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Strengthening the Community. Key themes from the meeting of European leaders in Moldova

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The European Political Community (EPC) summit, held in Chisinau on June 1, 2023, was a step toward firmly rooting this format in the international system. At the same time, it was a clear gesture confirming the growing importance of the Eastern European countries. The meeting of European leaders outlined divergences on the issue of security guarantees for Ukraine. At the same time, the event was a success for the pro-Western power camp in Moldova.

The European Political Community. An international dialogue format bringing together forty-five countries. Initiated by French President Emanuel Macron after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The first summit of the Community was held in Prague on October 6, 2022. The purpose of the EPC's existence is to expand the political dialogue on issues fundamental to European security – primarily related to military threats and energy – beyond the European Union's member states. The format brings together EU members and its institutions with associate and candidate states, countries that do not express such ambitions such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Norway, or Iceland, as well as European powers: Britain and Turkey. Belarus and Russia were not invited to join the Community. Compared to other institutions, the EPC is distinguished by its lack of bureaucratization and current goals. The crux of the idea of the EPC is the desire to maintain the dialogue of the "European political family" for peace and stability on the continent, despite the existing political differences.

Chisinau Summit. The Republic of Moldova was the host for the second EPC summit. It was the largest political and diplomatic event in its history. Hosting the summit on the territory of a country that Russia still sees as belonging to its sphere of influence was a clear political statement. It took on additional overtones due to the fact that the deliberations took place on the grounds of a resort in the village of Bulboaca (near Chisinau), located not far from the border of unrecognized Transnistria, where Russian military troops are stationed, and a few dozen kilometres from the border with Ukraine. The meeting brought together more than forty heads of state. Noticeable was the absence of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, due to his duties related to re-election and the formation of a new government. The meeting was inaugurated with a joint address by Moldovan President Maia Sandu and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who was the first to arrive at the venue. The leaders of the two post-Soviet states declared deep cooperation and unity on the path of European integration ("we are ready to go shoulder to shoulder," Sandu and Zelenskiy said).

Security guarantees for Ukraine. The most important topic of the one-day meeting was security guarantees for Ukraine. The tone of the discussion was set by President Macron, who, during his speech in Bratislava on the eve of the summit, said that the West must give Ukraine "concrete and credible" security guarantees. In doing so, he suggested the direction in which he believes their formula should develop: "We should work out something between Israel-style security guarantees (guarantees that the U.S. gives to Israel – PO's note) and full membership (in NATO)." This was seen as a significant turnaround in the rhetoric of the French president, who until now had been considered very reserved on the issue. In so doing, it was noted that his speech in Bratislava was full of expressions of appreciation for the Central and Eastern European countries, their history, and their optics on security issues. It was perceived as an attempt at a new opening in France's relations with the countries of the region.

The topic of security guarantees was taken up at the EPC summit by President Zelenskiy. He stated explicitly that Ukraine is counting on a "clear invitation" to NATO membership and security guarantees during the transition period. He described both issues as "needed". This is likely to have set the agenda for international dialogue

ahead of the upcoming NATO summit, to be held on July 11-12, 2023, in Vilnius. The topic was also taken up by other European leaders, most of whom exercised considerable restraint. Of particular note was the stance of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who pushed back on the issue of NATO membership, pointing to criteria that preclude the admission of a country that is in armed conflict or in conflict with another country. Scholz stressed the current commitment of European countries and NATO members to support Ukraine, while pointing out that decisions on permanent security guarantees will be made after the war ends. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg spoke in a similar tone. Against this background, the voices of Central and Eastern European leaders stood out (Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas: "The only security guarantees that work... are NATO membership").

In terms of ongoing support for Ukraine during the war, the summit discussed the creation of an international coalition for the purchase of Patriot missile launchers and fighter jets (F-16s). This was an important topic on President Zelenskiy's agenda.

Moldovan context. For the Republic of Moldova, hosting the EPC summit was an opportunity to raise its international profile, as well as to manifest its affiliation with the Western political space and its aspirations for EU membership. The last point resonated particularly strongly in the communications of Moldovan leaders during and on the eve of the meeting (IES Commentaries No. 854). The summit was also an opportunity for European partners to announce increased financial and material assistance to the country; on May 30, 2023, The Council of the European Union decided to double financial support. Another 145 million euros were added to the 150 million euros allocated in April 2022. As a result, 220 million of the total 295 million will be provided in the form of loans, while the remaining 75 million will be provided in the form of grants. In addition, support of 50 million euros was already announced by Norway during the summit. Poland has decided to support the security sector. A shipment of weapons, ammunition, helmets, bulletproof vests, and other equipment was donated to services under the Moldovan Ministry of Internal Affairs (prior to the summit, anti-terrorists from the Polish police carried out joint exercises with Moldovan services; the involvement in the exercise of a Black Hawk helicopter, which was visible in the airspace over Chisinau, aroused a great deal of interest among the Moldovan public).

The topic of Transnistria was also raised. The attention of experts and the public was captured by the words of Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who said that the unrecognized republic would not be an obstacle to Moldova's admission to the Union. In doing so, he referred to the case of Cyprus, an EU member state that faces the problem of separatism of the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. President Zelenskiy, on the other hand, said that the problem of Transnistria is likely to be solved after Ukraine's victory in the war with Russia. He also stated unequivocally that he sees no point in continuing the "5+2" format, which, in addition to Moldova and Transnistria, also brings together Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE as well as the EU and the US as observers. According to the Ukrainian leader, a new formula for talks will be worked out after victory over Russia.

Conclusions

- The second summit of the European Political Community was a good step toward cementing the format's place on the international stage. Critical voices are still heard, accusing it of being ephemeral, lacking specific goals, and duplicating existing institutions. After the Chisinau summit, however, there were numerous opinions that modern Europe needs just such a format – one that allows for broad discussion and manifestation of a community of interests on strategic issues, while remaining free of bureaucracy and narrow commitments. Concerns are resounding among EU candidate and associate countries that Western European leaders will treat the EPC as a replacement format for the EU enlargement process. The recent summit, and political gestures to the countries of the region, muted these opinions for a while. However, it seems that the issue will continue to raise questions in the future. The deepening of divergences and the development of tensions around it will depend on the dynamics of the EU enlargement process. The goal of leaders who are particularly concerned about the development of the EPC should be to convince their partners that this format is needed for discussing a broader

political agenda beyond the issues of EU enlargement, and for including important countries from outside the EU – primarily the UK and Turkey – in the security debate. The importance of the EPC for European security issues was highlighted by talks on relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and a meeting between the presidents of Kosovo and Serbia.

- The organization of the summit in the Republic of Moldova, and the rhetoric of European leaders, reinforces the impression of the growing political importance of Eastern Europe. In the coming weeks, the topic of security guarantees for Ukraine and the country's membership in NATO will play a large role in the international debate. It is apparent that there are still clear contradictions on this issue. Most Western European leaders are unwilling to commit to developing lasting provisions. A new dynamic has been given to this issue by a turn in the rhetoric of the French president. His proposals for guarantees for Ukraine should be read as an attempt to ease tensions around the issue. Time will tell whether this is part of a genuine turnaround or a rhetorical ploy to create a good atmosphere ahead of the Community summit (the idea of which was originated by President Macron).
- The holding of the summit was an international success for Moldova's pro-Western power camp. It confirmed their determination to integrate with the European Union and build a security system in line with the interests of Western countries. In addition, additional financial assistance from the EU and Norway is likely to soon translate into socio-economic realities, which could have an impact on restoring popular support for the ruling Action and Solidarity Party. Josep Borrell's declaration on the Transnistria issue should not be considered either binding or ground breaking, but it was significant. It allowed President Sandu to make it clear that integration with the EU does not mean giving up on the separatist republic. It is noteworthy, however, that Borrell did not address the issue of Russian soldiers stationed in Transnistria – in fact, their presence may be a bigger obstacle to Moldova's integration into the EU than the mere existence of the unrecognized republic.