

ALBANIA

Reflections on the Journey to Self-Reliance.



While I was in Albania earlier this month, the Journey to Self-Reliance was on view everywhere I looked. Albania broke free from communism roughly a generation ago -- the last of its neighbors in the region to embark on democratic and free market reforms. Their path has not been easy. From an infamous pyramid scheme that collapsed its economy in the late 1990s to deeply entrenched networks of organized crime and corruption, the pace and trajectory of development has been neither steady nor straight. Yet, Albanians have persevered.

The spirit I encountered in Albania felt familiar. Representing a diverse cross-section of society, the Albanians I met with showed real affection for their country, but were quick to call out where progress should move more quickly. Across the board, they shared the view that Albania's lingering challenges can be solved but that progress was not a given. Ordinary citizens would need to do their part.

This spirit is paying dividends.

More and more Albanian citizens are embracing their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy. In the small town of Cerrik, I met with 30 high schoolers who are members of a USAID-supported Youth Board. This group is developing their skills as community leaders, able to identify community challenges and advocate for government action. And they are already seeing the impact of their efforts. Similar Youth Boards are scattered throughout the country. I met journalists and public

watchdogs who are holding public officials to account, sometimes at great cost to themselves; representatives of civil society groups who have stepped up to help address issues ranging from preventing radicalization to safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities; and members of the newly created High Judicial Council -- an organization on the frontlines of justice reform, an issue that will have a determinative impact on Albania's development journey. As these citizens step up to take the lead, we are better positioned to support from behind.

Other signs of Albania's J2SR abound. Fewer than ten years ago, this country faced an energy crisis. Power outages, high import prices, and energy losses estimated as high as 45 percent were crippling the economy. But through bold action and close partnership with USAID, the Government of Albania has managed to right the course. These days, energy losses are significantly reduced and the regulatory framework has improved markedly, making the energy sector more compatible with the EU.

Similar gains are underway across the economy. The private sector continues to breathe new life into Albanian communities. Organizations like the Albanian American Development Foundation -- a legacy of USAID's Albanian Enterprise Fund, and the American Chamber of Commerce in Albania are paving the way for Albania to leverage its assets -- a rich cultural heritage, a beautiful environment, exceptional hospitality -- into opportunities for economic expansion. These efforts complement USAID's own programs to support economic growth.

During my trip, I saw firsthand the historic impact USAID has had in helping Albania transform into a market economy. One entrepreneur I met, Elvira Subashi, owns an olive oil company and small storefront. Years ago, USAID support assisted the Subashis to modernize their mill, helping them break into high-quality olive oil production. The program's benefits further rippled out to area farmers as well, as the Subashis have provided training and guidance to farmers to improve the quality of their harvest. This small company is now thriving, no longer in need of assistance. Subashi Olive Oil is just one example of Albanian businesses that have leveraged USAID support to create lasting economic opportunity for itself and its community.

Albania's development journey demonstrates the transformative impact of USAID assistance. Our team, many of whom have been with USAID since the doors first opened in Tirana, or shortly thereafter, have played a critical role in this transformation. When the day comes that we work ourselves out of business, our Foreign Service National colleagues will be the ones to ensure our efforts continue to pay dividends into the future -- an essential component of the Journey to Self-Reliance.

