the €230 billion allocation as “revolutionary,” sending a strong political signal. However, she cautioned that its effectiveness will depend on a clear definition of industrial strategy and careful prioritisation, given the limited size of the budget.

Discussion then turned to the revenue side of the MFF. Konstantinos Diamantouros mentioned two ways to increase the budget: increasing taxes or mobilising private investment. He shared that many member states have expressed concern over the existing proposal. Christina Kattami stressed that debates should be guided by where the EU budget delivers the greatest value added.

On public versus private investment, speakers agreed that private investment is central, though public investment still matters. Europe's lack of a strong venture capital culture and its lower tolerance for risk were identified as obstacles to innovation. Karen Massin noted that only 10% of SMEs export within Europe, underlining the need for further simplification.

Skills were repeatedly described as a form of “soft infrastructure.” Karen Massin highlighted that Google has already trained around 13 million people in Europe. Cinzia Alcidi pointed to the Commission's Competitiveness Compass and stressed that focusing only on money will not be enough: skills, environment, and opportunity must go hand in hand.



Keynote Speech

Fostering Affordable, Accessible and Available Health Care in the EU

*Neophytos Charalambides,
Minister of Health of the Republic of Cyprus*

Neophytos Charalambides, Minister of Health of the Republic of Cyprus, emphasised that Cyprus assumes the Presidency of the Council of the EU at a time when Europeans are seeking practical solutions. Health, he said, is crucial for resilience and security, as well as for strengthening communities and preserving dignity.

Cyprus will promote an EU Action Plan for cardiovascular health, noting that cardiovascular diseases remain the leading cause of death in the EU. In health, autonomy means ensuring that every European can access high-quality care even in challenging times. No European citizen should be denied fair and quality health care, he stressed.

Priorities include improving access to medical devices and healthcare, advancing legislative files related to life sciences, the medical and diagnostic devices frameworks, and the European Biotech Act, as well as intensifying work on the European Health Data Space. Mental health, inclusiveness, and the meaningful participation of young people in policymaking are also central.

His ambition is clear: “A Europe where systems are resilient, medicines and medical devices are accessible, innovations serve people, and no citizen is left behind.”



Panel II – Shaping Europe’s Future

Moderator: Cleopatra Kitt, Advisor to international organisations and governments, Cleopatra Kitt Limited

- Michael Teutsch, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Directorate B – Youth, Education and Erasmus+, Unit B.4 – Erasmus+ Coordination, European Commission
- Kika Kattami, Education, Sport and Youth Counsellor, Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU
- Marinos Papaioakeim, Strategic Partnerships and Development Lead, CARDET

This panel focused on education, youth, demographic change, and the long-term foundations of European competitiveness and democracy.

Kika Kattami noted that education, youth, and sport often receive limited political attention, despite their strategic importance. Cooperation in these areas, however, has a long history within the European Union through the European Education Area. She stressed the need to invest in resilient education systems and to ensure that Europeans can move freely to learn, work, and strengthen their skills. Inclusion, equity, and the wellbeing of people should remain central priorities.

Erasmus+ was highlighted as the main priority of the Cyprus Presidency in this policy area, with Cyprus leading Council discussions on future regulation. The aim is to ensure that the programme responds to the needs of education systems over the next decade. A second key priority concerns teachers. Many Member States face teacher shortages and are seeking ways to attract high-quality professionals, encourage them to remain in the profession, and invest in their continuous professional development. At the EU level, the Cyprus Presidency is working toward a common vision regarding the role of teachers in the era of artificial intelligence, acknowledging the impact of AI on students, teaching methodologies, and education systems, while safeguarding the human dimension of teaching and learning.

Michael Teutsch underlined that the real investment is in people. Europe not only has bright minds, he said, but also lives within a structured framework of democracies, justice, and shared values. Supporting people from a very young age is therefore essential, as living together is something that is learned and practised.

Marinos Papaioakeim argued that Europe's most serious democratic challenge is not political apathy, but a growing disconnection between citizens and institutions. Across Europe, young people actively demonstrate on issues such as civic values, climate justice, digital rights, and peace. While the majority of young Europeans aged 15–30 participate in civic life, they often feel that the formal political system does not work for them and that their voices do not count in decision-making. Although many express an intention to vote, actual turnout remains low. This dynamic risks undermining the legitimacy of political systems.

Participation, he stressed, must therefore move beyond consultation toward co-creation. Europe must also find complementary ways, beyond formal politics, to engage young people and harness their energy and ideas.

On Erasmus+ and European values, Michael Teutsch explained that the programme invests the majority of its resources in supporting mobility. Participants consistently report that they become more open-minded through their experience. Erasmus+ is implemented in cooperation with national agencies and involves extensive partnerships with schools, vocational institutions, and higher education providers across Member States, as well as through the European Youth Dialogue.

Vocational training and higher education were identified as key pillars for strengthening Europe's future. Kika Kattami noted that one Cyprus Presidency priority is connecting the EU more closely with young people, including by ensuring that recommendations emerging from youth–policymaker dialogues are reflected in policy documents. Higher education is a main priority within cooperation in the European Education Area, with initiatives such as the European Universities Alliances promoting deep, long-term transnational cooperation, innovation, and interdisciplinarity. Vocational education and training (VET) was described as a strategic sector that must receive greater focus, as it closely reflects labour market needs.

Financial literacy and civic engagement were also discussed. Marinos Papaioakeim explained that participatory democracy is shaped by people's economic reality: those facing financial insecurity have less capacity to engage in public life and are less likely to vote, volunteer, or participate in civic activities. Financial literacy and economic empowerment therefore act as enablers of engagement. He also introduced the concept of "financial citizenship," whereby greater awareness and understanding of public money help people see policy not as abstract, but as something tangible and implementable.

Michael Teutsch added that while financial literacy is important, it is not in itself a guarantee of democratic engagement. In some cases, financially secure and politically active actors promote agendas that are anti-democratic and contrary to EU values. This reinforces the need to engage in dialogue with people who are dissatisfied with how democracy works, rather than disengaging from them.

Life-long learning was emphasised as a core element of EU education policy. Kika Kattami noted that re-skilling and up-skilling are essential, both to avoid leaving people behind and to help citizens adapt to changing economic and technological conditions. Michael Teutsch added that Erasmus+ is, by design, a life-long learning programme, accessible even to staff working with very young children.

Keynote Speech

Seas of Opportunity: Strengthening Europe's Strategic Autonomy and Food Security in an Open World

*Costas Kadiş,
European Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans*

Costas Kadiş, European Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans, emphasised that the Cyprus Presidency has a clear vision that recognises the broader maritime dimension of Europe's future. With more than 70,000 kilometres of coastline, Europe's seas connect economies to global markets, host vital transport and energy infrastructure, and sustain coastal communities.

The way Europe engages with its seas, he argued, is a defining element of strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy relies in part on how coherently Europe governs and protects its maritime space. Maritime transport, ports, fisheries, offshore renewable energy, and advanced maritime industries all contribute significantly to Europe's competitiveness.

Opportunity alone, however, is not sufficient. Fragmented governance and competing uses of maritime space risk undermining Europe's potential. The European Ocean Pact therefore plays a crucial role as an enabling framework, bringing together the EU's ocean-related policies under a single umbrella and ensuring that objectives reinforce rather than contradict one another. It supports more integrated maritime planning and strengthens the link between ocean health and Europe's long-term economic resilience.

Resilient ports and maritime routes are essential, while offshore renewables represent one of the fastest-growing sectors in the Union. Fisheries and aquaculture contribute directly to food security but also highlight Europe's continued exposure to external dependencies, making it necessary to strengthen internal, sustainable production. Fisheries are also closely linked to healthy ecosystems, skills development, innovation, and effective governance of shared marine resources.

The Union, Commissioner Kadis noted, continues to invest in international ocean governance and research. “Cooperation, not disengagement, remains our guiding principle,” he said.

Coastal communities face particular challenges, and island and coastal community strategies are expected to be adopted under the Cyprus Presidency in June. He concluded by emphasising that “the sea is not merely a resource, but a partner in progress.”



Panel III – The Strategic Importance of EU Enlargement in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

Moderator: Harry Tzimitras, Director, PRIO Cyprus Centre

- Gert Jan Koopman, Director-General, Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission
- Oksana Diakun, Deputy Head of the Mission, Mission of Ukraine to the EU
- Petar Marković, Ambassador, Mission of Montenegro to the EU
- Ian Lesser, Distinguished Fellow and Advisor to the President, German Marshall Fund of the United States
- Nektaria Kakoutsis, Counsellor, Enlargement, Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU

This panel examined enlargement in an era of unprecedented change, highlighting its existential importance for the European Union.

Gert Jan Koopman underlined that the rules-based order is the DNA of the EU and that enlargement is, by its nature, existential. One of the key challenges, he said, is ensuring that the Union's own interests are taken forward robustly while maintaining this order. Candidate countries are expected to align with EU values and policies, particularly in relation to geostrategic interests. He noted that Ukraine's accession is currently held back by one Member State, despite broad recognition of its strategic significance.

Oksana Diakun stressed that there is no dilemma between enlargement being geopolitical and merit-based. Enlargement is a geostrategic necessity for both the EU and candidate countries. The consequences of the war demonstrate that security cannot be taken for granted, and Ukraine's accession has become a matter of security guarantee for Europe. At the same time, accession is a tool of discipline that motivates deep reforms. Ukraine is committed to delivering on a merit-based accession process and aims to complete all necessary steps by the end of 2027. A future peace deal could help accelerate this process, with the ultimate goal of full political and economic integration into the EU.

Ambassador Petar Marković emphasised that enlargement must proceed in a way that strengthens the Union. He highlighted the need to strike the right balance between compliance and reward. Montenegro has been steadily complying with accession criteria for nearly 15 years. However, methodological changes to the enlargement process have meant that early compliers risk losing their frontrunner status. He argued that mechanisms are needed to expedite compliance for all candidates while still rewarding those who have made early and sustained progress, and to provide incentives for countries that are halfway through the process.

Ian Lesser noted that the strategic environment is increasingly challenging for European competitiveness and security. Strategic autonomy, he argued, is harder to contemplate without a credible path for enlargement. If the EU does not move forward with enlargement, others will fill the gap. Enlargement is also closely linked to the transatlantic context and to how the EU and NATO relate to one another. Beyond questions of spending, he emphasised the importance of strategic culture and whether European societies are willing to assume risk.

From the Cyprus Presidency perspective, Nektaria Kakoutsis highlighted that the Union is facing overlapping crises, including challenges to the rules-based order and increased security vulnerabilities, resulting in greater unpredictability and complexity. The EU must find its voice and stand by itself, but without becoming introverted. Enlargement remains a merit-based process and a structural stabilisation project. Drawing on Cyprus's own experience of joining the EU with an ongoing political issue, she stressed the importance of respecting rules and maintaining consensus in the Council. Ukraine, despite being a country at war, is doing an excellent job of meeting accession criteria. Enlargement, she concluded, is not a competition, but a process that embraces those who wish to accede. "When we talk the talk, we must also walk the walk."



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