

## **Testimony about Albania Issues**

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The host of “*Good morning Albania*”, a popular TV-radio talk opens his show with “Love your country, like Albanians love America!”

Albania is a small, but a great friend and ally of the U.S.A. In five minutes, if I could, I call upon your imagination to take you over 10,000 miles away across the Atlantic ocean, in a country in the middle of Europe, where almost everyone in urban and rural areas flies the U.S. flag, where often times the US dollar is the purchasing currency that “competes” Albanian lek.

U.S.A. is loved by Albanians, even though not many Americans live, work, and have business in Albania. Unlike many countries and governments that are partners with the U.S.A., such relations with Albania and Albanians do not stem from any sort of governmental or diplomatic partnership. Said plain and simple for America, Albania is a true partner-nation regardless of language, nationality, religion, and tradition. Feelings that Albanians have for Americans have been and remain unique.

This is true because of historical reasons (*i.e.*, statement of President Woodrow Wilson in 1920 on self-determination of nations) that never got vanished even during 50 years of one of the harshest dictatorships in the Eastern Europe. Albanians have felt closer the land of freedom after the fall of the Berlin Wall. US-led NATO intervention in Kosovo, continuous assistance and support towards further democratization and rule of law, and support for the euro-Atlantic integration are efforts that can never be forgotten.

Three years ago we established a Coalition of Civil Society in the fight against corruption. Time proved that it came about in the right time. Politics and politicians had grown distant from voters. Instead of governing for the interest of those who voted them in the office, they began to take care of their own personal interest. Coalition of Civil Society group’s active organizations, which programs and campaigns, aimed at fight against corruption. Establishment of that Coalition was necessary because corruption, power abuse, nepotism, excessive bureaucracy, organized crime, smuggling and creation of illegal monopolies in business and mass media by handful politicians have become a serious challenge to the rule of law and country’s economic development. Those reasons disqualified Albania in its bid to *Millennium Challenge Account* Fund.

Although, situation has improved significantly in terms of adoption of a legal framework to fight against various forms of trafficking, Albania still remains a country that both exports and produces narco-trafficking, as well as a *green light* for human beings trafficking.

Unfortunately children and women can be sold and purchased like any other good. Often they sell for less than a laptop computer or a TV set. Thousands of victims are witnesses of malfunctioning of the justice system, which fails to punish exploiters and effectively fight well organized crime rings. High level of corruption in the judiciary so far has favored considerably the tolerance to and co-existence with crime. Thus the inclination to view involvement into trafficking as a way of life as strengthened.

Democracy is being held hostage of “state capture”. Construction industry that is currently booming in Albania is said to have blossomed largely with money of corrupted officials involved in money laundering activities, narco-trafficking and trafficking of human beings. They have gradually have invested their businesses, and now not only they corrupt, but also they want to buy power.

Ambitions of those people to turn in to politic and influence mass media has put democracy in the crossroad. If up until now, there were doubts whether crime was linked to politics, quite soon we risk not distinguishing one from the other. This is true due to individuals who should face justice, rather than “contributing in politics”.

Honorable Members of the Congress:

What I just said is not hypothesis. Last year’s elections proved an ongoing trend of election of dubious businessmen. It all builds upon an empty ground where there is no legislation, nor rules on the conflict of interests, lack of committees of electoral ethics. Controlling mechanisms of money laundering and declaration of personal assets do not function properly.

The Organization I am Chairman of (Citizens Advocacy Office) is involved in an awareness campaign and public denunciation. We have increased the role of civil society in the process of economic and political decision making. Our most recent initiative is a movement to seek transparency of the party financing. It is an obligation under the Constitution that political parties shall make public and transparent their financing. For 14 years now they have refused to comply with that Constitutional requirement.

In an attempt to increase transparency, Albanian Coalition against Corruption insisted in the preparation and passage of a law that obligates high-ranking officials to disclose their personal assets. The law is in the process of implementation, and yet being questioned by false declarations made by politicians and high-ranking officials. It is perhaps, the moment to inform you that formally Albania has world’s “poorest” Prime Minister, who has declared that does not have shelter of his own, and his only asset is an armored Mercedes Benz, whom he has forgotten who he got it from. It is only acceptable for Albanian politicians that a \$ 150,000 USD vehicle constitutes a gift, and not a bribe.

Personal hatred between leaders of politics has produced continuous political instability. Since 1990 a number of presidents, secretaries of state, and party leaders, have changed in your country, while in Albania anything similar has happened very little to none.

Independence of judiciary, institutions and mass media from politics is a challenge of our [Albanian] times. The majority of Albanians view resolution of such challenges by current politicians merely a mission impossible.

Albanians are looking for a change. Leaving the country to Europe and the U.S.A. is not a solution to the problems. It is clear that those who have enjoyed abuse of power and continue to do so will not give power at their own will. The answer to this is punishment of abusers with the free vote. I am afraid that the free vote has been seriously damaged in Albania. Votes do not get count and voters do not get heard. Albanian politicians trust to the muscles of their militants and manipulation of votes, than the free will of the voters. It is a fact that Albania is the only country in the region that cannot realize free and fair elections. For this political elite bears responsibility. I think it is the time to support a new political thought that is currently being cultivated in Albania. Halls and squares are packed with people not anymore because political leaders show up. Albania has the people and capacities capable to bring a change.

We are trying to articulate concerns and abuses done to and suffered by the citizens due misbehavior and abuse of power.

We have improved significantly the awareness level of the civil and constitutional rights transforming the society needs into indicators for change in governance and in compilation of strategies for the establishment of rule of law in Albania. Albania has change several government but never governance model. Civil society has a different vision from the politicians relevant with Albania future. A new and better governance need a younger generation and new strategy build on the different mentality. We demand support for our symbolic efforts because we have cultivated a radical change from a rot corruptive system to an opportunity for dynamic social change. Strengthening partnership with civil society is more strategic than any diplomatic relation between ours countries. Governments come and go, politicians do so as well, but the rout of the friendship and feeling are deeper to the society.

Right before I left for this trip, many people I know and I don't, friends and citizens asked me to greet the message of the President Bush to deny U.S. entry visa for corrupted officials from all over the world. They are expecting USA to assist establishing and strengthening rule of law in Albania. Meanwhile we wish that USA could support Albania to pass at the next bid of Millennium Challenge Account Fund and to advocate or push Albania towards Euro Atlantic integration. This might happen not because of government but because of such a partner-nation as Albania.

Thank you.