

Opening Statement of B. Bix Aliu
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Montenegro
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
March 7, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Committee Members; I am humbled and honored to appear before you as President Biden's nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to Montenegro. I am grateful to the President and Secretary Blinken for their confidence in me, and I hope to earn your trust as well. If confirmed, I will work closely with you to advance U.S. interests in Montenegro.

I would not be here today without my family's support. With me is my wife, Dr. Nora Zajazi, who has championed me through our incredible 36-year journey together; my son, Bled, a Nittany Lion and recent GW law grad; and my daughter, Tea, who is studying archeology and historical preservation at the University of Mary Washington. My children are my greatest blessing, and I am very proud of the global citizens they have become. None of us would be here without the sacrifices of my parents, Azem and Shirley. They fled the former Yugoslavia, leaving everything behind to allow my sisters and me to pursue a better life in the United States. Distinguished Committee members, if confirmed, I will be the first Albanian American in our history to serve as a U.S. Ambassador – a testament that if you trust in God, dream big, and work hard, you will succeed.

Over my 22-year diplomatic career, I have been privileged to serve American citizens and promote U.S. interests and values in the UAE, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Hungary. Recently, I led Mission Poland and guided our team in advancing humanitarian and security goals as Russia's brutal invasion sent millions of Ukrainian refugees across the Polish border. The welfare of American citizens is ever paramount, and I worked with Polish leaders to secure safe passage for Americans fleeing Ukraine. If confirmed, the safety and security of U.S. citizens in Montenegro will remain my top priority.

I have always ensured mission policies reflect Administration and congressional priorities. I have sent tough, clear messages advocating for the rule of law, democratic institutions, media freedom, and rights of minority groups - often in the face of outside criticism. These experiences have prepared me to lead U.S. Mission Podgorica.

American leadership matters. Montenegro's 2023 elections provide a historic opportunity to accelerate the country on its EU path. We must also be clear-eyed about the risks to this goal that Montenegro's governing coalition poses, and remain engaged, with practical solutions, to help the country attain its rightful place in the European Union, which 80% of Montenegrins desire.

If confirmed, four priorities will guide my work:

First, Russia's brutal war in Ukraine underscores the urgency for Montenegro to accelerate critical reforms for EU accession, democratic development, stability, and prosperity. If confirmed, I will lead an interagency effort to engage Montenegrin leaders and promote the rule of law, fight entrenched corruption, respect human rights, and deliver tangible results to their citizens, all in line with U.S. national security objectives.

Second, Montenegro has been a steadfast NATO Ally for seven years, including stalwart support to Ukraine, deployments to Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia, and increasing troops for Enhanced Vigilance Activities in Bulgaria. If confirmed, the mission and I will work to deepen those security ties, also through our excellent State Partnership Program with the Maine National Guard; and streamline Montenegro's acquisitions that enhance interoperability, such as its recent purchase of patrol boats built in Alabama and 65 JLTVs produced in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Third, we will strengthen Montenegrin resilience against malign actors seeking to undermine its democracy and institutions. If confirmed, I will collaborate with the interagency, EU, and local partners to counter disinformation; expand journalistic professionalism, freedom, and independence; buttress civil society; and amplify U.S. messaging on Trans-Atlantic values. We will also pursue sanctions, where appropriate, to confront and counter malign actors.

Finally, if confirmed, I will support Montenegro's economic prosperity through a renewed U.S.-Montenegro Economic Dialogue to strengthen the investment climate, improve infrastructure, diversify energy sources, promote decarbonization, and deepen regional economic integration. It is essential that the United States and EU partners help identify viable alternatives to problematic PRC investment, particularly in critical infrastructure. To that end, I will encourage adopting Blue Dot Network and Strategic Ports initiatives to bolster sustainable, transparent development, level the playing field for U.S. exporters and suppliers; and reduce trade barriers.

Montenegro is at a crossroads – the country needs effective democratic institutions cemented in the Euro-Atlantic framework and committed to the welfare of all its citizens. The United States will work with Montenegro's leaders to advance shared goals, uphold international commitments, and tackle corruption. We are Montenegro's ally in building a better tomorrow as part of NATO and the EU. Montenegrin citizens clearly voiced this desire with their votes and deserve nothing less. I would be honored to lead our Mission in Podgorica. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this Committee and welcome your questions.