



Integrated Country Strategy

BULGARIA

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1. Chief of Mission Priorities

The United States and Bulgaria are strategic partners. Bulgaria is a NATO ally and a European Union partner, but it continues to struggle to achieve all the characteristics of a free-market democracy. The development of democratic institutions is behind the EU norm, the country ranks very low in media freedom, and corruption continues to hamper economic development. The country is also struggling to modernize its military. Bulgaria looks to the United States for assistance overcoming these deficiencies. Our principal goal is to ensure that Bulgaria continues to develop its institutions so it can evolve into a more prosperous democratic state and a more capable partner of the United States, one that is firmly integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Bulgaria remains the poorest EU member country with weak economic infrastructure. Frustration with unfulfilled economic expectations, corruption, and rising energy prices have caused unrest in the past. The country needs to increase trade and attract foreign investment to thrive. Working in its favor are its natural resources, productive agricultural land, skilled and educated workforce, location at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, and a relatively low cost of doing business. A number of U.S. companies have invested in Bulgaria, creating more than 30,000 well-paying jobs. We will continue to encourage U.S. investment and help our companies and Bulgaria overcome the constraints caused by corruption, a shrinking labor force, and excessive regulation. We will also continue to engage with underserved groups to protect their human rights and promote economic opportunity for all.

In late 2021 a new government took office that was focused on reforming government and combatting corruption. Convictions in high-profile organized crime and corruption cases are few; corruption and other complex cases move very slowly through the justice system when they are pursued at all. Progress on rule of law will depend upon the commitment of Bulgarian authorities to tackle corruption and to implement much-needed reforms. Post's Regional Legal Advisor and law enforcement offices are sharing experiences and best practices to help the country fight corruption and reform its legal system.

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Bulgaria is a small but willing NATO ally. The GOB has a credible plan to modernize its military forces but needs to implement that plan and commit resources to it. They are on track to spend two percent of GDP on defense by 2024, meeting their Wales pledge. U.S. training and assistance remain key elements in this transformation and will be especially necessary as Bulgaria strives to replace legacy Russian weapon systems. Our goal is to see a Bulgarian military that is interoperable with its NATO partners, capable of defending itself, and able to deploy to and sustain international peacekeeping or stability operations. We are particularly interested in helping Bulgaria increase the security of the strategic Black Sea region.

We signed a bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Bulgaria in 2006 that regulates the status of U.S. Forces in Bulgaria, allows for our joint use of four Bulgarian military facilities, provides for bilateral and multilateral exercises, and facilitates the movement and temporary stationing of aircraft and vessels. In 2020 the United States and Bulgaria signed a Ten-Year Defense Roadmap to deepen our cooperation, including in new areas like cyber security, and facilitate the modernization of the Bulgarian military.

Bulgaria must also secure and diversify its energy supply. Currently the overwhelming majority of Bulgaria's energy depends on Russia. We are helping the country find new sources, especially for natural gas and nuclear fuel, and promoting carbon-neutral technologies such as renewables and small modular nuclear reactors. These changes will improve Bulgaria's energy security, bring down prices, and combat climate change. There are ample opportunities for U.S. investors and exporters on the Bulgarian market, but the government must take steps to ensure that Bulgaria is seen as an attractive location for foreign investment, where rules are consistent, transparent, and uniformly enforced.

Bulgaria consistently ranks poorly on media freedom indices. Media ownership is concentrated among a few oligarchic circles and media self-censorship is rampant. This provides too many opportunities for foreign malign influences to peddle their own disinformation and large segments of the media lean toward Russian perspectives. We are encouraging reform of the media sector, providing training for journalists, and helping educate the public to inoculate them against disinformation.

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Younger Bulgarians often have more positive feelings toward the United States and EU, and we continue to expand our engagement with Bulgarian youth, especially with those living outside of Sofia. Increasing the number and diversity of our public diplomacy programs, and further activating our American Spaces and USG program alumni networks, are key to reaching diverse audiences and shaping the views of Bulgaria's future leaders. Educational and vocational exchanges, cultural preservation projects, English language learning, STEM programs, media literacy workshops, music and art envoys, and entrepreneurship training are all vital parts of Post's robust strategy to engage and inform audiences to advance Mission priorities.

Bulgaria continues to be a transit state for drug smuggling, a source and destination country for human trafficking, and an incubator for cybercrime. The Government of Bulgaria recognizes these problems and our law enforcement cooperation continues to pay off through the disruption of criminal networks. Our counterterrorism cooperation is excellent. In light of ongoing migrant and refugee flows to Europe, as well as the threat of foreign fighters transiting to and from the Middle East, the continued development of Bulgarian law enforcement and counterterrorism capacities is necessary so Bulgaria can successfully balance the need to protect its and Europe's borders.

Making progress on all of these priorities is essential because they are key to the maturing of Bulgarian institutions, our relationship with important elements in Bulgarian society, and the country's capacity to partner with us on a range of strategic issues.

2. Mission Strategic Framework

Mission Goal 1: Strengthen governance, transparency, and rule of law to foster stronger democratic norms and ensure free and fair economic competition

- **Mission Objective 1.1:** Assist in increasing the effectiveness and fairness of Bulgaria's justice system to improve rule of law and public faith in government accountability.
- **Mission Objective 1.2:** Encourage reforms that enhance the operation of a free and independent media and vibrant civil society to strengthen democratic institutions.
- **Mission Objective 1.3:** Support Bulgarian government institutions and officials, including at the sub-national level, to promote good governance and accountability to the voters.

Mission Goal 2: Encourage Bulgaria's development into a stronger NATO ally and provider of regional security.

- **Mission Objective 2.1:** Develop Bulgaria's military capabilities so that it can defend its sovereignty, meet its NATO obligations, and contribute meaningfully to regional deterrence and defense initiatives.
- **Mission Objective 2.2:** Expand U.S. engagement along Bulgaria's Black Sea coast to better support Bulgarian efforts to counter security threats, particularly in the maritime domain, and broader malign influences in the Black Sea region.

Mission Goal 3: Promote economic prosperity and energy diversification to improve Bulgaria's security, trade opportunities, and the environment.

- **Mission Objective 3.1:** Encourage Bulgaria to develop a more competitive, sustainable, and inclusive economy to increase growth and investment and to reduce political instability and malign influences.
- **Mission Objective 3.2:** Support Bulgaria's efforts to diversify the country's energy sources to increase energy independence and augment regional security.

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- **Mission Objective 3.3:** Expand engagement on environmental initiatives and in green technologies to combat climate change and assure a cleaner environment for citizens.

Mission Goal 4: Highlight shared Euro-Atlantic values and build people-to-people partnerships to bolster Bulgaria's western orientation.

- **Mission Objective 4.1:** Intensify the Embassy's people-to-people engagement so that more Bulgarians embrace democratic values and support the U.S.-Bulgarian bilateral partnership.
- **Mission Objective 4.2:** Increase awareness of, and resistance to, foreign malign influence among the Bulgarian public to encourage more informed and engaged citizens.

Management Objective 1: Implement workplace improvements to attract, retain, and further develop a high quality, diverse, and professional work force.

Management Objective 2: Implement upgrades to enhance facilities and infrastructure and improve telework capable systems to accommodate increased staffing.

3. Mission Goals and Objectives

Mission Goal 1 | Strengthen governance, transparency, and rule of law to foster stronger democratic norms and ensure free and fair economic competition.

Description | Bulgaria continues to face challenges to its development as a fully democratic, open-market country. Continued weakness in the rule of law – including corruption, systemic influence of non-state actors over government institutions, and erosion of media independence – undermines democratic institutions and limits economic growth. Bulgaria must bolster its ability to investigate and prosecute cases involving corruption and transnational crime and enact reforms that demonstrate the country's commitment to transparency, freedom of expression, and an end to the culture of impunity. This, in turn, will help to create conditions for our mutual security and prosperity, as well as build confidence of the Bulgarian people in their government and in the country's positive future.

Objective 1.1 | Assist in increasing the effectiveness and fairness of Bulgaria's justice system to improve rule of law and public faith in government accountability.

- **Justification** | [Bulgaria's weak rule of law contributes to political and economic instability, hinders growth, robs citizens of their rights, and has significant security implications. Structural flaws in the civil and criminal justice realms, lack of political will to make reforms or pursue corruption, and limited technical capacity perpetuate the influence of oligarchs over key government decisions and result in poor public perceptions of the justice sector and loss of revenues due to fraud and negligence. We will focus on legislative and judicial reform, strategic planning, and providing tools to fight corruption and organized crime.

Weaknesses in the Bulgarian security apparatus and Russian influence make Bulgaria more vulnerable to a variety of threats and impede our capacity to collaborate effectively. We will focus on enhancing Bulgaria's counter-terrorism capabilities and encouraging the adoption of the necessary legal framework, including the

implementation of information sharing plans and procedures that will help keep our countries safe.

- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.4, JSP Objectives 3.1, 3.3, JSP Objective 5.1, 5.2
- **Risks** | The lack of action by Bulgarian authorities to deter and punish high-level corruption and other crimes poses a threat to the security of the country, increases foreign influence, makes Bulgaria a less attractive destination for foreign direct investment, and decreases confidence in institutions. Political infighting and external influence stall critical decisions related to military modernization, energy independence, and judicial reform. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks by sharing judicial reform best practices and collaborating on counter-terrorism capabilities.

Objective 1.2 | Encourage reforms that enhance the operation of a free and independent media and vibrant civil society to strengthen democratic institutions.

- **Justification** | In addition to persistent weakness in the rule of law and judicial sectors, Bulgaria suffers from an underdeveloped civil society and a media environment that is tightly controlled by entrenched political and oligarchic interests, as well as malign foreign influence. A robust civil society is essential to ensuring government accountability and to seeing much needed legal reforms through to completion. We will work to ensure a freer and fairer media landscape in Bulgaria, provide support to independent media and investigative reporting, and empower civil society organizations and activists to hold public officials and institutions accountable. We must also encourage the GOB to respect the human rights of all its citizens and adhere to its bilateral and international obligations. We will advocate for increased tolerance and inclusion strategies targeting marginalized groups such as the Roma, Muslims, persons with disabilities, and the LGBTQI+ community.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.3, 1.4, JSP Objective 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, JSP Objective 5.1, 5.2
- **Risks** | Erosion of political institutions and media independence decreases the effectiveness of U.S. policies and weakens Bulgarian democracy. Bulgarian political

leadership fails to demonstrate the sufficient political will to drive meaningful reforms. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks through concerted private and public diplomatic engagements with Bulgarian government counterparts, non-governmental partners, and other diplomatic missions, to closely monitor on developments and advocate for necessary reforms. In addition, the Mission will take every opportunity to publicly support a free and independent press.

Objective 1.3 | Support Bulgarian government institutions and officials, including at the sub-national level, to promote good governance and accountability to the voters.

- **Justification** | Action by regional and local actors is necessary to improve governance. Widespread corruption, at the national and sub-national levels, means resources are not effectively used in the public's interest, while offenders, especially at high levels in government, are not held accountable. This has caused the public to lose faith that the government works for the benefit of the people and has nurtured a culture in which expectations of justice are low. Greater digitalization and e-governance services, which the Bulgarian government is already working on, will help these efforts by increasing access, transparency, and oversight of government services and activities. Increasing stakeholder engagement in decisions both at the national and sub-national levels will also promote accountability. There is currently insufficient use of public consultation and impact assessments.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 2.1, 2.3, JSP Objective 3.1, 3.3
- **Risks** | Continued weakness in the rule of law, including corruption in public procurement and systemic influence of non-state actors over government institutions, undermine democratic institutions and public faith in national and sub-national institutions. Bulgaria's lack of collective political will limits its effectiveness in participating in bilateral and multilateral programs of interest to the United States. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks by pushing Bulgarian leaders, including local and municipal leadership, to involve stakeholders in key decisions; make government contracting open, fair and transparent; and act decisively and chip away at the culture

of impunity. The Mission will also use the free and independent media to garner public support for these efforts.

Mission Goal 2 | Encourage Bulgaria's development into a stronger NATO Ally and provider of regional security.

Description | The Black Sea region presents increasingly complex challenges to the security and stability of Bulgaria and our NATO allies and partners. Russian malign activity, irregular migration, and transnational criminal activity in Bulgaria's immediate vicinity necessitate that Bulgaria enhance its military and law enforcement capabilities to effectively counter security threats. Bulgaria seeks to modernize its military so it can play a stronger role in NATO deterrence and defense, but it has not fully enacted its modernization plans and public support for NATO is not as robust as in many other member states. The Embassy will continue efforts to aid Bulgaria's military and law enforcement in modernizing their equipment, infrastructure, and doctrine. The Embassy will also work to increase the Bulgarian public's awareness of the benefits of Bulgaria's NATO membership to encourage greater public support for and a more active Bulgarian role in the Alliance. Concurrent to enhancing law enforcement capabilities respective to border security, anti-smuggling, and counter-trafficking initiatives are required to develop anti-corruption capabilities within the respective law enforcement fields. U.S. counterparts should seek to conceptualize anti-corruption initiatives within capacity building initiatives. As the capacity of the Bulgarian military and law enforcement grows, the Embassy will seek greater operational cooperation with U.S. counterparts in addressing regional and global security challenges.

Objective 2.1 | Develop Bulgaria's military capabilities so that it can defend its sovereignty, meet its NATO obligations, and contribute meaningfully to regional deterrence and defense initiatives.

- **Justification |** Russia's 2014 invasion and occupation of eastern Ukraine and Crimea significantly changed the security situation in the Black Sea region. As a NATO Ally and Black Sea littoral country, Bulgaria is strategically placed to play a prominent role in

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regional security. We will partner with Bulgaria to counter security threats and to serve as a stabilizing force in the Balkans and on NATO's Southeastern flank. To that end, we will encourage and support Bulgaria's efforts to modernize its security forces.

Over 90% of Bulgaria's current military equipment is Russian-origin, but Bulgaria's latest Strategic Defense Review committed to reduce its dependence on such equipment, consistent with Bulgaria's Wales Summit pledge to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2024. Bulgaria must also continue to reappropriate defense spending to reach the NATO target of allocating 20% of its defense budget toward the procurement of major equipment. Additionally, Bulgaria needs to update doctrine and processes within all its defense structures to be able to fully integrate with NATO practices.

- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.4, 1.5
- **Risks** | Without additional investment, Bulgaria's military will struggle to achieve NATO capability targets and meet military readiness goals, to the detriment of the Alliance's deterrence and defense posture along its southeastern flank. Dependence on Russia for sustainment of certain legacy Russian equipment further puts Bulgaria's military readiness at risk. Absent political will to invite Allies to backfill certain capability deficits, Bulgaria could face challenges in performing certain collective security missions, such as air policing over the Black Sea, until it completes its own modernization projects. The Mission will continue to encourage Bulgaria's commitments to NATO and support opportunities to partner on security initiatives.

Objective 2.2 | Expand U.S. engagement along Bulgaria's Black Sea coast to better support Bulgarian efforts to counter security threats, particularly in the maritime domain, and broader malign influences in the Black Sea region.

- **Justification** | As the United States increases strategic focus on the Black Sea, U.S. Embassy Sofia is expanding our diplomatic engagement on Bulgaria's coast to support a critical NATO Ally. This expanded engagement is aimed at amplifying our extensive bilateral security cooperation, shoring up Euro-Atlantic values against growing Russian malign influence, and advancing economic diplomacy. The coastal city of Varna hosts

one of the largest ports on the Black Sea, the headquarters of the Bulgarian Navy, and Bulgaria's Naval Academy. The Bulgarian Navy is a key partner -- both internally to the embassy via strong partnerships with the Defense Attaché Office and Office of Defense Cooperation -- as well as externally with U.S. Naval Forces Europe (NAVEUR)/U.S. Sixth Fleet. The Mission also seeks to expand law enforcement cooperation on the coast to combat narcotics trafficking and smuggling. Embassy Sofia's Public Diplomacy Section maintains an active American Corner in Varna and through expanded engagement would provide more robust programming slate, improved oversight of grant funds, greater engagement with cultural and press partners. U.S. business interest in the Black Sea region is likely to grow as Bulgaria transitions from fossil fuels to renewable energy, including potential expansion of offshore wind energy. Our greater Mission engagement aims to identify new business opportunities and credible local partners, advocate for U.S. companies, and strengthen our anticorruption work.

- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.2, 1.4, 1.5, JSP Objective 2.3, 2.4, JSP Objective 3.1, 3.3
- **Risks** | Russia will continue to influence Bulgaria's politics, media, energy, and economic sectors with the objective of undermining Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Limited coordination among Bulgarian interagency reduces its ability to police territorial waters in the Black Sea. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks through increased visits to, and programs and trainings involving, the Black Sea region, culminating in the possible establishment of an American Presence Post.

Mission Goal 3 | Promote economic prosperity and energy diversification to improve Bulgaria's security, trade opportunities, and the environment.

Description | Bulgaria's economy is showing signs of strength in some areas but still faces a number of challenges. Legacy policies, energy dependence, lack of political will to implement change, and corruption in key sectors decrease foreign direct investment and decrease Bulgaria's prosperity. Bulgaria is making incremental changes in line with guidance from the European Green Deal and Just Transition. Bulgaria's draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan calls for deep structural reforms and investments to transition the economy to be

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competitive within the European and global market and to protect the environment. Reducing Bulgaria's energy dependence and diversifying its market would strengthen the economy and reduce foreign malign influences. Environmental efforts, including the adoption of new green technologies, could also contribute to diversification while supporting global efforts to combat climate change and increasing Bulgaria's resilience in the face of future threats and challenges.

Objective 3.1 | Encourage Bulgaria to develop more competitive, sustainable, and inclusive economy to increase growth and investment and to reduce political instability and malign influences.

- **Justification** | The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated unsustainable economic trends in Bulgaria, leading to slowed growth, increased debt, and high inflation. Malign foreign actors use an already weakened system to manipulate energy prices and undermine Bulgaria's economic independence, security, and political stability. Threat of state capture, undue influence on the regulatory process, lack of political will, lack of coordination among relevant ministries, and overall opacity of government institutions and the justice system also undermine the investment climate and the energy sector. This perpetuates reliance on unfair business practices, compounds socio-economic problems, and incentivizes many to utilize illicit practices and grey markets. Systematic exclusion of minority groups, coupled with an unstable economy, stimulates unemployment while deepening social and political divides. With an eye toward developing a more competitive and sustainable economy for all citizens, Bulgaria has made steps to implement needed changes in the business sector. Aspects of Bulgaria's legal and regulatory framework are also evolving in line with EU norms, such as those in the EU Green Deal and Just Transition, albeit slowly.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.2, 1.5, JSP Objective 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, JSP Objective 3.2, 3.3, 3.5
- **Risks** | An unpredictable and nontransparent business climate in Bulgaria hampers international trade and investment flows, as well as the country's overall economic development, limiting U.S. investment and making Bulgaria vulnerable to malign investment. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks by partnering with Bulgaria to

improve regulatory transparency and minimize excessive bureaucratic requirements, modernize and widen its education and job training programs, and thus improve its investment climate.

Objective 3.2 | Support Bulgaria's efforts to diversify the country's energy sources to increase energy independence and augment regional security.

- **Justification** | Bulgaria continues to be highly dependent on Russia for natural gas, oil, and nuclear fuel supplies, and for spent nuclear fuel reprocessing and storage. Projects that would help lessen that dependence have been hampered by regulatory hurdles, insufficient political will, or outright corruption. Gas links offering non-Russian-sourced gas, such as the Interconnector Greece- Bulgaria (IGB), have progressed very slowly. Meanwhile, gas links transiting Russian gas, such as the TurkStream 2, were swiftly completed. Competition on the national gas market is limited despite political rhetoric about market liberalization. Bulgaria's parastatal electric company is virtually bankrupt as a result of bad governance and reform is desperately needed to address deep structural problems in the electricity market. As a result, Bulgarian energy prices continue to climb. Ultimately, Bulgaria's energy dependence on a single foreign supplier is a key vulnerability to the country's security and health. Exploiting this vulnerability threatens not only Bulgarian citizens, but also the country's pro-Western alliances and European Union solidarity. By encouraging greater energy diversification and the use of forward-looking, environmentally-friendly technologies, Bulgaria will not only increase its security but also make an important step forward in the increasingly urgent global battle against climate change.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.2, 1.5, JSP Objective 2.2, 2.3, 2.4
- **Risks** | Energy prices continue to climb while dependence on a dominant energy supplier empowers malign influences and threatens the country's independence, security, and economic growth. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks by advocating for greater energy diversity and improved energy transit infrastructure,

while investing EU and domestic funds in new, green technologies and modernizing existing assets while phasing out inefficient, polluting infrastructure.

Objective 3.3 | Expand engagement on environmental initiatives and in green technologies to combat climate change and assure a cleaner environment for citizens.

- **Justification** | Bulgaria's new government has prioritized environmental issues and climate action on its national agenda in line with EU and other global efforts and is collaborating with the United States and other trusted partners to support a cleaner and healthier Bulgaria. Bulgaria's efforts follow its history of having some of the highest carbon emissions in the EU, lowest energy efficiency scores in the EU, and highest COVID-19-related mortality rates in the world. Bulgaria's health system is struggling to cope with the pandemic given a persistent lack of capacity within its hospitals. Progress on the economy and environment must also address a lagging scientific, technological, and digital base, which is prompting the Bulgarian "brain drain." Despite these challenges, Bulgaria has great potential for progress in all areas. Under the draft Recovery and Resilience Plan, the Green Bulgaria plan calls for environmentally friendly solutions in keeping with the EU Green Deal goals, including: increased digitalization; \$2.5 billion of European funds to support a low-carbon economy; and energy transition in the coal-dependent Maritsa Valley. Nuclear energy remains another critical component of the green transition, as it produces 40 percent of Bulgaria's electricity. If developed smartly, nuclear energy could provide Bulgaria a clean alternative to Russian fuels. Nevertheless, Bulgaria is in need of specialized expertise, concrete plans, transparent approval processes, and infrastructure to implement the changes required for its transition and will rely on the United States and likeminded European partners for support.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, JSP Objective 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4
- **Risks** | Carbon reduction goals are unmet while pollution becomes even worse. Attractive job opportunities remain scarce, exacerbating Bulgaria's "brain drain." The Mission intends to mitigate these risks by introducing economically attractive green

technologies and infrastructure development opportunities, promoting foreign investment that generates challenging and well-paying employment, and sharing best practices about coal region transition and reskilling practices.

Mission Goal 4 | Highlight shared Euro-Atlantic values and build people-to-people partnerships to bolster Bulgaria’s western orientation.

Description | Bulgarians are eager to engage with the United States but continue to maintain a historic affinity for Russia, whom they view as the savior from 500 years of Ottoman rule. Views on the United States and the West, as a whole, tend to split along generational lines. Older citizens exhibit a nostalgia for the “simpler times” before the 1989 transition to democracy, while younger Bulgarians tend to look to the West and view the United States more favorably. Russia and other malign actors capitalize on the lack of a mature, free press and the widespread use of social media to spread dis- and misinformation and to cast doubt on the benefits of Bulgaria’s western orientation. China is also growing its media and public diplomacy efforts in Bulgaria. Aggressive and wide-ranging public engagement is key to maintaining and growing the Bulgarian public’s support for Euro-Atlantic values and to shaping the opinions of future economic and political leaders. These efforts will facilitate the country’s further integration with the West, bringing greater wealth, peace, and stability for generations to come.

Objective 4.1 | Intensify the Embassy’s people-to-people engagement so that more Bulgarians embrace democratic values and support the U.S.-Bulgarian bilateral partnership.

- **Justification |** Public support is essential to our success in achieving policy priorities in Bulgaria and the region. Unfortunately, economic disparities, demographic challenges, and an active anti-Western propaganda campaign fuel discontent among Bulgarians. Polls indicate that Bulgarians – and increasingly Bulgaria’s youth – by far have the most favorable perception of Russia and Russian policies of all EU and NATO member states. Robust people-to-people engagement, not only in major cities but across the country, is essential to ensuring the Bulgarian people continue to look to the United States, and the

West, as their partner of choice to building a more secure and prosperous future. Programs and outreach initiatives that highlight our partnership and empower youth to affect positive change will bolster Bulgaria's western orientation and ensure strong public support for the shared democratic values that underlie our entire diplomatic agenda.

- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.5, JSP Objective 3.1, 3.2, 3.5, JSP Objective 5.2
- **Risks** | U.S. and NATO favorability ratings remain low or decrease, while Russia favorability grows or remains steady. The COVID pandemic and budgetary constraints inhibit our ability to grow people-to-people engagement. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks through active interagency coordination, and close coordination with other foreign missions and outside partners, to maximize limited resources and synergize programming; we also will increase our social media engagement and advertising, and reinvigorate the Embassy outreach program, to counteract disinformation and reach a broader audience.

Objective 4.2 | Increase awareness of, and resistance to, foreign malign influence among the Bulgarian public to encourage more informed and engaged citizens.

- **Justification** | Disinformation and fake news campaigns inundate Bulgarians with messages designed to undercut the country's commitment to NATO, EU membership, and Western democratic orientation. The Bulgarian public is generally unable to critically assess the veracity of news presented to them and is unaware that false narratives present a threat to Bulgaria's stability. Civil society and government actors who are aware of the threat often lack the training and resources to push back or counter disinformation. While we work in the short term to counter disinformation and present a positive narrative of our own, we must build long-term resilience of the Bulgarian people to recognize and reject false information, improve media literacy, and contribute to a fact-based discourse on key issues in society.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.4, 1.5, JSP Objective 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5

- **Risks |** Bulgarian media literacy remains low in the face of an ever-increasing volume of dis- and misinformation, and insufficient response by government and civil society actors to equip citizens with the tools to detect and reject fake news. Bulgarian media fail to engage in sufficient fact checking and investigative reporting and remain beholden to malign actors. The Mission intends to mitigate these risks through increased emphasis on PD programming and messaging to build media literacy and combat disinformation, and through close partnerships with Bulgarian government, civil society counterparts, and other international partners to build capacity and align/unify our efforts against foreign malign influence.

4. Management Objectives

Management Objective 1 | Implement workplace improvements to attract, retain, and further develop a high quality, diverse, and professional work force.

- **Justification** | Embassy Sofia has two enduring strengths that contribute to its efficient operations, strong customer service results, and good post morale: a well- maintained first-rate facility and talented, motivated local staff. The combination of these two factors have produced consistently high ICASS customer satisfaction scores, allowed program offices to rapidly expand their operations in the wake of a changing geopolitical climate, and even allowed Sofia to become a strong platform for regional and global initiatives such as: the Post Support Unit (PSU), which processes vouchers for Missions throughout the world; the EUR Regional Support Services office for position classification; and, continuing the EUR software Application Development Group (ADG), which creates proprietary, unique solutions for posts worldwide (e.g., the electronic Merit-Based Compensation application (GOMBC) , Contact Database, Online Auctions, and the Arrivals and Departures System(ADS)).

Post received across-the-board pay raises for all LE Staff each year from 2017-2020, for an average salary increase of 22% over that period. These wage increases have raised the overall salary base to the 70th percentile vis-à-vis local comparators and as such a wage increase was not authorized by GTM/OE in 2021, Over the last year, Post has continued to observe some employees leaving the Embassy for better paying positions and career opportunities elsewhere. Many of our most experienced LE Staff are reaching retirement age and Post will face significant challenges finding replacements with their capabilities as long as our wage levels remain non-competitive. Furthermore, HR has noted a decline in the number and quality of applicants as compared to previous years, which has also been noted by other employers, as well as the local government. Over the last year, some new applicants who receive a formal job offer have declined the offer due to salary reasons. Post will likely continue seeing this trend of a workforce

shortage and will take a more targeted recruitment approach to attract more qualified applicants.

During the pandemic, Post has delayed training and other required professional development requirements for both its USDH and LE Staff labor force due to travel and other restrictions. Reintegrating our work force, as well as keeping them current in the job requirements, will be a Post priority through the next two-to- three-years.

- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 4.1, 4.2
- **Risks** | In an increasingly tight labor market, with options for many local nationals to work abroad in the European Union, Post will find itself unable to attract the educated, diverse work force required to maintain its operations, including the regional platform we support. Post is actively pursuing additional outreach avenues for potential applicants, requesting to be moved to the 75th percentile, and targeted pay increases with GTM/OE (Global Talent Management Overseas Employment)

Management Objective 2 | Implement upgrades to enhance facilities and infrastructure and improve telework capable systems to accommodate increased staffing.

- **Justification** | The Embassy compound includes three primary buildings: the Chancery, the Warehouse, and the Marine Security Guard Quarters (MSGQ). The compound was built and occupied in 2004. These facilities are LEED Certified and have been well-maintained during the past decade. The compound is in very good condition. However, there remain areas in which building systems efficiency can be improved and cost savings achieved, mostly by equipment upgrades and minor changes to processes and practices. Many of the building appliances and systems will be nearing the end of their nominal life cycle in the next 5-10 years, and Post must remain alert to perform maintenance and monitoring of these components to ensure optimal life cycle and replacement timing.

Post also has 23 Government Owned (GO) Residences in our housing pool, which includes the Chief of Mission Residence (CMR). Improving seismic survivability on all of Post's residences and facilities will be the focus over the next three years.

- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 4.1, 4.2, 4.3
- **Risks** | The Sofia NEC (New Embassy Compound) commissioned in 2004 was one the first Standard Embassy Designs completed. As such, many of the improved features later NECs received are missing from our facility. Post has higher maintenance and repair costs because of this issue. Moreover, Sofia is located in Zone 3 seismically active area that requires constant attention and access to funding to lease and purchase new, more seismically sound residences. Post is developing, with OBO (Overseas Buildings Office) for improvements to the facility that will bring our maintenance and repair costs down and improve functionality. Additionally, we are in the process of surveying our residences for seismic survivability with the view of replacing those at the lowest rating.