Statement by the Chambers of Commerce of the Atlantic Arc

Bilbao, June 21, 2023
The Chambers of Commerce of the Atlantic Arc - North Portugal, Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, Burgos, Navarre, Basque Country and Nouvelle-Aquitaine - share the need to strengthen our cooperation to tackle the great challenges that we are facing as a society, among others: globalisation, the energy-ecological transition, the technological-digital transition and the socio-demographic transformation. Our shared goal is to harness local initiatives to transform the Atlantic Arc into a region that is more competitive, more sustainable, more dynamic, more open and connected. In short, a more attractive region with greater prosperity and a better quality of life for its citizens.

For all these reasons, the Chambers of Commerce present here wish to state:

**Our concern** is the risk that the peripheral condition of the Atlantic Arc will result in a loss of competitiveness, attractiveness as a region and capacity to influence. Due to globalisation, we are fully aware that the centre of gravity of economic activity and innovation is shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and in the European context, with the involvement of new countries, the weight tends to shift increasingly eastward. On the other hand, there is a risk that Atlantic interests may be sidelined or will not be duly taken into account by the European institutions.

**Our desire to create a forum for reflection and cooperation** relating to the challenges that the Atlantic Arc Regions must address in order to position themselves in a new competitive and social environment characterised by uncertainty. In this landscape, factors such as talent, energy transition, digital transformation, physical and intelligent infrastructure, and connectivity are critical drivers for advancing regional prosperity. Our willingness to work in partnership with other relevant stakeholders to effectively advocate for Atlantic interests and, particularly, with the Atlantic Arc Commission of the CPRM-Conference of Maritime and Peripheral Regions.

**Our firm determination to act** as facilitators and catalysts so that, with the participation of all the agents concerned, the actions and projects identified as levers to advance towards a more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable space can be implemented.
That we share the conclusions included in the declaration by the Atlantic Arc Commission held last May 23rd in Cardiff (Wales), and we respond positively to the call for socio-economic players to get involved. We understand that the Chambers, by our nature, by representing the defence of general interests, and by our proven ability to develop actions in favour of improving the competitiveness of our territories and our companies, that we can play a relevant role in constructing the Atlantic macro-region.

The Chambers of Commerce present here have made a joint diagnosis of the main challenges we must face:

1. **Connectivity and Influence Capacity.**

   This challenge relates to our peripheral position and demographic weight. Geographically, we are outside the significant development axes, so in this situation, one of the keys to competitiveness is connectivity. Infrastructure and smart logistics bring us closer together.

   On the other hand, peripheral areas tend to lose influence and fall into a "vicious circle": the less the capacity to influence, the more peripheral the area becomes, and the more peripheral, the less relevant and the less ability to influence. The formula to break this dynamic is “regional cooperation,” which will allow us to be more relevant, more strategic and have greater influence to make our voice heard by the institutions that make the decisions that affect our competitiveness.

2. **Diversification and Entrepreneurship.**

   This challenge relates to the need to incorporate higher value-added activities that will help us to increase productivity and, by consequence, GDP and the welfare of citizens. We must seize the opportunities that get opened up by major transformations: ecological, digital and demographic, and the relocation of some supply chains. Other fields such as food security, healthcare sovereignty, and the blue economy are new areas of opportunity that we must seize. To achieve this, a key lever is to have a strong entrepreneurship ecosystem.

3. **Sustainability, innovation and internationalisation.**

   This challenge is related to a less innovative production system, with a lower level of openness and a smaller company size compared to the European average. In addition to taking advantage of new opportunities, it is necessary to consolidate and develop the current productive fabric. This development involves improving its
competitiveness and for this, we have three major levers: Sustainability, Innovation and Internationalisation. This development also requires a public sector commitment to innovation policies that support SMEs in this process.

4. Demographic challenge.

This challenge is related to a clear trend toward an aging population: lower birth rates and high life expectancy. This is a challenge to maintain our welfare state, but it can be transformed into an opportunity for development.

5. Talent: An Attractive Region.

This challenge relates to the need to attract and retain talent in order to be able to respond to all of the above challenges. We have an attractive environment and good quality of life, but we need to have attractive professional projects.

The Chambers present here commit ourselves to work together internally and with all the players concerned in the following areas, which are related to the challenges we share:

1. Improved Connectivity and Capacity to Influence

1.1 Improved connectivity (transportation, logistics and networks)

Transportation infrastructure

- Development of the necessary efforts to complete the Atlantic Rail Corridor in due time - as far as the core network is concerned, this is by 2030 - eliminating bottlenecks and missing links, particularly at the French-Spanish and Spanish-Portuguese borders.

- Strengthening and adapting the railroad connection and integrated transport along the Cantabrian coast and developing an advanced logistics system.

- Promoting a strategy of cooperation between ports and developing maritime highways that connect our regions and connecting us more strategically with Europe. Establishing a strategy for our ports to contribute to the EU's energy autonomy.

Energy Infrastructure
o Promoting the map of interconnections on the European level of the hydrogen infrastructure to include the Atlantic interconnection of the HiWest corridor by 2030.

o Deploying the electric vehicle recharging and hydrogen charging network in order to complete a corridor that enables sustainable mobility for both people and goods.

Digital Infrastructure

o Deploying 5G networks and services that will enable positioning in sectors such as industry 4.0, connected and autonomous vehicles, as well as deploying the broadband network to rural and isolated areas.

1.2 Capacity to influence.

o To act in a joint and coordinated manner, as Atlantic Arc Chambers, with an organisation that supports this cooperation on a permanent basis (Association of Chambers of Commerce of the Atlantic Arc) and by making the most of the pre-existing structures for cooperation (Association of Chambers of Commerce of the Camino de Santiago, Bihartean, CCI Pau Béarn...).

o Developing a common branding strategy to better identify and make visible the specific characteristics of the Atlantic Arc.

o Firmly supporting the creation of the Atlantic Macroregion and in coordination with the Institutions promoting it, fundamentally the "Atlantic Arc Commission", carrying out all actions within our scope of action so that the European Council gives the green light to this project before the end of this year.

2. Sustainable diversification and entrepreneurship.

2.1 Diversification

 o Redoubling our commitment to:

   - the Energy Transition and for integrating the value chains of marine renewable energies and green hydrogen, while promoting the Circular Economy.
- the Digital Transition as an opportunity for the development of advanced services.

- the Blue Economy and the development of the possibilities offered by maritime resources; promoting sustainable fisheries and aquaculture and maritime industries.

- and with the Demographic Challenge and the Silver Economy as an opportunity in the face of growing demand for the needs of an aging population.

  - To bet on industry 4.0 and to relocate value chains and on sustainable tourism (wine tourism, slow tourism, etc.) linked to the preservation of the natural environment.

  - To support a food sector that is beneficial for food safety and healthy eating.

  - To contribute to European sovereignty in the field of health.

2.2 Entrepreneurship

  - To work on synergies for the generation of new activities in the different areas of opportunity, to promote the culture of entrepreneurship from an early age and to promote the figure of the entrepreneur.

  - To develop entrepreneurship ecosystems with public-private partnerships, with the involvement of tractor companies in the development of entrepreneurs (supplier development) and with the involvement of universities and technology centres.

3. **Sustainability, innovation and internationalisation.**

3.1 Sustainability

  - Promoting the decarbonisation of the economy, especially in the most energy-intensive sectors.
3. Strengthening energy management, energy efficiency, self-consumption and sustainable mobility.

Promoting more efficient water and waste management.

3.2 Innovation

Establishing mechanisms for cooperation with innovation policies, maximising the synergies between scientific-technological capabilities and their promotion.

Promoting the strategic and innovation capacity of SMEs in cooperation with the different players and sharing experiences among regions. Promoting the use of advanced management models that integrate ESG.

Increasing private and public resources allocated to innovation and investments in assets that contribute to its development.

Promoting the increase in business size when the characteristics of the company and the market make it important, and establishing partnerships and alliances between associations/clusters and through cooperation between tractor companies and SMEs.

3.3 Internationalisation

Promoting internationalisation, exploring new markets and foreign establishments.

Working on attracting investment to the Atlantic Arc.

4. Demographic challenge.

Promoting active aging strategies and valuing all the experience of elderly people.

5. Talent: Attractive territory.

Activating the levers and policies necessary to create an attractive region, especially for young people, facilitating the employability of the unemployed and filling job vacancies.
- Matching professional profiles to demand, promoting lifelong learning and involving companies in the development of people's skills.

- Promoting innovation in business policies for people, being sensitive to the demands of the new generations, taking into account the challenge of generational change and valuing senior talent.

- Encouraging cooperation and promoting exchanges between universities and vocational training centres throughout the Atlantic arc.

Finally, the Chambers present here commit ourselves, once the potential areas of cooperation have been identified on the basis of shared challenges, to prioritise the areas of cooperation and to develop and implement an action plan to move forwards with the transformation of the Atlantic Arc into a more attractive and prosperous region.

Signed in Bilbao, on June 21, 2023