

Good afternoon. My name is Ron McNamara. Welcome to this briefing of the Helsinki Commission on developments in Belarus. I'm currently serving as the international policy director for the commission.

In the format of our briefings, after the presentations are delivered this afternoon, we'll have an opportunity for any questions from the audience. The couple things that we ask is that you identify yourself, any affiliation that you may have, and please try to keep your question fairly succinct and to the point. And if there's a particular panelist that you're interested in having respond, please indicate that as well.

Our co-chairman, Congressman Christopher Smith, had hoped to attend this afternoon -- some of you may be aware that he was the author of the Belarus Democracy Act -- but his responsibilities in the House prevent him from participating.

Another indication is that within 24 hours a full transcript of today's proceedings will be available on the commission's Web site, which is www.csce.gov.

Again, greetings, and, as you know, Belarus will hold presidential elections in a little over six weeks. Just a few days ago, four candidates submitted their 100,000 voter signatures -- a requirement for registration.

Authorities interfered in the signature collection process, harassing activists gathering signatures for opposition candidates. The pre-election environment thus far has not been conducive to a free and fair election process, but this comes as no surprise if we look at the conduct of the Belarusian authorities in recent elections, in 2001 and 2004, or for that matter if one reviews the nearly 12-year history of the rule of Aleksander Lukashenko, Europe's last dictator.

I'd propose that decade of dictatorship is probably more an apt description of Belarus under Lukashenko, a ruler who has disposed of past opposition, literally, silenced independent voices and manipulated the political system to illegally maintain his hold on power in Belarus.

Belarus has increasingly a pattern of contempt for its freely undertaken OSCE and other international commitments on human rights and democracy.

In anticipation of these elections, the repression in Belarus has intensified over the last several months. By monopolizing the media and stifling the independent press, political opposition, non-governmental activity, minority and religious organizations, Lukashenko aims to make certain that no meaningful challenge emerges to his continued rule.

By doing so, he reveals a profound level of mistrust for the Belarusian people and affronts their dignity. But the leader of that outpost of tyranny, as Secretary Rice termed Belarus a year ago, doesn't have much to worry about as about every level of the apparatus of the electoral process remains firmly in the control of his faithful followers.

Just a few days ago, in the latest of a pattern of repressive actions, the strong man himself warned activists that any protests over the upcoming presidential elections would meet with

harsh government response. This comes from a man who a few months ago encouraged the Belarusian KGB to look at the Cheka, the notorious Bolshevik secret police, for inspiration.

Bearing all this in mind, we can only salute the courage of the beleaguered Belarusian democratic opposition and admire their persistence in the face of great adversity and personal risk.

Particularly relevant for today's briefing is the significant common ground in policy toward Belarus on both sides of the Atlantic.

We're pleased to welcome two distinguished members of the European parliament who are active on matters pertaining to Belarus and who represent some of Belarus' neighbors.

We are also pleased to have today with us Harald Gunther of the Austrian Embassy, representing the presidency of the European Union held currently by Austria.

As I indicated earlier, Congressman Smith had undertaken a specific initiative in the United States Congress, the Belarus Democracy Act, and some of you may be familiar with the elements of that program.

We welcome the European parliament and E.U.'s strong interest and attention to Belarus, including the very recent broadcasting initiative, which we'll hear more about shortly.

It is vital that Europe and the United States stand shoulder to shoulder in promotion of freedom worldwide. It is especially important with respect to Belarus, which borders the E.U. and NATO states, yet which due to the nature of the Lukashenko regime remains for the time being an anomaly in Europe.

Therefore, I welcome the U.S.-E.U. cooperation in promoting freedom for the long-suffering people of Belarus and look forward to even stronger cooperation to advance democracy there and in the region.

Our first speaker this afternoon will be Aldis Kuskis. He's a member of the European parliament from Latvia, representing the group of the European People's Party and European Democrats. He is a vice chairman of the Delegation for Relations with Belarus, member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and the Committee on Transport and Tourism.

Prior to that, Mr. Kuskis was a member of the Latvian parliament during the eighth parliamentary term. At the Latvian parliament, he was a member of the European Affairs Committee, Human Rights and Social Affairs Committee and the vice chairman of the New Era Parliamentary Party.

Before he started his political career, he worked in the private sector in the field of telecommunications and advertising, and certainly as one who's followed developments in Belarus, the thing that certainly impresses one is the near monopoly in the information states that

the regime has.

Following Mr. Kuskis, we'll hear from Barbara Kudrycka. She, likewise, is a member of the European parliament, in this case from Poland, representing the group of the European People's Party and the European Democrats. She's a member of the Delegation for Relations with Belarus as well and member of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs.

Ms. Kudrycka holds a doctorate in law and is a professor of law at the Department of Law and Administration at the University of Warsaw. She is head of the Department of the Administrative Law at the University of Bialystok -- hopefully I didn't mispronounce that too badly.

And our final panelist this afternoon, again, is Mr. Harald Gunther who's currently serving as the deputy chief of mission at the Embassy of Austria here in Washington. Austria currently holds the presidency of the European Union. Mr. Gunther has served as deputy director, Press and Information Department at the Austrian Foreign Affairs and at various posts, including Austria's consulate in Los Angeles, the embassy in Tokyo and embassy in Algiers. He holds a law degree from the University of Vienna.

So without any further ado, I'll turn the microphone over and welcome your presentations. What I'd suggest is that we have each of the three panelists give their presentations and then at the end of all of the presentations we'll open up to questions. Thank you.