

Gagauzia: growing separatism in Moldova?

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On 2 February, the regional authorities in Gagauzia - an autonomous region of the Republic of Moldova - carried out two simultaneous referenda. In the first, local residents were asked to declare their support for the country's integration either with the EU or with the Moscow-led Customs Union (CU); the second referendum sought their opinion on the draft law "On the deferred status of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia". Under the proposed legislation, if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty (for example, through the unification of Moldova and Romania, or even as some politicians have argued, through Moldova's further integration with the EU), the autonomous region would automatically become the independent Republic of Gagauzia. As expected, the outcome of the vote has shown overwhelming support for both the CU and for the draft law. According to the figures released by Gagauzia's Central Electoral Commission, 98.5% of the voters supported Moldova's integration with the Customs Union, while 98% voted in favour of the 'deferred independence' bill. Support for closer integration with the EU was marginal, reaching just over 2%. Despite the one-sided outcome of the referendum, there is no reliable evidence to suggest that the ballot was rigged. It should also be noted that voter turnout was very high, reaching about 70%. Representatives of the Moldovan Central Electoral Commission, however, believe that the figure may have been artificially inflated by excluding many of the voters currently residing abroad from the count.

The primary reasons for such an unambiguously one-sided result are: the traditionally pro-Russian attitude of the local population; a fear of the potential unification of Moldova and Romania (fuelled by local officials and compounded by statements released by Bucharest); a fear of a further drop in trade with Russia and restrictions on access to the all-important Russian labour market; and also poor knowledge about the European Union and the process of European integration. The referendum was held in the face of protests from Chisinau and a declaration that the vote would be illegal. The region's defiance was yet another manifestation of the long-standing crisis between Chisinau and the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia. This has been caused by

a number of factors, including: the struggle for power on the Gagauz political scene; the tussle between central and regional government over the degree of autonomy as well as the amount and the distribution of funding; and Russia's interference aimed at stoking separatist sentiment in the region. Moldova's decision to initial an association agreement with the EU in November 2013, which is expected to be officially signed in the second half of this year, became a catalyst for the current crisis. The problems in Gagauzia are just one of a number of instruments which Russia has used to dissuade Moldova from signing the document. Moscow hopes to destabilise the situation in Moldova and to cause the collapse of the pro-European

coalition government and thus help bring Moldova's Communist Party back to power. Despite the complicated relations between Chisinau and Gagauzia, it seems that there is little danger that the region may become dangerously unstable and force Moldova to change its current geopolitical course. The region is too small, sparsely populated, and too weak economically to muster enough leverage to put sufficient pressure on the central government. The most prominent political leaders in the region have been using separatist and pro-Russian slogans, both to mobilise their electorate and as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Chisinau. Importantly, the results of the February referendum (in combination also with other measures) are likely to be used by Russia and by the Moldovan Communists in an attempt to undermine the country's pro-European foreign policy.

Key features of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (*Unitatea teritorială Autonomă Găgăuzia*) is a special administrative region in southern Moldova, with a population of about 160,000 people (or 4.5% of Moldova's total population). The region's main ethnic group are the Gagauz - an Orthodox Christian, Turkic-speaking people of Turkish or Bulgarian origin¹, who have been living in the area for about two centuries. The region's total area is very small - around 1,830 km², which represents just 5% of Moldova's total territory. Gagauzia does not constitute a uniform and compact territorial unit, and under current law it includes all areas of Moldova where the Gagauz make up more than half the population, as well as those parts of the country which have opted to join the Gagauzia by refer-

¹ There are a number of theories regarding the origin of the Gagauz people, but due to the lack of written sources none of them can be verified. The Gagauz are most commonly considered to be the descendants of medieval Turkic tribes (*Uz* or *Oghuz*), Seljuk Turks or 'Turkified' Bulgarians, although some scholars see them as 'Turkified' Greeks.

endum². As a result, the boundaries of Gagauzia have undergone several small revisions since the region was officially established in 1994. It currently consists of four separate areas (see Map), with just three cities between them: the capital of Gagauzia, Comrat and Ceadăr-Lunga and Vulcănești, along with about 30 villages.

Gagauzia is exceptionally pro-Russian. In the collective consciousness of the Gagauz people, Russians are seen as protectors from external threats, especially from Romania.

Gagauzia did not enjoy special status within the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1990, following an increase in separatist sentiment, and due to fears that Moldova might merge with Romania³, MPs from the region announced the establishment of the Gagauz Republic, operating as an entity within the Soviet Union. Over the next four years, Gagauzia (like Transnistria) functioned as an unrecognised quasi-state. In 1994, the local authorities reached a compromise with the Moldovan government and officially recognised Chisinau's authority over the region, which resulted in the formation of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia within the borders of the Republic of Moldova.

Gagauzia has its own ethnic symbols, a flag, an emblem and an anthem, all of which are used

² As a result of the referenda, Gagauzia includes the village of Kirsovo, inhabited mainly by Bulgarians, the town of Svetlii, dominated by ethnic Russians, and Ferapontivka in which ethnic Ukrainians outnumber the local Gagauz population.

³ The Gagauz people tend to hold exceptionally strong pro-Russian and anti-Romanian sentiments. In their collective consciousness, Russians are seen as the protectors from external threats, especially those emanating from Romania. The people remain acutely aware of the particularly painful period of Bucharest's rule during the interwar period across present-day Gagauzia, followed by a fascist regime led by Ion Antonescu during World War II. Moreover, Romania is still seen as the cause of the Moldovan-Romanian nationalism of the late 1980s, which sparked ethnic tensions in the region.

alongside Moldova's national symbols across the autonomous region. It has three official languages: Gagauz, Moldovan (identical to Romanian) and Russian; however, Russian is spoken most widely, while proficiency in Romanian remains relatively low. The Gagauz Autonomous Region does not have its own Armed Forces, but it does have a local police force, which is fully subordinate to the General Police Inspectorate at Moldova's Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Until 2003, Gagauzia was guaranteed the power to declare independence in the event that Moldova lost its sovereignty. The region was stripped of that right following an amendment to the constitution.

The Gagauz economy is quite weak and represents only a small part of the Moldovan economy. It is based largely on agriculture and in particular on wine production. Industrial production does not play a significant role in the region and represents just 3.1% of Moldova's total industrial capacity. The region's main industry is food processing, alongside several textile companies and furniture makers. Gagauzia is considered to be Moldova's poorest region and remains dependent on financial support from the central budget. The region's budget represents only about 1.5% of Moldova's total budget⁴ and only about half of it comes from the taxes collected within the region. The remaining 50% of the budget comes from grants allocated by Chisinau.

Gagauzia's political system

The basis of Gagauzia's political system and its relations with Chisinau have been set out in three documents: the Constitution of the

⁴ The budget for 2014 has been set at approximately US \$30 million. Moldova's expenditure in the same period has been forecasted at approximately US \$2.1 billion.

Republic of Moldova, the Code of Gagauzia (seen as a local constitution) and the Law on the special legal status of Gagauzia. According to the above documents, Gagauzia is a special, autonomous territorial unit within Moldova's borders, and as such, it embodies the right of the Gagauz people to self-determination⁵. Nonetheless, the documents emphasise that Gagauzia is an integral part of the Republic of Moldova. Until 2003, under the region's statute and under the law on the special status of Gagauzia, the region's government was given powers to declare independence in the event that Moldova loses sovereignty. However, the powers were *de facto* abolished with the introduction of amendments to the constitution in 2003. The amended constitution considers Gagauzia to be a "constituent and integral" part of Moldova, while its land and resources have been identified as assets of the Moldovan people⁶. Although the provisions on the possibility of secession included in other two documents constituting the legal basis for Gagauzia's autonomy have not been amended, they have in effect been nullified due to the primacy of the constitution.

Gagauzia has its own executive and legislative bodies. Its law-making powers are vested in the People's Assembly (Halk Topluşu), which has 35 members elected for four-year terms. The assembly is responsible for drafting legislation relevant to the functioning of the region, including with regard to: the local budget, education, culture, social policy, and local administration⁷. All bills approved by the People's Assembly must comply with the constitution and with the law on the special legal status of Gagauzia. Any legislation failing to meet this condition is automatically considered null and void. The

⁵ Act "Об особом правовом статусе гагаузии (гагаузы)" dated 23 December 1994, Article 1, Section 1, Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, Article 111, Section 1.

⁶ Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, 29 July 1994 (reflecting amendments of 25 July 2003), Article 111, Section 1.

⁷ Act „Об особом...”, Article 12, Section 2.

People's Assembly also has the right of legislative initiative in the Moldovan parliament and the right to participate in the implementation of Moldova's foreign and domestic policy relevant to Gagauzia's interests⁸. The members of the assembly are granted immunity from prosecution within the boundaries of the autonomous region. Following the 2011 elections, the current People's Assembly has 25 independent members. Most of them belong to New Gagauzia - a faction of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM)⁹ led by the mayor of Comrat, Nicolai Dudoglo - or to United Gagauzia¹⁰, led by the head of regional government Governor Mihail Formuzal. The remaining ten seats were won by representatives of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM - 7), the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM - 2) and the Party of Socialists (1).

The executive powers within Gagauzia are vested in an Executive Committee headed by a governor, who - like the People's Assembly - is elected for four-year terms by a direct majority vote by the people of Gagauzia. The governor represents the Gagauzia in Moldova and abroad, and is therefore an *ex officio* member of the Moldovan government with the rank of minister. In contrast to other members of the cabinet, a governor cannot be dismissed by the president at the PM's request, and only the People's Assembly has the power to remove

a governor from office. The governor's duties include signing or vetoing laws adopted by the People's Assembly, and issuing regulations and directives. The governor also has the right to hold a referendum and to disband the People's Assembly if it is unable to approve the composition of a new Executive Committee.

The current crisis and its origins

The current crisis in the relations between Chisinau and Comrat is the result of the confluence of three factors: political competition inside Gagauzia; disputes over the degree of Comrat's autonomy from Chisinau; and Russia's policy aimed at stirring up separatist sentiment in Gagauzia and triggering conflicts between region and central government.

On 1 October 2013, Governor Mihail Formuzal submitted a proposal to the People's Assembly (PA) for a consultative referendum in Gagauzia

The key political forces in Gagauzia are: New Gagauzia (a faction of the Democratic Party of Moldova), the association United Gagauzia, and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova.

to "determine the direction of Moldova's foreign policy". On 27 November, the members of the PA authorised the referendum and additionally passed a draft law "On the deferred status of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia"¹¹ that was also to be put to a vote in a lo-

⁸ *Ibid.*, Article 12, Section 3.

⁹ The decision to link the organisation with PDM was taken on 24 November 2012. The leader of New Gagauzia, Nicolai Dudoglo, who ran against Mihail Formuzal in Gagauzia's 2010 gubernatorial elections, made no secret of the fact that "New Gagauzia" needed the support of a powerful political party with national reach if its candidate was to stand a chance of winning the region's next gubernatorial elections scheduled for late 2014/2015. <http://www.gagauz.md/ru/content/dudoglo-ya-i-moya-komanda-ponyali-chto-bez-podderzhki-kishinyova-novaya-gagauziya-mozhet-ne>

¹⁰ Due to a ban on establishing local political parties, there are no Gagauz parties in Gagauzia. Instead, most local politicians are members of local civic movements. Individuals seeking a seat in the People's Assembly, run as independent candidates, and only later form factions, which are often also joined by members running from party lists. Consequently, the number of members in a faction may exceed the number of independent candidates.

¹¹ The Bill does not introduce any major changes to the existing provisions in the acts that form the legal basis of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia. The most important modification is the theoretically automatic change in sovereignty. Although local legislation previously also granted Gagauzia the right to declare independence in the event that Moldova lost its sovereignty, the new law automatically establishes an independent Republic of Gagauzia at the moment Moldova's sovereignty is lost and without the need for approval by the Gagauz people or the region's government. It seems, however, that the new rules can be lawfully implemented only after the loss of Moldovan sovereignty has been officially recognised.

cal constitutional referendum. 2 February 2014 was set as the date for both issues. It appears that the real reason behind the decision to hold the referendum was linked to a power struggle between Formuzal (who is now serving his second term as governor) and the mayor of Comrat, Nicolai Dudoglo. The idea of a referendum being held on accession to the Customs Union has long had significant support from the Gagauz people. Already in December 2012,

The crisis in the relations between Comrat and Chisinau stems from political rivalry within Gagauzia, as well as struggles over the degree of autonomy held by the region, and Russia's policy, which seeks to stir up separatist sentiments in the region.

New Gagauzia called for a vote on the country's geopolitical orientation. Nonetheless, the referendum proposed by the governor was not immediately backed by New Gagauzia¹² due to fears that the voters could perceive support for the initiative as a success for Formuzal's administration, which would be of no benefit to the governor's political opponents. It was only after a failed attempt on 15 November to remove Formuzal from office that the leaders of New Gagauzia finally decided to support the referendum. To make their own mark, however, they augmented the question with the populist idea to demand guarantees that would automatically become an independent state if Moldova should lose sovereignty, for example by merging with Romania. This put New Gagauzia in a much stronger position and allowed it to present itself as a promoter and initiator of the new referendum. The intense rivalry between Nicolai Dudoglo, the leader of New Gagauzia, and

Governor Formuzal is fuelled by the upcoming gubernatorial elections in the region, planned for late 2014 or early 2015. Dudoglo has made no secret of his gubernatorial ambitions, while Formuzal - who is prohibited from running for a third consecutive term - may need backing to secure a parliamentary seat in Chisinau.

It seems likely that the motivation behind the government in Comrat organising the referendum was their attempt to strengthen its bargaining power in talks with Chisinau, which would enable it to negotiate a better funding formula for the region. Gagauzia uses its threats to adopt pro-Russian policies as a bargaining chip in local power struggles and to put political pressure on the government in Chisinau. This in turn, allows it to effectively negotiate the degree of its autonomy or the amount of funding it receives. Since July 2013, the regional government in Gagauzia has been trying to block amendments to the law on local public finance. Under the proposed changes, the revenues from taxes collected within the region would be significantly reduced: Gagauzia would keep 25% of the income tax collected from individuals and 50% of corporate income tax, VAT and excise duty¹³. Currently, 100% of locally collected tax revenue stays in Gagauzia. The resulting gap would be filled via subsidies from the central budget, which would increase the region's dependence on Chisinau¹⁴.

It is also possible that the growing political struggle in Gagauzia is being exacerbated by a rivalry between the two main political parties that form Moldova's ruling coalition: PLDM and PDM. Formuzal is thought to be a political opponent of Vlad Plahotniuc - the main sponsor and deputy leader of PDM, while at the same time being a supporter of PLDM leader and former Prime Minister Vlad Filat. The attempt by members of New Gagauzia (and by extension,

¹² At the time, New Gagauzia argued that there was little point in holding a referendum on EU vs. CU integration in Gagauzia alone, and that such a vote should be held nationally.

¹³ <http://www.kommersant.md/node/19159>

¹⁴ Currently, subsidies represent about 50% of the region's budget; if the changes come into force, this share will increase to 72%.

of PDM) to remove Governor Mihail Formuzal from office on 15 November could be analysed in the context of a struggle for control over the administrative apparatus in the Gagauzia. Formuzal's departure, followed by a snap election, would most likely have seen Dudoglo take over as governor. Consequently, PDM would have been given a *de facto* monopoly on power in Gagauzia, which would have allowed it to use its clout to improve the Democrats' chances in the parliamentary elections scheduled for late November. Finally, this would also have given PDM its own minister, whose appointment would not depend on approval from the prime minister.

Russia's activity in the region

Although the current crisis is the result of mainly domestic political rivalry, the tensions between Chisinau and Comrat have also been stirred up by Russia. The outcome of the Gagauz referendum, which has shown a clear preference for closer integration with the Customs Union, has undoubtedly been welcomed by the Kremlin, which is seeking to destabilise the political situation in Moldova and to slow down, or even stop the process of Moldova's European integration. Russia supported the plans for a referendum from the very beginning. In early 2014, Farit Mukhametshin, the Russian Ambassador to Moldova, said "this year, the embassy will pay particular attention to Gagauzia and Taraclia"¹⁵ which are seen as "positive role models" for the rest of Moldova. The voting process itself was monitored by Roman Khudyakov, who is a member of Russia's State Duma and who later described the referendum as well organised and fair. On 2 February, shortly after voting ended, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin welcomed the unprecedented turnout

¹⁵ Taraclia is a region neighbouring Gagauzia, with a population of about 40,000 people and, like Gagauzia, it is predominantly pro-Russian. Ethnic Bulgarians make up the bulk of Taraclia's population.

and said that the outcome of the referendum "must have made the supporters of European integration in Chisinau furious". The media in Russia widely reported the Gagauz referendum,

The extreme outcome of the referendum reflects the pro-Russian views of Gagauzia's residents, the fears of a possible unification of Moldova and Romania, and concerns about the impact of EU integration on trade with Russia and access to Russia's labour market.

stressing that, contrary to the declarations made by government officials in Chisinau, opposition to EU integration was widespread among Moldovans, adding that residents in other parts of the country had simply not yet had the opportunity to express their opinion. The reports also repeatedly suggested that if the Moldovan government continued to pursue a pro-EU foreign policy, the country would break up, or at least become politically destabilised. It should also be noted that due to budget cuts made by Chisinau the referendum in Gagauzia was bankrolled by Yuri Yakubov, a Russian businessman of Gagauz origin.

The central government's position on the referendum

From the very beginning Chisinau strongly opposed the idea of a referendum being held on the question of EU vs. CU integration. Under Moldovan law, foreign policy is the prerogative of central government and may not be the focus of any referenda organised by Gagauzia. On 3 January, a court in Comrat ruled that the referendum would be illegal, but the regional government ignored the court's decision, arguing that the ruling would not be final for another 30 days, and therefore not until after the scheduled date for the referendum. As a re-

sult, on 9 January, Prosecutor General's Office launched a criminal investigation against the organisers of the referendum for alleged usurpation of power.

In a last ditch attempt to prevent the vote from going ahead, the central government withheld the funds allocated for its organisation (about US \$70,000). However, the measure proved ineffective after Yakubov offered to cover the total cost of the referendum (see above). Finally,

Splitting the region from the rest of Moldova is not in the interest of the local political elites, who do not wish to emulate Transnistria, whose government is fully dependent on Russia and shunned by the international community.

on 22 January, Prime Minister Iurie Leancă and President of the Moldovan Parliament Igor Corman arrived in Comrat for a special session of the People's Assembly. However, these discussions also failed to persuade the region's government to cancel the vote. Since then Chisinau has not adopted a tougher line against the region, although it continues to emphasise that the referendum had no legal force and should be treated as nothing more than an opinion poll. The opposition Liberal Party has been the only political body to officially demand that Governor Formuzal be removed from the cabinet.

Reasons for the success of the referendum

There have been a number of reasons for the extremely one-sided outcome of the vote and the high voter turnout. In addition to their traditionally pro-Russian views, the residents of Gagauzia also acted out of fear that Moldova might indeed merge with Romania. In the months running up to the referendum, these concerns were fuelled by a series of unmistakably pro-unification statements made in Bucha-

rest by Romania's President Traian Băsescu¹⁶. The comments were then very skilfully used by both the region's government and the Communist opposition to mobilise the electorate. In addition, the Gagauz people believe that Chisinau's pursuit of closer integration with the EU could translate into a drop in living standards in Gagauzia. Russia's embargo on Moldovan alcoholic products introduced on 11 September 2013 affected primarily Gagauzia, where the agricultural sector is focused largely on wine production. Similarly, the potential restrictions on access to Russia's labour market, which the Kremlin announced in the second half of last year, would affect the migrant workers from Gagauzia most acutely, as Russia is a key destination for them (with only few Gagauz workers seeking employment in the EU). In addition, there has been a profound misunderstanding of the very nature of European integration and a near complete lack of knowledge about the EU. This has been the case mainly because the government in Chisinau has failed to implement a coherent information policy and because of the relatively low popularity of Romanian-language media in Gagauzia. Consequently, the people of Gagauzia tend to learn about the EU chiefly from Russian media reports.

The outlook for Gagauz separatism

It is unlikely that the situation in Gagauzia could in future become a serious problem for Chisinau. This region does not have the sufficient political and economic power to be able to shape Moldova's policy as a whole. Its only real bargaining chip is the threat of separatism and

¹⁶ In recent months, Băsescu announced in a TV interview that following its accession to NATO and the European Union, Bucharest's new major political project should be its unification with Moldova. The President also stated that if Transnistria's and Gagauzia's resistance were to threaten Moldova's chance of EU integration, Romania would be duty-bound to restore Chisinau's pro-European course by unifying Romania and Moldova". <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-12-04/president-romania-supports-unification-moldova>

the political support it receives from Russia. There is no doubt that the regional government in Comrat will continue to capitalise on the pro-Russian and anti-Romanian sentiments, both to mobilise its electorate and increase its own support, as well as to gain the upper hand in negotiations with Chisinau concerning the degree of the region's autonomy or its level of funding. This is likely to become particularly apparent in the run-up to the elections. However, any real attempt to split the region from the rest of the country seems highly unlikely. This is because full sovereignty is not in the best interest of the local political elite, who are aware that breaking away from Moldova would put Gagauzia in a position similar to that of Transnistria, viz. of complete political and economic dependence on Russia, coupled with international isolation. It appears to be more beneficial to maintain the current status since this allows Gagauzia to win political concessions from the Chisinau government by capitalising on the pro-Russian sentiments of its people and Russia's interest in the region. Gagauzia's government's policy of strengthening its position relative to Chisinau reflects Moscow's strategic interests but, in contrast to Transnistria, the policy is not controlled or formulated by Russia,

and the local leaders are seen by the Kremlin as players rather than pawns within its wider geopolitical strategy.

Although the results of the February referendum have not been recognised by Chisinau, they will undoubtedly be turned into a propaganda tool by the opponents of Moldova's EU integration, both at home and abroad. There is no doubt that the issue will be used by the Moldovan Communists and by Russia to destabilise the situation in Moldova, especially ahead of the signing of an association agreement between Chisinau and the EU, scheduled for September. It is also possible that Moscow still hopes that the Chisinau government will lose power, triggering a snap election. Consequently, the coming months might see attempts to hold similar "referenda" or opinion polls in other traditionally pro-Russian parts of the country, especially in Moldova's second largest city (excluding Transnistria) - Bălți. However, it should be noted that, should the revolution in Ukraine have a successful outcome, this would certainly improve the political position of the pro-European government in Moldova and reduce the strength of the arguments put forward by the opposition Communists.

MAP

Republic of Moldova



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