Mr. President, Honorable Members,

It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss with you the situation in Belarus on behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Ashton.

We are increasingly concerned about the continued lack of respect for human rights and the rule of law in Belarus. Over the last months, the situation has gone from bad to worse with further repressive measures and policies towards civil society and the political opposition.

Our concerns are many. The first of them is the immediate and unconditional release and rehabilitation of all twelve political prisoners. The presence of political prisoners in the heart of Europe is unacceptable.

We are also deeply concerned about reports of torture and inhumane prison conditions of political prisoners. The Belarusian authorities are under an absolute obligation to ensure the respect of the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment and have a responsibility to investigate reports thereof.

All harassment of members of the opposition, and of civil society must stop, and their freedom of movement cannot be impeded. The increasingly draconian legislation that will further restrict the Belarusian citizens’ freedoms of assembly and association, as well as the provision of support to civil society, must be rolled back.
Belarus remains the only country in Europe to still apply the capital punishment. As already highlighted in this house, the EU remains opposed to the capital punishment under all circumstances. Along the lines of the Parliament’s resolution of 16 February, the EU calls on the authorities of Belarus not to carry out the executions of Dzmitry Kanavalaw and Uladzislaw Kavalyow, and to introduce a moratorium on the capital punishment in view of its eventual abolition.

The EU’s policies are principled. We remain committed to a visible and united defense of our values – human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. It is clear that we cannot stay idle in fact of developments in a country that is neighboring three of our Member States.

The EU restrictive measures are an important instrument to keep up the political pressure on Belarus. The EU has repeatedly stressed that they remain open and under constant review. In January, the Council expanded the criteria to target those responsible for serious violations of human rights, the repression of civil society and opposition and persons or entities benefiting from or supporting the regime. As highlighted by HRVP Ashton after the February Foreign Affairs Council, work is currently ongoing in view of a decision to be taken by the 23 March Foreign Affairs Council, on the basis of a list of business interests supporting the regime or drawing benefits from it.

We have made clear that the EU’s policies are not directed against Belarus as such, nor against its population. The EU maintains its policy of critical engagement, including through dialogue and the Eastern Partnership. We remain ready to develop our bilateral relations, depending on progress made by the authorities towards the respect for the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. As inter alia highlighted by HRVP Ashton in her joint statement with Secretary of State Clinton on 18 December 2011, the EU remains willing to assist Belarus to meet its obligations in this regard.

The engagement with Belarusian civil society, the political opposition and the public at large is a crucial element of the EU’s policies.

We remain ready to launch negotiations for visa facilitation and readmission agreements which would enhance people-to-people contacts to the benefit of the Belarusian population at large. It is regrettable that the Belarusian authorities have so far failed to our invitation to start negotiations.

We will also step up our dialogue with civil society and the political opposition through a “European dialogue on modernisation” with the Belarusian society on necessary reforms for the modernisation of Belarus and on the related potential development of relations with the EU, as well as possible EU support in this regard. The EU and its member states want to reach out to Belarus and to share their successful experience of transition to democracy and market economy. Once conditions are ripe, the EU will also be ready to provide the right conditions for EU companies and financial institutions to support the country's transformation and to invest in Belarus' future privatization process.

The European dialogue will be launched in Brussels on 29 March in Brussels: what we want to achieve is an open exercise taking in all political forces, and civil society, with substantial involvement by EU Member States.

Finally, one word about our diplomatic relations. In difficult times, it is important to maintain channels of communication and information. This is why the EU upgraded its delegation in Minsk last summer.
Further to the request by the Belarusian authorities on 28 February that the EU Head of Delegation and the Ambassador of Poland should leave the country for consultations, the EU agreed in a determined act of solidarity to withdraw all EU ambassadors for consultations. Our ambassadors fulfill a crucial function on the ground in Belarus as channels of communication and information and we remain committed to a unified and coordinated approach also to the issue of their return.