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Stepping out of Russia's sphere of influence

The EPC Summit has sent a strong message to Russia: no deals can be expected at the expense of the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine or Moldova

The 2nd European Political Community (EPC) Summit that took place on 1 June 2023 in Bulboaca, Moldova, made history by marking the end of the so-called 'Russian sphere of influence' over the Eastern European region. The presence of 45 European countries' heads of state and government, including the Eastern Partnership partners, send a strong message to Russia: no deals or concessions could be expected at the expense of the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine or Moldova. Voicing the firm EU commitment to take steps in the direction of enlargement, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, reassured the Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian people that they are not alone in their fight for freedom.

The Moldovan governing political elite, institutions and, first and foremost, the Moldovan President Maia Sandu managed, in a short period of time marked by geopolitical struggle, to demonstrate strength and commitment to push their country out of the 'grey zone' of Europe. Not only did Moldova become Europe's centre, but it also determined Europe's agenda for one day — firmly stating that the country cannot be referred to as Russia's 'backyard' anymore.

A tale of partnerships and solidarity

Though the discussions went beyond Moldova, the results of the Summit considerably favoured the latter, both in political and development terms. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced that there would be a tripling of already committed financial assistance to Moldova, amounting to €1.6 bn. In the short term, €100 million will be provided to cover the immediate energy sector needs. In addition, Norway announced €50 million of financial aid for Moldova while the UK pledged £10.5 million to support Ukrainian refugees. This financial assistance is of utmost importance in fighting

Russian hybrid threats such as energy blackmail, information and cyber-attacks, and concerted anti-establishment actions using Russian political proxies in Moldova. At the same time, the political backup of 50 European leaders is an undisputable strong sign to continue the reforms and speed up the EU membership agenda in the wake of three years of electoral cycles in Moldova.

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The EPC Summit turned out as a perfect security exercise; an example of precise interoperability of institutions and partnerships. While NATO AWACS guarded the skies over the Summit venue, several other security arrangements were provided to secure Moldova. Ahead of the Summit, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell inaugurated an EU Partnership Mission – an exclusively civilian mission meant to strengthen Moldova's crisis management capacities, assist in enhancing resilience against hybrid threats – especially cybersecurity – and counter foreign information manipulation and interference.

The symbolic appearance of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the first to step on Mimi Castle's red carpet, once again demonstrated the solid Moldovan-Ukrainian relationship – not only as neighbours, but as friends and partners. Moldova continues to play a crucial role in hosting Ukrainian nationals and in providing logistic support to Ukrainian partners. It is largely understood that peace in the region is not an individual matter, but a collective one.

The commitment to support Ukraine in its fight for freedom and to strengthen Ukraine's and Moldova's defence capacities was reassured by all present leaders. The Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte referred to the need to expand the 'Patriot' coalition. The Polish Minister of Interior Mariusz Kamiński announced on Twitter on the day of the Summit that Poland will offer its Moldovan counterparts six planes (two Hercules and four Cass) full of modern protective equipment, weaponry and munitions meant to increase the capabilities of the Moldovan police and ensure public order.

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The presence of Russian troops and ammunition on the territory of Moldova, which includes the secessionist region of Transnistria, continues to pose an increased threat to both

collective and firm decision to bring peace to Europe.

Moldova and Ukraine. Thus, the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict becomes a priority for the region. This time, the Transnistrian settlement process was brought to discussion not as an impediment to Moldova's European integration, but as an issue that needs to be solved in order to provide a safe harbour for Moldovan citizens residing in the Transnistrian region. President Sandu stated that Moldova will not abandon the Transnistrian region while following the path to European integration. Using the previous experience with the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DSFTA), Moldovan authorities rely both on finding political solutions to the conflict based on the current context, as well as practical arrangements which would benefit people in the region. Complementary to Sandu's statement, Borrell mentioned that 'Cyprus became a member of the European Union while having a territorial problem. Moldova can also do it,' thus opening the doors to the EU for Moldova.

Overall, the second EPC Summit made it clear to Moldova that the European Union is ready for enlargement and is expecting the country to work speedily to ensure the compliance of the *acquis communautaire* and the association arrangement. The Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki encouraged an acceleration of the EU accession process, appreciating the courage with which Moldova copes with Russia's hybrid attacks. On the same note, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that 'Moldova's accession to the EU is not only realisable, but is also a fact that is to be accomplished.' Concluding with the words of the Moldovan President, the whole continent reunited 20 km from Ukraine, reaffirming the collective and firm decision to bring peace to Europe.



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