

**Opening Statement by Commissioner Danuta Hübner at the panel discussion
"Success stories of EU Cohesion Policy and problems in practice"**

Hof, 9 May 2007

Strong Regions – Building bridges for Europe

Dear Ministers, dear Minister Presidents, dear State Secretaries, dear Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank the German Presidency in particular Minister Glos and his collaborators for organising this wonderful event. My thanks also go to the city of Hof and its mayor, Mr. Fichtner, for inviting us to come here and for being such an excellent host. Yesterday I heard so many times this line, so close to my heart, that Europe is built on the ground. Europe is in fact built in cities like Hof, a symbolic city, which had been surrounded for decades by the Iron Curtain and which now serves as an important bridge of a reunited Europe.

The European cohesion policy that has brought us here is at the heart of the European project. It addresses two key concerns of our fellow citizens: it reduces economic and social disparities within the Union through innovative ways and means and it facilitates Europe's response to globalisation and the socio-economic changes that it brings.

Internal disparities in the EU are substantial and, have deepened with the several enlargements of the Union, which now encompasses 27 Member States with a population of 492 million and 268 regions.

Cohesion Policy is a powerful tool for fostering socio-economic convergence. It concentrates support on the poorest Member States and regions and thus accelerates their catch-up process. And of course it does it with different investment patterns compared to the past.

But cohesion policy is also an essential lever for stimulating competitiveness across the EU at regional and local level. Through its focus on growth, jobs and innovation enhancing investments it contributes to the modernisation of our economies.

This is a policy which both promotes solidarity and helps develop prosperity. Both are key objectives of Europe.

That is why the essence of the reform for 2007-2013 has been to position Cohesion Policy as the major instrument for the modernisation of the Union's economy in line with the so-called Lisbon agenda for growth, jobs and competitiveness.

We are well aware that there is no successful policy with one-fits-all solutions. Cohesion Policy promotes flexibility that allows each region and city to design and implement its own development strategy.

By involving regions in the design and implementation of development strategies and projects, we are taking Lisbon down to Europe's citizens. People can see the concrete benefits of European integration in their everyday life. But as the European reality is increasingly created on the ground, we need to draw on the capacities of all those on the ground willing to get involved in creating new public value. This policy generates the chance for all regions and local communities to contribute to Europe's prosperity.

Today in Hof, we are taking stock of where we are with respect to our ambitions. We also look at how to efficiently and successfully build bridges between European goals of solidarity, competitiveness and prosperity and Europe's regions. It is indeed a great pleasure to see all of you here and I wish all of us a lot of satisfaction from our common effort.

I look forward to a fruitful discussion.

Thank you for your attention.