

*Brussels, 18 March 2026* — Against a backdrop of mounting geopolitical tensions and increasing societal polarisation across the European Union, policymakers, civil society leaders and practitioners convened at the European Parliament for the Civic Champions project’s final event, *“Navigating Civic Space in an Age of Geopolitical and Social Upheaval”*.

Hosted by Georgios Georgiou, Member of the European Parliament (The Left Group in the European Parliament), the event brought together key stakeholders to examine the growing pressures on civic space and to explore policy-driven solutions aimed at strengthening democratic resilience across Member States.

The session opened with remarks from Georgios Georgiou, Member of the European Parliament (The Left Group in the European Parliament), and Rositsa Dzhekova, Director of the Democracy Shield Task Force at the Center for the Study of Democracy.

A scene-setting segment presented new evidence on the challenges facing civic actors across Europe through the Civic Champions project. Contributions were delivered by:

- Mariyan Sabev, Senior Security Analyst at the Center for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria)
- Rania El Ampasy, Senior Project Manager at KMOP (Greece)
- Rosina Ndukwe, Unit Coordinator at CESIE (Italy)
- Foteini Sokratous, Project Manager and Researcher at CARDET (Cyprus)

The speakers highlighted trends including foreign interference, shrinking civic freedoms, and the operational constraints faced by civil society organisations, while also presenting policy-oriented recommendations, including the development of an **Early Warning Mechanism** by the consortium of the Civic Champions project.

The high-level panel discussion focused on *“Empowering civil society organisations and activists in upholding democratic values and resilience”*. The panel brought together:

- Kristian Vigenin, Member of the European Parliament (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament)
- Liliana Carrillo, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of CollectiveUP
- Thijs Berman, Executive Director of the European Partnership for Democracy
- Nadia Karayianni, Head of Business Development at CARDET

The discussion was moderated by Rositsa Dzhekova, Director of the Democracy Shield Task Force at the Center for the Study of Democracy, and emphasised the critical role of civil society in safeguarding democratic norms, countering disinformation, and fostering social cohesion.

Panellists called for stronger institutional support, enhanced cross-sector collaboration, and sustained investment in civic infrastructure, highlighting the importance of EU-level mechanisms capable of detecting early signs of democratic backsliding and enabling timely intervention.

The event concluded with a networking session, providing an opportunity for participants to exchange insights and strengthen partnerships aimed at reinforcing civic resilience across Europe. The Civic Champions final event was organised by the Center for the Study of Democracy, KMOP, CESIE, and CARDET, under the Civic Champions project, co-funded by the European Union.

The Civic Champions project seeks to strengthen democratic values and civic participation in Southern Europe by enhancing the capacity of civil society actors to become active agents in addressing and reversing the 'shrinking civic space' phenomenon. This initiative is carried out by a consortium of organizations from Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus.

Civic Champions aims to empower CSOs and practitioners to identify, report, and address threats and violations while promoting positive narratives. Through a focus on capacity building, the establishment of early warning systems, and the implementation of evidence-based actions, the project strives to safeguard fundamental rights and ensure a vibrant civic environment.