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Ladies and Gentlemen,
First of all, I would like to welcome you all to this conference on the fight against racism. It is hard to overstate the importance I attach to this issue. So, when I say how pleased I am to be here amongst you, you can be sure I mean it. It is an honour for me to be addressing a room full of people – project managers, NGO representatives, staff from the European Monitoring Centre – who all share a common conviction.

As you are no doubt aware, the European Union’s commitment to fighting discrimination was finally made clear in the Amsterdam Treaty. Under Article 13 of the new Treaty, the Union now has the power to combat discrimination on grounds of sex, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation and—of greatest relevance to us today—racial or ethnic origin.

We are determined to honour that commitment to a discrimination-free society. That is why the Commission put forward a package of proposals only two months after taking office. It was one of our first decisions.

The time was certainly ripe for action. The Community has been campaigning against discrimination for decades. But in the past, it needed an economic justification for anti-discrimination measures. Now it has a clear Treaty commitment to anti-discrimination as a political end in itself. The Community has been fighting discrimination based on nationality ever since it was first set up. That narrow focus was justified by the Community’s mission in the aftermath of the war: to reconcile a continent divided by nationalistic and ethnic antagonisms. Its achievements have been remarkable. It may not have stamped out every case of discrimination on grounds of nationality, but it has brought about remarkable changes both in official policies and public mentalities.

But of course it is not nearly enough. The Union must now do the same for all the other grounds for discrimination.

Europe’s twentieth century history should provide it with a unique insight into the destructive force of discrimination. And the history of its colonial past confers on its people and politicians a responsibility - a duty, to promote the principles of tolerance and equality in today’s multi-ethnic societies.

Today, though, the focus is on racism. Not because other forms of discrimination are less important. No, we are compelled to concentrate on this issue, by the increasing virulence of racism in Europe.
If evidence were needed of the rising tide of racist hostility, the last few months have given us many proofs.

However, we cannot let racist views go unchallenged, whoever expresses them. We have a duty to respond with the most forceful arguments we can muster and, when necessary, with appropriate action. You may be sure that the Commission will be vigilant, and firm, in defending the principles and values of the European Treaties.

We are encouraged by the anti-racist sentiments that have been expressed in the whole European Continent. The significance of this issue extends beyond the EU’s present borders. Many countries in central and eastern Europe have applied to join the EU. Many of them have sizeable ethnic minorities, some of which also face hostility and prejudice, as do other countries like Romania and Turkey. The authorities in these countries do not always take this discrimination seriously enough. Sometimes, official attitudes are part of the problem.

Of course, there are also many people in those countries fighting hard against discrimination. Europe’s leaders can support their efforts, by making clear their distaste for the politics of prejudice and division – both within the EU and outside.

My message today is by no means all gloom and doom. In many quarters, there is growing recognition of the need for European action against racism. That is why, in the Article 13 proposals, we were able to make greater progress on racial discrimination than on the other grounds. We felt that it was politically possible.

As you know, the package of proposals consists of two directives and an Action Programme. One Directive deals with discrimination in employment on all the grounds mentioned in Article 13 – except for sexual discrimination, which is dealt with separately. The other Directive concentrates on racial discrimination and its scope extends beyond employment, to education, social protection and access to goods and services.