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The media storm over Transnistria

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The media in Russia and Transnistria are building up the threat of war from Ukraine and Moldova against the separatist republic. The Ukrainian parliament's termination on 21 May of the agreement with Russia on the transit of Russian troops to Transnistria, and Moldova's decision to limit Russian military access to the republic (hitherto only peacekeepers have been admitted) are offered as alleged proof of this. The Transnistrian media have cited Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko's declaration, during a meeting with the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis on 17 March, of his desire to "unfreeze the conflict", which they have presented as a threat. Further alleged proof of Ukraine's preparations for conflict is the nomination of Mikheil Saakashvili as governor of Odessa (Russia blames him for starting the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008), as well as a reported increase in the number of Ukrainian troops near the Transnistrian border. At the same time, the idea is being put forward that Moldova and Ukraine, which have introduced an economic blockade, are responsible for the deteriorating economic situation in the breakaway region. The bellicose rhetoric in the media has not been accompanied by similar statements from Kremlin representatives; Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin has only stated that Russia will support Transnistria and "take care of the region's security", as usual.

Commentary

- Both the Russian and Transnistrian media have exaggerated the recent moves by Kyiv and Chisinau, which do not in fact represent preparations for military action. From the point of view of Ukraine, which is struggling with the conflict in the Donbas, aggravating the situation on its south-western border would be counterproductive. Kyiv's decision prohibiting the transit of Russian troops, merely sanctioning a state of affairs which has persisted since at least the beginning of last year, stemmed from the fear that the transit of Russian troops could be used to spread the conflict beyond the Donbas. Moldova is also unable to take any offensive action, due to the weakness of the army and the lack of political interest in such a project. The economic crisis in Transnistria, meanwhile, has mainly been caused by errors in the regional governments' economic policies, reduced demand on the Ukrainian market, and a decline in the exchange rate of the Russian rouble, and not by aggressive neighbours.
- The intense media campaign in Transnistria has led to an increase in the feeling that an explosive conflict could be imminent. The general public believes that the actions of Moldova and Ukraine may represent preparations for the launch of hostilities. This sense

of danger is beneficial to the Transnistrian government, which can thus distract its citizens from the bad economic situation.

- The media offensive is part of the Russian strategy of blaming Ukraine for rising tensions in the region. The aim is to convince Western states that the Ukrainian government is an aggressor, a tactic which is intended to pressurise Kyiv into acceding to Russian demands to upheld the Donbas's broad autonomy and introduce constitutional reform in Ukraine. The uncertain situation has also forced Kyiv to maintain a military presence on the border with Transnistria, therefore tying down forces that could otherwise be used in operations in the Donbas. It is possible that in order to make the threat more credible, a provocation with the participation of Transnistrian forces will be staged in the coming weeks; but a serious exacerbation of the conflict with the involvement of Russian troops seems less likely – the forces stationed in Transnistria are too weak to undertake offensive operations.