

Press Release

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Brussels

"The Future of Europe doesn't only mean the EU", said MEP Ivan Stefanec during his opening of a debate on The Associated Trio: Enhancing Cooperation for Peace, Democracy and Prosperity that he hosted.

On the 9th of February, the Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers, together with the European Enterprise Alliance, the SME Connect and SME Europe, co-organised a debate bringing together the perspectives from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to discuss how Brussels could build practically on the success of the Association Agreements signed in 2016 and 2017.

While this step undoubtedly encouraged the Trio nations to draw closer to the bloc, the European Union cannot rest on this accomplishment alone. Rather, speakers emphasised that both sides have to take concrete steps to advance this relationship and ultimately conclude the accession of the trio countries to the European Union. They focused on formally recognising the Associated Trio as a distinct grouping within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and reconsidering proposals to pursue integration on a sector by sector basis with enhanced economic integration. In their views, it would demonstrate the commitment of the European Union and lead to a watershed moment to push for a more visionary policy on the European continent.

In December 2019, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova – the three EaP countries with an Association Agreement with the EU – signed a joint statement submitted to EU High Representative. In the statement, they advocated a new EU+3 format enabling sectoral integration in transport, energy and other fields, as well as full access to the four freedoms of the EU – free movement of goods, services, capital and persons to help them progress faster on their path to European integration.

During his intervention, Deputy Economic Minister of Ukraine, Mr Taras Kachka, outlined that his country ambitions are focused on daily economic integration. More business to business dialogue is needed to overcome the prejudice about the competitive advantage and picture Ukraine as a strategic partner and not a competitor.

Mr Vladimir Cuc, a State Secretary of Foreign Affairs Ministry of Moldova, followed this statement and added that he welcomed the Associated Trio's shared ambitions while advocating for its expansion through informal ministerial meetings.

Ms Mariam Gabunia, Head of Foreign Trade Policy from Georgia, highlighted that *"despite challenges, we continue to implement complex reforms to transform our legal and institutional system"*. She said that Georgia has achieved 40% of its commitments and strive to reach 65% before applying for the European Union membership in 2024.

Member of the European Parliament, Luliu Winkler, said that *"we need to go beyond economic cooperation and have a social impact, changing people and communities' lives for the better"* through dialogue and diplomacy.

Whereas, a Member of the European Parliament and a Vice-Chair of the European Parliament's Defense Committee, Lukas Mandl, stressed that we should focus on the areas of cooperation when we can deepen our engagement: Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects, and peace and capability building.

Damir Filipovic, Secretary-General of the European Enterprise Alliance, reminded that the EU has a good recipe for relations with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. But it also needs to adapt for the future and focus on a deeper inclusion of political, societal and security dimensions. Moreover, it has to look in more pragmatic ways and consider the sectoral approach or present a more flexible approach depending on the particular needs of the partner.

Agata Boutanos, representing the Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers from Poland, outlined that from business perspective it is crucial to strengthen the already developed association by further support for EU standards implementation.

To watch the recording of the webinar, please visit the website: <https://youtu.be/V1QDhHuqITA>.