Good morning everybody.

I was delighted to receive an invitation from Vice President Reding to speak at this Conference on the European Year of Citizens. Recently in Dublin we participated together in a Citizens’ Dialogue to mark the inauguration of the Year. I was particularly gratified that Antigoni Papadopoulou from the Parliament, who is with us here today, came especially to Dublin for that occasion.

This is an important moment – a vital moment - as we work to encourage a debate about what it means to be part of the European Union and what we want the future of that Union to be. It comes at an opportune time: 2013 is the 20th anniversary of the introduction of EU Citizenship, when the Maastricht Treaty came into force in 1993, and it is also one year before the European elections of 2014.

I see the Year as providing an opportunity to recall and celebrate the rights and benefits we enjoy as citizens of the European Union. However the opportunity is greater than that. This year is our chance to have a pan-European debate about what it means to be a citizen of this European Union and the kind of future we want to realise within it.

Let me be very clear about this. If we want to keep the people of Europe connected to the politics of Europe then we must focus on our political and social future as much as our economic future. The European Union has always been about developing and progressive,
compassionate society. Of course a vibrant economy is central to that goal but a society is much more than an economy. Society is something that citizens connect to

Yesterday in Dublin I hosted an informal meeting of EU affairs ministers where we discussed ways to strengthen democratic legitimacy and accountability within the European Union as steps are taken towards closer economic and monetary integration.

We had a really valuable exchange of views on how we make sure that there is proper democratic oversight of decisions that are increasingly being taken in Brussels. We looked at the role that the European Parliament and our national parliaments should play. For example, one proposal which attracted considerable support today was the possibility of candidates for the position of President of the European Commission being nominated by the political groups in the European Parliament, in doing so being seen as a leading “face” for these groups in their campaigns.

We were also all agreed that we need communicate and listen. It is not good enough that only 33% of Europeans feel their voice is heard in the EU.

For us in Ireland, membership of the Union helped to transform relations within our island and to deliver peace and prosperity, mirroring what has happened again and again across Europe. In forty years Ireland has become a more outward-looking and confident nation. Despite the economic crisis and its huge toll, we remain a positive advert for the benefits of membership. Irish citizens in common with all EU citizens enjoy rights, including the rights of free movement of persons, goods and services across the continent, which many of us take for granted today but which would have been inconceivable to past generations.

As well as acknowledging what has been achieved together in Europe, the European Year of Citizens will, I hope, help people understand better the rights and opportunities they enjoy as citizens of the Union, and how to overcome obstacles to using those rights.
And at a time when part of Europe’s response to shared challenges is through deeper integration, it is more important than ever that the Union be transparent, and accountable, to its citizens.

The economic crisis has seen levels of public trust suffer at national and EU levels. We cannot deny this fact. We need to act to restore that trust and to empower our citizens. In saying ‘we’ I’m not just referring to politicians across Europe. The responsibility also falls equally on you as members and leaders of a wide range of non-governmental bodies. I would hope that the European Year of Citizens can provide a platform for a real and constructive role in encouraging public discussion about the European Union. We need greater engagement by citizens across the EU on the issues that affect us all today.

I intend to carry forward this debate in the coming months across Ireland, as I hope you will in your respective member states. As I mentioned this process started with the successful launch of the European Year of Citizens and the Citizens’ Dialogue in Dublin on the 10th of January last.

I intend to build on this with a number of initiatives throughout this year by participating in a series of Town Hall style public conversation across Ireland during the year. This will enable me as Minister with specific responsibility for European Affairs to engage directly with citizens in open Q&A format events not just during our six month EU Presidency, but for the duration of the European Year itself. I’m sure that this process won’t stop then either. I am optimistic that these Citizens Dialogues will gain an impetus of their own and I look forward to an active ongoing engagement with citizens.

As our Prime Minister, the Taoiseach Enda Kenny, recently stated, we need to focus on what the EU means for individual citizens, and how we can take the fullest benefit from it to improve our lives.

Our ambition must be to ensure that this improvement takes place for everyone in Europe. Inclusiveness, community, equality, and fairness must be at the heart of the European project.
However the European project also needs to deliver. If the EU can create the conditions for sustainable growth and jobs then European citizens will once again be able to say that Europe is working for them. Unfortunately, since the onset of the crisis it is just not clear to people who the EU is serving. Is it the markets? Is it the banks? Or is it the people? Of course there can only be one answer and we must ensure it is the people.

As we say in Ireland, tús maith leath na hoibre – a job well begun is a job half-done. Ladies and gentlemen I very much hope that this European Year of Citizens is the beginning of a process of democratic renewal in the European Union, a process that I hope will never end.

Thank you all.