

## TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY IN GAGAUZIA

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The year 1995 was momentous for the Gagauz people located primarily in the towns and villages of southern Moldova in the area known as Gagauzia. The Gagauz leadership in Comrat and the Moldovan government in Chisinau reached agreement in December 1994 on autonomy for Gagauzia, ending a five-year secessionist movement involving both a war of words and sporadic conflict. For Chisinau, this agreement settled the lesser, but nonetheless important, of two secessionist movements that threatened the Moldovan state's viability. For Gagauzia, the agreement set the terms for extensive cultural, political, and social autonomy within Moldova. For Europe, this agreement broke new ground in granting a small nation control of its affairs within a larger state.

The law on Gagauz autonomy passed by the Moldovan Parliament on 23 December 1994, set in motion a series of events during the first half of 1995. Voters in towns and villages decided which localities would make up the autonomous entity, how they would be represented in the newly formed Gagauz-Yeri (parliament), and who would serve as the Gagauz Baskan (head or governor). The law also led to new relationships between central Moldovan authorities and the newly formed Gagauz institutions. Each of these steps raises interesting questions involving the relationship between majority and minority nations within a larger political entity. Before exploring these contemporary questions, some background is needed on the history of the Gagauz, their migration to southern Moldova, and their treatment during the Russian and Soviet periods.

### **Who are the Gagauz?**

Most Gagauz living today can be found in southern Moldova and the contiguous Ukrainian oblast. In the 1989 Soviet census, 198,000 people identified themselves as Gagauz. Of this number, 153,000 lived in Moldova, where they make up 3.5% of the population. An additional 36,000 Gagauz lived in the Odessa oblast of Ukraine (most of these villages are within 40 kilometers of the Moldovan border on the territory that Stalin transferred from Bessarabia to Ukraine after the Second World War). Thus, almost all Gagauz live in a single geographic "homeland" which is now part of two independent states.

A century ago, according to Stepan Kuroglu, Chairman of the Gagauz Research Department of the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, Gagauz could be found in other areas as well. Bulgaria had four cities and 67 villages where Gagauz predominated

leaders from both of the break away areas; Chisinau's action strengthened relations between the two secessionist areas and made continuing negotiations on the basis of trust between Chisinau and either of the parties more difficult.

Gagauzia held its first presidential election on 1 December 1991, the same day that Ukraine held its referendum for sovereignty which sealed the fate of the former USSR. Stepan Topal, who had been acting as Gagauzia's executive, received almost all of the votes, and participants overwhelmingly affirmed that Gagauzia should remain a part of the USSR. A week later, Mircea Snegur was elected for a five-year term as Moldova's first president. Snegur's election lessened the influence of the pan-Romanian Popular Front and established a force in Chisinau willing to deal with the fundamental issues of territorial autonomy for Gagauzia. Nonetheless, the path to an eventual agreement was difficult. At first Topal had little interest in any arrangement implying subordination to Chisinau, yet he seemed to realize that recognition as an independent state was not a realistic dream. Under Topal's leadership, the self-declared autonomous territory permitted the Gagauz paramilitary formations (like the Transnistrian Republican Guard) to attack administrative offices in both Moldovan and Bulgarian villages during 1992-1993. While only sporadic, these forays made serious discussions with Chisinau almost impossible. Even more damaging was the Gagauz sympathy for the Transnistrian secessionist movement during the 1992 war.

An intermediate step that has remained the primary goal of the Transnistrians has involved the federation/confederation of Gagauzia, Transnistria, and the remaining territory of Moldova. Such an approach recognizes the sovereignty and essential independence of the three areas, which would then, by treaty, relinquish some of their powers to a central authority. Gagauzia's very presence and desire for local control makes the Transnistrian articulation of such a proposal more credible, though Chisinau has been unwilling to entertain it.

The Gagauz demand for outright independence, Transnistria's parallel (and more serious) secession, and Chisinau's inability to enforce its control over either territory ultimately led to an agreement that codified significant local autonomy for Gagauzia. Had these circumstances not coincided, Chisinau would have been unlikely to agree to a precedent-setting grant of territorial autonomy. Because the Moldovan leadership viewed Gagauzia as the lesser of its secessionist problems and the consequences of meeting many of the Gagauzian demands relatively minor, it was willing to establish a precedent that it hoped it could then apply to Transnistria. The significance of the final agreement is underscored by the initial opposition to its terms by the Council of Europe. Other European states with national minority populations far larger than the Gagauz feared that their own minorities would demand the same level of autonomy granted to the Gagauz.<sup>3</sup> But Moldovan central authorities had little choice: an agreement granting "special status" to Gagauzia not only removed a major challenge to the new Moldovan state, but also created at least the foundation for the discussion of a similar settlement with Tiraspol.

Unlike the left-bank movement toward autonomy which eventually led to secession and war, Comrat and Chisinau were willing to go further in their search for a compromise. In early 1991 Chisinau offered the Gagauz a special *raion* that would have increased responsibility for local self-government and, at the same, time increased budgetary support for the southern region. Some months later the Gagauz began discussing a proposal for autonomy that conceded Moldova's overall sovereignty but outlined administrative and political structures that would provide considerable self-government to Gagauzia.<sup>32</sup> The final agreement on autonomy, reached in December 1994, contains many of the features of these earlier plans.

The biggest difference between the Gagauz and the Transnistrian secessions has been Moscow's relative absence in the Gagauz situation. Gagauz leaders are not as closely linked to the former Soviet institutions as are Tiraspol's leaders. From the other side, Moscow - from the early days of the two secessions - paid far greater attention to Tiraspol. While some ultra-nationalist, Russian figures include Gagauzia with other areas that want to maintain ties to the old union, they do not have the same interest and loyalty to the Gagauz that they have toward Russians in the "near abroad." Thus, the negotiations toward a Gagauz settlement remained bilateral, while from the beginning the Transnistrian talks involved Moscow, the OSCE, and later Ukraine.

Ukraine joined Russia, the OSCE, Moldova, and Transnistria in formal negotiations beginning in the summer of 1995. For its part, Ukraine has consistently supported Chisinau's position toward both the Gagauz and the Transnistrians.<sup>33</sup> First, Ukraine wants to avoid potential territorial unification of the Gagauz on its side of the border with their co-nationals living in Moldova. If Gagauzia were to become autonomous or independent, it might want to incorporate the Gagauz *irredenta* living in Ukraine, of which was divided from the larger Gagauzian population and territory by Stalin in 1940. Second, because of both Crimean and its own left-bank threats of secession, Ukraine is particularly sensitive to any redrawing of borders. Finally, Moldova has been supportive of cultural and language rights for the Ukrainians who make up Moldova's largest minority.

### **Striking the Deal**

The change in leadership in Chisinau from the pro-Romanian Moldovan Popular Front to the group committed to long-term Moldovan independence made serious negotiations with Gagauzia possible. The election of Mircea Snegur as President, Petru Lucinschi as Parliamentary Chairman, and the appointment of Andrei Sangheli as Prime Minister resulted in a leadership determined to re-establish central authority within Moldova's former borders. The disastrous 1992 war with Transnistria seems also to have convinced the leadership that patience and moderation would be the best

negotiating strategy. At the same time, the realization that the Transnistrian problem was much more intractable than the Gagauz situation encouraged Chisinau to move decisively to get at least one of its territorial problems resolved.

Essential agreement was reached between Moldovan and Gagauz negotiators in mid-1993 but was blocked in the Moldovan Parliament by the Popular Front and its pro-Romanian allies, in spite of the pleas for passage by Snegur, Lucinschi, • and Sangheli. The matter was then put on hold until the new Agrarian-dominated Parliament was elected in February 1994 and the new Constitution (with Article 111 allowing "Special Autonomy Statute") was passed in July 1994.<sup>34</sup> The delay resulted in minor modifications to the earlier draft, some of which were included not only to meet Gagauz demands but with the realization that parallel concessions would be necessary in any case to resolve the Transnistrian secession.<sup>35</sup>

On 23 December 1994, the Moldovan Parliament approved the law, on the status of Gagauzia-Gagauz Yeri (*locul unde traiesc gagauzii*—"the place where the Gagauz live")-<sup>36</sup> The title itself has significance. In their own language, Gagauz Yeri best translates as "Gagauz land," and the term Gagauzia (which appears in a hyphenated form with Gagauz Yeri throughout the document) has a country-like form. Thus, from the outset the law recognizes both the people and their land.

The legislation makes major concessions to both parties. Article 1 (1) states that Gagauzia is an "autonomous territorial unit with a special status for the self-determination of the Gagauz people." At the same time, this provision recognizes that Gagauzia is a "constituent part of the Republic of Moldova." Thus, Chisinau recognizes the Gagauz as a people and devolves control of, some, political, cultural, and economic matters to Gagauzia. And Gagauzia recognizes its subordination to the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova.

In addition, Article 1 (4) states that "in case of a change of the Republic of Moldova's status as an independent state, the Gagauz people have the right to external self-determination." The history of this point involves Transnistria as well as Gagauzia and goes back to the early days of the Moldovan independence movement. Both secessionist movements were triggered in large part because of non-Moldovans' fear of their status should Moldova rejoin Romania. The more moderate Moldovan politicians were willing to concede that both Transnistria and Gagauzia could go their own way should this occur, but this concession became formal only with the law on special status for Gagauzia. Thus, the Moldovan Parliament acknowledged that it has no right to cede the Gagauz territory to another state without the agreement of the Gagauz people.

Article 3 notes that Moldovan, Gagauz, and Russian serve as the official languages of Gagauzia and that Moldovan and Russian will serve as the languages for correspondence with public administrative authorities. The use of Russian for administrative purposes is particularly important to the Gagauz, since most are unable to use the state language. Gagauzia can also use its own symbols together with those of the Republic of Moldova (Article 4).

Article 5 defines the territory of Gagauzia as those localities in which the Gagauz constitute more than 50% of the population. Those localities in which the Gagauz are less than 50% are included if a majority indicates in a local referendum that it wants to link itself to the Gagauz territory. Thus, some outlying Gagauz settlements are included in Gagauzia even though they are not contiguous to the main area of the "autonomous region. Other Villages inhabited mainly by non-Gagauz within the area of Gagauzia are not subject to Gagauz administration. Twenty-nine settlements, including three large towns (Comrat, Ciadar-Lunga, and Vulcaesti) and 26 Villages, now comprise Gagauzia. (

The Popular Assembly is designated as Gagauzia's representative authority (Article 7). It is to be elected every four years on the basis of one seat for each 5,000 voters, with each locality having at least one deputy. The chief executive is the Baskan, who is also elected for a four-year term. The Baskan must speak the Gagauz language. The Baskan is also a member of the Moldovan government by decree of the President of Moldova (Article 14).

The Popular Assembly and the Baskan were elected in May and June 1995. Gheorghii Tabunscic became the first Baskan, and set about the task of administering the autonomous region. However, as Charles King notes, the devil is in the details: "How local leaders are to administer region whose constituent parts (the villages) are not territorially contiguous remains uncertain." The uncertainty of grants of authority to the "autonomous region will certainly result in jurisdictional struggles between the autonomous territory and central ministries.

But more important than the resolution of all the administrative questions is the agreement's acknowledgment of Moldova's territorial integrity. Concomitant with Chisinau's consenting to Gagauz territorial autonomy was Comrat's recognition that Gagauzia was part of Moldova and subordinate to the Moldovan Constitution. This arrangement is advantageous to both sides: autonomy, though limited and to some extent symbolic, grants the Gagauz the recognition as a nation (not just a minority) that they have long desired; at the same time, it permits attention to the difficult Transnistrian dispute that remains the major threat to Moldova's viability as an independent state.

Two years have now passed since Parliamentary action on Gagauz autonomy. The first six months of 1995 were devoted to putting the institutions—the Halk Toplusu (popular assembly), the Baskan, and the administrative offices—in place. Now, after 18 months of regional autonomy, a degree of normalcy has been re-established. According to Vasilie Uzun, the chief assistant to the Baskan, normal administrative tasks—dealing with Gagauzia's perennial water shortage, combatting unemployment, controlling crime, and trying to upgrade wine production—have replaced many of the earlier concerns of identity and the location of political power.<sup>38</sup> Gagauzia, like the rest of Moldova, must now concentrate on rebuilding its devastated economy and providing basic services to its population.

NOTES

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1. Stepan Kuroglu, Chairman of the Gagauz Research Department, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, personal interview, Chisinau, 30 May 1995.
2. Olga Radova, "To the Problem of the Gagauz Ethno-demographic Development in the 19th Century," unpublished paper, Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, 1995.
3. Hülya Demirdirek, personal interview, July 1995; Radova, *ibid.*; Valentin Zelenciuc, "Populatia dintre Prut si Nistru: Probleme de identitate etnica," *Revista de Etnografie si Folclor*, Vol. 38 (Bucuresti: Editura Academiei Romane, 1993), pp. 1-2; "Gagauzi: Issledovaniya i materialy," *Rossiiskii etnograf*, Vol. 17 (Moskva: Rossiiskaya Akademia Nauk, 1993).
4. G. Dimitrov, "Potekloto I proiskhozhdenieto na dumata," *Izvestiya na Varnensko arkheologichkoto druzhzhestvo*, No. 2, 1909, pp. 15-25, cited by Radova, 1.
5. See Valentin Zelenciuc, "Populajia dintre Prut si Nistru: Probleme de identitate etnica," *Revista de Etnografie p Folclor*, Vol. 38 (Bucuresti: Editura Academiei Romane, 1993), pp. 1-2; "Gagauzi: Issledovaniya i materialy," *Rossiiskii etnograf*, Vol. 17 (Moskva: Rossiiskaya Akademia Nauk, 1993).
6. Kuroglu, personal interview, Chisinau, 30 May 1995.
7. See Shantha K Hennayake, "Interactive Ethnonationalism: An Alternative Explanation of Minority Ethnonationalism," *Political Geography*, Vol. 11, No. 6, November 1992, pp. 526-549; Jeff Chinn and Robert Kaiser, *Russians as the New Minority* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper "Ethnic Mobilization and Reactive Nationalism: The Case of Moldova," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1995.
8. V. S. Zelenchuk, *Naselenie Bessarabii i Podnestr'ia v XIX v*, pp. 158, 197.
9. The southern region of Bessarabia (Bugeac), today occupied by Gagauz and Bulgarian villages, was under Romanian rule from 1859-1878. During this same time the northern part of Bessarabia was ruled from Moscow, as well as the 1918-1940 and 1941-1944 periods when all of Bessarabia was ruled from Bucharest.
10. Kuroglu, personal interview, Chisinau, 30 May 1995.
11. Vladimir Socor, "Gagauz in Moldavia Demand Separate Republic," *Radio Liberty, Report on the USSR*, Vol. 2, No. 36, 7 September 1990, p. 8.
12. Dmitri Fyodorovich Chebanov, prefect (appointed by the Baskan) of the Comrat district, personal interview, Comrat, 1 July 1996.
13. Gavril Gaidargi, Deputy Director, Institute of National Minorities, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, personal interview, Chisinau, 30 July 1996.
14. The state language in Moldova, according to the Constitution and the state language law, is "Moldovan," in spite of the belief of some that it should more properly be called "Romanian." This chapter conforms to the official terminology.
15. Hülya Demirdirek, social anthropologist, University of Oslo, personal interviews, Chisinau, June/July 1995.
16. Departamentul de Stat pentru Statistica al Republicii Moldova, *Anuarul Statistic al Republicii Moldova*, 1992 (Chisinau: Universitas, 1994), pp. 64-65.
17. Kuroglu, personal interview, Chisinau, 30 May 1995.

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18. Evgenia Perovna Ciorba, Gagauz Minister of Education and Culture, personal interview, Comrat, 1 July 1996.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Gavril Gaidargi, personal interview, Chisinau, 30 July 1996.
21. Dimitri Kulak, journalist, personal interview, Taraclia, 26 June 1995.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Vladimir Socor, "Gagauz in Moldavia Demand Separate Republic," Radio Liberty, *Report on the USSR*, Vol. 2, No. 36, 7 September 1990, p. 9.
24. Vladimir Socor, "Popular Front Founded in Moldavia," Radio Liberty, *Report on the USSR*, No. 23, 1989, pp. 23-26.  
For an extensive review of this period see Cassandra Cavanaugh, "Conflict in Moldova: The Gagauz Factor;" *RFE/RL Research Report*, 14 August 1992, pp. 11-17.
26. *Moldova Suverana*, Chisinau, 22 August 1990.
27. *Moldova Suverana*, Chisinau, 21 August 1990.
28. Cavanaugh, p. 13.
29. Cavanaugh, p. 14.
30. Cavanaugh, p. 15.
31. *RFE/RL Daily Report*, No. 143, 29 July 1994.
32. Cavanaugh, p. 14.
33. Branimir Radev, Acting Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, personal interview, Chisinau, July 1996.
34. *Constitutia Republicii Moldova* (Chisinau: Moldpres, 1994).
35. Nicolae Andronic, personal interview, Chisinau, June 1995. Andronic, a close ally of Snegur and chair of the Parliamentary Commission on Legal Affairs, together with Mihai Cotorobai, chair of the Parliamentary Commission on Local Government, and Presidential Counselor for Minority Affairs Viktor Grebenshchikov did the negotiating for Chişinau.
36. "Lege privind statutul juridic special al Gagauziei (Gagauz-Yeri)," *Monitorul Oficial al Republicii Moldova*, Vol. II, Nos 3-4, 14 January 1995. The law was approved by Parliament on 23 December 1994. Reference to articles of the law in the discussion that follows are based on the text and format from the *Monitorul Oficial*.
37. Charles King, "Gagauz\_Yeri and the Dilemmas of Self-Determination," *Transition*, Vol. 1, No. 19, 20 October 1995, pp. 24-25.
38. Vasile Uzun, personal interview, Comrat, 8 July 1996.

and used their own language. But most assimilated as a result of strong Bulgarian pressure. Today, only a few villages with approximately 1,500 elderly Gagauz can be found along the Black Sea in Bulgaria. With the passing of the remaining members of this generation, the Gagauz presence in Bulgaria will have ended. Few Gagauz remain in Romania, though some areas have people who consider themselves Romanian yet who have Gagauz family names and live in villages with cemeteries filled with graves marked by Gagauz names. A few Gagauz remain in some Greek villages as well.<sup>1</sup>

As one of the few Turkic peoples with a Christian faith, Gagauz elicit particular interest among ethnologists. Gagauz origins in southern Moldova can be traced to migration from northeastern Bulgaria in 1750-1791, when about 2,000 people moved from villages in Dubrogea (southern Romania and eastern Bulgaria). The second major migration from Bulgaria, estimated at 3,000 families, took place between 1808 and 1812.<sup>2</sup> The Gagauz migration from Bulgaria to the Bugeac steppe of Moldova, and the population growth after arrival, is accepted by most scholars. The dispute about identity involves Gagauz origins before migration to Bessarabia in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Most contemporary scholars, citing linguistic and folkloric evidence, consider the Gagauz to have originated from north-Turkic tribes (Pechenegi, Oguzi, and Polovtsi) which migrated from Asia to the Balkans beginning in the tenth century. The Gagauz presence in southern Europe, and especially Dubrogea, thus predates the Turkish invasion. Centuries later their descendants moved to the area in which they are now found. This view attributes their faith to their conversion to Orthodoxy along with the Bulgarians among whom they were living. Discrimination at the hands of the Moslem Ottoman Empire, together with the strife between the Bulgarians and the Turks, resulted in the Gagauz migration from Bulgaria to Bessarabia beginning in the late eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Though this view of the Asian ancestry of the Gagauz prevails today, it is not unanimous. A Bulgarian scholar, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, identified 19 different explanations of Gagauz origins.<sup>4</sup> The main contemporary controversy centers on the possibility that the Gagauz were originally Bulgarians who adopted the Turkish language during Ottoman domination. Today, the Gagauz live side-by-side in southern Moldova with Bulgarians (who also migrated from Bulgaria to Bessarabia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) as they did when they both lived in what is now Bulgaria. They share much in common with the Bulgarians, including Orthodoxy. Nonetheless, viewing the Gagauz as Bulgarians who adopted a Turkic dialect seems unconvincing to most contemporary scholars.<sup>5</sup>

A third position contends that the Gagauz are indigenous to Bulgaria and the southern Bessarabian area.<sup>6</sup> This contention, popular among today's politically active Gagauz, has contemporary political roots, though questionable historical merit. This position counters the argument that the Gagauz, as migrants to Moldova, have lesser claim to the territory in which they now live than do the indigenous Moldovans.

At the height of the Moldovan Popular Front's popularity in the late 1980s, the Front's most extreme members argued that the Gagauz, like the Russians, should return to the places from which they came.

Such outspoken ethnonationalism by the Moldovan majority played a major part in provoking subsequent Russian and Gagauz nationalism. The Gagauz response that "we have always been here" came from politically active Gagauz who began articulating a Gagauz-nationalist agenda. Such a view grows out of the nationalist's attempt to link the desired future to the real or imagined past and to claim that the nation has occupied its particular territory "from time immemorial."<sup>7</sup>

The southern part of Bessarabia where the Gagauz settled was under Turkish rule until Russian annexation in 1812. Russia, interested in promoting migration to this sparsely populated area, granted preferential rights to Gagauz and Bulgarian settlers, releasing them from military service and taxes and allowing them to use state land. The Gagauz moved into Tatar and Nogai villages as these peoples migrated farther to the east, particularly to Crimea. Such favored treatment at the hands of the Russians spurred further immigration and resulted in positive Gagauz views toward the Russians, views that continued through Soviet times. By 1821 the Gagauz population in Bessarabia had grown to an estimated 14,600, then further increased to 28,200 in 1851 and 55,800 in 1897.<sup>8</sup> The periods of Romanian rule<sup>9</sup> are considered less favorably, at least in historical memory. This view of the Romanian past, whether constructed from historical fact or fiction, accounts for some of the contemporary Gagauz fear of unification with Romania. To round out the picture, the first half of the nineteenth century also saw additional migrations of Bulgarians, Belarusians, Romanians and Jews to Bessarabia.

### Language

The Gagauz language is part of the Western Oguz group of Turkic languages, together with Azeri, Turkmen, and Turkish. It became closer to Turkish during the centuries that the Gagauz lived in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> Gagauz and Turkish speakers thus begin with a good basis for learning each other's language. When the language was first written at the beginning of the twentieth century, some materials were originally rendered in Cyrillic, but most were produced in Latin script before the takeover of Bessarabia by the Soviets in 1940. Vladimir Socor notes that "(i)ronically, the Gagauz were able to use the Latin script under Soviet rule for a considerably longer time than the Moldovans, whose Romanian language was switched to the Russian script immediately upon the Soviet annexations of 1940 and 1944."<sup>11</sup> While theoretically true, there was virtually no written Gagauz language until 1957 when an alphabet was created using the Cyrillic script.

The use of the Cyrillic alphabet to represent the Gagauz language predominates today. However, a group of scholars, led by the specialists on Gagauz at the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, have worked for several years to devise a Latin-

based script for the Gagauz language. The implementation of this new script began with the 1996-1997 school year.<sup>12</sup> According to Gavril Gaidargi, the script is similar to Turkish, though he argues that the Gagauz language has similarities with European languages because of the freedom of word placement. While enthusiastic about the change, Gaidargi pointed out that parents, educated in Russian and knowing Gagauz only in Cyrillic script, will be unable to help their children with the new alphabet.<sup>13</sup>

During Soviet rule, russification proceeded more successfully among the Gagauz than among the Moldovans. Education within the Gagauz region was almost entirely in Russian. There were only two periods during which native-language education was even allowed. The first of these was during Khrushchev's "thaw" from 1956-1961, when concessions were made to indigenous cultures throughout the Soviet Union. No Gagauz-language schools existed before this time, and none existed after the last of the Khrushchev-era schools closed in 1962.

As a result of Soviet educational policy, the most educated portion of the Gagauz population became the most russified. Consequently, those Gagauz, who by virtue of their educational attainment were positioned to become the national intelligentsia, were often the very part of the population that had lost its ability to use its native language in public life because they had been educated exclusively in the Russian schools and universities. This situation was typical throughout the former Soviet Union and by no means unique to Moldova or Gagauzia. Most third-level nationalities (those groups in addition to a union republic's titular nationality and the Russians) were heavily russified. This process occurred for a number of reasons, with the most important being the absence of native-language schools.

The second period of Gagauz language re-emergence began with the first anti-Moscow activities in the late 1980s that eventually led to Soviet dissolution. But emphasis on Gagauz education and culture was limited and remains so to this day, in part because of Chisinau's desire for all to master the state language. This emphasis on Moldovan<sup>14</sup> caused a backlash in Gagauzia. Many Gagauz, threatened by the prospect of having to learn the state language, clung to the language that they knew best - Russian. Some Gagauz even conducted political meetings in Russian because participants were more comfortable in Russian than in Gagauz; to justify this irony, politicians sometimes claimed that more than Gagauz were present; Russian was used so "everyone" could understand.

Nevertheless, language remains the predominant distinguishing feature among the different peoples living in Gagauzia. Outsiders cannot easily differentiate among the Gagauz, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Russians and others living in Gagauzia by either appearance or customs. For example, social anthropologist Hülya Demirdirek found little ritual behavior to distinguish the groups: baptisms, weddings, motherhood, obligations of godparenthood, and views of God are largely the same. She attributes this similarity to the Orthodox religion - the common denominator for all the groups.<sup>15</sup> In fact, all the national groups attend the same churches and the same services, as do Orthodox believers in other parts of the former Soviet Union.

In spite of the russification of Soviet times, 91% of the Gagauz in 1989 maintained Gagauz as their native language, though this figure was down from 97% in 1959. Seventy-three percent claimed to speak Russian, while only 4% claimed competence in Moldovan.<sup>16</sup> According to Stepan Kuroglu, approximately 20,000 Gagauz adopted Russian as their first language during the Soviet period, and 5,000 others, scattered around former Soviet territory, adopted the languages of other groups.<sup>17</sup> Chisinau's attempt since independence to encourage increased proficiency in Moldovan has had, to date, only limited impact in Gagauzia. Russian remains the primary language of administration, commerce, and education. While the Gagauz movement for autonomy has resulted in increased attention to the native language in schools and media, it has not yet resulted in a shift from Russian as the primary language of instruction. All of the 52 schools in Gagauzia use Russian as the language of instruction with the exception of a single school in Vulcaesti and a lycee in Comrat which use Moldovan.<sup>18</sup> Gagauz children, however, typically study their own language (for 4-5 hours per week in the early classes and less in the upper classes) either as a subject in school or in an after-school program. In addition, Moldovan is now a required school subject, though finding qualified teachers who wish to live and work in Gagauzia has been a problem for educational leaders.<sup>19</sup>

Gagauz language newspapers and broadcast media remain limited and often originate with the small group of Gagauz intellectuals in Chisinau rather than in Gagauzia. The first and most significant newspaper in Gagauz, *Ana-Sozu (Mother Language)*, began in 1986 and was published in Chisinau. While this paper engendered pride among many Gagauz, it also resulted in some controversy: it first used Cyrillic, then shifted to Latin, and emphasized Gagauz relations with Turkey. Especially during the early years of national re-emergence, many Gagauz were unable to read the Latin alphabet since their educations had been entirely in Cyrillic. Today, the newspaper's readership numbers only about 500. A monthly Gagauz television broadcast began with governmental permission at approximately the same time. Even today, however, television programs are broadcast only for 45 minutes twice monthly. Gagauz radio broadcasts are now weekly, but for only 30 minutes.<sup>20</sup> While such media are important symbolically, they do little to foster more widespread knowledge or use of the Gagauz language.<sup>21</sup>

### **Early Steps Toward Autonomy**

The journey toward today's autonomy began in the early 1980s, when few imagined either Moldovan independence or an autonomous Gagauzia. A small number of Gagauz intellectuals started meeting in Chisinau, Comrat, and Ciadar-Lunga to discuss ways to preserve the language and culture of their people. They created a cultural club in 1983-1984, but faced repression from not only Moscow and Chisinau but also from the authorities in Comrat. On one occasion, the KGB reportedly cut electricity to Comrat's House of Culture when a meeting was in

progress. Ironically, Gheorghii Tabunscic, recently elected the first Baskan of the newly autonomous Gagauz territory, was first secretary in Comrat during this period. During the 1995 election campaign for Baskan, his detractors attacked him for his lack of nationalist sentiments when he was first secretary.<sup>22</sup>

Language and "cadre" questions were the first issues that emerged in the 1980s. Younger people were not learning Gagauz. How could the language survive another generation if all education and public business were conducted in Russian? At the same time, the cadre question - the realization that people of Gagauz origin were unable to achieve top positions - became increasingly salient to Gagauz intellectuals, especially those who found their own careers blocked. Gagauz were under-represented in intellectual and technical areas and state and Party employment.<sup>23</sup>

During the recent election campaign for Baskan, Tabunscic's role as first secretary during the early and mid-1980s was one of the issues used against him. While he was widely respected for his hard work and expertise (schools and factories were built and the agricultural infrastructure was improved during his tenure as first secretary from 1979 to 1987), Tabunscic did not champion the issue of Gagauz identity. In fairness, however, one must remember that during most of the Soviet period, those branded as nationalists typically sacrificed their own careers. Tabunscic continued to climb the career ladder in Soviet Moldova and moved from Comrat to Chisinau.

Gagauz discovery and assertion of identity paralleled the awakening of national awareness of the Moldovans and other groups in the late 1980s. The Gagauz experience during these years was neither unique nor particularly tumultuous. In fact, some Gagauz leaders participated in the founding of the Moldovan Popular Front. But the Moldovan Popular Front's growing Romanian ethnonationalism provoked Gagauz reaction far more than the harsh and continuing russification experienced since the end of the Second World War. The final blow was a 1989 Moldovan parliamentary report on minorities, classifying the Gagauz as an ethnic minority rather than an indigenous people. In response, some Gagauz tried to show (as noted above) that they were not originally migrants from Asia and then Bulgaria, but rather indigenous to southern Europe.

Prior to this time, Moldovans as a group were friendly and supportive of the Gagauz. While some Moldovans may have been anti-Russian or anti-Soviet because of the desire to retain their own Moldovan-Romanian history and culture, they acknowledged that the russification of the small Gagauz population had been more severe and effective than the russification of Moldovans (which was typically the case for non-titular peoples throughout the former Soviet Union). Despite the drive to legitimize their own Moldovan — Romanian roots, Moldovans advocated the same

culturally sensitive treatment for other peoples in Moldova, building at least an argument for a multi-national Moldovan state. Officially, the Moldovan Popular Front favored cultural autonomy and local control of education and administration within Gagauzia.<sup>24</sup> This official stance, however, was in conflict with much of the

Moldovan Popular Front's rhetoric; while the Moldovan Popular Front's official position in regard to the Gagauz and other groups never changed, this position was overwhelmed by rallies and speeches emphasizing romanianization and union with Romania. That the Gagauz, the Russians, and other groups found this rhetoric threatening should hardly come as a surprise.

The *Gagauz Halki* (Gagauz People) and the Moldovan Popular Front developed concomitantly and were at first mutually supportive. In 1989 and 1990 they shared a common goal - the struggle against the communist administration. When the Moldovan Popular Front shifted its emphasis from national sovereignty to independence, the *Gagauz Halki* followed with the notion of Gagauz independence. Gagauz leaders in 1989 claimed that their state would encompass most of five raions in southern Moldova, together with 10-12% of the land area and as many as 300,000 people. At least half of this population was non-Gagauz, including Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Moldovans, and some Russians. As we shall see, the eventual agreement in 1994 on autonomy reduced this scope considerably.

The Gagauz and the Moldovan popular movements soon split, largely over the language question. As the Moldovan Popular Front championed Moldovan/Romanian as the state language, the Gagauz population faced the task of learning a third language in addition to Russian and Gagauz. And if this shift were not sufficiently threatening, the prospect of unification with Romania went hand in hand with the Moldovan Popular Front's rhetoric. The adoption of the state language laws on 31 August 1989, stating that Moldovan was the state language, that it was identical to Romanian, and that it was best represented by the Latin alphabet led directly to the *Gagauz Halki* demand for autonomy within Moldova.

Initially the *Gagauz Halki* proclaimed Russian to be the official language. As the Gagauz movement developed further and as Soviet dissolution and Moldovan independence became a reality, the Gagauz and Moldovan languages joined Russian as official languages on Gagauz territory. Changes, however, have been slow. Russian remains the language of public life. More children are studying Gagauz in school, but Russian continues to be the primary language of instruction. Little progress has been made in increasing the facility in Moldovan.

Because of their salience to non-Moldovans during Chisinau's drive for statehood, the language issue and the fear of unification with Romania made the Gagauz and the Transnistrians natural allies. Deputies to the Parliament in Chisinau from the two areas voted together on most issues, and together boycotted proceedings to push their goals of autonomy. On closer inspection, however, the two areas differ considerably, and the alliance of convenience that formed was unlikely to be of lasting duration. Gagauzia is almost entirely agricultural and village-oriented; Transnistria is highly industrialized and urban-focused. Transnistria has one of the highest levels of educational attainment in Moldova; Gagauzia (and especially the Gagauz) has the lowest. Because of its industrial facilities and their military orientation, Transnistria has a large cadre of politically aware and active people; Gagauzia, in contrast,

remains much less politically mobilized. Thus, the marriage of convenience prompted by the pan-Romanian activities of the Moldovan Popular Front was destined to be short-lived.

### Secession

The Gagauz leadership (deputies to the Moldovan Supreme Soviet, local councils, and other activists) held meetings in Comrat in fall 1989, and again in summer 1990, during which an "autonomous republic"—within Moldova rather than as an independent state—was first proclaimed. This approach followed the Soviet "national-territorial" model familiar from other settings. Activists wanted control of five raions: Comrat, Ciadar-Lunga, Vulcaesti, Basarabeasca, and Taraclia, and part of a sixth, Cahul.<sup>25</sup> Gagauz made up just under half of the population within these raions. But on 19 August 1990, the Gagauz elite, led by President Stepan Topal and Supreme Soviet Chairperson Mihail Kendighelean, quickly took the next step, declaring Gagauzia to be independent of Moldova and subject only to central Soviet authority. While freeing Gagauzia from the much-feared romanianization, this step also protected the Soviet-era *nomenklatura*, who feared losing their own positions if Moldova broke away from Moscow. In retrospect, the Moldovan Popular Front's increasingly strident pan-Romanian rhetoric, which threatened both the masses and the elites, seemed to be the primary factor in provoking the Gagauz break with Chisinau.

Naturally, the Moldovan Supreme Soviet in Chisinau viewed Gagauz autonomy to be inappropriate and quickly annulled the Gagauz actions, going so far as to ban the *Gagauz Halki* for unconstitutional actions.<sup>26</sup> Yet opposition to the *Gagauz Halki* and to its declarations of autonomy did not mean that the leadership in Chisinau was unsympathetic to Gagauz demands. Both Gagauzian poverty and consequences of russification were widely recognized. Indeed, governmental and parliamentary officials had developed plans for assistance to the region inhabited by the Gagauz.<sup>27</sup> Some of this attention from Chisinau was based on the recognition of long-standing problems within Gagauzia, while some was no doubt developed as a means to stop the Gagauz drive for autonomy. But just as Moscow was losing control of events in Moldova as well as in other republics, Chisinau itself was losing control of Gagauzia and Transnistria. These Gagauz declarations of autonomy were the first steps at state formation that soon led to outright secession.

The summer, Comrat meetings led to a call for a Gagauz parliament, with the first election scheduled for 28 October 1990. In addition, national symbols (a flag, an anthem, and a coat of arms) were created and a local self-defense force was formed. But Gagauz state formation was never to progress like Transnistria's because both the leadership and the populace remained relatively unmobilized. Tiraspol's leaders were much more closely connected to Moscow because of the presence of the 14th

presence of the 14th Army and because Transnistrian industrial facilities, unlike the agriculturally-based economy of Gagauzia, had never been subordinate to Chisinau.

President Stepan Topal became the most visible Gagauz leader after the August meeting. Negotiations between Topal and the Chisinau leadership went nowhere while plans for the October Gagauz parliamentary elections proceeded. These elections provoked the most serious confrontation between Chisinau and Comrat, the repercussions of which can still be felt in Gagauzia. Moldovan Prime Minister Mircea Druc, responding to pressure from the Moldovan Popular Front, mobilized "volunteers" from throughout Moldova to go to Gagauzia to prevent the elections. Some 40,000 volunteers boarded buses and headed toward Gagauzia, and thousands of Gagauz gathered in Comrat to oppose them. Moldovan parliament speaker Mircea Snegur intervened by declaring a state of emergency, fearing that a situation would escalate and Moldovan police in Gagauzia would be unable to control the people streaming toward the territory. Both Snegur and local Gagauz and Russian leaders appealed to Soviet President Gorbachev to use Soviet troops to keep the groups apart.<sup>28</sup> Fortunately the Moldovan mobs never entered Gagauz territory, remaining largely on the borders, and a clash between the groups was avoided. Nonetheless, Gagauz distrust of Chisinau grew out of these rather bizarre events in 1990 and continue to color today's political relationships.

In spite of Chisinau's discomfort, elections for a Gagauz Supreme Soviet were held. Meeting for the first time in December 1990, the Gagauz Supreme Soviet stated its intentions for autonomy; nonetheless, Moscow failed to recognize either Gagauzia or Transnistria, which was following a parallel path. Efforts by Chisinau to reach a compromise with Comrat based on a grant of limited local autonomy also failed to break the impasse. From this time until the agreement in late 1994, Gagauzia was essentially independent from Chisinau. The Moldovan government was unable to exercise authority over the Gagauz area; and while Gagauzia did not establish functioning state institutions as did Transnistria, it was nonetheless able to deny Chisinau control of the region.

The next major event was Gorbachev's vote on a new union treaty in March 1991. Chisinau-controlled areas of Moldova boycotted the referendum, but Gagauzia (like Transnistria) participated in the election. Gagauz voters almost unanimously affirmed their desire to remain in the union.<sup>29</sup> The holding of the election and its unquestionable outcome once again illustrated the extent that Chisinau's authority was absent from the Gagauz raions.

The *coup* in August 1991, was greeted with support from the Gagauz leaders. Topal and Kendighelean, along with Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov (who had emerged as the OSTK leader) in Tiraspol, quickly communicated loyalty to the emergency committee in Moscow. Chisinau, on the other hand, took advantage of the *coup* to declare independence. Both the Gagauzian and the Transnistrian leaders were initially arrested by the Chisinau authorities and detained for several weeks after the *coup* failed.<sup>30</sup> Local protests soon forced the Moldovans to release the