

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AT THE 733rd MEETING OF THE PERMANENT COUNCIL

18 September 2008

Conclusions of the General Affairs and External Relations Council on Belarus

The European Union would like to draw the attention of the Permanent Council to the conclusions of the General Affairs and External Relations Council of the European Union of 15 and 16 September 2008 on Belarus.

“1. The Council welcomes the release by the Belarusian authorities between 16 and 20 August of the political prisoners Mr. Alyaksandr Kozulin, Mr. Sergey Parsyukevich and Mr. Andrey Kim. The Council notes with satisfaction that their release means that no further internationally recognized political prisoners are currently incarcerated in Belarus.

2. The Council points out that it regarded the release of all political prisoners as a significant step towards the adoption by Belarus of the fundamental values of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and that this was a precondition for the European Union’s reviewing the restrictive measures currently applying to certain leading figures in Belarus, and for gradually restoring relations with Belarus. Nevertheless, the Council remains concerned at other important aspects of the human rights situation in Belarus.

3. The Council would also point out that the democratic conduct of the parliamentary elections on 28 September represents another opportunity for Belarus to demonstrate its respect for democratic values. Encouraged by the commitment of the Belarusian authorities, it hopes that these elections will be pluralist and will signify real progress towards respect for international and European standards. In this context it welcomes the deployment of the OSCE/ODIHR observers and stresses the importance of guaranteeing these observers effective access to all stages of the electoral process, including the counting of votes. It further stresses the importance of guaranteeing the rights of the opposition, as regards both the right to stand and access to electoral monitoring commissions and the media.

4. The Council will evaluate the situation in Belarus in the light of the parliamentary elections and of the progress made by Belarus in embracing the values of democracy and human rights, and is prepared to begin to review the restrictive measures against Belarusian leaders, and to take positive and concrete measures that may lead to a gradual reengagement with Belarus, including via a meeting between the European Union troika and the Belarusian Minister for Foreign Affairs. It recalls in this connection the possibilities offered by the

European neighbourhood policy, including the document on the European Union's offer to Belarus of November 2006. In this context, the European Union remains ready to increase its official, commercial and cultural exchanges with Belarus, and to significantly increase its bilateral aid. The Council would also emphasize the benefits that Belarus could receive from the regional forms of co-operation developed by the European Union.”