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Statement on behalf of the European Union

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(check against delivery)

Mr. Chairperson,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union.

The Acceding Countries Bulgaria and Romania, the Candidate Countries Turkey, Croatia* and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, as well as the Republic of Moldova align themselves with this statement.

Mr. Chairperson,

The European Union is multicultural and multiethnic. As such, it attaches great importance to combating racism and racial discrimination. The fundamental concept that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the founding principles of the European Union. This fundamental principle of equality is a cornerstone of the international human rights architecture. The diversity of people is a value, not a reason for discrimination. Unfortunately, a breach of this principle can often result in racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, which undermine human dignity. This is incompatible with the values of the European Union as well as the United Nations. The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights explicitly prohibits discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation. The fight against racism and elimination of any forms of racial discrimination is a part of the internal as well as external policy of the European Union.

The international community has created a comprehensive legal framework to fight against racism and racial discrimination. The International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, which was opened for signature exactly 40 years ago in New York, has been ratified by 170 States to date. Although 47 States have made their declarations, nevertheless, the deadline of 2005 for universal ratification of the Convention set by the Durban Programme of Action resulting from the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance was not realized.

The European Union reiterates its call upon all states to ratify this Convention and implement its provisions as a matter of priority and to adopt effective measures at a national level to combat the symptoms and causes of racism and discrimination. Taking this opportunity, the European Union wishes to express its appreciation and support for the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Also, we thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination,

Xenophobia and Related Intolerance for their valuable work and contribution to the fight against racism on a global scale. We urge all states to co-operate fully with and support these bodies.

Mr. Chairperson,

Today's societies face many challenges in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, since discrimination and intolerance, unfortunately, find their way to emerge in the new forms in various parts of the world.

The report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance contains alarming information about the resurgence of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia, fed by intolerance and hostility towards immigration, and also racism flowing from anti-Semitism, Christianophobia and Islamophobia. He also notes the appearance of several targets of modern racism, namely members of national, ethnic or religious minorities, non-citizens, refugees and asylum-seekers.

Many contemporary societies are becoming increasingly diverse. Diversity brings richness into the daily lives of our people. However, it is sad to say that the multicultural nature of our societies has sometimes led to tension and conflict. It is absolutely unacceptable that intolerance towards individuals, groups or wider communities based on cultural, ethnic or religious diversity results in attacks and assaults, worst of all when such actions of violence are deliberate. Violent movements based on intolerance on racial grounds or discriminatory ideas emerge irrespective of the geographical location. Some racial discriminatory ideas even appear on the agenda of some radical political parties. The European Union is committed to struggling against such ideas and to respecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Racism reveals itself in multiple forms and can be both a cause and a consequence of discrimination. Entire groups can potentially be at risk of becoming the victims of racism.

Ethnic minority groups and indigenous peoples have often been the objects of discrimination. The European Union welcomes the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the Human Rights Council at its first session and we urge governments and indigenous peoples to work together in cooperation to realise the goals set in the Declaration.

Counterterrorism brings new challenges in ensuring respect for human rights, the rule of law and democratic principles. In particular we need to guard against counterterrorism policies leading to entire groups being identified with terrorism. This only brings suspicion, mistrust and hostility. Our actions to eliminate these tensions require global understanding and cooperation, and the fight against terrorism must be conducted in full compliance with international human rights law, including non-discrimination norms.

Intolerance and violence directed against members of religious communities around the world continue to be a cause of great concern. The EU condemns all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief and urges states to ensure that their constitutional and legislative systems provide adequate and effective guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief to all without distinction.

Racism leads to the denial of equal opportunities, be it in employment, education or other areas, bringing with it a range of negative consequences due to the social and economic disadvantages experienced by the victims of such situations. That is also applicable when it comes to gender. The European Union wishes to stress the importance of integrating a gender perspective into the development of all policies against racism to ensure that they effectively target the diverse situations of women and men. In this regard, we expect that the European Institute for Gender Equality will be established soon.

Exceptional attention must be paid to those who, unfortunately, become the victims of racial discrimination and the best efforts must be made in combating its roots and consequences. Prevention, education and awareness raising could be the key instruments to promote tolerance, understanding of diversity and respect for human dignity and rights. Effective measures taken by politicians can prevent the spread of racist ideologies. Also, media must not be misused in distributing messages of racism.

Mr. Chairperson,

The European Union is deeply committed to combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance through various measures at the EU level as well as at the level of Member States, and is devoted to cooperating with regional institutions and organizations in this respect.

In May, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a Decision designating 2007 as the 'European Year of Equal Opportunities for All'. This initiative came exactly a decade after the European Year Against Racism and the introduction into the EC Treaty of Article 13 - allowing the EU to combat discrimination. The core activities of the Year will be based on four themes: rights, representation, recognition and respect.

The main aim of the Year is to launch a major debate on the benefits of diversity for European societies and also to seek to make people in the European Union more aware of their rights to enjoy equal treatment and a life free of discrimination, irrespective of their race or ethnic origin, gender, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation – this is the key message that the Year will strive to put across not only to the general public but also to individuals or groups that suffer from discrimination or are potentially exposed to discrimination.

Hundreds of activities, including campaigns, surveys and conferences, will be carried out to mark this Year at both the European Union and the national levels. We deeply believe that the measures undertaken by the EU and its Member States during the next year will add to mutual understanding, tolerance and respect by active

participation in the events by individuals, groups, civil society and authorities. We also believe that the year will be a good encouragement to EU Member State governments to elaborate national legislation with respect to the measures for more efficient combating of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. At the European Union level, we very much appreciate the work and valuable contribution made so far by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. We expect this Centre to be transformed soon into the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and further to develop its activities. The main tasks of the Agency will relate to data collection, the provision of advice, cooperation with civil society and awareness raising among the general public.

The European Union is engaged in active, valuable and effective cooperation with regional institutions and organizations in the fight against racism and discrimination, including OSCE and the Council of Europe. Dialogue, understanding and cooperation of all involved parties can make our societies free from intolerance and discrimination and help to foster the promotion of the human rights and equality.

Mr. Chairperson,

In conclusion, the European Union urges all states to redouble their common efforts in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The promotion in our diverse societies of tolerance towards racial, ethnic, religious and other differences as well as a non-discriminative attitude will help to build respect for human dignity as well as commitment to human rights. This is a challenge, which the international community must face together.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

*) Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process