

**Ranking Member Eliot L. Engel's  
Opening Statement for hearing on  
"Democracy in Albania: the Pace of Progress"  
Monday, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to join your Committee today. We both share a long-standing interest in Albania, and I look forward to continuing our discussions on efforts to strengthen its democratic institutions.

This hearing is timely as it comes less than two months before a crucial parliamentary election in Albania. It is crucial not in the context of which candidates will be elected, as that is up to the Albanian people to decide, but crucial in terms of how the election will be conducted.

Today, I urge all the political parties to fulfill the commitments Albania has made to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on the holding of elections, and the campaigns leading up to them. The June 23 election must be judged by the OSCE as free and fair. This will not only validate the results for the Albanian electorate and the international community, but it will also mandate that all political parties accept the final election results and take their seats in Parliament.

As the Co-Chairman of the Albanian Issues Caucus, which I founded 24 years ago, I have been honored to be part of the effort to advance the democratic development of Albania and to preserve the good relations between Albanian Americans and their ancestral homelands. America has no better friends than Albanians regardless of where they live in the Balkans; they have always stood by the United States.

The citizens of Albania are proudly entering the second century of their independence that began on November 28, 1912 when they broke free from the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Despite nearly half of a century of draconian isolation after World War II under an authoritarian communist regime that even perceived the Soviet and Chinese communist models as too open, the people of Albania never lost their belief in their European identity.

I would like to take a minute or two to discuss Albania's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In the last two decades, Albania has made extraordinary progress towards meeting the standards and norms of the value based Euro-Atlantic community. It obtained full membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on April 2, 2009, and Schengen Visa Liberalization on December 15, 2010.

What is left now is for Albania to capitalize on the promise of the European Union's Thessaloniki Declaration of 2003 that the countries of the Western Balkans, including Albania, are eligible for accession to the EU. To do so, however, Albania must fulfill the requirements for membership. Croatia's July entry this year into the EU validates that if a Balkan country meets the requirements the door to the EU is open.

A free and fair Albanian election in June will go a long way towards propelling Brussels to extend to Albania in 2013 EU candidate status; the EU's waiting room for membership. This dramatic step would signal to Albanians that their living within the borders of the European Union by 2020 is a realistic aspiration. This opportunity cannot be missed.

Last month's agreement between Kosovo and Serbia demonstrated the role of political courage on the part of politicians in ensuring a better life and future for their people. It is only because of Prime Minister Thaci's willingness to make hard decisions and Prime Minister Dacic's willingness to embrace a forward leaning vision that the prospects for peace, security and prosperity, within the borders of the EU, is something that the citizens of these two countries can now count on.

The same opportunity lies in front of the political leaders of Albania, be they in or out of government. Will they exercise the political courage to do what is right for their country's future, and for the people they aspire to lead to the EU? Politicians, government officials, and Central Election Commission members, at all levels in Albanian, are being asked in this June election to do no more, but no less than what is expected of their counterparts in elections in any of the countries of the Euro-Atlantic community.

The people of Albanian have the right to have a free and fair election as defined by Albanian and OSCE norms; and, thus be assured that it is their votes that elect their leaders. The people of Albanian also have the right for the election to be conducted in a manner that affirms that Albania belongs in the EU. Anything less would be a disservice to the remarkable accomplishments of the Albanian people and to the potential their future should hold.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to offer my thoughts on this matter.