

Speech for Commissioner Hübner

*"The way forward for Outermost Regions: evolution of our
partnership"*

Opening Session, 14 May 2008

The Future of the Strategy for the Outermost Regions

Brussels, 14 and 15 May 2008

Ministers, Mr Presidents of the Outermost Regions,

Honourable Members of the European Parliament, of the Committee of the Regions and of the European Economic and Social Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I warmly welcome you to this Conference. Thank you very much for coming all the way to Brussels for this key event, to bring your experience and ideas to our common reflection concerning the challenges and the evolution of the European strategy in relation to the outermost regions. Your presence today in such numbers confirms the strong interest of all stakeholders in fully participating in this work. Your commitment is for me the confirmation of the importance of the partnership relationship we have developed throughout the years.

I would like to seize the occasion of having you all here today to address three issues. First, where we stand today on the Strategy for the Outermost Regions. Second, to share my view on the challenges and opportunities for the Outermost Regions. And finally, to outline some ideas of the future of the strategy, the policy and of our partnership.

- **Where we stand**

In May 2004 the European Commission adopted the Communication “A reinforced partnership for the Outermost Regions” which announced the strategy for global development for the Outermost Regions based on three axes: **accessibility**, **competitiveness**, and **regional insertion**.

Three years later, the Commission adopted a new Communication, which I had the honour to present, in September 2007, to the members of the Parliament's REGI Committee and, a couple of weeks later, to the

participants of the Outermost Regions Presidents' Conference in Madeira. With this Communication we launched a wide consultation process that was finished in March.

Indeed, I would like to thank all those who participated actively in this process by submitting their ideas and proposals. I would like to thank, in particular, the Presidents of the Regions who organised numerous public events aiming at reflecting and debating on how to make the Strategy evolve and to take into account questions that are essential to the future of the Outermost regions.

My gratitude is also addressed to Mrs Sudre, to President Rivero Baute and to Mr Coupeau for elaborating the reports respectively on behalf of the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and of the European Economic and Social Committee. But as well as to the Members of the European Parliament, Mr Jardim Fernandes, Mr Marques, Mr Guerreiro and Mr Casaca for sending us their views. All the contributions have been published on our web-site and they are currently being analysed by DG REGIO with the involvement of other Commission services.

As you know, the Communication was welcomed by the Heads of State and Governments in the European Council in Brussels in December 2007. The Council also invited the Commission to present relevant proposals by October 2008.

This conference therefore takes place at a very appropriate moment. It gives us the opportunity to debate how we can, together, push the 2004 strategy further with decisiveness and pragmatism to address positively the challenges the Outermost Regions are facing

- **The challenges that the Outermost Regions are facing.**

Clearly, a globalized world calls for improvements and development efforts to cope with the new challenges identified in the last communication: climate change, migration, maritime policy and agriculture. Today more than ever, it is necessary to prepare ourselves to counter the negative effects of these new challenges but also to grasp the opportunities they can bring.

I believe that our strategy is a success story in this context. Why? Because it clearly identifies and targets the challenges for your regions but, very importantly, it also shifts the focus towards your strengths, towards your assets. I said this very clearly in Madeira last year but I feel it is worth repeating, I sincerely believe that the challenges we face are also combined with opportunities.

Indeed, I believe that your regions have unique possibilities that should be promoted to the rest of Europe, outside the Member States concerned. You are uniquely placed to lead in pushing for measures to cope with climate change as you are also at the forefront of the problems that this creates. You are uniquely placed from a geostrategic position and can project the values and democratic strengths of the EU to your neighbours. Not to speak of your exceptional position in terms of maritime resources or as a focal point for maritime links with the European mainland. You are also uniquely placed to cooperate economically and to make use of the opportunities given by globalization and trade in your own hinterland. This expertise of your neighbouring area can also be exported to the mainland Europe, to attract entrepreneurs that need a solid, safe and secure basis for making business. In addition, I also see cross-border cooperation with your

neighbouring areas as a complementary way to address migration issues and to prevent illegal migration.

There are of course also other challenges that need to be met positively to profit from the opportunities such as modernising and developing high value added niche products in agriculture, upgrading to the high end tourism market, develop a thriving private service sector, innovate in renewable energies or moving towards a knowledge society. Other challenges with opportunities include the need to mobilize R&D in the areas where you have a competitive advantage in order to ease the integration of the Outermost Regions in the European research area or upgrading the skills and mobility of your, again, uniquely young generations.

From my different visits to your regions, I noticed many initiatives that represent a promise for the future like Net-Biome, an excellent example of the high added value of technological innovations and their application to environmental concerns. However, this and other promises for the future - like the renewable energy projects in the Canary islands or *Seas Guyane* delivering satellite data on the Amazonian environment and stimulating the creation of small and innovative firms specialized in the treatment of information and mapmaking - need to be confirmed and developed. Indeed, you are the initiators and the pilots of your own prosperity. That's our common interest.

Looking towards the future, this brings me to my last point: our ideas of the future of the policy and how we can develop a pragmatic partnership.

- **Ideas on the future of the strategy and a pragmatic partnership**

The new challenges I mentioned call for a policy that targets structural factors of competitiveness as well as environmental and social sustainability. It also calls for a policy that promotes the restructuring of regional economies by addressing the development of physical, institutional and human resources. I strongly believe that the debate on the future of cohesion policy must be seen in this context.

But I am also convinced that we should pursue in the direction of recognizing and addressing the Outermost Regions' specificities. Indeed, outside any budgetary debates, allow me to focus on the political dimension of the future of the cohesion policy. The introduction of territorial cohesion in the new Treaty opens up new venues in terms of distribution of responsibility between levels of government, of better consideration of territorial specificities, and of new contractual arrangements. As you know, the Commission will adopt a Green Paper on territorial cohesion in September 2008. This will be followed by broad public consultation and an informal meeting of Ministers for regional policy under the French presidency in November 2008. Finally, I plan to summarise the results of this work in a paper due in Spring 2009, containing a first batch of concrete ideas for cohesion policy post-2013.

I am looking forward to your input into this important debate on the evolution of our policy and its various dimensions.

Our strategy, as the various contributions we recently received clearly indicate, also need to evolve to reflect the challenges and developments I have mentioned throughout my speech. I would say, however, that we're looking at an evolution rather than a revolution. It is about pushing

the strategy further. Indeed, beyond the challenges that were identified in the strategy and which will be discussed here today, I believe it is time to change the way we address the issue of "Ultraperipherality".

We should now put the emphasis on how important the Outermost regions are for the Union. Our efforts should be devoted to make the EU citizens and decision-makers aware of the geopolitical and strategic importance of the Outermost regions, your role in terms of stability and economic development in your specific geographical environment and the renewed focus on the quality of products and services of your economies. The potential of our Outermost regions is very clear to me and I will be your enthusiastic partner in making sure that others see this as well.

To conclude, allow me to pay tribute to Aimé Césaire by using one of his quotes: "*J'accepte mes origines, mais que vais-je en faire?*" I believe we can be inspired by these words for our work. The key words for us thus become: "acknowledging the handicaps, coping with the challenges but, as I would like to add to Aimé's wise words, also seeking the opportunities".

I wish to all of you a constructive and fruitful work as well as a franc and inspiring exchange of views and ideas in the plenary and workshops.

Thank you for your attention.