



Euro-Mediterranean Civil Society Organisations Conference

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES REPORT

Euro-Mediterranean Civil Society Organisations Conference

“Realities, Challenges, and Collaboration of Civil Society Organisations
across Europe and the Mediterranean”

Nicosia, Cyprus • 23–24 April 2026

About the Conference

The Euro-Mediterranean Civil Society Organisations (CSO) Conference was held on 23–24 April 2026 in Nicosia, Cyprus. Bringing together practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors from across Europe and the Mediterranean, the conference examined the evolving landscape of civil society at a time of mounting geopolitical, economic, and democratic pressures.

The event was organised by CARDET as part of the EU Presidency Project ‘Towards an open, fair and sustainable Europe in the world’ (2024–2026), implemented in partnership with Global Focus (Denmark), Grupa Zagranica (Poland), and CONCORD (Belgium), and co-funded by the European Union. It was aligned with the EU Council Presidency Trio of Poland, Denmark, and Cyprus.

The proceedings reflect a collective recognition that civil society is operating under mounting pressure, yet remains an indispensable actor in promoting democratic resilience, sustainable development, and inclusive governance.



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Executive Summary

This report presents the key outcomes, insights, and recommendations emerging from the conference. Eight cross-cutting themes defined the two days of dialogue:

- The contraction of civic space across Europe and the Mediterranean, driven by increasing regulatory pressures, declining public trust, and security-oriented political agendas.
- The critical yet under-resourced role of civil society in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in addressing complex social and environmental challenges.
- The transformative potential of Global Citizenship Education as a foundation for democratic participation, social cohesion, and cross-cultural solidarity.
- The urgent need to address the growing mental health crisis among young people, especially in relation to digital environments, online risks, and social isolation.
- The persistent challenges related to securing sustainable, flexible, and diversified funding for civil society organisations.
- The evolving geopolitical landscape of the Mediterranean, with significant implications for regional stability, multilateral cooperation, and the operational space of civil society actors.
- Migration as a defining issue in the Euro-Mediterranean region, encompassing challenges of integration, skills recognition, social inclusion, and access to services, while highlighting the crucial role of civil society in supporting vulnerable populations and facilitating inclusive policy responses.
- The emerging role of artificial intelligence for social good, including its potential to enhance service delivery, policy innovation, and civic engagement, alongside the need to address ethical concerns related to bias, transparency, and accountability.

“Civil society is not merely a stakeholder in the democratic process; it is the architect of a resilient society. Our mission is to move beyond consultation toward co-creation, where civil society and public institutions jointly shape an open, fair, and sustainable future for the Euro-Mediterranean region.”

Dr. Charalambos Vrasidas, Executive Director of CARDET



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Euro-Mediterranean CSO Conference by the Numbers



160+
Total Participants



34
International Delegates



70+
Organizations Represented



19
Participating Countries

Geographic Representation

The conference brought together a diverse group of actors from across the Europe and the Southern Mediterranean regions.



Cyprus, Greece, Denmark, Poland, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Romania, Croatia, Malta, Slovenia
Represents Northern Europe



Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan, Algeria
Represents North Africa and Middle East



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Theme 1: Civic Space and Democratic Pressures

Panel Coordinator	Nadia Karayianni, Head of Business Development, CARDET, Cyprus
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mohammed Hafez, Civil Society Unit Coordinator, Anna Lindh Foundation, Egypt• Jan Bazyl, Executive Director, Grupa Zagranica, Poland• Rebekka Blomqvist, Head of Policy and Analysis, Globalt Fokus, Denmark• Carlotta Besozzi, Director, Civil Society Europe, Belgium

The opening panel, 'The Shrinking of Civic Space: Challenges, Risks, and the Way Forward', set the tone for the conference. Panellists from Denmark, Poland, Egypt, and Belgium offered perspectives from across the Euro-Mediterranean region, revealing the systemic and transnational nature of civic space contraction.

Key Findings

A Region-Wide Trend

Participants emphasised that the shrinking of civic space is not an isolated national phenomenon. The 2025 Civicus Monitor reported that only 3.4% of the world's population lives in open societies where civil society is free from pressure. Official Development Assistance (ODA) was cut by 23% in 2025 — the largest such reduction in a decade — directly undermining CSO capacity in development cooperation.

Political and Regulatory Pressures

Contributors identified a consistent pattern of contraction across the region. Geopolitical tensions are redirecting political attention toward security agendas, leaving limited space and resources for civil society. The rise of far-right movements at national level and within the European Parliament, growing disinformation, and legislation such as anti-money laundering frameworks and proposed foreign-funding laws are creating significant barriers for CSOs, particularly those working across borders.



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Differential Impact

Panelists from Central and Eastern Europe highlighted that for organisations in these regions, restricted civic space is not a new phenomenon. The narrative of ‘shrinking space’ risks obscuring the persistent structural disadvantages faced by CSOs outside Western Europe in terms of funding, institutional capacity, and public trust. At the same time, these organisations note with concern that challenges previously concentrated in their regions are now also affecting civil society in Western Europe.

Survival Mode

Many organisations reported being forced to prioritise short-term survival over long-term impact — even shifting their narratives to safer, more acceptable positions in order to secure resources, at the cost of their organisational identity and transformative potential.

Emerging Opportunities and Responses

- New forms of private-sector engagement, particularly with companies led by Millennial and Generation Z founders who hold value-driven approaches to social investment.
- Crises as mobilising moments: refugee solidarity in Poland following the war in Ukraine demonstrated that public engagement with civic causes can surge in moments of humanitarian urgency.
- Strengthening transnational networks and platforms to amplify advocacy and share resources across borders.
- Better positioning of CSOs as expert problem-solvers — demonstrating measurable impact to governments to unlock greater institutional support.

Recommended Actions — Civic Space

- ✓ Invest in citizenship and global education to build long-term democratic awareness among younger generations.
- ✓ Develop strategic communications that frame civil society as expert contributors to public goods, not only political actors.
- ✓ Pursue funding diversification — individual donors, value-driven private companies, and community foundations — alongside EU institutional support.
- ✓ Strengthen transnational networks to enable coordinated advocacy at regional and European levels.



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✓ Engage proactively with the EU Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations to protect and expand civil society funding streams, including through the proposed Agora EU programme.

Theme 2: Civil Society and the SDGs

Panel Coordinator	Chara Triteou, Educational Planning Officer, Unit of Education for the Environment & Sustainable Development, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, Cyprus
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marta Garcia-Haro, Senior Manager, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (online) • Susana Fonseca, ZERO – Association for the Sustainability of the Earth System, Portugal (online) • Natasa Ioannou, Environmental Campaigner and Project Manager, Friends of the Earth, Cyprus • Dr. Theodoros Zachariadis, Professor & Interim Director, Energy Environment and Water Research Centre, Cyprus Institute, Cyprus • Anna Dorangricchia, Programme Manager, Human Development Division, Union for the Mediterranean, Spain

The panel on ‘The Role of Civil Society in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals’ explored how CSOs translate global frameworks into local action. Representatives from the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Friends of the Earth Cyprus, the Cyprus Institute, the Union for the Mediterranean, and a Portuguese environmental organisation provided a rich multi-stakeholder perspective.

Key Findings

Civil Society as an Essential Intermediary

Participants consistently described civil society as the critical link between global SDG commitments and community-level implementation. CSOs translate complex scientific and policy language into accessible public narratives, provide evidence of implementation gaps to policymakers, and hold institutions accountable for commitments made at the national and international level.



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The Case for Coalition-Building

A strong message emerged around the need for environmental, social, and development CSOs to work across their traditional silos. Organisations that present integrated positions — linking, for example, climate action to gender equity, energy poverty, and access to urban green space — are better positioned to influence broad policy agendas and to engage a wider range of stakeholders.

Barriers to Full Participation

Panellists identified several structural barriers preventing civil society from fully engaging in SDG implementation: lack of access to timely policy information (which is routinely shared with economic actors but not CSOs); exclusion from early-stage policy dialogue; insufficient and unstable funding; and limited data on the effectiveness of interventions over time. Grassroots organisations face particular challenges in accessing decision-making processes at even the local level.

The Value of Partnerships

Collaboration between civil society and research institutions was identified as a powerful but under-utilised mechanism. Academic partners can increase the credibility of CSO positions, provide access to broader networks, and contribute evidence-based knowledge to policy processes. At the same time, scientists must be willing to prioritise the common good over institutional funding incentives.

Good Practice Examples

- SDSN’s Sustainable Development Report, produced annually with contributions from global academic networks, is used by governments and NGOs worldwide to track SDG progress and inform policy.
- Citizen Assemblies coordinated by SDSN networks in Switzerland and Spain on food systems and climate respectively, engaging citizens directly in shaping national sustainability policy.
- The Union for the Mediterranean’s regional network on the nexus of climate, women, peace and security, combining ministries, civil society, academia, and UN organisations across 43 member states.
- Portugal’s Sustainable Development Council as a model for structured multi-stakeholder dialogue, alongside lessons learned on the challenges of consensus-based advisory processes.



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Recommended Actions — SDGs

- ✓ Institutionalise civil society participation in SDG monitoring and voluntary national review processes at national and local levels.
- ✓ Establish co-decision (not merely consultation) mechanisms that embed CSOs in the design of policy frameworks from the outset.
- ✓ Support coalition-building across environmental, social, and development CSOs to present integrated SDG positions.
- ✓ Develop funding instruments that support long-term, structured civil society engagement rather than short-term project delivery.
- ✓ Strengthen CSO capacity to collect, analyse, and present data as a foundation for evidence-based advocacy.

Theme 3: Global Citizenship Education

Panel Coordinator	Dr. Marios Antoniou, Educational Officer, Unit of Education for the Environment and Sustainable Development, Cyprus
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Francesca Vanoni, Global Citizenship Education Practitioner, Italy

The fireside chat on Global Citizenship Education (GCE) provided a reflective, values-based counterpoint to the policy-focused discussions elsewhere in the programme. Drawing on extensive professional experience in former Yugoslavia, the Western Balkans, and EU institutions, the speaker offered a personal and conceptual framing of GCE as a tool for questioning power, addressing injustice, and building community.

Key Findings

Reframing Education

Global Citizenship Education was presented not as a school subject but as a lifelong, community-embedded process. Education in this framing encompasses every interaction — media consumption, social engagement, commercial environments — that shapes how people understand



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the world and their place in it. GCE prompts three essential questions: Who is privileged and who is disadvantaged? What is my role or complicity in existing power imbalances? And how can I use whatever advantage I hold to make space for others, on their terms?

Acknowledging Structural Inequality

A central insight was the distinction between individual behaviour change and systemic transformation. While personal reflection and lifestyle change have a role, the core challenge is addressing systemic inequality — and civil society, educators, and citizens must engage with this at a structural level, not merely an individual one. The discussion echoed themes from other panels: that placing responsibility entirely on individuals, without addressing the systems that constrain their choices, is both unfair and ineffective.

The Role of Storytelling and Hope

The speaker argued that ‘hope-building’ is not optimism but agency: the belief that change is possible if people engage and mobilise. A key role for educators, activists, and civil society is to tell the stories of change already happening — to demonstrate that alternatives exist and that individuals have a place within broader social movements. Historical transitions, including those currently underway on climate and democratic resilience, typically begin as minority movements.

Recommended Actions — Global Citizenship Education
✓ Integrate GCE as a cross-cutting competency across formal and non-formal education at all levels, rather than treating it as a stand-alone subject.
✓ Develop critical media literacy alongside GCE to equip citizens to navigate disinformation and recognise manipulative narratives.
✓ Invest in community-based, participatory learning models that build collective agency rather than individual compliance.
✓ Support CSOs working on GCE as strategic contributors to democratic resilience, with stable, multi-year funding.
✓ Centre the voices of marginalised and historically excluded communities in GCE programmes, rather than designing for them.



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Theme 4: Digital Environments and Youth Mental Health

Panel Coordinator	Dr. Charalambos Vrasidas, Executive Director, CARDET, Cyprus
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kadri Soova, Director, Mental Health Europe, Belgium• Dr. Joseph Duffy, CEO, Jigsaw (Adjunct Professor, School of Psychology, UCD), Ireland• Alexandros Tifas, Mental Health Nursing Officer, Ministry of Health, Cyprus

The panel ‘Digital Mental Health: Challenges and Responses’ examined the growing intersection between digital environments and youth wellbeing. Representatives from Mental Health Europe, Jigsaw Ireland, and the Cyprus Ministry of Health presented evidence-based insights alongside practical service models and policy proposals.

The Scale of the Challenge

The statistical picture is stark. One in seven young people in Europe lives with a mental health condition, and suicide remains the leading cause of death among those aged 15–29. On a typical weekday, 96% of 15-year-olds in the EU are active on social media, with 37% spending more than three hours per day — a threshold consistently associated with negative mental health outcomes. Among 40,000 adolescents surveyed across EU countries, 47% of 15-year-olds reported experiencing depression and approximately half reported anxiety.

Key Findings

Systemic

A consistent theme was the need to shift focus from fixing young people to fixing the environments that harm them. Social media platforms are designed to maximise engagement, not wellbeing. Consumer protection frameworks, product safety regulations, and platform accountability mechanisms must be extended to treat digital products as health-relevant consumer goods.



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Opportunities in Digital Mental Health

Digital tools — when co-designed with young people and integrated with human support — offer significant potential. Jigsaw Ireland demonstrated that live text-based chat, web referrals, and email support have reached demographic groups — particularly older young men, neurodiverse individuals, and gender-questioning youth — who rarely access traditional clinical services. Blended models combining digital access with human therapeutic contact show stronger outcomes than fully automated approaches.

AI, Chatbots, and Ethics

The rapid adoption of AI tools — including chatbots used by young people for companionship and informal therapy — presents both opportunity and significant risk. Research shows that blended models with human oversight consistently outperform fully automated tools. Concerns were raised about closed-loop AI interactions that validate and amplify negative thoughts, the use of chatbots by extremist actors to radicalise young people online, and the reliance of large language models on unvalidated public data rather than peer-reviewed clinical evidence.

Policy and Implementation Gaps

Participants noted a significant lag between the pace of technological change and the development of appropriate regulatory and educational responses. Several concrete measures were identified as ready for implementation: limits on phone use in schools, age-based delays in social media access, and the application of the EU Digital Services Act to mandate greater platform accountability on content harmful to young people.

Recommended Actions — Digital Mental Health
✓ Promote an EU Mental Health Strategy that integrates digital wellbeing as a cross-sectoral priority, linking health, education, consumer protection, and digital policy.
✓ Apply product safety and consumer protection frameworks to digital platforms, treating harm to mental health as a legitimate regulatory concern.
✓ Implement and enforce age-based delays in social media access, supported by robust enforcement, capacity building and awareness campaigns.
✓ Invest in co-designed digital mental health tools that include meaningful human contact, early intervention, and long-term follow-up.
✓ Design whole-school mental health promotion programmes that involve teachers, parents, and young people rather than delivering isolated interventions.



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- ✓ Regulate AI-based mental health tools and require transparency about data sources, design principles, and human oversight mechanisms.

Theme 5: Sustainable Funding for Civil Society

Panel Coordinator	Dr. Eria Makridou, Director of Program Development, CARDET, Cyprus
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nenad Bogdanovic, Head of National Contact Point/Desk Creative Europe, CERV & New European Bauhaus; Planning & Development Coordinator, Organisation for European Programmes and Cultural Relations, Cyprus• Yiannis Trimithiotis, Senior EU Programme Management Professional; Programme Director for the EEA Civil Society Fund; Co-Founder and Director, ProjectSquared Ltd, Cyprus

The closing panel of Day One examined the evolving funding landscape for civil society organisations. Drawing on perspectives from both EU programme management and funding authorities, panellists provided a candid assessment of structural challenges in accessing funding, alongside practical strategies to strengthen organisational resilience and long-term sustainability.

Key Findings

Two Persistent Gaps

Two structural mismatches define the current funding landscape. First, a gap between the priorities of funding programmes — which are driven by institutional policy cycles — and the actual needs and missions of CSOs on the ground. Second, a significant disparity in organisational capacity: a small number of professionalised CSOs consistently secure funding, while the majority — particularly volunteer-led, geographically peripheral, or thematically niche organisations — struggle to navigate complex application processes.

The Project Economy Trap

The conference identified a structural tension between the ‘project economy’ model — short-term, deliverable-focused funding — and the long-term, systemic work required to address complex social



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challenges. Organisations that excel at securing funding are not necessarily those doing the most important work. Funding should be understood as a vehicle for mission, not an end in itself.

Knowledge Loss and Institutional Memory

A critical but under-discussed challenge is the loss of organisational knowledge when key staff members leave following the end of a funded project. Without institutional structures to retain and transfer learning, organisations are repeatedly starting from zero — undermining impact and wasting both human and financial resources.

Emerging Opportunities

Despite these challenges, several positive developments were noted. The proposed Agora EU programme — merging Creative Europe and CERV — is projected to provide a budget of 8.6 billion euros, with civil society as a primary beneficiary. Simplified application processes, including lump-sum funding models, are reducing administrative burdens. And a new generation of purpose-driven private companies is increasingly open to partnership with value-led civil society organisations.

Recommended Actions — Funding

- ✓ Pursue strategic funding diversification — combining EU institutional grants, philanthropic support, individual donors, and value-aligned private partnerships.
- ✓ Invest in organisational development and professional staff structures to build the capacity needed to secure and manage funding sustainably.
- ✓ Advocate for operational grant instruments within EU funding frameworks that support core organisational costs, not only project delivery.
- ✓ Engage in consultations on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework to ensure civil society voices shape funding priorities and programme design.
- ✓ Develop knowledge management systems to retain institutional learning across funding cycles.
- ✓ Strengthen regional networking, including through platforms such as the Anna Lindh Foundation, to access collaborative funding opportunities and share expertise.



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Theme 6: Education, Citizenship, and Democratic Responsibility

Panel Coordinator	Keynote Speaker
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Aravella Zachariou, Head of the Unit of Education for the Environment and Sustainable Development, Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, Cyprus; Chair, UNECE ESD Steering Committee

The Day Two keynote by Dr. Aravella Zachariou provided a searching analysis of the gap between education systems as they currently operate and what is needed to produce engaged democratic citizens.

Key Findings

A System in Crisis

Education systems across the Euro-Mediterranean region — and globally — are producing adaptable, performance-oriented, and compliant graduates rather than empowered democratic citizens. The institutional form of education often contradicts its stated democratic mission: schools that promote competition and compliance cannot simultaneously cultivate the solidarity, critical thinking, and civic responsibility that democracy requires. Citizenship is not adequately integrated into higher education or vocational training; pedagogical approaches remain fragmented; and teacher training in civic competencies is insufficient.

What Kind of Citizen?

Effective citizenship education requires investment in the whole person — not merely the professional. The citizen of today must have knowledge, empathy, critical capacity, a sense of responsibility to others, and the capacity to act. These qualities are not produced by content delivery alone; they emerge from lived experience in democratic environments within schools, families, and communities.



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Towards a Whole-Institution Approach

The keynote emphasised that citizenship cannot be taught as a subject; it must be lived as a school culture. This requires whole-institution approaches that integrate democratic values into every aspect of school life, not just the curriculum: in decision-making structures, in relationships between students and staff, in community engagement, and in the connection between schools and local society.

Recommended Actions — Education and Citizenship	
✓	Adopt whole-school approaches to citizenship education that embed democratic values in school culture rather than limiting them to the curriculum.
✓	Ensure pre-service and in-service teacher training includes substantive preparation for facilitating civic and SDG-linked learning.
✓	Link formal and non-formal education pathways to create coherent citizenship learning across the life course.
✓	Integrate intergenerational dialogue and community engagement into school programmes to reconnect young people with local society and civic identity.
✓	Move from knowledge-based to project-based and participatory curricula that treat students as active citizens rather than passive recipients.
✓	Invest in research on the impact of citizenship education to build an evidence base for policy and practice.

Theme 7: Artificial Intelligence and Civil Society

Panel Coordinator	Dr. Charalambos Vrasidas, Executive Director, CARDET, Cyprus (Fireside Chat Coordinator)
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demetris Skourides, Chief Scientist for Research, Innovation and Technology, Cyprus (Keynote Speaker)

The keynote and fireside discussion on ‘AI for Social Good: Opportunities and Ethical Challenges for Civil Society’ brought together the Chief Scientist for Research, Innovation and Technology of Cyprus with CARDET’s Executive Director to explore how artificial intelligence is reshaping the



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context in which civil society operates, and how CSOs can engage responsibly with this rapidly evolving landscape.

Key Findings

Transformative Potential

AI offers significant opportunities for social good: in healthcare (early diagnosis, patient triage, accessibility for people with disabilities), in education (personalised learning, administrative efficiency, comparative policy analysis), and in civil society operations (research synthesis, advocacy preparation, impact monitoring). Specialised language models — trained on domain-specific, validated data — outperform general-purpose tools such as ChatGPT for professional applications, and organisations should invest in understanding which tools are appropriate for which purposes.

Ethical Challenges Remain Unresolved

The discussion highlighted a range of pressing ethical issues: algorithmic bias affecting gender and marginalised communities; questions of accountability when AI-generated decisions cause harm; the environmental cost of training and running large models (with data centres consuming millions of gallons of water daily); the spread of synthetic media and AI-enabled disinformation; and the tendency of large language models to validate rather than challenge user assumptions, reinforcing bias and creating closed information loops.

Digital Sovereignty and Concentration of Power

Approximately six to eight corporations currently control the global AI infrastructure. Europe is in the position of catching up. The discussion advocated for a model of digital sovereignty — in which European institutions and member states build the regulatory frameworks and, where necessary, the infrastructure to ensure AI development serves the public interest, not solely commercial returns. The EU AI Act was welcomed as a step in this direction.

Critical Literacy as a Civic Imperative

A central message was that AI literacy — the ability to understand how AI works, to interrogate its outputs critically, and to use it responsibly — must become a foundational civic and professional



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competency. This is not simply a technical skill; it is an extension of the critical thinking and democratic awareness that citizenship education seeks to develop.

Recommended Actions — AI and Civil Society

- ✓ Develop and disseminate AI literacy programmes for CSO staff, educators, and community members as a democratic and professional priority.
- ✓ Advocate for transparent, accountable AI governance frameworks — including the full implementation and enforcement of the EU AI Act.
- ✓ Engage in public debate and policy consultation on the environmental impact of AI infrastructure and the concentration of AI power in a small number of corporations.
- ✓ Invest in Socratic AI models — tools designed to prompt reflection and challenge assumptions rather than to validate existing views.
- ✓ Maintain the human in the loop: CSOs should use AI as a tool to augment, not replace, professional judgement and human relationships.
- ✓ Participate in the development of responsible AI frameworks at national and European level to ensure that civil society perspectives are reflected in governance decisions.

Theme 8: Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation in a Changing Geopolitical Context

Panel Coordinator	Dr. Marinos Papaioakeim, Strategic Partnerships and Development Lead, CARDET, Cyprus
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Zenonas Tziarras, Lecturer, Department of Turkish and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cyprus • Dr. Harry Tzimitras, Director, PRIO Cyprus Centre, Cyprus • Dr. Michalis Kontos, Associate Professor, Department of Politics and Governance, School of Law, University of Nicosia, Cyprus

The final panel brought together three academics specialising in Mediterranean geopolitics, Turkish and Middle Eastern studies, and international relations to examine how shifting global power dynamics are reshaping the context for civil society and multilateral cooperation in the region.



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Key Findings

A Region in Transition

The Mediterranean is experiencing a profound reconfiguration of strategic priorities. The decline of US global primacy — evidenced by its military withdrawals, its retreat from international law, and its transactional approach to alliances — has created a vacuum that regional powers including Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Russia are seeking to fill. The ongoing wars in Gaza and against Iran, the transition in Syria, and the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon are not isolated events but symptoms of a broader systemic transition from a unipolar to a contested, multipolar world order.

Energy: Narrative vs. Reality

The aspiration for the Eastern Mediterranean to become an energy hub was examined and largely deconstructed. Commercial investment timelines, geopolitical risk premiums, and the relatively modest scale of regional reserves (accounting for approximately 2% of global supply) make grand energy strategies unrealistic in the near term. A more productive framing would position regional energy resources as assets for intra-regional cooperation and energy security, rather than as leverage in global negotiations.

The European Union's Role

The EU's capacity and willingness to act as a normative and stabilising force in the Mediterranean was critically assessed. Participants noted that the EU's credibility in the region has been damaged by its perceived failure to apply consistent principles on international law, human rights, and democratic standards to its partnerships in and around the Mediterranean. At the same time, the post-Ukraine impetus for European strategic autonomy and defence capability was acknowledged, with the caution that military capacity must not come at the expense of the EU's foundational normative identity.

Diplomacy as the Only Path

For smaller states and civil society actors alike, international law, multilateral institutions, and principled diplomacy remain the only viable basis for sustainable security and cooperation. The erosion of these foundations — to which even democratic states have contributed — poses an existential risk. Participants called for a return to principled pragmatism: pursuing realistic and workable cooperation arrangements without abandoning the values-based framework that underpins the EU's role in the world.



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Recommended Actions — Geopolitics and Cooperation
✓ Strengthen the EU's commitment to international law and human rights as the non-negotiable foundation of its engagement with Mediterranean partners.
✓ Increase EU diplomatic investment in conflict prevention and mediation, particularly in Lebanon, Syria, and the wider Gulf region.
✓ Develop a coherent and principled EU strategy for the Mediterranean that goes beyond security and migration management to address governance, civic space, and sustainable development.
✓ Support civil society Track 2 diplomacy and people-to-people initiatives as complementary to formal diplomatic processes.
✓ Reconceptualise regional energy cooperation around shared sustainability objectives rather than geopolitical leverage.
✓ Ensure that increased European defence investment does not displace funding for civilian, humanitarian, and development cooperation.

Theme 9: Migration, Skills, and Inclusion

Panel Coordinator	Irene Theodoulou, Project Manager, CARDET, Cyprus
Panellists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natasa Xenophontos Koudouna, Project Manager, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Cyprus Office • Dr. Başak Yavçan, Head of Research, Migration Policy Group, Belgium • Mariavittoria Garlappi, Senior Human Capital Development Expert (Skills and Migration), European Training Foundation, Italy (online) • Gemma Aubarell, Director of Culture, Gender, and Civil Society Department, European Institute of the Mediterranean, Spain

The panel on 'Migration, Skills Development and Social Inclusion' explored how migration can be transformed from a perceived challenge into a driver of regional growth, provided that the right policy frameworks, civil society capacities, and multi-stakeholder partnerships are in place.



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Key Findings

The Skills Underutilisation Problem

Skills underutilisation among migrant populations represents a triple loss — for migrants themselves, for host countries, and for countries of origin. Data on migrant qualifications and skills levels remains poor across Europe. Recognition of formal qualifications and validation of non-formal and informally acquired skills are inconsistent, nationally fragmented, and frequently inaccessible to migrants who most need them. Joint diploma frameworks between EU member states and partner countries, similar to those already operating in higher education, could offer a model for vocational and medium-skills recognition.

Integration as a Systemic Challenge

Effective skills utilisation cannot be separated from broader integration policy. Countries with high scores on labour market integration also tend to invest in education access, healthcare, anti-discrimination measures, family unification, and political participation for migrants. A holistic approach to integration — of which skills and employment is one component — consistently outperforms fragmented, sector-specific interventions.

The Role of Civil Society

Civil society organisations know the grassroots realities of migration far better than governments or international agencies alone. Their participation in policy design, not only project implementation, is essential for developing responses that are grounded in lived experience. The tripartite model — connecting civil society, employers, and government in structured policy dialogue — was identified as the most effective mechanism for making skills programmes responsive to both migrant needs and labour market demands.

Recommended Actions — Migration and Inclusion

- ✓ Develop integrated policy frameworks that connect migration, education, and employment at national and EU level.
- ✓ Invest in systematic data collection on migrant qualifications and skills to address structural information gaps.
- ✓ Expand joint diploma and mutual recognition frameworks to cover vocational and medium-skills qualifications across EU and partner countries.



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- ✓ Fund skills programmes that are co-designed with employers from the outset, ensuring direct pathways to employment rather than training without follow-through.
- ✓ Institutionalise the participation of civil society — especially migrant-led organisations — in the design and monitoring of integration policy.
- ✓ Promote intercultural mediation skills as a strategic competency for both migrant and host-community populations.

Cross-Cutting Conclusions

Several themes recurred across the conference’s diverse panels and discussions, pointing to a set of shared structural challenges and shared strategic directions for civil society across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

1. The Interdependence of Democratic Health and Civic Space

Every panel, in different ways, affirmed the same foundational truth: the health of democracy depends on the vitality of civil society. Restrictions on civic space are not administrative inconveniences — they are threats to democracy itself. Civil society must frame its advocacy accordingly, positioning the protection of civic space as a democratic imperative rather than a sectoral interest.

2. The Need for Systemic, Not Only Symptomatic, Responses

Whether discussing youth mental health, SDG implementation, education reform, or migration integration, participants consistently identified the limits of symptomatic, project-by-project responses. Durable change requires systemic engagement: policy reform, institutional change, long-term investment, and the willingness to challenge the structures that produce the problems civil society is called upon to address.

3. Coalition as Strategy

No single organisation, sector, or country can address the challenges identified at this conference alone. Across every theme, the most effective responses involved genuine partnerships between civil society, academia, government, the private sector, and communities. Building and sustaining



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these coalitions — across silos, across borders, across languages — is a strategic priority, not an optional add-on.

4. Funding Sustainability as a Precondition

Sustainable civil society requires sustainable funding. The current over-reliance on short-term, project-based EU funding — while important — creates vulnerability, administrative burden, and mission drift. Diversification toward philanthropic, private, and community-based sources, combined with advocacy for core operational funding instruments, must become a sector-wide strategic goal.

5. Investing in People and Knowledge

The most important asset of any civil society organisation is its people and the knowledge they carry. Institutional investment in professional development, knowledge management, and organisational learning is not a luxury — it is the foundation of long-term impact. This is especially urgent in a landscape where funding cycles are short and staff turnover is high.

Closing Statement

"Our work at the Euro-Med conference has made one thing clear: to build a better future, we have to stop treating symptoms and start changing systems. At CARDET, we are committed to building coalitions, protecting the spaces, and supporting the people who turn democratic values into a daily reality for everyone in the Mediterranean".