

Interview with Eurochambres Neighbourhood and Enlargement Committee Chair, Rifat Hisarcıklođlu

As leading business representatives, chambers are supporting the business community to prepare for enlargement in enhancing SME competitiveness, as well as strengthening economic, trade and investment relations between both regions. Chambers also play a crucial role in other key areas of the enlargement process, such as regional cooperation, application of EU rules and standards, vocational education and training, and enhanced dialogue and mutual understanding between business communities.

1. What is the main priority of the Neighbourhood and Enlargement Committee for the remainder of 2022?

The Eurochambres Neighbourhood and Enlargement Committee concentrates on three geographical areas: Turkey, Western Balkans and finally EU Eastern Partnership countries.

The war in Ukraine has shaken up the European Union's approach to enlargement. Ukraine's swift application to join the bloc has also rejuvenated the membership aspirations of other countries with Moldova and Georgia following suit by submitting their own applications, while Turkey and Western Balkans countries expect progress after years of stalemate.

In 2022, we would like to collaborate with our committee members to advance the discussions for accession support for future Western Balkans member states. The process should support the digitalisation of companies, entrepreneurial knowledge, and training through regional partners, not least chambers of commerce and industry. A more unified European voice in external affairs is crucial to all these issues. In addition, we would like to work with chambers from the Eastern Partnership countries to identify long-term activities that will assist those people adjusting to a new life in other EU countries, such as entrepreneurship, education, professional development. The modernization of the customs union with Turkey, as the 6th largest trading partner of the EU, will be among the topics of the committee.

2. What activities do you have lined up in this area?

On 30 May during our Neighbourhood and Enlargement committee, we had the opportunity to exchange with representatives of the European Commission - Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) to discuss the financial and humanitarian support activities to Ukraine, as well recent the recent membership applications of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia.

Eurochambres' engagement in EU neighbourhood and enlargement policy is reinforced through the implementation of practical support measures to chambers and the business community in the framework of initiatives such as EU4Business: Connecting Companies and the Turkey-EU Business Dialogue. We will soon organise the next edition of the EU-Turkey High Level Business Dialogue in Brussels, which will allow us to discuss distinct aspects of the EU-Turkey business environment, and to

improve economic interaction and cooperation. The HLBD will offer the opportunity for a substantial bilateral EU-Turkey economic and trade debate, which should result in an important understanding of each other's economic and trade situation and policies.

We are also organising in coordination with Western Balkan (WB6) Digital Summit taking place in Pristina, on September 21-22nd 2022, a seminar related to digitalization of Western Balkans chambers' services, based on EU best practices.

3. The pandemic and now the war in Ukraine have had a significant impact on the business community. How do you perceive this in relation to neighbourhood and enlargement?

The continuation of the war in Ukraine is likely to have long-term ramifications in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, affecting migration patterns and economic output. Eurochambres and many national chambers are maintaining contact with our colleagues at the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who are striving to continue to support member companies in the most difficult circumstances. Other chambers have been engaged in offering advice and assistance to companies active in the region and are mobilizing to provide humanitarian support.

Conclusion

Eurochambres has always been in favour of a coherent and dynamic EU enlargement policy. Taking this into account, our committee will continue to give practical support to chambers and the business community in the neighbourhood and enlargement countries. Given the extremely challenging economic situation since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and indeed even before as a consequence of the pandemic, this role is more important than ever.