

Statement of Alexander A. Arvizu
Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Albania
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
August 5, 2010

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

It is a privilege to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to be the next Ambassador to Albania. I am honored by the confidence placed in me by the President and Secretary Clinton. If confirmed, I will do my utmost to validate the Senate's trust in me and consult closely with this Committee and your colleagues in Congress to advance our Nation's interests in Albania.

It has been an honor to call the Foreign Service my chosen profession for the past 29 years. During that time, I have witnessed first-hand the difference that concerted U.S. engagement can make in fostering political openness, respect for human rights and improved standards of living in different locations throughout the world.

Albania's transformation over the past 20 years has been nothing short of dramatic. Once an isolated dictatorship, Albania has assumed its rightful place among nations that espouse democratic values, hold multiparty elections, and subscribe to the transformative power of free markets. These changes and significant reforms earned Albania NATO membership on April 1, 2009.

Equally impressive, Albania today is a net provider of global security and a reliable United States ally – as evidenced by its recent deployment of 44 combat

troops to fight alongside U.S. combat forces in Kandahar, Afghanistan. This is the first Albanian combat deployment since World War II and brings to nearly 300 the total number of Albanian troops participating in the International Security Assistance Force. Albania has also contributed significantly to our government's policy of resettling detainees from the Guantanamo Bay detention facility.

Albania is also a strong proponent of Western Balkans integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, embarking on a diplomatic campaign to cultivate good relations with and among its neighbors, including Serbia and Kosovo. At the same time, Albania is a key supporter of our policy of expanding the number of countries extending diplomatic recognition to Kosovo.

Economically, Albania was one of only two countries in Europe in 2009 to experience economic growth, something it is forecast to do again this year. A low debt to GDP ratio, increased exports and a shunning of non-traditional debt financing have helped fuel this performance.

Yet, there is more to be done in Albania. As a NATO Ally, Albania must adhere to the highest principles of the Alliance. While democratic structures are much in evidence, full respect for the rule of law and independent institutions is still relatively weak. Corruption remains stubbornly high.

At times it appears that the political class is more concerned with its own rivalries than with the welfare of ordinary citizens. For a brief moment before the

2009 parliamentary elections, we witnessed a short-lived sense of bipartisan spirit. Objective international observers assessed those elections as generally reflective of the will of the people. Unfortunately, Albania remains hobbled by a legacy of zero-sum politics and a deep distrust between the majority and the opposition. A constructive dialogue between the sides is long overdue and would assist Albania in letting its innate talent and resourcefulness propel it to the fore.

Yet for all of these shortcomings, Albania is a success story and proof that strong U.S. engagement makes a difference and contributes to prosperity.

The United States wields considerable influence in Albania. If confirmed, I will endeavor to use that influence wisely and reinforce the growing mutuality of interests between the United States and Albania.

Thank you once again for granting me this opportunity to appear before you. I look forward to answering your questions.