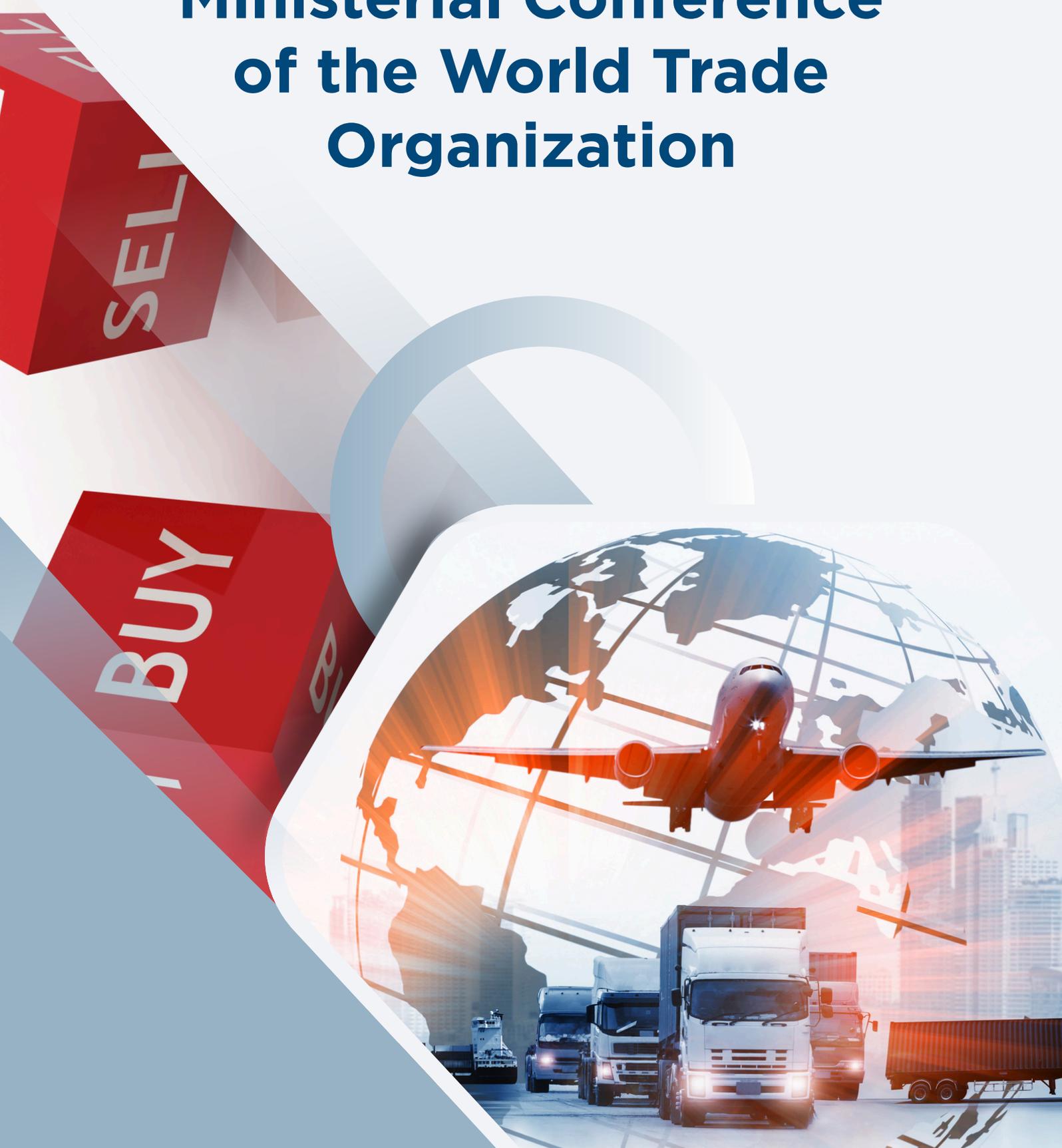




Priorities for the 14th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization



Eurochambres Priorities for the 14th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization

The World Trade Organisation's (WTO) 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) will take place from 26 to 29 March 2026 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, where Ministers from around the globe will come together to discuss the multiple crises facing global trade, as well as the opportunities and challenges for the multilateral trading system.

In fact, multilateral rules have come under unprecedented strain in recent times, and while global trade has remained relatively resilient, it is increasingly characterized by unprecedented levels of uncertainty, rising protectionism, and risks of fragmentation.

We thereby see the current situation in global trade not as a period of fluctuation, but of structural transformation, where the current state of uncertainty risks not being transitory; but instead, increasingly becoming systemic.

Additionally, the nature of international trade has equally evolved and is no longer merely an economic activity; it has become a tool of power, security, and geopolitics, and in consequence, we are witnessing that countries are increasingly protecting their own markets. The restructuring of supply chains and increasing policy uncertainties have thus made risk management permanent for businesses. They are no longer operating based on expectations of "normalization," but instead acting on the assumption of ongoing uncertainty.

Considering those tendencies, if asymmetries and protectionist measures continue to spread on the global level, there are increasing risks of a further proliferation of counterbalancing policy tools to safeguard the competitiveness of local economies. Therefore, it is essential that international trade is rules-based, predictable, and inclusive for all companies, and evolves to match business realities.

For European business, whose welfare depends to a great extent on the ability to maintain open markets, underpinned by free and fair trade, and the predictability of global market conditions as enshrined through the WTO's MC14 in Yaoundé comes at pivotal time.

While core WTO rules, be it on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS), or its review function through the Trade Policy Reviews continue to deliver, the challenges of the WTO rulebook not keeping up with business realities, addressing systemic imbalances, or restoring proper enforcement are mounting, making effective WTO reform more important than ever.

For Eurochambres, MC14 must therefore outline a clear path towards revitalizing the global trading system and avoid inertia that risks further eroding the foundations of rules-based trade on which businesses around the world rely on.

This requires, first and foremost, a credible, action-oriented commitment to preserving and renewing the organization through effective WTO reform with clear milestones that can address some of the fundamental challenges of the organization. At least, a structured, concrete, and forward-looking agenda that is credible in strengthening the system for the future should emerge from Cameroon.

The private sector, including key business support organizations such as chambers of commerce and industry, should be closely associated with the process in a structured and

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institutionalized dialogue to make sure it's driven by the voice and needs of business, including the SME community.

The European Union (EU) as the world's largest trader, must play a decisive role in steering such a strategic reform process in an inclusive fashion, securing updated global rules, as well as more flexibility in the system.

This must also allow for greater economic cooperation in the future through plurilaterals between WTO members, without being blocked by one or a few members. The EU must thereby lead in areas that are vital to its interests. At MC14 the plurilateral initiative of the agreement on Investment Facilitation for Development should already become a demonstrable result of the WTO's Ministerial Conference as a new multilateral agreement by having it integrated into Annex 4 of the Marrakesh Agreement. Said agreement can play a critical function to stimulate needed private sector investments.

For the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference in Yaoundé, Eurochambres believe the following areas are the main priorities to be agreed on:

1. Dispute Settlement

For multilateral rules to be fully efficient, they need proper enforcement and a system that allows all WTO members, large or small, effective and conclusive legal recourse. Therefore, it must continue to be an absolute priority that the WTO dispute settlement system be restored to its usual capacity and competence, with two levels of appeal. This is of crucial importance for the business community and the credibility of the WTO, as only a fully functioning dispute settlement body can ensure fair competition and legal certainty in international trade, especially in times when geopolitical competition is rising exponentially. The longer the practice of so-called appeals into the void persists, the more damaging it will be to the credibility of the system, and its vital function of providing certainty to companies trading internationally.

The EU must thus maintain pressure on all members, including the more difficult negotiating partners within the organization in order to present a concrete roadmap for dispute settlement reform at the end of the MC14, beyond a progress report on a process that risks leaving the problem unaddressed.

In the meantime, the Multiparty Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), an alternative dispute settlement mechanism initiated by the EU, represents a plurilateral interim solution until the WTO dispute settlement body is restored. It should be expanded to include other important trading partners of the European Union.

2. Preventing Digital Tariffs: Making the Moratorium on electronic submission permanent

It must be of the most important goals of the MC14 is to ensure that the WTO moratorium on tariffs on electronic data transfers does not expire in March 2026, but is enshrined as a permanent trade rule, or at least extended, to ensure that the cross-border flow of data is guaranteed with no new digital tariffs.

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The WTO e-commerce moratorium is an essential element in ensuring predictability in digitally traded goods and services, an area where global trade has grown the most in recent times, further turbocharged by AI, allowing the digital economy across the world to grow exponentially.

Allowing the Moratorium to expire would be a historic setback for the WTO, representing an unprecedented termination of a multilateral agreement in place nearly since the WTO's inception.

Moreover, the WTO negotiations on an e-commerce agreement should swiftly be concluded to address the increasing digitalization of global trade. To factor in technological progress, particularly in the field of AI, a dedicated working group could be established to better focus the attention of the membership to the opportunities and changes this technology brings to global trade.

3. Industrial subsidies and Level playing field

Steps toward addressing the issue of industrial subsidies were already taken in January 2020 with a joint declaration by the EU, the United States, and Japan agreeing to tighten existing rules on industrial subsidies and condemning forced technology transfer practices. In the meantime, global subsidy races, a persistent lack of transparency regarding subsidies, excess capacity, and other related measures are increasingly distorting the competitive conditions for business.

This is not a situation that can be managed solely with individual anti-dumping measures; it requires a more structural and multilateral assessment. In this context, the WTO is called upon to propose measures to reduce global trade imbalances as global trade is not sustainable without strong institutions, transparent rules, and equal competitive conditions.

In fact, developing common solutions against practices that distort fair competition is a shared responsibility for all international institutions. Therefore, the initial initiatives by the EU, Japan and the United States must be urgently followed by a WTO initiative on competitive neutrality that includes industrial subsidies, state-owned enterprises, and forced technology transfers.

In this sense, the WTO Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures should be modernized to include a broader definition of subsidies paired with a procedural modernization of defence instruments through accelerated and standardized procedures and a reversal of the burden of proof for highly distorting and harmful subsidies. It should also include more transparency requirements for subsidies and incentives for compliant members in view of dismal record of notifications, stricter reporting obligations for state-owned enterprises, the inclusion of further types of subsidies, and prohibitions on forced technology transfer.

Eurochambres also fully supports a further differentiation among developing members focusing on those most in need for the purposes of special and differentiated treatment, based on evidence, and possibly similar to graduation criteria applied for respective EU instruments such as the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP).

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To encourage higher compliance with existing obligations, Eurochambres has already previously suggested establishing annual public reports that could be elaborated by the WTO secretariat or another independent entity, where WTO members can be annually listed, ranked and tracked regarding their performance in complying with existing WTO commitments and obligations.

Lastly, closer coordination with international institutions such as the WB or the IMF, and relevant G20 processes is encouraged to better analyse and address macroeconomic imbalances that stem beyond the trade arena.

4. Trade and Climate

In recent years, the EU has advanced several initiatives within the framework of the Green Deal, such as the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which primarily focuses on the European dimension. The goal must be to advance multilateral solutions to come to a more coordinated multilateral approach on the climate and trade nexus within the framework of the WTO.

Negotiations for a WTO agreement on environmental goods and services should also be resumed to pursue gradual liberalization of climate-friendly goods and services. The abolition of intellectual property rights for environmental and climate technologies is however not supported by European business.

5. Small and Medium sized enterprises

Eurochambres has been at the forefront of advocating that SMEs become a central part of the WTO agenda by tailoring existing and future measures better to their needs and priorities, and MC14 must further build on that momentum.

SMEs around the world are not only engines for growth and critical to stimulate competitiveness and resilience for the global economy, but also one of the main sources of employment. Yet SMEs are still one of the main untapped sources of growth and inclusive development.

To support MSMEs as important pillars of the economy, all WTO members should fully adopt the package of recommendations for MSMEs developed by the informal WTO working group.

In this regard and given the substantial impact of regulation on SMEs in particular, WTO members should strive to expand the MSME package regarding the regulatory impact of trade, taking, and deliver a set of global good regulatory principles for MSMEs as soon as possible.



Eurochambres – the association of European chambers of commerce and industry – represents more than 20 million businesses through its members and a network of 1700 regional and local chambers across Europe. Eurochambres is the leading voice for the broad business community at EU level, building on chambers’ strong connections with the grass roots economy and their hands-on support to entrepreneurs. Chambers’ member businesses – over 93% of which are SMEs – employ over 120 million people.

Previous positions can be found [here](#).

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