

Gagauz

Profile

The 2004 census recorded 147,500 Gagauz. They are either Christianized and Bulgarianized Turks or linguistically Turkicized Christian Bulgarians; they speak the north-western dialect of Turkish with many Slavic, particularly Bulgarian and lately Russian, additions. The Gagauz claim that they migrated to Bessarabia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Only a handful now remain in their original area of settlement, the western shores of the Black Sea (Romania and Bulgaria). With the annexation of Bessarabia to Russia, the Gagauz settled in southern Bessarabia as privileged colonists.

Historical context

Following the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia in 1940, the Gagauz-populated areas were divided between the Moldavian and the Ukrainian SSRs. The Gagauz populate some of the poorest areas of Moldova. Under Soviet rule, the Gagauz were subject to Russification with the Cyrillic script introduced in 1957 and Russian taught in schools from the late 1950s. Some 73 per cent of Gagauz consider Russian to be their second language, and most of the political elite are Russian-speakers.

Within the Soviet Union, the Gagauz was the largest Turkic population not to have its own territorial formation. Throughout the Soviet period, ethnic awareness remained weakly developed among the Gagauz. This situation changed rapidly in the late 1980s as fear of Romanianization spread. Although the 1989 language law permitted the use of Gagauz, strikes against the elevation of Moldovan to the status of state language took place in Gagauz areas. In response to the Moldovan declaration of sovereignty, the authorities in Komrat, the administrative centre of the Gagauz region, announced the creation of the Gagauz Soviet Socialist Republic.

Gagauz actions led to a period of dual power in the region. During 1992-3, Gagauz paramilitary units intermittently clashed with Moldovan local authorities, but the Gagauz stayed out of the Transnistria conflict. Nevertheless, Komrat worked in tandem with Tiraspol to promote the idea of developing Moldova as a confederation of three states. As 70 per cent of the world's Gagauz live in Moldova, the Gagauz do not consider themselves a national minority but rather a people with a right to a national territory. The Turkish mission in Moldova has supported the more moderate idea of autonomy for the Gagauz within the context of a united Moldova.

In February 1994, the Gagauz agreed to abandon their aim of confederation and to participate in parliamentary elections in return for support for Gagauz demands for autonomy. The Gagauz areas cast their vote for the Unity-Socialist alliance - the Russian-speakers' bloc. In July 1994, a new Moldovan constitution was approved with an article guaranteeing autonomy for the Gagauz-inhabited districts.

In December 1994 the law 'On The Special Legal Status of Gagauz Yeri (land)/Gagauzia' was passed. The preamble of the law recognizes the Gagauz as a 'people' - not an ethnic group or ethnic population, as Soviet theory had indicated - and recognizes their right to self-determination within Moldova. The

initiative combined two principles: it linked nationality as a corporate body to a specific territory and a notion of constitutional guarantees, devolution of powers, representative institutions, checks and balances. The law also allowed Gagauz self-determination if Moldova should change its status as an independent state.

Under the terms of the law, the Gagauz autonomous region was to have its own legislature, the Halk Toplusu, elected for four years and executive authorities - a chief executive (Bashkhan), to hold the ex officio position of a deputy prime minister of Moldova - both exercising substantial devolved powers; and three official languages were to be Gagauz, Moldovan, and Russian. Gagauzia was to have its own judicial, police and security bodies under shared regional and central jurisdiction. The central authorities retained sovereignty over citizenship, finance, defence and foreign policy.

On 5 March 1995 a referendum to determine the boundaries of the Gagauz Yeri/Gagauzia was conducted. On 28 May 1995 an election for the Gagauz Bashkhan, and the Popular Assembly and a referendum to determine the administrative centre of the region (Komrat) were held.

Although most political forces in Moldova reached a consensus on the creation of a Gagauz territorial autonomy, the opposition Christian Democrat People's Party remains opposed to its existence. In 2001 President Voronin pledged to enshrine the status of the Gagauz autonomy in the Moldovan Constitution, a pledge on which to date he has not delivered.

Current issues

From 2002 increasing allegations emerged among opposition groups in Gagauz-Yeri concerning government interference in the affairs of the autonomous region. In 2002 and 2003 government interference was alleged in local and mayoral elections respectively. In April 2004 the centrist opposition alliance Our Moldova accused the Party of Moldovan Communists of 'totalitarianism' in Gagauz-Yeri after the dismissal in March of Comrat mayor Constantin Taoushanjee on charges of embezzlement. Then in August 2005 the United Gagauz movement alleged that the autonomous region's governor, Gheorghe Tabunshik of the Party of Moldovan Communists, was planning to submit an amendment to the law on the region's status to allow for its chief executive to be elected by the legislature rather than by popular vote. The movement called for a regional referendum to be held on the issue.

Corruption within the Gagauz Yeri remains a problem. Transparency International highlighted the region as the most corrupt in Moldova after Chisinau.