

**Helsinki Commission Hearing on:  
Democracy in Albania: the Pace of Progress  
Monday, May 6, 2013**

**Opening Statement of Senator Benjamin L. Cardin, Chairman**

As the chairman of the Helsinki Commission, I want to welcome everyone to this hearing and thank them for their interest in our work. In a moment I will have the honor to introduce our distinguished witnesses who have taken the time to be here to present their views on the situation in Albania in the weeks before that country's parliamentary elections.

As the Chairman, it is also my responsibility to set the scene for this hearing and to put it into context. This is the second Helsinki Commission hearing in a row focusing on a traditional friend and NATO ally. The first, in March, focused on Hungary, where we have seen a disturbing retreat from democratic norms. In February, the Helsinki Commission also visited Turkey, at which time human rights concerns were included among the many topics we discussed with that important friend and ally. We may need to focus on others in the future.

To be absolutely clear, this is not an effort to equate the records of any of these countries with those OSCE states, from Belarus to Uzbekistan, where human rights are far more grossly violated and democratic norms are routinely ignored. Instead, this is an effort to ensure a united and a credible front when we challenge these other countries to meet OSCE commitments. The NATO Alliance is far more than a collective defense of territories; it is also a collective defense of democracy. The stronger our own democratic credentials, the stronger we are as a global force for the positive changes that enhance our own security. It is for that reason the Helsinki Commission has examined the U.S. record, from our elections to Guantanamo Bay, when it may have weakened our own efforts to promote human rights and democratic development abroad.

I stress this point not merely to counter the unserious bluster we hear from Moscow or other capitals accusing us of double standards, but to emphasize to those in Tirana, Budapest and elsewhere that we are very serious when we raise these concerns, and that we expect them to be equally serious in their response.

In the case of Albania, it is also important to note that, despite its strong friendship and solid commitment, the weakness of its democratic institutions and inability at times to adhere to the rule of law can detract from its own contribution to European security, especially if these problems lead to rampant corruption and political instability. Moreover, Albania serves as a model for other NATO aspirants from the region, and it must meet that task.

We also have seen elsewhere, but particularly in the Balkans, how resistance to democratic change can be too easily found in recourse to nationalist sentiments. We do not want to see that phenomenon develop in Albania as well. Plenty of borders have needed to be changed due to de-legitimized authority and policies of either clear aggression or brutal repression. Borders will NOT be changed by efforts to sway the loyalties of ethnic kin living in neighboring states, who can and must realize their rights within those states. We must awaken all those who continue to dream otherwise.

Our hearing title appropriately focuses on the “pace of progress” in Albania’s democratic development. There has, in fact, been incredible change in Albania since the Helsinki Commission first visited the country in 1990 and since Albania became an OSCE participating State in 1991. We have, however, already noted that same fact in hearings in 2004 and before. The rapid pace of early progress obviously could not have been sustained, but should we be satisfied with the much slower pace of the last decade? Should we excuse Albania for not having yet held elections that meet the OSCE criteria defining free and fair? Should we be content with both the ruling parties and the opposition in Albania regularly testing and sometimes exceeding the limits of acceptable political behavior?

In response, some may calmly argue that democracy takes time. That may be true, but democracy is a significantly stronger force today than it was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it was held with suspicion even in the early American republic, and even the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when it struggled to grow in Europe. It is today viewed as the inevitable and practical result of the respect shown for universally accepted human rights, and many other formerly one-party communist states have successfully completed their transitions in much less than two decades.

Of course, the sheer brutality of Albania’s communist past must also be taken into account, and it would be arrogant for me or any other person who did not suffer through such a period to minimize its tragic legacy. At the same time, with everything that the people of Albania have been through, they deserve to have the confidence their ballots will now be counted, to have the satisfaction that their leaders will now serve them, and to have a sense of the security that comes from knowing courts now provide due process and blind justice. I, for one, will not tell them to be happy with less than these things more than two decades after they were finally and rightfully promised.

I am deeply disturbed by the frequent reports of political impasse and confrontation in Albania since the last parliamentary elections in 2009, with a “winner-take-all” approach to democracy that discourages dialogue and compromise across the board. I am also disturbed by reports of corruption, including at high levels, and the lack of political let alone judicial accountability for the alleged improprieties of officials. Most recently, I was disturbed to hear of the controversy surrounding the Central Election Commission in Albania, which must be addressed so that these elections can meet OSCE standards and the results will have the legitimacy they need to compel winner and loser alike to accept them graciously and then move on.

I now turn to our witnesses, who will detail these current conditions in Albania on the eve of parliamentary elections, as well as discuss policy responses. Their biographies are already available. I want also to recognize and include for the record the welcomed contribution provided by the Delegation of the European Union to this hearing. The EU is our partner, and this collaboration reflects our mutual interest in encouraging all eligible OSCE countries to realize their European aspirations. Similarly, let me recognize and include for the record the pre-election assessment prepared by the National Democratic Institute, which works hard both in Tirana and Washington to encourage Albania to improve its electoral performance.

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Witness Introductions

On the first panel, Phil Reeker has a distinguished career as a Foreign Service officer and is the current Deputy Assistant Secretary of State with the portfolio for the Western Balkans. I welcome you here, as I have virtually all your predecessors in that position to discuss the Helsinki Commission's ongoing concerns in that part of Europe. I also want to express appreciation for the State Department's collaboration with the Commission in focusing on some of our friends and allies in Europe. It is admittedly easier for parliamentarians to call for a more enlightened and public foreign policy than it is for the diplomats who must develop and implement such a policy with the additional work and challenges it entails. I hope, Ambassador Reeker, that as we focus on Albania today we can also rely on your broader experience to include a regional context to our concerns, as needed.

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Our second panel consists of two experts on the current situation in Albania.

Elez Biberaj [el-ez BEE-burr-eye] is well known to the Helsinki Commission for his expertise regarding Albania, Kosovo and the Balkans as a whole. He has participated in previous Commission hearings on Albania and served us brilliantly as an official interpreter in the early 1990s. At the time, he was head of the Albanian Service of Voice of America, and he now serves as VOA's Director for Eurasia. We are grateful to the VOA for always ensuring our concerns are heard, and for allowing Dr. Biberaj to appear today.

Besa Shahini [BAY-sah shah-HE-nee] may not be quite as well known in Washington at the moment, but she is already a highly respected analyst for the European Stability Initiative from Kosovo, now serving in Albania with funding from the Open Society Foundation and the German Marshall Fund. She provides not only the added benefit to us of an informed perspective directly from Albania, but she also represents a new generation of intelligent minds that exists throughout the Balkans, committed to human rights, democracy and Europe. It is the quality of the people like her that we meet in the region which gives us hope for the future.

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Our final panel features Gilbert Galanxhi [ga-LAN-jee], the Ambassador of the Republic of Albania to the United States of America. He is a good friend of the Helsinki Commission and, having previously served in Vienna as his country's representative to the OSCE, knows our issues well. As with other countries at other hearings, it is only right that we afford an opportunity to the Ambassador to respond to the concerns that are raised today. It may not be an easy task, but your presence here, Mr. Ambassador, is a recognition that it is legitimate for us to raise these concerns and that we raise them in a spirit of friendship and a desire to improve the lives of the citizens of Albania. I want to thank you for that.