

Understanding and Approaching Moldova's Pro-Moscow Gagauzia Region

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez and Lucia Scripcari

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WILDER ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ AND LUCIA SCRIPCARI, AUG 5 2023

The war in Ukraine brought global attention to countries with Moscow-friendly governments, including separatist regions like Transnistria in the Republic of Moldova. Leaving aside Transnistria, another Moscow-friendly region within Moldova is Gagauzia, which recently had gubernatorial elections: the new Governor (locally known as *Başkan*) is the pro-Moscow Evghenia Guțul from the now-banned Șor Party. Besides the fighting on the physical battlefield, there is also a parallel global war of information and disinformation to gain popular support. As a predominantly Russian-speaking population, the Gagauzians are firmly under Moscow's influence, in contrast with Chisinau, which supports Kyiv.

The Gagauz are Turkic Orthodox Christians who live in Southern Moldova. The region's official title is Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, as the region held a referendum in March 1991 to remain part of the USSR. A law was signed in 1994, granting the region a special status within the Republic, quelling separatist sentiments to prevent another Transnistria. Today, Gagauzia continues to have a Moscow-friendly local government and population. In 2014, the region held an illegal referendum in which voters rejected Moldova's closer relations with the European Union and supported integration with the CIS Customs Union. More recently, between April and May of 2023, Gagauzia held two rounds of elections to elect a new *Başkan*: all candidates were representatives of pro-Russian political parties. Moldovan President Maia Sandu's pro-Europe Party of Action and Solidarity (*Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate*: PAS) had no candidate in the elections. The winner, Evghenia Guțul, represents ȘOR.

It is worth noting that the Moldovan Constitutional Court has found the ȘOR party illegal and has banned it from future activities, while Moldovan authorities call for the revision of the Gagauzian elections as the winner is a ȘOR member. At the time of writing, it is unclear if new elections will occur (though it is unlikely that a pro-Europe candidate could win in any case).

This situation is noteworthy since Sandu's PAS has a majority in the Moldovan Parliament, but the party has failed even to have a candidate in Gagauzia. This gap stems from the population's anti-European sentiments nourished by Russian propaganda. Specifically, Moscow's disinformation machine capitalizes on the sympathy of many Moldovans towards a potential, and very hypothetical, (re)unification with Romania. Gagauzians believe their culture and identity will be lost if Moldova unifies with Romania. (The reunification issue has been analyzed by *E-International Relations*).

Moreover, the Gagauzian population also does not support Moldova's EU integration. After Moldova signed an Association Agreement with the EU, in 2014 Gagauzia held a(n illegal) referendum where the majority of the population rejected closer ties with the EU and expressed its right to declare independence "should Moldova lose or surrender its own independence." It should be noted that this "referendum" did not prevent Moldova from securing candidate status in the EU. To avoid a new wave of separatist sentiments in Gagauzia, the current pro-EU government in Chisinau must engage Gagauzia more assertively and support candidates for the local Gagauz government who can represent the needs of the Gagauz people and, at the same time, share Moldova's EU aspirations to join the European Union by 2030.

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Due to the war, Washington and Brussels are keen to approach and assist friendly governments in the Greater Black Sea and Eastern Europe regions; Moldova's President Maia Sandu has maintained a Washington and Brussels-friendly attitude since being elected in 2020. However, the Gagauz people have continued supporting Russia even after the war commenced, despite Ukrainian refugees passing through Gagauzia escaping the war.

Why is this situation? Language is part of the answer. Gagauzians primarily speak Russian and Gagauz (though this is a dying language), a legacy of the Soviet Union. Hence the news they consume is mainly Russian, meaning they hear and read Moscow's opinions about the war, Moldova, and the European Union. According to Iulian Groza, the executive director of the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, even though Chisinau has suspended the broadcasting of six Russian television stations for disseminating propaganda, the channels can still be watched in Gagauzia. Moreover, Gagauzians have daily reminders of the Soviet Union: Comrat, the region's capital, has a statue of Vladimir Lenin, and the main street is, unsurprisingly, called Lenin Street. The authors have not found data about how widespread Romanian is spoken in Gagauzia, but news reports and anecdotal evidence suggest that not many Gagauzians speak it.

Europa Libera Moldova reported a new and promising initiative on 11 July: Moldova's Ministry of Education has begun teaching Romanian-language courses to Gagauzians. Teachers, educators, kindergarten and school principals, or accountants have registered, primarily from Congaz village. However, years will need to pass before more Gagauzians learn Romanian – if they choose to learn it – which will enable access to another source of information and more opportunities for daily communication and interaction with their fellow Moldovans.

Moreover, there is the issue of branding and marketing. On 14 July, the Atlantic Council, a research center in Washington, DC, hosted a conference titled "How can the US support Moldova's Western aspirations?" with Doina Gherman, Chair of the Foreign Affairs and European Integration Committee in Moldova's Parliament; Igor Grosu, President of the Parliament; and Michael Cecire, Senior Policy Advisor at the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. During the Question and Answer portion of the event, one of the authors of this analysis asked the panel about Gagauzia's elections and the pro-Moscow attitudes of the population. Gherman explained that the recent election "was a lesson for us as authorities because we understood Russian influence and propaganda is very aggressive in that region of our country." She added, "the sad aspect is that so many European funds are in that territory, so many US funds are concentrated in different, beautiful, wonderful projects in modernizing and developing [that] region."

Marketing, public relations, and disseminating information are the missing link so that Chisinau can connect with Gagauzians. "Now we were discussing ... to concentrate all these funds, maybe, more on educating, more on better communicating because 95% of the citizens from Gagauzia when are asked where the money comes from to your region they answer the Russian Federation," the Moldovan member of Parliament explained. "The last poll shows very clearly [this situation], so probably we have to change the narrative, to change the strategy because we cannot move forward in the way we [are now doing]," Gherman added. In other words, a new social strategy is needed. Similarly, Cecire explained that after a visit to Gagauzia, he believes "there is, among some people there, a real interest in the West, in Western Europe, in the United States [and] we could do better in demonstrating how we are there already, and also that we are very interested in this place, and not just as a sideshow but ... as a unique region with its own particular regional identity."

On 15 March 2023, the Moldova-U.S. Strategic Dialogue occurred in the Moldovan capital. A joint statement notes that since the war commenced, Washington has made available "nearly \$320 million in new economic, security, and humanitarian assistance to help Moldova ... The United States, working with Congress, also plans to make available an additional \$300 million for energy assistance." Interestingly, the joint statement does not mention Transnistria or Gagauzia. It is unclear how much of these funds are assigned to projects in Gagauzia.

Financial aid and assistance from Washington continue to flow to Moldova, not including trade and investment projects. However, as Gherman and Cecire correctly note, what is missing is a proper information campaign (in multiple languages, including Russian and Gagauzian) to approach the Gagauzian population so they stop viewing Brussels and Washington as existential threats.

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Although this analysis has focused on Gagauzia's pro-Russia attitude, Moldovans generally have a mix of pro-Russian and pro-European attitudes and the country has had several democratically-elected, pro-Moscow governments. The war in Ukraine and the Russian government's attitude towards Moldova nowadays are making Moldovans reconsider their cultural identity and views regarding their nation's history. Looking forward, if other Moldovans continue to struggle with their kinship towards other countries and governments almost a year and a half since the war started, convincing Gagauzians to change their attitudes becomes all the more challenging.

With support from international partners, the Moldovan government must focus on engaging Gagauzia, integrating the region with the rest of the country (which includes dealing with the language gap), and providing access to multi-language, free, and independent media. Changing a person's beliefs is challenging. Changing the beliefs and opinions of an entire population is even more difficult and will not occur overnight. Years, maybe decades, will need to pass for Gagauzians to believe that Moldova's Western/US leanings, and efforts to join the EU, will not destroy Gagauzia's identity.

About the author:

Wilder Alejandro Sánchez is president of Second Floor Strategies, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. He is an analyst who monitors defense, geopolitical, and trade issues across the Western Hemisphere, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. He has monitored Moldovan affairs for over a decade.

Lucia Scripcari is a researcher of Moldovan affairs and a lawyer who specializes in international law.