

Speech by Mrs. Danuta Hübner

European Commissioner for Regional Policy

CROSS BORDER TERRITORIAL COOPERATION

PROGRAMME PORTUGAL/SPAIN 2007-2013

"Transform the border that divides into the border that links us"

PUBLIC PRESENTATION: Bragança, 26 March 2007

**"EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION 2007-2013,
WHICH CHALLENGES?"**

(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Today we have gathered to celebrate the start of the new cross-border programme between Spain and Portugal for the period 2007-2013. It is already the fourth edition of this programme covering one of the longest borders in the European Union.

I have appreciated your comments, your clear visions, and your commitment to work together.

I am sure you agree with me that we can look back with pride in our achievements. Cross-border cooperation between Spain and Portugal has contributed to strengthen economic and social development on both sides of the border. It has helped to overcome the peripheral status of the two border

regions and to improve the living conditions of the population. The presence of so many of you here today also proves that cross-border cooperation has reinforced the understanding for each other. It has contributed to building up trust, good personal and institutional relations between national, regional and local administrations in the border area. All this has contributed to the establishment of a "frontera ejemplar". We must now look forward to the next seven years with determination and optimism and we must aim high.

Firstly, I will make some comments on the need to translate the challenges that the border areas face into opportunities. I travel a lot across Europe, and I can see that border regions are often cut off from part of their natural hinterland across the border. Even though borders today have a different meaning, for decades many border areas have suffered from inadequate transport connections. Even today, I see that many transport corridors are planned to bring goods and people quickly across the border, past the border regions. Companies in border areas frequently lack adequate knowledge of market possibilities and export opportunities across the border. They have to deal with different administrative structures and competences, different fiscal, social and environmental legislation. As a result, border regions frequently struggle with a shortage of high-quality jobs, a lack of educational and research facilities, and are lagging behind in economic terms.

The objective of European Regional Policy is to assist in overcoming these challenges and turn them into new opportunities. Through our cooperation programmes we want to enable and encourage people on both sides of the border to work together in order to make their region attractive, both for job creation and to live in.

Your cross-border cooperation between Portugal and Spain offers many examples where challenges have been turned into opportunities, covering very different areas:

- Measures to improve and conserve the environment: Air and water pollution do not stop at borders. This requires a joint approach to effective environmental protection and nature conservation. One good example is the project in Puebla de Sanabria (Spain), which aims at improving the water quality and quantity for urban consumption in the border area.
- Measures to support cross-border cooperation between enterprises: I am thinking of the platform for technological development in the automobile sector in Galicia (which I have visited in June 2006) and Norte which I will see tomorrow. Through this platform new cross-border relationships between producers and suppliers will be developed and border-related competitive disadvantages will be eliminated.
- Measures to develop research and cross-border education: The University of Minho and the University of Vigo have for example launched a joint project to establish a broadband communication network between Galicia and Norte. This will not only increase cooperation in research projects but also improve cross-border student services.

Through the cross-border programmes we can pool resources together, in order to ensure a more efficient, and joint, management of economic, environmental or social challenges. They involve citizens in implementing cross-border projects for their region. People can easily see the concrete benefits of these projects in their region and in everyday life. Cross-border programmes also contribute to a new model of multilevel governance based on shared ownership and partnership between European, national, regional and local actors. As the European reality is increasingly being created on the

ground, we must draw on the capacities of all those who are able and willing to get involved in creating public value.

Let me now look ahead to the future of Territorial Cooperation in the new programming period 2007-2013.

What used to be a Community initiative it is now a fully fledged Objective of the EU Regional Policy. This is an important political signal, placing Cooperation on the same level as the Convergence and Competitiveness objectives.

Its importance is also marked through the 50% increase of the Territorial Cooperation budget compared to the previous period (2000-2006), taking into account the increase of new border regions in the EU, including maritime borders. Unfortunately, the financial envelope of the new cross-border programme between Portugal and Spain will decrease significantly (ERDF contribution 2000-2006: 824 MEUR; ERDF contribution 2007-2013: 267 MEUR). Still, the programme remains one of the most important ones in financial terms in Europe and we now have to make sure that the funds work much harder than before to achieve maximum impact.

We received your draft Operational Programme for cross-border cooperation between Spain and Portugal in February and I am glad to see it responds so well to the challenges that it is facing.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, in a global world, it is clearer more than ever that the competitiveness of Europe cannot be achieved by the Union or by individual Member States. Economic success must take into account local and regional growth potential.

The new regulations provide for a strategic concentration of the new cooperation programmes on themes closely linked to the Lisbon agenda for jobs and growth in order to increase the competitiveness of the European territory: innovation and entrepreneurship, environment, improved accessibility and sustainable urban development. The priorities of the new cooperation programme between Portugal and Spain, which was submitted to the Commission on 15 February 2007 and which my services consider to be admissible, are in line with these strategic objectives.

I hope that we will be able to adopt the new programme soon and I am confident that it will contribute to increasing the competitiveness of the Portuguese/Spanish border region.

I am very happy that Galicia and Norte have expressed their interest in setting up a European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation (EGTC). A request has already been introduced and its approval is pending while we are waiting for the modification of the respective national legislation to the corresponding Council Legislation.

The EGTC offers regional and local authorities the option of creating a grouping with legal personality thus eliminating the problems due to the existence of different structures, competences and laws on both sides of the border. Setting up an EGTC sends out an important political signal and it offers a range of practical advantages, regarding the implementation of cooperation.

It is not for the Commission to prescribe or insist on a particular approach for the use of the EGTC instrument: it should be viewed as a framework tool which has been provided, and it is very much for the implementers – the users on the ground – to assess how best to take advantage of this.

Let me finally turn your attention to the need to exchange best practice and for networking. We all agree that there is a wealth of experience in Europe's regions in implementing policies directly relevant to the Lisbon agenda. It is essential that we share this experience and exploit it to the full in our efforts to modernise our economies. Indeed it is our duty to do so. This is the motivation behind the Regions for Economic Change (RFEC) initiative which we adopted last November.

I am convinced that you have accumulated experience in the methods of cooperation, which you will be able to apply with success in the future initiatives across the border.

We build on what has been achieved so far. The new RFEC initiative capitalizes on the experience of the INTERREG IIC initiative - supporting interregional cooperation – and the URBACT network for exchange of best practice between European cities. These two programmes implemented in 2000-2006 programming period created numerous networks linking regional and local actors throughout Europe. This know-how today turns out to be yet another precious asset that European regional policy can bring to economic development in Europe.

RFEC also aims to link this exchange of best practice more solidly to the implementation of our Convergence and Competitiveness Programmes. We want to make sure that bright ideas emanating from regional and urban networks find their way into the new programmes, with their total budget of € 350 billion for 2007-2013. "Regions for Economic Change" has been developed in response to this need. I would like to ask you to ensure the best possible use of this initiative by the Portuguese and Spanish cities and regions.

Yesterday, European leaders signed in Berlin a declaration on the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the Treaty that gave birth to the

European Union. We are celebrating 50 years of European integration, 50 years of unprecedented peace, stability and prosperity on our continent. Cooperation across borders between different partners at all levels has contributed to this process. Border regions are the building blocks and bridges in the process of European integration.

But we cannot stop here. We have to realise the next steps of our common project. I count on you to make our future as successful as our past.

Thank you very much for your attention.