Turbulent Months in Gagauzia: Internal Struggles, External Influences and Conflict Background

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In the summer of 2023, Gagauz Yeri, Autonomous Territorial Unit in the Republic of Moldova, got into the spotlight of political commentaries. In May, Evghenia Guțul, a representative of the "Șor" political party, won the regional election for the post of Başkan, the regional governor. However, this electoral outcome was met with disdain and skepticism by the central authorities in Chișinău. Moldovan president Maia Sandu defiantly refused to attend Guțul's official inauguration, the Anti-Corruption Committee attempted to seize ballot papers from the local election office (to which the region's residents responded with mass protests), and Guțul herself claimed to have been threatened by the state prosecutor. What are the reasons for this situation and what could be the consequences for the political life in Moldova?

The Gagauz are a historically Orthodox people speaking a Turkic language very close to Turkish and Crimean Tatar. It is believed that they came to the territory of modern Moldova in the 19th century, when these lands were part of the Russian Empire, trying to escape the Islamic domination of the Ottoman Empire. Since then, they have lived compactly in the south of Bessarabia, in and around the cities of Comrat, Vulcănești, and Ceadîr-Lunga. Unlike many ethnic groups living compactly in the USSR, they were not granted any territorial autonomy during the Soviet era. However, frightened by the prospect of Moldova's (re)unification with Romania, in 1988 the Gagauz intelligentsia formed a political group "Gagauz Halkı" ("the Gagauz People"). It became the nucleus of the nascent Gagauz nationalism. In 1989, the Gagauz activists proclaimed the establishment of the Gagauz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic as an autonomy within the Moldovan SSR. However, the authorities in Chișinău did not recognize it, and in response the Gagauz SSR was established, which after the collapse of the USSR turned into the unrecognized Gagauz Republic.

After a short period of semi-independence in 1990-1994, Gagauzia was peacefully reintegrated into the Republic of Moldova as an autonomy with its own legislative, executive, and judicial power. This was in stark contrast to another Moldovan breakaway entity, Transnistria, which continued to exist as an unrecognized state after a violent confrontation. In Gagauzia, there were no violent clashes with the central authorities, except for the infamous "March on Gagauzia" led by Moldovan Prime Minister Mircea Druc in 1990, when escalation of the conflict was prevented at the last moment. Gagauz Yeri opted for reintegration for several reasons. First, unlike Transnistria, it could not count on massive external military support. Second, its territory was not consolidated; even now, looking at the map of the region, we see its obvious "mosaic" character. In 1994, the territories where 50+ percent of the population are Gagauz automatically became part of the Gagauz autonomy, while the rest (in neighboring districts) decided their fate in a referendum. Third, unlike Transnistria with its high concentration of industrial capacities, Gagauzia is the poorest region of Moldova. As an independent state, it would be highly dependent on external finances.

Historically, Gagauzia is viewed as a region with strong pro-Russian sentiments. Indeed, for the majority of the autonomy's residents (about 135 thousand people) the main language of everyday and official communication is Russian, not Gagauz. Russian is one of the three official languages of the autonomy (along with Gagauz and Romanian), and Russian

television dominates the information field. It is also the main language of instruction in schools and the Comrat State University, as well as the language of church services. In 2011, this situation culminated in a "linguistic crisis" between Comrat and Chișinău, which was further exacerbated in 2018 when Russian ceased to be officially a "language of interethnic communication" in Moldova. In 2014, as a reaction to the Moldova-EU Association Agreement, a "consultative referendum" was held in Gagauzia. Almost 99 percent of participants voted in favor of joining the Russian-led Customs Union and for independence in the event of the country's unification with Romania. This is a symptom of deep miscommunication: the Gagauz public believes (probably following the propaganda of both local and Russian actors) that closer cooperation with the EU means loss of sovereignty and inevitably leads to "Romanization," that classical bogey of the 1990s. Gagauz voters fear the possible loss of access to the Russian labor and exports market, and the central authorities do not care to explain to them the advantages of the European alternative.

Here we come close to the true reasoning behind the current events. Being the poorest region of Moldova, Gagauzia clearly has no resources to influence Chișinău economically. Nor does it have any real political leverage: the Law on the Special Status of Gagauzia, adopted in 1994, is very vaguely worded and does not provide any real opportunities for the region to influence the state legislation. Even those elements of autonomy that do exist are constantly threatened by Moldovan lawmakers. Thus, in 2017, the Gagauz authorities were accused of non-compliance with the legislation on countering foreign propaganda (due to the proliferation of Russian-language media); in 2022 Oazu Nantoi, a representative of the ruling party, proposed to "revise" the Gagauz autonomy; and in July 2023 the Moldovan parliament stripped Gagauzia of some tax benefits. In this context, "instrumental separatism", threatening possible secession, becomes the only weapon that Gagauz politicians can use against Chișinău. In most cases, these steps have a purely symbolic meaning: for instance, the 2014 "referendum" demanded secession from Moldova if it lost its sovereignty. However, in the 1994 law, the respective provision is already stipulated (Article 1[4]), so there is no need for an additional vote on this matter.

Thus, the Gagauzian "pro-Russianness" is mainly tactical in nature. At rallies in support of the elected Başkan, not Russian flags are displayed, but Moldovan flags and the flag of the Gagauz Republic of 1990-1994 with a wolf's head – an ancient pan-Turkic symbol. The Moldovan flag is used as a common disguise for anti-EU sentiment: activists claim to be defending Moldovan sovereignty against "infringements" by the EU and Romania. Russia is not a sole "significant Other" for Gagauzia: it should not be forgotten that in 1994 it was Turkey, not Russia, that acted as guarantor of the nascent Gagauz autonomy. Süleyman Demirel, the then president of Turkey, linked Turkish-Moldovan relations with the status of the Turkic "ethnic brothers" in the country. Turkey has invested enormous resources into Gagauz business and education and even opened its consulate general in Comrat in 2020. A monument to Demirel proudly stands in the Gagauz capital, next to monuments to Mustafa Atatürk and Heydar Aliyev. Against this background, the pro-Russian orientation of the Gagauz no longer looks so unambiguous.

However, it seems that the Chișinău authorities are not inclined to see the nuances in the context that formed after February 24, 2022. Since the spring of 2023, both Comrat and Chișinău have been upping the antes with an increasing momentum. The president and her backing "Party of Action and Solidarity", which has a parliamentary majority, feel they need more direct control over the region, which they consider a "Russian proxy." With local elections coming up in November 2023, the ruling party fears the possible strengthening of its counterpart, the bloc formed by communists and socialists. The Başkan fears further encroachments on autonomy and de facto blackmails the center, publicly stating that she promises to "continue friendship with Russia", unblock Gagauz exports to Russia, and even

open a Gagauz representative office in Moscow (which the region cannot do independently of the national center).

The Eurosceptic "Șor" party, of which Guțul was a member, is considered the most "pro-Russian" party in modern Moldova; it was banned as "unconstitutional" in June 2023. After Evghenia Guțul was elected, Maia Sandu refused to attend her inauguration and has yet to sign a decree making her a member of the government (which the Gagauz Başkan *ex officio* is). During her first-ever visit to Gagauz Yeri since her election in 2020, Sandu met with the local branch of a women's NGO, but not with the region's governor. The president called Guțul a "member of a criminal gang", and Igor Grosu, the parliament speaker, said that "we have nothing to talk about with thugs." Başkan has faced unexpected challenges with the forming of the regional Executive Committee: the Gagauz legislature rejected multiple times the proposed composition of the body. Most likely, this is caused by the position of some local influential clans that do not support the respective candidates, but most observers also do not rule out that the crisis was inspired by Sandu.

Overall, when assessing the current situation in the southern region of Moldova, several points should be taken into account.

(1) The pro-Russian attitude of local residents is not a recent invention of Evghenia Guțul. Her predecessors, Mihail Formuzal and Irina Vlah, also considered Russia a "strategic partner," which resonated positively with the regional voters.

(2) The current crisis is a continuation of a decades-long miscommunication: the authorities in Chișinău do not bother to explain the meaning of European integration to the country's poorest region, so anti-European sentiment is quite widespread.

(3) The separatist threat is mainly instrumental: the region had a negative experience of independence in the 1990s and does not want in fact to repeat it. Separatist "games" are the only modus vivendi for Gagauz Yeri, which has no other economic or political leverage over the national situation.

(4) Russian influence is also perceived by the region in mostly instrumental terms, as a lever to counter the encroachments on autonomy; furthermore, it is counterbalanced by Turkish "soft power."

(5) Against the backdrop of a full-scale military conflict, the stakes are being raised by both regional and central actors. The Chișinău government wants to regain full control over the "dangerous" region, and that is exactly what Gagauzia fears the most. In September, a criminal case was opened against Evghenia Guțul; and earlier some regional MPs had proposed to hold a referendum on independence and "restore" the Gagauz Republic of 1990-1994. Under the current circumstances, if miscommunication is not overcome, negative scenarios are very likely.

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