

**Testimony by Deputy Assistant Secretary Philip T. Reeker
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission)
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your kind invitation to speak before the Helsinki Commission. The Commission has played a significant role in fostering stability and democracy throughout the Balkans for more than two decades, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the pace of democratic progress in Albania.

I would like to begin my testimony today with an overview of our policy toward Albania, review the pace of Albania's democratic progress, and finally identify the key challenges that remain.

The United States and Albania share a strong, vibrant, and enduring relationship. The United States has long supported Albania's independence and its democracy. After the First World War, President Wilson defended Albania's statehood. After the fall of the harsh communist regime in 1991, the United States under President George H.W. Bush quickly reestablished relations with Albania. President Clinton established an enterprise fund to bring U.S. investment to Albania, supported Albania's democratic elections, and worked with Albania and our NATO allies to protect Kosovo and to restore stability to the region. President George W. Bush became the first sitting American president to visit Albania; President Obama welcomed Albania, along with Croatia, as our newest members in NATO in 2009. Secretary Clinton helped Albania celebrate its 100th anniversary of independence in November 2012.

Internationally, Albania has been a responsible and steadfast actor, committing troops and resources in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Iraq. As a NATO member, Albania has supported robustly NATO-led operations, most prominently in Afghanistan where over 200 Albanians serve proudly right now. The United States deeply values Albania's many contributions to our mutual goals.

The United States is partnering with Albania as it works to achieve its European Union (EU) aspirations, which is one of our core goals in the Western Balkans and toward Albania specifically. This has been the clear policy of both Democratic and Republican Administrations for over twenty years.

Since 1991, Albania has made significant progress in its democratic development and the United States has partnered with and supported the country's efforts to shore up its democratic institutions, improve rule of law, increase living

standards for the Albanian people, and to maintain friendly and mutually productive relations with its neighbors. The United States has also supported efforts to develop trade and investment opportunities, and we have cooperated on regional law enforcement, economic, and environmental issues.

Albania's NATO membership is enormously important for consolidating peace and security in the country and in the broader region, but in the twenty-first century and beyond, economic statecraft is of increasing importance. The prospect of integration with the EU provides Albania with strong incentives for continued democratic, economic, and social reform, and it represents the best prospect for Albania's long-term economic and democratic stability. Albania, like other countries aspiring to join the EU, knows that EU integration is its best chance to secure prosperity for its people.

As Albania looks to its European future, therefore, we and our European partners are hopeful that Albania will take the necessary steps to solidify its democratic credentials and give it the best opportunity to gain EU candidate status soon. Then-Secretary Clinton reiterated this in her historic address to the Albanian parliament last Fall: "Albania and the Albanian people deserve a place in the European family of nations. That is not only good for you, it will make this continent more peaceful and secure."

Today, Albania's political leaders (from all parties) and indeed its people have some hard decisions to make about their future: Despite some progress on the EU reform agenda, the European Commission did not recommend candidate status in 2012. The Commission's progress report noted that while Albania had made great strides towards fulfilling the Copenhagen political criteria for membership, Albania needed further to intensify efforts to reform the judiciary to strengthen its independence, efficiency and accountability. It also noted that Albania needed to demonstrate a track record of reforms in its fight against organized crime and corruption and in its protection of the rights of minority communities. Further, the report highlighted the need for Albania's parliamentarians to pass remaining reform legislation in the areas of public administration, judicial reform, and parliamentary rules and procedures.

Finally, elections remain an area of concern in Albania's democratic progress. The Commission report stated that the successful conduct of parliamentary elections in 2013, to be held on June 23, will be a crucial test of the country's democratic institutions and Albania's readiness for EU candidacy status. We share the Commission's concerns.

The 2009 OSCE/ODIHR and Parliamentary Assembly election observation mission noted that while the election met most OSCE commitments, it did not attain the highest standards for democratic elections. The mission cited procedural violations, administrative problems with the vote count, biased media coverage, and a highly toxic political environment. The conduct of the May 2011 nationwide elections for mayors and city councils fared mildly better according to OSCE/ODIHR's observation mission final report, but the highly polarized political environment was cited as problematic as was the Central Election Commission's (CEC) decision to intervene in Tirana's mayoral contest. This decision undermined the independence of the institution and undermined confidence in the election results.

As we look toward the upcoming parliamentary elections, the United States has been clear that to meet international standards, the independence of Albania's institutions must be respected; the political discourse must remain constructive and civil; and the Albanian people must have confidence in both the process and the results. American personnel will join our colleagues from ODIHR and work with their Parliamentary Assembly counterparts to ensure that the international community watches the conduct of the elections very carefully. We also understand the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly will also deploy a mission.

The United States has worked to engage with civil society in Albania. Through our voter outreach and education programs, we are encouraging open discussions of important issues that matter to Albanian citizens. We are supporting active participation in the electoral process, and observation and reporting on the electoral process itself. Yet, due in part to lingering effects of the harsh communist regime, civic participation remains the weakest aspect in the electoral process. Parties must more seriously engage civil society and reflect their recommendations into their party platforms. In the United States, politicians pay attention to public opinion because citizens make their opinions known through their votes.

The United States is particularly concerned with the independence of the Central Election Commission (CEC). The CEC has the primary responsibility to administer elections in a fair and impartial fashion, in accordance with Albania's electoral code. To do so, the CEC must be free from interference by any individual, any political party, any institution, including the Parliament. With respect to the composition of the CEC, the members of the CEC – who were selected and appointed on the basis of inter-party consensus and in accordance

with the Electoral Code – should be apolitical. Once appointed, CEC members have pledged, and are obligated, to impartially discharge their duties to realize free, fair and democratic elections in Albania.

The United States has stressed the need for all parties to strengthen lost trust in the main institution responsible for the conduct of elections in Albania. This includes adhering to a timeline established by the electoral code and conducting elections on June 23, just over 45 days from now. To do this, Albania's political party leaders must work together, compromise, and find a solution that allows the CEC to carry out its mandate to administer elections. Leaders of all major political parties have expressed their desire for elections to take place on June 23. However, the CEC does not currently have enough members to administer elections effectively. We would like to see the CEC as fully constituted as possible, and urge Albania's leaders not to waste time.

The United States together with our European partners have stressed that democracy is not just who wins and who loses a single election. The democratic process matters too. It matters how the political parties run their campaigns; how the CEC interprets Albania's electoral code, conducts the elections, and manages disputes; how the votes are tabulated; how disputes are resolved; and, how the public and the political parties respond to the final tally. The conduct of these elections will be an important indicator of Albania's democratic maturity and it will send a clear signal whether Albania is ready for European Union candidacy status. It will also have an impact on our bilateral relationship with Albania.

In spite of our concerns, the United States remains committed to Albania's future. Beyond elections, we will remain engaged on the long-term goals I cited earlier, to help Albania build and refine democratic institutions, respect the rule of law, fight crime and corruption, and develop a market economy to bring prosperity to the Albanian people.

Thank you for again for granting me the opportunity to speak before the Helsinki Committee. I look forward to your questions.