

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**“Albania’s Leadership in Europe: Parliamentary Perspectives of the
Albanian OSCE Chairmanship in 2020”**

Committee Staff Present:

**Robert Hand, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

Participants:

**Ditmir Bushati, Member of Parliament from Albania’s ruling Socialist Party,
Head of the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA;**

**Elona Hoxha Gjebrea, Member of Parliament from Albania’s ruling Socialist
Party, Member of the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA;**

**Rudina Hajdari, Member of Parliament from Albania’s opposition
Democratic Party, Member of the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA**

**The Briefing Was Held From 2:05 p.m. To 3:43 p.m. in Room 2200, Rayburn
House Office Building, Washington, D.C., Robert Hand, Senior Policy
Advisor, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

Date: Wednesday, December 11, 2019

HAND: OK, I think we're ready to start. Welcome, everyone. In 2020 Albania will chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, otherwise known as the OSCE. And this is the reason for our briefing today.

Albania has made the news recently, however, not for this but for the 6.4 magnitude earthquake which struck it the early morning of 26 November. It was the strongest to hit Albania in decades, the deadliest in nearly a century and, I believe, the deadliest globally in 2019. Our Albanian guests, both parliamentarians on the panel and the diplomats in the audience – Ambassador Faber, I'm glad that you're here – would probably receive widespread expressions of sympathy and support in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. As the country turns to a recovery process that could take a very long time, and as we must move forward on other issues, it is important to note that the tragic event is not forgotten but still with us, and that support for Albania must continue throughout the recovery process.

The OSCE chairmanship is a year-long assignment. It is an honor that must have the confidence and support of all 57 participating states. It is, however, also a major challenge leading the world's largest regional organization with its consensus-based decision-making as it confronts the significant security, economic, human rights and democratic challenges facing its members and their citizens. These challenges presently include Russian aggression against Ukraine and threats to other neighboring countries, several regional conflicts, resistance to democratic reforms in some countries, and serious democratic backsliding democratic development in others.

As described in a paper prepared for this briefing and included in the folders you received, the OSCE chairmanship has been held by the foreign minister, known as the chair-in-office, of one OSCE country or another since the institutionalization of the Helsinki process in 1991. Since that time, the OSCE has contributed strongly to the international response to numerous conflicts and crises in the western Balkans, including Albania, and especially during the turbulent 1990s. In fact, the OSCE historically has probably focused more on the Western Balkans and the problems that have existed there than any other place within the OSCE region.

Now Albania, like Serbia which chaired the OSCE in 2015, is admirably seeking to make its own contribution to security and cooperation in Europe as a whole, even as it continues to face the challenges of transition at home and still aspires to an ever-distant European membership. Indeed, it is precisely those countries that have benefited most from OSCE focus and assistance that have the potential to be the strongest advocates of the tools available to the organization in order to encourage implementation of OSCE commitments by others.

At the Helsinki Commission, we believe that the most senior representative of the OSCE should exemplify the spirit of the 10 principles and implementation of the whole body of OSCE commitments. That does not mean having a perfect or even among the best records of the 57. It does mean clearly moving in the right direction and being clearly committed to that path. A chairmanship needs competency and capacity, but also credibility.

This briefing comes less than a week after a foreign ministerial gathering in Bratislava, known as a Ministerial Council, that is the culmination of the 2019 Slovak chairmanship. Also in the folders distributed today is the statement of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama at the closing of the ministerial. As the baton, or torch, is being passed from Bratislava to Tirana, we hope to take a closer look today at Albania's interest in chairing the OSCE and how that task may, in turn, impact Albania in 2020.

Our panelists – (coughs) – excuse me. Our panelists comprise Albania's three-member delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and will provide a parliamentary perspective, those of elected officials, on these matters. A Commission hearing next year plans to feature the chair-in-office and focus more specifically on the priorities and objectives of the Albanian chairmanship for the organization. The biographies of our panelists have been circulated, so I will say just a few words of introduction.

First, Ditmir Bushati is a member of Parliament from the ruling Socialist Party, who has been the head of the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA since the beginning of this year. Prior to that, he served for several years as Albania's foreign minister. It was during those years that chairing the OSCE was first proposed, considered, and ultimately approved by consensus at a Ministerial Council in Milan one year ago. There is probably no person more qualified to explain the Albanian initiative than him. I should mention that Mr. Bushati is already contributing his experience to the Parliamentary Assembly as an OSCE institution, leading for example the OSCE PA delegation observing the parliamentary elections in Belarus just a few weeks ago. (Coughs.) Excuse me. Election observation is an important task of the OSCE, and perhaps what it is most widely known for.

Next, we have Rudina Hajdari, a member of Parliament from the opposition Democratic Party and the newest member of the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA, having only joined in September or October. She represents not only a new face in the OSCE, but also, in my view, new way of thinking in Albanian politics. Ms. Hajdari was among a very small number of parliamentarians who courageously decided to keep their seats in parliament even as the opposition parties they represented withdrew in February of this year. Those who stayed were later joined by those on party lists who decided to fill vacated seats, seeking to serve their country and its citizens, including by actively making Albania's case for forward movement on European integration, rather than merely following their party leaders. That, to me, embodies the spirit of Helsinki I mentioned earlier.

Finally, we have Elona Hoxha Gjebrea, a member of Parliament also from the ruling Socialist Party who has served as a member of the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA for few years now. More than that, she holds a position in the OSCE PA leadership, having been elected twice now as rapporteur for the general committee covering economic, science and environmental issues. In that capacity, Ms. Gjebrea represents the assembly as it interacts with other OSCE institutions and beyond, and she also contributes her expertise by drafting and managing a resolution by adopted – adopted by the 323-member body which seeks to forge the widest possible consensus among issues ranging from official corruption, to energy security, to climate change, and a whole lot more. That is no easy task, and I applaud her for her for her active engagement.

So with those – that introduction, and for more biographical information you can look at their biographies in the folders you received, I will now turn it over to Mr. Bushati to make his remarks. My apology for the dry throat. I have a cold.

BUSHATI: Thank you. Thank you, Bob. Thank you for inviting us for this meeting of the U.S. Helsinki Commission on the parliamentary perspective Albania's 2020 chairmanship of the OSCE. It's a(n) honor indeed for us to provide you with our insight about this challenge which is ahead of us.

Chairing the OSCE in 2020 marks a transformative phase for Albania. After the NATO membership, OSCE chairmanship is the biggest achievement of Albania's foreign policy. From a historical perspective, from a country which originally chose not to participate in the negotiations of the Helsinki Final Act to a country in receipt of significant OSCE democracy assistance, Albania has now gained the trust of all participating states to lead the OSCE in 2020. We, Albania and particularly this delegation, is very pleased with this success. And our intention is to transform this into a project of nation building.

After the collapse of communism in the beginning of the '90s, Albania was named a security concern. Our democratization path was rocky, but we are very proud that today Albania sits at the table with nations that hold democratic values high, whether at NATO or OSCE. Our role to that table was difficult and sometimes even painful, but we headed it up. OSCE and Helsinki Commission engaged in this work with us from the very beginning of our transformative process. Here we are today, a NATO member, an EU candidate country, and Albania is widely considered as the pillar of stability in Southeast Europe.

Therefore, during our chairmanship of the OSCE, this strategic posture will remain intact. While the task of the chairmanship is to mediate among 57 non-likeminded states, spanning three continents, we will not shy away from the fact that the primary violation of the Helsinki principles stems from the Russian aggression to Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. To (value-added to offer ?) in East-West relations, and the tools to improve the current situation, if not avoid escalation, the OSCE need to be maintained. When it comes to human rights or political-military fields, the OSCE has valuable insights to guide relations within and between states. Since we see the violation of such commitments as a prime source of instability in Europe, (reconnecting ?) our commitments together will be the main model of our chairmanship.

Now I'd like to share with you a few lines about our commitments as chair 2020. Priorities and the calendar of the commitments will be presented at the beginning of January by chair-in-office. Certainly Ukraine will remain a top priority. Chairmanship will reach out Ukraine. He can build in OSCE field operations. Chairmanship will support and defend special monitoring mission to Ukraine as the OSCE flagship operation. Its role indeed proved essential both to avoid escalation, to be the most authoritative voice on the ground, and to provide flexible support to positive developments, such as the disengagement process. We also support the two – (inaudible) – border observation mission and project coordinator in Ukraine. Albania will support the Trilateral Contact Group format and the political process in the Normandy format.

In 2020, the four top jobs of the OSCE will be up for renewal. This will be a major negotiating process and a big challenge for the chair-in-office. Chairmanship will fight to maintain the current level of field presence without any restriction in terms of mandate and scope and their appropriate funding. Being a country which hosts an OSCE field presence we are quite lucky to have this experience of cooperation with the OSCE. And we know very well the value of the OSCE on the ground.

The promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms will be at the core of our chairmanship. This is directly linked to our vision of implementing our commitments together. Chairmanship will certainly support ODIHR efforts to ensure the broadest possible exercise of election observation mission. We will continue to support the work of special envoys, special representatives, and field missions, and all bodies within the OSCE in relation to their respective conflicts.

Last but not least, we consider parliamentary diplomacy within OSCE to essential to advance dialogue, in particular when governments are distant or where there is reluctance to tackle pressing issues for citizens. Furthermore, the representatives chosen directly by people are the best links between the organization and those it was created to serve.

Our chairmanship coincides also with lots of anniversaries. And as I explained at the very outset, the unique history of Albania in relation to this organization will make sure that with other likeminded countries, and also with the different bodies of the OSCE, will make sure to highlight those events during the chairmanship.

I'm sure that my government will provide you with information. With the opposition, we will lead this process. And also I'm sure Ms. Hajdari, taking into account also her experience in the bureau of the OSCE PA, will provide further information considering different dimensions of the organization and how those dimensions will be reflected into the priorities of our chairmanship in office.

Thank you very much for giving us this opportunity and I look forward for the discussion.

HAND: Thank you very much, Mr. Bushati. I particularly appreciate the comments that you have made on the field presence and the need to keep those active, because over the last few years some of the countries have either gotten rid of their field presences by denying consensus to their continuation or have been blocked by others, or in some cases are trying to adapt their mandates from what they actually need, particularly in terms of democratic development, into softer things that aren't as much of a threat to the ruling elites. And this is something that's always been a very major concern of the Helsinki Commission. And I'm glad to hear that Albania, which has hosted a mission or OSCE presence since 1997, will use its experience to push on those countries the value of having an OSCE presence to help facilitate OSCE implementation. We can also come back to comments you made on elections, because I think that's also very important part of that as well.

Ms. Hajdari.

HAJDARI: Thank you. Thank you, Bob. Thank you for everyone who came to this briefing. I also want to take a moment and thank also the chairman of the Helsinki Commission, Senator Wicker, and also the cochairman Congressman Hastings, as well as all of the members of the committee that agreed to hold this briefing.

It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss Albania's priorities for the OSCE chairmanship in 2020. Together with my colleagues of the Socialist Party, we are here to outline Albania's priorities for the upcoming OSCE chairman in the year ahead. This is a huge responsibility that always requires parliamentary commitment and political and national unity to undertake this unique opportunity that is presented to Albania.

But first, let me start with a personal note. As we stand here today, 30 years ago on this day, December 11th, 1990 my father was celebrating the start of democracy in Albania, along with other students and prominent figures, who created the Democratic Party. After 50 years of communism, they were able to have the start of pluralism in Albania. It is because of this important day and event that Albania was able to join the OSCE a year later, in 1991, after more than a decade of being mocked and rejected by Enver Hoxha, to join the OSCE.

Soon after that year, my father, along with a delegation, set foot in these halls and appeared before the Helsinki Commission on May 22nd, 1991, to testify before the Helsinki Committee on Albania's democratic developments and the implementation of the Helsinki Accords. And now, almost 29 years later, I stand here today as his daughter to brief you on Albania's chairmanship of the OSCE. I'm very honored for being here, and thank you, Bob, for giving us this opportunity. And it is with great pleasure that I give these opening remarks.

Of course, this is a very major step for our country, and we are very proud that we are here across political parties and with different political beliefs to show national unity, and that we are here to defend our national interests above all other interests. As Albania will be chairing the OSCE in 2020, an organization of 57 countries and over one billion people, the task comes with a huge responsibility. And the members' countries expects us to meet our goals and be a reliable partner. And although Albania's a very small countries, with limited capability and resources, this is a chance to show to the world that we are a country that we believe in human values and political norms set by the OSCE. We must strive to seek compromise among nations and promote the protection of human rights at all costs.

The Helsinki principles are based on common values and common norms of international law that we must all respect and never forget the history. The OSCE played a crucial role in ending the difficult period of the Cold War. And although it has a home ever since, it still holds an important place in the European security architecture. The OSCE has managed to carve its place and keep going and continues to make a mark particularly on regional issues and conflict zones. Albania must remind and revitalize the OSCE about its core principles.

This should be a chairmanship about coming back to the basics, protecting the Helsinki principles such as sovereignty, equality, refrain from the use of force, peaceful settlement of dispute, respect for human rights, cooperation among states, respecting our obligations under

international law. All these principles are now more important than ever. As my colleague recently mentioned, I will not repeat what he said. It is important, although, we take some of the priorities forward and we make sure that these priorities are set to be fulfilled by the Albanian government.

On the top of the agenda we have conflict resolution and conflict prevention efforts, which will be supported by the OSCE on the ground, and guiding new efforts to peaceful solutions, such as Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. Particular attention will be paid also on the role of women, particularly with the upcoming – the 20th anniversary of the application of the United Nations Security Council 1325. Albania must also look forward in promoting the role women in conflict resolution and peace processes. Albania will prioritize the revitalization of dialogue within the organization, particularly when it comes to issues like – such as Kosovo. It is important that Albania plays a constructive role with its – (inaudible).

The fact that there's corruption, of course, is another important topic, a priority that will be covered by Albania, which needs a lot of work in this direction. Albania will also dedicate a lot of resources in efforts to promote tolerance and nondiscrimination. And last but not least, the fight against all forms of trafficking is also necessary. Taking measures to combat the trafficking of human beings with new sets of technologies will be also necessary.

Again, we are very grateful for the amazing bilateral relation we have with the United States, and that we have aligned our priorities within the OSCE together. We know that we can rely on such a strong partner and ally as we embark on this endeavor. We will continue to enrich and nourish this relationship by aligning our shared interests and common vision. However, as the OSCE is also a regional-based network, we must look at our neighbors and promote dialogue, and find ways to bring new solutions to frozen conflicts. We must help the region grow forward and not let it slip backwards. In this context, we must help Kosovo to move forward with its peace negotiations with Serbia and promote its role in the OSCE.

Albania's a small country, and it's often not the best example for its leadership in Europe. This past year has been particularly tough for our country. Starting with the giving up of mandates by the opposition parties to the boycotting of the local elections, and to the terrible earthquake that left us with a high death toll of 51 people, 750 people who were injured, and thousands of people displaced from their destroyed homes. In short, this country is still struck by an unprecedented political and institutional crisis. The solution to this crisis should be on the agenda and the main priority of the government, the opposition, the main institutions, and all parties involved.

But apart from solving this political crisis, we must – we must bear in mind that in fact we must take a more long-term solution related to the future of Albania, its integration to the European Union, and the aspiration of our nation, and not seek short-term solutions that only fulfill the needs of individual politicians. Submission of mandates back in February in order to accomplish a forced transitional power is an extreme escalation of the 28-year political behavior. For 28 years, that Albania has been characterized by a chaotic disaster and unprecedented politics that has happened at the expense of the Albanian people. The 20-year – 28-year old politic that has been polarized by this landscape is perhaps being experienced now in the U.S.,

but Albania has been in this deeply fragmented political crisis for a very long time and has left the country behind on so many fronts.

Today the Albanians and many other people are losing patience with the fact that there's no standard, no representation, not enough passion to protect their fundamental rights and freedoms. The emphasis of leadership should really rely on respecting the Helsinki principles and committing ourselves to the national interests above any other interests. And this is why I entered politics. And this is why I remained in Parliament. I wanted to bring a new political model, good governance, a dignified representation to fight for social and institutional standards in Albania.

Albania has great potential, and if it's governed with professionalism and honestly Albania will soon have a new political elite, new spirits, a new people that believe in Western values, and promote a new model of government where the rule of law is respected, and no one is above the law. The OSCE chairmanship is a chance to turn that page in history towards this direction. I'm choosing to go forward with my eyes on the future as we stand at the crossroads between the hope for the future and the self-loathing, helpless dreams of some Balkan leaders whose fantasies of revolution bring us back to the fake continuous crisis.

Their behavior doesn't just suggest they are suffering from delusion in the present, but that delusion is full of willful misrepresentation of their country's needs. And wrongfully they play with people's emotions. However, I'll end with a positive note. I know that we will prevail because our future hopes lie on the young people, as they did 30 years ago. We will stay committed to the change and enrich Albania with Western values and share a common vision and future with the United States and within the OSCE.

Thank you very much for your attention and happy to take any questions you may have.

HAND: Thank you, Ms. Hajdari. And I particularly like how your statement shows that in a democracy you can have differences of opinion without threatening national unity and purpose in what you're trying to accomplish.

Let me also say that I remember the hearing of May 1991. It was an honor to have known your father and to have worked with him, although it was somewhat limited. His English was not necessarily the best, but it certainly was a lot of better than my Albanian was. But we still worked well together. And the hearing that you mentioned was actually very relevant to what we're discussing today, leading the OSCE. So I brought a copy of it along. Albania was the first country to try to join the Helsinki process after it already existed since 1973-75, is when the first negotiations took place.

And throughout 1990 and '91, we were conditioning Albanian membership and a lot of improvements in the country because it was a one-party communist state. Elections were held in March 1991, the Democratic Party that your father helped to found lost those elections. They were not free and fair. They were multiparty, but not free and fair. And there was a lot of political turmoil afterwards – demonstrations, people were being killed. It was quite disruptive. So when we had the hearing we asked the panelists there: Should we continue to condition

Albania's membership in the Conference of Security and Cooperation, as it was known then, in Europe on improvements, or what should we do?

And the first one to speak was a very famous Albanian novelist, Ismail Kadare, who said: I believe the United States should support Albania's membership for one essential reason. I believe that one of the major problems in Albania today is the loss of hope. In the middle of a crisis which is unprecedented, it can become a factor for the disintegration and worsening of the situation. And I said earlier that Albania should be accepted into the CSCE. This would not be done as a favor to the Communist regime. It would be done to give some hope to the Albanian population.

Your dad, your father, then quickly interjected to say: I fully support Mr. Kadare. And this would be of great moral assistance for the people of Albania who have suffered so much. Albania has suffered a lot because of the recent exodus. The acceptance of Albania as a full member of the CSCE will go a long way, if the Albanian people would understand such a decision. This is more of a test that is given to the people of Albania.

And that was really a turning point because at that point there was 34 countries in the Helsinki process, and there's now 57. And the OSCE went from an organization that was originally thinking about conditioning membership to one that's welcoming people in, getting them committed to the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE documents, and then working with them for improvements.

And it's relevant to Albania today because from that time when we were considering whether to support membership or not, we are now welcoming the chairmanship. And this briefing is about how this chairmanship can hopefully further the process of democratization and transition to Albania until it meets all of its aspirations for European integration. So I want to thank you, and sorry for speaking so long. But I wanted to note your father's role in helping to set that precedent for the Helsinki process back then in 1991.

We'll now turn to our last panelist, Ms. Gjebrea, if you would like to take the floor.

GJEBREA: Thank you, Bob. Thank you for being here. I would like also to thank the Helsinki Committee members for supporting us in this important briefing session on the parliamentary perspectives of Albanian OSCE 2020.

Without repeating what my colleagues mentioned, I would like to focus on some priorities which are important to be shared, no less. Especially, I would also focus on the support, the priorities related with the second and third dimensions. Practical attention, for example, will be given to the role of women in peace processes. Under Albanian chairmanship, we will focus on the worrying reality that women continue to be affected by conflict in OSCE areas and across the world.

On the occasion of 20th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, Albania will work towards promoting the role of women in conflict resolution and peace processes. But the situation of women is of concern not only in the conflict

areas. The recent findings of the OSCE-led survey on violence against women had worrying statistics. We need to redouble efforts to ensure that – a safer and prosper future for all women and girls in our region.

The OSCE is a unique platform for dialogue, and many of its success stories are related and rooted upon mutual understanding and consensus for action among participating states. Experience has shown that confidence and security-building measures, and mil-to-mil contacts continue to be a substantial contribution to security in Europe by increasing adaptability, reducing risks, and also contributing towards increased transparency and trust in the OSCE area. Therefore this also 30th anniversary of the Charter of Paris for the new Europe, Albania OSCE chairmanship will characterize the revitalization of dialogue within the organization.

In coordination with the chairmanship of the forum for security and cooperation, Albania will also promote a lot of work against arms-controlled regions. The structured dialogue remains an innovative and complementary form for exchanges amongst participating states, and Albanian chairmanship looks forward to using its full potential to increase trust and lay the ground for further OSCE achievements.

In regards to economic and environmental dimension, I would like to mention that 2020 Albania OSCE chairmanship will characterize the fight against corruption and promotion of good governance. Corruption erodes the foundation of trust between citizens and state. It is a main obstacle to economic growth and fuels inequality, impunity, and instability. Furthermore, the Albanian chairman also intends to dedicate attention to environment protection and ensure the balance between economic and environmental issues.

Looking at the third dimension, our organization remains one of the core pillars underpinning the protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights in Europe. Racism, xenophobia, and other forms intolerance continue to threaten security and our increasingly diverse society. Albanian chairmanship will therefore dedicate the resources and efforts to promote tolerance and nondiscrimination, fostering a stronger sense of security in the OSCE participating states. The incoming chairmanship will pay particular attention to youth in peace and security across the face of all three dimensions.

We value the positive growth of youth towards a culture of peace, dialogue, justice, and peaceful coexistence, trust, and free elections. The OSCE is at the forefront of international engagements in several areas. In 2020, we'll continue efforts to benefit from our organization's comparative advantages. For example, addressing transnational threats. We will promote reinforced efforts on countering violent extremism and radicalizations that leads to terrorism, paying particular attention to the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families. Moreover, while addressing emergent challenges, also cybersecurity will be tackled, and also other issues related to organized crime.

The fights against all forms of trafficking will be also on the high of 2020 agenda. Mindful of its cross-dimensional nature, the incoming chairmanship – now we are already officially heading this – we'll pay particular attention to promote the reduction and implementation of measures to combat trafficking in human beings, with a help of new

technology. I have also served for four years as the deputy minister of interior and also as a national coordinator against trafficking of human being. Definitely there are a lot of efforts that all the countries has to do to combat this transnational crime. And I think that we will pay a lot of focus on this regard also to make sure that global efforts are joined against this horrible crime.

I would like to mention that our prime minister for two more weeks has also mentioned – and I would like to end my speech on what he said in Bratislava. We'll build upon the achievements and experience of the previous chairmanship. And together, we – (inaudible) – our partners will make next year a successful year. Our success will be the success of 57 states. We also will want to ensure that also Albania parliamentary delegation is dedicated, and we work as a team to make 2020 Albanian chairmanship a successful story. Thank you very much for your attention.

HAND: Thank you very much. And thank you for also mentioning the role you played as the national coordinator on trafficking in persons in Albania. As you know from your OSCE parliamentary assembly experience, members of the U.S. delegation are very active on trafficking issues as well. In fact, it's probably the Helsinki Commission and our former chairman Congressman Chris Smith more than anybody who brought trafficking in persons to the attention of the OSCE and the countries of the OSCE many years ago.

Many of those countries would deny that they even had trafficking taking place. Getting them to recognize it and to deal with the issue took a lot of effort. And he was quite happy to see countries like Albania have a national coordinator, because it takes law enforcement, it takes health care, it takes a whole bunch of different offices within government to go after trafficking in persons. And so thank you for the work that you have done on that. And it also answers a question that I was going to ask, so now I don't have to ask it, which is – then to actually turn to the question and answer period.

Since this is a briefing and not a hearing the questions come from people in the audience rather than members of Congress. And I would like anybody who does have a question to come up to the podium. You'll need to press the button to make sure the microphone works, because this is being transcribed, so that your voice can be heard. And then identify yourself, ask the question, and to whom you want to direct it, whether it's one of the individuals or the whole – the whole panel. Then while you're making your way up, I'll start with the first question. And it would be for all of you to address as you see fit.

Mention was made of work on tolerance and nondiscrimination. And Prime Minister Rama in Bratislava specifically mentioned anti-Semitism, pointing out that Albania was the one country in Europe that protected its Jewish population, even as it was occupied – first by Italy then by Nazi Germany. And it also became a place of shelter for Jews from elsewhere in the region who came to the country seeking protection. And I mention that because Albania, I believe, is planning to host a conference as the chairman on anti-Semitism and intolerance sometime in early February, if I remember, if that is correct. And it's a good example of how a chair-in-office can have the moral authority and the ability to actually press some other participating states on issues of importance to the OSCE.

I'd like to use that as a preference to ask about other areas where the Albanian experience might be useful. One of them is in the area of countering corruption, because Albania is going through an extremely thorough process, but a rather turbulent process, of judicial reform. And I would be interested to hear from any of you how that experience will enable the chairmanship to press other countries where corruption is a problem, where there needs to be greater adherence to the rule of law, how the chairmanship can press for those – can press for those changes.

Another area that I think is being undertaken in Albania right now, it's an ongoing discussion, is that of electoral reform, something very important to the OSCE. And how is that going? And would that be able to be used as a model to press other countries to undertake electoral reform as well? Because far too many OSCE countries still have elections that are less than free and fair.

And then also I did want to ask about some of the news that has come out about two laws, draft laws in Albania, regarding online media that have been criticized by the civil society in Albania as well as those who follow the media internationally, and even the OSCE representative of freedom of the media has asked that there be amendments to these laws. As Albania seeks to – as chair-in-office – to advocate freedom of the media and freedom of expression, including online, how do these laws impact its credibility in doing so? And is there still the possibility that the Albanian government can work with civil society to try to work out some compromises or something that could be more satisfactory for all parties involved?

So those are some wide-open areas. And I don't know who would like to go first in responding to any or all of those points that I just raised.

GJEBREA: Thank you very much. For the first question, with regard to the incoming conference on anti-Semitism, I mean, that will be all focus of discrimination are incompatible with human dignity and human rights. And definitely also the OSCE has a solid basis with regards to the political combatting in this – combatting this dynamic, and with a distinct focus on the discrimination on the basis of religion. And it's right now that the OSCE has appointed three special representatives with the focus on Christian, Muslim, and anti-Semitism.

Albania do have a very unique value in regards to having in equilibrium all of the religions in our own country, has a lot to say in these regards. So definitely incoming conference will show us all what we have to focus with regards to the rhetoric on anti-Semitism, Albanians also values, and Albanian example, but also good examples for other countries. As I have said, all focus of discrimination are incompatible with the respect for human dignity and human rights. Thank you.

HAJDARI: Yes. Maybe I'll say a few words about electoral reform and perhaps on the online media, new media law that has been passed. Actually, it's ongoing right now. We're having committee hearings today, as we speak, on this issue.

So on your first one, though, I just want to state maybe an obvious fact. But for those that don't know Albania during World War II was able to help with about 200 Jews that came in from 1942. And then by the end of the war we were the only country that had 2,000 Jews left.

So this is quite a remarkable country that protected the Jews that came in. And so Albania's very known for its religious tolerance. And I think some of those values should be shared with the OSCE members, and our good practices on this front.

Besides election reform, I think right now Albania's going through two different important reforms. One is judicial reform and the other is election reform. And election reform really has two main components. The first component is about adapting OSCE recommendations that have been produced in reports on the last four elections – 2013, '15, '17 and the recent one, 2019. So these are local and general elections. Unfortunately, the previous ad hoc committees on election reform, they haven't found the political willingness, the compromise to adapt or to adopt these OSCE recommendations – the OSCE ODIHR recommendations.

So now we're finally taking on this mission because we feel it's necessary for assuming the OSCE chairmanship that we take on the OSCE recommendations and apply them in our code – electoral code. However, the opposition in Parliament at the moment has another objective. And that objective has to do with changing the system. We're looking at – looking at differences in Albania because, for those that maybe don't know, we have close system with regional representation. And at least since 2008, Albania's never been able to really choose their representatives. They've just been able to vote in primaries. So we have a closed system. And people go out to vote either one part or the other.

So to us that really doesn't mean that the polity within Parliament or the representation within Parliament has been very dignified, given that the – (inaudible). Many other issues that have occurred in regional areas of Albania where – (inaudible) – operates. So we are looking at a different system that's much like perhaps 22 countries out of 88 – 28 countries in European Union have adopted, which is to have an open system. People can be able to vote for representatives. The majority obviously doesn't want such a thing, because they have – they hold the power and they want to be able to choose their own representatives. But this is something aside, and we're looking forward to pressing and talking to government as well to trying to change the system that will allow Albania to have more representatives that directly represent its own people, rather than their parties – or their parties' interests.

However, election reform I think is a – needs to be a reform that's accepted by all the parties involved, all actors involved, and we've made sure to involve the civil society in every hearing that we've had so far. The drafts have come from the experts. They have been consulted by the civil society. And we have taken their criticism and everything they have said on each draft that have come before us to consider their recommendations. And this is our task right now, to be able to include – particularly as an opposition member, I think that's the one thing I have been vouching for, that the civil society has a big role into having their say when it comes to election reform.

And maybe to say a thing about the online media law that has come to Parliament just recently. And this is not – this is an effort that's come for the second time, because the first time it was shot down, I think, and criticized heavily by the OSCE. And now we're looking at it again. And we are really concerned about this law, because I think it jeopardizes free speech in

Albania and free online media. And of course, there needs to be some way of controlling fake news, but like other countries, like Western countries, it needs to be self-regulated rather than government regulated.

So for the government to actually take this initiative to regulate online media is not the best way to go. And this is why it's been criticized by the OSCE, by NGOs in Albania. And it's being forcefully passed within the parliament because the majority right now does hold the majority, and they have 74 votes out of 140. So they can – they can pass without the opposition approval. So we're really looking at this, and we're trying all our best to at least voice our opinions about what's going on. And we'll keep monitoring as the opposition to control the government as far as this law. But it has been highlighted for many. Thank you very much.

BUSHATI: Well, you have explaining a very eloquent version of how this organization is being transformed since beginning of '90s and now this. So the scope will be the OSCE. It's quite different from those regional fora or regional organizations we have been used. Also, because of the fact that different countries share different viewpoints about multilateralism, about the set of liberal values that we as a NATO and EU candidate country would like to – would like to promote. So in this respect, I need to repeat what I – what I have said at the very outset of this briefing session, that as chairmanship of the – as chair-in-office of the OSCE, we need to strike this balance in order to accommodate also views and concerns coming from all participating states. And here we are speaking of all states which are located in three continents and while a dual representative from – (inaudible).

However, we need to maintain this strategic posture and we need to be credible, as we all agreed here today. And one of the pillars of that credibility is to build upon positive developments and positive experiences. When it comes to media, I, you know, will repeat here what I have declared also for the new way a few minutes ago. My country has a very good track record in cooperating with the Office of Media within the OSCE. We have been cooperating quite well with Dunja Mijatović and the same also for Harlem Désir. We understand the concerns that have been posed by civil society and the media representatives. We have taken very – we have led on taking this criticism as a country from OSCE, but not only OSCE, but also EU, as there was some criticism concerning media law.

And I would like to express my belief that at the end of the process rationality will prevail. So we need to maintain media freedom, as one of the pillars of this organization. Although there are countries which do not fall under, let's say, this rule of law that belongs to the Western civilization, which do have a different – a different viewpoint concerning media. This is as far as media law, online media law, is concerned.

You asked a question on anticorruption. And this also goes quite well – you in particular have strong authorities. The U.S. government is working closely with us and others in the region. And we all know that corruption is still a pervasive phenomenon shared across the region. So it's not – it's not an Albanian phenomenon. It's not a Balkan phenomenon. It's – it is going beyond the border. But I know we have had reforms and organizations and only recently in order to fight corruption.

Within the context of the chair-in-office, apart from the judicial reform that we would like to promote further, and for all the audience I would like to share with you the fact that all judges and prosecutors in Albania are going through a vetting process, which is testing not only their professional – the capability of judges and prosecutors, but also their wealth. Because there are cases where we are dealing with unexplained wealth.

And there are cases where judges and prosecutors failed intentionally to declare their assets. And there is an investigation process going on. And this is all conducted also in close cooperation with the U.S. government and with different U.N. states that have been a means of support through this process. And we have judges and prosecutors that are playing an advising role to Albanian leaders. And all this process is being very transparent and ensuring this way also added scrutiny.

But we need to combine this also with the security dimension of this organization, by saying we need the anticorruption dimension in relation to especially second dimension, to the economic and environment dimension. We believe we will bring some added value to the organization. But, again, we all we know within the organization, it's very difficult to impose a certain viewpoint, or to impose a moment, having in mind the fact that here we're dealing with a broad geographical area, and countries which do not share necessarily the same interests.

The third point was in relation to other priorities that could come during the Albanian chair in 2020. I think violent extremism is a very valid point, where Albanian could leave a valuable contribution, and well as in line with the logic of Albanian as learned by my government. We had a rich history of providing shelter to Jews during the Second World War. We have a religious fraternity as Pope Francis labeled when he visited Tirana. Tirana was one of his first European destination.

So apart from, let's say, legislative and institutional measures that we have embraced in countering violent extremism, there is also this soft approach mechanism that we have been embracing during all these years, reaching out to not only local communities but also religious communities, introducing in – (inaudible) – elements concerning violent extremism and working also through the social programs in reintegrating those returnees into society. And we have done quite good work in this perspective also with countries like Georgia. We have been working closely with the U.S. government. We have been asked also by other countries to share our own experiences, since we believe we can bring added value to this process.

Last but not least, there has been also this argument about women in conflict, that was highlighted during the introductory remarks. We are part of the resolution of the U.S., but we have been working also with some EU member states in this respect. We are a country situated in Southeast Europe. I would like to avoid as much as possible Balkan from my vocabulary, and I like speaking about Adriatic Europe. But you know that we are situated in a region that has produced more history than it was able to digest it, or to consume it, as Winston Churchill used to say. So in this respect, Albania has a more cold-blooded approach, because it was never a part of interactive conflicts. But it values a lot the role of women and the protection of women in the areas of – I the areas of conflict. And in this respect, it can also bring an added value to the organization.

It goes back to our experience in – in our last experience in Belarus with the election monitoring mission. Here, when it's – come to a vote because we have benefitted enormously from the expertise of ODIHR in the past years. We haven't been able to address all deficiencies in the system, as Ms. Hajdari was mentioning. Still, the political climate in the country is – (inaudible) – the source of this polarization has to be also with the – with the election process in itself. And here, we can combine both ends. Our positive experience as a recipient of democratic assistance and expertise from ODIHR and promote it as widely in possible first within the organization – because we know that not all participating states are pleased or are happy to work with ODIHR. And this would be, I believe, a tremendous contribution for the organizations as well.

HAND: Thank you. I think I heard from all three of you the fact that Albania does have experience and assets that will make it quite a credible chair in office, in terms of advocating these changes in other countries. There are differing views, but there's also the common commitments that we all have. And I just hope that Albania will have success as it takes on the challenges in getting other countries to undertake the necessary reforms.

So let me now go to who's ever – would like to ask a question first, Again, please identify yourself and then to whom you'd like to address the question, whether the whole panel or just an individual.

Q: Yeah. My name's Paul Massaro. I'm the anticorruption policy advisor for the U.S. Helsinki Commission, one of Bob's colleagues. We work in the same office. Talk a lot about these issues.

So I want to dwell on the point you made there, Mr. Bushati. You know, I wouldn't that corruption's still a problem; I would say corruption is a growing problem across the world. I'd say that corruption is perhaps one of the key national security threats, you know, that the United States even faces today, certainly the United Kingdom, I mean, I think a lot of other countries; Albania for sure. You know, a great many. You know, because it's never been easier to steal a massive amount of money and then launder that into London, or New York City, or wherever else.

And it's fascinating, because in the OSCE region we have the states where the money's stolen, we have the states where the money's laundered, you know, and we have the states where the money actually ends up – whether it's in Manhattan, or London, you know, or the French Riviera, or wherever. You know, and then you know, states that are running banking services – Cyprus, Latvia, things like that, you know.

So I actually think that there's this huge opportunity here in the OSCE region to be talking about exactly this sort of thing, the anticorruption. So you also said that there's no – there's a differing interest, lack of common interest. And I also would say that there's one huge interest that's shared by all peoples of the OSCE region, and that is that nobody likes it when their leaders steal money from them, you know? I think that we all have different views, but at

the end of the day, you know, no one wants to be robbed blind by their political leadership. And I think that that's a really important message to get across.

So coming to my question – (laughs) – I want to, you know, ask you concretely, you know, like, what – at the OSCE level – I applaud Albania's, you know, taking anticorruption on as the kind of primary second-dimensional theme. But what's the concrete stuff that can be done here? I mean, I've been going to these second-dimension meetings now for, you know, five years. And every year it's a different theme. You know, every year we talk about it and have sort of a good time. And then, you know, a new theme, a new thing, you know? So I think we got the right theme. I think that Albania could really do something here. But I think that there needs to be, like, a new real commitment made that has something behind it to make a difference. So what are the concrete measures? You know, how can – how can the OSCE really engage on transnational corruption, not necessarily the state-based stuff? Thanks.

HAND: Who would like to speak to that, or speak first?

GJEBREA: OK. Thank you. Thank you very much. I'll just mention something also with regards to the big also rapporteur of this, you know, committee, which is really also with economy and environmental committees as well. And definitely, as I mentioned, that Albania chairmanship will prioritize the fight against corruption and the promotion of good governance, and definitely would something that we can be focused. Digitalization of public services, for example, and all the opportunities which are offered by innovation, are very essential. And lot of examples of other countries with – you know, with we think is good examples in this regard.

Also we share as well attention also be paid to the links of corruption with money laundering, with terrorism, with environmental degradations. All of these are topics that definitely will be shared. We will have a lot of conferences and shared experiences, and definitely will be a lot of issues that countries can benefit. And there will be also messages which are quite important. Corruption and good governance are a main priority in the second committee. And we are committed to work on that. Thank you very much.

HAND: Anybody else?

HAJDARI: Yeah. I think the question was directed to Mr. Bushati, or did you want?

Q: No, everybody. Whoever, you know. I drew off his comments, but whoever. Whoever wants to take it.

HAJDARI: Yeah. Well, I share your concern, really. I mean, I think if there is anything that has infected our societies it's corruption, and particularly those countries where we are more authoritarian than I think you can complain about your country at the moment. But, you know, some may argue with me. However, I think corruption is a long, painstaking process. And it takes a really long time to heal. I don't think it can – sometimes you do need some radical steps. And unfortunately there aren't as many countries where we can show as an example that has really fought corruption. You still have a lot of countries that are still going through this process.

But if there is something that I should mention there, and find a positive story in all of this, is justice reform. And the fact that Albania, part of the justice reform is a vetting process. And this is a process that vets prosecutors and judges. And in the last two years that we have undertaken this hope or this process, more than half of the judges that have been prosecuted so far – that have been vetted so far, they don't pass this – not professional-level criteria, but they can't justify their wealth. So it basically means that they're corrupt. And so those judges and prosecutors have been taken out of the system, and so they no longer serve our justice system.

So this is a positive step when it comes to the fight against corruption. Of course, that's not the only level which we should be fighting corruption. Politicians have always been corrupt. And if you look at Transparency International, the numbers are now dropping. We dropped I think many, many places I think we're the 98th or 99th country, which is quite low in the ranking portion, where we should be going. And we should be gaining not losing places at this point. But so I also – even the human rights reports that come from the U.S. department, I mean, those are some really difficult reports when we read every year, and they're not getting better. Which means that corruption is to be fought not just on the justice level, but on the politician level as well.

We do still have politicians in Albania who've been serving for a very long time. And they do not want to give up their power. They've been around for 30 years, and what is happening, and this is one of the things I've been fighting for, is that we need to change the system because we have four or five people in Albania who have been in government for at least five years. And believe me, these are not poor people. So if there's going to be a vetting, we're going to vet judges and prosecutors, we also should have a vetting of politicians as well so we can move forward.

HAND: OK, thank you. Just to sort of add on that last week the Helsinki Commission had a briefing that looked at corruption in some of the other countries of the western Balkans, specifically Serbia and North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and to a lesser extent Montenegro. And we focused primarily on corruption in terms of government procurement, but also the vulnerabilities that corruption creates in terms of direct investment, you know, from other countries, and how that can lead to reforms politically in those countries.

And one of the key points they stressed in that briefing was that unlike in Albania I think that country that focuses on ethnic conflict and ethnic tensions, that one of the real problems in that countries as well is also corruption because politicians actually just play one ethnic tensions and try to develop them even further as a way to cover up the fact that they're making money. And then they want to stay in power in the meantime. And so I would say that, you know, even some of the neighboring countries of Albania, the problem is not the ethnic tension but the corruption, and that those tensions are just used as a way to divert attention from the corruption that takes place. So thanks, Paul, for asking that question and giving that focus to what the OSCE can do to combat corruption.

I would also say that you have a good parliamentary counterpart from Cyprus who's a special representative in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly on combatting corruption. And I think Cyprus is going to be hosting a parliamentary – hosting a Parliamentary Assembly

engagement in Cyprus on corruption in mid-May, which would be a good opportunity to sort of fine-tune the OSCE approach.

Who'd like to ask the next question? Right here.

Q: Hi. My name is Juliet Michaelson. I work with Bob at the Helsinki Commission.

My question is also about the second convention, but mostly about the environmental part of that. I know Ms. Gjebreja you mentioned it in your – in your opening remarks, that the environment will play – will be a priority in the – in Albania's chairmanship. The environment has become such a hot topic nowadays, especially climate change and environmental degradation. So my question to all of you would be how Albania plans to actually deal with this dimension and deal with both climate change and environmental degradation, especially given the not-as-great record that Albania has with deforestation and pollution.

GJEBREA: Thank you very much for your question. So let me, as I mentioned also in my speech, definitely the focus on environment that you mentioned is quite important for the Albanian chairmanship. And it's definitely – there are a lot of issues that will be addressed with regards to the climate around degradation, protection, and a balance between economy and environmental issues as well. And so with regard to the environmental protection, reflecting increased holds for stronger OSCE action on the larger issues that characterize the environmental issues as well, to supportive projects in the area of disaster risk reductions, with the waste management, and the protection of the environment also in the conflict zones as well.

Albania also has progressed with regards to a lot of environmental aspects and issues. And the Ministry of Environment in Tirana is also taking a leading role in a lot of projects, and also under the initiatives with regards to the protection of the environment. So definitely will be also a lot of issues which we can also share these good practices, but also important within the Balkans as well, and with our neighborhood countries, which also are sometime in danger with regard to the impact of climate change as well. And the climate change is not now an abstract world. It's a reality. And we are affected. All the countries are affected. So definitely a lot of key messages and strong messages will be given with regard to the climate change.

Last year as a part of the second committee we were, for example, in the North Pole. And we saw, as a team, how the climate change has affected Arctic. As a famous place looks technical Arctic, doesn't stay Arctic. So all the countries are affected by the climate change. Thank you very much.

HAND: It's good we're having this focus on the economic and environmental dimension. It was often – within the OSCE circles was sort of the forgotten dimension, and it's good to see that it's getting the attention it deserves. It certainly is a challenging area. I also point out, though, as other people are asking the questions, I will say they work with Bob. None of them work for Bob. So let me see who else in the audience would like to ask a question.

Q: Hi. My name is Erick Boone. I work at the U.S. Helsinki Commission with Bob. (Laughter.)

And my question has to do with what you and the Albanian – what Albania can do with the chairmanship in terms of changing the narrative for a country who had an OSCE presence. I know that historically there might be a negative connotation with countries who have had OSCE presence and a country like Albania who had a presence – an OSCE presence since 1997. So is there anything that you can see with your country doing a chairmanship to possibly change that narrative so that other countries might be more welcoming to having OSCE help or having a presence with OSCE? Thank you.

BUSHATI: This is part – this is part of the priorities of Albania chairmanship for 2020. And as I explained also during the introductory remarks, there is the political dimension. By paying a visit in all countries where there is an office of the OSCE, I also support for the work of the OSCE on the ground, and also encouraging states to work with those offices. I want to mention also the case of Albania, and here they've had different experiences with different chairmanship in offices. The last – the current chair, Slovakia, did a critical job in this respect by paying a visit to all countries where there is an OSCE presence by encouraging the work that those offices are doing on the ground, by engaging with law communities, with civil society. We did not mention that much civil society today, but this is a strong and key component of the role of the organization at the local level, and also at the ministerial level, in all – in all dimensions.

And here, I think Albania will follow the path of Slovakian chairmanship by paying attention to the work of the OSCE on the ground because, at the end of the day, it's quite a flexible organization. And as it is, being evidence of so many protracted conflicts. You have the mechanism. You have the tools. And we have, in some cases also the organization on the ground. Having a presence in the country, it's not an easy exercise, I have to say, because you need to be very strategic when you are discussing about the scope of the presence, the appropriate funding.

And you need to narrow down the assistance being provided by OSCE, especially in those areas strictly related to the mission of the organization, because as we've seen in western Balkans, or in Southeast Europe, in some cases when countries are advancing towards becoming members of European Union, they think that by having an OSCE mission, or presence, an office in their territory this is a – this is a signal of deficiencies in terms of institutional building, institutional set up and progress in terms of democratization, and so on and so forth. So in this respect, we need to – we need to ensure that offices on the ground are serving, first and foremost, needs of the country, the needs of different levels of the communities. And they are – they are having a clear ladder of communication not only in the governments, not only with politicians, but also with civil society, with media, since this is quite critical for the democratization process.

And in this context, as I mentioned also during my introductory remarks, we can have a – we can offer our own experience, because we have had some very good days with OSCE and ODIHR. We have had also our bitter experiences. And I do believe we have – we have drawn the necessary lessons in this respect in order to be – to be – in order to share these lessons also with others in the organization.

HAJDARI: If I may just add maybe just a – I think my father did a good job – (inaudible) – and I think changing the narrative of course is something very difficult to do. It's not – it's very – it takes a lot of support and it takes a lot of common efforts to come together and to change that narrative. It's impossible to do it alone. However, I think Albania and it's unique nature in the region as it has played a very active role as far as regional issues. And we are in a place where the Balkans has had very difficulties dealing with the challenge, particularly when it comes to the Kosovo and Serbia relations.

I think Albania can – within the OSCE – I think can play a role in promoting dialogue and consensus and can help Kosovo move forward. I think Kosovo stands in a very difficult situation right now. And in order for Albania to use its platform it has to deal with these non-recognizers within the OSCE and help them understand what's going on in the region and help them really take on Kosovo as a country that's sovereign, but also needs to promote it's values both – and know what it stands for. Because right now Kosovo is very much isolated within the region. And it's not able to travel with the visa-free within the European Union. And it stands very much – and we have people – we have countries that are taking away their reputation. So this is very kind of dangerous precedent that's happening in Kosovo.

So I think the OSCE – Kosovo does have a participating role within the OSCE. But I think as a – you know, as a country we can help increase its role and work with the non-recognizers, to work with a way to sit down with Kosovo to find compromise and ways to build the way forward. Thank you.

HAND: Any additional questions from the audience? I'm seeing none. Let me just ask the three panelists who have spoken quite a bit, but I don't know if you would like to each have, like, one minute just to give sort of a quick concluding remark? Why don't we start at the end and then move forward, and then I'll bring the meeting to a close.

GJEBREA: Well, technically it's really historical, as it was mentioned already, for Albania to have this chairmanship, and definitely Albania will be open and inclusive chair. And definitely all the voices of all participating states will be heard with respect to the decision. And definitely this is something that will guarantee us success. As I said that today what I want to emphasize is our success will be the success of 57 participating states. So we need to work together. And this is, again, the joint voices and the joint work of all states. That that way we can ensure that we will lead to a very good way how in fact we will see the work, and then Albania will follow what others has done in order to be engaged in a constructive way in the life of this organization.

I would like also to thank you, Bob, again. I want to emphasize this. Again, having lead us – and organized us to be here, and to share what the Albanian authorities are, and also our vision, and letting us also be heard what are concerns and how we can also improve our past in this important momentum for Albania. Thank you very much.

HAND: Ms. Hajdari.

HAJDARI: Thank you, Bob. Thank you, again.

I think in my concluding remarks I would just also like to sum up what has been said during my remarks earlier, that of course this is a very big step for Albania, and it's a huge responsibility. But at the same time, we have to recognize Albania's a very small country and with very limited resources and capabilities. So the stakes are high, and the responsibility is big. However, I think aligning and relying on the U.S. and other strategic partners and allies, I think it's quite important for us to reach these goals.

So we'll be working very closely not only with the U.S. but other countries within the OSCE that can give us the – (inaudible) – in order to meet these targets that we've put forward. And the targets are quite plausible, very important, and well-balanced, I think. Conflict resolution and the empowerment of women, which is very important. But at the same time, we need to recognize that these are still challenges within our country. So it's not just about dealing with these but putting light on – and putting our country at a position where we need to meet those standards.

So while we're actually chairing the OSCE, we know that we're not a perfect country, but we are willing to work on these priorities even within ourselves, and while also working with the OSCE countries who meet these targets. So, again, I just want to thank Bob for making this event possible. And I hope that this has been productive. And I also want to thank the chair and co-chair for agreeing to this briefing here on Capitol Hill. It's been an honor to be here, and to get this briefing. And hope that this will be a success story for Albania.

BUSHATI: It has all been said by the colleagues, but I just want to emphasize the fact that we're not expecting miracles to happen while in the chair the organization, because we know that it's about 57 minds. It's about consensus. And since this is a consensus-driven organization, as I mentioned, we need to strike a balance. But I hope that this experience will mitigate also the consensus that we have back home. And since witnessing this to be a project of national unity, bearing in mind the involvement of this exercise. I've been involved in that during this year and our basic capacities in the country all this time, since our political, diplomatic capacity will be tested this year.

It's an immense opportunity for – not only for the foreign service but for public administration to learn through this process and to interact also with other countries, not only within the troika but based on different issues also with other countries. I also would like to express the value not only for this house and for this Commission – you have various members working with us, with the U.S. government and also with the whole delegation within OSCE in providing political support and being vocal for the Albanian chairmanship in office.

And we do believe that this cooperation at the bilateral level will be strengthened during the course of 2020. And this will be the – this is the first bilateral. This is not going to be the last opportunity where we will interact together at the parliamentary level to make sure that the chairmanship is successful. And – (inaudible) – that we attach the necessary support to this exercise. Thank you.

HAND: Thank you. I'm not sure what that was, but I got the sense something was coming in – coming down the line. Thank you for your closing remarks.

And let me just saying in closing how much the Albanian chairmanship means to the Helsinki Commission as well, and to me in professional capacity. In my first years at the Helsinki Commission in the 1980s – early 1980s, I have to admit when asked who signed the Helsinki Final Act the answer was the standard United States, Canada, and all of Europe except Albania. My first time in Albania was August of 1990. That will be 30 years next year. And that first stay the Commission organized a congressional delegation led by former chairman Senator Dennis DeConcini of Arizona, a year before it became an OSCE-participating state and at least six months, if not more, prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Albania.

It was still a highly repressive one-party communist state. And my first impression when I was walking from the Hotel Dajti, which was the best hotel in Tirana at the time, to Skanderbeg Square. And the people I passed avoided even looking at me, acknowledging my presence. You just got the sense of fear that existed under the authoritarian regime. And it's been just such an honor to follow Albania's development ever since and see how far it has come, to see the engagement that we now do have. And that's despite the many frustrations we had along the way. As the ambassador knows, I often will express my frustration, but always in a constructive manner because I want to see Albania continue to move forward. And it meant so much to me to see Albania become a NATO ally in 2009. And it was equally an honor for me to see it now take the chair of the OSCE. As Prime Minister Rama said in his statement in Bratislava, it is really amazing. And I'm very happy for it.

If I were to say that there is more important to me in professional responsibilities, however, it is the OSCE itself, and more broadly speaking the Helsinki process. I have also had the honor of over the decades to track many statements given by the United States and the OSCE or the CSCE as it was known beforehand, and the draft proposals, and in some cases participate in negotiation of those proposals, that turn into a well-known body of OSCE commitments regarding human rights and democracy, including those of holding free and fair elections. I can be the OSCE's greatest critic, but it is only because we at the Helsinki Commission truly believe in the comprehensive definition of security that the Helsinki Final Act established, a definitely of security that include respect for human rights. And I have witnessed and gotten to see again and again a matter of diplomatic exchange that produces direct and positive change, including in many of the countries that have yet to implement the OSCE commitments.

So as I was thinking about how to conclude this I kept wanting to sort of complain myself to the philosopher Diogenes, who although he was a cynic he did hold up the lantern looking for that honest man. In my case, I'm looking for the chairmanship that pushes to utilize the OSCE's fullest potential and not just manage it for a year to check the box. We've had some good OSCE chairs-in-office, but also I have seen so many missed opportunities. I'm optimistic about Albania. I don't expect miracles as well, given the world that we live in today. But I'm a believer in incremental progress. And as I said at the very beginning, the thing that people frequently miss is not where we're at but the direction we're doing. The trend is so important. And I think that hopefully 2020 will be a year where we will see a very positive trend under

Albania's leadership. And the one thing that I am certain of is that we do have this strong parliamentary partnership that will help to make that happen.

So I want to thank you for being here. I also wanted to thank Juliet Michaelsen and Erick Boone for working with me. Sometimes I actually think that I work for them in organizing some of these briefings. They know how to organize it better than I do. But for making this possible. I thank the audience for coming. And so this briefing is adjourned. Thank you. (Applause.)

[Whereupon, at 3:43 p.m., the briefing ended.]