

**Statement of Chairman Christopher H. Smith  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**Hearing: Advancing Democracy in Albania  
July 20, 2004**

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Helsinki Commission's hearing on "Advancing Democracy in Albania." Let me start by emphasizing that Albania is a close friend of the United States. Albania's support and cooperation during periods of regional conflict in the 1990s and in the dangerous world we face today must be acknowledged and is greatly appreciated.

Official relations are very good, thanks in large part to the work of one of our witnesses today, Ambassador Tarifa. Through the Partnership for Peace and the Adriatic Charter, among other things, we can look forward to the day when Albania is not just a close friend, but a NATO ally.

The bilateral relationship, however, is more than between governments. It is also between people, and the people of Albania have clearly demonstrated in many instances their attachment to the United States. Likewise, Americans who have visited or worked in Albania develop similar affinities with the people of that country. This is, in part, due to the hospitality they receive, but it is also the result of the positive spirit so many Albanian citizens show despite the difficult conditions in which they live.

Of course, the Albania-American community has contributed tremendously to the building of bridges between the two countries on all levels. This was particularly important as Albania emerged from horrible communist repression and self-imposed isolation in the early 1990s, but it remains important today.

So why is the Helsinki Commission holding this hearing today on Albania? It is precisely because we want to encourage Albania to succeed in its democratic transition and its economic recovery. We want good bilateral relations, but we also want to encourage respect for human rights and adherence to the rule of law. Rather than mutually exclusive, the two are mutually supporting.

Now is also a good time to focus on Albania's record relative to its OSCE commitments. Parliamentary elections are to be held within the next year. Past elections have seen some improvements, and there are reports of further progress since last October's local elections. Hopefully, by discussing the remaining issues and concerns today, more can be achieved so that, by Election Day 2005, OSCE standards can be met.

We also owe it to the people of Albania to insist that steps be taken to tackle official corruption and combat organized crime. We cannot become fatalistic about these phenomena, suggesting that they are an unfortunate but unavoidable reality in Albania – or any other society, for that matter. Measures taken so far by Albanian authorities clearly indicate otherwise, but more needs to be done, including at the highest levels of the country's leadership.

Members of this Commission remain particularly concerned about trafficking in persons, but, more broadly, we realize that any type of corruption and crime siphons economic progress and opportunity from the people. In addition, we live in a dangerous world today, where tolerance of corrupt practices can unintentionally become an attractive lure to notorious criminals and terrorists on the international level, people who pose a threat to global peace and security.

It is my hope that today's hearing will give the Commission, which has not held a hearing on Albania in several years, an accurate picture of Albania's progress in adhering to OSCE commitments. I hope we will hear about the development of democratic institutions rather than the promotion of personalities. The presence of representatives of an actively engaged international community as well as of independent, civic-minded domestic organizations is reason to be optimistic. By focusing on continuing problems at this hearing, the Commission can contribute to positive change that Albania needs, and we all want to see.

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Our first panel is represented by Ambassador Osmo Lipponen, who has been Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania for almost two years. The Ambassador has a distinguished career as a Finnish diplomat, including postings in Geneva, Tokyo, Paris, Moscow, St. Petersburg and, prior to his OSCE appointment, Ambassador to Zagreb, Croatia. We welcome you, Mr. Ambassador, and want you to know that the Helsinki Commission has been a strong supporter of OSCE field activities in Albania and elsewhere. We sense that the work you do makes a real difference in people's lives.

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Our second panel is comprised of five experts on Albania who look at the country from different perspectives.

First, we have Professor Nicolas Pano, Professor Emeritus of History at Western Illinois University. Professor Pano is a longtime scholar of Albanian affairs and hopefully will put developments in the country in a larger perspective.

Next we have Erion Veliaj, Executive Director of MJAFT!, which means "Enough!" His group is essentially saying "Enough!" to the many obstacles to progress in Albania today. He holds a degree from Grand Valley State University in Michigan and, despite his youth, has served as a consultant for many international agencies. He also is an active participant in youth networks around the world.

Kreshnik Spahiu heads the Citizens Advocacy Office in Albania, as well as the Albanian Coalition Against Corruption. With a strong background in law, Mr. Spahiu has served as a judge in Albania and has participated in drafting the country's Constitution, the Criminal Code and numerous other Albanian laws.

Fatmir Mediu is the President of Albania's Republican Party and a member of the Parliament. In that capacity, he has been a strong advocate of change in Albania, most recently focusing on property restitution legislation.

Finally, Edward Salami was a founding member of the Democratic Party in Albania. An active participant in Albania politics and diplomacy in the early years of democratic, Mr. Selami subsequently came to the United States, where he was associated with Stanford and Columbia before settling in Virginia.

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Our third and final panel today is represented by the Albanian Ambassador to the United States, Fatos Tarifa. The Ambassador has an incredible academic record, including a double doctorate, and is a career sociologist and university professor. He was Albania's Ambassador to the Netherlands prior to his appointment to the Embassy in Washington in 2001.