

**Remarks by Robert Benjamin, Regional Director, Central and Eastern Europe
In the Assembly of Kosovo
On the occasion of International Democracy Day
September 15, 2010**

On behalf of the National Democratic Institute, Director Laura Nichols and the NDI staff here in Kosovo, I am proud and happy to join you today, together with the President of the Kosovo Assembly, to celebrate the International Day of Democracy. It is fitting that we celebrate democracy in this building, the Assembly of Kosovo, for, like its counterpart in Washington, it is the symbol of what we call in America “government of, for, and by the people.”

The National Democratic Institute is a nonpartisan, non-governmental organization headquartered in the United States of America. Our organization supports democratic reforms countries around the world. NDI opened its Pristina office in 1999, and since then has worked in Kosovo in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development. NDI has been fortunate to cooperate with thousands of Kosovars from all walks of life, from all parts of the country, and with all ethnic communities, who have worked very hard to build democracy. We have helped civic advocacy groups engage municipality mayors on neighborhood issues and monitor the work of municipality assemblies. We have supported nonpartisan monitoring of elections by trained observer groups which have given their fellow citizens impartial analysis on the conduct of Kosovar elections. We have worked with political parties to train the activists, to prepare elections and on public policy issues. And here in the Assembly, in partnership with the Speaker, his fellow members of parliament and staff, we have supported the strengthening of the legislative process in ways that enable the Assembly to fulfill its constitutional mandate as a separate branch of government, one that represents all citizens—regardless of ethnicity, gender, or residence—on issues large and small that are important to the people of Kosovo.

Building democracy is always difficult task, and in a certain respect the job of building democracy never ends, because, to ensure democratic rule, the political system must constantly change as societies naturally evolve.

What has been accomplished here in the last decade is impressive, and Kosovars have many reasons to be proud. The Assembly is becoming an independent institution and capable of making laws, representing citizens and overseeing government. Civic groups, big and small, here in Pristina and in other towns, are participating in the policy-making process. Political parties have built structures that they are using to enhance their leadership and to develop policies. Minority communities are working hard to advocate for their needs in Kosovo.

As someone who has observed Kosovo in the last decade, I think that there is among all citizens of Kosovo a growing sense of confidence in understanding the kind of

democracy they want to build. This is very good because all democracies, in order to be effective, are developed in their home, and for this reason they are unique. Kosovo will have its unique system of democracy. But, there is also universal truth. All democracies, including Kosovo, are built around essential values--citizen participation, political representation, fair and equal treatment before the law, government's transparency and responsibility toward citizens.

Madeleine Albright, I am very proud to say, is the Chairman of NDI. In this capacity, she visited Kosovo in 2005 and, before the Assembly, she spoke of her admiration for Kosovars as "excellent builders." She was referring to the talent of Kosovars in construction, but she was also speaking metaphorically about building a democracy. And as with building a house, it takes all Kosovars, the President, the Prime Minister, the Speaker the opposition, civil society leaders, mayors, and every citizen to build Kosovo's democracy.

Indeed, people build democracy – not the government, not the international community--but people, people in groups, people as individuals. Kosovo's chief asset, of course, is its people, in particular the youth. It is very important that all the citizens exercise their democratic rights for participation, not only at ballot boxes, but also by joining civic groups or political parties, to raise their voices and to exercise their democratic rights, for that ultimately is how democracy is built, sustained, and perfected.

Democracy is a long-term process. Kosovars have accomplished a lot, and they recognize that there is still much to do. More people need to participate in politics in more ways, more often, with more views expressed about what should be done, and political institutions, from the government to the Assembly to political parties, need to open themselves to this participation. From my vantage point, Kosovo is looking more confidently to the future as it takes account of its past. So, as you move forward, today and ever day, NDI will be there, to support you, proud of your accomplishments, mindful of your challenges, and respectful of your unique democracy.