



NEXT4EU perspectives on Moldova's EU integration

Re-united in Diversity?

Challenges and Opportunities in the Dialogue with Gagauzia for Moldova's EU Accession

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12 March 2024

Gagauzia, the autonomous region in the south of the Republic of Moldova, may at first glance appear to be of minor significance to Moldova's EU accession process. However, since the Russian full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the decades-long tensions between the Moldovan government and the autonomous region have gained more attention. In the current geopolitical situation, they have the potential to cause destabilisation and severe problems for the pro-European course of Moldovan President Maia Sandu. This might particularly be the case with regards to the domestic power conflict between pro-European and pro-Russian positions, but also to the protection of minorities in the run-up to EU accession.

Superficially, the tensions are presented as a conflict between pro-European Chişinău and pro-Russian Comrat, the regional capital of Gagauzia. Furthermore, Moldovan officials fear the influence of Russian propaganda on the mainly Russian-speaking Gagauz and the local elections in the autonomous region. Prior to the election for the Gagauz governor (locally called Bashkan) in April 2023, the Moldovan President accused Russia of interfering in the country's internal affairs and causing chaos to prevent the EU accession of the country. She specifically accused several candidates of being agents of Moscow instead of politicians who were acting for the good of Gagauzia (Nienhuysen 2023). According to this general assessment, the conflict appears to be simple. However, the challenges are much more complex. A closer look reveals three conflicts that may impede Moldova's accession negotiations with the EU.

Disagreements over the distribution of competences between Chişinău and Comrat

Approximately 150,000 people live in Gagauzia. Most of them are Gagauz, ethnic Turks who are Christian Orthodox and speak Gagauz and Russian. They are the second largest ethnic minority in Moldova, after Ukrainians, and have strong ties with Russia for historical reasons. Most inhabitants would refer to the fact that the Tsar granted them, as persecuted minority in the Ottoman Empire, the right to settle in the area as a main reason for pro-Russian positions (Rehmsmeier 2018). There seems to be a degree of Soviet nostalgia too, which is visualised to some extent by a large statue of Lenin in Comrat. Originally, Gagauzia wanted to separate from Moldova when it declared independence in 1990 and instead remain part of the USSR. Against the backdrop of the war in Transnistria 1992 and due to escalating tensions, decision-makers in Comrat and Chişinău negotiated the status of the region in order to avoid another war and to guarantee a peaceful integration in the Republic of Moldova. Consequently, Gagauzia obtained its autonomous status in 1994. The Gagauzian autonomy is enshrined in Article 111 of the Constitution of

the Republic of Moldova on the "Autonomous Territorial Unit of Găgăuzia" (Republic of Moldova 1994) and in the Law on special legal status of Gagauzia (Gagauzia 1994). Thus, in accordance with the constitution and legislation of the Republic of Moldova, Gagauzia has a parliament – the Popular Assembly of Gagauzia – and a governor, called Bashkan. The latter is also part of the Moldovan government. Furthermore, Gagauz serves as an official language with Moldovan and Russian in the region. (Gagauzia 1994) However, the autonomous status still poses legal and social challenges, with disagreements between Chişinău and Comrat over the distribution of competences, e.g. currently regarding tax regulation. Relations between Gagauzia and Moldovan authorities have been complicated for the last 30 years and have the potential to cause severe domestic destabilisation (Cirmizi 2023, Colesnic 2023, Harrington 2023).

Historically Rooted Anti-European Positions in Gagauzia

In 2014, Gagauz authorities organised two referenda against Moldova's EU Association Agreement, which were both declared as illegal by the government in Chişinău. In the first referendum, the Gagauz were asked whether they would opt for Moldova's integration into the EU or into the then Eurasian Customs Union, which has been turned into Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) under Russian leadership. 98.5 per cent of the voters were in favour of joining the Eurasian Custom Union. In the second referendum, the citizens of Gagauzia were asked whether they support Gagauz independence if Moldova were to lose its independence, which refers to Article 1 of the Law on special legal status of Gagauzia (Gagauzia 1994). It was affirmed by 98 per cent. Gagauzian decision-makers still refer to this expression of anti-European sentiments in the autonomous region.

After Moldova was granted EU candidate status in June 2022, the Popular Assembly of Gagauzia adopted a resolution referring to the 2014 referendum. In this document, the Popular Assembly criticises the government in Chişinău for excluding Gagauzia from the negotiation process and for ignoring the wishes of the Gagauz people. In addition, at the end of January 2024, the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova condemned a document sent by the General Directorate of Education in Gagauzia to all teachers in the autonomous region, calling on them to march with their students on 2 February to commemorate the referendum (Harrington 2023, Necsutu 2024).

Today, it is unclear, how the perception of the EU in Gagauzia will evolve. There are signs that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine might have triggered change. A large part of the population longs for peace and even the outgoing Bashkan Irina Vlah has changed her rhetoric in

2023. In 2015, she won the election with the slogan “Russia is with us”. In her second and final term in office, she campaigned for EU integration of both, the Republic of Moldova and Gagauzia (Colesnic 2023). Nevertheless, the campaigns of the 2023 Bashkan elections entirely featured pro-Russian tendencies.

Discussions with Gagauz officials in 2023 showed that the region is not actively supporting the EU accession of Moldova, but EU investment projects in the region contribute to changing perceptions of EU integration, which might become more positive. However, Turkey appears to exert much greater influence in Gagauzia than the EU. Turkey has been investing heavily in the region since the 1990s, which is also clearly reflected in the public perception of the Gagauz people. Currently, Turkey focuses on infrastructure and socio-economic projects which are highly appreciated by the population of Gagauzia.

Russian Influence and Propaganda and Chişinău’s Handling of It

Due to historical narratives and the good proficiency of many Gagauz in Russian, the inhabitants of Gagauzia are predominantly pro-Russian. The pro-European stance of the current president Maia Sandu has further fuelled the criticism of the Moldovan government in the region. Russia also used this fertile ground to spread its propaganda and further fuelled anti-Western sentiments.

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The various attempts of Russia to destabilise Moldova especially through its propaganda and influence on local elections resulted also in a deterioration of the relations between Chişinău and Comrat.

A vast majority of the Gagauz are furthermore affected by economic consequences of the war. Rising energy prices (especially gas) and high inflation are being felt strongly in this economically underdeveloped region. Pro-Russian populists are using these increasing tensions and the unfortunate socio-economic situation to further polarise the political landscape in Gagauzia. (Harrington 2023) It can be observed that the Moldovan government is not responding by primarily addressing the legitimate socio-economic concerns of the Gagauz people. Instead, it is actively trying to combat Russian influence, e.g. by closing down Russian-language TV stations that disseminate war propaganda.

Moreover, the controversy escalated during the campaigns for the Bashkan elections in April and May 2023, in which only pro-Russian candidates ran. The new Bashkan, Yevgeniya Gutul, promised during the election campaign to establish closer relations with Russia and to open a diplomatic mission in Moscow. She was a member of the Shor party, a party founded by and named after fugitive pro-Russian Oligarch Ilan Shor, who is seeking to topple the government of Maia Sandu. The government in Chişinău accuses Shor of trying to destabilise the country. In April 2023, he was condemned to 15 years for participating in a mass fraud between 2012 and 2014, but never started his prison sentence. According to reports, Shor is staying in exile in Israel and Russia. Furthermore, the Shor party which has since been forbidden by Moldova’s Constitutional Court, has illegally funded protests against price increases and for the resignation of the government in Chişinău. (Euractiv 2023a, Neacsutu 2024).

Due to the fraudulent elections of the new Bashkan, for the first time since 1994, the Bashkan inauguration took place without the attendance of a senior official from Chişinău and was consequently not approved by the Moldovan president. This means that the Bashkan is not “confirmed as member of the Government of the Republic of Moldova by a decree of the President of the Republic of Moldova” as regulated in Article 14(4) of the Law on special legal status of Gagauzia (Gagauzia 1994, Republic of Moldova 1994). The Gagauz see this as affront against Gagauz autonomy.

Recommendation: Overcoming the Stalled Dialogue between Chişinău und Comrat

The previous descriptions of the multi-layered conflicts are caused by a clear pro-Russian orientation of the Gagauz authorities. The support for its pro-Russian policy has three sources: First, there is a pro-Russian socio-cultural orientation among the Gagauz; second, Shor has exerted criminal influence on voters to manipulate the election result; and third, there are direct interventions from Russia. Therefore, it is essential to take a closer look at the Moldovan government’s policy. Its foreign policy orientation and the EU membership as one of the main objectives needs to take more into account the complexity of Moldova’s ethnic, cultural and linguistic particularities as well as socio-economic issues of the rural areas. The example of Gagauzia shows the necessity of further engaging with the minority populations and balancing the dialogue with Russian controlled political actors. This includes finding solutions for dealing with an externally controlled and financed Bashkan and a Popular Assembly, which deputies were elected in an election marked by voter manipulation. It is important that this should not result in the Moldovan government neglecting the potential to win votes in the Gagauz region and limiting its own investment in dialogue with the population. Chişinău should therefore seek to establish new direct communication channels with

the Gaguz population especially as there are other powers in the region besides Russia, like Turkey, that are extending their effective influence. Although a considerable amount of EU funding supports the region, pro-EU opinions are much less audible compared to pro-Russian or pro-Turkish views.

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The Republic of Moldova needs to gather the support of the entire country for the EU integration process - including Gagauzia. The EU accession must be supported by a clear majority.

However, problems arise if a minority is united against it and marginalised. Therefore, the historically rooted negative perception of the EU must be overcome.

Due to the lack of investment in solving domestic problems (especially socio-economic) and the lack of pro-European opposition in Chişinău, opponents of the current government are linking foreign policy aspects and the EU integration course to the ruling party. Actions like the contested closure of Russian-language television stations and stalled relations with the newly elected Bashkan tend to reinforce arguments that can be negatively spun by pro-Russian propaganda. It is e.g. not enough to work only with young Gagauz, as Maia Sandu described in June 2023 in an interview during the summit of the European Political Community: “We still have to work with the population which has been listening too much to Russian propaganda. We recently launched a free program for them to study Romanian and we have to continue our efforts for them to study the Gagauz language because the aim of autonomy was to help them preserve the language and culture.” (Bloj 2023) Considering the Copenhagen criteria regarding human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the Moldovan government needs to be careful in its relations with Gagauzia and start dialogue to be able to fight Russian influence and the consequences of Russian propaganda in Gagauzia. It is essential that the government measures taken are not further alienating the Gagauz population from the central government, as it will need its support for a future EU membership of the country.

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About NEXT4EU perspectives

This article was produced as part of the NEXT4EU trip to the Republic of Moldova from 10-14 December 2023, in which civil society representatives, journalists and academics took part. The trip served to promote civil society exchange with the Republic of Moldova and to analyse the challenges and political situation in the country on the eve of the European Council's decision to open EU accession negotiations.

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Publisher

Prof Dr Funda Tekin

Editor

Dominic Maugeais

Layout

Laura Worsch

Cover Photo

Roman Drits Barnimages / Unsplash

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