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***Opening statement
by State Secretary
of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior
Citizens, Women and Youth
Peter Ruhenstroth-Bauer***

***on the occasion of the opening of the European Youth
Conference***

***„European Youth in Action for
Diversity and Tolerance“***

on 7 November 2005 in Berlin

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Opening statement by State Secretary Ruhenstroth-Bauer on the occasion of the opening of the European Youth Conference “European Youth in Action for Diversity and Tolerance”

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Participants,

I am delighted to be able to welcome you here to Berlin today for the opening of the European Youth Conference “European Youth in Action for Diversity and Tolerance”. You have come here from all corners of Europe in order to discuss together the causes of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, of intolerance and racism, as well as the possible ways and strategies to overcome these problems. In the coming days we will find ample opportunity to share our experiences, discuss joint projects, get new connections and, I hope so, maybe even make new friends.

With that I warmly welcome you here to Berlin. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the European Commission for co-organising this conference, and I am especially extending my welcome to their representatives. Let me also thank the International Youth Exchange and Visitors’ Service of the Federal Republic of Germany (IJAB) and the German National Agency for the European YOUTH Programme and their staffs for their preliminary work in the organisation of this conference. The Advisory Board also played an important role in the preparation of the conference. You have met twice during the run-up to the conference, giving important input in terms of the contents to be dealt with and in terms of the winning participants and referees. I would like to explicitly thank you for your work.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Almost exactly four years ago the first European Youth Conference, “Youth for Tolerance and Democracy – a European Perspective”, was also held here in Berlin. This triggered a still ongoing discussion, initiated and promoted by the federal government. The objective of the first conference was to integrate and promote the ideas, actions and impulses of young people into the battle against racism and

xenophobia in Europe. Young people were given the opportunity to share their experiences in the battle against racism and xenophobia and to participate in a debate with politicians and experts on possible strategies of fighting these phenomena. This first conference has shown its effects – not only here in Germany, but also within the European Union. In a conversation with the former Youth Commissioner, Ms Reding, it was therefore only natural for me to take up her idea to organise a follow-up conference in cooperation with the European Commission. For today, four years later, we must go through this process again and develop it further to examine what has been achieved these last years. Did we make any progress? Where do we have to make more of an effort? What has changed in the last few years? And – most of all – what solid actions still need to be taken in the coming years? In the next few days, you, dear Participants, will have the opportunity to discuss all these questions, find joint answers and come up with specific actions and objectives for the future.

However, I think we can say today that one thing is certain: Europe has become more colourful and more diverse in recent years. In May of 2004, ten new members acceded to the European Union – more will follow. The end of the East-West conflict and the integration of the Central and Eastern European states in the European family of nations mark the final victory over the iron curtain which separated Europe for decades. Today Europe is home to millions of people with the most varied cultural, ethnical and religious backgrounds. To create a Europe of diversity and freedom – that shall be our goal for the coming years and decades.

Even beyond the borders of our continent, the world at large is moving closer together. Telecommunication networks, globalisation and global trade, an increased mobility of large parts of the population and flourishing tourism contribute to closer relations and interdependence among countries and regions. This also concerns us Europeans; we should not build walls around us, but we have to be open to other ideas, other products and also other experiences and influences. And that which in economics long ago became second nature must also become a reality in society: the time of the national state as such, of isolating ourselves from others, of living and working only for ourselves is definitely over. Today, our society is marked by a diversity of cultures – anyhow by a diversity of ethnic groups. That is the reality and that is, for all particular conflicts which may exist, nor horror scenario but, in the contrary, something positive.

In the coming years, dealing with foreigners and their cultures will become more and more of an everyday experience for many people. We know that a feeling of insecurity and disapproval among some people will be the consequence. There is fear at the root of this attitude – the fear of losing jobs in particular. Other factors, such as the impossibility to control globalization with the old national mechanisms, economic problems and the loss of traditional social bonds, enhance the feeling of uncertainty and cause tensions in the relations among the different social and ethnic groups within our society. Plain prejudices, ignorance and insufficient knowledge of the overall context also contribute. This in turn strengthens radical positions and washes people and parties to the political surface who appear to have simple solutions. Currently there are far-right wingers or at least right-wing populists on the rise in many European countries. These parties take advantage of the worries and fears of the people and use them for their own ideologically blind and inhumane purposes. This is a danger we have to tackle. Because if we do not succeed in presenting the European integration process for what it is – that is, a gain and an enrichment for all of Europe and for all the people living here – this process may fail, causing the European house to collapse. Together we have to fight this threat.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

For me it is important and encouraging to see that especially young people are enthusiastic about the ideals of the European integration process and that they are fighting for an open, tolerant and diverse Europe. Because if people are interested in different cultures, languages and religions from an early age, they will later not shy away from what is foreign. Therefore, the promotion of tolerance and cosmopolitanism, of key democratic skills and the commitment of civil society are of pivotal importance. It is the basic condition for a long-term policy, a policy to effectively combat right-wing extremism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and the attitudinal and behavioural patterns they are associated with. This combat must be strengthened and extended on all levels – international, national, regional and local.

For this reason the federal government employs a multi-dimensional strategy with repressive and preventive elements to combat right-wing extremism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism.

The repressive area lies within the authority of the police and judiciary. When crimes are committed, the state has to defend itself and enforce the existing laws with severity. But if we want to get to the root of the problem instead of fighting the symptoms, we have to do more than prosecute the worst offences with all the force of the criminal law. We have to take preventive action, promote the extension and strengthening of civil and democratic structures and support tolerance and cosmopolitanism. With the European action programme “Youth for Tolerance and Democracy – against Right-Wing Extremism, Xenophobia and anti-Semitism”, the federal government has set important priorities in this area over the last four years: Mobile consultation teams strengthen democratic awareness; consulting services for victims support victims of racist assaults; network services collect data, experiences and insights concerning the treatment of victims and perpetrators and interconnect those locally involved; initiatives of young people against intolerance and xenophobia, international youth movements, history workshops, film projects, poster competitions or photo workshops – the action programme supports a wide range of projects. Since the start of the programme in 2001, more than 4,000 preventive projects, initiatives and schemes were subsidised with more than €163 million.

But in the past years, the federal government was also committed to combating right-wing extremism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism on an international level. The anti-Semitism conference of the OSCE in Berlin in April 2004 was surely an especially conspicuous milestone – an internationally perceived sign to jointly combat and overcome anti-Semitism in all its forms. But it is not only the big signals seen far and wide that are important – one can also achieve a lot by taking smaller steps that are not so apparent in the focus of the public eye. It is particularly important to the federal government that especially young people play an important role in this field. The declaration of the Council of Youth Ministers on racism and intolerance, adopted on the 18th of May, 2004 clearly emphasises this. That is why I also welcome the fact that the new draft of the European YOUTH Programme “Youth in Action 2007 – 2013” focuses even more strongly than the current Youth Programme on the promotion of tolerance, solidarity and mutual understanding, as well as on cross-cultural and cross-generational dialogue. The federal government is also actively cooperating with the Council of Europe concerning youth policy – especially regarding the promotion of tolerance and

the fight against racism as a pillar of education for democracy and the implementation of human rights. We will firmly support the new campaign “All different – all equal”.

To create a united Europe in equality, unity and diversity is an enormous task into which we will have to put all our effort – and which is well worth fighting for. Therefore, we should never forget how much stronger, richer and more vital our societies become through constant exchange with people of different cultural, ethnical and religious backgrounds. Our common goal must be to relay this idea to all levels of society.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Become active, exchange your ideas and get involved – especially in the development of a joint action plan. Because this is new about this conference: In the coming two days you will not only formulate a political declaration – as is customary at conferences – but also design an action plan with specific recommendations, proposals and commitments to support you in your own projects and at the same time support setting up European networks. Thus, the results of this event are aimed at several addressees. On the one hand, they are targeted at the political decision-makers and on the other at yourselves, the participants and responsible local players. I am looking forward to these two days full of events and insights, and I am especially keen on hearing about your conclusions and results. In this spirit I wish this conference to be successful, and I wish you many new encounters and experiences, which will be both technically and personally enriching.

Thank you very much for your attention.