

EUROPEAN SECURITY CHALLENGES AND THE ROLE OF CYPRUS

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Introduction

On December 4, 2025, the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs (CCEIA), in cooperation with the European Policy Centre (EPC), co-organised a high-level discussion entitled *European Security Challenges and the Role of Cyprus* at the University of Nicosia. The event was chaired by Dr. Michalis Kontos, Associate Professor and Associate Head of the Department of Politics and Governance at the University of Nicosia.

The speakers were: Professor Andreas Theophanous, President of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs; Iana Maisuradze, Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre; Stavri Kalopsidiotou, Head of the Human Rights Policy Sector of AKEL; and Panayiotis Papadopoulos, Ambassador Ad Honorem.

The discussion examined Europe's shifting strategic landscape, the pressures created by simultaneous crises in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods and Cyprus's potential contribution to a more coherent European approach to the Eastern Mediterranean. This event took place within the wider framework of the upcoming Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the EU, which will have to navigate institutional complexity, geopolitical uncertainty and heightened expectations for leadership during a critical juncture for the Union.

Andreas Theophanous

Professor Andreas Theophanous offered a comprehensive evaluation of Europe's current security dilemmas. The prevailing focus on the Russian invasion in Ukraine and ongoing war has several implications. He described the war in Ukraine as both a tragedy and a European failure, stressing that during the Cold War European security depended on structured engagement and agreements between the US

and the Soviet Union. He argued that in today's environment the absence of adequate communication channels between great powers increases potential risks.

He also emphasized that Cypriots often perceive the EU as inconsistent, particularly when the Union adopts strong positions on Russia while failing to address Turkey's continued occupation of the northern part of the island, which constitutes EU territory. He noted that beyond political leadership, broad segments of Cypriot society view the EU's handling of regional security challenges with growing skepticism, as perceived inconsistencies undermine trust in the Union's strategic commitments. Drawing on Shlomo Avineri's observation in 2004 that "the Annan Plan reflected the EU's and the UN's favorite occupation", he argued that the way the EU will deal with Cyprus will serve as a litmus test for the Union's own credibility.

He added that Cyprus has the obligation to share with the other EU member states its experiences given its geopolitical location and familiarity with the region's complexities. He stressed that Cyprus, through its history and position at the crossroads of three continents, can share with the EU a great deal about the geopolitical realities of the Eastern Mediterranean. He also noted that Cyprus's exposure to regional crises, ranging from war and displacement to irregular migration, offers practical lessons for EU policymaking.

Theophanous further noted the absence of a coherent European strategy for the Middle East despite the region's profound implications for migration, energy, and security. Internally, he pointed to challenges such as deindustrialization, demographic changes, rising energy costs, and socioeconomic uncertainty. He also expressed concern that the EU's long-term economic and technological competitiveness is weakening at a time when global rivalries intensify.

He concluded by stressing Cyprus's capacity to contribute constructively, both as a humanitarian hub and as a potential model of peaceful coexistence between Greek Cypriot Christians and Turkish Cypriot Muslims, thereby strengthening both regional stability and the EU's normative ambitions.

Iana Maisuradze

Iana Maisuradze structured her analysis around the economic, regional, and security dimensions that will shape the upcoming Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the EU. She observed that the Presidency will inherit challenges rooted in technological disruption, economic-security interdependence, and heightened geopolitical volatility. She highlighted a broader shift in EU external action toward building coalitions in the face of geopolitical turmoil and stressed that Cyprus can

act as a bridge between Europe, Mediterranean partners and the southern neighborhood.

On the economic dimension, she underlined the importance of the Draghi Report as a strategic blueprint for enhancing competitiveness, strengthening Europe's technological base and improving resilience. The Cypriot Presidency, she argued, must view the EU budget not only as a financial tool but as an instrument to advance competitiveness, align budgetary choices with Europe's strategic goals, protect critical sectors and support long-term investment. She also noted that simplifying access to EU instruments for SMEs and scaling up European technological capacity must remain key objectives.

On the regional dimension, she described EU enlargement as the most consequential objective for Europe's strategic future. She noted that advancing the accession processes of Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans is vital, but internal reforms are equally necessary to make the EU enlargement proof. She stressed that Cyprus can help deepen engagement with Mediterranean and southern neighborhood partners, reinforcing regional cooperation. She further underlined that Cyprus's cultural and diplomatic ties with the region give it an advantage in fostering mutually beneficial cooperation frameworks.

On security, Maisuradze emphasised maritime security as an essential pillar of European stability and an area where Cyprus holds a competitive advantage. Protecting critical maritime infrastructure, strengthening maritime corridors, and addressing hybrid threats will form key priorities for the Union, and Cyprus's geography and operational capacities allow it to play a central role. She added that submarine cables, energy corridors, and maritime surveillance require coordinated EU action, especially as vulnerabilities multiply.

Stavri Kalopsidiotou

Stavri Kalopsidiotou argued that the EU has increasingly undermined its foundational narrative as a peace enforcer by applying double standards across conflicts, thereby weakening the credibility of its normative framework. She noted extensive displacement, civilian suffering, and recurrent violations of humanitarian law in Ukraine, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Cyprus as evidence of an erosion of international legality. She criticized what she described as selective moral outrage, where principles are defended vigorously in some cases but ignored in others.

She also warned that Europe's budgetary turn toward military rather than social spending risks further diluting its declared commitment to human security and

equality. She stressed that militarization without parallel investment in diplomacy, development and social cohesion creates deeper long-term insecurities.

She stressed that such inconsistencies create an international environment in which major powers act with growing impunity, particularly destabilizing regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean. Kalopsidiotou argued that the cumulative weakening of legal and normative commitments threatens both regional stability and the international structures upon which smaller states depend for their security. She emphasized the urgency of restoring coherence and credibility to the foreign policy of the EU. She noted that only an uncompromising commitment to international law, without exceptions, can restore legitimacy.

She also highlighted Cyprus's positive contributions, pointing to the Amaltheia corridor as an example of how a small state can exercise humanitarian leadership despite operating in a volatile regional context. She stressed that Cyprus must uphold a principled foreign policy grounded in international law, equality, and consistency, especially in efforts to resolve the Cyprus Problem. She reaffirmed that any settlement must adhere to the UN framework, safeguard political equality, and preserve reunification as the core objective. Cyprus's insistence on legality, she concluded, strengthens both its national position and the EU's broader credibility. She added that Cyprus must not shy away from calling out violations of international law wherever they occur.

Panayiotis Papadopoulos

Ambassador Ad Honorem Panayiotis Papadopoulos presented a historical assessment of Europe's strategic evolution from the Second World War to the present. He recalled how the post-war settlement entrenched the division between East and West, turning Europe into the central arena of Cold War confrontation. Events such as the Berlin crises, the Suez episode, and the establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact reflected Europe's limited autonomy and the consolidation of a bipolar order shaped largely by external powers. He emphasized that these dynamics continue to shape European strategic behavior today.

He noted that while the European Economic Community aimed to promote stability through integration, Europe continuously struggled to reconcile its aspiration for strategic autonomy with its dependence on the United States. In the post-1991 period, the Yugoslav wars, NATO enlargement, and subsequent regional crises revealed the EU's limited capacity to shape outcomes in its own neighborhood and exposed persistent institutional and strategic weaknesses. He further noted that the Kosovo crisis underscored Europe's inability to act independently of NATO.

Papadopoulos argued that these limitations remain visible today. Brussels is losing diplomatically and has increasingly been pushed aside as a mere bystander in major international developments, from Ukraine to the Middle East. Others, he noted, are determining the course of events while the EU reacts rather than leads. He concluded that the Union needs to rediscover itself if it wishes to remain a relevant geopolitical actor. For Cyprus, a small but strategically exposed member state, these shortcomings carry direct implications, reinforcing the essential need for the EU to guarantee the geographic integrity of its members.

Conclusion

The event underscored that the EU is confronted with simultaneous crises in its eastern and southern neighborhoods, demanding a more coherent strategic approach. The speakers agreed that Cyprus, given its geography, experience, and diplomatic links, can contribute meaningfully to shaping European policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. They emphasized that Cyprus's upcoming Presidency offers not only administrative responsibilities but also a strategic opportunity: the chance for Cyprus to enhance the Union's attention toward the interlinked economic, geopolitical, humanitarian, and security challenges that define the region. In this respect, the Presidency will unfold during a period when Europe must reconcile its normative aspirations with the hard realities of an increasingly competitive global environment.

At the same time, the discussion revealed deeper questions about the EU's consistency, strategic cohesion, and credibility. As Professor Theophanous stressed, the EU must guarantee the territorial integrity of its member states if it is to maintain strategic relevance. Cyprus thus emerges both as a litmus test of the Union's ability to act in accordance with its own principles and as a state capable of supporting a more effective and grounded European engagement in the region. Restoring trust, both within the Union and with its neighborhood, will require the EU to overcome double standards, articulate a clear strategic vision, and develop a more autonomous capacity to respond to geopolitical shocks.

Ultimately, the discussion illuminated a broader truth: the Union's future stability depends on its ability to integrate its neighborhood policy, security aspirations, economic resilience, and normative commitments into a coherent strategic framework. Cyprus, situated at the crossroads of three continents and possessing unique historical and diplomatic experience, is well positioned to contribute to this effort. As the EU enters a decisive period, the Cypriot Presidency may serve as a catalyst for a more credible, outward-looking, and strategically confident EU.