

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
H.E. ALEKSANDER SALLABANDA
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE
COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(HELSINKI COMMISSION)
MARCH 4, 2008

“NATO ENLARGEMENT AND THE BUCHAREST SUMMIT”

Chairman Rep. Hastings, Co-Chairman Sen. Cardin, distinguished Members of the Commission, and U.S. experts. Thank you for the invitation to submit written testimony to address Albania’s readiness for accession to NATO and its willingness and efforts to strengthen democratic principles, meet obligations and advance human rights.

It has been over a decade since Albania expressed its desire to join NATO, and, not long after that, the country was offered a Membership Action Plan. Even though the road towards NATO membership has had its ups and downs, Albania has made considerable progress and the GOA and all Albanian institutions are working hard to fulfill all obligations and requirements in order to deserve an invitation to join the Alliance, at the Bucharest Summit. I am happy to tell you that significant progress has been made in recent years, and even though challenges remain, the Albanian state and all Albanian political forces are fully committed and have clearly demonstrated their willingness to meet all NATO membership obligations in the very near future.

I avail of the occasion to express my country’s gratitude to the US and NATO for the continuous support they have given Albania and reassure you that the Riga and Reykjavik Assembly declarations have been taken seriously and that we are well aware that the invitation to become a member depends, first and foremost, on our performance.

In the last years Albania has undertaken a series of reforms to meet NATO Membership Action Plan obligations and strengthen democracy and rule of law in the country. My testimony today will focus on the recent achievements of Albania and the reasons we believe that these reforms are sustainable and irreversible. I will focus on the following areas:

1. Governance
2. Economy
3. Security

Albania has made significant progress in enhancing democratic governance, reforming its judicial and electoral system, fighting corruption, curtailing informal economy, combating crime and expanding minority rights. During recent years Albania held parliamentary elections that produced a democratic rotation of power, local elections that were deemed free and fair by political parties of the opposition and the government, and the election of the President in full compliance with the constitution. The Central Electoral Commission adequately prepared voter lists, which ensured transparency and gave international and domestic election observers access to election proceedings. Electoral reform is ongoing. By the end of the year, a new electronic civil register will be completed and Albanian citizens will be issued new digital identification cards and biometric passports.

An excellent political climate exists now in Albania regarding cooperation on the major reforms needed for the country's integration. This is reflected in the resolution adopted by parliament expressing the commitment of all political parties to cooperate for these reforms and the subsequent approval with full consensus of the new Law on the Organization of the Judiciary System. The Government of Albania (GOA) has increased popular confidence in the judiciary by adopting legislation promoting an independent judiciary and strengthening checks and balances. Court decisions are now published to enhance accountability. Working conditions for judges have been upgraded and recruitment is based on merit. Based on this cooperative climate, parliament has established an ad-hoc committee with the participation of major political parties aiming to prepare and present before the Law Committee and parliamentary plenary session a National Pact on justice reform. The National Pact will be drafted based on material presented by both political groupings and contributions of other actors in the justice system. The Pact will include short and long term measures, with specific deadlines.

To combat corruption the government has downsized public administration and other bloated services, established an interagency force to combat financial crime, implemented e-procurement and e-tax procedures, adopted new legislation to protect whistle-blowers, new regulations on conflict of interests and a legal and institutional framework aimed at reducing informality. Albania has also taken significant steps to combat crime. During 2007, 202 organized crime groups were dismantled, 850 of their members arrested and 191 criminal gang ringleaders extradited from other countries in the region, the EU or the USA.

A legislative and institutional framework has been established to prevent trafficking in humans, narcotics, and other forms of smuggling. The State, Border and Migration Police have all been restructured to focus on dismantling these phenomena. Speedboats and other small private vessels were banned from coastal waters for 3 years, and a maritime radar-surveillance system is being implemented.

Although Albania has traditionally been a country noted for its inter ethnic and inter religious tolerance *par excellence*, following the collapse of communism, Albania has taken several steps to further expand minority rights. Albania does not have any restrictions for languages and religions of minorities, and minorities are free to form associations and engage in the political and social life of the country. A political party representing mainly the interests of minorities has been part of the ruling government of both, the center left and the center right coalition governments throughout the last decade.

Albania's economic stability is demonstrated by its high economic growth, stable low rate of inflation, stable currency and constant increase in FDI. Albania's economic growth has been around 6% during the last years, inflation has held steady within the target range of 2-4%, the domestic budget deficit during 2007 was 2.6% and exports increased by 28%. The number of people living in poverty has fallen from 25% in 2002 to less than 18 percent today, and the unemployment rate has decreased significantly during the last years.

Trade volumes have been on the rise, assisted by transportation and other infrastructure developments, and the recent fiscal reform has boosted economic development. Albania is now one of the countries with the lowest fiscal burden in Europe, having implemented a flat income tax of 10%, decreased social security contributions by 30% and the price of energy for businesses by 33%. The establishment of a one-stop shop for the registration of business has reduced registration time from 42 days to 24 hours and significantly lowered the number of informal business. All the above have increased the rate of tax collection and have made it possible for the government to approve extra budgets, in spite of lower taxes. Moreover, in the last three

years, revenues have increased from 22 to 27% of the GDP. As a result of these reforms, on June 12, 2006, the EU signed the Association and Stabilization Agreement, which until now is ratified by 17 EU countries and a Visa Facilitation Agreement in 2007.

Regarding security, Albania, in cooperation with western allies and international organizations has undertaken several reforms to enhance and modernize its military and flow of classified information. Albania raised its defense budget to 2.01% of the GDP in 2008 and is working to achieve the goal of a fully professional, well trained force by the end of 2010. Albania cooperates extensively on security matters with NATO members and has signed a number of important international treaties. Recently, Albania became the first country in the world to eliminate all known chemical weapons stock.

Albanian armed forces serve alongside NATO forces in Afghanistan, Albania's special forces participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Albania has a peacekeeping contingent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It also participates in NATO's naval counter-terrorist Operation Active Endeavor in the Mediterranean Sea. In addition to this, the Albanian government has expressed its readiness to contribute troops to other troubled areas such as Darfur.

Albania has always been a supporter of good neighborly relations and factor of stability in the region. It maintains excellent relations with its neighbors: Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosova, Croatia and Greece, and has played a significant role in encouraging moderation by Kosova's political leaders. In addition to the above, cooperation within the framework of the US sponsored Adriatic Charter has fostered cooperation between Albania, Croatia and Macedonia and enhanced security in the region. Albania strongly supports independent, democratic and multiethnic Kosova, fully implementing the Ahtisaari plan and firmly oriented towards Euro-Atlantic integration convinced that this guarantees long lasting peace and stability in Kosova and the region.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for the opportunity you gave me to provide this testimony and for the continuous support your country has given Albania and the Albanians during the last two decades. In closing, I would like to assure you of our continued commitment to maintain the pace of these reforms, which will be guaranteed by the broad support integration enjoys with the Albanian population (more than 94%) and all political forces, and the next goal of my country, integration in the EU.