

**Opening Statement of Kenneth Merten  
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
November 29, 2022**

Thank you, Chairwoman Shaheen, Ranking Member Portman, and distinguished members of the Committee.

I am honored and humbled to appear before you today as President Biden's nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Bulgaria. Thank you for your consideration of my nomination. Should I be lucky enough to be confirmed, I commit to working closely with you and your staffs.

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge my wife Susan and our daughters Elisabeth and Caryl. We are a Foreign Service family. Susan has accompanied me throughout my career, including three tours in Haiti. My daughter Caryl is not here today but is a first tour Foreign Service Officer serving in Matamoros, Mexico.

My family and I have had the honor of representing the United States overseas for over twenty years of my thirty-five years in the Foreign Service. I've been fortunate enough to have served six of those years as Chief of Mission, in two very different countries. If confirmed, I believe I would bring relevant, broad-based experience to our Mission in Bulgaria.

My time as U.S. Ambassador to Haiti -- in which I confronted the worst urban natural disaster in modern history, a cholera epidemic, and a hurricane -- gave me numerous opportunities to demonstrate a full range of management, political, and public diplomacy skills. I led an Embassy that increased in size by 20 percent; managed a whole of government approach as Mission Haiti began to spend \$1.2 billion dollars in reconstruction assistance; and ensured an effective transition from a 22,000-person military mission to a smaller civilian-led humanitarian mission.

In Croatia, my team and I accompanied the government through the final stages to EU membership. I successfully advocated at every level of the Croatian government -- including with heads of state -- for the return of pre-war Jewish property to the Croatian Jewish community, resulting in the first restitution of Jewish property since Croatian independence. My efforts also laid the foundation for Croatia to construct a liquefied natural gas terminal, thus making Croatia more energy independent, a particularly important consideration these days. If confirmed, these experiences would inform my sense of U.S. priorities in Bulgaria. First and foremost, the safety and well-being of U.S. citizens living, working, and traveling in Bulgaria, as well as that of the Embassy team in Sofia, will be my most important and sacred responsibility.

Bulgaria is a strategic partner and Ally of the United States. Since joining NATO in 2004, Bulgaria has consistently demonstrated its commitment to the Alliance. It contributed forces and sustained casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine makes our continued close coordination with Bulgaria all the more urgent, particularly given the country's position along

Europe's Eastern Flank. Bulgaria is hosting a multinational NATO battlegroup that includes U.S. troops. It has registered more than 145,000 refugees from Ukraine for temporary protection, fully supported sanctions against Russia, and in November Bulgaria's parliament voted overwhelmingly in support of military assistance to Ukraine. Bulgaria's acquisition of a second tranche of F-16s will mark a significant step toward meeting its NATO defense spending commitments. If confirmed, I will continue to grow our Mission's engagement in security issues and support Bulgaria's efforts to combat Russia's malign influence.

If confirmed, I will also prioritize the expansion and diversification of our economic ties with Bulgaria while serving as a tireless advocate for stronger rule of law and for the fair treatment of U.S. firms. There is tremendous potential to boost our relations and expand U.S. commercial interests in key areas like technology and innovation, agriculture, education and entrepreneurship, infrastructure, and notably, energy.

Bulgaria has taken positive steps toward energy diversification, particularly since Russia cut off natural gas supplies in April after the Bulgarian government refused to pay Gazprom in rubles. The completion of the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria, which facilitates natural gas imports from Azerbaijan, was a major achievement in this regard. More remains to be done, from securing further LNG supplies to procuring nuclear fuel that does not rely upon Russian inputs. If confirmed, I am committed to supporting Bulgaria's efforts to strengthen energy security, including with the help of U.S. companies' technology and know-how.

If confirmed, I commit myself to earnestly serving as a Chief of Mission who leads, manages, and safeguards all our Embassy colleagues. I will work tirelessly to build on the outstanding work of my predecessors to strengthen our bilateral relationship with the Republic of Bulgaria and advocate for the priorities of the United States.

Thank you for your time and your consideration. I look forward to answering your questions.