

**Statement by Edward Selami**  
**To the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**  
**United States Helsinki Commission**  
**Hearing**  
**Advancing Democracy in Albania**  
**July 20, 2004**

Mr. Chairman, staff, ladies, and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to share with you my thoughts about the state of democracy in Albania. I highly appreciate the fact that this distinguished panel is holding this hearing, which, while not scheduled in response to a specific event, is timely nonetheless. First and foremost, Albania is preparing for parliamentary election next year, the results of which will have important ramifications for the future course of the country. Second, Albania is preparing to join NATO, the U.S.-led organization that provides security and stability in Europe. Therefore, I think it is important for the U.S. to help Albania in its difficult road towards a fully fledged democracy, given that it is a country in which, like in not many other European countries, it is so difficult to find people with anti-American feelings, and which is a staunch U.S. ally in the war on terrorism.

I would like to pay tribute to the wonderful work this commission has done for the advancement of democracy in Europe, and especially in Albania. Being an Albanian, I can never forget the important role the Helsinki Commission played in helping my country in its very first steps towards democracy. This, at a time when only few people here in Washington or in other Western capitals paid any attention to Albania, or even knew that it existed on the international map.

Mr. Chairman, staff, ladies, and gentlemen, since the last hearing this Commission has held on Albania, the country has experienced both negative and positive developments. The total collapse of government following a pyramid scheme financial scandal in 1997 was a major setback in the democratic process in Albania. Albania is still paying a price for the economic ruin and the political chaos that followed that scandal. That tragic event emphasized how important it is for a country to make democracy the only game in town. It demonstrated that democracy in Albania, even after initial dramatic progress, was very fragile. Since then, The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe deployed a mission in Tirana, which has been very helpful in restoring stability in the country and get democratic development back on track.

I would like to focus my testimony on two major issues: on free and fair elections and on the need for a healthy political discourse. The first is a minimum requirement for any functioning democracy. The second has a major impact on the ongoing democratic process and the establishment of the rule of law in Albania.

Since 1994, no elections in Albania have been declared free and fair by the OSCE or the losing parties. This is one of the major factors that keep many Albanian voters away from the polling booths, and one of the causes for the very polarized political climate. The two major

parties have agreed to work on improvements of election law and infrastructure. Yet, it remains to be seen if they will have the political will of conducting a normal electoral process. I think, this commission, the State Department, and the OSCE presence in Tirana can play a very important role in convincing both the parties in power and in opposition to abide by their agreements. The more voters get the message that each vote would count, the more they would show up at the polling stations.

There are several areas that require improvement in the electoral process, which are already addressed by OSCE reports on Albania. I would like to mention one, which strikes me as very important: the counting of votes. The political parties in Albania should reach an agreement on a formula that would make this process completely transparent. Without getting into technicalities, I think this is feasible. It only requires a strong political will, shared by all parties.

This will can exist only if Election Day is not seen as a life-or-death matter for political parties. In other words, it should be seen as a milestone in the ongoing democratic process and as an opportunity for voters to choose the party with the best platform for the development of the country and the most reliable people to implement it.

Having been in a leadership position in Albania, I am fully aware that the democratic process is not always easy, especially in a country which has had very little experience in democracy. However, the democratic process is indispensable for the well-being of Albania. Unfortunately, all the major political parties have demonstrated that they do not always respect the democratic process, both within parties and among them. I think part of the problem arises from a cultural tradition where political opponents are considered as personal enemies. This has created an environment of extreme polarization, and much of the valuable energy has been wasted fighting among politicians and in between parties.

It is especially the responsibility of the governing party to concentrate its energy in building and strengthening the legal, social and economic framework for a sustaining democracy. After all, it was elected in office to serve and address the needs of the people. Instead, its leaders have focused their energies on their in-fighting for political power, an in-fighting that has been a major factor in slowing down democratic reforms.

Besides the political bickering between political rivals, another issue which seems to take a large portion of undeserved attention of some governing party officials is the advancement of self-interest. As a result, official corruption, as perceived by the common citizen, has become widespread. It seems as if they do not realize that public office, in addition to being an honor, it is also a responsibility to the people who voted for them, and a responsibility to the ideal of democracy.

For a functioning democracy to work, it is important that both the governing and opposition parties play a major role in strengthening democratic institutions. It is encouraging that, in the past, there have been a few instances when the Socialist Party has allowed the opposition parties to have a say in major issues: the most telling example being the election of the President of the Republic with a wide consensus across party lines.

On the other hand, the opposition parties can help strengthen the democratic process by offering not only deserved criticism towards government but also alternatives for improving the life of ordinary citizens. The Democratic Party, the major opposition party in Albania, has not always focused its attention on providing alternatives. However, it is encouraging to see that, in the last year, its leaders have publicly solicited ideas from the civil society, academia, media, and the business community. It is also encouraging to hear from the Democratic Party officials that they would like to see new people in party leadership positions. What they are looking for, it looks like, is people with Western education and/or experience, who would implement the party's political platform.

It is important that they pursue this course. I think the opposition should spend more time looking towards the future: what can be improved, if elected, and how it can be done. The opposition should give real alternatives to people and convince them that it represents the best choice. It should try to bring into the democratic process people that feel left behind. It needs to focus its main energies on the real issues facing Albanian people like unreliable power and water supply, official corruption, high crime rate, unemployment, poor public education, and lack of decent and affordable health care.

Fully aware of the challenges that lay ahead, I remain optimistic that the best days for Albanian democracy and people lay ahead. And even in the darkest day I never lost faith and confidence in the Albanian people's ability to overcome obstacles and to bring out the best in any situation. After all, it is the people who gave the world somebody that was the symbol of goodness -- Mother Theresa.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you today.